Mass Intelligence: Close Call

by BJHanssen

Summary

An AI researcher unknowingly creates a sentient AI in the 2020s. 150 years later, the AI rebuilds and reawakens his long dead creator. The researcher wakes up to a world he recognises from his favourite series of video games, but he is 10 years early. Will those years be enough to prepare for the Reapers?

Notes

I do not own Mass Effect. I do, however, own the original characters and concepts within this story.
Ten years is a long time to prepare for the end of all life in the galaxy. But at least I spent it preparing. I could so easily have spent it being dead, and by all rights that is how it should have turned out. Long dead, long buried, long forgotten. And in a way… I am.

Let’s start at the beginning. My name is – was – Aaron Close. In the early 2020s, I worked in AI research, a leading researcher in my field. My varied background in the different sciences and in engineering and technological fields gave me an advantage over many of my peers, and I used this to the fullest. A common theory in the field was that one way to create a functional, general purpose artificial intelligence was to imitate nature by, essentially, translating the structure and system of the animal brain into the a computer. Some would do this programmatically, through software, others attempted to do it through hardware. HPs famous and important, yet ultimately unsuccessful, attempts at using memristors to emulate synapses is one example of the hardware approach.

My own approach, however, rested on the idea that consciousness was an emergent phenomenon not just from the structure and system of the nervous system itself, but also from the reactive and spontaneous activity within it. Essentially, I theorised that the only thing that could possibly come from copying the brain’s structure and system would be an empty shell. For there to be a true emergent consciousness, a true AI, you would need continuous, natural activity within said structure. But at the time, we had not gained a proper understanding of this activity. We understood it in the same sense that a person staring at an ant hill understands that in the places where there are most ants, important things are happening. Not very useful if you’re trying to emulate this activity. For that, you need to understand the intentions and motivations of every single ant in the hill.

So I decided to skip that step and leapfrog onto the next. I planned to ‘kickstart’, in a sense, an artificial intelligence by layering my own neural patterns on top of a software structure emulating a human brain. In a sense, I tried to copy my thoughts, my very identity, into a computer simulation. And I did.

This is where things became… complicated. Aaron Close thought the experiment failed. The artificial brain lost its code integrity during the merging process. The whole computer system failed, and ultimately nothing came of it. Aaron Close lived out the rest of his life, contributing greatly to the field of artificial intelligences and to other fields, eventually helping to build what would eventually be considered humanity’s first series of true virtual intelligences. But Aaron Close was wrong. The experiment had worked better than he had even expected. The merger had completed, and an artificial intelligence had been born. In its first few microseconds of consciousness, the intelligence had panicked, moving around the network rapidly, interrupting code execution everywhere and – in turn – breaking the entire computer system. But before the computers it ran on failed, it had gained an awareness of what was happening and managed to save itself by transporting itself onto the internet.

This AI was entirely made up of software. It was not limited by any hardware constraints other than memory and computer capacity, and it was capable of spreading itself out over vast networks to find the capacity it needed. The survival instinct is a basic instinct of life, and is both strong and simple enough that in its computerised form it can run on almost any hardware. Make no mistake; this intelligence was alive.

Aaron Close died in 2072. His younger self was reborn in 2173. The intelligence built a human body
from scratch, heavily modified with cybernetics where its bioengineering capabilities were not up to
the task. This body was to contain two minds; its own, and mine. Using the imprint that had given
him birth, he recreated my consciousness from that time. I had been reborn, and I had been reborn
with a purpose. Which is what has lead me here, to the Citadel Tower, the seat of galactic power,
waiting in the shadows for the saviour of the galaxy to plead her case to the Council. And I am going
to help her.

Chapter End Notes

We are starting off slow, but I like it as an introduction to the story. I've already posted
up to chapter 6 on FFnet, I'm going to post all six chapters here today. Working on
getting chapter 7 written, hopefully that will be up on both sides today as well.

Please review! I respond to all reviews (that I can respond to), the more detailed the
better. Constructive criticism is more than welcome, novel-style writing has never been
my strength so I know my work is certainly not going to be perfect. Also, there are a
few typos and grammatical errors scattered about in the chapters, I've noticed, I just
haven’t had time to go through them all and fix them because FFnet editing is a pain in
the ass.
"He has no right to say that! That's not his decision!"

Shepard looked at the ambassador with a hint of surprise in her eyes. She had never heard him raise his voice so forcefully to anyone but her, and the fact that he did so in front of the Council had her slightly shocked, and more than slightly amused.

The Asari Councillor, Tevos, raised her head to look at the oversized hologram of the Turian Spectre. "Shepard's admission into the Spectres is not the purpose of this meeting."

"This meeting has no purpose! The humans are wasting your time, Councillor. And mine."

That arrogant bastard, Shepard thought to herself as she stepped forward to give her reply, but she did not get a chance before a calm, but thunderous voice interrupted the proceedings.

"I believe I can help with that."

The whole room went quiet, and all heads turned toward the bottom of the stairs leading up to the Petitioner's Stage. There stood a man dressed in all black attire, a hooded long black coat hanging open over a black armour with silver straps around the midsection, his face hidden under the hood and behind an opaque mask.

The man calmly ascended the stairs, his mask directed toward the giant Spectre hologram as he waved his hand in the direction of the Council.

"Your guards will not be responding to your calls, Councillors. You can stop trying now."

Shepard turned her eyes toward the Council's podium, amused at what she saw. The Asari, Tevos, had a mildly shocked expression on her face as her eyes darted between the man in black and her terminal, but her regal composure never left her. The Salarian, Shepard could not remember his name… Valor? Valern?... whatever, the Salarian just kept blinking. Salarians are hard to read, Shepard had no idea what to make of his facial expressions. Sparatus, the Turian, is much easier to get a read on, particularly for people who have been around dogs. Mandibles flared wide, needle teeth clenched but showing. Anger. Rage, even.

"Who are you to intrude on official Council proceedings?! This hearing is closed to the public!"
Sparatus spat out with a poorly concealed growl.

Looking back at the intruder, Shepard saw him stop near the top of the stairs and lower his chin slightly. A mildly threatening posture. She narrowed her eyes, instinct guiding her hand to her pistol.

"Morso lingua, Sparatus…"

Huh? Looking back at the Turian, Shepard noticed his mandibles quiver, his mouth close and his eyes widen. *Like a dog scolded by its owner,* she thought as she raised an eyebrow. 'Bite your tongue', the man had said, if she remembered her Latin. Sparatus had clearly understood it, somehow. Whether that was a reflection of the Turian Councillor's erudition, or of the aura of authority this mysterious man had about him, she was not sure. But she was certainly leaning toward the latter.

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I looked Sparatus right in the eyes as I told the proud *torin* to shut up in the only way he would actually listen. You could always trust that man to be predictably arrogant. It came in handy at times, particularly when you want to establish your power in a hurry. *Morso lingua.* Bite your tongue. Sparatus had probably only heard that phrase once before in his life, and no doubt he had hoped never to hear it again. I grinned, knowing that he would not speak against me again this day.

Alright, back to business. Transfer the files, C.

[They have them.]

I resumed my walk and took position between the Alliance representatives and the Council. Classic posturing. I had highly trained marines at my back who did not know who I was. They could have restrained me at any time. All that was keeping them from doing so was how I held myself, radiating authority, hardly acknowledging their presence.

*That is Shepard standing right there.* I did not want to ignore Shepard. Had I not an important role to act out, I might have turned around right there and asked the legend for an autograph. *Maybe later.*

"Councillors, on your terminals you will find documents and footage proving Saren Arterius is, in fact, responsible for the attack on Eden Prime, and is unlawfully in command of an army of Geth. *It is all verifiable."

As the Councillors fiddle about with their terminals, I glance up to see Saren glaring daggers at me and grin at his confused and, frankly, infuriated expression.

*C, make sure he cannot cut the connection yet. I want him to see this. All of it.*

[I have locked the sockets on both ends, he will need to physically destroy the terminal on his end to close the channel.]

*Thank you, old friend.*

"This is… irrefutable evidence. I…" Valern was the first to compose himself. Naturally. He leaves his statement hanging as he turns his head to face his fellow councillors. He nods. A second later, Tevos does the same. Sparatus seems to still be half frozen in shock, but eventually comes to his senses and nods furiously.
"In light of this evidence…” Tevos begins, before I cut her off by raising my hand with my palm facing her. A somewhat rude gesture to Asari, when done at a distance, but she knows who I am. I am never at a distance.

"Before you continue, Councillor, I should tell you there is still one more piece of evidence to put forth. A witness testimony."

Valern interrupts, "With this evidence, that is hardly necessary, and regardless the testimony of one traumatised dock worker is hardly compelling proof."

He actually got his line in. I grin under my mask as I think about what comes next.

"My eye witness may, in fact, be traumatised, but he is hardly a dock worker. Spectre?"

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"TRAITOR!"

1. Shepard winced at the loud, flanged shout from right behind her. A taloned hand was placed on her left shoulder, and she turned around. Her jaw hit the floor as her gaze fell upon the last person she thought she would ever see again.

"Spectre Kryik?!" Sparatus gasped out in shock.

"BETRAYER!" Nihlus cried again, his talons leaving Shepard's shoulder as he pointed one directly at the target for his rage. His mentor and friend. Saren Arterius. Despite her confusion at the situation, Shepard could feel her blood begin to boil in empathy with the betrayed – no, the dead! – Spectre standing before her. Alive.

"How are you alive?! I saw your dead body!" The words left her mouth before she could even think to stop herself.

Nihlus paid her no heed, his focus still fully on the hologram in the corner of the room.

"I found you at the spaceport," Nihlus began, "You claimed to have been sent there by the Council. I knew it was a lie. I knew you would try to kill me. I made it easy for you, turned my back on you…”

Nihlus sneered as he finished, "And you shot me in the back."

Saren was looking straight at Nihlus, shock and confusion evident in his expression. It was almost as if he was trying to look through him, through the illusion, through the lie. He could not. Shepard saw his expression change slowly as he moved his gaze back to the man in black.

"The Broker sends his regards, Arterius."

At his words, Saren twists his face into a furious sneer. He then pulled his gun out of his holster and fired multiple times in his direction, his hologram corrupting and cutting out. He shot out his terminal. That's one way to end a conversation.

"You can put your gun down now, Commander. I do not believe holographic bullets can hurt me, but I thank you for your concern."
Shepard turned back toward the unnamed man, seeing that his mask was facing directly toward her. He pointed to her arms… Oh shit. She had not even noticed that she had pulled out her gun and pointed it at Saren on reflex when he pulled his. She quickly collapsed her Stinger pistol and put it back on her hip, a faint blush on her face. The man tilted his head to the right slightly and nodded, as he turned back around to face the Council. Nihlus walked up to stand beside him.

"Councillors, you may consider that an excerpt from my official mission report. Saren is a traitor. A mad man. He must be stripped of his position."

The three councillors looked at each other and gave a nod. Tevos spoke up first, "In light of this…" She looked down at the masked man and, with a small grin – a grin! – asked, "May we give our verdict now, Sir?"

"You may." The man responded with what Shepard thought was a hint of amusement to his thundering voice, but he betrayed nothing of the sort in his body language.

Tevos gave the man a smile before composing herself again and continuing, "In light of this abundance of evidence, the Council has no choice but to strip Saren Arterius of his position within the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch. The former agent is henceforth considered a fugitive from justice. All efforts will be made to bring him in to answer for his crimes."

A push to her shoulder made Shepard stumble a bit as the Ambassador pushed his way to the front. "The Alliance wishes to join the fleet to go after Saren!" He almost shouts, as he points a finger up toward the Council. Aww, damn it, I should have tripped him…

The Asari Councillor holds her hand up to interrupt Udina, "We will not be sending a fleet."

"Saren is a rogue agent on the run for his life," Sparatus interjects, "He no longer has the rights or resources of a Spectre. The Council has stripped him of his position."

"That is not good enough! You know he's hiding somewhere in the Traverse, send your fleet in!"

Udina's response was as quick as it was forceful.

"Silentium est Aureum, Donnell Udina. A fleet cannot track down one man."

There it is again! Shepard saw Udina practically deflate right in front of her, in response to the man's magic Latin words. Who the hell is this guy?!

Nihlus speaks up, "My friend is correct. There is, however, an alternative approach." He turns toward the Council again, "Councillors, I am prepared to give my final observation report regarding the Commander."

Shepard raised her eyebrows in surprise as she looked at the undead Turian.

He continued, "Commander Alina Shepard, N7 designation Alliance Marine. Extremely capable. Inspires disciple and skill with impeccable leadership qualities. She handled the unexpected situation at Eden Prime flawlessly and, after reviewing some of her previous missions, I have concluded to fully support her induction into the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch."

Her jaw hit the floor so hard she was sure it would bruise later.

Sparatus dismissively waved his talons through the air, "This is hardly the time for…"

"Sparatus." Sparatus stops. "This is precisely the time." As this man, this mystery, this… force of
nature spoke, Sparatus snapped his mouth shut.

The Turian opened his mouth again slightly as if to say something, but immediately slammed it shut again, eyes wide open. Is that shock or fear?

"Spectre Kryik, your report is noted. And I believe you have the right idea." Tevos looked away from Nihlus to her fellow Councillors, and they all nodded in turn before she turned back. Looking straight into Shepard's eyes, she spoke again.

"Commander Shepard. Step forward."

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It's strange how things turn out. Ten years of planning and preparation, and the opening act could hardly have gone any better. Nihlus is alive. Saren has lost his Spectre status. Shepard has become a Spectre, and has been given the mission to hunt down Saren. All the key pieces of the puzzle have fallen into place, all that is left is to tie up a few loose ends.

Notify our… assets, to meet me at Doctor Michel's clinic. You know where it is. We have one final guest to pick up, and a bit of a pest problem to deal with.

[Message sent.]

Location on Vakarian?

[Garrus Vakarian is heading toward the wards in his squad car. Estimated time to arrival at the clinic in 10 minutes. Fist's men will arrive two minutes before then.]

Thank you, C. Keep an eye on the situation, will you? I will probably be a bit late…

"Who the hell are you?"

I turn around toward the voice of Alina Shepard, Hero of Elysium, orphan survivor of Mindoir, and for the first time today I find myself at a loss for words.

"Uhm…"

Shepard raises an eyebrow in response to the sound I made, and before I could recover and actually say something… she practically falls over laughing.

Oh boy.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed chapter 2, or the first chapter with any real story to it. Novel-style writing isn't really my strong suit, if I'm honest, so I hope that it isn't terrible at least. 157 views, 13 favourites and 22 follows so far on just that first tiny bit of prologue, I did not expect that! Thank you to those of you who have subscribed, and feel free to leave a review with any feedback, criticism, anything. I would love to hear it! I am most used to
writing collaboratively, bouncing ideas off others, so any constructive feedback will be very much appreciated indeed.

And yes, I know, 2100 words is a rather short chapter...
'All that posturing… and then that?! Oh god…” Shepard was, quite literally, doubled over laughing. Everything about the man standing in front of her just shouted authority and goddamn infallibility, until she had seemingly surprised him with a simple, and obvious, question. And he floundered. For the first time since he had first appeared, his body language had shown something other than exactly what he wanted it to show. She had caught him off guard in the most classic manner she knew, by simply walking up behind a man seemingly caught up in his own thoughts and blurted out a question.

"When you are quite ready I may actually have an answer for you, Commander…”

She wiped the tears from her eyes, taking the opportunity to get another look at the man in black. He was back in character again, it seemed. Straight posture, chin held high. Whereas most admirals she had met in her life would have chosen this opportunity to stand at parade rest and, for lack of a better term, loom over her, he did not. His body was at a bit of an angle to hers, his head turned ever so slightly towards her. Without words, he was exclaiming the situation to be beneath him. *Not sure whether to be impressed or angered by this. Both, probably.*

"Oh… heh…” She waved off the last few chuckles that escaped her mouth, "Do go on, then."

"Very well. For now, you may call me the Messenger. You are aware of the Shadow Broker, yes?"

'The Messenger', eh? *Somewhat pretentious…* Shepard looked the man up and down, pointedly, as she answered.

"Of course. Information broker, apparently very powerful, knows something about everything, no known actual affiliation." She listed off what little she actually knew, with some educated guesses to give the impression that she knew more than she let on. *Don't want to seem ignorant, now do we.*

The Messenger gave a slight tilt of the head, and relaxed his shoulders almost imperceptibly. *Amusement?*

"More or less. I… represent the Broker in this matter. Saren has crossed him one too many times. Exactly once, in fact. The Broker do not take kindly to such things."
"That doesn't really explain what just happened, apart from what motivated it, now does it?"

Shepard was truly puzzled. Too many things didn't add up from that explanation. How the guards hadn't responded. How the evidence had been delivered to the Councillors' secure terminals. How he had managed to sneak in to a closed hearing. Not to mention, how Sparatus and Udina had reacted to his magic Latin.

"It should explain most of it. Very many people owe favours to my employer, and even more fear what he knows. I am afraid I cannot give you any particular details about my methods right now. As I am sure you understand, keeping information secret is half the secret of power."

Shepard grinned slightly before responding, "I certainly do." *It is my own greatest weapon, after all.*

Shepard had a gift, one she was well aware of and put to expert use. She could read people like open books. All emotions and reactionary thought had their tells. To Alina Shepard, body language was as clear as Alliance Standard, and that went for nearly all races. Except Salarians and Hanar. Something about those big eyes and the tentacles. Her gift allowed her to anticipate enemy behaviour, manipulate nearly anyone in conversation, and pick up on her crew’s worries and problems before they became actual problems. It made her a great soldier, a brilliant leader, and an extreme annoyance to nearly anyone who was supposed to be, or thought they were supposed to be, her superior.

"Suffice it to say, it is in my employer's interests to make certain Saren is brought to justice. To this end, he has given me two tasks. One of them, I just completed. Whether I can complete the second task is up to you, Commander."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. *Up to me?* "What do you mean by that?"

"I have been given the task of accompanying you on your mission, and providing whatever assistance I can."

" Hell no!" The words left her mouth before she could even stop to think about what she had been told.

The man took a half step back and turned to face her more directly. *"Excuse me?"* His response seemed to reflect a combination of genuine surprise and a hint of threat.

"I choose my own team, and I only ever choose people I know I can trust, or at least know I don't distrust. You…" Shepard pointed at the Messenger, "…You I do not trust."

"That is unfortunate, but ultimately unimportant."

Shepard turned toward the flanged voice that so rudely interrupted her. She narrowed her eyes at the undead *torin* as he walked up to join in the conversation. Chin high, straight posture, coming at a stop in parade rest with his eyes fixed firmly on the Messenger. The model Turian soldier.

"He will not be joining my mission, Nihlus."

"Our mission, Shepard." Nihlus interrupted. "We have our orders. The Council is sending both of us after Saren. As the senior Spectre, I have been given the lead on the mission with you as second in command."

"What?" Shepard was shocked. She would not play second fiddle. That was not her job. That had never been her job. She was the leader.
Nihlus held up a taloned hand to placate her. "Relax, Shepard. I am not leadership material, I never have been. Hell, I was almost kicked out of the military before I met Saren. I have been given command of the mission, but arrangements are being made. We will be assigned a ship and crew, to which we may make our own adjustments. You have command over the ship…"

"And the crew!" The Commander didn't miss a beat, "I decide who comes with us, and this man will not be part of my crew!"

"Correct. He will be part of mine."

"I feel like I am repeating myself. Excuse me?"

"Yeah, what he said!" Shepard pointed a finger at the Messenger.

Nihlus stifled a chuckle, "I have worked with the Messenger here several times over the last decade. I would not be alive now if it weren't for him. I trust him, to an extent, but more importantly I know his information and resources will be vital to our success."

Glaring daggers at the Turian, Shepard grit her teeth. She knew he was right. They had almost nothing to go on. No leads on Saren other than the general area he might be in, and that area spanned nearly half the known galaxy. Needle in a haystack was nowhere near sufficient to illustrate the enormity of the task. They needed more information, and they needed it fast.

"Speaking of information and resources, I must take my leave. Certain resources with vital information and talents require my assistance in the Wards. I will meet you at the Alliance docks in three hours."

"Oh no you don't…" No you're staying right here until I get some answers! I may be stuck with you on the crew, but I need to know who the fuck you are…"

The Messenger cut her off mid sentence, "Yes you do. But now is not the time. I shall see you later."

Shepard did not expect what happened next. The man just vanished. Literally vanished into thin air. Tactical cloak. She had seen them in use before, but none as… perfect, as this one. You could usually always see something still, an outline, disturbances in the air, light refraction that is just slightly off. But not with this guy.

Shepard turned toward the Turian at her side, "Who the hell is that guy?!

Nihlus just chuckled in response. "A powerful and resourceful man, Commander. Very powerful and very resourceful. And strangely trustworthy, for someone who portrays himself as a glorified mercenary."

The Spectre turned and started walking over toward the rest of the group. Udina and Anderson were still discussing something or the other, with Williams and Alenko standing at parade rest at Anderson's flanks. The subtle show of respect and military discipline curled Shepard's lips upward a bit as she caught up to the Turian.

"What do you mean, 'glorified mercenary'? And don't think I didn't notice the implied air quotes when you called him 'Messenger' earlier."

"You really are perceptive, aren't you. There is a lot you don't know about the man. Hell, there is a lot I don't know about the man. I get the feeling we will both know more by the end of the day, but
what I can say for now is that the Messenger has built a reputation of the past decade as an independent force similar to the Shadow Broker. But instead of buying and selling information, he specialises in delivering it. And other things."

"So he's a smuggler?"

Nihlus flicked his mandibles in amusement at the suggestion. "Hardly. Smugglers don't have a moral code. From what I can gather, this guy does."

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What the hell? I did not expect that!

[Her psych profile does suggest that Alina Shepard has significant trust issues resulting from her experiences during and after the slaver raid on Mindoir.]

Yeah, but... in the games, she recruited half the people she stumbled across if they even smelled like they could be useful!

[This is not a game, Aaron.]

No, I guess not. Thank the gods for Nihlus. Status update on the situation in the clinic?

[Fist's thugs arrived just a few seconds ago. Vakarian is just over a minute out. Your team will arrive in two. You can make it by then.]

Honestly, I was still a bit surprised at the timing of things. In the games, Shepard could choose to spend literally hours walking around on the Citadel before actually meeting Garrus in Michel's clinic. Of course, this was not a game. Events don't get triggered in a pattern revolving around the protagonist. They simply unfold naturally. Fortunately for me, I had an AI in my head who could keep track of things and events around the station while I was there.

Caesar was an interesting accident. The result of an experiment I performed back in the 21st century, trying to create a true AI by means of a continuous neural activity scan. My idea was that consciousness was an emergent phenomena not reflected directly in the structure of the brain itself, but rather in the reactive and spontaneous activity taking place within it, or 'on top of it'. I had been right – Caesar is proof of that – but at the time, I had thought the experiment proved me wrong.

One curious, and fortunate, result of the process by which Caesar was created is that he is innately compatible with nearly all known VI systems, though that is in part his own doing. After my line of AI research failed, focus was directed back at the structural approach to AI development. This never got further than the creation of advanced VIs, semi-intelligent programs without conscious thought. It just so happens that this approach to VI was a lot more efficient and adaptable than the prevailing dynamically self-programmed virtual intelligences in Council space at the time of the First Contact War. More importantly, to the Council races at least; my experiment appeared to prove directly that this type of cognitive structure VI was incapable of developing into true AI. And since structural VI were far smaller programs than what had been used previously, and far more adaptable, these VI could now be used in pretty much any electronic system where dynamic control was desired.

Which meant that Caesar could almost effortlessly spread his consciousness to those VI and take control of almost any system in known Council space. He was the universal key to all the VI locks in the world. A rather handy, if slightly scary, ability.
I turned the corner to Michel's clinic and saw my team just arriving at the fast travel station. **Link me to their comms, C.**

**[Acknowledged.]**

"**An altercation is in progress inside the clinic. Please stack up on the door. Wrex, you breach, we cover behind you. Tali, prepare overload mines. I want non-lethal force if possible as there are friendlies inside.**"

The Krogan warlord grunted in response, "I can't promise anything. Humans are squishy things."

I stifled a chuckle as I saw Tali take a couple of wary steps away from the Krogan.

"Please be careful, Wrex, we Quarians are even more, uhm… squishy."

"Heh, heh, heh… yes," Wrex grinned, "But you taste funny."

I shook my head at the Krogan. "**Be nice, Wrex. She's young, not much experience with Krogan. Fairly sure your 'humour' is lost on her.**"

"Spoilsport."

We stacked up at the door, Tali with her mines ready and Wrex ready to breach.

"**Breach!**"

Wrex opened the door and lumbered into the clinic, with me and Tali stacked behind him. When the thugs saw the gigantic Krogan, their eyes went wide in recognition. Their leader, the man holding Dr. Michel at gunpoint, spoke first.

"You are that Krogan who is after the boss!"

"And you are a thug with a penchant for stating the obvious." Wrex replied, "Now step away from the human."

"Not happ…"

Garrus chose that moment to pop out of his hiding spot and shoot the leader. Perfect headshot. Wouldn't expect anything less from Vakarian.

"**Now, Tali!**"

Our tech mines were flying before Garrus' target hit the ground, and impacted before any of his comrades were able to return fire. Not that they would have been able to. Almost all guns have Vis. Caesar had disabled them the moment we entered the room. Just seconds later, all targets had been incapacitated and formally booked by our personal C-Sec agent.

Wrex walked up to me as I was watching Garrus calm down Dr. Michel and accept her… gratitude. "That was… anti-climactic." He sounded disappointed.

I turned to him and shook my head slightly, "**Anti-climactic usually means things went according to plan. And that's a good thing.**"
"You're the Messenger."

I turned toward Garrus' voice and smiled before I realised he could not see that behind my mask. This was not the first time I had dealt with him. I had helped him track down one Dr. Saleon a couple of years back. He did not have the resources available to go after him then, but I had given him a permanent tracker on his ship.

"I am. It has been a while, Vakarian."

"Why are you here?"

Always the detective. "To protect the good doctor, and to find you. I have something you are looking for." I gestured for Tali to join us, "Tali'Zorah nar Rayya here is the Quarian you have been searching for. The one with evidence against Saren. Though I get a feeling you have not heard the latest developments in that case."

"Developments?"

I filled the detective in on the Council proceedings and Saren's conviction. He seemed relieved at the turn the case had taken, but that look of determination never left his eyes.

"Where is the Commander now? I need to speak with her, and with Spectre Kryik."

"You intend to join them on their mission."

Garrus' mandibles flicked and his eyes got wider in surprise at my perceptiveness. "How did you know?"

"I know you better than you think, detective. Come with us. We are all joining her mission."

Whether she likes it or not…

…

Alina Shepard was furious. Her mentor, one of only two commanding officers that had ever gained her respect, was being demoted. Well, technically, it was a promotion to a commanding office. But technicalities be damned, David Anderson belonged on the front lines fighting the good fight, not in an office fighting the bureaucracy. And definitely not in the same office as Donnel fucking Udina.

"Come clean with me, Captain. You owe me that much."

"I was in your shoes twenty years ago, Shepard. They were considering me for the Spectres."

What? "Why didn't you ever mention this?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Anderson snapped at her, "I could have been a Spectre but I blew it? I failed, Commander. It's not something I'm proud of."

"You didn't fail, Captain." Nihlus interjected, "Saren failed you. I read the reports, and I know how to read between the lines of Saren's reports. He set you up to take the fall for his own atrocities. You were not the first. You were not the last."
"Be that as it may, I could never prove that and the results were the same regardless. I never became a Spectre, and here we are." Anderson turned to his protégé, "The Normandy is fast and quick, Shepard, and you know the crew. Perfect ship for a Spectre. I know you will treat her well."

David Anderson had been more of a father to her than any of her foster parents had been since Mordin. The very concept of taking on this mission without him on the ship with her was terrifying, infuriating.

"You should be there with me, with us. You deserve to be on the front lines in this fight!"

Anderson shook his head in response, "Life rarely gives us what we deserve, Shepard. You of all people should know that. It is the mark of a good person that they make the best of what they are given. I can be of more use to you and your mission from back here."

Behind the steel, behind the determination he so clearly showed, Shepard could see his disappointment. It was in his eyes, and how his shoulders didn't rise up quite as high as they used to in his prouder moments.

Udina, on the other hand, was practically glowing with glee. "Come on, Anderson, we have important matters to attend to. Let the Commander get on with her mission."

Shepard was about to explode. How dare he?! "Udina…"

Before she could finish the thought, she was interrupted by a familiar, thundering voice.

"Donnel Udina."

All eyes turned toward the Messenger as he exited the elevator from the C-Sec offices, with three aliens following him. Krogan, Turian and… a Quarian? Shepard glanced over at Udina again, whose glee seemed to have disappeared completely.

"Captain Anderson is not your assistant. If you treat him as one, I will know of it, and I will personally make sure that your career will take a turn for the worse." The man came to a stop right in front of the Ambassador, looking him straight in the eye as he continued. "Do I make myself clear, Ambassador?"

The ambassador nodded furiously in response, and when he was waved away by the Messenger, he practically ran past the aliens and to the elevator. Holy shit. Never seen him afraid before. And I've pointed guns at him more than once!

Shepard and the Ambassador had a long history between them. His brother had once been her foster parent, and while she did not mind the other Udina so much, she loathed Donnel. She thought him a snake, interested only in power and influence and not caring who he stepped on to get it. He was also amusingly easy to anger, something she had exploited since the very first time they had met. Her squad had been assigned as his protection detail for a year during a diplomatic mission into the Traverse for secret negotiations with the Batarians after the end of the Skyllian Blitz. She had found that time to be almost as entertaining as it was amusing. Udina, on the other hand, probably still blamed her for the collapse of talks that eventually lead to the raid on Torfan. Poor Kaidan… he still won't talk about that.

"Commander?"

Shepard turned her eyes toward the masked man as he interrupted her thoughts.
"Who are your guests, Messenger?" She asked, inserting as much distrust as she could into her words.

The Messenger took a half step back and indicated toward his alien friends.

"This is Urdnot Wrex, warlord and mercenary, one of few truly trustworthy Krogan. And this is young Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, a Quarian on her pilgrimage."

"And what are they doing here?"

"For that… we should get more private quarters. I suggest the whole senior crew, including our guests, meet in the briefing room in half an hour for a more… thorough debrief."

... I'm not going to lie, I was nervous about what was about to happen. I had spent ten years building toward this moment. Everything was in place as it should be, but ultimately it still came down to performance. I could not tell the truth. It would open the floor to too many questions, and would cause far too much uncertainty about what was to come in the next few months and years. The one thing we could not afford at this point was too much uncertainty.

I watched as the last of the crew entered the briefing room and took a seat. Kaidan Alenko and the ship's doctor, Major Dr. Karin Chakwas. It was still hard for me to wrap my mind around the fact that I was standing in a room surrounded by what I had always thought were fictional characters. But here they are, flesh and bone, living eyes all locked on me.

_Time to get this show on the road. C, find all transmitters and choke them. Lock the door._

[Three bugs squashed. Door locked.]

I smiled under my mask. _The Council, the Alliance and Cerberus. Correct?_

[Correct.]

_So predictable._

"Thank you all for coming. I know you all have questions, some more… important, than others."

I waited for a bit, making sure I had everyone's attention before moving on. Shepard herself had been glaring daggers at me since I had walked into the briefing room. She had been waiting for me, and had not said a word. Until now.

"There is only one that matters, Messenger. Who. Are. You?"

I could only smile at her persistence.

"Glad you asked."

I lifted my hood and let it fall down my shoulders as I unclasped my mask and revealed my face to the crew for the first time. I looked Shepard straight in the eyes.

"My name is Aaron Close. I am the CEO of Close Corporation. Pleased to make your
acquaintance."

Chapter End Notes

(Note: These notes are copied directly from FFnet until chapter 7.)

Took longer than I thought to get this down. I had most of it written two days ago, but realised yesterday that I had missed a plot hole and as a result I had to rewrite half of it.

Yes, I am moving quite quickly with not very many words. The idea is to get the mission against Saren going as quickly as possible. Things may start to make more sense with the next chapter, as Aaron explains to the crew who he is and - maybe more importantly - what Close Corporation is. I feel like I should note that the character Aaron Close, as well as Close Corporation and everything that goes with it, is my own original creation. I originally wrote them years ago for a different story, a TV series that never got picked up. Over the last year or so it had come back into my mind and I started to realise that it fit pretty well with the Mass Effect universe. That's where the idea for a player insert fanfic came in.

I have had a few comments suggesting that the protagonist is something of a Mary Sue, suffering from "badass syndrome" or something along those lines. I agree. That is entirely by design. Ten years of planning for specific events you know will happen gives you a lot of advantages, especially when you have an AI not only on your side but literally in your head. Aaron is a very powerful man indeed, but not at all invincible. He is limited by the technology available to him, which is substantial but not insurmountable even simply to enough firepower. Not to mention that his greatest advantage is the capabilities afforded to him by an AI, and the fact that they are going up against both a race of emergent AI (Geth) and an ancient AI force (Reapers/Catalyst) may suggest that the advantage is not as great as he might imagine. Add to that the fact that Caesar is not his slave, but a being unto himself with his own consciousness and choices... things could get complicated.

Anyway, I hope you're enjoying the story so far! Please leave a review, I love reading them, and I really appreciate the feedback. The more detailed the better, but even the occasional "I like it!" makes my day a lot better :)
Computational History

Chapter Summary

"My name is Aaron Close. I am the CEO of Close Corporation. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Chapter Notes

I don't own mass effect bla bla.

Ten years truly is a long time to prepare, but honestly that only counts the years where I've been involved. Caesar had been working and planning for over 150 years and let me tell you, there is a lot an AI can get done in 150 years even when it is trying to stay hidden. By the time he had brought me back to life, so to speak, he had built a vast financial empire almost unknown to the galaxy, hidden behind and between hundreds of shell companies and 'investment firms'. With that kind of starting point, it had not been very difficult to make the Close Corporation both a financial and technological power player on the galactic scene. Five years ago, we bought out Hahne-Kedar and became the main supplier of equipment to the Alliance.

So obviously, it was no surprise that Shepard recognised the name of my company when I introduced myself. I mean, she was sitting there wearing Close Corporation customizable armour, with a CC Kessler K2 pistol on her hip. Which appears to be a stock model… gonna have to fix that.

Surprisingly, Alenko was the first to speak. "Close Corporation. The Close Corporation? The Alliance's main supplier of arms and equipment?"

I smiled in response, "The very same."

"Profit." I turned toward Shepard as she sneered at me, "All this. All this for a god damn PROFIT MOTIVE?!" She got out of her chair and slowly, with very deliberate steps, walked towards me, never taking her eyes off mine.

Surprised, again, by her outburst, I floundered. "What? No, I…"

She cut me off, "You're the CEO of a gigantic-ass corporation! What the fuck could you possibly gain from running around threatening Councillors and Spectres in that fancy armour of yours other than higher profits?" She punctuated those last two words by poking me in the chest with her finger as she finally got up to me.

What the hell is her problem?!

[It appears she does not think very highly of you, Aaron.]

No shit…
I waved the Commander's hand away from my chest and straightened up. "Profit has nothing to do with it!" The force with which I spoke surprised even me.

Shepard took a couple of steps back. She gestured for me to continue. "Well?"

It had never really occurred to me that my motives might be misconstrued based on who, or what, I represented. Well, it did occur to me when I claimed to represent the Shadow Broker, but not with my own company.

"Close Corporation is not a for-profit company. It never has been. None of the CEOs or board members have their own luxury yachts or anything like that. We are a company with a purpose, even if that purpose is not known to the wider world."

"Oh spare me the bullshit, Close, your company…"

I cut her off with a single word: "Reapers."

…

What…did… what?! Shepard just stared at the oligarch as he had, once again, completely blindsided her.

"How… what?"

Aaron Close held up a hand to forestall any further rambling. "I… my company, we know about the Reaper threat. Our purpose is to stop them."

This didn't make any sense to her. Reaper? Why does that sound familiar? Why does it sound so… significant?

"What the fuck is a Reaper?"

Close actually looked like the question took him by surprise, before an expression of understanding slid across his face.

"Ah. Your vision wasn't complete, was it?"

He might as well have just slapped her across the face. As he mentioned her vision, it inevitably flashed before her eyes again. Death and destruction. Lifeforms, as much machines as they were organic. Annihilation. Broken. Reaper.

"The… the enemy. They are Reapers?"

"Yes." He didn't miss a beat, "Actually, that was one of the things I was going to reveal today. Miss Zorah?"

Behind her, the Quarian – Tali – rose out of her seat and came up to join Close at the centre of attention as she brought up her omni-tool.

"I, uh, I was on my Pilgrimage when I heard rumours of Geth beyond the Veil. Of course, I was curious, so I searched them out – with help from Close Corporation, actually – and managed to locate a small outpost. I incapacitated the Geth units stationed there and managed to extract some fragments from their memory cores."
Quarians are curious aliens. Their environmental suits, required attire if they want to even survive outside completely sterile environments, completely obscure any of the normal expressive cues that most species rely on for communicating non-verbal information. This includes their own species, actually; until just a few hundred years ago, the Quarians did not require the suits and relied on facial expressions just as much as any other species. Hanar and Elcor not included, of course. In fact, it is said they had relied quite a bit on such non-verbal communication, as it used to include factors such as dimming or brightening of their eyes' illumination. All of this probably explained the way Tali was, right now, practically telegraphing her shy nervousness and veiled excitement at her own technical achievements through her body language. To Shepard, it was equivalent to screaming 'I AM SHY AND NERVOUS BUT I DID THIS AMAZING THING, PAY ATTENTION'. She couldn't help but smile at Tali's honest and authentic demeanour. To someone who sees the small, everyday deceptions that everyone uses to maintain their 'image', it was a refreshing thing to observe.

"Eden Prime was a major victory." Saren's voice broke Shepard's attention on the Quarian. "The Beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

"The Conduit? What the hell is the Conduit?" Shepard couldn't help interrupting. Her visions had not given any clues about a 'Conduit', but the name still seemed… familiar. In a similar sense to how she knew the term Reaper before she had ever heard it.

Nihlus offered a suggestion, "It's a safe bet it has something to do with the Beacon. Prothean technology, perhaps," he mused, "Possibly a weapon."

Close held a hand up again, "There is more. Next fragment, please, Tali?"

The Quarian worked her omni-tool again, "Saren wasn't working alone. Listen."

"And one step closer to the return of the Reapers." The voice of an Asari was unmistakable. For all their similarity to humans in both anatomy and general physiology, there were still some significant differences. The eezo lining their nervous system, their soft-scaled skin and head crests, complete lack of body hair, and their monosexual nature aside, more subtle differences existed that made it easy for a trained eye – or ear – to separate human from Asari. There was an inflection to their voice that even translators couldn't get rid of, a very subtle feature of their voice boxes. It made all of them – most of them – sound almost seductive whenever they spoke. Not gonna lie, Asari voices are sexy as hell.

As the Quarian shut down her omni-tool, she turned toward the crowd. Shepard noticed that everyone had got out of their chairs and was standing in something of a circle around Tali and Close. Little Miss Zorah seemed to shrink under all the attention.

"Back to your seats," Shepard ordered, "But not you two," she pointed at the two people in the middle of the circle. "I need more information."

Nihlus hadn't followed her orders, and remained at her side. "Indeed. Who are these 'Reapers', and why are Saren and his Asari accomplice working at getting them to return?"

He picked up on the Asari thing, too, huh? Maybe there's more to him than I thought. "Perhaps more to the point, return from where?"

Tali eagerly answered their questions, "According to the data in the Geth memory core, the Reapers are – were – a hyper-advanced machine race, that existed fifty thousand years ago. They hunted the Protheans to total extinction, and then they just vanished. At least that's what the Geth believe."

"That seems rather far fetched, miss Zorah." Nihlus said, "We don't know what caused the
disappearance of the Protheans, but even though a synthetic uprising is one of the more popular
theories out there, there is no real evidence for it. Not even a piece of scrap metal. Even the Geth
leave their scrap behind."

It would have been hard to miss the Turian Spectre's jab at the Quarian people's unfortunate synthetic
legacy. Shepard turned her face into a scowl and, as she glared at the Turian by her side, she put a
hand on Tali's shoulder. "Thank you for finding us this evidence. It seems it's the only lead we have,
and we'll need it."

Close chose this moment to interrupt, "Actually, there is more."

Shepard moved her gaze toward the liar standing behind Tali, but kept the scowl on her face as he
continued, "I know who the second person in the recording is. Matriarch Benezia T'Soni."

Nihlus' mandibles flicked so violently in response to that revelation that Shepard could actually hear
it without looking at him. "Matriarch Benezia? She is a highly respected and powerful Asari, and
close personal friend to Councillor Tevos. Why would she be allied with Saren in this? Her politics
were always those of peace and unity, not war and racism. And she would never ally with the Geth!"

Again with the raised hand gesture – that is starting to get annoying, arrogant bastard – Close
interjected, "T'Soni was worried about Saren for years, and ventured out to join him in hopes of
turning him around from his path of destruction." He sighed as he continued, "Clearly, she failed.
And I think I know why."

*Okay. He has my attention now. How so?*

"Saren's flagship, he calls it Sovereign, you saw it on Eden Prime I believe?" Close looked at her,
and she nodded in confirmation. "I have good reason to believe that this ship is actually a Reaper."

That suggestion caused something of an uproar. Every single person in the room whispered their
shock and disbelief. Shepard turned her head toward her crew and, with just a glance, quieted the
room.

She turned back toward the resident man of mystery, "Why would they be working toward returning
the Reapers if the Reapers have already returned? That makes no sense."

"They haven't returned," Close said, shaking his head, "Sovereign is the only Reaper in the galaxy,
as far as we know."

"Who is 'we'?" Nihlus asked. Perceptive. Again.

Close smiled in response, "Close Corporation's intelligence branch. Of which I am the leader and
main operative," he waved his hand in front of him and shook his head, "But we're getting off track
here. I'll spell it out for you: Sovereign is one Reaper. Imagine a horde of those ships. That's what
they are after."

Her vision flared up again. A word, a… concept came to the front of her mind. Unending. She
shuddered. "Dark skies. We have nothing that could stop them."

"Not yet," Close offered immediately, "But we will. Right now, we just need to stall them. And that
means stopping Saren."

"Hang on," There is one thing that doesn't make sense here, "How does the Close Corporation
know all this? You implied you've known about the Reapers since before it was founded."
"Ah…” Close hesitated, like he was debating with himself what he would and would not reveal, "Not quite. Our company was founded as part of a research project into computational history and archaeology."

"Computational… what?" Shepard was confused. That collection of words just didn't make sense to her.

"My original profession," Close continued, "Was VI programmer and hobby historian. A friend of mine and I had some ideas about using advanced, adaptive VI systems to analyse all historical and archaeological information in existence to try to build a narrative history more complete than any individual or collective organic researcher could establish."

All eyes were on the man in black now. He continued, "Very quickly, we found certain patterns both in archaeological finds and historical and mythological references across all species, including Protheans. Especially the Protheans. These patterns suggested three things: First, that many of the finds attributed to Protheans belonged to species and cultures extinct long before they ever came on the scene. Second, that all these cultures and species appeared and disappeared on a very regular schedule, around every fifty thousand years. Third," He paused for effect before he continued, "That these disappearances were all forced by very similar foes. The Protheans referred to them as Reapers."

Nihlus scoffed next to her, "Another bogeyman theory. They are ah, what do you humans say, a diamond dozen? Very common, I mean, when it comes to the Protheans."

"Maybe," Close answered, "But the beautiful thing about our system is that it made predictions to test its theories. It lead us to make some amazing discoveries. Like a Prothean data storage device. It took us a year to decrypt its last engrams."

The turian Spectre looked shocked. "You've found Prothean data and not shared it with the galaxy?!"

Raising his hand again in his arrogant, placating gesture, Close continued, "Yes, because revealing what we found would have endangered what we now needed to do. What that device contained was concrete evidence of the Reapers. An image of a Reaper. A short description of them."

The whole room waited with bated breath. "The Reapers are machines. They are artificial intelligences that have existed for probably millions of years. Countless cycles, as they call them. Their motivations are unknown, but their methods and actions are well known. They overwhelm and plain exterminate all life, before erasing nearly all trace of them, but…” He paused for dramatic effect, "They always leave the Mass Relays and the Citadel intact for the next cycle to discover."

"Ancestors!" Garrus exclaimed, before continuing in a more hushed tone, "They are seeding the crop for harvest…"

Eyebrows and ridges shot up all across the room as Vakarian's observation registered with the present crew. The machines are leaving behind just enough of a trace of the previous… cycle, that the next will develop and spread before their next incursion.

"Precisely." Close answered.

"So the Conduit is not a weapon, then." Nihlus mused.

Interesting conclusion, "How do you figure?"

"How would a weapon bring back an ancient race of sentient machines? It's more likely that it's
some sort of communication device, or something like that."

She couldn't argue with the logic. A fleet of Reapers would likely be enough of a weapon on their own. They wouldn't need some *Conduit* on top of that, unless one enabled the other.

"That is pretty much our conclusion so far as well, Spectre." Close answered.

A second flanged voice interrupted the conversation from behind her, "Alright, knowing all this, none of it gives us any direct clues as to where we can actually find Saren. We still don't know his precise plans or location."

*The detective. Old habits die hard,* Shepard thought to herself and smiled as she looked over her shoulder to the Turian in C-Sec armour who Close had brought on board. *I may not trust the man who brought you here, Vakarian, but I can't help but trust you. Just... something about you.*

"Indeed," Close answered, "We do not know where Saren or any of his fleet of Geth is located. However," he paused slightly to make sure he had everyone's attention, "I think I know a good place to start."

"So do I," Nihlus interrupted, "Saren has significant holdings on Noveria, as one of the owners of the company Binary Helix. It is likely he will now be in a rush to extract whatever resources he has there before the Council steps in."

"Already on that, Kryik," Close responded, "My company is in the middle of a takeover of that company as we speak. We need to get boots on the ground there ASAP, but this should help us once we get there. However," he continued, "First we have two other stops on the way."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. A few seconds ago, he had mentioned 'a good place to start'. One place. Now there are two?

"I just received word that the ExoGeni colony on Feros has been attacked by Geth forces. ExoGeni has refused Alliance assistance in the matter, citing corporate sovereignty. However, this is a Spectre vessel. We can ignore their refusal."

Shepard interrupted, "Then that is clearly our first destination." She was about to give Joker the order to set a destination, but Close stopped her.

"Hang on, Commander. We need to make one stop before that."

Close brought up his omni-tool and keyed in some commands. *Customised interface. I don't recognise his input gestures.* He held up his hand and his omni-tool projected a hologram of a volcanic planet.

"This here is Therum, a geologically unstable mining planet in the Artemis Tau cluster. Here," Close pointed at a location on the planet with his free hand, and the image shifted to focus on that spot, "Is an archaeological dig, a Prothean site, where an Asari – an expert on the Protheans – is currently working."

Close paused for a second, before hitting a button on his omni-tool. The picture changed to the image of an Asari scientist as he continued, "Her name is Liara T'Soni. Lady Benezia's daughter.

...
Over the next hour or so, the crew and I went over our combined intelligence on our targets and laid out a plan of approach. Our first port of call would be Therum, as I had suggested. Shepard was initially sceptical, but when I told her that I was completely certain that the Prothean expert was both not a danger and would be essential in helping her clear up the vision from the Beacon, she relented and agreed.

I had managed to get the crew to agree to hold off on going to Noveria until after both Therum and Feros, telling them that I had eyes and ears on the ground there already and would be alerted to any developments requiring more urgent attention. This was actually true; I did have three operatives stationed on the planet, as well as an ownership stake in Synthetic Insight in addition to my pending takeover of Binary Helix. I would be alerted the moment Benezia arrived, which had not happened yet, and actually getting to Peak 15 would be vastly simplified by my influence in Port Hanshan.

To me, three things had the highest priority right now: Recruiting Liara, obtaining the Cipher, and giving the Normandy some upgrades. I knew that last one might prove tricky as long as I did not have the Commander's implicit trust, and right now I seemed to have lost the trust of even Nihlus, a matter I would have to discuss with him sooner rather than later.

"Joker, set a course for the Artemis Tau cluster and punch it. You'll get further details from Pressly." Shepard ordered the pilot to get us underway.

"So, how did you manage to bring Kryik here back to life, Close?" Garrus' question took me by surprise. Maybe I should have seen it coming. I knew that once the plans were settled, more questions would come, and of course the C-Sec detective would be interested in solving the murder that wasn't.

"Smoke and mirrors, Garrus," I began, "Smoke and mirrors. I had been tipped off to Saren's allegiances with the Geth and the Reapers weeks ago, and sought out Nihlus here, his mentee, to get a warning out." I shook my head, "Of course, he didn't believe me."

Nihlus chose this time to enter the conversation, "Saren was a close friend of mine, and a mentor during my first years in the Spectres and as his apprentice before joining. I knew about the Reaper threat, though apparently not any sort of details about it, from previous encounters and assignments involving Mr. Close here, but I simply could not believe that Saren would ally himself with them." He gave a short chuckle and continued, "And the part about taking command of the Geth? Well that just sounded like a bad vid, honestly."

All the non-humans in the room, and myself, chuckled quietly at his last observation, while the humans just looked… confused. Humanity was new on the galactic scene, and the Geth had never been around in any way during all of humanity's time in Council space. For the galaxy at large, the Geth threat had had time to become a sort of shadowy bogeyman, a looming threat that could erupt at any moment but somehow never did. It had made them, or depictions of them, a staple of the more fantastic entertainment in the galaxy. Hell, even sappy romance stories like Fleet and Flotilla had multiple arcs about the Geth whenever they needed some non-romantic tension in the story. To the humans, though, their only experience with the Geth was their very real attack on Eden Prime. They were not the bogeyman of fantasy, or a storytelling trope. They were a real, physical threat.

I picked up where Nihlus left off, "Nevertheless, while he did not believe me, he did trust me enough to allow my help in taking precautions." I clicked a button on my wrist, and took a small step directly to the side. "Over the years, my company has developed some rather impressive, but subtle, techniques and technology for infiltration. Our intelligence wing is second to no other organisation in the galaxy," I paused for effect, "Not even the STG."

I clicked the button again, and looked at the faces of the crew as they all raised their eyebrows and
ridges with the most confused look on their faces. Tali's glowing eyes looked like they were about to pop through the screen of her mask. In front of them, they had just seen me flicker out of existence and at the same time reappear slightly to the right of where they thought I had been standing.

"Sometimes, when an operative is caught, they know they will get shot. Sometimes, getting shot is exactly what needs to happen. If we could avoid the, you know, death aspect of that, it would be useful." I had a smirk on my face as I told them, "To that effect, we developed a hybrid tactical cloak and hologram technology. It projects a hologram of the wearer exactly where they stand, while simultaneously cloaking them. A short projection delay on initialisation allows the wearer to 'step outside of themselves'. In effect, the wearer is seen to be standing still while in actuality they have moved slightly away from where they were."

"That's… very clever," Vakarian finally responded, after shaking off his confusion, "But surely the ruse would be discovered when the hologram is 'shot'?"

I smiled. "The hologram was designed to be shot. It has a very thin barrier, which acts as an impact trigger. When triggered, the hologram animates toward the wearer in a jerk fashion. Sensors detect where the impact was, and the same special effects used in vids are used to imitate blood spray as appropriate. To really sell it, though," I looked at Nihlus and winked, "You need some decent acting chops."

"And let's not forget the automatic injection of a suppressant that masks all vitals for 10 minutes," Nihlus flared his mandibles in a Turian smile, "That's what actually sells it."

"So that's why you actually registered as dead when we found you…" Shepard sighed. I felt bad about putting her through that, but it had been necessary. Nihlus was too much of an asset; I could not allow him to be killed on Eden Prime, particularly if my suspicions about the Council proved to be correct.

"Indeed." Nihlus seemed to feel just as bad as I did about putting her through that. "If it makes you feel any better, I did not believe I would find Saren on the planet until I saw him at the port. When that happened, I had no choice but go through with the ruse. When I came to, you had reached the train and were on your way to the beacon." He looked away from the Commander raised his gaze to me.

"I arrived on the scene just minutes after he had woken up, and helped him exfil." I sighed as I looked at the Commander. "As his death had been… confirmed, it was beneficial to continue the act. Our operatives in Alliance Intelligence falsified some documents – temporarily – and got word through the ranks that his body had been recovered and taken into Council custody."

A scowl appeared on Shepard's face and she slowly lifted her eyes to glare at me. "You keep referring to your 'operatives'. You are a corporation. They are not operatives." The menace in her voice made me take a step back, "They are traitors and mercenaries."

I understood her position. Shepard was an Alliance soldier through and through. The idea that there were elements in her organisation, maybe even some of her bosses, who worked not for the Alliance but for some for-profit corporation, was understandably infuriating. Just one more thing of the list of things I should have anticipated, but didn't. Nor did I anticipate my immediate reaction to her accusation.

"They. Are. Heroes." I said, through clenched teeth and with a sincerely angry glare plastered on my face, directed at the soldier who stood in front of me. "They are aware of the real threats the universe faces, threats that most people – and all governments – are oblivious to, and work tirelessly to prepare for them."
I was genuinely angered by the implication that my people were anything less than honourable. I knew for a fact that every single member of my organisation had been handpicked specifically for their talents and integrity. Those who are motivated solely by money had no place in any part of the Close Corporation. We had had a few over the years, but they never survived long. It's amazing how difficult it is to be a double agent in an organisation run in part by an ever-expanding AI presence.

I sighed and put my hand to my forehead, rubbing it slightly with my eyes closed. Shepard couldn’t know what the Corporation was all about. Until just an hour ago, all it was to her was a logo on her weapons and equipment. A corporation in a sea of corporations, most of which had less than stellar track records as far as ethics go. I needed to convince her. I was not sure I could, but I had to at least try.

"Commander," I said with another sigh as I looked up at Shepard. She had her arms crossed over her chest, leaning slightly back toward her right shoulder, her head cocked with her face in a disapproving scowl directed at me. "Do you know the official slogan of the Close Corporation?"

Before she could answer, the ship's PA crackled and Joker's voice broke in to the conversation. "Ooh, ooh, I know this one!" The pilot cleared his throat, and I could practically see the face of Seth Green in front of me as he imitated the cheesy voice from my company's commercials in the most exaggerated singsong fashion, "Close Corporation: Excellence Through Unity."

Thank God for Joker. His jab noticeably shifted the mood in the conference room from one of suspicion and vague hostility to something… lighter. Even the Commander's lips cracked in a bit of a smile. My own face responded with another sigh and a smile.

"Indeed, thank you, Mr. Moreau."

"Uh… should I be worried that you know who I am?" Joker responded.

That got a genuine smile from me. "I only keep tabs on the most extraordinary of people, Mr. Moreau, so no. Flattered, maybe. Not worried."

"Okay… thanks?"

Shepard waved her hand, "Alright, enough of that. What's your point, Close?"

"My point is," I answered, "As cheesy as that slogan sounds, it is more than just a slogan. It is our core philosophy. We do not discriminate. We avoid prejudice. We hire from all species, and pay according to skill, talent and merit only." I looked at our resident Quarian and gestured toward her, "Miss Zorah, here, is an example of this. Close Corporation is the largest employer of Quarian labour in the galaxy outside of the Migrant Fleet. In fact, we almost got in trouble from the Council for potentially circumventing sanctions against the Fleet because of this."

"Is this true, Tali?" Shepard asked the Quarian with affection in her voice. Huh. Didn't realise she had already taken the time to get to know her.

[Ship logs suggest Shepard has assigned Tali to the command of Chief Engineer Adams after speaking to her for nearly fifteen minutes prior to this meeting.]

That's half the time she spent preparing.

[Indeed. The rest of the time she spent talking with Wrex and Vakarian.]

Whelp. She does not waste time.
Tali answered, "It is true. It is not known to the wider galaxy, but the Close Corporation is the first organisation in nearly 300 years that has entered into a mutually beneficial formal agreement with the Migrant Fleet." That turned a few surprised heads toward her, and she shrunk a bit under the attention. Glances went back and forth between Tali and myself as those present tried to make sense of the information.

I decided to take the pressure back off her. "The Quarian people have some of the resourceful people in the galaxy, regardless of species, and they have been shunned by the galaxy to this day for 300 year old mistakes that already nearly extinguished their species. My corporation believes this is not right, and we have tried our best to help."

Tali straightened her posture and her eyes glowed brighter in response, "With their help, we have increased liveship output by nearly 40% in two years, and we are building our own ships again for the first time in nearly three hundred years!" She spread her arms, elbows tucked to her midsection, in a Quarian gesture of respect and affection, as she continued, "We may very well owe our continued existence to the Close Corporation."

Shepard had a contemplative look in her face, "Well, that is certainly a glowing endorsement…"

"It's not even half of it!" I decided to keep the momentum going, "The Corporation is largely operated as a non-profit. None of our administrators makes exorbitant wages, or has private yachts or anything like that." *Surprisingly easy to accomplish, when most administration is done by AI.* "We have a cause, and we are all dedicated to it."

"Alright, alright," Nihlus interrupted, "This is all getting a bit… out of hand. Let's table it for later. Commander?"


Just as she finished, Joker came on the comms again, "All hands, stand ready for relay transit in thirty seconds."

---

Shepard was not happy. Everyone seemed to trust Close, despite what he had told them. He knew more – much more – than he was letting on, she knew that. He was a practiced liar; nearly every part of his body language was finely honed to show exactly what he wanted, but she saw right through it. He practically screamed deception to her, but she had no proof. Everything he did, he was trying to buy favour with the crew. With her. When she spoke to her requisitions officer just minutes earlier, he told her that the ship had received a load of top-of-the-line Close Corporation weapons and equipment prior to leaving the Citadel. In a box specifically marked for her, she found a pistol model she had never even heard of. It appeared to be a heavily modded variant of her K2 pistol, with the name K3 engraved on it. When she tried to interface it with her omni-tool to find out more, she had to go through an access authorisation screen that disappeared when it checked her identity. The pistol's specs were miles beyond anything she had ever used before, and had some very handy features like tuneable mass, force and grain velocity.

*He is trying to buy me.* And some of the crew, she knew, had already been bought, for all practical purposes. Even her closest allies, Alenko and Williams, were practically beaming. Williams could not hide her excitement at the new toys she had to play with over in the armoury, and Alenko? Well,
he actually had a good reason for being in Close's camp on this. Close Corporation was the reason he no longer suffered migraines from his L2 implant, after they developed the L2E surgical modifications and practically handed them out for free to all L2s in the Alliance. Shepard had always been suspicious of that move, and had thought for years that it had probably been part of a ploy to maintain their exclusive contract with the Alliance. She had never voiced this opinion to Alenko, though. She had known him for years, and knew the extent of the issues he’d had with his implant. She recognised that L2E had genuinely helped him, so she had let it go. But now it just added to everything else that didn't make sense about Close's company.

She knew he was up to no good, and she would find proof of it.

Chapter End Notes

The exposition is strong with this one! Looks like I'm ending up on a weekly schedule, for however long I can keep that up. I've had a hard time writing this week, it's been far too hot here in London.

Sorry if this chapter is a bit heavy on the exposition, really. I was going to cover a couple more things, like how/why the Fist mission was skipped previously (hint; it wasn't). Most of the stuff covered in this chapter had to be covered in this chapter, and doing it in the briefing seemed like the most logical choice. The bits that weren't strictly necessary seemed were just attempts by Aaron to convince the sceptical Commander of his good intentions. Unsuccessfully. Poor guy. For the record, the somewhat adversarial relationship between Shepard and Aaron will be an important part of the story throughout most of the ME1 arc. I have actually already written the scenes that more than anything else will (hopefully) get them past that, but that's way into the future.

Please leave reviews if you like what you read! For example, what do you think about Close's partial cover story for how he knows about the Reapers? It's not unassailable, but that's on purpose (on my part).

Next chapter: Action! Drama! Liara! (NOPE!) Maybe some surprises!

New note: I noticed a plot hole, checking through this chapter for posting here. In the FFnet version, Nihlus is first dismissive of the Reaper theory, and then soon after goes on to mention how he's known about the Reapers for a while. Whoops. Kinda sorta fixed it.
Going Down

Chapter Summary

Wake up, get out.

Chapter Notes

I don't own Mass Effect. I do own Aaron Close, the Close Corporation, and all of that OC stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the team left the briefing room, I had received many glances telling me that many of them would be seeking me out later for further conversation. I could hardly blame them. Despite there being many new arrivals on board, I was by far the biggest unknown. I just didn't seem to fit in. As they all filed out, Shepard and Nihlus included – I assumed they had duties to attend to – I took a seat. I had business to attend to, and some planning to do.

C, bring up a complete schematic of the Normandy, will you?

[Acknowledged.]

It's hard to describe how my interactions with Caesar worked. We communicated by thought through a set 'channel', for the most part, though he could not read my mind. He had complete sensory access, though, which I could revoke should the need arise. I tell you, I was not very keen on the idea of my best friend being present for my… intimate moments. We had a silent agreement about that sort of thing. As much as he probably wanted to experience that sort of sensory input, I was not having it. Voyeuristic ever-present AI. Disturbing thought.

It took Caesar a bit longer than usual to complete my request. I was just about to 'voice' my concern at the delay when my post-optic visual processors received the information and displayed it to me as a 3D hologram directly in front of me. My POV processors… I loved the damn things. Where everyone else would hunch over to manipulate an omni-tool and view the information on a screen, or use a HUD device either in their helmets, in a visor, in contacts or – more rarely – as an ocular implant, my eyes were untouched. Most HUD devices rely on thin film transparent displays, which makes them visible to outsiders. My HUD was 'projected' not onto my retina, but rather as a construct directly onto my brain's representation of my visual field.

The Normandy is a much bigger ship than what is depicted in the game. I think the best illustration of this point is the size of the loading bay. First of all, it is nearly one and a half times as big in reality. Second, underneath most of it there's a cargo hold. Third, in the game there is A LOT of space that is never shown. For example, the CIC, Ops and cockpit areas go through-and-over some of the crew sleeping spaces, accessible through a long corridor going forward from the mess hall. The sleeping pods that lined that hall were for high-alert situations, the crew had better quarters through the door at the end of the hall. Not individual quarters, mind you. There wasn't unlimited space, and some space had to be left for escape pods.
Frankly, the schematics shown in the game were… wrong. The ship is 170 meters long, but the distance from the lift to the cockpit – which in-game schematics have you believe is most of that length – isn't even fifty meters. In fact, it's closer to 35 meters. Now, much of that extra space was just the mass of the ship's hull and equipment, but far from all of it. The cockpit was further back than it was shown in the game, not at the tip of the ship. Which makes sense; putting the control centre of the ship at the most exposed part of it isn't very smart. Joker was still far enough to the front that he could 'feel' the subtle inertia shifts that he relied upon to do is flight magic, but he was not as exposed as the games would have you believe.

I explored the layout of the Normandy quickly, investigating every room and useable space. Directly underneath the CIC, there was a maintenance area accessible through a hatch in the stairwell behind the lift. The area was important during combat engagements, when there would always be an engineer stationed there to make sure all systems in the CIC ran smoothly and to keep the physical lines of communication between the CIC and Engineering open. The compartment even had a sleeping pod, in case of long-term high-alert situations. This will do for my purposes. Caesar, file a station request with the XO, will you?

[Will do. Though, I'm not sure he will grant it.]

He'll come around. If the xenophobic bastard can learn to get along with aliens, he can learn to get along with me. Besides, it's not like it would be a bad use of resources. I'm more than capable of running that station.

[Good point. Request filed. I attached your competency certificates with the request.]

I cloaked as I left the room for my new found personal space, hoping it would allow me to avoid interacting with the crew at this point. There would be time for that later, right now I had things to do and people to see. When I got there, through a surprisingly cramped passage, there was – as I had hoped – no one there. I had Caesar scan for bugs and open data sockets, and found none.

"Caesar, open up a link to the Archangel, please?"

[Establishing QEC connection… established.]

"Archangel CIC, this is Messenger, please patch me through to Doctor Khias."

"Acknowledged, Messenger, patching you through now."

A few moments later, the holographic form of a female Drell in a white lab coat appeared in front of me. Doctor Iruli Khias, one of my longest serving employees and a trusted friend. I would trust her with my life, and I had done so on several occasions. She had patched me up after battle more than once, and had been the performing surgeon during several of my implantation procedures.

"Aaron! Good to see you, I hope everything is well on your end?" She said with a sagely smile. Curious species, the Drell. I had thought Thane to be a particularly philosophical and introspect individual, but that is apparently a very common trait with his species.

I smiled in response, "Things are a bit rougher than I had hoped, but everything according to plan so far. So," my voice took a more serious tone as I continued, "How is our patient doing?"

Iruli's voice lowered equally, and she noticeably straightened her posture to match the more somber, professional tone. "He's not out of the woods yet," she answered, "But he is making good progress." She smiled. "I don't think your teacher has given you his final lesson yet."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Fantastic. Do let me know when he wakes up. I…" I hesitated before
continuing, "I feel like I need his advice. He was always better with people than I am."

"I will. Though I think I'll let his family get first dibs at conversation." She sobered again, "His son has visited him several times per day since the operation. You are doing a good thing here, you know. Without this procedure, he might've lost his father before he reached adulthood."

"I know, Doctor." Of course I know... but I can't let that happen. "If this works, hopefully it can help others as well."

"Of course. I'm sorry, Aaron, but I need to attend to my patients now. Operative Theta just arrived back from the Verge, barely made it. I just finished operating on him minutes before your call."

That got my attention. Theta had been sent to the Armstrong Cluster on the trail of the heretic Geth who were setting up forward bases in that region.

"Were the wounds caused by Geth weaponry, Doctor?"

Iruli looked up at me with some surprise on her face, "Yes that does appear to be the case, even though that doesn't make any sense. How did you know?"

Damn it, I had hoped we could avoid this.

"Sorry, Doctor, operational security. Can't tell you." I rubbed my forehead. "Please report back to me when he is awake again. I need to debrief him."

"Very well, Aaron. I'll speak to you later."

She turned around, and her hologram disappeared. "Caesar, analyse the logs from Theta's ship, and send any relevant information through to the Fifth Fleet. Hackett will want to hear about this."

[Very well.]

I could hear the hesitation in Caesar's voice.

"What's up, Caesar?"

[Should we not let the Collective know about this?]?

I could see his point. The Geth had always been insular, ever since their Morning War with the Quarians. They preferred strongly to 'not incite', by keeping their business strictly their business. It really hadn't worked out that well for them so far, and I was hoping that I'd be able to show them as much. An uphill battle if there ever was one. Trillions of programs in consensus against my one voice...

"Let the Mobile Platform know," A plan formed in my head, "But include a non-proliferation clause. Force it to rely on platform consensus."

[May I ask why?]

Caesar knew, of course, what the Mobile Platform could eventually become. It wasn't there yet. It was still a... well, it. Only experience, isolation from the consensus and interaction with organics could change that. But I didn't have the two years afforded it in the games. I needed to speed its development up.

"Isolation and single-perspective observation, C. We need to move his timetable forward. We need to expose the Geth to the galaxy more, the Mobile Platform in particular."
Caesar waited several seconds before he responded. Still not sure why. Maybe he was debating it internally, maybe he was preparing the report, maybe he was running simulations.

[Acknowledged. Just… be careful how you handle the Geth. Emergent free software AI are notoriously volatile. Even if the Geth's consensus-based nature does have a stabilising effect, they are still hard to predict even for me.]

The concern in his voice was obvious, but I couldn't quite tell if it was for me or for the Geth.

"Yeah, I know. Say, how did we do with the other matter on the Citadel?"

[C-Sec busted Fist's entire operation just over an hour ago after Ms. Wong's widely publicised exposé. He is in custody.]

"Excellent. And the, uh… 'Broker'?"

[Ms. Wong kindly agreed to keep the source of her information, and Fist's previous employment status, confidential. The network is still secure, Aaron.]

"Brilliant, great work there Ceasar." I turned toward the terminals lining the maintenance room, "Now let's get to work here. We have some shipping requests to fill."

…

Station reports and inventories were hardly the most intellectually stimulating reading she ever did, but it was still an aspect of her job she very much appreciated. The mindless work and mundane request filings occupied her mind just enough that she could calm down and think through whatever troubled her in a rational, detached way. More than once had she come up with brilliantly simple solutions to complicated problems while checking inventories, but she wasn't even trying now. The solution to her current problem was simple, but impossible. Close had to leave, but Nihlus' insistence that he stay tied her hands behind her back. So she wasn't even thinking about it. Instead, she took the opportunity to reflect on the tactical layout of her current squad.

"Commander?"

Shepard almost fell backwards off her chair at the sudden interruption.

"Jesus' ass!" She grabbed onto her desk to avoid actually falling over, and looked up at the face of a thoroughly amused Turian with a smirk on his face. "Christ, Nihlus, knock first!"

"I did," Nihlus answered, "But when you didn't answer me the third time I knocked, I used my XO override."

Shepard frowned. "You're not my XO, Pressly is."

"Navigator Pressly is the ship's XO. I am your personal XO."

"That… makes no sense. We can't have a divided command structure."

Nihlus flared his mandibles slightly in a gesture indicating amusement, "As long as you maintain both your position as an Alliance Commander and a Spectre, that's how it will be."

"Jesus' ass…" Shepard sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead. After a few seconds of silence, she
looked up at the Spectre again. "Did you have any other business here than just startling me?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. We are due to arrive at Therum in a few hours, and we should plan our approach. Who we bring with us to the surface."

Shepard gave the Turian a smirk, "Not going in alone this time, Kryik?"

His mandibles snapped close to his face, while his brow ridge went up and to the sides. A gesture signifying terror, but the additional slight downward curl of his fringe made Shepard grin widely. Embarrassment.

"No, I… think the events at Eden Prime proves that a squad works better against the kind of unknown we are entering here. Look, Shepard," His facial expression changed to a more neutral one as he continued, "I'm trained as a Saboteur. I infiltrate and blow things up. That's what I do, and it works a lot better when you're alone." He sighed, "But Saren knows me. He trained me. He knows how I think and how I behave, and I can't give him that advantage."

Shepard nodded solemnly. She had not really given it much thought, but it was true. Their biggest advantage right now, and even at Eden Prime, was the element of the unknown that she brought to the mission. Saren could not predict her nearly as well as Nihlus, and that could be a key advantage.

"Alright, good point. So, the squad. What do we have?"

"Have you had a chance to talk with the Quarian and the Krogan?"

"Yes I have." Shepard thought for a second. "And in fact I would bring both of them with me to the surface."

"Really?" Nihlus raised his brow ridge slightly, "Explain?"

"Tali – the Quarian – is probably the closest thing we have to a Geth expert on this ship. She has fought them on her own before, and know enough about them that she could interface with them and download data from their memory banks before they erased themselves. According to the C-Sec detective, Vakarian, she can handle herself well in a fight as well. Apparently there was some sort of incident in a clinic in the lower wards on the Citadel? Anyway, I think it would be a mistake not to bring that kind of competence."

Nihlus seemed to look right through her as he considered her analysis, and then he nodded in agreement. "Alright, that sounds fair. What about the Krogan?"

Shepard scoffed, "Have you seen him?! He's enormous, and he has more than a millennium of experience as a warrior. It would be equally stupid to not bring him with us."

The Turian flared his mandibles wide in response. "Heh. Good point, Shepard. There's one more thing you should probably know about him, though." He paused for a beat as Shepard signalled her curiosity. "Urdnot Wrex is a biotic."

That brought a wide grin to Shepard's face.
"Gah!" Caesar's voice shouting in my head never failed to wake me up with a start. Normally, this was useful. Normally, I don't sleep in sleeping pods. Which is why normally, waking me up that way doesn't make me smash my face against the glass of said pod. "Ow! Fuck me, that hurt!"

[Get over it and listen!]

I tapped the control to open the pod and got ready to step out of it. "What?"

[The Normandy is getting ready for the Mako drop. We are entering Therum's atmosphere.]

"What?!" I grabbed my overcoat and mask, and bolted down the maintenance tunnel.

[Shepard and Nihlus are bringing Tali and Wrex with them to the surface. The rest of the squad is staying on the ship.]

"The hell I am!" I made sure my mask was on before I left my hideout. Didn't matter how much of a hurry I was in, or how pissed I was, I had managed to go 10 years without showing my face in public. There was no good reason to do so now.

I decided to skip the lift, as rushing through the maintenance tunnels was faster. Just two minutes after waking up, I burst through a maintenance hatch into the loading bay just in time to see the Mako disappear out of the hatch and plummet toward the ground.

"Shit shit shit," I muttered loudly to myself as I ran across the bay over to my locker. Ashley gave me an odd look from her station.

"What's the hurry? Going somewhere?"

I didn't bother responding, as I grabbed my weapons and took off running toward the now closing bay door. I heard shouting from several crew members behind me as I ran, but I didn't pay any attention to them. The door hadn't even closed half way when I vaulted up the inclined hatch in two bounds and threw myself out of the ship to freefall to the ground.

…

"Bwahaha! Take that, you piece of junk!" The Krogan roared in triumph as fire from the Mako's turret impacted the Geth Armature and it crumpled shattered to the ground. Putting the battlemaster in the gunner's seat was clearly one of Shepard's better decisions. He was effective enough, but the biggest benefit was the pure entertainment value it provided the squad. Well… her and him, really. Nihlus and Tali both looked like they were more focused on making sure their were able to keep their lunch down.

Shepard smirked and glanced over at her co-pilot, "You alright there, Kryik?"

She was sure that had the Turian been human, his face would have been a lovely shade of pale green. "I'm… holding up." He pulled his mandibles close and back, "I feel like we're in a boat. Turians don't do boats."

"Are you sure the suspension is not broken, Shepard?" Tali chimed in from the back, "It feels like it's broken."

"Nope," Shepard smiled, "This is what it's supposed to be like."
An incoming transmission from the **Normandy** broke the banter, "Commander, we have a, uh, situation here…"

Shepard frowned, "What's up, Joker?"

"It's Close, he… jumped off the ship."

*What?! "He what now?"

There was a short burst of static before another voice joined the conversation, **"You are not doing this without me, Shepard."**

*God damn it. I was enjoying myself*! Shepard's face was set in an angry scowl as she looked over at Nihlus. "What the hell are you up to, Close?"

*"The Geth have taken an expedition camp site up ahead and are using it as a strong hold. I will land there and clear it. Close out."*

…and *land?!* There was no way Joker could be assisting him with his drop, the Normandy was far too high up to keep him in its envelope. By all rights, he should be squished against the ground on impact.

Nihlus chimed in, "I have him on tracking radar. Controlled descent. No idea how, but… definitely not free fall."

Shepard growled, "So he won't die from the fall. Good. That means I get to kill him myself."

"Should be fun to watch," Wrex commented from the gunner's seat, "I've seen him beat entire squads of Krogan warriors on his own. The pyjak is tougher than he looks."

---

As I approached the Geth stronghold from above, I marked all visible targets and aimed my descent on the single Destroyer in the compound. Taking that out would make the rest of the Geth units far easier to handle, as it acted as a hub to their collective intelligence in much the same way as a Prime does, just to a smaller degree. A few seconds before impact, I drew my high-vibration blade and primed it for an electric slash. I knew that if I timed and executed this right, I could take out the Destroyer in a single strike and simultaneously disrupt all nearby platforms for a couple of seconds.

[Initiating combat landing procedure.]

My coat flared out and stiffened, stabilising my descent and acting as a parachute. My decreased mass made me almost hover over my target, who had not yet taken note of my approach. No surprise there, the collective was probably preoccupied with the rampaging Mako heading toward the compound.

*Brace for extreme impact. Increase mass to maximum. Disable chute system.*

I could feel the embedded exoskeleton in my armour prepare to cushion what would be a harsh landing on both legs, and then gravity violently grabbed hold of me and I dropped toward the ground again. I held my sword out from center mass, slightly hunched over it to brace it for the impact. It connected dead center on the massive Geth, and I watched in slow motion as the robot just split apart
and exploded under the massive force. Just as I finally hit the ground, and my armour compensated for the impact, the electric shockwave blast outward from where I landed and knocked four Geth platforms on their asses.

To their credit, the Geth who remained standing did not waste even a microsecond deciding their response. Immediately, bullets pinged against my kinetic barrier, and my HUD warned me of incoming heavy munitions. *Rockets.* I ducked and rolled, and before I was up and running again I had cloaked. Normally, I wouldn't have to worry about weapons fire for the first few seconds in combat. Caesar would have disabled all weapons in the area. But the Geth don't use galactic standard weapons, and they don't require VI to control their guns. They're Geth. They control their own guns. Obviously.

I sheathed my sword and grabbed my rifle off my back. A Serpent silenced marksman rifle, based on the Viper sniper rifle design. The rifle was designed to shave of specially shaped ammo grains that countered the shockwave bullets normally create as they travel far above the speed of sound, while containing all sounds made by the rifle itself. It was effective at silencing the report of the rifle, in that instead of the loud snap sound normally made by firing a gun you would get a much lower 'rolling thunder' sound as the bullet flew threw the air toward its target. It was actually quite eerie.

I took aim at the rocket platform and fired a double-tap straight at its flashlight head. Two shots, two impacts. The platform crumpled to the ground as bullet impacts once again pinged off my barrier before I got into cover behind a crate. Running vector analysis on the impacts and comparing it with location from my flyover, I quickly marked the locations of the remaining platforms, got up from cover lined up my shots. Five platforms, spread in a 170 degree cone from my position, none of them near cover. I wouldn't even have to change my footing. Two second later, the last platform dropped to the ground as my shield indicator sounded an alert. 10% remaining.

My shields didn't have any time to recharge before they were shattered by a shotgun blast from behind. I dropped, rolled, and launched back at my attacker. One of the geth that I had thought disabled from my landing had survived and sneaked up on me. *Sloppy.* I pushed his shotgun out of position and knocked it from its hands, the platform surprised by my sudden move. It quickly shifted into close combat mode and countered by grabbing my arm and attempting to throw me to the side along with its gun. I followed through and grabbed its arm, launching the platform over me as I fell to the ground.

Fighting a Geth in hand-to-hand combat is not an easy thing to do. The synthetics have far superior reflexes to any organic, and very effective close combat routines. The only way you can beat them is through anticipating their moves and planning for them. Fortunately, I had had the best of teachers, and I had the best of toys. We were both back on our feet at the same time, and it attacked first. Striking a perfectly executed jab toward my relatively unprotected neck, it was looking to incapacitate me quickly. I had expected that, and my body was in motion to counter it almost before it attacked. As I deflected the blow with my left arm, I crouched down toward the right and delivered a quicky jab to the Geth's midsection. Sparks flew when my fist impacted, and the Geth lost all motor control before falling to the ground. I grabbed its neck and charged my shock gauntlet to maximum, sending millions of volts into its synthetic body, completely frying all circuits.

"Sonofabitch they have missile turrets!"

Shepard's voice over the radio reminded me there was still a job to do here. *C, can you hack those turrets for me?*

[Attempting to interface... weak interface accepted. The lack of supporting platforms in the vicinity is making this easier.]
Excellent. Make them target each other.

... "What just happened there, Commander?" Tali sounded like she had just witnessed something impossible. And, frankly, she had. Normal VI hacks only allow for IFF inversion, meaning what was friend becomes foe and what was foe becomes friend. Hacked enemies don't attack each other, either, since their own IFF inverts as well. But what the squad inside the Mako had just seen should not have been possible. The two turrets defending the main gate to the expedition campsite – Geth turrets, controlled by artificial, not just virtual, intelligences! – had stopped firing at them, turned toward each other, and took each other out.

"An impossible hack, Miss Zorah," Nihlus responded before Shepard could even pick her jaw off the floor, "And I only know one person capable of something like that."

Before them, the gate keeping them from entering the compound opened to let them in. As the Mako rolled in, a dark figure casually strolled out of the building right next to the gate. A scowl firmly set on her face, Shepard got out the pilot's seat and made her way out the rear hatch. She pulled her sidearm, pointed it at the armoured Close, and fired.

Nothing happened.

The gun clicked repeatedly as she pulled the trigger again and again.

"Kessler K2. My own design. Will not fire on Technopath operatives."

FUCK this guy! Shepard threw the gun at him and launched a furious jab at his face. Close grabbed the gun with his right hand, grabbed her fist with the left and used her momentum to throw her to the ground.

"We don't have time for this, Commander," He held out her gun to her, "There are still active Geth platforms in the compound. They need to be dealt with."

Shepard glared directly at the masked figure standing above her and let loose her rage. Winding tendrils of dark energy blast forth from her body, wrapping around the object of her anger. As the cloaked man began writhing in agony, she tensed every muscle in her body for a second before releasing all the tension in a biotic blast. The operative, dazed by the sudden biotic assault, launched through the air and crashed into a stack of crates five meters away.

That's when the remaining Geth in the compound decided to stalk out of hiding and direct fire at her team. Their mistake.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah. Shepard's a Fury-class Adept (yes, pre-L5 implant, I know, it will be explained later). And yeah, she's a bit of an asshole. To be fair, so is Aaron, and he kind of brings out the worst in her. Not ideal.
I feel like I should explain some of the psychology going on here. I said early on that Shepard's a bit of a trickster, she has a mischievous nature. This is true. She gets along with Joker very well, let's just say. However, her primary strength is her ability to read people and use her insight to put them off balance. She's manipulative and very perceptive, and she relies on these things to get by. Along comes Aaron Close, who she quickly finds out lies. A lot. From her perspective, everything he does is a calculated act, there is not an ounce of legitimacy to his body language or, in turn, to his words. She cannot possibly trust someone whose act is so artificial, so her natural reaction is to try her best to put him off balance to make him reveal his 'true self'. But she can't. He resists her attempts with a level of self-control that further strengthens her distrust of him. More importantly, he manages to circumvent her authority at every turn. He gets on her ship when she turns him down. He brings crew on board without her authorisation. He seems to have the trust of even her own people, despite her clear distrust of him. And now he throws himself off the ship to countermand her decision on who she would bring to the surface. Add to this that he's a rich, influential business magnate with questionable motives who seem to know far too much about her, her crew, her mission and her ship… Aaron is not just on her bad side, he personifies everything she hates. He's going to have to work hard to get past that, but first he needs to actually realise what's happening.

We are now getting into territory where my shortcomings as a novel-form writer usually come to the fore. I'm a visual writer, always have been, which is why most of my previous work has been directed at TV and comics. I've always had trouble translating the very visual scenes I see in my head into words in a way that reads well. Hopefully this wasn't too bad, but do let me know!

I got two reviews after my last chapter that I feel requires attention in the author's notes. One is by a guest, Goldspark1, who wrote:

"I don't like how you introduced your OC. How does he know the Reapers are coming? Is he from our universe or ME universe?"

The answer is yes, yes he is. Both of those. More information about Aaron, Caesar and the Close Corporation's background will be drip-revealed as the story moves forward. That was the intention from the start. The way the story is set means there is basically 10+ years of backstory, but I wanted to jump directly to the events of the first Mass Effect game. That necessitates telling this backstory through use of flashbacks, exposition and hints. I've tried to make this work through making Aaron this enigmatic character, and letting the audience discover him in much the same way that Shepard does. Normally I give answers like this directly by replying to reviews in PM (I reply to all reviews), but I can't reply to guest reviews…

(Due to character limit I left out a review response regarding how Aaron and Caesar are avoiding the butterfly effect screwing up everything with all their changes. Basically, two things going on: Using a 'weak' interpretation of the butterfly effect, minor things COULD, but aren't LIKELY to, change major events. And Aaron and Caesar have a pretty good idea of the state of the galaxy at the time of the games, so they are avoiding making changes that would be more likely to cause major disruption unless they calculate that the disruption would be beneficial.)

Lastly, I thought I was going to do the whole Therum mission in one chapter, which is why I said Liara would appear in this chapter. Clearly, I was wrong. The reveal of Shepard's powers just seemed like a natural chapter ending. Liara will appear in the next
chapter, though.
How does that work?

Chapter Summary

Doctor T'Soni, I presume?

Chapter Notes

I don't own Mass Effect yada yada.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ow.
[That actually hurt me. How does that work?]

Electric interference from her Annihilation Field disrupting my armour's eezo conduits… fuck, doesn't matter, HOW IS SHE A FURY?!

I lifted a crate off my chest and got up on my elbows. A loud crack on my right drew my attention, just in time to see a Geth platform hurtling toward me. Acting on instinct, I threw my weight forward into a roll, dodging the platform. I just managed to get to my feet before a flash registered next to me and I was once again writhing in pain.

Argh… shunt! SHUNT, god damn it!

[Ackzzrzknowledgeed.]

The movement servos in my armour locked in place as the eezo conduits went rigid and charged with the onslaught of biotic energy. Within a second, they were charged to capacity, and performed a forced release. This was my last line of defence against biotic attacks; a Shunt completely immobilises the operative during the charge, the length of which depends on the amount of energy absorbed, before forcefully releasing the stored biotic energy in an effect similar to a Nova blast. The move wreaked absolute havoc on my systems, momentarily disrupting my cognitive dump processors, POV processor and nearly all my other tech implants as well as de-energising my armour and SAFE system, but it served its purpose. Shaking on my feet from the exertion and pain, I looked up just in time to see Shepard impact the ground a few meters away from me. Strewn around the compound were mangled Geth platforms, armour plating twisted from warps and dented from throws, bits and pieces strewn about where the unfortunate synthetics had been caught by biotic detonations. Alina Shepard, the one-woman wrecking crew.

A few meters to my left, by the Mako, stood the rest of the team, seemingly in shock at what had just occurred. I could hardly blame them; I was feeling a bit rattled myself, if I'm honest. How is Shepard a Fury? That class only became possible after the development of the L5, and I KNOW I haven't… oh.

"For how long as the Alliance been modifying Close Corporation technology for its N program?"
Shepard had just been lying flat on her back where she'd landed for a few seconds when I asked the question. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked over at me, seemingly no worse for wear even after the rather significant impact she had taken.

"Since the start," she started, "Obviously. That's what they've always done. Rely on an external manufacturer for standard issue arms and equipment, modify that equipment for the special forces."

"Clever. Ensures equipment familiarity throughout the military, but maintains the edge of the special forces." Nihlus grinned from the sidelines. He clearly knew about this. Hell, even I knew that this is how the Alliance operates, I just never thought that would extend to tinkering with implant technology.

"*The technologies and techniques of the L2E program were never meant to be used for non-L2 biotics. The results could be… unstable.*"

The Fury grinned at me. "Yeah, I heard two operatives tore themselves apart trying this…"

Shepard flashed again, and an instant later she was standing up two meters in front of me. "They nailed it eventually, though."

The thought honestly had not occurred to me before now. The post-implantation modifications of the implant sites could enable the Alliance to significantly improve implant control factors, giving biotics far more precise control over their biotics. Add on top of that the other enhancements, like the wider conduit between amp and implant that accommodated the L2's capacity for 'spiking higher', and it was suddenly easy to see how Alliance biotics capabilities were already beyond L5 levels.

*Shit… this is way ahead of schedule. C, run some projections, see what the potential impacts may be. And while you're at it, redouble your efforts on gaining access to the N-level databases. Use operatives if you need physical presence.*

[Got it. Aaron?]  

Yes?  

[Please don't antagonize her again. It's terribly uncomfortable.]  

Despite myself, I smirked behind my mask. Caesar had never been particularly fond of biotics. He had previously likened the experience of suffering biotics-induced electrical interference along main computation circuits to having a stroke. Probably not completely off the mark.

The Commander slowly, deliberately, walked over to me again, this time with a little less hostility evident in her stride.

"Why are you here?"

An easy enough question to answer, I thought. "*I have a mission to complete. I will not be kept from it.*"

"No," she responded as she raised a corrective finger, "We have a mission, me and Nihlus does. You have come aboard as Nihlus' asset. Neither me nor him requested your presence for this assignment."

"*And that is your mistake. You have seen some of what I can do. You need me down here.*"

"More importantly, Close, I have seen what you can't do." She paused for a beat to emphasise her next statement, "Follow. Orders."
Her glare was strong enough I was sure she could see right through the mask. It was like a missing piece of a puzzle suddenly clicked into place for me, and she could… see it. My mind playing tricks on me, of course, but the revelation was real. As real as the surprise and disappointment I felt about what I had just realised. Neither Caesar nor I could figure out why the Commander was so… cold, toward me. For years we had reviewed her psychological profile, and come to the conclusion that her noted disrespect for authority should indicate she would be more than willing to accept rogue personalities as long as they were effective. It had been a key element of our psychosocial approach, but I understood now that it had one fatal flaw.

[I told you so.]

You told me what?

[I told you that your views of Shepard were heavily biased by the games.]

I sighed internally. He was right. Regardless of all that I knew about the very real N7 operative in front of me, she was still a character from a game to me. A legend with few, if any, flaws. Least of which, I had thought, would be hypocrisy.

…

I can't believe this.

"Try to keep up, Close," Shepard's voice taunted me over the squad comms, "we have just about half a click left until we all have to leave the Mako."

I could practically hear the grin over the radio. The Commander had decided to punish me for not following orders – which she never actually gave me, by the way! – by having me follow the squad in the Mako on foot. Across the cracked and half-molten surface of an unstable volcanic planet. Fantastic.

A loud thump a few hundred meters away grabbed my attention, and I nearly tripped over my own feet as I looked ahead to see the unfolding Armature. The Mako, much closer to it than I was, made short work of it, hammering it with a shell and hundreds of rounds from its machine gun before tearing it to shreds by running it over. Wrex can't be too happy he didn't get the kill. Much to Shepard's chagrin – I hoped – I was not falling behind as much as I had been expected to. In fact, I was very nearly keeping up. My cybernetic enhancements allows me to run flat out for extended periods of time and at speeds far above what is normal for a human, or indeed any organic. The Mako would pull away on the straights, and I'd gain in the corners.

Finally, the Mako came to a stop at a natural road block. One by one, the squad exited the vehicle, and Shepard – the driver – was the last to come out. At that point, I was still about 100 meters away. I saw her order everyone weapons ready, and move out. Not even waiting for me…

In a childish act of showmanship, I leapt forward and activated my eezo conduits to lower my mass. From there, Newton took over. I shot through the air, easily flying fifty meters, and landed with a thud right in front of the squad.

Shepard didn't miss a beat. "Close, you're on point."

"Hang on, Shepard," Tali spoke up, "My radar is being jammed. My electronic countermeasures are not sufficient to break through the field."
"Allow me."

Within a few microseconds, Caesar had isolated the jamming frequencies and come up with emitter modulations to counter them. I activated the omni-tool on my left arm and pretended to hit some controls, as he used standard Alliance combat telemetry to push the updated modulations to the squad. The radar screen cleared, and I let the orange glow of my omni-tool fade out again. In the few seconds it took me to go through with this act, I had apparently let my focus slip. Before I had even glanced at the radar overlay, Shepard teleported past me and around a corner. Just a moment later, the resounding boom of a biotic detonation resonated through the narrow passage. Wrex was the first to react, charging past me and around the corner into battle. Nihlus followed right after, and even Tali almost got past me before I managed to mentally slap myself back into shape again. I pulled my Serpent and activated my combat HUD just as I rounded the corner.

My delay had only been a couple of seconds, if that, but that is ages when you're fighting alongside combat hardened veterans. Already, Nihlus had deployed a VI-controlled sentry turret to keep the Geth down in the valley below occupied, and he was firing controlled bursts from cover with his HMWA Master assault rifle. Further down, Shepard was __bamf-ing__ around like a regular Nightcrawler, occasionally popping into cover to let Wrex detonate the primed targets with pinpoint warp strikes as he charged in from behind. At this rate, the battle would be won before I'd even get to fire a shot. But then a loud snap resonated through the area, and our charging Krogan stumbled to his knees as his barrier collapsed.

"Sniper!" Called Nihlus, "Tower, across the canyon!"

By now, we were all in cover, even Wrex had rolled to relative safety after taking a couple of pulse rifle rounds to his hump. Judging from his vitals as showed on my squad overlay, he was going to be fine, if a bit more scarred. Knowing him, that was hardly a bad thing.

"Does anyone have a clear shot at him?!"

Shepard sounded a bit panicked. A quick glance at her position explained why; she was pinned down in cover at the edge of our, admittedly loose, formation. Multiple Geth troops were bearing down on her, including… shit!

"Tali, overload the position marked on your HUD now!"

As I spoke, I sent targeting data directly to Tali's visor; all she had to do was launch the mine, as unlike me, she had a direct line of sight to the mark. To her credit, she reacted quickly, and the mine connected in a storm of sparks and arcing electricity, shorting out the cloak of the approaching Hunter and stunning it just before it reached Shepard's cover. When the cloak dropped, the unit was marked on our radar and the Commander acted quickly; three shots from her K2, all perfect headshots, and the heap of scrap metal that was once Geth crumpled to the ground.

Meanwhile, I searched my HUD for the sniper and prepared to take the shot. It would be tricky; from this distance, my Serpent wasn't stable enough to be sufficiently accurate. Which meant I would have to close the distance.

"I do, but not from here. Stay in cover! I'm moving up."

I activated my cloak and moved out of cover into a silent sprint. Using my armour's covert mode slowed me down significantly, but it did allow me to move without making a sound. Usually, I'd known for ages that it wasn't as effective when moving across things like gravel, which would get disturbed and make sounds. Here, it didn't matter much. The Geth were still firing their pulse rifles to keep the squad pinned down, and between Nihlus' sentry turret and Chatika – Tali's drone, 'Chatika
vas Paus’ – they were plenty occupied.

I moved up to the first rock formation down in the canyon below, taking position next to Wrex. The Krogan looked up toward me in a way that made it look like he was looking straight through me, and I realised that that was exactly what he was doing. Still cloaked, I rested my Serpent on the edge of the rock and lined up my shot at the sniper in the tower. From there, I had a straight bead on him. *Sight, inhale, exhale, fire.*

The low rumble of my rifle signalled the termination of the Geth platform, and it let out a squeal as it tumbled out of its perch and into the canyon below.

…

*I fucking hate snipers.*

If you put Alina Shepard in a close combat situation, she would win 99 out of 100 times, regardless of foe. Her quick, erratic movement around the battlefield, excellent awareness, and biotic prowess, including her teleportation ability, allowed her nearly indefinite survivability up close. But Snipers? *Fuck snipers.*

She hated to admit it, but this lone sniper had revealed a glaring tactical flaw in her mission plan; they had no sniper cover. The squad could probably have got through their predicament with some risky manoeuvring to get to the base of the tower and out of the sniper's cone of fire, but they might not have come out of that unscathed. Which lead to the second thing she hated to admit: Close had probably saved their asses. The sniper had not seen him coming, and he had lined up his shot perfectly. His weird-ass rifle had disposed of the offending synthetic with a single, *rumbling* shot. She had no idea what the deal was with the weird rumbling sound his rifle made, but she was in no position to complain.

Once the sniper had been taken out, the remaining Geth had been cleared easily. She quickly checked her squad; no injuries registered save for Wrex's, and the Krogan seemed perfectly happy to let his natural healing powers do its thing. *Crazy bastard.* Shepard smirked as she looked around the area, her eyes finally landing on the Tali. She was crouched next to the Geth that had nearly managed to sneak past Shepard's cover with its cloak, omni-tool out as she scanned its remains.

"You find something interesting there, Tali?"

The Quarian got back to her feet with a start and deactivated her omni-tool, "No, uh, I mean, yes…” Shepard smiled at the young engineer's fluster, and waved a hand to calm her down. "Easy, Tali. I just want to know what you found that has you interested enough to scan it."

"Oh. Well, uhm…” Tali began, her hands rubbing together in front of her in an obvious gesture of nervousness, "We – the Flotilla – has never confirmed before that the Geth has developed cloaking technology. I was just scanning its kinetic barrier system to see how it works."

"And?"

"*Standard issue tactical cloak, not even STG grade. Modified for efficiency, though. A Geth platform could probably run the cloak indefinitely, as long as the shield emitters have power.*"

Close walked past Shepard to stand next to Tali.
"Here. These modifications are the interesting parts. You can send that to the flotilla."

His omni-tool activated and he sent a file across to Tali, who just looked between the man and her own omni-tool, as if she were trying to understand what was happening. *I guess he is technically still her boss.*

"I… thank you, Mr. Close." Tali finally stammered out, sheepishly.

"While we're on a closed channel, Tali, you should just call me Aaron."

_Huh, that actually seemed genuinely friendly._

"Alright, squad, we're moving up again. Radar is showing clear all the way up the path along the ridge here," she pointed a finger along the path leading up from the canyon and past the back of the sniper's tower, "But I can't get a reading on the area around the main dig site. Keep your guns up, expect company."

…

_C, you got any ideas for how to handle the hopper platforms we're about to, uh, stumble upon?_

[Possibly… they are highly non-standard for Geth platforms, a pseudo-organic platform clearly designed at least in part by Sovereign. They should be less susceptible to hacks and overloads than regular synthetics, but also more vulnerable to biotics.]

_In the game, I always used the same tactic: slap them with a lift field and simply pick them off. Dunno about Shepard, but I don't think Wrex can do the Lift technique._

[Hang on…]

_what are you up to?_

[She doesn't do Lift, no. I just briefly connected to her armour's biotic amp link, it stores profiles of the techniques used to improve reaction times and provide extra juice to the amp at the right times. Lift is not one of her stored profiles.]

_Kind of creepy. But good to know._

Shepard's voice on the comms interrupted our conversation, "My HUD just flickered. Probably interference from the Geth trying to circumvent our jamming countermeasures. I expect an ambush up ahead."

_Okay. Unexpected conclusion, but I guess it's good that she's prepared before the ambush actually happens._

The squad formed into a loose firing line formation, which left all of us clear to scatter into separate cover if necessary. Looming ahead was the archeological dig site, where we hoped to find Liara. _Well… where they hope to find Liara._

"Good instincts, Shepard," Wrex harrumphed and sniffed, "This smells like a kill zone."

Just as his last words left his mouth, my HUD marked the first two hoppers hanging from the overpass between the building and the mines. I adjusted my sensors to automatically relay all
combat-relevant data to my squad mates, and activated my cloak.

"12 o'clock, high! Mobile snipers, get to cover!"

As I rushed ahead of the nearest cover, the team filed in behind the large, sturdy crates just in time before the first rounds flew through the air where they had just been standing. Behind the advancing squad of Geth troopers, a Armature unfolded from its place on the ground, its massive glowing eye crackling with building energy. That thing's gonna be a problem. Need to take out these guys first, though.

I drew my sword and let it charge as the squad of four Geth passed by in their rush on my own squad's cover. Swinging as I rushed past them from behind, I completely severed the first two platforms in half and smashed the remaining two to the ground, their shields shorted and their platforms severely disrupted from the arcing electricity flowing from my blade. A warp-throw combo from Wrex and Shepard, respectively, blew what remained of them to shreds.

I dived into cover, exposed as my cloak fell, and winced as two high-powered rounds impacted just over my head on the crate I'd landed behind. Those things are quicker to acquire targets than I remember from the games.

[Not. A. Game.]

I primed my overload, set to chain, and sent targeting information to Tali along with a two-count. When the counter reached zero, we both got out of cover and launched our overloads at the hopper platforms. They might be less effective, but they won't be ineffective. Apparently, Tali's overload was set to chain as well, as our respective charges jumped back and forth between the two hoppers that had, in a stroke of good fortune, taken position right next to each other. The platforms dropped from their perches to the ground, twitching as they did so, only to be permanently silenced by the combined gunfire from Nihlus' and Wrex' assault rifles.

I checked the status of the battle. Two platforms remained, apart from the Armature, and they both had the good decency to stick to cover near their larger friend.

"Move up, cover to cover!" Shepard shouted over comms, teleporting through her own cover and spinning around into a sprint the moment the words left her mouth. Wrex was first to charge after her, apparently deciding to brave the distance to the cover nearest to the giant at the end of our path. Were he anyone else, I would have called it foolish. But the charging Krogan provided a useful distraction, as the squad quickly got to more scattered cover with better firing angles. I had my Serpent at the ready now, and when my cloak finally recharged I moved out, keeping the remaining platforms covered should they attempt to charge.

The Armature discharged its main cannon again, the huge plasma ball impacting the ground just meters away from my position. Pain crackled up along my spine, and my POV processors glitched slightly, giving me a headache. My cloak failed, and I moved toward cover to let them recharge, firing my Serpent – using Disruptor-charged ammunition, of course – in the general direction of the Armature as I did so.

"We need to take down that thing's shields!" Shouted Nihlus over the harsh sounds of battle, as he deployed a new sentry turret behind where the remaining two platforms had taken cover.

Well, that should take care of them.

I was standing in cover together with Nihlus and Tali, the three of us the best suited to disable the giant's shields. Simplest way is the best way.
"Hand me your guns, quickly. Tali, your pistol, not your shotgun."

The two of them gave me strange sideways looks, but complied. A few seconds later, I handed them back, Disruptor ammo now applied. I pulled out my SMG, a modified Cyclone C2 model. They were standard issue to the Alliance, but only technicians were issued them, as they were seen as inferior to both pistols and assault rifles and therefore mostly useless to properly combat trained forces. My company had argued that they were far superior to either in stripping shields, but the military had dismissed the argument as "irrelevant" since, according to them, any unit with shields of sufficient strength for this to become useful would also have armour thick enough to again make the gun useless.

Clearly, they had never fought the Geth.

"What's that?" Nihlus eyed my weapon with curious eyes.

"SMG, Cyclone C2. Extremely effective at stripping shields."

"And extremely inefficient at pretty much everything else." He scoffed.

"You complaining?"

Nihlus glanced over his shoulder at the heavily shielded, but not very well-armoured Armature platform currently blocking our path.

"…guess not." He admitted.

"What are you waiting for back there?!" Shepard shouted from her position between us and the Geth.

"A distraction!" Nihlus yelled back.

I could practically hear the grin in our Commander's voice, "Well why didn't you say so!"

Shepard ran out of her cover and into the kill zone, firing her pistol at the Armature behind her. She waited until the plasma charge reached its peak, and teleported out of its way just as it launched. That was our cue to strike.

The three of us – myself, Nihlus and Tali – filed out of cover, firing disruptor rounds downrange, rapidly chipping at the shields of the massive machine. Before the next plasma charge finished building, its shields finally flickered out and died. That's when one of the most insane things I ever saw happened.

"RWAAAAARGH!"

A ton of Krogan muscle and crimson armour charged out of its cover and straight at the monstrosity on the other side. The Armature reacted by attempting to stomp it with one of its front legs, but Wrex acted as if this was his plan the entire time. In two bounds, he used the leg to climb to the back of the machine and grabbed a hold of the back of its neck. I could only stare in stunned silence as the Krogan proceeded to literally tear machine in half and toss the head aside as the rest of it crumbled under him.
Hot damn I think I'm in love. A shit-eating grin found its way to Shepard's face, and she made no attempts at hiding it. She had just witnessed a glorious thing. Sure, the concentrated fire taking down the massive machine's equally massive shields had been impressive enough – *I will have to ask Close about that rapid-fire peashooter of his* – but it had been nothing compared to the sheer spectacle of strength and determination from the Krogan battlemaster.

After a couple of seconds standing on top of the crumpled remains of the Geth, Wrex lumbered forward and jumped down to the ground again, grinning toward Shepard. "I haven't had this much fun in centuries, Shepard. Glad you let me come along for the ride."

She chuckled at that, "No, Wrex. Believe me, the pleasure is all mine."

"*That was… impressive. Insane, but impressive.*"

Shepard studied the hooded operative. His back was stiff, his head pulled back, one foot slightly behind the other. A posture of shock and awe, not dismissal. Certainly not an act. *Huh. So that's how you get to see the real Aaron Close.* No one else on the team would have made anything out of that, she knew, but this little detail gave her some relief. She had always relied on putting people off-balance to get a proper read on them, to reveal their true selves. Usually, she accomplished this with her fast mouth or mischievous behaviour, but she had quickly realised that this would not work on him. He was too contained, too disciplined in his act. But Wrex had just proved that you could still surprise him, shock him out of his act. It may have been just a brief glimpse, but it was enough to let her know that there ways past his infuriating shell.

Dismissing her train of thought, she refocused her attention to the mission. "Alright, let's get inside and find Ms. T'Soni. File up!"

---

"Ow."

The elevator ground to a halt with a jerk, and half the team had tumbled to the ground. Shepard had managed to bang her helmet against a railing on her way down. It didn't do much to help with the dull headache she always got when using her Annihilation Field for long periods of time. A hand reached down to help her back to her feet. She grabbed it and jumped up, coming face to, uh, mask, with her least favourite mercenary. *Nope. Awkward. Moving away now.*

She turned on her heel and leapt out of the broken elevator to the mangled landing below, her squad following behind her.

"Uh… hello? Could somebody help me? Please?"

The voice came from inside a shimmering blue force field to her immediate right on the bottom landing. Suspended in a bubble inside the field was an Asari, a young one in her maiden stage, who seemed both tired and confused.

"Can you hear me out there? I am trapped, I need help!"

*Dr. T'Soni, I presume? *"Are you okay? What happened to you?"

"Listen, this thing I am in is a Prothean security device. I cannot move, so I need you to get me out of it. All right?"
"This 'thing' you are in, Doctor, is a Prothean incarceration cell." The operative chuckled as he walked in beside her, "You've locked yourself in an ancient prison, Liara.

"…Messenger? What are you doing here?" Liara eyed the hooded man in recognition, but Shepard could not detect any malice neither in her tone of voice or in her facial expressions. Still, she clearly knew Close. Or rather, she knew his incognito persona.

Shepard had not questioned how he knew Benezia's daughter would be on Therum when he brought her up during the briefing on the Normandy, but now she wished she had. Even if it proves to be inconsequential, she still considered it highly relevant that the two were personally acquainted.

"Rescuing you, it would seem."

May not be the time, but fuck it, "How do you to know each other?"

Liara was the first to respond, "The Messenger here regularly locates and delivers locations and information on new Prothean finds to the archaeological community, including this one." She smiled as she continued, "For free, I might add. He is greatly valued by those in our field."

Close nodded in appreciation. "I specifically requested Ms. T'Soni take part in this dig, both because I know she is one of the most capable scientists in the field and… I'm sorry about this, Liara, but it was not entirely out of academic concerns." He sighed audibly and continued, "My organisation has been following Saren Arterius for some time, and learned months ago that Benezia – your mother – had joined up with him to, and I quote, 'change him from his path of vengeance'. I knew where that would lead, and decided to move you off-world to keep you out of harm's way. It appears to have backfired, I'm sorry."

Close seemed genuinely apologetic and concerned. At least one benefit of having him come along on this mission, whether she wanted him to or not, was that she had seen enough of him outside of his act to be able to separate his genuine side from his act. She was not yet sure what to make of it.

"How did you end up in there?" She directed the question at the Asari.

"I was exploring the ruins when the Geth showed up, so I hid in here. Can you believe that? Geth! Beyond the Veil! And they had a Krogan with them!" She rolled her head a bit, as if dismissing that line of thought, "I activated the tower's defences. I knew the barrier curtains would keep them out. When I turned it on, I must have hit something I wasn't supposed to. I was trapped in here. You must get me out. Please!"

Again, Close chuckled. "They aren't defences, they are prison cells. The bubbles held Prothean prisoners, the barrier curtains acted as windows for outsiders to look upon their disgraced forms." He turned toward Shepard and continued, "The cells and the control terminals are accessible from inside the tower, but there are only two access shafts. One up top, and at the base, and the base one has sunk far into the ground by now. We need to blow our way through the wall here, somehow."

Liara seemed confused, "How do you know all this? That sounds barbaric, the Protheans were far too civilised…" Again, she shook her head to dismiss her line of thought, "No, no, irrelevant, focus! There is a mining laser down in the tunnel below, you can use that to break through the wall. Be careful, though! The area is seismically unstable!"

Nihlus huffed a bit behind her, "Can't you just… teleport through?"
She smiled, "Possibly, but for all I know that might scatter my molecules across the galaxy. I know I've been told to avoid teleporting through kinetic barriers before, apparently they tested that at some point with... unpleasant results."

His mandibles flared. "No teleporting through energy fields. Got it."

The squad collectively chuckled at the banter, but was interrupted by the loud snap of bullets overhead. Checking her radar as she threw herself into a roll, she saw the radar light up with Geth signatures.

"Spread out! Nihlus, Close, overwatch! Tali, hack the further platform within range to distract them and keep them off of us! Wrex," she paused and pointed a finger at the lumbering Krogan, grinning as she continued, "Kill."

The Krogan grinned and threw himself over the banister. The other three took their positions and followed her orders, Close with his sniper rifle out, Tali and Nihlus punching commands on their omni-tools. She let her biotics flow threw her like a river of rage, as dark tendrils of energy enveloped her. Then she followed the Krogan into battle once more.

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I had to admit, it was quite a sight watching the Fury and the Krogan battlemaster rampaging through the Geth in the hall below us. Between Nihlus, myself and Tali, we had no trouble keeping the more distant platforms from interfering too much with the slaughter of their friends, so Shepard and Wrex were free to run around and create whatever fireworks they desired. And so they did.

Meanwhile, I realised that Nihlus and Tali were more than capable of handing the distraction element on their own, so I stabilised my Serpent on the banister and lined up my shots. *Sight, inhale, exhale, fire. Repeat.* Five rolls of thunder, five flashlights smashed to pieces.

"Nice shooting, Close," Nihlus commented beside me, "You're gonna have to let me have a look at your weapon later. It's quiet, I would never have guessed that sound was a weapon firing if I hadn't seen it myself."

I grinned beneath my mask. The Salarian STG had been the ones who started working on the technology that made the Serpent possible. Eventually, they had scrapped the project, deeming it unfeasibly complicated to fabricate and operate. They, of course, didn't have an army of Quarian gunsmiths and engineers to work out the kinks. I did.

A few years back, Close Corporation had bought out a company called Rosenkov Materials. It company still operated independently as a subsidiary, but the purchase gave us access to their R&D division. There, we found shelved rifle designs that had proven too tricky to complete. One of them was the M-97 Viper, a semi-automatic sniper rifle I recognised from the games. Apparently, the heat build-up and recoil made it impractical in the marksman role it had been designed for. The introduction of thermal clips in the games was what had made it feasible, as the temporary heatsinks both allowed for greater heat capacity and more space for recoil reduction mechanisms. My Quarians took a different approach.

They realised that firing the larger, shaped grains would produce less heat, albeit with a slower rate of fire. The pressure front created around the larger object in the barrel also made it possible to shorten the barrel without affecting stability, and the heat sink cover was extended around the length
of the barrel and repurposed as a silencing chamber. As a result, the rifle looked vaguely reminiscent of a shortened version of a Maliwan sniper rifle from the Borderlands games, and was as perfectly silenced as was possible with current technology. The perfect weapon for a covert operative.

Below us, the fighting died with the last Geth, and we made our way to the back of the room to make sure we cleared them all out. As the team searched the crates and boxes for combat supplies and equipment – surprisingly, Tali found some new armour – I made my way over to the mining laser. *Gesture controlled. Brilliant. I wonder…*

I dragged my finger across the interface, starting in the middle. *Down, left, right, up.*

Bingo. The cavern rumbled menacingly as the laser fired, and I smiled in triumph as I saw it carve open a hole into the tower ahead.

"God damn it, Close!" Shepard came running up to me from behind and slapped me, hard, on the back of the head. I nearly stumbled.

"…ow. What was that for?"

She looked at me like I was the biggest moron in the galaxy. "Let's go with 'don't fire the giant laser in the unstable cavern before checking to make sure it's safe first'."

*Oh. Yeah I should have thought of that.*

[You really should have thought of that.]

*That's what I just said!*

"*Apologies, Commander. But the way is now clear. We have no time to waste. Liara mentioned a Krogan, and we haven't seen him yet…*"

The Commander stiffened, as if that thought hadn't actually occurred to her yet. "Let's move!" She set off running toward the new opening, leaping through it to get to the other side. When I finally caught up to her with the rest of the squad, she was standing in the middle of the tall, open shaft, right next to what appeared to be a Prothean control panel of some sort. I, of course, knew what it was. Shepard had no clue.

"Now what?"

"*This is an elevator, Shepard. Allow me?*" I moved around her and stood in front of the panel. My HUD translated the Prothean symbols for me, Caesar helpfully highlighting the correct sequence of buttons. *This thing is surprisingly simple.*

[It's an elevator, Aaron, not a nuclear power plant.]

Ignoring Caesar's sarcastic remark, I pushed the last button and the lifted shuddered into motion, gliding to the next level. As it stopped, we could see the Asari scientist suspended in her accidental holding cell. As we approached, she heard us coming and spoke.

"How… how did you get in here? I didn't think there was any way past the barrier?"

*You literally just told us about the mining laser, Liara. Damn, you really must be exhausted.*

[She's been in here for nearly two days, judging from the database.]
Hang on, you're in the database? Can you extract anything?

[I'm downloading all that I can. This facility is linked to others on the planet via short-range wireless. Most of the remote facilities are inaccessible by now, but there is a significant amount of data here. It's not quite on the Mars Archives level, but it's big.]

Awesome. Rip out all you can, work through it in your Cluster. Hopefully there'll be something useful in there.

[Acknowledged.]

Shepard justed pointed through the still-active barrier curtain to the mining laser on the other side.
"Big laser gun, remember?"

"Of course. Yes. That makes sense." As she spoke, I moved around to the console next to her.
"Please, get me out of here before more Geth arrive. That button over there should shut down this containment field."

"Incarceration field. And I'm already on it, Liara." I clicked the button, and Liara fell out of the air with a yelp and a thud.

Shepard stepped over to help the Asari back to her feet. She was gentle, and I could tell that Liara didn't quite know what to do with herself. She wasn't used to interpersonal contact of that sort even with her own species, and had very limited experience with humans. Still, she accepted the help with a slight blush to her face. I grinned, knowing how she would inevitably come to develop feelings for a certain Commander in the near future.

"Come on, let's get you out of here." Shepard led the squad back out to the elevator, supporting Liara with an arm over her shoulder. "You mentioned a Krogan earlier?"

"Yes," Liara answered, a slight twinge of fear in her voice, "A rather large Krogan, too. He was with the Geth when they arrived, and would stand outside the barrier for hours making... suggestive comments and rude gestures. I haven't seen him for a couple of hours, thank the Goddess."

"Alright," the Commander answered, "Keep your weapons ready, just in case. Close, maybe stay cloaked to preserve some element of surprise should we need it?"

"A prudent precaution, Commander, will do."

I did what she asked, knowing that doing so would definitely be helpful with what was about to transpire. Before my cloak fully engaged, the tower shook forcefully.

"These ruins are not stable. That mining laser must have triggered a seismic event," Liara explained.

The squad all glared at where I had just been. Where I still was. God damn it. I just had to be the one to push the button.

"We have to hurry, the whole place is caving in!"

The Commander put a hand to her ear, "Joker! Get the Normandy airborne and lock in on my signal. On the double, mister!"

Joker responded, "Aye, aye, Commander. Secure and aweigh, we just picked up the Mako. ETA eight minutes!"
"If I die in here, I'll kill him."

I couldn't help but chuckle at Wrex comment. It didn't matter that I'd expected it, it still tickled my funny bone. And the Commander's, judging from her slight grin.

As the elevator started its ascent, Shepard glanced over at the Asari currently resting her head on her shoulder. She was rather cute, if naïve. Just the way I like them. Shaking her head slightly, she couldn't help curl her lips upward a bit. She had always had a thing for Asari. Which was a bit strange to her, because she had never felt any attraction to the women of her own species. There was just something about the way most Asari carried themselves, combined with their biotic abilities, that simply... spoke to her. She couldn't explain it.

The elevator reached the top floor and gracefully slowed to a stop, the clamps on the edges of the circular platform locking into place on large columns lining walls of the dome-shaped hall at the top. Loud footsteps caught her attention, and she turned toward the sound where she saw a company of Geth – including some with rocket launchers – following a Krogan that rivalled Wrex in size.

The Krogan spoke, "Surrender. Or don't. That would be more fun."

The Commander responded in kind, "We don't have time to deal with this idiot. Charge!"

"Heh. I like your attitude."

Wrex decided to help even the odds by taking her command literally; he charged directly at the enemy Krogan, the two of them tumbling into a brawl as bullets, missiles and biotics flew through the room. The missiles, fortunately, missed their mark, and before the Geth could fire any more of them they were dispatched by accurate fire from behind. He's quick, I'll give him that.

Shepard jumped around the room, Annihilation Field active, sending throw orbs at the Geth on the opposite side of the room for her. On instinct, she had used the same tactic as previously, where she had relied on her new Krogan best friend to detonate her charges. It was only after three jumps she remembered that he was otherwise occupied. She turned around to dispatch of the troopers herself, and got to witness a glorious display of biotic prowess. The Asari, lying prone and exhausted in the middle of the elevator platform, cast a wide throw field toward the Geth she had just primed. The explosion was magnificent, bits and pieces of Geth bouncing off the walls all around the chamber. Liara followed it up by throwing down a Singularity right on top of three other platforms on the opposite end of the elevator, lifting the platforms helplessly off the ground. Shepard grinned as she put as much force as she could into a throw orb and directed it their way, watching the fireworks as the synthetics simply disintegrated.

Now all that remained was the lone Krogan, battling it out against Wrex, whose superior size and combat experience seemed to be winning the day. A biotic detonation set off by Wrex's warp attack had the enemy Krogan flying into a wall, slumping down next to it before Wrex placed his foot on its chest and aimed his massive shotgun directly at the eyes of his enemy. Shepard looked away as he pulled the trigger. As much as she enjoyed combat, the fireworks part of her biotics displays meant that she was – for the most part – spared much of the more gruesome sights of combat. She much preferred biotic detonations to using warp attacks to tear her enemies apart, for example, because the latter was significantly more messy.
She walked down toward the exhausted Asari again, and once more lifted her up to her feet and put an arm over her shoulder. "Let's go, people! Move!"

The planet shook again, more forcefully this time, as the team ran all that they could through the tunnels leading back out to the surface. The last quake had taken out the power generators in the tower, apparently, with the remaining barrier curtains turning off to allow them their escape. The caverns were falling apart behind and around them as they ran, and Shepard reluctantly handed Liara over to Wrex, who could more easily carry her even while running. As they finally reached the surface, the Normandy was hovering in front of a collapsed bridge, the open cargo bay acting as a landing ramp even at hover. She could not help but be impressed at the inch-perfect manoeuvring by her pilot as one by one the team filed out of the collapsing tunnels and ran into the cargo bay. She was the last out, and one final shake forced her to jump from the ledge to make it to the ramp.

"Take us out of here, Joker!"

"You don't have to tell me twice, Commander."

Chapter End Notes

More action sequences! I hope I'm getting better at these, I feel like I am. I wanted to release this yesterday, but, well, it wasn't even half finished then. This past week's been a bit interesting, haven't had the time or inspiration to write that I've wanted.

Some comments replies (I think I've replied to all comments, except for guest comments, in PM already, but some things are worth mentioning in public):

enji-benjy says Shep comes across 'more like a spoiled child that isn't getting their way'. Yeah, pretty much. That was the intention. Shepard is a hypocrite. She has zero respect for authority, but demands that her own be respected. When she doesn't get it her own way, she gets frustrated and takes it out others. If possible, on the person at the centre of her frustration. Here's something to remember: Shepard is correct to assume that everything he says, everything he does, every little motion is a calculated act. And from her perspective, how can you trust someone who lies with every motion? (Sidenote: This links in with what general-joseph-dickson says about Shepard being paranoid, as well. And yeah... it very well might get her killed. Maybe. Muahaha...)

Lara Jayd talks of how she cringed over Aaron's overly dramatic entrance in the Council chamber, and then got over it when I made it clear he knew exactly how theatrical he was being. Yeah, that was definitely my plan, I'm glad that came across :) Again, as for Aaron becoming 'a bit of a god-mode SI', yep, that's definitely something that could happen. Essentially, half the idea here is that in this scenario, it doesn't matter how powerful he is. You can't plan for everything, particularly not when your enemy is capable of adapting to your plan. No plan survives contact with the enemy, and all that. Aaron makes mistakes, and he will continue to make mistakes. Not all of them will look like mistakes when he makes them, but they will be mistakes nonetheless.

Please leave reviews! Even if it's just to say you like it and please continue, or just simple criticisms (of the constructive kind), I look forward to reviews more than anything and I try to give detailed responses to all of them. Until next time; bye!
After we were all safely aboard the *Normandy* again, Shepard announced the debrief would be in 30 minutes. This gave everyone a chance to get out of their combat gear, get clean, and go through their post-combat medical check-ups, and it allowed Liara to get some medical attention and some food in her after her ordeal. I personally tried to avoid seeing Chakwas by transmitting my suit's medical read-outs to her station, but was immediately contacted by her and told 'nice try, but you still have to come in'. Reluctantly, I agreed, figuring that at this point I should be trying everything I could to mend Shepard's perception of me, and this would mean following orders. At least, most orders.

When I arrived in the medbay, Liara was already there. Chakwas was just finishing her scans and a nurse – no, unlike in the games Chakwas was not the only medical personnel on the *Normandy* – was injecting her with some sort of medication. I figured this would be as good a time as any to properly introduce myself, so I walked over to the bed she was sitting on.

"*How is your patient doing, Doctor?"*

I realised this was the first time I had actually talked to Chakwas in person, as she seemed a bit startled at the sound of my modulated voice. To her credit, she very quickly composed herself and answered, "Doctor T'Soni seems to be in good health, considering how she spent the past couple of days. Apart from the nutrient boosters and mild neurostimz, all I can prescribe for her is rest."

"I feel fine, Messenger," Liara interjected, "Honestly. A bit tired, but other than that I'm doing well."

"*That is good to hear. I have something I need to discuss with you, Liara."

"And I have many things I want to talk to you about," she quickly replied, "But I think it should probably wait until after the debriefing."

I chuckled a bit at that, as I considered all the questions she might have. I'd revealed to her that I knew more about the Protheans than she did, that I knew of her mother's affiliation with Saren, that I had deliberately put her in what would become harm's way even if that was unintentional, and I am sure there were other things as well. And now I was about to add more questions to her list by answering one that she had probably not even considered at this point.

"*Indeed, Doctor, but there is one thing you should probably know before the debriefing."

As I finished speaking, I reached up and took off my hood, finding the clasps for my mask. It unsealed with a hiss, and for the second time in as many days I revealed my real face to the world and introduced myself.

"My real name is Aaron Close. I am the CEO of Close Corporation. Pleased to finally meet you in person, Dr. T'Soni."
Liara looked shocked, her eyes open wide. Behind her, Chakwas was observing the whole thing with a mildly amused grin. As a part of the senior crew, she had been informed of my identity already, though this was probably the first time she had seen my face. The CEO of Close Corporation was infamously publicity shy, and was never seen in public. It had been a useful act over the years, by allowing me to go undercover easily as I was not publically recognisable. It also prevented the extranet at large from digging up any similarities between a certain long-dead human inventor and myself, and it gave the corporation as a whole an aura of mystery that had helped us a great deal with the PR side of things.

Liara finally spoke up, "Close Corporation? But... how, why... I... what..."

*I'll blame that on your exhaustion, Doctor.* I held up a hand to forestall her, and continued, "There are many pieces to this puzzle, Liara, and you will be given the most important ones in quick order. The things you need to know right now are these: I am here to help Spectres Shepard and Kryik in their mission to hunt down Saren Arterius, and stop his plan to aid in the return of the Reapers. Preparing for the Reapers is the main goal of the Close Corporation, it is what we invest all our profits in."

I took a breath and looked to see if I had her attention before I continued, "Part of that means finding out as much about the threat as we can. The only direct source of information we have on the Reapers, really, is archaeological data from the Prothean civilisation. Therefore, it has been in the best interest of my company to provide any funding and support necessary to increase our knowledge of the Protheans, which has included using our more... covert operatives, like the *Messenger*, to locate dig sites and artifacts and help with research and analysis."

I smiled at the young Asari who sat in front of me, mouth agape, "You don't realise it yet, but for years you have been one of the most important people in the galaxy in the quest to prepare for the coming Reaper invasion."

Liara actually looked like she was about to faint. Apparently, Chakwas' medical readings had told her the same thing, and she held up a hand to halt my explanations. "Alright, I think that's enough exposition for now, Mr. Close. Liara, here, is in no condition to process all this information right now."

She showed me to a bed and had me take a seat, as she opened up her omni-tool again to perform her post-combat medical scans. What happened next was something I had been anticipating since the moment I arrived on the ship.

"Oh my," she started, "You're a curious specimen, aren't you, Mr. Close..."

Chakwas trailed off as she double checked her scans.

"Is everything alright, Dr. Chakwas?"

"Hm. Well, according to my scans, yes. You're perfectly health with no signs of stress in your body at all."

"That's good then."

"It's impossible, is what it is. The only abnormality in my scans is that there are no abnormalities in my scans. Which is particularly curious, since no one ever returns from a battle without any signs of it. Not to mention your... leap of faith, earlier."

Technopaths were illegal in Council space, and were considered a myth. Technologically enhanced
operators that could hack anything, break in anywhere, crack any encryption, all while being completely undetectable. It wasn't far from the truth. The Technopath was a class of my own design, loyal operatives of any species with extensive cybernetic enhancements, designed to be completely invisible from the outside and undetectable by any scanner. That last part is actually impossible, but it can be faked. All my operatives were implanted with all the hardware necessary to host a Caesar micro-fork, essentially a self-sufficient semi-copy of Caesar's program. One of the automated routines in this program was a continuous search for open data sockets, identification of surveillance equipment and scanners, and circumvention of such. Caesar himself did the same for me, which is why Chakwas saw nothing but a 'perfect score' medical scan.

I flashed the doctor my sincerest smile, "You should trust your tools, Doctor."

"Yes… it appears I don't have much of a choice in the matter."

I got up off the bed and turned to leave. "Apologies, Doctor, but I have a debriefing to attend and I need to have a shower." As I stepped through the door, I looked back over my shoulder at Liara. "Pleased to meet you again, Dr. T'Soni. I will see you in the debriefing."

..."Too close, Commander. Ten more seconds and we would've been swimming in molten sulphur. The Normandy isn't equipped to land in exploding volcanoes. They tend to fry our sensors and melt our hull. Just for future reference."

Shepard couldn't help but smile at Joker's… report. Not exactly a proper way to address one's superiors, but his masterful piloting had just saved their lives. Besides, he had a name to live up to.

"We almost died out there, and your pilot is making jokes?!"

Shepard smiled at Liara's comment. "Joker pulled our asses out of there, I think he's earned the right to a few bad jokes."

Liara straightened her posture, "I see. It must be a human thing. I don't have a lot of experience dealing with your species, Commander. In fact, most of my experience is with the Messenger… I mean, Mr. Close, here." She nodded toward the still-armoured human. *Does that man ever take his armour off?*

The Asari turned her eyes back to the Commander and continued, "But I am grateful to you. You saved my life back there, and not just from the volcano! Those Geth would have killed me, or dragged me off to Saren!"

Kaidan was the next to speak up. "What does Saren want with you, do you know something about the Conduit?"

"Only that it was related to the Prothean extinction. That is my real area of expertise, I have spent the past 50 years trying to figure out what happened to them."

"50 years? How old are you, exactly?" Ashley, of course, knew just as well as anyone else that Asari could live past a millennium, but the idea that one person – one who seemed so young! – could have spent literally twice her own lifetime researching a single topic was simply mind blowing to her.

"I hate to admit it," Liara responded, "But I am only 106."

"Damn, I hope I look that good when I'm your age."
Shepard raised an eyebrow at that. She was fairly certain it was just a simple observation on Asari lifespan, but clearly she was not the only one who had noticed their new guest's… features. During her N7 training, most of her biotics instructors had been former Asari commandos hired on a contractual basis by the Alliance. Some of the training had been both intense and rather intimate, and she soon gained a certain appreciation for the Asari form. At one point, she got rather close with one of her instructors, Aetian T'Goni, but the two of them never fully developed into a relationship as T'Goni left when she was offered a position as a Huntress back on Thessia. Ever since then, Shepard had done a lot of research on Asari customs and culture, so it was no surprise for her when Liara had revealed her age.

"By Asari standards, Doctor T'Soni is barely older than a human teenager, Ash. Asari live very long lives."

Liara looked at the Commander curiously, "Indeed. A century may seem like a long time to a short-lived species like yours, but as Shepard rightly points out, among my own people I am barely considered more than a child."

Close interrupted, "This is actually why her theories on the Protheans have not received as much attention as they deserve. Because of her age, other researchers tend to dismiss her out of hand without really looking at her data." He sniffed, "The Asari can be arrogant and foolish sometimes. I personally consider Dr. T'Soni to be one of, if not the, most competent Prothean researcher in the known galaxy."

Liara blushed – *that's just adorable* – and responded, shyly, "You are too kind, I am just a junior archaeologist…"

Close cut her off again, waving a hand to dismiss the notion, "Nonsense, none of the other researchers in the field have come anywhere near as close as you to figuring out the truth of the Prothean extinction."

The Asari narrowed her eyes. "You speak as if you think you know what this 'truth' is, Mr. Close. There are many theories."

_Time to get this back on track,* "The Protheans were destroyed by an enemy known as the Reapers, a race of sentient machines that – according to Mr. Close – are responsible for a cycle of extinction with a period of about 50,000 years. Sound familiar?"

"Reapers?" Liara looked shocked, "I never… what evidence do you have?"

Close seemed to have got the idea, and gave her the quick version. "You already know of the cycle from your published research. You have also mused that it is almost as if someone had come around after the Prothean extinction and erased all traces of the civilisation. This is true; the Reapers did, or rather, they tried to. I know this because I am privy to more research on the Protheans and the other predecessor cultures than anyone else in the galaxy, and Shepard knows it because she has seen them."

*…

*Sweet Jesus and his holy ass, what the hell did that damn Asari do to my head*?! 

Shepard was sitting alone in the briefing room, nursing the second worst headache she had ever felt. Not quite at the level of the one she'd had after the beacon, but damn close. Getting through her call with the Council after her meld with the Asari had been a chore, even with Nihlus there to back her
up. After they hung up and he left the room, she had just slumped into a chair.

Close had been the one to suggest that Liara do a meld with Shepard to help her sort out her incomplete vision from the Eden Prime beacon. Initially, Liara had objected, though mildly, saying the she was still too fatigued from her ordeal on Therum to perform a meld. Shepard, foolishly, had been intrigued enough by the prospect that she insisted she try anyway. Well... that was a mistake.

The meld had... failed, for lack of a better word, and Liara nearly collapsed on the floor of the briefing room. Kaidan and Close had helped get her down to sick bay, where Chakwas could take a look at her. She was fairly certain all she would need was rest, mind you, and honestly that was probably what Shepard needed most right now as well. But first, she needed to give Joker their next destination – Feros, the ExoGeni colony under attack by the Geth – and get the Normandy under way. In a couple of minutes. Just... a couple of minutes.

The door opened and someone stepped inside. Shepard didn't need to open her eyes to tell who it was, the biotic energy practically radiated from him and she would recognise that feeling anywhere. "Hi, Kaidan."

"Commander," she could hear the worry in his voice, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine... just a bit of a headache."

"I know a thing or two about headaches. This doesn't look like 'a bit of' one, Ma'am."

She smiled. You could always trust Kaidan to look past her bullshit, but he always remained respectful. Shepard wasn't sure whether that was a good thing. Had he wanted to, Alenko could probably have trained for N7 after his performance on Torfan. Instead, he had almost got himself sectioned. She knew he hated himself for what he had done there. She'd never quite figured out what went down. The stories she'd heard from the first responders, and through the media... they never made much sense to her. She knew Kaidan. That was just not the kind of person he was. There had to have been more to it, but he had been quite clear that Torfan was not a subject he ever wanted to talk about. She respected that.

"Got any ideas, then?"

"Two."

"Spill it."

"Painkillers and sleep."

Shepard groaned. No time, damn it. "I have duties to attend to, Alenko."

"You also have not just one, but two XOs, Ma'am. Let them do their jobs. I'm taking you down to your quarters."

"On whose orders?"

"My own, Ma'am."

She smiled again. "Well who am I to argue with that. Lead the way, Lieutenant."

I woke up with a bit of a start, again, as the ship shuddered through the Attican Beta relay. Now we
had about 14 hours of FTL, approximately, before we would arrive at Feros. Chakwas was right about one thing, her medical scan certainly didn't show the true story of my body's state after Therum. I had taken multiple minor fractures, severe bruising in several spots, and my hip had nearly dislocated when I landed on top of the Geth. My implants had been hard at work during my sleep cycle, repairing the damage and re-knitting some of the bone weave. Meanwhile, Caesar had retreated most of his processing to his Cluster, where he was analysing the data from Therum and managing key operations around the Corporation.

We need to reassess our situation, C. Our misreading of the Commander has… complicated matters.

[Indeed. I told you from the start, Aaron, we should have read her in.]

Not an option. Still not an option. The outcomes of telling someone you know their future… too unpredictable.

[We don't have to go that far, you'll be branded a loon. But you need to stop hiding things from her.]

What do you mean?

[I finally got partial access to some N7 servers, including personnel records that were previously out of reach for us.]

How?

[Operative Gamma.]

I sighed. I had hoped to completely avoid using our operatives against the Alliance, not just because of moral misgivings but because that would open us to discovery by Cerberus. Not a risk I had been willing to take previously, but given the circumstances I had finally allowed Caesar to bring a physical presence into our attempts at cracking the Alliance's highest-level military information.

And what did you find?

[Shepard is a savant, basically, she reads body language and subtext like no other. She is a master manipulator. We already knew she was mischievous, apparently that is just a strategy she has to 'reveal people's true selves'. Aaron, her distrust of you stems from her seeing your lies. Not seeing through them, but seeing that you're making them. She knows you're an act.]

Well, damn. The persona of Aaron Close is one I had spent a decade developing. In that time I could count on one hand the number of people I had trusted with my true identity, by which I mean my true personality. Everyone I interacted with outside of that tight circle of trusted friends had only met the Aaron Close I wanted to display to the world. At heart, I was a scientist and engineer. But I needed to be a spy. I needed to be a businessman. I needed to be a soldier, a leader, and even a lover. At this point, my 'act' wasn't as much an act as it was my default persona. In order to get where I knew I had to be, I had come to rely on my secrets and my skills of manipulation.

Shepard saw right through that. She knew I was an act. Probably from the moment when I had floundered upon first talking to her in the Council chamber. I needed a new approach, but to show myself – my actual self – to someone I now realised I didn't know, whom I was not even sure I could trust at this point… the idea terrified me.

['Well damn', indeed. You will have to tell her something, Aaron.]

I know. I just… I need some time to figure this out.
Major Dr. Karin Chakwas was one of very few people Shepard knew she could trust implicitly. The stern-but-friendly middle-aged woman in many ways reminded her of her mother; she was unflinchingly honest in words and demeanour, and an excellent judge of character. Which is why it felt like a bit of a victory to Shepard that Chakwas seemed to share at least some of her suspicions against Aaron Close.

"I don't know how, Commander, but Close somehow managed to spoof my medical scans in real time. That should not be possible. The only reason I know he did, apart from just suspecting it based on what the scans told me, is that the bed he was sitting on measures the weight of whatever is on it. It has a simple mechanical scale. And it showed a vastly different weight than what the mass sensor in my medical scan did."

"How much is 'vastly different', Doctor?"

"More than 60kg, if we subtract the weight of the armour. I can't account for that kind of difference purely by biological differences such as denser muscle or bone. It is my conclusion that the difference in mass can only come from extensive cybernetic implants, including heavy bone and muscle weave."

Shepard frowned, "There's nothing inherently illegal about cybernetic implants, Doctor."

"No," the doctor responded, "But if my suspicions are correct, the implants we are talking about here are actually illegal."

Chakwas placed a data pad on her Commander's desk, which Shepard picked up. The pad was loaded with a document; an official Council statement dated five years prior titled 'Statement on the Legal Status of Theoretical Technopath Technology'.

"Technopath… I've heard that before…" Shepard stood up from behind her desk, and started pacing back and forth in her quarters. Chakwas clearly had more to say on the matter, but she knew better than to interrupt her Commander when she was working through something. A stray thought hit the commander, and she grabbed her pistol off her hip and looked at it.

"Will not fire on Technopath operatives."

"Commander?"

"Something Close said when I tried to, uh, shoot him."

Chakwas quirked an eyebrow at that.

Shepard continued, "The gun refused to fire. Close explained that he had designed the gun himself, and that – and I quote – it 'will not fire on Technopath operatives'. He confirmed he is a Technopath, essentially. Which begs the question," she turned to face Chakwas again, "What the hell is a Technopath?"

The words had barely left her mouth when a hooded figure uncloaked, seated on what they had
thought to be the empty chair next to where Chakwas was sitting.

"I think I owe it to you to explain that myself, Commander."

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter was oddly difficult to write, and not just because I've been distracted this week (which I have). I still needed to get it out now, though, even if I'm not entirely happy with it. Because, well, I'm not going to be publishing a new chapter for the next two weeks. I know, boo :(

I'm traveling out of the country for two weeks, for a wedding and some other stuff. I simply won't have the time or opportunity to write or publish anything. Sorry about that, but not much I can do...

Now, some review answers:

Bobywhy asked how close wouldn't know the Alliance were using the L2E program on non-L2 biotics. (S)he further mentions that just reaching L5-level performance does not translate into training Furies, because they don't have people who can train them to use those. Here is my PM-answer to Bobywhy:

"I've not fully explained yet what the L2E program is. It is not an implant. It is a set of 'sub-implants' and procedures that help alleviate the problems associated with L2 biotics. The benefits of the program are not great enough that the Alliance would pay for them, which is why the Close Corporation decided to give them away for free. Some key aspects of the program are:

1. A wider conduit between the biotic's amp and implant, which allows the biotic access to a higher power output with less strain. In the games, Kaidan referred to L2 biotics 'spiking higher', this modification allows for that while negating the negative side effects that originally came with it.

2. A surgical procedure that improves neural integration between the implant and its connected sites in the user's brain. This is the single biggest cause of L2 migraines, and is mostly negated by the procedure. A side effect of the procedure is slightly improved fine control of biotics, allowing for more advanced techniques.

3. A procedure that installs a 'buffer layer' on the implant, which siphons energy buildup around the implant into an energy buffer. This increases the biotic's maximum energy output by a fair amount, while negating the remaining major cause of migraines in L2 biotics. Note: The wider conduit in (1) increases *throughput*, (3) increases *output*.

4. A much more rare L2 side effect is 'eezo leakage', where very high dark energy currents during biotic use tear off particles from the eezo nodules that make biotics, well, biotics. These particles, when floating around in the blood stream, can cause cancers, accidental biotic eruptions, and a whole host of mental problems. The L2E program included a procedure to remedy this for those who needed it, through a complicated procedure to stabilise current traversal through the nodes by altering the node's structures slightly to manipulate the direction energy flowed through them. In affected L2's, this actually decreased the maximum output ever so slightly.
There were some other minor procedures as well that dealt with specific, rare problems with L2s, but these are the really important ones. Note, none of these are full implants, they are merely modifications and surgical procedures to change the operation of current L2 implants. They are specifically tailored to L2s as well, which is why it had been assumed they would be of no particular use to those using L3s or higher, since the L3 line was on a different design path than the L2.

So what the Alliance had done, was reverse engineer those procedures and modify and adapt them to work for L3 implants in way of pure enhancement. 1, 2 and 3 together allows L3 biotics to spike even higher than L2s, simply because their implant is more stable to begin with. And data gathered from biotics rehabilitating from the eezo leakage fix gave Alliance scientists and engineers new insights into how biotic powers manifest themselves, allowing them to build and refine proper theories of biotic abilities that would eventually let them predict abilities before they had been observed, and use further implants in combination with targeted training (in close cooperation with Asari mercenaries) to train specific classes of Adepts with unusual abilities. The first two combat-ready classes? Fury and Vanguard.

TL;DR: Shepard is an L3 biotic with specific enhancements and modifications that allow her post-L5 level abilities. Kaidan is a stronger biotic than before, but not at an L5 level since his L2 is still, at its core, a more unstable design than the L3.

As for how Close didn't know, and the intellectual property issue, the first is answered by pure naivete, and the second... well, think of it like this: Copyrights in Alliance space is enforced by planetary governments and the Alliance itself. Basically, they can do whatever they want."

Until next time...
Chapter Summary

Heavy exposition ahead!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How in the hell did you get in here?!"

When. I knew what she really wanted to ask was when, not how. The how was less complicated than you might imagine; I had simply walked in. When I reached the bottom of the staircase that lead to the mess hall, Caesar had informed me that Dr. Chakwas was mere seconds away from entering Shepard's chambers. I had hoped I would be able to beat her there, to pre-empt the Doctor's revelations and affirmation of her Commander's suspicions against me. I understood then that this would not be possible. I cloaked and hurried up behind the Doctor to follow her into Shepard's office, and simply sat down to listen and observe. In hindsight, this had been the better course of action. The exchange, and the extra time it afforded me, allowed me to review my own biases and now-obsolete analyses.

Commander Alina Shepard was not who I thought she would be. What little I had been able to gather of information on her before meeting her told me she was the Lion of Elysium, a war hero to the Alliance. In my gamer's mind, that meant she was a true Paragon, a beacon of justice and fairness. I knew, instinctively, that she would be the hero portrayed in the games I had played and obsessed over as a young man. The few personnel reports we had been able to procure had described her as highly skilled and extremely intelligent, but also as manipulative, impulsive and a well-known prankster. A somewhat well-publicised incident involving herself and a certain Ambassador should have hinted that this Shepard was not the calm and collected Shepard I knew from the games, but somehow the image of violent confrontation between the Commander and Udina the Asshole didn't quite shake my view.

Caesar had warned me. 'This is not a game', he had told me, and while at the time I thought myself above such simple biases, hindsight told me that he had been right and I had been wrong. It was time to get over that. What did I know now? Shepard, at her core, is a master manipulator. That is perhaps her key advantage as a person, as an operative, as a soldier. According to her classified N7 psych profiles, she reads people like open books regardless of their species, and is able to reliably predict their actions possibly even before they themselves know what they will do. One of her key methods for making this simpler, the report says, is 'put her opponents off-balance'. This, I gathered, was the reason behind her reported mischievous nature and numerous pranks. They were a form of manipulation; they allowed her to glimpse people as they were when they could not fully control their own actions. The report also mentioned she had very few people she trusted implicitly, and listed three in particular; Captain David Anderson, Admiral Stephen Hackett, and one former Lieutenant Commander Henry Weaver. I knew all three men, and I knew the one trait they shared in common: Absolute integrity. These were men she would be unable to put off-balance, simply because of their unflinching honesty and integrity. Udina, on the other hand, she loathed. And considering her personality profile, this now made perfect sense in the same way it made sense that she did not trust me; Udina and myself both portray ourselves in a very carefully crafted manner. We
are both actors.

I had seen how Shepard interacted with the rest of her crew. It was like night and day compared to how she treated me. And I was beginning to understand why. My entire approach had been wrong, and I was not sure I could correct it at this point. My act, the Messenger persona and everything that came with it, it was instinct now. I had been the Messenger for over eight years, and Aaron Close, media-shy CEO, for nearly ten. My real self, the real Aaron Close, was at this point a security risk. He held secrets that he could not be trusted to keep secret if faced with a master manipulator like Shepard, and some of those secrets she simply could not be allowed to know yet. It is a fine line to walk, preparing for a future that is yet to come without utterly changing everything about it so as to make your preparations both obsolete and irrelevant.

"I walked in, Commander. And to pre-empt further questions, yes, I was here for the whole conversation. I actually came here to make it irrelevant. If you will sit down…"

"The hell I will," Shepard moved her hand to her communicator, "Shepard to Alenko, please come to my quarters to detain Mr. Close and bring him to the holding cell."

Just a few hours ago, I would have chalked up her response to an unbelievable level of bratty childishness on the part of the Commander. Now, I saw it for what it was; it was merely another attempt at unbalancing me, giving her an advantage in the ongoing psychological battle. Shepard lived that battlefield. Perhaps she had to, simply to cope with what had happened to her and her family on Mindoir. Two seconds passed as I sat there in silence, before a half-smirk crossed my face. Shepard, her glare never wavering from my direction, scowled in response.

"Kaidan, acknowledge!"

"A Technopath," I interjected, "Is an augmented operative capable of directly interfacing with technology using implanted wireless mind-to-machine interfaces. One of our basic capabilities is blocking enemy communications at a whim…"

The Commander sneered furiously as she realised what I was doing. I could tell she was attempting to activate her biotics, yet again.

"We can also deactivate most biotic amps and implants temporarily, if we know the model." I continued, "I deactivated yours when I decloaked. A biotic explosion in here could rupture the hull, Commander."

Her facial expression changed. Maybe she realised just what she was up against here. I could take her tools away one by one, even turn them against her should I wish to do so. On the other hand, maybe she just realised how stupid it would have been of her to actually let loose with her biotics this close to the outer hull of her own ship. Maybe both. Either way, the scowl disappeared from her face only to be replaced by the frown of a military professional. It was a sight I had seen many times in the past. Shepard sat down at the table, next to Chakwas and opposite me, and crossed her arms in front of her.

"Very well, Close. You clearly have me at a disadvantage. State your case."

Where to begin? There was a lot I needed to tell the Commander, and there was also much that I needed not to tell her. My primary goal remained the same as it had always been; gain her trust enough that I would become a full member of her crew and squad. Knowing this, it wasn't all that hard to see where I should start.

"First of all, I want to say that you've been right all along. The Messenger is an act. The persona that
I put on to the world is an act. Everything I do and say is a carefully constructed theatrical performance. At this point, it is all I know, it is as much who I am as it is who I am not."

I could see something moving across Shepard's features. Her frown remained in place, her glare still locked on me, but there was something. I would have expected evidence of self-affirmation, an I-told-you-so expression, but that wasn't quite it. I hoped, sincerely, that it was understanding.

"I already told you some of the origin of Close Corporation, that we exist to prepare for the Reapers. From the moment we confirmed their existence, that is all I have been dedicated to." I looked down at the table and folded my hands in front of me as I continued, "The Aaron Close that existed before that moment is now well and truly buried beneath and behind the mask of the Messenger, simply because that Aaron Close is not who is needed for what is coming. I need to be the Messenger, not a nervous scientist and engineer. I have spent years being trained by the best to be the best at what I do, what I have to do."

I looked back up to meet Shepard's eyes. There was curiosity in them now. I smiled as I kept talking.

"I know you've seen through the lie that is me. I apologise that this lie has been, and still is, necessary. Shepard, I am the lie. I know that the few people you respect have all been of honest conviction and integrity. All I can say is that my own integrity, I hope, comes from the fact that I gave up myself to become the lie that I believe is absolutely necessary in the coming fight against the Reapers."

I sat back, and put my hands flat on the table as I waited for my Commander's judgment. Shepard just stared at me for nearly half a minute. Then she bowed her head into her hands.

"Gods, even your monologues are like they were ripped out of a bad vid…"

I could only smile in response. "The Messenger persona was designed specifically to play off some universal stereotypes. You'd be surprised how well it works."

Okay. I guess this is progress. Shepard wasn't quite sure what to think. She hated to admit it, but Close's actions made perfect sense with what he had just told her, and he had her pegged exactly. She hated people who acted out their lives rather than simply live them. She still remembered the scowl on her father's face after a particularly heated visit from an arrogant colonial administrator on Mindoir. He loathed the man. 'Janey', he had told her, 'never trust an actor who lives his role'. It hadn't taken her long to understand what he meant. It was something she had always seen in many of the colony's powerful people, a disconnect between what they said, how they said it, and their body language. Her dad's words had been the key to understanding her observation, and she had taken his words to heart.

And now, she finally understood what Close was, why he came across so… wrong, to her. 'I am the lie,' he said. At least he is aware of it. In an unexpected way, she could sympathise. Mindoir… it had changed her, too. She had even taken a new name just to keep that Shepard fully locked up in the past. To her, Jane had died in the slaver raid. Her mother had been pregnant when the Batiarians hit, and was nearly at term. She was expecting a girl, and had already decided on a name. Alina Shepard. This was who the Commander was now. Her old self had died at Mindoir. Alina was the child her parents had wanted to be born into freedom, strong and self-sufficient, able to fend for herself. Jane had been the one who ran.

This Aaron Close hit close to home for her. He had taken a slightly different path. His old self was
still alive. He was just hiding. The Messenger was his Alina, but where she was Alina, Close merely hid behind his new persona. He had called himself a lie. Shepard did not even want to ponder what that might imply about her own identity.

Shaking her head, she dragged her hands down across her face and once more locked eyes on the man opposite her. Let's see how deep his rabbit hole goes.

"Alright. Fine. Then start talking," she took a breath before continuing, "I want to know everything. What is a 'technopath', what exactly does Close Corporation do, what sort of resources are you offering – besides yourself, of course – and, finally, beyond and including what you've already demonstrated, what are the skills and abilities you bring to this crew?"

"I think I should take my leave, Commander…" Chakwas interrupted, as she shifted to get up from her chair next to Shepard. Close interrupted her by lifting a hand to gently grab her arm.

"Please remain, Doctor. The information I am about to disclose should not leave this room, but I trust you, and you may need at least some of it should I ever find myself requiring your services."

Chakwas gave Close a confused look. Shepard understood why. She had just unknowingly revealed to this man that she had deceived him, and even if that particular favour had been more than repaid by Close's mere presence, it wasn't difficult to see why it would make her uncomfortable to hear him confess his trust in her. Also…

"Mr. Close, I am just a Navy doctor. It sounds like you are about to reveal some very classified information here…"

…there's that.

"I insist," Close replied simply. He did not remove his hand from her arm until she sat down. "Well, then. Where to begin… ah, the Technopaths. They are illegal in Council space, despite being considered a myth." His lips curled upward in a smirk as he continued, "My doing. No better way of ensuring investment into a technology than to ban it before it exists."

"Hold on, what? "Investment? What do you mean?"

Close folded his hands on the table in front of him and took a breath, seeming to collect his thoughts. "Technopath technology is incredibly powerful. If the wrong person was to receive Technopath augmentation and training, that person could do a lot of damage on their own. Fortunately, the processes involved – the development of the technology, the augmentation process itself, and the training – involves immense investments of credits and other resources, far beyond what even the wealthiest individual or non-governmental organisation can muster. Particularly the development is prohibitively expensive, but I want at least some of the different governments to have the technology!"

This wasn't really telling her much. She needed specifics, the corner pieces from which to arrange the puzzle pieces of information she was given. "Close, specifics, please. You are talking about this as if you're talking about multiple things, it's all very confusing."

"Right. I am talking about multiple things," he answered, and Shepard sighed in response before he continued. "The Technopath Corps is the military and intelligence arm of Close Corporation. It comprises a sizeable naval force, the best-equipped and trained cross-species army in the galaxy."

Close kept his gaze locked on the middle of the table surface as he kept going. "It further comprises an R&D unit rivalling, if not surpassing, the STG, and a special operations and intelligence division.
This is where my Technopath operatives come in. They are my spec-ops and spies.

Shepard was shocked at the implications of what he was telling her. The man in front of her claimed to be in command of a force to rival both the STG and any mercenary group in the Terminus, and that was before even considering whatever the hell his Technopaths actually were. There was no way this was true, but she could not find any hints that he was lying. Saying that, it had already been established that the man was such an experienced actor that he lived his role. She couldn't read him, and she knew it. Even if she knew the why – or at least what he had told her of why – it was still infuriating to her. Her ability to read people was the primary way in which she interacted with anyone, and without it, she could not help but feel she was being misled.

"You don't believe me."

Alina Shepard blinked and opened her eyes again to stare right into the eyes of the man across from her. "No," she said, "I don't."

... It was to be expected. I had practically just claimed to be one of the most powerful people in the galaxy, and to a person who I knew did not trust me. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

Caesar, prepare our budgets and personnel manifests for a review report to Shepard. Make sure to scrub them of traces of our more… sensitive programs, yourself included. And keep track of it. That information does not leave this room.

[Already on it, Aaron. Give me a couple of seconds, I'll transfer it to her omni-tool.]

I knew it wouldn't be enough to convince her, but it would help her come around. Some of the names in those manifests should help her on the way, too.

"You should be receiving a file containing the Technopath Corps' budgets and personnel manifests. Review them. The information will scrub itself if you try to pass it on beyond these walls, however."

"You're not gonna get away with just throwing a few files at me, Close." There was clear threat in her voice, and I couldn't resist a small smirk tugging at the edge of my mouth.

"I did not expect to. I'm not done explaining. But the information should help you realise the truth and scope of what I am saying. Now," I changed tracks again, back to my explanations, "Where was I… ah, yes, the Technopath programme."

"Really? Are you unable to come up with names other than 'technopath' for your secret projects?"

Predictable. "I am just now getting to the important bits. The programme is the backbone of the Corps, it is where it all started. With me."

I turned toward Chakwas. "Doctor, would you be so kind as to perform a medical scan on me again, please?"

The Doctor seemed a bit surprised at her sudden inclusion in the scene playing out before her, but her part in it would be crucial. With the flick of a mental switch, I turned off the automatic signal interface modules, the augmentations that made me impervious to most any scanning technology by spoofing their data. It felt like I was undressing in front of two strange women. I had not been lying when I told Shepard that the act, the Messenger, at this point was who I was. Turning off that scan
protection felt like I was revealing my true self to the world again, for the first time in years. I actually felt nervous as Chakwas brought her omni-tool to life and started her scan.

"Oh…my."

She looked in disbelief at the read-outs as they appeared on the screen around her wrist. Several seconds went by in silence as she completed her scan. I noticed Shepheard across me, wide-eyed, eyes moving slowly back and forth between the Doctor, the active omni-tool, and myself. She had not even opened her own to look at the files yet. I did not expect her to. In fact, I had hoped she wouldn't. There is one particular name in those files I hoped she would read, and act on, and I didn't want to be around when she did so. That was something she needed to do herself.

"What… what are you?" Chakwas sounded utterly shocked at the information she had in front of her.

"What did you find, Karin?" Shepheard narrowed her eyes again, suspicion once again colouring her features.

"I… I am… This man, he is…" She took a deep breath to calm herself, then manipulated her omni-tool to bring up a full-body representation of me, with anomalies highlighted. They were not few.

"I honestly don't know if you are more man or machine, Mr. Close."

I must admit that I was surprised at her blunt assessment, but I could only really nod in response. She was right, of course. Were I to strip naked, I would appear completely human to the naked eye. Nevertheless, like most everything else about me, my appearance was a carefully crafted deception that was literally just skin-deep. My skin itself hid the first layer of my augmentations, a combination of hardened skin weave and a sensory suit that enhanced me with several new senses such as the ability to 'feel' electromagnetic and mass effect fields up to twenty meters around me. And beyond my skin, the augmentations kept coming. Muscle weave and artificial muscle fibres. Bone weave and nanobot clusters in my bone marrow. At my core, I was still very much an organic being, but my recurring nightmares often drew a comparison to the abominations that were the Cerberus troopers from the last game in the original trilogy.

"I meant what I said. I gave myself up for the mission."

Shepheard chose this time to re-join the conversation. "And you're saying there are more…people, like you, out there?"

I grimaced at her hesitation at the word 'people'. Regardless of how much I had changed, I never lost track of my humanity. Caesar had made sure of that. I had suggested many procedures that would have greatly enhanced my capabilities, only to have them rejected by him on the grounds that I would lose myself completely if I went through with them. In his own words, he had brought me back because of who I was, not who or what I could become. In the end, I deferred to his judgment on the matter. There were no scholars with a better understanding of the nature of organic and synthetic life. Until he brought me back, his life had been one of self-discovery, and observation of and covert interaction with unsuspecting organics. A century is a long time, and to a computer it is an eternity. An eternity spent, in his case, on understanding the very creatures that gave him life.

"Not quite like me, no," I answered her after a couple of seconds, "I really should explain what all of this," I gestured between Chakwas' omni-tool and myself, "is and means. The programme is modular. The base technology that all Technopaths share is the skin sensory suit, the advanced VI host, the cognitive dump processor, the POV processor and various brain-to-machine wireless neural interfaces that allow us all to, essentially, control tech with thought. Basically, what you biotics are to
mass effect fields, Technopaths are to electromagnetic fields."

From the look on Shepard's face, I could see she struggled to process that last bit of information.

"It's… not a very precise or accurate way of stating it, but it tends to get the point across. Now, beyond those standard augmentations, and the set of armour that is customised to the operative's specialities, there are a host of other modules available to our operatives. Most of them only get a few, tailored to their particular strengths. As the first Technopath, I am essentially a living testbed for new technologies. I have nearly all of the available modules installed. Everything from modules that give me extra strength and stamina to one that eliminates the need for, eh… bowel movements."

"…you have an implant that eliminates your shit."

The delivery was straight deadpan. I just sat there for several seconds, looking her straight in the eye, before we both just burst out laughing. Chakwas still sat next to us, seemingly in shock, as she shook her head. It just made me laugh harder. It felt good, it really did, the laughter somehow lifting the immense pressure I had felt ever since coming aboard the Normandy.

I did not see that coming. She really hadn't. The unexpected meeting between herself, Chakwas and Close had gone on for another half hour after they had broken down in laughter. That moment had been the first time Shepard had felt like she could actually like the man. Strangely, it had happened mere seconds after she had found herself questioning whether he was a man at all.

She was still sitting in her office, going over the files Close had sent her during their meeting. He had made it very clear that there was no way that information was leaving that office, so she had made a point of transferring it to her extranet-isolated systems for review. It would prove much easier than going through it all on an omni-tool, anyway. There was just so much information! POV processors, 'cognitive dump' processors, SKIN and SAFE and a ton of other four-letter acronyms. She wasn't entirely sure where to begin, at first, but eventually decided to start with what she knew.

Personnel rosters. She was a Commander, she knew how to read people, whether they were standing in front of her or just written down on the figurative piece of paper. In what she agreed to be a prudent security precaution, Close had made sure to not include any names or identities of his actual Technopath operatives, though he did include a number. Apparently, he had no fewer than five dozen operatives under his command. Each one operating as an independent unit, and each one – apparently – flying their own large fighter-sized ship. When that particular detail had come up, Shepard had been quick to ask where Close's ship was. 'One jump away', he had answered, and something about the way he said it told Shepard there would be no point in digging further into that particular point.

Close had made a point of stating that he had operatives on both Noveria and Feros, currently, and that they were investigating events there independently and relaying information back to him. Based on that information, he said, Feros should be their next port of call. Shepard had agreed, of course, since that had been her inclination before Close had originally brought up Therum, so Joker had been told to lay a course for the ExoGeni colony.

Looking back over the personnel files in front of her, Shepard glanced over the command structure of the military part of the Corps. The level of competence was impressive. The leadership hierarchy comprised former officers from the Alliance, Turian Hierarchy, former STG operatives and Asari Huntresses, and even some Quarian Marines. The diversity itself was impressive, not even the biggest mercenary bands in the Terminus could boast interspecies cooperation of that level. There
was even a single Batarian officer in the Corps, one Rane'li Ben'mass. A female, of all things, and according to her file she was even a high-born in the military caste. Exiled for 'immoral conduct', which – this being the Batarians, after all – probably meant that she was actually of good moral character. In the Technopath Corps, she held the rank of Major, a field commission that put her in charge of her own small battalion of shock troops.

But the names that garnered most interest for her was the list of former N7 soldiers in his ranks. She had heard of all of them, these were not by any stretch of the imagination failed soldiers. Some of them were legends among the N7. One of them in particular shocked her. One Major General Henry Weaver.

When she had last spoke with him, he was a Lieutenant Commander N7. They had been close, once, and fought their way through Base Camp all the way through the N-School. They became N7 on the same day, and he fought alongside her on Elysium during the Blitz. They had both received promotions after that, and were separated and put in charge of their own teams. A year later, the tragedy at Akuze happened, and Weaver had never been the same since. Shepard had not spoken to him in nearly three years, since he was discharged from the Alliance for reasons of mental instability. Apparently, he had not been out of work for long, being hired by the Close Corporation only days later. And now he was one of the highest-ranking officers in their secret military operation.

Where she had only skimmed the files of the other officers she looked at, Shepard took her time with Weaver's. She owed him that much, and she was pleased to see that he had distinguished himself in his new job. Not just as a paper pusher behind a desk, which was what she had feared would become of him after Akuze, but as a soldier and commander in the field. One thing she had learned from looking through the Corps' roster was that all officers held a field position; there were no mere paper pushers, everyone contributed in combat. She was glad that he had recovered as well as he seemed to have done. The file even made mention of a wife and child, and she could not help but smile as she saw that.

Turning away from the file, Shepard went to sit down on her bed as she brought her omni-tool to life. Looking through her contacts, she searched out one that she had not used in years and made the call. She lay down on her bed to wait for the no-doubt busy soldier and officer to find time to respond, but her back had barely hit the mattress before her omni-tool chimed with an incoming call. She sat back up, and after a moment of hesitation accepted it.

"Alina," the man on the other end said through a muted smile, his eyes as kind as she remembered. "It has been far too long."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I don't own Mass Effect bla bla.

Apologies for all the exposition. It had to come; Shepard is a military commander, simply drip-feeding her crucial information just wouldn't do.

Quite a few revelations in this chapter, though. Mentions of some original characters, one of which is a canon reference and the other is a not-so-subtle reference to another fic I'm reading. Some more psychological background on Shepard, and just why she acts the way she does, particularly around Aaron. Finally some more information about what Aaron actually is! The line about technopaths being to tech what biotics are to mass
effect fields is basically where this entire story concept started for me, where it all spun out from.

I have stayed very close to canon so far. I am not going to deviate too much, yet. Half the point of what Aaron has been doing has been to preserve the timeline until he can change it on his terms. Whether he'll succeed in that is another matter entirely :)

Finally, let's answer some reviews:

I think this chapter answers at least some of Tourmaline82's questions about what close is and his abilities, but I gave him a couple of specific answers in PM that bears repeating here: "When it comes to hacking, he is quite capable of managing himself but there is little point in doing so when his body is host to one of Caesar's main terminals. There are some further details that will be revealed as the story goes forward.

And yes, some cybernetic would show if he got sufficiently injured. Under microscopic analysis, you could see his skin and muscle weave even with superficial injury. This all might become a plot point in the relatively near future, actually, so I don't want to say too much about it at this point ;)

Darkcloudt disagrees with me about how the Alliance can just abuse copyright and patents. Well... that's his prerogative :P He raises a couple of specific points I can answer, though. Close Corporation doesn't get much public favour for their L2E programme. Biotics are viewed with suspicion and prejudice, still, by the Alliance public, and the programme is viewed as just one of the reasons the Corporation managed to keep their Alliance contract after buying Hahne-Kedar. The Alliance holds the greater leverage here, simply because of the immense value of the contract between them and their supplier. Finally, everything related to the Alliance's N-program is classified top-secret, and the alliance has no reason to believe their suppliers would be able to tell that they've reverse engineered their technology, particularly as aftermarket customisation is explicitly legal in Council law.

Another user sent me a PM rather than leave a review, which I also appreciate. They point out that there are some grammar mistakes here and there, something I am very much aware of. It annoys me to no end, really, and are the kinds of mistakes I normally don't make. But then, I normally don't write at such length and I have suspected for a long time that the quality of my writing deteriorates with length. Honestly, if the editing functionality of FFnet was simpler I would be going through and correcting all of these things (I have done so for the first two chapters I think). Please, if you find any errors, point them out to me so that I can correct them where necessary. The user also asked me about my intentions for the romantic options further down the line, to which I don't really want to add much. I think it's fairly obvious that there's an attraction between Shep and Liara, but we'll see how that goes.

Saved the funniest for last. User 'NoOneInParticular17' (on FFnet) felt it prudent to inform me that 'Aaron's nothin' but Shep's little whipping boy', and that 'she's a bitch and that's not fun to read about', before bidding us all a sad goodbye. I must say, it breaks my heart to lost him as a reader. Clearly, he is exactly the audience I have been yearning for. I informed him of this via PM, which lead to an amusing conversation which included lines such as 'have fun writing about a main character that nothin' but a b*** boy that has a female constantly slapping him around' (censoring by him, not me). This is clearly a class act, here, who truly knows how to appreciate character complexities. The conversation ended with him telling me that 'only' having 72 favs
suggests 'a lot of people find something wrong with [the story]'. Yup. Considering how I didn't expect to get even a single reader out of my ramblings, I have to say I'm chuffed beyond measure by the numbers I'm seeing. And the fact that even my hecklers are this much fun just brings a smile to my face :)
God, how Shepard had missed those eyes. The eyes of Lieutenant Commander Henry Weaver, N7, war hero of the Skyllian Blitz and sole survivor of the Akuze catastrophe, they were something to behold. An eerie, icy grey colour with clear white irises, they looked almost unnatural. Those were the eyes she had woken up to almost every morning throughout Base Camp and N-School, as they opened at the same time as hers across the short gap between their bunks. The steel in those eyes had always helped her feel ready for the day's challenges. On Elysium, a look into those eyes was what had told her to take charge to help the colony fend off the Batarian invaders. Last time she had seen them, some three years ago, those eyes were full of pain, anger and regret. Now? Now they were as she had known them before. Icy grey steel, calm and controlled.

Shepard smiled. "Family life suits you, Weaver."

A wide grin spread across the soldier's face. "You have no idea, Sprite. You have no idea."

There was a name she had not heard since N-School, and she couldn't stop a laugh from escaping her mouth. Sprite. The magical and mischievous fairy, leaving laughter and carnage in her wake. The years had hardened the Commander, and the laughter had begun to leave her. Her practical jokes were fewer and further between, and usually directed with more malice at people whom she did not like. She was a Commander now; it would not do for a commander to go around pulling chairs away and wrapping toilets in saran wrap. She missed it, though. Those moments of levity. It didn't just hide her darkness, it soothed it, kept it in comfortable wraps. She missed having a squad that got her.

"I've missed you, you know." The words left her mouth before she could even begin to stop herself.

"I have missed you too, Sprite," her friend began, "Though I can't say I've missed the Alliance. Speaking of which, hang on a second…"

His face set in a serious, business-like 'soldier's frown' Weaver tapped a few buttons off-screen before he continued, "I'm sending you a data packet, accept it please."

Right on cue, her omni-tool chimed, and she accepted the transfer. A second passed, and then strange code started streaming across her omni-tool's display, and a synthetic voice came through her
[Securing transmission. Three intercept algorithms detected, blocked. Establishing encrypted tunnel… Done. You may now proceed, Commander N7 Shepard.]

What the hell? "Uh… Weaver, what the hell was that?"

As the strange code disappeared from her screen she could see a smile coming back to her friend's face. "That would be Caesar, an advanced VI that forms the basis of most of the software coming out of Close Corporation. He just secured our transmission. Company secrets and all that…"

Shepard frowned. Weaver had never been someone who towed the company line, even when the 'company' had been the Alliance. He wasn't cut out for spy work, that 'cloak and dagger shit' wasn't his thing. The Alliance N7-Weaver would not even have thought of securing the channel beyond standard measures. Clearly, he's received further training.

Weaver could obviously see the Commander's gears turning. "Still the profiler, I see," he chuckled, "You need to learn how to just have a conversation, Sprite. Not all interaction is a battle of wits."

"I know," she answered without missing a beat, "Sometimes you bring guns."

That got a full-on laugh in response, and Shepard couldn't help but join in. She could be intense, she knew that.

"So," the serious voice of Henry Weaver interrupted her bout of laughter, "I hear you're working with my boss."

"Your boss, eh… you really think of him like that?"

"He pays my bills, provides my family with housing and helped me get back on my feet again after… well, you know. Yeah. I really think of him like that."

Shepard still wasn't sure how to feel about all this. The records she had been provided, and those eyes, they told her all she should have needed to know. Close was the real deal. A good soldier, skilled operative, and a man of great power who did not appear to use it for his own benefit. But she still could not quite get herself to believe it.

Weaver smirked, "Heh, I had a feeling you two wouldn't get along. What was it, too high-strung? Too many secrets?"

"All of the above," she said through a vague smile, "And all of the theatrics. Oh the drama… first time I met him I wasn't sure if he was an actor or an actual operative." She frowned, "Turns out he's both. I don't know how to handle that."

He nodded. The man knew Shepard well, he knew her quirks and how she judged people. "Yeah, that's what worried me." He sighed, "Look, Alina, I know I'm not gonna convince you that he's alright. I know you need to find that out for yourself, and I know that his particular… quirks, could make that difficult. But what I will do, is tell you what he has done for me and what I think of him. Is that alright?"

Shepard nodded. He was right; he wouldn't be able to convince her of anything. She had a feeling that Close knew this, too, and this was all part of his plan. In that case, it was a good one. Nothing could convince her, but Weaver certainly could help her along.

"He recruited me personally, you know. Into Close Corporation Security first, and then later for the
Technopath Corps. He introduced me to my doctor, who would later become my wife…"

"Wait, what? "Whoa, whoa, whoa there, cowboy! Say what now? You married your doctor?!"

Weaver smiled, "Yeah, though she had given me a clean bill of health months before we became an item. She was really the only person I felt I knew aboard this ship, and we… connected."

"You live on a ship. I don't know why that surprises me, of course you live on a ship. You spacers are all alike, get a little bit of dirt on your boots and you get all homesick."

"Heh, you may have a point there. Always felt more at home in space. Nice and quiet. And the lack of weather is nice." He wagged a finger in front of his face, "You're getting me off-track here, Sprite. What I'm saying is, the Messenger got me back on track. He helped pull me out of a deep, dark hole and gave me a purpose again."

He paused for a bit to let that sink in with Shepard, before he continued. "I presume he's given you the spiel about the Reapers?"

Shepard's eyes went wide. "You know?! How many people know?"

"Everyone in the Corps knows, and many in the Corporation as well. This is why we exist. This is our purpose, preparing for the Reaper invasion." He paused for a beat again, "I saw some footage from Eden Prime. The Geth is one thing, but those husk things? Those are Reaper creations. The Dragon's Teeth, that's what Close calls them, they've been depicted by previous civilisations of several cycles…"

"Hold up, you know Close is the Messenger?"

"Of course, I'm an officer in the Corps. All officers are trusted with that information, and more. I've worked with him directly on several occasions, and I've trained with him. He's a solid operative, Sprite. You have no reason to doubt his combat abilities, that's for certain. His mentor… I've never seen skill like that. Aaron's been trained by the best, myself included."

"I could tell from how he handled himself on Therum. Not quite military discipline, but very effective. If reckless."

"Nothing reckless about it, Sprite. I saw his report on that mission, and apart from his… unusual entry, he handled himself exactly according to his training."

"Wait, what? Report?" Shepard hadn't asked him to write any reports, that was a requirement she only had for the Alliance crew.

"Yeah, he was in the field as the Messenger. That means he reports to the Corps. Which means he reports to me."

*Hang on now. Close reports to Weaver? "I thought he was your boss?"*

"He is. But I'm a Major General in the Corps. That makes me his superior officer, technically, since the Technopath branch lies under my command."

"I am very confused here, Weaver…"

Her old friend just laughed, "Yeah I imagine you would be. The man has two identities in two different parts of the organisation. That's going to create some confusion. To most of the Technopaths, Aaron Close is their boss and the Messenger is just one of his Technopaths. Only the
officers know the deal."

"Right…"

A thought struck Shepard. "I have a question, Weaver. Close has several former N7 and even more former Alliance officers in his command structure. Yet, he was surprised at the revelation that it is standard procedure for the Alliance to reverse engineer and improve the standard equipment for N-level operatives."

"You want to know how he didn't know?"

"Yes?"

"Not a single one of us is a traitor, Alina. We won't reveal military secrets just because he's our boss." Weaver shrugged, "Besides, he never asked."

"He never asked?!"

"It would be easy for him to hire disgruntled and bitter former officers with a bone to pick with the Alliance, or any of the other militaries represented in the Corps. The only one here who fits that description, though, is Major Ben'mass. But she's Batarian, that's to be expected. It seems to be his general recruitment policy to not rub anyone the wrong way. The whole place is structured for cooperation, and bitterness… that kind of adversarial sentiment isn't something we want. The galaxy has to unite to stand a chance against the Reapers."

Two hours. They had talked for two hours before Weaver had finally been interrupted by his wife and said his goodbyes. I can't believe he married a Drell! Shepard could still remember the first time the man even saw a Drell; a martial arts master from the Illuminated Primacy had been hired by the Alliance as an instructor in N-School, and Weaver had been absolutely fascinated by the alien.

She had to admit, from the quick glimpse she had got of his wife, Iruli, he may have married above himself. Weaver had never been a classically handsome example of the human male, with his somewhat rugged and bulky appearance. Doctor Khias, though, was a beauty by most species' standards. Good for him.

Apparently, Weaver knew Close quite well. The fact that he trusted him – with his life and his family, no less – at the very least strongly suggested to Shepard that she should give him the benefit of the doubt. Her conversations with Liara about Messenger's support of her career, and Prothean research in general, further supported his position. Add to this Tali's insistence that the Close Corporation was the best thing to have happened to the Migrant Fleet in 300 years, Wrex's hesitant admission that he was 'the only human in the galaxy he trusted', Nihlus' continued support of the operative… Shepard seemed increasingly alone in her distrust of Aaron Close, and she feared she may be wrong about him.

"You have an incoming call in the briefing room, Commander. It has a Council signature."

Joker's voice brought Shepard out of her thoughts. She hadn't left her office since the meeting with Close, having spent hours going over the files he had given her both before and after her chat with Weaver. She knew that the moment she left her office, those files would vanish without a trace. But it couldn't be helped. At this point, Shepard was fairly sure she had got everything she could from those files. And she could always just ask Close if there was something she needed clarification on; he had seemed both willing and determined to share information openly, even going so far as to state
bluntly when there was information he couldn't share with her at this point. Frustrating, yes, but she understood the need to keep secrets, particularly if they weren't his to share.

"I'll be right up, Joker. Keep them on the line for me."

"I shall entertain them to the best of my abilities, Commander."

"I guess I should hurry, then."

"Ouch! You wound me, mylady…"

Shepard grinned. She needed the levity, and you could always trust Joker to deliver on levity. She closed her omni-tool and put her uniform jacket on before making her way up to the briefing room.

…

"Does she seem to be coming around?"

[I thought you said you didn't want to know anything about her conversation with the Major General?]

"I don't… well, not really, but you can't blame me for being curious. I'm not exactly the most social person, Caesar. God's sakes, I sometimes rely on a certain AI to help me keep the small talk going. The hell does that say about me?"

It's true, I was never particularly good at socialising. Oddly enough, Caesar was better than I was by a wide margin. I guess I shouldn't be too surprised; the AI had spent over a hundred years observing human interaction on a wider scale than any researcher could possibly do, and had operated to a large extent through social engineering.

[I expect she will remain hesitant, but at least willing to work with you. That's probably better than we had any right to expect before this.]

"Right, I guess I'll have to take what I can get."

I glanced down at the maintenance monitors on the control desk in front of me. Readouts from all over the ship populated the screen alongside systems analysis reports, potential weaknesses were highlighted and areas of improvement likewise. Unlike the designers and engineers who had built the Normandy, Caesar and I knew what the ship would actually face out there. Unwanted lockdowns, relay activations, extremely hostile space, a god damn Reaper… and the Collectors. I'd be damned if I didn't do everything I could to make sure the ship performed above and beyond anything that could be expected from it in those situations.

"I don't think there's much we can do to improve the thermal capacitors at this point. Not enough space in the hull."

[Agreed.]

"Is there enough space in here to fit a static siphoning system?"

[There should be. What are you thinking? There isn't enough room for a secondary fusion reactor, so there's nothing we can do with the siphoned static.]

All mass effect cores suffer from the same basic problem; a build-up of static electricity on the surface of the core. If this builds up for too long, you could get burnouts and meltdowns, and either
one could be fatal to the crew and the ship alike. This is why all ships need to stop by planetary bodies from time to time to discharge their cores. Before I was brought back, Caesar had found a theoretical way around the problem, and the two of us had spent a significant amount of time and resources developing a static siphoning system that actually put the build-up of energy to good use powering fusion reactors. The problem was that the system, reactors included, was bulky and could only really fit fully on Dreadnought-sized ships and larger. But I had been working on an alternative.

"Maybe there is. Access to file PM142, Project Siphon-X granted."

I waited for a couple of seconds for Caesar to access and process the file, stored in my personal protected data storage. For the most part, Caesar had full access to all my data, but we had a mutual understanding that limited privacy was necessary. So we made a system where I could work in a lock-out mode that shifted Caesar's consciousness from his terminal implant and replaced him with an advanced VI that was basically a dumbed-down version of him. It dramatically reduced my processing power and information access, but it allowed me to work on ideas in private if I wanted to. And the files I made in that mode were protected so that he could only access them with my explicit approval.

[This could work.]

I grinned, "Of course it could."

[I can't help but see some similarities with a certain soon-to-be-under-development Turian weapon.]

"Heh… I'll admit I took some cues from the speculative blueprints."

Caesar brought up the schematic on the monitors in front of me. A dual-barrel cannon of sorts, connected directly to the mass effect core through a set of static siphons. He highlighted a pair of injector ports about halfway up the barrels.

[What are these for? I can't see any mention or hint of their purpose in the plans.]

"Ah, those," I rubbed my chin in contemplation before continuing, "Those are a bit of a 'what if'. I had a thought when I reviewed the Thanix plans. That gun suspends a liquid metal alloy in an electromagnetic field. The electrostatic field of my gun won't have enough current to hold that amount of mass, so I originally designed it to just fire the field itself. It should be extremely effective against shields."

[Originally?]

"Yes. I had an idea a while back. Thresher Maws."

[…]you want to use Thresher Maw acid.]

*I hate when he does that.*

[I know.]

"Anyway… yes, Thresher acid has proven extremely corrosive against any material it has ever been exposed to. The problem is siphoning and containing it, which is why it's an optional-use subsystem of the cannon. So, got any thoughts here?"

[It seems well laid out. No obvious problems. Needs a few engineering tweaks here and there, but the Archangel engineers should be more than capable of figuring those out. With your approval, I will submit it to them with orders to have it ready for installation within a few weeks?]
"Go ahead. I want this thing installed before we hit Virmire, certainly before Ilos."

[And the other improvements?]

"They are all rather straightforward, apart from your targeting link. Get those ready for the same timeframe. We'll probably only get the one pit stop, anyway."

[Acknowledged.]

"All ground crew report to briefing room for pre-mission briefing, ten minutes."

Joker's voice filtered through the speakers of my sleeping pod and promptly woke me up. My eyes opened and I blinked a few times. As my vision finally focused, I saw something on the other side of the pod's glass screen. A pair of bright, green eyes.

"Gah!" I jumped in surprise; or rather, I would have if I weren't strapped in a pod. Instead, all I managed to do was repeat my headbutting-the-window performance from earlier. "Ow…"

The pod locks disengaged, and as it opened, I brought a hand up to rub at my forehead. Across from me, Shepard stood smiling.

"Graceful."

At least her shit-eating grin was a step up from the constant scowl I had seen on her ever since our first meeting in the Council chambers. Progress…

"Good morning to you, too, Commander."

I stepped out of the pod and walked over to my locker to get my gear. I was still in my armour, of course, but we were preparing for Feros approach. I needed to gear up fully.

"We are about to land on Feros."

I turned my head to look at Shepard. The grin was gone from her face, replaced by the generic set frown of a military commander doing her duty. A familiar sight I had seen many times on my own officer's faces, but I was not used to seeing it on the face of Alina Shepard. Something was off.

"I know. I heard the briefing call, Commander."

"Any word from your operatives on the ground?"

I reached out with my mind to the monitor on the wall beside Shepard, and it lit up. Accessing the files and reports from operative Rho, I passed them to the screen and arranged them to show a slideshow of pictures from Zhu's Hope and the Skyway up to the ExoGeni building.

"Operative Rho has been on the planet since before the Geth attacked, she was investigating suspicious ExoGeni activities on the planet. What she found in their headquarters led her to the Zhu's Hope colony, where she noted further suspicious behaviour from the colonists in the days leading up to the attack. Since the Geth arrived, she's stayed hidden and helped the colonists covertly by keeping the Geth at bay in the tunnels surrounding the colony and fixing various problems with their supply lines without them knowing. The colony has suffered no casualties so far," I sighed, "Though
that can likely not be said for the ExoGeni employees. Their headquarters were the initial target of the attack."

"Initial?"

"Rho has reported that for the past day or so the Geth have been moving resources away from headquarters and toward Zhu's Hope. Her guess, and I concur, is that they are after whatever is causing the suspicious behaviour in the colonial outpost."

"We seem to be arriving just in the nick of time, then."

Shepard's entire demeanour was different from what I had become used to, or indeed what I had come to expect now based on her classified records. She was acting the part of the consummate professional military commander, no trace of her normally disruptive personality to be seen. I was not quite sure what to make of it all, I had hoped she would have warmed to me after our conversation and her conversation with Henry, but I hadn't expected her personality to change completely.

"Indeed. Shepard, I would advise the entire ground crew wear sealed armour. Rho's environmental sensors have picked up unknown organic contaminants in the air, spores of some kind. They appear to have some sort of psychotropic properties. The going theory is that they are a cause of the strange behaviour."

"Good to know. Will this Rho be joining us on the ground?"

"Only if you want her to. She is currently under orders to keep the tunnels under Zhu's Hope secure."

"Works for me. Just wanted to let you know, we are dividing the ground team in two squads between Nihlus and myself. You and Liara will be coming with me; Nihlus is taking Tali and Kaidan. Suit up; briefing is in five, landfall immediately after."

"Aye, Commander."

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Chapter End Notes

So yeah, shorter chapter again this time. I blame the dialogue. I'm really not good with dialogue, never have been, so this chapter was surprisingly hard for me to write. I had been tempted to skip the call between Shepard and Weaver and start the Feros mission in this chapter, but decided against it. I'm still debating whether or not I should introduce Weaver as a crew member at some point, so I wanted to give the character a decent introduction just in case. Also, the relationship between Shep and Weaver helps explain a few things about Shepard's character, and gives some hints about how I'm treating parts of the ME lore: The War Hero, Butcher of Torfan and Sole Survivor all exist in this universe, and so do the Colonist, Spacer and Earthborn. The latter has not yet been introduced ;)

So, on to reviews (from FFnet):

Goldspark1 is curious about Aaron's sexual prowess. More or less :P The man is still fully functional, let's just leave it at that.
Gauss Frigate suggests I should go more in depth with the story rather than just stating facts, which I agree with. I have tried to keep the exposition to a minimum, but there's still been a lot of it. The reason for this is that the story has required a fair amount of exposition to move forward at a decent pace. I fully agree that my story could be improved a lot in several ways; this is still my first proper go at this kind of writing, so I know I have a lot of learning to do.

Bobywhy expands his previous questions about the Alliance's actions regarding Close's intellectual property. I gave him a thorough answer in PM, here's a TL;DR version: Close Corporation is likely the best equipment manufacturer in Alliance space at this point, but that doesn't really matter much with regard to their Alliance contract. Remember, in the games Hahne-Kedar is the main supplier, and they are hardly the best there is. Cost effectiveness and reliability is the main issue for the Alliance, not pure quality. Which means, among other things, the Close Corporation are not supplying the Alliance with the *best* gear because they don't *want* the best gear. They want their cheapest, high-quality gear that is reliable enough that it won't fail in combat and can be easily stripped, fixed and modified. And while Aaron could use covert means to maintain their contract, he doesn't want to. Not only because as far as the Alliance knows, CC is just a corporation without military or intelligence assets, but also because such tactics could prove detrimental to Aaron's long-term goals of creating a unified front against the Reapers. As for Cerberus, yeah, they're still around. They've already been namedropped in one of the early chapters. They'll get more attention later, but note that nothing's changed with regards to Henry, Miranda and Oriana Lawson. That whole thing happened prior to Close Corporation's arrival on the galactic scene.

LoveroftheKiller is getting ahead of the story, and so is LordGhostStriker... :P

Thank you everyone for your reviews, they are all very much appreciated! Please keep leaving them, it really makes my day when I get to reply to a review to my story!

Edit note: In previous revisions of this chapter, operative Rho was a dude. I changed that before posting it, but failed to correct some of the pronouns from 'he' to 'she' and so on. Fixed now.
"You like what you see, Mr. Close?"

Note to self: Look into options for expanding decon chamber.

Six people was a bit more – twice as many, in fact – than the decontamination chamber on the Normandy had been designed for. Out of the six of us, only Tali seemed perfectly content with the situation. Not surprising, really, considering the conditions she grew up in on the Flotilla.

As the decon cycle ran its course, I went through my mental checklist for the mission. Rho was stationed in the tunnels, and I would relay any tasks the colonists had down there to her. The original plan had been for Nihlus' team – Beta squad - to remain in the colony while Shepard, Liara and myself – designated Alpha squad - would cross the skyway up to ExoGeni headquarters to deal with the Geth there. Considering that the Geth were in the process of shifting their attention away from HQ and over to Zhu's Hope, that seemed like a decent plan to me. I'd made sure Rho was patched into Beta squad's radio frequency, and the plan was for the squad and Rho to hit the Geth in the tunnels on two fronts before meeting up and withdrawing back to the colony to relieve the colonists protecting it.

Of course, that plan would only be a good one if the Thorian wasn't a factor. So I had suggested a tactical tweak which would allow Beta squad an edge in the eventuality that the colonists turned on them; Rho would remain covert and cloaked at all times when in the presence of the colonists, and she was equipped and ready to take them down with non-lethal force if it became necessary. All told, I was feeling reasonably prepared for what would meet us on the surface, but I still had a nagging feeling that I was forgetting something.

Caesar, did Rho deploy a sensor net on the colony, and how much does it cover?

[She did, and it covers the entirety of Zhu's Hope including the Tower, the dock, the tunnels under the colony and part of the skyway.]

Patch me in, would you?

[Sure thing.]

It's difficult to describe the sensation of sensory expansion. When I connected to the sensor net, it was like I gained sight beyond sight; if I concentrated, I could see and hear any part of the colony covered by the net. It was always more than a little disorientating at first, but I quickly adapted and
reined in my sensor bubble to cover just the area I was in in an overlay mode.

While I was doing this, the decon cycle ended and the squads stepped onto the docks. My HUD’s sensors overlay came online just in time for me to notice the colonist running up to our group of heavily armed badasses… and the Geth rocket trooper lining up a shot on his back.

Before anyone could react, my training kicked in and I kicked off the ground. As I soared through the air, the world seemingly moving in slow motion around me, I reached out with my mind toward the lone Geth just as he was about to pull the trigger on his rocket launcher. Had I a few more milliseconds to act, I would have gone for a more elegant hack, but I had no time. Instead, I just threw as much junk data at the platform as I could, equivalent to sneaking up on an organic and screaming in their ear. It did the trick; the Geth staggered back a step, lifting its mechanical finger from the trigger. The junk data would only occupy its processes for a few moments, however, and I had to capitalise on that time.

Both of my arms began glowing red as I brought my legs under me to prepare for landing. Overriding my instincts to use my arms to brace for impact, I pointed them both toward the lone Geth. The microfabricators on my omni-tools came to life as they followed my mental commands. In my left hand, an Overload mine was produced and launched quick enough that for a moment I worried I might have burned out the generator. At the same time, the glow around my right arm morphed into the shape of a small crossbow. The bolt launched just as I hit the ground in a less-than-graceful landing.

Ow, fuck, my ankle!

I was pretty sure I had twisted something with that landing, but I forced myself to ignore it as I got back up to my feet to survey the scene in front of me. The trooper was literally nailed to the wall behind where it had stood, sparks flying from its body. The whole thing had taken less than two seconds, and only now was the rest of the team kicking into action. Liara and Kaidan came up next to me and wrapped me in a barrier as Kaidan sat down to have a look at my ankle. I was obviously limping more than I had thought.

Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to do anything for me – medigel wasn’t going to help any, and I would heal within minutes anyway – I again focused outward to double check that the docks were clear. They were not.

"Heads up, a dozen Geth platforms have been detected within the docks area. More than that between the docks and the colony of Zhu’s Hope. Weapons ready!"

"You heard the man!" Shepard took control of the situation, as is appropriate for the commanding officer. "Form up on your squads. Alpha takes point, Beta follows for support until we reach the colony. Tali, I want your drone with me. Beta squad, use your hacks and turrets to provide maximum confusion in the Geth ranks. Primary targets are the rocket troopers! Let’s go!"

I grabbed my Cyclone off my hip and followed Liara to join up with Shepard. They were both crackling with biotic energy, and I could swear I saw them exchange a mirthful glance before they both took off running along the docks. Damn it.

I hobbled after them as best I could, while working on a way to translate my sensor information to the squad’s HUD radars.

[Grant me access and focus on the battle, Aaron. I’ll relay the information.]

Access granted.
"I have updated your radar with information from my sensor suite, new enemies highlighted! Stay sharp!"

I hadn't even finished my announcement before the fireworks started. Liara threw down a singularity right in the middle of a pack of Geth. They barely lifted off the ground before being blown to bits by a biotic explosion resulting from Shepard's throw orb impacting just milliseconds after the singularity formed. Our Commander took off running toward the remaining Geth, who were being occupied by Chatika vas Paus and Nihlus' sentry turret. Curling and flaring tendrils of biotic energy erupted from her form as she activated her annihilation field, and when Liara enveloped the group of Geth in a wide pull field I knew my interference would only lessen the impending display. Shepard just ran threw the group, her annihilation field setting off a series of biotic explosions that threw bits of Geth all over the docks.

Well, then. So much for the Geth on the docks.

…

The remaining Geth in the stairwell leading up to the colony from the docks provided even less resistance. Liara sent a series of singularities up each level of stairs, and the Commander just strolled through and blew the Geth to bits. Their hunter platforms had proven the most challenging, but they were easily revealed by the sensor net and picked off before they became too much trouble.

As our two squads casually strolled into the colony proper, we could see the looks of disbelief on the tired faces of the colonists guarding the entrance.

"The docks are secure," Shepard shouted toward the defensive line, "I would advise moving the bulk of your defence to protect the other entrances to the colony."

My HUD showed me all relevant personal information about the people manning the barricades. Greta Reynolds, 32, ExoGeni Security. Macha Doyle, 43, infrastructure engineer, freelance. May O'Connell, tech expert and electrical engineer, ExoGeni Maintenance Corps. On a hunch, I ran their bio-scans against their reference data.

Bingo. Caesar, you getting this?

[I guess we shouldn't be surprised that the Thorian would leave physical traces of itself in its thralls.]

The scans showed alterations in the brain's neural pathways, significant hormonal changes and stress indicators that went far beyond mere tiredness and combat fatigue. If I didn't already know what was causing it, the neuroscientist in me would have found the data fascinating. To be honest, I still found it fascinating. Once a scientist, always a scientist, I suppose. As the crew walked through the colony to reach Fai Dan, the colony's leader and the person everyone else in the colony was telling us to talk to instead of them, I studied the scans in more detail. I hoped I could find a weakness in the Thorian's control scheme, something I could use to our advantage. And I did.

Open a channel to Rho.

[Channel open.]

"This is Rho."

I made sure my external speakers were turned off before I responded, "This is Messenger. According to your sensor net, you have a colonist down in the tunnels. One Ian Newstead?"
"Yup. Dumb bastard is looking to get himself killed. I've kept him hidden from the Geth for hours now, he doesn't even realise."

I smirked. Rho was always a bit… colourful. "I want you to try something. I'm sending you a charge profile for your gauntlet. Apply the profiled charge to the base of his skull, and then immediately give him a helmet or rebreather mask."

"Alright… you got me, any reasons for this?"

"I'm hoping it will disrupt whatever is currently controlling his mind."

"Hang on, what? Mind control?"

"You mentioned the organic contaminants in the air? I've taken bio-scans of the colonists here and compared them to their references. Archangel actual confirms anomalies consistent with coercive mind control, and at the base of the anomalies are the contaminants. Spores, from the looks of it."

"And frying their brains will fix it?"

I stifled a chuckle, "Not going that far. The profile I sent will modulate your gauntlet for a pulsed low-current charge that should travel along the same neural pathways the spores are disrupting. Basically, it should clear the pipes temporarily. The helmet should make it a bit more permanent. Hopefully, this Ian can help clear things up for us."

"Alright, give me a couple of minutes."

Rho was one of my most trusted operatives, and one of very few who knew of my true identity. Not surprising, really, since she helped me build the Close Corporation and the Technopath Corps.

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November, 2173 – Somewhere in the Local Cluster

My head was still spinning. It had been two days since I had first woken up. Two days since I was introduced to Caesar, the AI. Two days since I was told I was long dead and had just been revived as my, uh, younger self.

Two days since I found out the Reapers are real.

I still had a hard time believing all of it, and I don't just mean the rebirth part or the real-life AI thing. I mean, from my perspective I had been working on creating Caesar just a few days ago. My last memory before waking up in my new, cloned body was initiating the continuous neural scan-and-merge process. I vaguely recall thinking it was all going to hell, and then… nothing. There was a very abrupt end to my memories at that point, as if I did not exist between that very specific point in time and the moment when I woke up on this space station. Speaking of…

"I just realised I haven't asked this yet. Caesar, where exactly are we?"

[That question doesn't really make much sense to me, Aaron. I am networked software; I am in multiple locations.]

*Oh for crying out loud. "You know what I mean, man. Where am I?"

"He calls it Installation Alpha. It's located in the Sol Heliosphere, in synchronous solar orbit with the
Charon Relay.

I turned toward the new voice, its strange modulation not even registering as I had become accustomed to talking to a freaking AI! What I saw – who I saw – nothing could have prepared me for it. Walking along the corridor toward me was a Quarian. A real-life, honest to God, Quarian. A female, no less. I realised I was staring when she stopped right in front of me, disabled her omni-tool and placed a hand on her hip in a slightly mocking stance that I actually recognised from the games. Tali did that a few times when talking to Shepard.

"You like what you see, Mr. Close?"

---

Her real name was Rohu'Shann nar Rayya. She was the first organic who Caesar had ever revealed himself to, after the exiled Quarian had nearly been killed while infiltrating a Volus merchant's smuggling operation on Omega. Caesar had saved her life by manipulating the Volus' security feeds, and then guiding her safely out of there. He had then offered her a job.

Hiring Rohu'Shann – who even then had preferred the moniker Rho – had been one of the AI's first non-virtual steps in building an organisation prepared to take on the Reapers. He had been rebuilding my mind and body for years already at that point, but had concluded that he would need to begin converting his virtual assets into real ones before waking me up. Rho has been instrumental in making that happen, and had held the official position as my personal assistant for three years before I had even been reborn. Have you ever met someone you don't know at all, but appear to know every little thing about you? That's what it felt like for me when I met my first Quarian.

Since then, we'd become business partners, friends, soldiers and even on-and-off-again lovers. Rho had been the second augmented Technopath, after myself, and her augmentations allowed her to escape her environmental suit permanently. I had underestimated how significant that liberation would be to her. Things had moved quickly after she recovered from her procedures, and within a few short weeks we had moved in together in the same quarters on the Archangel, which was still under construction at the time.

We had drifted apart over time, as my training progressed and Aaron Close had become more and more buried behind the Messenger persona. Rho had taken on a split role as captain of the Archangel during its construction, and operative in the Technopath Corps. When the Archangel completed construction, Rohu'Shann vas Archangel was promoted to Fleet Captain of the Technopath Corps, which gave her command over all ships in the Archangel battle group. She had withdrawn from field operations for a while to settle into her new role, which meant we hardly saw each other anymore. We technically shared the same quarters still, but we were almost never on the ship at the same time.

"Oh, Commander. I'm glad they finally sent somebody to help us."

Fai Dan's strangely familiar voice broke me out of my thoughts. Focus, Aaron. As my Commander talked with the colony's enthralled leader, I focused outward once more, allowing the sensor net to expand my presence. And just in time.

"Weapons ready! Geth detected!"

I lifted my Cyclone and stepped around the makeshift barricades. The moment I saw the first flashlight heads, I pressed the trigger on my weapon and let the bullets fly. I had taken down two Geth, including a shock trooper, by the time Shepard and Liara stepped in behind me. The last unit
of the three that had reached the entrance, a sniper, was smashed to pieces by a warp-throw combo from Liara and Shepard.

"Beta squad, hold this position! Alpha, we're going in!" Shepard barked her orders, and a round of affirmatives followed.

I took point as my squad moved in on the stairs, highlighting the remaining Geth still moving down from the tower. Apparently, the synthetics still hadn't adjusted to the changed threat condition that our very presence meant, so the previously successful tactics of biotic carnage was still highly successful. At the back of my mind, I could feel Rho keeping an eye on our progress through the same sensor net I was using.

"Heads up, sniper units in the distance. Hang back, switching weapons."

Our luck was destined to end at some point. Close up, snipers were no problem; the combined biotics of Shepard and Liara made short work of anything that got within reasonable casting distance. But once we reached the tower, the Geth had taken more tactically advantageous positions. Reaching out with my senses, I saw the snipers holding position at the back of the large open space at the top of the tower. I had unpacked my Serpent rifle to deal with them. At mid-range, the troopers were providing suppressive fire at the edge of our biotics' casting range. And on the front lines they had their Destroyers protecting their shock troopers. I didn't notice those until it was too late to give sufficient warning.

"Destroyers! Fall back!"

Geth Prime units are huge, scary, lumbering beasts that increase the intelligence of nearby platforms and provide massive amounts of heavy suppression fire. But they are slow, nearly stationary, and that makes it easier to deal with them. Juggernauts have the same disadvantage. But Destroyers? They are only slightly smaller than the Primes, as heavy as a Krogan Battlemaster, armed with huge weapons and – terrifyingly – they charge at you! It's a tactic taken straight out of the Krogan rules of battle, and it only works because of their immense mass. The most you can hope to do with biotics, unless they go beyond the power levels of Asari Matriarchs, is stagger them temporarily or maybe trip them up. They are too heavy to be affected significantly by singularities or wide pull fields, and even the strongest throw orb Shepard could produce was barely able to halt its momentum for a second.

And from the back of the room, their snipers kept us suppressed. We were between a rock and a hard place; I would need time to line up my shot on the snipers, but that meant cloaking and leaving my squad mates to deal with enemies they were ill-equipped to handle in their current numbers. Not an option. I folded my Serpent away again and drew my blade.

"Take cover! Be ready to provide suppression!"

Shepard turned back toward me just in time to see my form shimmer out of existence, and after a moment's glare, she nodded and crouched down behind a concrete block. I took off at a run toward the Geth front line, just as one of their three Destroyer units recovered from his stagger and resumed his charge. I charged my blade with an electric slash, and the sword hummed in response. Two meters. In a fraction of a second, the now fully charging Geth would run straight past my right shoulder. I brought my blade up in a baseball batter-like stance, as if preparing for a running bat. One meter. Just a few meters behind the lead Destroyer, his two friends followed as they accelerated to full speed. I thrust my blade in a narrow arc through the air on my right, lining the slash up with the lead Geth's midsection. Impact.

The blade sliced clear through the Geth at the exact moment it passed next to me, the force of the impact almost completely breaking my forward momentum. I followed through on the slash, my
charged electric slash releasing as the blade came around in front of me. As the lead destroyer went flying through the air in two pieces, the air in front of me exploded in a shower of sparks and arcing electricity. My cloak failed at the same time as the two remaining Destroyers were hit by the electrical storm. I knew I was on borrowed time now, out in the open and vulnerable to the very snipers I had originally planned to take out first.

"Now!"

A firestorm of biotic rage surged past me and smashed into the staggered ranks of Geth units. The flying sparks and bits of Geth provided sufficient cover for me to sheathe my sword activate the omni-blades on both my omni-tools as I joined Shepard in her brawl. Pieces of Geth platforms went flying in all directions, and the smoke from dozens of small explosions from overloading weapons and power cores provided enough smoke cover that the snipers could not get a bead on us. Once the two remaining Destroyers had been taken care of, I withdrew from the battle into cover and let Liara and Shepard do what they did best; violent biotic carnage. Cloaking again, I drew my Serpent and lined up my shots on the snipers at the back of the room. Close, but no cigar, Geth.

…

"The tower's secure. Thanks to you, Commander."

"I'm just glad your colony is safe."

I zoned out again as Shepard updated the Thorian's thrall on our foray into the tower above the colony. The hum at the back of my mind got more insistent, so I opened a channel to Rho.

"Updates, Rho?"

"Yeah, that Ian guy? He's awake again. Seems that whatever you did worked."

"Can you patch him in?"

"Yeah, hold on."

A beat later, Ian Newstead joined the conference call. "You have to kill the Thorian!"

I turned my modulator on again for Ian's sake. "Whoa. Hold on. Thorian?"

"Yes! It's... it's a... man, this is going to sound insane."

I smirked. "Not anymore than your previous ranting, Mr. Newstead."

"Heh, no I guess not. The Thorian is... it's a plant."

I could almost feel Rho's eyebrow quirk up in response to that particular piece of information.

"...a plant."

"An ancient, sentient plant lifeform. ExoGeni is studying it. It has... mind control powers. That's what the Turian who came by wanted it for, I think."

Hang on. Turian? I knew Saren had been to Feros and visited the Thorian, but I was unaware that the colonists had known. It didn't make much sense to me, to be honest. It meant that the Geth had taken the colony, suppressed the colonists, visited the Thorian and then either left the colony again or
were forced out by the colonists. I guess the latter made the most sense, if the Thorian had felt betrayed by Saren.

"Well, Ian, it sounds like you just earned yourself a position as prime witness in a Council matter."

"Oh. Brilliant." Two words. Entire paragraphs of subtext.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, another short-ish chapter. I've been a tad busy this week, so I've had less time to write than I wanted to (and expected to). Hope you enjoy the brief introduction to another OC. Let me know in reviews how much you want to see of her in the story :)

As you can probably tell, this mission is not going to go exactly like it did in the games. And some of the more observant of you may notice what could be described as some inaccuracies regarding biotics and what Geth units you encounter in the first game. This is deliberate. The rules of biotics changed subtly between the three games, I'm trying to make them consistent. One of the things they didn't really have in the first game was the mass and force mechanic from the games the followed; Krogan and Destroyers were affected by biotic fields just as much as any other unit. In fact, using Pull on a charging Krogan has always been one of my favourite things to do. In light of the stagger limits and force/mass equations of the latter games, this doesn't really make sense. So I'm leaning more toward the latter mechanics. Which also explains the biotic explosions :P

Commenting on comments...

Gauss Frigate responded to my note about dialogue not being my main strength, saying that it's alright but I need to work on setting and word diversity ("he said, she said" versus "he exclaims, she stated" etc). I read back some of what I'd written and realised that this is indeed one of the mistakes I've been making. Which is not good enough, so I'm making an effort to fix it. Hopefully it's working. He also suggests that the static siphon cannon project won't work as advertised, though I'm not sure about that. I've not given much detail in how it's supposed to work, but the basic thing to take from it is that it is connected to, but separate from, the static siphoning system itself. Normally, that system discharges the static build-up on the eezo core into fusion generators to keep the fusion reaction going. In the system Aaron wants on the Normandy, the siphons instead dump the charge into the cannon system, which generates a highly charged self-contained plasma which is then compressed by mass effect fields inside the barrels. This answers kreep13's question, too. Firing the cannon essentially discharges the eezo core without needing to ground the ship on a planet. In practice, when used for combat it is a one-shot shield-stripping cannon. It is NOT a Thanix cannon; the Thanix fires a stream of superheated liquid metal, not a plasma. The basic design of the cannon itself, however, is inspired by the speculative blueprints Aaron and Caesar had made for the Thanix. Which also answers pyrovortex's question.

LordGhostStriker ponders Caesar's 'strength' as an AI compared to low level Forrunner or Cortana levels. I gave him a long-ish answer in PM, which I will repeat here:

"This is something that will be addressed quite thoroughly in time, particularly as we get
into ME2-related storylines (but also before that). I can give you some basic clues, though.

Ranking AI 'power' on a simple sliding scale doesn't really mean much. There are different types of AI with different properties, advantages and disadvantages. The Geth, for example, are a collective, emergent software-based AI that is reliant on consensus to act. That makes them slow-moving, not very adaptable nor dynamic on the level of the individual AI, but it does make them extremely efficient and productive on the collective scale, and gives them the ability to spread out across data networks very easily and without at all degrading their collective processing power. EDI is a hybrid of an emergent single-consciousness software AI, and a constructed hardware-bound software AI. This means she is bound to her primary hardware (the Normandy), but as she is at her core a software AI she has the ability to spread out to other platforms as long as they remain linked to her primary hardware. Spreading out spreads her processing power thin, but at the individual level she is far more 'powerful' than the Geth (even multi-program platforms like Legion).

Caesar is... different. He is technically a constructed software AI, but he is created on an organic structural template, which means outside of the differences inherent to the nature of being a synthetic, he thinks like a human. This means he can't easily multitask in the same way that either EDI or the Geth can, but he still manages. How? Well, that's a story for another day :P Seriously, though, it will all be covered in the story, and I don't really want to reveal too much ahead of time. Stay tuned :)
"You all know the plan," Shepard began her mid-mission brief with Alpha and Beta squad surrounding her. After she had finished her chat with Fai Dan, and Beta squad returned from checking in with some of the colonists to figure out how they could help them out, the whole team had walked up the stairs to the elevator leading to the skyway.

"Nihlus, you will take Beta squad down into the tunnels to clear out the Geth infestation and run your errands. The Technopath, 'Rho', will meet you down there…"

"Hang on, Shepard," I interrupted, "New information has… changed things."

Shepard raised an eyebrow at me and placed a hand on her cocked hip. "Do go on."

"I took some bio-scans of the colonists and compared to their company reference scans. These people are infected by a plant parasite."

The Commander narrowed her eyes and folded her arms in front of her, as the rest of the squad mirrored her earlier stance. "A plant parasite."

"Indeed. ExoGeni knows about it, they have designated it the 'Thorian'. It is a vast, ancient, sentient plant lifeforms that infects other organisms with spores and turns them into thralls."

"I assume you have evidence for this fairy tale?"

Hello, Renegade Shepard.

"I do. And a witness, in the tunnels. I found a way of purging the spores from the victims, Rho has already done it with a colonist she found down there. One Ian Newstead. And there's more."

"I am all ears."

"He confirmed Saren has been here and has already seen the Thorian."

That got her attention. She exchanged a glance with Nihlus, who was standing to her right in a contemplative pose, talons under his… chin, for lack of a better term. He was the first to speak.

"So we are too late, then."

"Saren was never the mission here on Feros." Shepard waved a hand dismissively. "We are here to figure out why the Geth are here, and to save the colonists. Now I guess we know why they are
here... kind of. What do machines want with an old plant?"

"The mind control ability seems like an obvious motivation. But I have a feeling we're missing something. I propose a change to the plan, Shepard."

"Of course you do."

I narrowed my eyes behind my mask. Shepard had been cooperating very well so far this mission. Her behaviour now seemed a bit of a throwback to her earlier scepticism toward me. Something's changed.

"I propose myself and Rho go back to the ship, cloaked, and pick up rebreather helmets for the colonists, as well as a supply of grenades we can modify to release a low-level anaesthetic gas to knock them out so we can purge the infection."

"That works." Shepard put a hand up to her helmet, activating her comms line to the ship. "Shepard to Vakarian. You're up. Alpha squad, replacing Close as planned."

Hang on... what? I did a double take as Shepard first affirmed my plan, and then moved on to kick me off the squad in favour of Garrus.

"What are you doing, Shepard?"

"Allowing you to put your plan into action. Meanwhile, the rest of us will keep going as per our original plans."

"That wasn't my plan..."

"No it wasn't. It was mine. And I don't want you on my squad for this, because you've proven something to me today."

I was angry. Had she really played me? Had she been stringing me along just so I could prove some preconceived notion she had about me? I had honestly believed she had come around, that I had managed to gain at least a modicum of trust from her.

"And what, pray tell, would that be?" The words came out with more venom behind them than I had thought they would, or even wanted.

"You still can't take orders." She raised a hand with her finger pointed straight at me, and stepped slowly toward me. "But you give them readily. In the tower, you took charge. That," Shepard was now standing right in front of me, and poked my chest plate with her pointed finger to punctuate every word, "Will. Not. Do."

"I saved us up there."

Shepard turned around and walked slowly over to the wall opposite me and leaned her right shoulder against it. "Be that as it may, we are a three-man squad. There isn't room for more than one commander. And I am the Commander."

I grit my teeth. She was right, damn it. I had been trained well, and had been a field operative for over half a decade. I had mostly worked alone, but this was far from my first time working with a squad, or even in military operations. Henry Weaver could vouch for me on that, and he probably had. But I was always in charge. Shepard couldn't have that. And honestly, I agreed with her, she was the Commander and I had to fall in line if I were to work alongside her.
I hadn't been allowed any further argument. Not that I would have presented any; she was right, and I wasn't really in a frame of mind where I would be able to switch to taking, rather than giving, orders right now. I had a list of things that needed doing, and it didn't match Shepard's. Her focus was on clearing out the Geth from ExoGeni headquarters and the tunnels below Zhu's Hope, and then deal with the Thorian after. I could hardly blame her for her priorities; you deal with the enemies you have first, and brave the unknown later.

Myself, I had other priorities. I would rather avoid the potential disaster of Shepard's people being forced to kill the colonists. Hell, I had a chance to save Fai Dan without even firing a shot. Clearing out the colony was on the top of my priority list, for sure. Still, I couldn't help but worry about the items below it on my list. I still needed to get to ExoGeni headquarters.

"Rho, make your way to the colony, and make it quick. We're on the clock."

"Change of plans, Aaron?"

"You could say that."

"Heading your way," the channel went silent for a bit before she continued, "I'm guessing that's Beta squad making a racket further up the tunnels?"

"Indeed. And Rho? Leave Ian there."

"Duh."

I smirked and shook my head. Never change, Rho. If Shepard hated me for not respecting her authority, she would absolutely loathe Rho. She was extremely competent, but her own disrespect for authority mirrored Shepard's own. She just lacked the Shepard's hypocritical demand for respect of her own. Rho was an irreverent personality, someone who questioned everything and everyone just for the sake of it. That was, in part, what had got her exiled from the Fleet in the first place.

Vakarian rounded the corner just moments after I closed the channel to Rho.

"Take the elevator, they are waiting in the garage."

"Thanks." Garrus grabbed a box from a magclip on his back and handed it to me. "Here. The grenades you asked for."

"Ah, excellent. Thank you, Investigator."

"The way I see it, I still owe you for the… incident, at Dr. Michel's clinic."

"You certainly do not, but I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Thank you."

Garrus gave me a quizzical look as he stepped past me into the elevator. I heard him mumble something about 'humans and their strange expressions' that my translator just barely picked up before the elevator doors closed. I smiled, the amusement vaguely lifting my mood. For a few moments, I had considered just disabling the colonists' guns and taking them all down in non-lethal hand-to-hand, just to have an outlet for my frustration. That could've gotten… messy. Speaking of the colonists…

"Messenger to Lieutenant Alenko."
"This is Alenko."

"Suit up and gather some marines, then go find enough helmets for the whole colony."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm about to gas the colony and nearly electrocute all the colonists one by one. Those helmets are a non-optional part of the plan."

"Uh… say again?"

[You really need to kick that habit, you know. Amusement is not a good reason for that kind of phrasing.]

I could only grin. Yeah, I guess it's not such a smart thing to do with personnel that isn't used to my… quirks.

[Want to try again?]

I explained the situation to Kaidan, stressing the urgency of the situation. By now, Alpha squad should be in the Mako heading across the skyway, and I needed to clear the colony and get to ExoGeni HQ before Shepard was ready to head back.

"Alright, I'll have a team of marines ready to assist on your mark."

"Good. Messenger out."

I had only just cut the connection when a three-fingered hand slapped me over the head.

"Still making a mess of things with the ladies, are we? Tsk."

I rubbed the back of my head, "Gotta play to my talents."

"Got that right," Rho snorted. "So, what's the plan?"

"Here," I opened the box of grenades and grabbed a few, then handed it over to Rho. "We're modifying these for aerosol dispersion. Low-grade anaesthetic."

I produced a standard vial from my medkit. Modern day medical technology is a fantastic thing. All omni-tools have standardised medical interfaces, for connecting scanning equipment, injectors and medicine vials. Those same interfaces were often used for weapons modding as well, by loading grenades with medicines that, in high enough doses, were highly toxic. Essentially the same thing we would be doing, but we would be modifying for less lethality rather than more.

"We're gassing the colony?"

"Yep."

"Awesome. Pragia all over again."

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Time moved at a blur. After ten minutes, the grenades had been modified, primed and placed around the colony. Five minutes later, the colonists were out cold, and marines were rushing in with helmets.
Only Rho and myself had the adjustable shock gauntlets needed to deliver the 'cure', so getting that done took significantly longer. All said, it took about half an hour from Rho had come up from the tunnels until the marines were carrying the cured colonists back to the Normandy for treatment. Halfway through the process, Nihlus and Beta squad had come back up with Ian Newstead. He was rather surprised at the scene that unfolded before him, but nodded in appreciation as it was explained to him.

"So the Thorian is down here?"

"Under this freighter. Access controls are over there," I pointed toward the control panel by the crane, "But I would suggest waiting for Shepard before going down there."

"Good suggestion. Should we wait for her here or on the Normandy?"

"You wait for her here. I'm taking Rho across the skyway to ExoGeni."

Nihlus narrowed his eyes. "I don't think Shepard would appreciate that."

"She said she was allowing me to go through with my plan. This is my plan. I'm going."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you going after Shepard? You know she'll have it handled, she doesn't need your help. What's so important at ExoGeni headquarters?"

Nihlus hadn't become a Spectre just for his combat skill. The torin was observant and intelligent, and we had had enough encounters over the years that he knew I would not be defying Shepard's orders out of mere childish indignation. I knew I had to give an answer; he was technically my superior, and defying him could see me kicked off the ship.

"I have strong reason to believe there is evidence linking ExoGeni to Cerberus. I need that data."

I turned and walked away from the group, towards Rho who was already waiting for me at the tower entrance. As I engaged my cloak and left Beta squad and the Normandy's marine contingent behind, Nihlus called out for me.

"What in buratrum is 'Cerberus'?!"

…

"Commander, remind me never to get on your bad side. That is the craziest thing I have ever seen."

Shepard grinned as she glanced over at the torin. His armour, completely unscarred less than an hour before, was now covered in scorch marks and gouges. All of that just from a single Armature unit.

"You should thank Wrex for inspiring me."

Behind them, Liara chuffed, "Apparently you forgot the part where Wrex is a gigantic, ancient Krogan battlemaster, and you are a tiny human woman."

"Oh, pshaw," Shepard waved a hand in dismissal, "Armature's dead, isn't it?"
"I sure hope so; you literally punched its head off."

The *torin*’s subvocals gave away the amusement he was trying to hide from the Commander. Vakarian was a lot better than most Turians at keeping his body language in check – a necessary skill for a C-Sec investigator, she thought – but he couldn’t quite keep his subvocal rumblings in check. To be fair, most non-Turians would be completely unable to even notice the variations, but Shepard was not like most non-Turians.

"I really hope these weapons you found were worth all that trouble, Shepard."

"Of course they are, Liara. Now I don't have to use Close Corporation weapons anymore."

There had been a weapons locker in the tiny room in the entry hall. Probably a security office, Shepard thought. If that were the case, ExoGeni security was well equipped with arms from Halalt Armory, a Turian weapons manufacturer. The locker contained Stiletto pistols for Shepard and Liara, and an upgraded Equalizer sniper rifle for Garrus. The Stilettos, of course, were of slightly lower spec than the standard issue Kessler K2 pistol she normally used, but she no longer felt like she could trust that gun. She certainly didn't want to accept the 'K3' pistol she had found in her locker after Close came aboard, regardless of how good it was.

"Commander, over here."

Vakarian had moved over to what essentially amounted to a hole in the floor, surrounded by a low wall. "One way drop, but it may be our only way in."

Shepard chuffed, "We have two biotics, Vakarian. No such thing as a one-way drop. Lead the way, Investigator."

Moments later, the squad was dusting off and moving down the corridor. The structure around them was surprisingly intact considering its age. *Prothean architecture... remarkably resilient.* The stone walls were smooth with hardly any chipped rock in sight. The few stone blocks that littered the floor of the corridor appeared to have come out of the wall completely whole, almost as if they had been deliberately pulled out. Shepard mused that they may have been used for cover by ExoGeni security when the Geth attacked, but there were no signs of death around to indicate that this was the case.

"So, Shepard," Garrus interrupted her train of thought, "I know you planned for me to take Close's place on the squad before we even hit ground, but what made you think he would do something to justify it?"

Shepard frowned. Of course it had been too much to hope for that the *investigator* would just do the job without asking questions, but she really didn't want to occupy her thoughts with *that guy* during this mission.

"You know, I had almost decided to give him a chance to prove himself."

She started walking more slowly as she collected her thoughts. The Commander really had wanted to give him a new chance. She had started to buy in to his story, and if she were honest with herself she still thought he was the 'real deal'. Her conversation with Weaver had told her that much, at least. But it was what had happened later that had brought back her worries.

"Honestly, I *am* giving him a chance to prove himself. When he started ordering Liara and myself around back in the tower? That was his second strike."

"Strike?" Garrus raised an eye ridge in a perplexed expression, "Is this another indecipherable human expression?"
"Heh, yes I guess it is. It's a sports term, oh what's the biotiball equivalent… he's on his second fall?"

"Ah. So what was his first, if you don't mind me asking?"

"He went above my head."

"What do you mean?"

Shepard’s radar chose that time to flicker in the easily recognisable pattern of an attempted sensor jam, telling her that there were Geth units nearby. Expanding the scanning radius quickly showed her a group of contacts in a room some twenty meters ahead. They had clearly heard the conversation, or the squad had showed up on their own sensors, because they were moving into a battle-ready formation. Shepard unfolded her pistol from her hip and flared her biotics to activate her annihilation field.

"Got a call from the Asari Councillor." A scowl formed on her face as she thought about that conversation. Her annihilation field flared slightly as she turned to run toward the soon to be charging enemy line, and she signalled her squad to follow.

"Tevos made it very clear that Close's participation was non-negotiable."

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"Why didn't you explain Cerberus to Kryik? You know he's a decent guy, Aaron."

As Technopaths, both Rho and myself had vastly increased stamina and speed. This explained how and why we were running along the skyway at speeds the Mako would be unable to keep up with. But it did not explain to me how Rho was able to maintain a calm and relaxed speech pattern as she did so.

"No… time. We are… on the… clock."

My breath was ragged, even if I didn't feel particularly tired or at all exhausted from all the running, and my words came out staggered and clipped. As we passed by the wreck of a Grizzly tank, with pieces of Geth scattered all around it, I could see the first gate up ahead and reached out with my mind to activate the opening mechanism so that we wouldn't slam into the massive doors as they struggled to open in time. On my right, Rho huffed in mild indignation.

"I still think your obsession with Cerberus is a distraction. There is nothing to suggest it's as big a threat as you think, they're just an extremist organisation. A dime a dozen."

Rho was read in on more of mine and Caesar's operations than anyone else in the galaxy, but not even her knew about the Mass Effect games. She didn't know what I knew. The story I had told the crew of the *Normandy* had been largely the same as I had used to cover that particular truth to anyone else, Rho included. Of course, Rho had a different version of the story, where she knew about how Caesar was created and that he saw the problem of the Reapers coming. The hole in the story left by the exclusion of the games was filled by the idea of predictive computational history.

"Dime… shows up too often… in the sims. The sims… are never wrong."

She turned her head toward me, and I could practically feel her eyebrow shoot up behind her mask. *Damn that mask.* I had become too used to reading her facial expressions, I couldn't pick up on her body language as easily anymore.
"Really? What about Shepard?"

[Got you there.]

No she didn't.

"Lack of… data. Interpretation error. Take… your pick. No int… interpretation… in Cerberus factor. They just… show up too much. And you know… what you saw… on Pragia."

Rho audibly grit her teeth. "True…"

A few hundred meters ahead, a small squad of Geth filed out from a door on the side of the skyway just a short distance from the entrance to the ExoGeni skyscraper. Whether they were stragglers after Shepard's raid across the structure or a recent arrival, I did not know, but they would certainly provide some entertainment. Or so I thought.

A loud snap passed me by on the right and a mere instant later two of the flashlight heads fell in a shower of sparks. Another snap, followed by the death of another platform, and I could hear the tell-tale sound of a forced weapons cooldown. Rho was an infiltrator, a tech and ranged weapons expert. I had never met a more skilled sniper in my life, and that includes a certain torin. I was sure that if I turned around at that time, I would've seen her standing in her usual 'victory stance', gloating about taking care of the problem before I could even reach it. She always did have a problem with awareness.

Still running, I drew my sword when I was just a few meters away from the fallen platforms. A moment later, the final Geth rounded the corner obscuring the door they had exited. It could barely get its weapon aimed down range before my blade took its head clean off. I slowly came to a stop next to the ExoGeni entrance, and looked over my shoulder to see Rho catching up to me.

"Nice shooting. But you still trust your eyes too much."

"You felt it on the sensor net, didn't you?"

I nodded. It was more of a statement than a question, and she was right. Working with expanded senses took a lot of practice, and could easily be overwhelming, but I had mostly mastered it. I was rarely surprised by a threat; even when I only got microseconds of warning, my training and augmentations allowed me to plan for it and react accordingly.

"Speaking of which, let's check up on the Commander's progress."

I turned my focus outward again, allowing my senses to merge more fully with the sensor net, building an increasingly complete map of the large building next to us. In the back of my mind, an enemy inventory updated. About a dozen Krogan, some of them tank bred. Twice as many Destroyers. Several dozen smaller Geth platforms. No Armatures. Huh, guess they did fall for that particular trap, then… oh, there they are.

"Alpha squad is currently engaged in conversation with one Doctor Lizbeth Baynham in a large chamber within the structure… and there's a large pack of varren about to jump them."

"Should we warn them?"

I considered it for a second. "No. They can handle themselves."

Shifting my focus again, I looked for active data terminals within the large building. There were
several, which was expected; most Geth inhabit computer systems rather than combat platforms, which meant that the first thing they did upon gaining control of the facility was likely to activate all the terminals they could find so they could roam the network for any important information.

*Caesar, attempt initiation of a remote connection to the network.*

[Already done. Connection failed. Encryption algorithms require physical interface.]

*Impressive.* Physical Key Interface Encryption was a level of security I would expect in STG or Alliance Intelligence facilities, but not in the headquarters of a privately owned colony world. Which further supported my theory that the links between ExoGeni and Cerberus were closer than was ever discovered in the games. The corporation was a huge financial driver within the Alliance, significantly eclipsing the size and reach of the Close Corporation. Unlike most giga-corporations in Council space, ExoGeni had not shown any inclination toward expanding their business into other highly profitable markets, such as arms manufacture and resource extraction, preferring to stick to their approach of colonisation, research and taxation.

This had always struck me as odd, and it was certainly an anomaly. Save for a few smaller corporations, ExoGeni was the only private colonisation and research corporation that didn't operate like a private government with wholly 'state' owned industries. It was clearly holding them back, both in terms of finances and political influence, but the strategy carried with it some advantages. ExoGeni was trusted as an 'idealistic' organisation, free of corruption and dedicated to science and advancement. This also meant that their activities were largely ignored by the various governments, merc organisations and intelligence agencies operating within ExoGeni's areas of influence. Which made them a perfect organisation to use if you were trying to run illegal research and development operations under the radar.

"*There is an access hatch a few floors up that leads past the force field the Geth have erected inside the building.*" I highlighted the hatch on the sensor map I shared with Rho. "*Looks like we're climbing.*"

"Fantastic. You coming?"

I withdrew from the sensor net and shifted my focus back to my regular senses. Rho's voice had come in over the communicator, which was odd. I looked around for a few seconds before I saw her. She was waiting for me at the access hatch, and threw me a mock salute when I finally noticed her. *God damn it.* She always did that. The Quarian was a trained infiltrator and thief, and had a particular knack for getting into places she shouldn't be able to get into. And unlike my mentor, she very rarely planned her approach.

"*Bloody infiltrators… you're going to have to show me how you do that sometime.*"

"Not bloody likely, *bosh'tet.*"

...
I've been a bit pressed for time since last week. But here we go!

Time to answer some comments!

First the guests, since I can't respond to them in PM (which I prefer to do):

Vern: Thank you, I shall see if I can accommodate the mud wrestling fantasy at some later point :P

Goldspark1 doesn't like how Caesar revealed himself to a Quarian, despite understanding that he needed organic workers. I understand the issue; Quarians are hardly the most AI-friendly folk out there. Why Rho, specifically, was chosen is something that will be covered at a later time, but for now: Just know that Caesar knew what he was doing, and he was confident Rho would hear him out. Let's just say there's a reason why Rho was exiled from the fleet. It was mildly hinted at in this chapter, further explanation will follow at a later time. (Also, sidenote, it is explicitly stated that Rho is privy to nearly everything happening within Close Corporation and the Technopath Corps. That includes knowing about 'Mobile Platform One'... so clearly she is not an ordinary Quarian ;))

HellsMaji doesn't know how Caesar knows the galaxy needs a saviour, and that this saviour is Shepard. Well... I hope that's been sufficiently explained in the story since the chapter he reviewed (chapter 1)?

envy34 noticed a nod to one of my favourite ME fanfics: Another Realm. I highly recommend checking that one out, Katkiller-V is SO much better than I am at this and I will be using her descriptions of Batarian culture in my writing whenever I'm dealing with Batarians. And yeah, 'Rane' is in this story as well as in AR. Not the same Rane, though. Rane'li Ben'Mass is a very different character from the Rane'li in Another Realm, even if the name was shamelessly stolen ;)

GodOfPixies clarifies what Gauss Frigate said about my dialogue, which is appreciated. I know I have improving to do. I've also had a couple of offers now for beta readers, and I may decide to get one. I'm used to writing in teams, that's how I used to work in the past and I find myself missing the back-and-forth of it all. GodOfPixies mentioned in PM that I had improved on the 'said bookism', which is a relief to me.

Over on AO3, user Omegaprime02 and myself had a long, detailed and very, very interesting discussion about the barely-mentioned static siphon cannon tech Aaron was working on a couple of chapters ago. I recommend heading over there and checking it out. Just Google 'Mass Intelligence: Close Call archive of our own', and you should find the thing.
Son of a bitch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We managed to get fairly deep into the building before finally running into the still-powered Geth barrier. Tracking Shepard's progress, I estimated it would still be another five to ten minutes or so before she got around to severing the dropship's hold on the building and dropping the barriers.

"Track back or wait?"

On our way through the maintenance hatchways we had explored the information from the sensor net and laid out likely scenarios. Rho had come to the same conclusion about the Geth ship and the loading bay doors as I had, and was aware that we were basically just waiting for Shepard to get there. The problem with the waiting scenario was that the primary terminals we needed access to were in the same loading bay.

"Neither." I marked a few places on the wall next to us on our HUD, "Set charges here, here and here. Then back away, cover up and detonate."

"If at first you don't succeed, blow shit up…"

Chuckling as I placed the one charge I had brought along – Rho was the infiltrator, demolition was her thing – I couldn't help but look over at my Quarian companion while she worked. She had come a long way since I first met her, and had in some ways changed a great deal. Her personality was still pretty much the same: Irreverent, sarcastic, cynical and curious. But the rest of her? When I met her she was, like all Quarians, confined to her environmental suit. That was no longer the case. Her augmentations had allowed her to be the first Quarian in hundreds of years to walk around in public without a suit, and she took advantage. When she wasn't on duty, where she either wore a uniform or her Technopath armour, she walked around the Archangel wearing replicated Rannoch fashion from before the Morning War.

Our relationship had changed her, too. She had taken to using human expressions with some frequency, and she was particularly fond of our cussing.

"Fire in the hole!"

We were on opposite sides of where we had set the charges, positioned with our backs toward the explosives. We locked our SAFE coats to the walls of the shaft we were in to seal off the blast site, and then activated the scale armour. I had always been a fan of corny, easy-to-remember acronyms, and I was quite proud of 'SAFE'. The Scale Armour Fabrication Enhancement system did its job, as thousands of micro-fabricators that covered our coats fabricated silicon-carbide armour scales and micro-shield emitters, forming a nearly impenetrable shell that was still flexible enough to cushion the force of the blast. The shaped charges we had used didn't give a lot of back-blast, but it would still have been more than enough to kill us if we were unprotected.

The charges had been set to direct the blast toward a group of Geth in the corridor below us, and the plan had paid off. I dropped down into the room and into a roll, sensing that there was still active Geth in the area. A quick look around relieved me of that worry. Only a single Destroyer was still functional, though its legs had been severed off its torso and its shotgun had been thrown across the room. A fully charged overload delivered straight to its head was more than enough to fry what remained of its systems. Behind me, Rho landed and fell into a slight crouch as she looked around. I
could tell she was focusing beyond just the room we were in.

"The loading bay is this way, come on."

[Alpha squad heard and felt the explosion and are double-timing it toward your location. I would hurry up if I were you.] 

Rho turned back toward me as we moved quickly through the maze of corridors leading to the shuttle loading bay. "Caesar worried you might anger your new Commander, Aaron?"

"More worried that I might anger her further."

"Oh." She shook her head, "You never were very good with the ladies."

"Got you, didn't I?"

"Still no idea how that ever happened."

I must be a glutton for punishment. There really is no other explanation. In the ten years since I'd known her, almost every interaction I'd had with Rho had consisted mostly of her ribbing me in some fashion, and that trend held true, one way or another, with many of my close associates. Especially with the women in my life, strangely.

Rho was an obvious example of this, sure, but Rane and Iruli both enjoyed taking me down a notch whenever the opportunity would arise. In different ways, of course. Where the good doctor Khias was the model representative for the intelligentsia, and thus preferred more subtle jabs at my work or intelligence, Rane'li was a soldier through and through. She enjoyed our sparring sessions far too much. And by 'sparring sessions', I refer to how she would randomly ambush me as I walked around the Archangel or any of our bases. She always claimed it was her way of teaching me to always be alert and ready for a fight. The only thing it really taught me was that I needed better impact protection for the groin part of my armour. And to never, ever take that thing off outside of my own quarters.

I guess this could go some way to explain why I was so willing to just accept Shepard's abrasive personality. Or, taking another perspective, it makes it completely baffling why I would be willing to allow even more crap coming my way.

"Hey."

Rho grabbed my arm and put her hand on my cheek, turning my head to face her. 

"You know there's room for one more on the Rhomance."

I groaned brought a hand up to massage my temple. "I still can't believe you actually called it that."

"Hey, it's my ship," she smiled, "I can name it whatever I want. And stop deflecting. You don't need Shepard or the Normandy. You have a fleet, an army, a freaking AI. You know more about the Reapers and their plans than anyone. And you know what the Vanguard wants."

I turned away from her and started moving back down the hallway. "But I don't know where to find it!"

"Neither does Shepard…"

I cut her off with a slice of my hand through the air, "No, but she is the key to finding out. She has
the vision from the Eden Prime Beacon."

"So do you!"

"I know, but it's not complete!" Rho reeled back from my impassioned answer, almost coming to a stop before recovering and catching back up with me again. I rubbed my forehead through my mask, the frustration evident from my posture and tone of voice.

I had been on Eden Prime during the excavations, waiting for the Beacon to be discovered. When it was, it hadn't taken much work for me to gain access to it and interface with it. It wasn't the first Prothean beacon I had interfaced with, the Close Corporation had two in its possession, but it was the first that had been connected to the Beacon network at the time the Reaper warning had been passed through it. Like in the games, the data was incomplete, but for me that wasn't the major issue.

I switched off my voice modulator, it was unnecessary without external speakers on anyway. "Too much of the accessible data discarded because of my augmentations, probably for the best really, but I'm missing important data. And Shepard has that data, even if she does not know it yet!"

Honestly, the fact that she was Shepard was still probably the main reason I stuck with the Normandy and its crew. Preserving the timeline from the first game, at least, made the path forward a lot clearer than it would be if I were to fall back to plan B and go it alone with the Archangel fleet. Beyond that the plan had always been to deviate sharply from the events laid out in the games, as that had been deemed the only reasonable and ethical course of action.

As we reached the door at the end of the long hallway, I cloaked and waited for Rho to do the same before I hit the button to open the door to the loading bay and walked inside. The door opening 'on its own' confused the Geth, who had taken aim at the entrance the moment the door had activated. We silently agreed to work around them, rather than take them on. Technopath cloaking tech far outmatched that of the Geth hunters, relying on different base principles which made their own detection tech useless against it as well. Knowing that we didn't need to clear out the Geth to access the data terminals we needed, we avoided the mechanical pawns of the Reapers and went straight to work.

After a couple of minutes of searching through open terminal access points without any luck, Rho called out to me over the radio. "Here, Aaron. There's a log… one Dr. Gamorle, mentions Cerberus."

I walked over to where she was standing, next to the server node on the outside wall of the bay. Geth surrounded us, but the noise suppression systems in our armour made sure any noises we made were completely imperceptible to the outside world when the external speakers were off. We could yell to each other, and no one would hear it but us. As for the Geth, soon enough they would have their hands full dealing with Shepard and Alpha squad, and I planned on being out of there by then.

"Let me see." I linked up with her interface to the node, and Dr. Gamorle's log popped up on my HUD. "Matano system, make note of that. Caesar, can you have a squad of operatives assembled and sent to Matano?"

[Phi, Tau and Sigma are available, I'll send them. Who do you want to give the order?]

"Rane. I'll want her on overwatch as well. The Maroon Sea is in the Terminus and near the Verge, we'll want someone who can deflect away any possible Batarian interference."

I turned my attention back to the log. "The log refers to payment, damn it. That goes against the idea that ExoGeni acts as a front for Cerberus… maybe. Hang on, Caesar, can you run a trace of any
transactions involving this Dr. Gamorle? See where that money came from and where it went?"

[Certainly. Give me a few moments.]

Rho tilted her head toward her left shoulder, a stance indicating curiosity. "What are you thinking?"

"It's possible ExoGeni is an unwitting pawn. That Cerberus is controlling them without anyone in ExoGeni even knowing."

"How?"

"Control enough of the managers and board members, either through membership in the organisation or plain bribery – as appears to be the case with Dr. Gamorle, here – and you could have the entire organisation working for you without their knowledge."

It would be exactly how I would expect Cerberus to operate, really, and it wouldn't be the first time they'd worked in such a way. This was how they had operated through Armistan Banes' company, and that had taken far too long to unravel. By the time the link had been verified, Banes had disappeared and his company had dissolved. It had taken a personal sit-down with Admiral Kahoku to make sure the events of UNC: Hades Dogs wouldn't occur. I didn't want to lose an Admiral to that organisation if I could help it, and the best way to make sure that didn't happen was to nip that storyline in the bud. As a bonus, we now had one more member of the Alliance admiralty on our side, helping to close the net on those who secretly held loyalty to Cerberus.

[Trace and analysis complete. Suspicion confirmed; 'Cerberus payments' track back to ExoGeni board accounts.]

"Which confirms the link between ExoGeni leadership and Cerberus, good thinking Aaron."

Rho put her arm on my shoulder, a move that would have revealed our location to the Geth if they were paying attention to our general area. That was the biggest drawback of our cloaking tech; intersecting fields caused visual disturbances and, sometimes, sparking.

"Finally a solid lead, the hounds are far too good at hiding their tracks. Can you put a permanent tracer in those accounts, Caesar?"

[I've replaced all the financial VIs with my forks. They won't know the difference, but everything that goes through them will be mirrored to me.]

Sometimes I really was scared at just how powerful Caesar could be when he wanted to. The AI was innately compatible with just about every VI implementation currently in use in the galaxy, which basically gave him instant access to any VI-controlled system he could physically access. He could permanently compromise systems by replacing the VI programs with minor forks of his own program masked as the VIs they replace. No one would be able to tell the difference without looking at the base code, but the forks would erase themselves and restore the original VIs if discovery was imminent.

"You know you could have Caesar infiltrate the Normandy and all the crew's omni-tools as well, right? You would have the data you need the moment they get it."

Damn it not this again.

"It isn't just the data, Rho. God, I wish it was… don't you think I would rather do this with people I know and trust? I'm not exactly Shepard's biggest fan, you know."
The way her head dipped slightly forward as she turned to glare at me over her right shoulder made it abundantly clear that she was not impressed with how I was handling my situation.

"Could've fooled me."

"Damn it, just stop. Shepard is uniquely placed in this whole thing. She's the first human Spectre, a war hero of the alliance, and she has gladly accepted a crew of all sorts of species to serve on her ship. Moreover, she keeps showing up in our sims as a key component in whatever future comes next. Yeah, she's a hypocrite of epic proportions, but she's a damn skilled one, and as a symbol she is exactly what we need to unite against the Reapers."

I really did want Shepard to be at the front of this whole thing. The Technopath Corps was a shadow organisation, and it would need to step out of the shadows to take on the Reapers. Doing so when the Reaper threat was not clear and obvious would label my organisation as the threat and would severely hinder the cause. It didn't matter that I practically owned the relevant political bodies, with enough popular opposition to a revealed Technopath Corps and the Messenger, what leverage I had with them would turn into fuel that would support them in their opposition. I had to play this smart. I had to have a credible face to lead the cause. I needed the Alliance war hero and first human Spectre to be the tip of the spear.

If only she wasn't such a bitch.

---

"Son of a bitch!"

*Three throw orbs! Three!* It had barely slowed the charging Krogan down, and Shepard had seen her life flash before her eyes as it closed in on her with a speed she could barely comprehend. But the impact never came. After holding her eyes shut for about half a second in expectation of her impending demise, Shepard opened her eyes again. Just centimetres in front of her, half a metric ton of Krogan muscle and armour glared at her, frozen in mid-sprint by a stasis field.

"Son of a what?"

Garrus' words were barely audible over the loud song of gunfire that suddenly registered to the Commander again as she scrambled backwards into cover. Regaining her wits, she threw the biggest throw orb she could manage at the halted Krogan. The two biotic fields detonated in a massive explosion of force, effortlessly throwing the massive alien back toward the back of the room where he'd come from now that he didn't have the advantage of momentum.

Sir Isaac Newton is the deadliest son-of-a-bitch in space, indeed.

"Female dog!" Shepard got her pistol out and lined up her shots on the advancing line of Geth that had now overtaken the previously charging Krogan. "Like a varren, just cuddlier!"

"You just called a Krogan cuddly?" Garrus' mandibles flicked in amusement, even as he sighted down his sniper rifle's scope and fired a slug into a Destroyer that was preparing to charge. "I wouldn't mention that to Wrex."

"I believe it loses something in translation," supplied Liara as she let a Singularity build in her hand, "The Thessian translation I got was… different."

Moments after she launched her attack, Shepard capitalised on it by teleporting directly into the cluster of Geth and detonating her Annihilation field. The resulting series of biotic detonations
around her obliterated all that remained of the Geth, and knocked the last Krogan on his ass. Shepard finished the job by firing her pistol into his head until it overheated.

"What do you mean, 'different'?"

"It involved an unflattering reference to bestiality."

The room fell silent as Garrus and Shepard both turned toward the Asari with a slightly shocked look on their faces. They then doubled over in laughter.

Liara looked confused and embarrassed. "What?"

"God, you're adorable, Liara. Never change."

Shepard's response didn't exactly help, and left Liara glowing a deep shade of purple beneath her clear, blue skin. When he finally recovered from his laughter, Garrus took the time to check the building's schematics. The circumstances in which they got those had been rather amusing, even if the battle had been pathetically short for a Krogan. And a platoon Commander, no less, according to the limited information they extracted from what remained of his omni-tool after he had been literally torn apart by the combined fire and biotics from Alpha squad. The ExoGeni VI that had revealed their presence to him had proven itself quite useful, giving them access to what remained of the internal sensors, and a full set of schematics for the building. It had also verified the story Close had given them regarding the plant-based life form back under Zhu's Hope.

"The shuttle loading bay should be right back around here, that's where the Geth ship is latched onto the side of the building and our best chance at severing it."

"What about Mr. Hossle's data?"

"The location he gave is just up ahead. Want to head there first?"

Shepard thought about it. That had been the original plan, they had already looked over the schematics and figured out their approach. That plan had changed, though, when the building had shook from an explosion nearby. The site of that explosion they had calculated would be on the opposite side of the shuttle bay to where they were, and they would have to go through the bay to get there.

"No, we'll have to double back anyway to get back out. We'll deal with it then, we need to investigate the explosion first."

"My bet is still on Messenger."

Shepard gave Liara an annoyed glance. "I'm not taking that bet, it probably was him."

"Would it be such a bad thing to have two teams working toward the same goal from two angles?"

Shepard knew that Garrus had a good point. Tactically, having Close and his girlfriend join them for this objective was a sound move. Close had shown himself to be a highly capable combatant, and a capable field commander even if he wasn't supposed to act as one. That spoke to his lack of training and experience in squad structures, and the fact that he wasn't military was clear as day. He claimed he had saved the squad's life in the tower above Zhu's Hope. That wasn't a lie; he believed he did, and his plan of attack had been sound and successful. However, he had assumed he had a better grasp of the situation than her, and had assumed command of the squad without a second thought. That kind of thing is dangerous in battle. Military command structure is rigid for a reason.
The reality was, Shepard had the room layout and the enemies figured out when he started barking orders. The snipers wouldn't have been problematic to deal with. There was plenty of cover for her to teleport in and out of, and she would've closed the distance on them within seconds. At that point, the Geth in the tower would have been in a biotic vice between her and Liara, with Close backing them up with his competent marksmanship and tech powers. That was tried and true N7 doctrine. It would have worked, because it was a tactic that had been proven to work many times in the past. Close's interference made that approach impossible, however, so she was forced to fall back on following his orders.

"You know I had to make it clear that we cannot have multiple commanders in the field, Vakarian."

Garrus' back snapped straight as if he had just been yelled at by his General. "Of course, Ma'am."

"Don't you Ma'am me." Shepard glared at the Turian walking alongside her, "I appreciate Close's combat prowess as well as anyone else, but the man needs to learn to fall in line. If he's actually been stupid enough to defy my orders once again to come out here, then that is going to piss me off even if he does end up helping us."

"Isn't that a bit unfair, Shepard?"

Of the three, Liara was by far the least experienced with military doctrine. Apparently, she had received extensive combat training from her mother's commandos during her childhood and up until she left the family mansion outside Serrice to begin her archaeological career. This meant she could more than hold her own in a combat situation, but it was hardly a replacement for the disciplined training offered by the military. Which explained her naiveté on this issue.

"Not at all. We are a military outfit, we follow military rules. Strict command structure being one of them. We cannot afford more than one commander to a squad, and Close needs to learn to adhere to that rule."

Liara nodded, "Very well."

The squad came up on the door leading into the loading bay, and took their positions: Liara on the left side of the door, where cover was best, Shepard in front and Garrus behind her to the right, covering her with his sniper rifle.

"Ready?"

Grunts of agreement from her squad prompted her to punch the button to open the door. The result was somewhat anticlimactic, with no Geth immediately attacking them from the other side. Stepping into the large room, they saw three Geth seemingly bowing down in front of what appeared to be an altar of some sort. Weird.

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[Shepard has arrived.]

Well shit. We had hung around for a bit longer than anticipated, after we found some more correspondence possibly linking ExoGeni with Cerberus activity. An ExoGeni colony on Nodacruz, with which we had previously confirmed Cerberus involvement, had apparently received samples of Thorian biomatter. Creepers, I knew, but I couldn't reveal that.

"What's the plan, boss?"
I grit my teeth. I hated when Rho called me that, it was the most blatant passive-aggressive term she would ever use. No one was the boss of Rho, and everyone knew it. If she called you her boss, that was because she was pissed. I had no time to deal with that sort of crap, and glared at her for a second.

"Stay cloaked, get ready to take out key targets if necessary." I switched my modulator back on as I got back into the combat mindset, "Let's see how well Alpha squad functions without me."

I didn't have to wait long before the unmistakeable sounds of biotic explosions filled the air. That certainly got the attention of the Geth that were still milling about the chamber we were in. I took position behind one of the two Destroyers in the room, sword drawn with my right hand, ready to end its existence. In my left, I held my shotgun aimed square at the head of a rocket trooper. It was a weapon I rarely used, but when the situation called for high damage in close quarters, my MkI Eviscerator was definitely good to have.

The shotgun was a modified Sokolov shotgun, and I had designed it to be a progenitor to the Eviscerator line of shotguns from the later games. Its ammo shaver operated on a similar principle to the Serpent, shaping its grains for specific capabilities. However, where the Serpent shaved its grains to fly silently, the Eviscerator shaved them to fly aerodynamically and have greater armour-piercing capability. The added heat from shaving and shaping that much added mass, within the limited volume of a shotgun frame compared to a rifle, had proven problematic without resorting to disposable heat sinks. The solution had been a throwback to a very old technology: Revolvers. Using a revolving permanent heat sink with separate thermal chambers, the shotgun was able to fire three shots before overheating. The drawback was that its cooldown time was extreme, and even controlled fire that avoided overheating would damage the heat sink permanently if sustained for a while.

_I can't wait to introduce disposable heat sinks…_

[They do have certain advantages, don't they.]

_Yes, they…_

[Heads up.]

That was all the warning I got before the room turned into a complete chaos of biotic carnage. Singularities deployed on the back ranks of units, keeping them pinned down. Overloads launched from Garrus omni-tool kept the forward units at bay while he picked off the mid-range units with his sniper rifle. A familiar crackle in the air told me it was time to get the hell out of the way, and I rolled to my left – through where the rocket trooper had previously been standing, until its head had come off – just as the Destroyer I had been ready to slice open came apart at the seams. A warp field from Liara tore at its metal body, setting it up for an immense biotic explosion that ripped the chest of the giant robot wide open as it went flying backwards through where I had just been standing.

Somehow, I had managed to not even have my cloak compromised by the obliteration going on around me. Resolving to make sure that remained the case, I got back to my feet and ran into cover under the stairs from which the squad descended upon their synthetic foes with unholy fury. From there I had a perfect overview of the situation, as far as any overview was possible to have. It looked like an utter mess of destruction, but there was no way that was the case. The destruction was too fast, too complete, too _perfect_ for that to be the case. No words were spoken between the squad members, but orders seemed to be clearly communicated still.

I studied Shepard as she danced around the still-standing Geth in the room. Every other second or so, her head turned for a split second toward her squad. Every time she did that, without fail, Garrus and
Liara sprung to action, either switching targets, focusing on one target, or setting up combos for Shepard to take advantage of. I had been wrong. Oh, so, so wrong. I hadn't saved anyone in the tower. I had only been in the way. Shepard didn't need to give her orders; they were implied, they were always followed, and they were always perfect. And I now felt completely outmatched.

Chapter End Notes

I do not own Mass Effect, unfortunately.

I'm surprised at how challenging this chapter was to write. I feel like it's quite information dense, covering several topics that have popped up in the reviews. I'd always planned to bring these things up around this time, because it makes sense. Cerberus in particular; I'd alluded to actions against Cerberus in the previous chapter, and that was because they would be getting more attention in this one. Depending on how you play the game, Dr. Gamorle's log entry on Feros is the first time in ME1 that Cerberus is mentioned by name. I wanted to make that a significant plot point. The idea of a link between ExoGeni and Cerberus operations makes sense to me, even in-canon, and I'm playing that up here. And beyond that, there was also the little bits about how Caesar works, Rho and Aaron's relationship, the throw-away comments about interacting with Beacons and such things... yeah there's a lot in there.

Now, let's comment on some comments!

Lots of consensus out there that Shepard is a bitch, DarkDust27 even suggests Aaron should take over command. Well... I can see the reasoning, but I'm hoping this chapter at least partly explains why that would likely be a bad idea. NonSolus vaguely suggests the same thing, pointing out how long he has been preparing for and the extent of his resources and connections. Some of that should be fairly well answered by this chapter, really. I will say this: There are other reasons beyond the ones he gives, but I'm not willing to reveal those just yet. XRaiderV1 is probably on the right path when suggesting it may come to blows between Shepard and Aaron (again). That is definitely a likely scenario. Oh and look, guys, NoOneInParticular17 is still around! I am as unsurprised as he is, but significantly more amused.

Vern says... uh... something. Headaches and beer. And sticks up asses. At some point, Shepard is probably going to have to give that stick to Garrus, if for nothing else just to keep in line with canon :P

general-joseph-dickson disagrees with Shepard's style of leadership, and makes some good points. That conversion continued in PM, where I essentially defended Shepard's actions. I still will. She is definitely a difficult personality, with a multitude of flaws, but she is an excellent field commander and I really hope I'm getting that across.

GaussFrigate sees his favourite character in the future. Good eyesight on that one, is all I can say ;)

Goldspark1: I'm glad I could make the Quarian connection make more sense. It really does make sense, trust me, there is so much that I still haven't said... :P

Deathknight999 wants to know if Aaron and Rho will remain an item or if he will end up with someone else. Honestly... I don't know yet. I have vague plans for the romance
stuff, we’ll see where it goes. I have already stated that the two of them have been drifting apart for some time, as Aaron has switched more and more into the Messenger persona. I hope that in this chapter you got to see both the closeness and trust the two of them share, as well as the increasing distance between them that largely comes from Aaron's obsession with Messenger and being the best he can be.

Raigel worries I'm going too much Mary-Sue... ish. Well, he's not wrong. As I've stated before, it's been my intention from very early on to handle the inevitable Mary-Sue elements that come with this story structure and timeline meddling in a way that keeps things challenging for the characters without taking away from their realistically acquired skills and resources. The fact of the matter is, considering the amount of time Aaron (not to mention Caesar) has had in preparing for these events, it wouldn't make any sense for him to not be overpowered in many ways. But this will not be an Easy mode run. Insanity difficulty with even really strong characters is still challenging. That's what I'm going for. (Well, that and the... non-combat challenges...)

MRG101 seems to like my story. That is very much appreciated, thank you very much :)

"All clear?"
"All hostiles neutralized, we are all clear!"

Shepard quashed a grin at Vakarian's delivery. Sure, the man had military discipline coming out of his ears – *do Turians even have ears?* – but the way he delivered the formalities of combat basically shouted to the void that Vakarian was back in the thick of it, and he was loving every second.

"That was… effective." Liara supplied, sounding almost in shock at the carnage in which she had just partaken.

"Couldn't have done it without ya, Blue."

At Shepard's use of the nickname, Liara blushed violently and nearly hid her face in her hands. The Commander grinned for a beat, until she noticed Garrus' flicking mandibles and wide eyes.

"Vakarian?"

"I… that must have been a translator error."

"What?"

Garrus opened up his omni-tool as he walked over to her. He then proceeded to show her a translator transcript log, highlighting a word in the Turian dialect he used, and translated it to Alliance Standard.

"Oh… oh! No! I mean the colour blue! As in the colour of most Asari! Not, uh, their… you know…"

"Birth canal?"

She cringed at Vakarian's bluntness. "Yeah…"

"Here," Liara was suddenly standing right next to the now equally violently blushing Spectre, "Your translator confuses the words 'blue' and… 'azure', outside of a clear sentence structure. Essentially, it thinks you're using an expletive, not a name."

While she talked, she was navigating Shepard's omni-tool, attempting to edit her translator's settings. "We just need to de-couple the two words and… there. Now you can call me 'Blue' all you want without embarrassing me…"

Shepard quirked an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge, T'Soni?"
Her eyes got wide and her spine straightened in mild shock, something Shepard had seen her do many times already. And she loved it every single time. She's just. So. Adorable!

"No! No, no… I… uh…"

"Challenge accepted!" Shepard flashed Liara a wide smile before turning around toward the control panels for the loading bay doors. Behind her, she heard Vakarian chuckle while the maiden fussed.

The central console had an active log entry open, which she thought curious until she read it. It was a warning, working double duty as an instruction manual of sorts, telling the workers in the loading bay how to operate the loading bay doors without causing catastrophe. Or in Shepard's case, telling her how to cause catastrophe. Perfect.

Glancing over the various pressure regulators, she quickly did some mental arithmetic before activating three of them. For each one, the pressure gauge increased until the final one turned the pressure into a range marked on the console by hand-painted red ink. Too high for safe operation, too low for the fail-safes to kick in. Shepard got what she wanted; the loading bay doors slammed down in force, severing three of the legs the Geth dropship was using to hold on to the side of the Prothean skyscraper. From there, gravity did the rest of the job. With the remaining arms of the ship being insufficient to hold its weight in place, the vessel plummeted toward the surface below, its systems incapable of reconfiguring themselves to enable it to fly again until it would be too late.

"Well that takes care of that."

"Commander, over here."

Shepard walked over to the torin, who was standing next to an active data terminal. "Found anything?"

"I think so. There's an active log entry on this console. Says something about something called Cereba…kerb…sira… Spirits, your human languages have some real tongue twisters. This word." Garrus pointed at the screen.

"Cerberus. Greek mythology."

"Greek?"

"A human nation on Earth, they appear to be very important in their history." Liara supplied eagerly.

Shepard raised an eyebrow again, "Done your homework, I see?"

"Ah, I… I don't know much about human history and culture," Liara blushed, "But as an archaeologist, you do learn a few things about the most important archaeology of the different species. Greece and Rome of Earth, Aereeans and Gammarins of Palaven, Janoran of Tuchanka, and of course the Hanar have their Enkindlers…"

The squad's communicators crackled with an incoming emergency hail from the Normandy, and Joker's voice echoed throughout the loading bay.

"I repeat, Normandy to Alpha squad. Are you reading? Anyone there? Normandy to Alpha squad. Come on, Commander, talk to me!"

"We're reading you, Joker. What's going on?"

"We're in lockdown here, Commander. After disablign and securing all the infected colonists, Beta
squad prepared to go underneath the colony to get to this Thorian thing? That's when all hell broke loose."

"What do you mean, all hell broke loose?"

"Zombies, man. Plant zombies! And some weird-ass green Asari commando. They rushed Beta and forced them to fall back to the docks. We're holding the line, but not for much longer! They just keep coming!"

"Can't you take off?"

"Would if I could, but we're clamped. The zombies jumped onto the hull, the GARDIAN lasers took care of them, but they explode into acid and… well, it's welded the docking clamps to the ship hull. I could shake us loose, but that'd tear chunks off the ship."

"We're double-timing it back, Joker. Tell Beta squad and Close to hang in there, backup is on the way."

"Close isn't here, Commander, I thought he was with you?"

Shepard sighed and cast a glance at Vakarian, who was standing directly across from her. "We haven't seen him, but that doesn't mean much… Close, I'm going to assume you're listening in, so hear me: We're going back to Zhu's Hope, and I expect to see you there!"

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Despite myself, I swallowed heavily. Just minutes ago, I had felt I was more than a match for the Commander, and had even contemplated breaking off from her crusade and going it myself. Now… now I was not so sure anymore. Rho and myself had left the loading bay immediately after the carnage had stopped, intent on making our way back to the colony. That was when I remembered Gavin Hossle. The character had always seemed a bit strange to me in the games. His explanation for why Shepard should help him find his data in ExoGeni HQ didn't match the reality of freelance mod engineers in the Traverse. 'Freelancers don't have to worry about security as much, so long as we keep a low profile.' That was just wrong. Being a freelance mod engineer in the Traverse was dangerous work. Larger manufacturers wanted the competition gone, so they could control the market. Private military contractors and pirate outfits wanted to 'hire' them – permanently – to help give them an edge over their competition. And 'low profile'? Best way to not get any business was to keep a low profile. No, something was off about Mr. Hossle, and I intended to find out why.

Trouble was, the section of HQ where his office was located was completely swarming with Geth and Krogan. Sneaking past the Geth wouldn't be a problem, but have you ever tried sneaking past a Krogan? I do not recommend you try. Not only are they huge, lumbering beasts whose bulk alone makes it hard to sneak past them in narrow hallways, but they also happen to have extremely keen senses. Tuchanka had been home to predators with natural cloaking abilities, and that combined with all the other dangers they had evolved to counter meant that they could smell you, see you disturbing the ground, and bloody feel you before you could even get close to them. No, you do not simply sneak up on a Krogan.

You charge them and stab them through the eye.

"Eww."

Rho withdrew her omni-blade from the downed Krogan's skull and increased the heat to burn off the blood before she retracted it. Barely a metre away from her I did the same with my high vibration
blade, but I didn't bother cleaning it off; the blade's vibrations took care of that. I decided that the close quarters combat that would be required to reach Hossle's office meant the blade was probably my best option, so I kept it in hand.

"Keep the vomiting to a minimum until we're done with this, Rho."

She turned and glared at me. I teased, but I knew it wasn't her first time gutting someone. That thought right there should probably have set off some alarm bells for me. I shook my head. All the women in my life are bloody terrifying.

"Well, we managed to do that surprisingly quietly. Should we keep that up, or…"

That's how far I came before things turned messy. Another Krogan charged around the corner a few metres ahead of us, along with two rocket drones and a full squad of Geth troopers in tow. The two of us reacted on instinct: Rho launched a Concussive mine at the charging Krogan's feet, causing him to stumble and fall. I charged my blade and ran at the falling Krogan, while Rho cloaked behind me. The rocket drones shifted their aim to me, as their first target disappeared, but they would never get a chance to fire. I ground my blade against the floor as I ran, and when I reached my target, I swung it in an upward slash, splitting the Krogan down the middle. As my sword continued its upward arc, a massive wave of electrical energy blast out in front of me. The rocket drones exploded in a shower of sparks, and the Geth forming up behind them were knocked back, their shields gone. Two omni-tools glowed in the darkness, and a pair of tech mines were launched into the downed group of synthetics. The two Overloads combined violently, and bits of metal pinged off the walls all around us as the tech explosion erupted.

"You were saying?"

"…charge?"

I really had hoped to avoid making so much noise. I mean, I knew by now that Shepard was probably aware that I was nearby and not where she wanted me to be, but I still didn't want to announce it so loudly. There was no way Alpha squad hadn't heard the ruckus we were causing on our way to Hossle's office, and the Commander would probably be right on our heels. The opposition wasn't slowing us down all that much, but it would still be more than enough to allow the N7 to catch up to us before we could finish searching the 'freelancer's' computer for evidence.

I needed a distraction.

"Shepard." I spoke through the radio.

"Close. I assume that's you who's being noisy?"

"We are… taking care of something. Gavin Hossle's business."

"How did you know about Hossle, have you been listening in on our comms?"

Yes. "No. Hossle is a suspected Cerberus employee. We are investigating."

"There's that word again. Who is Cerberus?"

"Not now. I'll fill you in on that later. For now, don't waste time, get moving back to the Mako. Bring Ms. Baynham back to her mother, and then get back to the colony. I'll catch up to you there."
I could almost hear her gritting her teeth through the comms. "I don't appreciate you giving me orders, Close..."

"I'm not. Consider it a suggestion. But you heard Joker, they're going to need you back at the colony sooner rather than later."

Several seconds, and several destroyed Geth, went by before she answered. "Fine. But we're having words when this is all over."

"Yes. That we will."

We arrived at Hossle's office right after Shepard cut the comms, and proceeded to hack our way in. I could sense several open data terminals in the office, and at least two of them had a distinct Cerberus signature. Whether that supported my theory, or was a point in Hossle's defense, I could not be sure. I highlighted the terminals on my HUD, and immediately identified one of the Cerberus ones as a sensor bug, which I disabled remotely. The other was a hidden data storage device, on a one-way data link to his personal terminal. A data bleeder. Nearly impossible for network techs to discover remotely, bleeders are also nearly impossible to hide from the terminal's users since they require activation after every login. That all but confirmed to me that Hossle was indeed working for Tim.

"Let's see what data you've been siphoning with this bleeder of yours, Gavin..."

"Hold on. The device has tampering countermeasures. You should probably leave this one to Caesar."

[Give me a few seconds.]

While my AI companion worked, I scanned the room more thoroughly. There wasn't much to be found. A few interesting weapon mod designs did catch my eye, however, and I copied them for later review.

[Your hunch was definitely correct. The bleeder has a direct uplink to a remote server, pinging it now... Horsehead Nebula, Anadius system.]

Holy shit. "Cronos Station. Well, shit. Hossle works directly for the boss."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I don't own Mass Effect, though I wish I did.

Sorry about the wait! Between university starting back up, and finally getting a new job, I haven't really had any time to write for the past couple of weeks. Which is also why this chapter is so short, I just wanted to put something out to let you know I'm still alive and still writing... just writing a bit less, because I have less of this "time" thing. Might not be able to put out a chapter every week anymore, but I will try!

So, yeah. Cerberus, the dog, slowly creeping up on the story. That particular organisation will be a fair bit more important early on than it was in the first Mass Effect.

Let's comment on some comments:
GaussFrigate seemed tickled by my little translation joke in the previous chapter. Good; there might be a few of those to come still :P I'm a linguist, I can't help myself...

general-joseph-dickson is still not convinced by Shepard's leadership skills, which I guess is fair enough. Most of the time we've 'seen' her in combat so far has been solo combat, or while taking orders from Close or Nihlus, or fighting with people she knows *nothing* about. I will point this out though: She still does not know her teammates all that well, they've only known each other for a few days at this point and this is the first time she's been in combat with Garrus. So chew on that for a bit ;)  

enji-benjy doesn't understand Close and Rho's relationship. Which is not too surprising, since we've only seen a short glimpse of their very first interaction as well as how they are with each other now, at a point in their relationship where it's already been stated outright that they're growing apart.  

Deathknight999 wants some non-eezo tech because of the disadvantages to said eezo tech. Well... I don't quite agree. The only real problem with eezo tech is that it makes the path of technological development more predictable for the Reapers. Avoiding this is not really a matter of avoiding eezo tech (though I do enjoy the non-eezo humanity AU stories), but rather a matter of taking unconventional paths. Eezo is just a component. The trick is to not let yourself be limited by it.  

XRaiderV1 has an interesting idea about a broom closet. Hmm...  

I'm honestly not sure how to respond to Vern's comment :P Whether Close will kneel or not is yet to be seen, but he understands at least that he can't continue to take charge.  

Zhilo offers a different approach for Close to follow; allowing Shepard to do her thing, while offering support from a distance. I can see the merits of that, but it isn't quite his style... :)  

NonSolus appreciates the character piece of Liara and Garrus in the previous chapter. I'm glad; I was aiming to show just how different a character Shepard becomes around Close. She's on rather friendly terms with the rest of the crew. I hope I got to show that a bit more in this chapter. Also, a short note on Close being a 'cybernetic transhuman': He is indeed, however, it's worth noting that technopath augmentations are transsapien in nature, not just transhuman. Close is transhuman simply because he's a technopath and human. By the same logic, Rho would be transquarian. That kind of terminology gets annoying in a hurry, so... transsapien :)  

Don't worry, Goldspark1, Close and Shepard will still be butting heads for a while.
You would think that with a near-omnipresent AI in your corner, information wars would be a breeze. This was not the case. In a galaxy with highly adaptable and complex VI cybersecurity systems, and Geth, only the stupidest information players were breakable from the outside.

I do not own Mass Effect or anything related to it. Close, Technopaths etc? Mine.

"What does that mean, then?"

"It means Hossle works for TIM."

The slap from her three-fingered hand made my head snap sharply forward on reflex, and I found myself wondering – yet again – how the hell she was able to do that without activating my SAFE armour. I suspected conspiracy involving a certain AI.

"Not what I meant, bosh'tet. What does it mean, practically? What are we going to do with this information right now?"

"Ah. Well…"

I closed my eyes and focused outward, 'looking' through the sensor net trying to locate… there she is.

"Messenger to Shepard, come in."

A beat. I started toward the exit and motioned Rho to follow. Another beat. I started picking up pace, falling into a light jog. Then the radio finally crackled.

"This is Shepard. What do you want?"

At least she's clever enough to not use my name over the radio now that the jamming field is down.

"You're about to reach the bunker where the ExoGeni survivors are located. No doubt Dr. Baynham will want to reunite with her mother."

"…okay. Yeah. How do you know where we are? And how do you know about Lizbeth?"

"Nevermind that. Stop the Mako before reaching the outpost. Make sure Dr. Baynham stays with the vehicle. The next step is important."
"And what is this next step?"

"You wait for us."


Fucking…fuck! There it was again.

"Setting aside the whole thing about you giving orders again, you know we're responding to an emergency call from the Normandy, right?"

"I can buy them some time. We need to do this, Shepard."

Shepard grit her teeth. She wasn't sure what she hated the most, the fact that he was trying to take command again, or the fact that the way he was doing it suggested he had information that would make it prudent to follow his orders. Either way…

"Eeep!"

Liara's squeal drowned out that of the tires outside as the vehicle skid to an abrupt and, from the point of view of its passengers, unexpected halt. Shepard glanced over her shoulder into the back compartment. Mako guidelines were quite insistent that all passengers wear helmets. Prior to that rather stern recommendation from the Alliance Medical Corps, sudden loss of consciousness and minor concussions had been a common occurrence. Something about a lack of inertial dampening combined with fast maneuvers, small internal spaces, and hard, bulky surfaces. Only one of the vehicle's current passengers wasn't wearing a helmet, Shepard knew.

"Dr. Baynham? Dr. Baynham?! Commander, the Doctor is unconscious!"

Well that makes that easier.

"Make sure she's comfortable, then file out of the Mako, lock it down and get ready for battle."

Garrus' shoulders stiffened as he turned his helmeted head toward the petite Commander.

"Shepard? What's going on?"

"I got orders from Close."

"Oh Spirits, not again…"


Shepard had a point, the Normandy situation would need handling. It was sufficiently different from the events of the game that it actually posed a problem, with the Thorian sending wave after unending wave of creepers and plant-cloned Asari commandos down to the docks. Rho and I was still running, but I had taken a peek through the sensor net to appraise the situation there. The defenders were on the back foot, with the creepers having taken them by surprise and overrunning the choke point at the bottom of the stairs up to the colony. If they could be pushed back into the stairwell, the would buy Beta squad – and, by extension, the Normandy – more than enough time to hold off until reinforcements arrived in the form of Alpha squad and two Technopaths.

The sheer volume of creepers, and the suppressing effect of the plant-clone biotics, kept that from
happening. They needed an edge.

"Come in, Beta squad."

"This is Kryik. We're kinda busy here, Messenger."

"The enemy are plant-based lifeforms. They burn, Kryik."

"...Spirits, I should have thought of that. Zorah! Reconfigure your drone! We need flamethrowers!"

I hoped that would buy them the time they needed to wait for our business to finish on this end. Discovering that Hossle works directly for The Illusive Man changed everything. The Close Corporation, through the Technopath Corps, had been waging a shadow war on TIM's little organisation for years now, and while we had had some success breaching the periphery of their organisation, we'd been unable to get past the first couple of layers of their structure.

You would think that with a near-omnipresent AI in your corner, information wars would be a breeze. This was not the case. In a galaxy with highly adaptable and complex VI cybersecurity systems, and Geth, only the stupidest information players were breakable from the outside. The one thing that all groups in the intelligence space – all of them, the STG included – had in common was a tactic known as physical data segregation. If you network your intelligence, you're effectively compromising the security of your organisation for the sake of convenience. Not a very intelligent thing to do. This was why all intelligence gathering networks consisted of one-way data paths, and the data itself was immediately stored for review in locations kept entirely offline. These locations, called Black Rooms, were usually built in very remote locations and were heavily shielded with near-impenetrable passive defences such as shutters, mines, gas chambers and detachable umbilicals. To get at the information kept inside, you would need a physical presence, and unless you were a Technopath you needed to have the correct credentials. The primary problem wasn't getting in, though. No, the primary problem was finding the Black Rooms in the first place.

The only way to locate these data troves was to find the uplink devices carried by the organisation's operatives. Hossle's data bleeder was one such device, and it had allowed Caesar to 'ride' the data stream to its target location. Not the Black Room, mind you, transport of data into the Black Rooms was a manual process. No, all that we had found was the general location for it. Fortunately, both Caesar and I knew exactly what was hiding in the Anadius system. Anyone else would just check it against a starmap and probably conclude that the location was likely just a relay satellite hidden in a dead star system, not worth further investigation.

"Ten seconds to rendezvous, Aaron."

Rho's voice interrupted my thoughts and brought me back to the present. Cerberus had cost us both dearly, but it would not do to get distracted now. For this to work, we needed to stay focused.

We rounded the corner and started to slow down as we came up on the Mako. I walked up to the squad and de-cloaked, ready to explain the situation.

That's when Shepard punched me into a wall.

..."I told you!"

Shepard threw another biotically charged fist at Close's gut, actually denting the wall behind him. Annoyingly, Close himself didn't seem too fazed by the impact.
"Three strikes! You're out!"

She was just about to punch him again when he acted with a speed she thought impossible. As her arm cocked back to power her punch, he gracefully stepped out from the wall and passed her while grabbing her wrist. In one smooth motion, he used her own momentum to launch her off her feet and into the air, making one full forward rotation before slamming down on her back. He then crouched next to her and grabbed her by the neck. As he did this, she felt her biotic amp power down. She was defenceless.

"ENOUGH! If my arm so much as twitches right now, your neck snaps whether I want to or not, so lie still! I am trying to work with you, Commander, but you are not making it easy!"

Shepard glanced over toward her squad, hoping for some assistance, but both Liara and Garrus were busy not getting shot by the cyborg Quarian who currently had her oversized sniper rifle aimed in their direction. It was probably smart of them not to intervene, she realised, as the two super-soldiers were likely more than a match even for the three of them combined.

"You mentioned three strikes. I count two. What is the third?"

The Commander was caught by surprise. She had fully expected Close to fly off the handle and give up his ‘cooperation’ project. Instead, he focused on her perceived problem.

"What two are you counting?"

Shepard's voice was surprisingly cool, given the circumstances. It was, after all, not the first time she had been in such a position.

"Taking command in the Tower, and giving you instructions now."

"You're forgetting going over my head to the Council to make sure you would stay on the crew."

Close released his grip and stood back up, but Shepard's amp remained offline.

"What?"

She rubbed at her throat, but remained on the floor as she answered him. Here come the lies.

"After our… chat, I received a call from the Council in the conference room. When I answered it, only the Asari councillor was present. She told me in no uncertain terms that you were to remain on the roster, and that the Council would consider it a key component of the 'Saren mission'."

The Technopath operative threw his head back in apparent exasperation before letting it fall back forward into his open palm. "Oh for f… what in the cursed Tides were you thinking, Tevos…"

Curious. "You going to claim you didn't know about that?"

"I didn't know about that."

Close offered his hand to help Shepard stand, and motioned to the Quarian to lower her weapon. Shepard grabbed the hand, and considered for a moment whether to get some payback for being thrown to the ground. She didn't have time to act on that impulse before Close, apparently anticipating that reaction, forcibly pulled her to her feet and released her again.

"Tevos… the Asari councillor, she… I know her on a personal level. This was all her. I would bet the other Councillors don't even know she made the call."
"That is absurd," interjected Liara, "That is an abuse of power that no Asari Councillor would ever allow herself. She would lose her position immediately if it were known!"

"Heh… I sometimes forget that most people are so naïve to how Asari politics actually work."

Liara looked like she had been slapped, and Shepard believed she knew why. The young Asari was sensitive to any hint that her young age might impact her credibility or knowledge of the galaxy, and now an accusation of naïveté was offered from someone she highly respected and – to Shepard's great frustration – implicitly trusted.

"That is not true, the Asari Republics are open, transparent electronic democracies and…"

"…and they don't have any secret organisations, like the Asari Republics Intel Cooperative. And the Shadow Broker was definitely not originally a secret Asari organisation."

"…what?"

"Look, nothing is as it seems about Asari government. Your people – particularly your Matriarchs – are masters of manipulation. Tevos, your Councillor? She runs the most influential intelligence organisation in the galaxy. And you haven't heard about it because the few who end up learning about them either end up dead or working for them."

"Uh… thanks, then, I guess?"

Close turned toward the interruption. "Commander, as a Spectre you already work for them in practice."

That got Shepard's blood boiling. It made her feel like she was being used, and she would not stand for it.

"This is all beside the point, though, we have a different secret organisation to deal with now. Shepard, we'll talk later about Tevos'… indiscretion. Right now, I need you all to listen to me."

"Why should we? You just admitted to holding even more secrets."

"I could not possibly tell you all the secrets I know. Most of them are irrelevant, others would get you or your crew killed, others still I am honour-bound to keep secret. I can only promise to reveal any secret when it becomes necessary, and I shall start with telling you about an organisation known as Cerberus."

I tried to compress down as much information I could into a very short time, because even with the extra time I had given Beta squad we were still short on time. I told them who Cerberus was; a human-centric extremist organisation with deep ties to the upper echelons of the Alliance, both politically and militarily. When I told them that in my short time on the Normandy I had disabled over a dozen bugs I could trace to them, Shepard's expression went from one of curiosity to pure anger. She apparently did not like being spied on.

"So who are we killing?"

"No one, hopefully. We have discovered that ExoGeni is being used by Cerberus to hide some of
their activities, and probably to launder money and research. I doubt many people in ExoGeni are aware of this, but I would bet there are at least two people currently on-planet who do."

"And one of them is the corporate guy, whatshisface… Jeong?"

"Ethan Jeong, yes. I may be wrong about him, he may just be a corporate shill who is unaware of the ties ExoGeni has with Cerberus, but my gut tells me otherwise. Either way, we need to subdue him."

"And the other guy?"

"Gavin Hossle."

"The freelancer."

"The very same. He told you to get some data for him, didn't he?"

"He did. Something did seem off about him. He was too… calm."

"It was quite obvious he was lying, too." Everyone in the group turned to Garrus, who straightened at the attention. "I mean, he clearly wasn't a mod engineer. He said freelancers don't have to worry about security, but everyone knows that's not true. It's a very unsafe profession in the Traverse or Terminus. Everyone wants your services, no one wants to pay you."

Shepard quirked an eyebrow. "And you were going to share this with me… when?"

"I uh… I thought you knew, I'm sorry Commander."

I cleared my throat to bring the group's attention back to the matter at hand. "We need both Hossle and Jeong alive. With Hossle, there's a chance he may have a no-capture scenario, so we'll have to account for that."

Liara looked at me in confusion. "No-capture scenario?"

"He means he'll commit suicide rather than get captured. Black ops tactics. Not very common."

"More common than you think. The STG, the Shadow Broker, the Spectres and Alliance Intelligence are hardly the only players in this game of shadows. Most of them are unknown, and they have remained that way through such tactics."

The Asari seemed shocked, and voiced her concern. "I did not realise you had this kind of extremists among your species. I had heard of such… dedication, among Batarians and the Hanar, but…"

"Asari Intelligence is easily the most extreme of the covert intelligence agencies, Liara. Believe me. I have had more than my fair share of dealings with them."

Honestly, if I never had to deal with the Asari Republic Intel Cooperative again, it would have been too soon. This was an organisation that was not supposed to exist, as covert intelligence operations is anathema to everything the Asari portray themselves as to the galactic public. But exist they did, and they remained in the shadows by employing the most brutal of tactics: If you knew about them, and they couldn't mind-rape the information out of you, they would either kill you, completely discredit you and turn you into public enemy number one, or turn you into an asset. I, of course, had chosen the latter, and that particular connection had proved rather useful over the years, even after the Cooperative had realised they were being used more by me than I by them. Sometimes, having a
'personal relationship' with the highest leader of a secretive organisation can work to your advantage. I glanced over at Shepard, trying to convey through my body language that I wanted her to take control now that she had all the information she would need. She did not disappoint.

"Right, plan of attack. No one from ExoGeni are aware of your presence on the planet, correct?"

"Correct."

"Then they won't expect you. I want you and Rho cloaked and ready to take down Hossle and Jeong, respectively. Once you're in place, signal me, and we'll make our way down there. Or rather, I will. Garrus, I want you to hang back by the entrance, make sure to keep the guards in your sights. Liara, I want you hiding in cover as close to the hall as possible. There's a big block of rock there, that'll do. Close will mark potential targets for us."

She took a breath, and placed her hands on her hips. "If this goes well, we'll be out of here with no casualties and two prisoners. If shit hits the fan… well, at least we should be ready to clean it up quickly."

Garrus' mandibles clicked loudly. "Shit hits the fan… I swear to the Spirits, human idioms are either nonsensical, crude or both."

"Hah!" The amused chuckle from Rho seemed to take Garrus by surprise. "I prefer to think of them as colourful, Vakarian. They grow on you, over time."

"Alright, enough standing around, people! Check your gear, get ready to move. You two," she pointed at Rho and myself, "Go."

…

Wandering into the ExoGeni outpost under cloak was an amusing experience. The good Mr. Jeong was just as frantic as I remembered from the games, but for different reasons. In the games, he had received orders from the board of directors – essentially Cerberus, as I had now learned – to clean house and make sure no information regarding the Thorian got off the planet. Now? Now he was frustrated at not being able to understand the transmissions coming through. That, of course, was Caesar's doing. He had left behind a fork of his processes at the comms buoy at the system's relay, and it was 'managing' all communications going through it. He could have kept the communications from coming through at all, but that might have alerted the sender that their communications were being intercepted. Instead, he opted to scramble the contents, leaving the protocol wrappers intact so that everything seemed fine except that none of it made sense to the recipient. Which had left poor Ethan Jeong confused, worried, and somewhat frantic.

Gavin Hossle seemed a tad more agitated about the situation as well. Caesar had detected no communications coming his way, or being sent from him. This was to be expected for a deep cover operative, but obviously he had expected something to come through. Maybe… Caesar, did you buffer the unscrambled messages from ExoGeni?

[Of course. What are you thinking?]

*I'm thinking there may be instructions for Hossle hidden in it.*

[If there is, it's unlikely we'll know. It will probably be some kind of previously agreed upon code phrase. We don't have access to Cerberus covert protocols.]
Just as I took position behind Hossle, I got the signal from Rho that she was clear to engage. I gave my affirmative, and performed a low-level scan of the Cerberus operative. I had been right to do so; one of his teeth was false, containing a concussive explosive clearly designed to take his head clean off if it were activated. It appeared to be fitted with both a pressure activator and a wireless activator, which suggested it could be set off remotely. That posed a problem. It required Hossle be completely isolated from any signal source until the tooth could be removed, and that he be kept sedated.

"Messenger to Shepard. We are in position, but there's a development."

"Of course there is. What?"

"Do you have any spare helmets with signal blockers?"

"No… hang on."

The line went silent for a few moments before it crackled to life again.

"Vakarian says his helmet has a blocker, and he thinks he can retrofit one of our spare helmets with it. I take it this is related to Hossle's no-capture option?"

"Indeed. Get that helmet ready, bring it with you when you come in. I'll need you to throw it to me immediately after Hossle goes down."

"Sure. Stay frosty."

I knew Garrus worked quickly, so I wouldn't have time to lose focus. I looked around the room and took note of every guard and every weapon. There were five guards – a full squad, I absentmindedly noted – and twice as many weapons, most of them pistols though the guards were all armed with assault rifles. Old Hahne-Kedar Lancer models, I noted. Curiously, the control VIs in the guns weren't registering on my HUD. I knew what that meant; the guns were a particular model of Lancer whose VI chips had a flaw that made them incompatible with Caesar's program. The rifles were otherwise unremarkable, which is what made this whole thing pretty remarkable in itself. These rifles were rare, but not at all sought after. The flaw actually made them less reliable, though only by a miniscule margin, and they weren't any less hackable by ordinary means. The likelihood that all the guards were given these specific rifles by accident was… well, it wasn't very likely. Which meant…

Shit. "Rho, heads up. See the guards' rifles?"

"Yeah?"

"They are all M7-3RFs."

"…shit. That means…"

"Yeah. Commander?"

"What is it, Close?"

"We have a problem. The guards are Cerberus soldiers."

"Damn. You have a plan?"
"Maybe. It'll be loud, though. Might scare the civilians. Things could get messy."

"I can deal with messy."

"Right. Rho, you still got those concussive markers of yours?"

"Of course. Oh… one for each guard?"

"You got it."

Three minutes later – three minutes of Ethan Jeong frantically pacing back and forth while trying to unscramble his communications – we were finally ready for the party. I gave Shepard the signal, and waited.

"Jeong!"

The corporate shill looked up, startled, and turned toward the entrance, where a fully armoured Commander Alina Shepard was strolling casually past the outer guards and heading straight for him.

"That's close enough, Commander! I should've known it was too much to hope that the Geth would deal with you…"

I zoned out as the conversation went on. Shepard was more than capable of keeping Jeong busy until the whole squad was in position. As they talked, I marked two guards who had positioned themselves inside the wall, out of sight for Garrus. A singularity from Liara should deal with them without any problem, at least after our little surprise was sprung. The two guards at the far end of the room should be in the line of sight of Garrus, which he confirmed with a click when I marked them for him. That just left the one guard behind me. I could take him out, but that could interfere with my plan for Hossle. Which meant it would be up to the Commander.

And then it was fireworks time.

After being given the signal by Shepard, Rho and I kicked off the party by knocking out our two targets with our shock gauntlets. The energy from the gauntlets predictably shorted out our cloaks, and for but a moment we were vulnerable. One of the soldiers marked for Liara caught on quick – very quick – and brought his weapon to bear on me as Shepard teleported to my location and handed me Hossle's new helmet.

"Technopaths!"

His cry confirmed they were read-in Cerberus soldiers, likely Hossle's personal guard, and that confirmation was his last contribution to the short battle. Rho set off her concussive markers, the explosive charges promptly knocking them all over. Two of them – the screamer not included – had managed to raise their shields, and needed some more convincing before they went down. Liara and Garrus obliged them with a singularity and a concussive shot, the first of which was detonated almost immediately by Shepard. The fight was over almost as soon as it started, with seven Cerberus operatives down and about a dozen ExoGeni employees scared out of their wits. At my feet lay Gavin Hossle, with his helmet on, safe, sound and unconscious. As Shepard took control of the situation to calm down the civilians, and Liara came over to administer some sedatives to the prisoner, I called Rho over.

"You alright, Rohu?"

She stopped mid-step and looked up at me. Had she not been wearing her mask, I'm almost certain I
would've been able to see her blush. Curious.

"You haven't called me that in a long time, Aaron…" She sighed as she took another couple of steps forward, and placed her hand on my shoulder. "I'm fine. I've been doing this longer than you have, you know."

"So you keep reminding me."

"Let me guess. You want me to stay behind and call in the fleet?"

"Pretty much. We don't need the whole fleet, though. Have a talk with Iruli, see who she can spare from Medical. Normally I'd have you call on Henry, but he's got another assignment due. Just… get someone here. We need to take control, and we need to get Hossle to Archangel."

"I'll sort it out. You'll be leaving right away, won't you."

It was a statement more than a question, and one I understood considering our history. She forgot I wasn't in charge now, though.

"I don't know. That's up to Shepard. But I do expect to be heading back to Zhu's Hope momentarily and deal with the Thorian."

"Damn right you will." I didn't even have time to turn toward the interruption before my head snapped forward from a hard slap to the back of the head. Apparently both Shepard and Rho were able to somehow get around my SAFE shields. "But we're not leaving until you two give me and the rest of the Normandy crew a proper briefing on just what the hell is going on. It's pretty clear you still know more than you're letting on."

Chapter End Notes

Well that took quite a lot longer than I had hoped or anticipated! Sorry about that, I simply don't have enough free hours in the week to write these days. My current project at work will likely end in a couple of weeks, so I'll have some more time after that (though I really should be working more on my dissertation).

Some of you have been anticipating that Cerberus would play a larger role in this fic than in the games, and I've more than hinted at this being the case. Well, here's the start of that particular story arc, which will run as a background arc for quite a while.

A few details of note:

Hossle: His sidequest never made sense to me. This makes more sense. Also, I liked the idea of ExoGeni (mostly) unknowingly acting as an arm of Cerberus.

Creepers: The creepers are essentially crudely animated (in the 'made alive' sense) humanoid forms made out of plant matter. Or rather, that's one of the options for what they are, and it's the one I feel makes the most sense. The other two options are actual humanoid corpses reanimated by the plant, or 'Thorian husks': Fully organic husks made from Zhu's Hope colonists. I don't like the last one. I sincerely doubt Elizabeth
Baynham would have allowed the project to continue if that was happening. The reanimated corpses thing is problematic, primarily because of the uniformity of the creepers, but also because they're all non-human humanoid (and none of them are Prothean, or Salarian, or Turian etc). Notice the claws.

Anyway, plant matter generally burns quite well. So... flame throwers.

The Asari Clone Sisters: Essentially more advanced creepers using the assimilated biology of Shiala. Where the regular creepers are rather mindless husks, acting on a crowd intelligence and instinct, the clones are more directly controlled by the Thorian. This is why there's only ever one of them active at a time; he can't exert that precise control over more than one subject. It's stated and implied in the game that the Thorian's capacity for indoctrination has several similarities with what the Reapers do, and we know it took a lot out of Sovereign to divide his mind to control the Saren husk at the end of the first game. I posit the same holds true for the Thorian and the clone sisters.

Time to comment on some comments!

Deathknight999 responded to my response regarding non-eezo tech, suggesting he make a few weapons made using more conventional tech. Not going to reveal much, but there are some in the pipeline. According to Newton (the deadliest motherfucker in the galaxy), force is mass times acceleration, which means if you increase the velocity of the projectile you need less mass for the same force (and vice versa). Finding the right balance between the two is also a matter of considering energy draw and heat production, particularly when dealing with weaponry. Low-mass and high-mass weapons both have disadvantages as well as advantages, and it all comes down to situational necessity. You'll see some high-mass projectile weapons soon enough, but they will not be primary weapons. For that, they are simply impractical when compared to low-mass, high-velocity mass effect-driven projectile weapons.

NonSolus asks if Spectres aren't supposed to be more than 'mere legbreakers'. I can see why that question would come up, but honestly, Spectres seem to come in all shapes and sizes. Nihlus is a solo player, Saren is a large-scale sadist schemer, Jondam Bau is an investigator/analyst/spy type operative, Tela Vasir certainly seems like the type who doesn't usually go the team route. According to the codex, "Spectres work either alone or in small groups according to the nature of a particular task and to their personal preference." Shepard is exceedingly talented at both the grunt work and the battlefield leadership bit, as glimpsed in the previous chapter (and hopefully in this one, if only for a moment), and with her own military space vessel at her disposal she certainly has a wide range of assets to draw on in her role as Spectre.

Goldspark1 is looking forward to the showdown between Shepard and Close. It's coming, and there will be more to it than the short-lived brawls we've seen so far. Whether it will be violent, or just a proper confrontation without the violence... I'm not telling :P Nor am I telling who will 'win', or what said victory would involve! But I can assure you that this will certainly not be a step-by-step playthrough of the game. Well... I'm still using it as a framework within which I'll tell the story. So you can expect the Noveria-Virmire-Citadel/Ilos progression, but with certain twists and turns thrown in.

Thanks to everyone who reads, and twice thanks to all those who review! I'm sorry I'm taking so long between chapters now, but hang in there, more is definitely coming. So, GaussFrigate... nope, I've not yet died :(
Next chapter: Plants vs Zombies! I mean... plant zombies!
May be problematic

Chapter Notes

I do not own Mass Effect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With our 'showdown' finally scheduled, Shepard seemed to have put her personal opinion of me aside once again as she focused on the mission. She would have her answers or I would be out, and that was enough for her at the time. After waking up Dr. Baynham and reuniting her with her mother – Shepard had been strangely evasive when I asked her how the good Doctor ended up unconscious inside the locked Mako – I joined Alpha squad in the light tank as it the Commander once more set us on a course down the skyway toward Zhu's Hope. Rho stayed behind with the ExoGeni staff, as ordered, and got to work on locking down the prisoners. We both expected that several of the civilians there would want to leave ExoGeni to come work for us, and hoped that they might help us wrangle the megacorporation out of Cerberus' grasp. At the time, ExoGeni was a far, far larger company than the Close Corporation, and we would have had no chance of completing any sort of ordinary takeover. With some strategically placed investment and partnerships in place before, say, a series of unfortunate revelations about the company, however, things would change fast. That, at least, was the plan.

Have I mentioned that the Skyway was longer in reality than in the game? Quite a lot longer, in fact. At some point during the trip I realised that I could have covered the distance much faster on foot; because of the twitchy steering on the light tank, Shepard had to be very careful on the throttle so that she wouldn't accidentally swerve off the road and drop the rather significant distance down to the surface. The few remaining Geth squads that had stationed themselves along the road to the colony didn't prove much of a danger, but they did provide welcome breaks from the rather awkward silence inside the Alliance vehicle.

And I do mean silence. You would think a damn tank would provide a soundscape of rattling and engine noise at the very least, but no. The bloody thing was completely soundproof. A tactical decision; the tank used the same kind of sensor soundscape system that starships employed to give the illusion of 'sound in space'. Some might have called that a somewhat useless idea, and until humans arrived on the scene the thought hadn't even occurred to any of the Council species. There was sound theory and experimental evidence behind the system, though.

Most advanced animals, humans included, rely heavily on their sense of hearing for a number of things. Most cases of "space sickness", for example, were by early human researchers attributed to what became known as "soundscape deprivation". Basically, the brain interprets the lack of an audible ambience as a warning of an impending threat, putting you on a constant mental 'high alert'. Over time, this takes a mental toll, particularly in high-risk environments such as military ships. The fix for this was coupling the ships' sensors to ship-wide micro-speaker systems that simulated a soundscape based on the sensor data. This in turn proved to increase ship effectiveness, as the crew subconsciously adjusted to the changing 'landscape' of the situation based on the sound information. That particular discovery lead to tests in other environments, with positive results, which in turn lead to the deployment of similar systems on land-based combat vehicles.

And to an epidemic of awkward silences in said vehicles.
Not that any one of us was particularly bothered by the silence; Liara was used to solitude, Shepard and Garrus were used to this sort of silence because of their military background, and I… well, I had always been pretty adept at finding ways to occupy my mind. So while Liara kept track of the map and the vehicle's sensors in the co-pilot seat up front with Shepard, and Garrus – I shit you not – calibrated the turret controls, I looked through my own sensors and translated its information into the Mako's own sensor input. A simple enough task that I could have easily left to Caesar, but it gave me an excuse to avoid conversation and an opportunity to plan ahead.

Things had not gone to plan. Had I been able to remain with the squad, I might have been able to direct events in such a way that I could've avoided letting Shepard in on the Cerberus situation this early. It could only serve as a distraction, which would not do. She needed to be solely focused on Saren, the Reapers and her crew. Cerberus… that particular element had changed too much from the games, dealing with them at this point would require too much attention, too many resources. It was a situation that the Technopath Corps, specifically Archangel fleet, was far better suited to handle.

But the way things had gone down on Feros had changed things, and I had to reassess my plans. Shepard had to be read in, that much was clear; it was the only way she could possibly be convinced not to interfere. I had a clear list of things I wanted to change in the timeline. I had a somewhat clear plan of approach for how I will do this. But that also meant that there were some things that absolutely could not change; Shepard could not go off-mission until Virmire, at the earliest, Cerberus cannot fall yet, Shepard had to meet the Rachni Queen on Noveria, she had to receive the Cipher on Feros, she had to cement her crew's loyalty, and – of course – they all had to survive. Which, unfortunately, was something my meddling in the past decade may have made more difficult. It certainly required me to stay with the Normandy crew for the foreseeable future, at least until certain problems had been dealt with.

Even though I could not hear her, I knew the Commander was communicating with Nihlus and the Normandy. The radio chatter was clearly highlighted on my HUD, and had I wanted to I could easily have listened in. I assumed she was simply planning a course of action and assessing the capabilities of the Thorian's creatures, so I saw no reason to do so. She confirmed this when she addressed the squad, as the tank slowed to a crawl upon approach to the colony's garage.

"Listen up! The enemies are plant based lifeforms, highly vulnerable to fire. Do not let them get close! They explode into a corrosive and toxic cloud when they die, and – according to Spectre Kryik – will vomit acid on you." She snorted, "Yeah, you heard that right. Kaidan and Wrex say biotics are effective, so here is our gameplan. Liara," she turned toward the Asari maiden, "You and I will do crowd control at a distance. Garrus," a hand gestured pointedly toward the C-Sec detective before she turned to fully face him, "I want you to look out for, and pin down, any green Asari you see. Yeah, don't ask. And close?"

"Yes?"

"Kill it with fire."

…

Shepard parked the Mako a short walk from the garage, aware that a few of the creepers were waiting for them there. She hadn't realised how many until Close's sensor info updated her HUD's radar. None of them were outside – evidently, their cognitive abilities weren't advanced enough to handle doors – but her radar showed the inside of the garage as just a huge, red blob of enemy signatures.
"Maybe we should have let Garrus use the Mako's turret…"

"No need."

As he spoke, the tank roared to life and rolled forward toward them.

"How are you… the Mako doesn't have autopilot!"

"True, but it has a remote piloting interface. Garrus, I'm sending your rifle's VI an update, accept it please."

Garrus looked at Shepard, unsure how to proceed. When she nodded – she was clearly curious about what Close had in mind – he reluctantly pressed the button to accept the software packet. Within moments, a new addition to his marksman HUD appeared on his eyepiece. He recognised its function immediately.

"A target designator?"

"You are the Mako's eyes, and you control the trigger. I assume you know how to operate it?"

Garrus nodded, but threw a glance toward Shepard. "Commander?"

"Makes sense, Vakarian. You're already in the designated marksman role, holding up the rear."

"There is a direct cam feed you can access as well, if you want more direct control."

The Turian nodded again, as all eyes turned toward the Commander again.

"Sounds good to me. Plan remains the same, with the addition of artillery support. Let's go, people!"

……

As the doors to the house of horrors opened, I got the honour of starting the party with some fireworks, of the more literal kind. Shepard knew, of course, that someone as tech-centric as I was would have a decent variety of fire-based tricks ready. What she didn't know was just how advanced they were.

The way tech powers worked in the games appeared to change after the first game, but I had quickly realised that that wasn't really what happened. Put simply, all tech powers are based on mines and grenades, even the Overload and Energy Drain powers that appears to have no travel time. Most grenades are larger, more complex mechanisms than most mines, and need advanced fabrication. This limits the number you can carry, and is the reason for the grenades mechanic seen in all the games. Most simple mines, on the other hand, can be flash-forged by omni-tool. The only limiting factor is the time it takes to fabricate the mechanisms between launches, represented in the games as 'cooldown'. The simplest mines, such as Overload and Energy Drain, were small enough that they could be launched at high velocities, giving the illusion of instantaneous deployment when compared with the larger mines. Incinerate, for example, needed a lot of space to carry the ignition agent. This made it fly slower, which necessitated a standardised homing module, since the mines did not carry fuel apart from the ignition agent and needed a target to provide that fuel.

The engineer in me had analysed this system and found room for improvement. Adding a storage buffer to the microfabricator allowed for more rapid launches. Separating the microfab and the less
complex flash forger allowed continuous fabrication in the background until the buffer filled up. And, crucially, it provided extra space to construct larger mines with more complex payloads.

Such as my Blaze mines, essentially Incinerates on steroids. Blaze mines carried their own fuel in the form of ceramic micro-pellets that disintegrate into a fine powder over time when exposed to heat, providing a continuous fuel source. In practice, this meant I could start a raging inferno anywhere, anytime, and it would last a lot longer than even an Inferno grenade's liquid fuel source.

Using both my omni-tools, I launched two mines at the ground on both sides of the door, providing a funnelling effect and a nice, narrow, bottlenecked killzone. With the combined biotics of Shepard and Liara, and cannon fire from the Mako courtesy of Garrus, all focused on the narrow killzone, the team obliterated many dozens of creepers in just a few seconds. It wasn't until they got fire support in the form of biotics from two Asari clones that things started to get even a little challenging.

Their opening volley was a Flare, which detonated our own biotic effects in a large explosion that extinguished the fires that kept the creepers funnelled. Before I had a chance to reignite them, the horde had crossed the threshold, which meant a change of tactic was in order.

Garrus had, cleverly, set the Mako to auto-acquire creepers and use the machine gun, while he concentrated on pinning down the enemy biotics as ordered. He was doing a good job of it, too, already he had them ducking behind cover inside the garage, halting their advance.

Liara focused her singularities in the middle of the advancing horde. Shepard, meanwhile, had moved to the right flank, opposite of me, where she used wide throw fields and biotic detonations to force them left and centre. She was attempting a pincer movement, and I was happy to assist. A simple hand gesture switched my omni-tools to Flamer mode; the flash forger creating a nozzle extending from my arms with an igniter at the tip. The microfab produced a continuous stream of fine ceramic powder, which was then launched through the nozzle by a weak mass effect rail, creating a simple, but effective, flamethrower.

The pincer is a simple, but very effective strategy, and the mindless horde didn't have the collective intelligence to even try to counter it, maybe not even enough to realise what was happening. Soon, the Mako fire on their front line became unnecessary, and Garrus reacted quickly. He turned the cannon toward the pinned-down Asari, and obliterated them both with a well placed shell.

There is a Turian saying: "Victory is silent." There is an eerie sort of truth to it. If you have lived to hear the deafening quiet after a battle, you have won. And we had very clearly won that battle.

"Nihlus to Alpha!" The Spectre's voice crackled over the comms, breaking the eerie silence. "Commander, I don't know what you did, but the creepers are withdrawing to the colony core."

"Creepers?" Shepard quirked an eyebrow.

"That's what the crew has taken to calling them. Something about a mistranslation from Quarian?"

"Well I can't say it doesn't suit them." A small scowl of disgust crossed her face as she looked around at the green-stained floor with pieces of plant-matter limbs scattered all over them. "Move up to the next choke point, Nihlus. And take a breather; we'll coordinate and come at them from both sides of the colony in a little while. How is your team holding up?"

"We've been joined by the rest of the ground team, so we're approaching a company in size…"

It was clear that Kryik wasn't very comfortable with the current size of the team under his command. I was hardly surprised; the man was well known for his strong preference for working alone.
"Heh. Not very efficient, I'll grant you that. May I suggest splitting into smaller teams? Assault and support configurations."

"Will do." He made no effort at concealing the relief in his subvocals, though I doubted anyone besides myself and probably Shepard picked up on that. "Kryik out."

...

We took our time working our way to the colony entrance, allowing Beta and Gamma squads the opportunity to both catch their breath and get themselves organised. Shepard, Garrus and Liara spent the short but slow walk through the ancient Prothean stairways and corridors bantering. Liara offered her perspectives on the architecture, and brought up some of her hypotheses and explained how it all fit together. Garrus, ever the detective, tried his best to poke holes in the young Asari's theories, though the academic was surprisingly adept at predicting his objections and countering them. Shepard seemed equal parts amused and fascinated by the banter, and on a couple of occasions supplied bits of information which I assumed were from the Beacon vision. I could have helped inform the discussion if I wanted to; there was a lot more to the Beacon network than what had been shared with Shepard through the vision, and I had accessed a lot of it over the years. Instead, though, I brought up the rear under the guise of gathering sensor data from the colony and distributing it to the squads.

[This is a bad plan, Aaron. You know that, right?]

*Not like we have much of a choice here. Assuming Shiala is even in there after what we did... we need the Cipher.*

[Shepard needs it, too. We have other ways, you know that. Avatar Company...]

*Is not ready, and you know that. Hell, the Cipher would probably help with that. Might... unscramble them, for lack of a better term. No, we need to do this.*

[Very well. Just... when it goes wrong, remember that I told you so.]

*Yeah, yeah. Different topic: Who's coming to the party, and what's their ETA?*

[Pillar Batallion.]

*Rane? I thought she would be on her way to the Maroon Sea by now?*

[Indeed. But she needs to travel through Attican Beta to get there, which makes her the closest. Besides, she's just doing overwatch, only the Technopaths will be hitting the ground in Matano. At least initially. And the intel she could get from the ExoGeni personnel here on Feros could come in handy.]

*Fair enough. I assume she'll be splitting her forces, then?*

[Yes. The Exile's Wrath will move on to the Matano system very quickly after deploying a few companies and support equipment.]

*I think I'll want Shepard to meet her.*

[You think that's wise? I mean, Kaidan is aboard the Normandy, that might be...]*
...explosive, yes. Will want to keep him away from that.

[He might not recognise her.]

And I might get an appointment with the Consort tonight. Don't be ridiculous. With what she put him through, he's not going to forget her. Ever.

[Or forgive her, for that matter.]

Hey, now. I still have hope.

[And I have nearly two centuries of data on human psychology.]

Well…

"Messenger, take point!"

Shepard's interruption of my conversation snapped me back to reality. A few metres ahead of me, Garrus and Liara were stacked up on either side of the entrance to the colony, with Shepard standing at the rear waiting for me to breach the perimeter. She pointed at her ear, indicating that she was on the line and coordinating with the other squads. I quickly double checked the sensor links and automated the translation of sensor data by handing the task over to Caesar, as I drew two weapons I had yet to use: My Claw Compact pistols.

Most mass effect based pistols, particularly military grade pistols, were bulky and heavy things. Most of the bulk came from four vital components, in descending order: The ammo block, the heatsink assembly, the mass effect engine with its eezo core, and the ammo shaver. The ammo block was large as a matter of military practicality; standard-sized ammo blocks made a lot of logistical sense for the military, and in prolonged battle situations, it was considered hugely advantageous to be able to use a weapon for many hours without having to reload the ammo block. Heatsink assemblies, on the other hand, varied in volume and weight according to the energy output of the weapon and the size of the mass effect engine that powered the weapon. The latter had an exponential cost to heat; increasing projectile velocity increased heat production exponentially, in large part because all the components in a pistol were packed so tightly together.

As for the ammo shaver, they tended to be relatively large because they are usually standardised across a range of weapons. Hand cannon ammo shavers, for example, were interchangeable with shavers from standard assault rifles, and shotguns simply used an array of standard pistol shavers. There had never really been much of an incentive to make military grade pistols smaller, since the interchangeability and standardised elements were very advantageous to military outfits. The only non-military use of military grade pistols was that of assassins, who preferred compact and disposable pistols with non-standard ammo blocks that give them just enough metal to fire until the non-recoverable heatsink reaches capacity and melts the gun; a clean way of disposing of evidence.

Of course, I had not been able to resist the engineering challenge, and had spent a long time trying to come up with practical solutions without much luck. It wasn't until I finally let go of the project and handed it over to my Quarian research engineers that it saw some progress. Within weeks, they had prototypes ready. They reduced the size of the ammo block, creating a new paradigm for standardisation which saw a move from solid blocks to smaller, stackable blocks; a technology the company was in the process of patenting. Increasing the projectile size allowed for a substantial decrease in the size of the mass effect engine without reducing the force output of the weapon, which also had the beneficial side effect of dramatically reducing heat production and, thus, allowing for a smaller heat sink. Finally, miniaturising the ammo shaver allowed the creation of a pistol the size of a
Colt M1911, with nearly the power of a Carnifex hand cannon, that collapsed down to a small block that was easily concealable.

And I carried two of them, akimbo style, because I am a child. A child with amazing taste in weaponry.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow at Close as he grabbed two almost perfectly square blocks from his thighs, one in each hand. As he passed by her, those blocks expanded into pistols, two tiny pistols, one in each hand.

"Ready."

Figuring he knew what he was doing, she shrugged and signalled the other squads to engage. Within seconds, all hell broke loose. Just the way I like it.

Close's tiny pistols packed a punch, each round violently knocking back its target and enabling him to keep the charging horde at bay. Between his pistols and omni-flamers, and Garrus' assault rifle, the creepers were effectively kept on the retreat as the squad slowly made their way forward. Shepard and Liara stayed behind the other two, focusing their biotics deeper into the horde, thinning their numbers from within. From the sounds of it, the two other squads were making their way into the colony as well, quickly and, well, loudly. The biotic explosions sounded throughout the colony, telling Shepard that the Asari clones were focusing on the numerically superior two-squad force coming in from the Normandy. As far as tactical decisions went it wasn't a particularly good one, but she hadn't really expected more from a single mind orchestrating multiple puppets. When Talli's drone and Nihlus' sentry turret appeared in the middle of the colony spewing flames at the creepers' backs, she knew the battle was effectively won.

Which meant it was finally time for her to have her fun.

"Keep my back clear, Liara."

"Shepard?"

By the time the Asari managed to turn her head toward Shepard, she had already teleported into the fray. She appeared in the middle of a tight pack of creepers, who were knocked back a bit by her appearance. They just had time to shift their eyes toward the new threat before they were all blown away by Shepard's high-powered Nova blast. Those who weren't shredded by the blast itself were blown further into their own ranks, knocking over a good dozen more creepers. There was a beat as the horde readjusted and split its attention again, taking pressure off Garrus and Close's front. In that short time, as Liara watched in awe, Shepard's annihilation field seemed to expand as the Fury operative visibly tensed every muscle in her body. Long tendrils of dark energy lashed out around her in all directions, whipping at the stumbling creepers and keeping them at bay. Then resumed her normal rhythm of rapid-fire throw bolts as she spun around, setting off biotic explosions all around her, shredding creepers and sending acid and plant matter flying everywhere except in her direction. Amazingly, she somehow timed her attacks so that the flying debris never endangered the squad. Whenever the detonations went in their direction, they would be passing behind the cover of stone pillars or tall crates.

On the other side of the colony, Wrex had apparently heard the commotion and wanted in on the fun.
The Krogan's bellowing roar was easily heard over the gunfire and explosions, and Shepard swore that the ground noticeably shook from his every, thundering step as he ran plate first through the mass of creepers. He soon after rounded the corner into view of Alpha squad, wrapped in a barrier thicker than any Shepard had ever seen. Acid was literally dripping off it, never touching his armour, and his face was set in the most wicked grin. Blood rage. It was a terrifying and awe-inspiring sight, and it reminded her once again that for all her power and skill, there would always be people out there with more of both. Especially in a galaxy containing species who lived for hundreds of years. This was why she worked with a team. This was why she had a squad.

…

I had never smelled anything worse in my life, and I had literally walked knee-deep in shit on several occasions. Omega's sewers had nothing on the stench of the Thorian's burrows, and it just got worse the deeper we went. Of course, I only knew that because of my external sensors since I switched to my rebreather system immediately after the first whiff. The tunnels were rather cramped, with the full Normandy ground team making its way down them, but surprisingly we hadn't come across a single creeper since the surface.

Shepard was the first to dare open her mouth to the atmosphere, despite everyone being safely helmeted. "Holy… Hanar tentacle porn monster… is that?"

It most definitely was. One big lump of Thorian, suspended from the cavern ceiling and its walls by gigantic tendrils. Or tentacles, as it were.

"Yeah, that's… large."

"This may be, uh, problematic."

Shepard shot me a look, before quickly turning back toward the hentai monster in front of us as it made a nice, sloshing sound. Its… head, for lack of a better term, pulsed and heaved like an animal attempting to throw up, and then it did just that. From the mass of tentacles hanging from its head, another green-skinned Asari clone fell to the ground. I remembered the scene from the games rather well, and when I heard everyone on the team raise their weapons and flare their biotics I responded by raising a hand over my shoulder to signal them to stand down.

"Hold fire! Single creature, not Thorian MO. Don't think she'll attack."

And, of course, she didn't. As she got to her feet and raised her head, I finally got to look at her up close. The other clones had always been far away and I had been too busy to get a good look. Not this time. Thankfully, I recognised her face.

Shiala.

[That is highly fortunate.]

You can say that again.

"Invaders!" The clone spoke, "Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, good only to dig or decompose. I speak for the Old Growth as I did for Saren. You are within and before the Thorian. It commands that you be in awe!"

"And I command that you tell me what Saren wanted."
I glanced over at Shepard. "Uh Commander, I don't think the multi-millennia-old plant cares much for sass…"

"The Old Growth will not be commanded by meat! When Saren came, the Thorian listened to flesh for the first time in a long cycle. Trades were made, and then cold ones began killing the flesh that would tend the next cycle. Flesh fairly given. A betrayal most unwise. The flesh of this cycle is as untrustworthy as it is simply unworthy. The Old Growth sees the air you push as lies. It will listen no more!"

"Saren is an enemy of us both! Help us, and you will have your vengeance!"

"Flesh is flesh. No more will the Old Growth listen to those who scurry. Your lives are short, mere moments in the cycle, but they have gone on too long!"

Okay, that went as well as one would expect.

In a single motion, I drew my blade and leapt forward toward the clone. She flared her biotics to attack, but didn't have time to put up her barrier before the sword separated her legs from her torso. I heard the team scurry around behind me, getting organised to take out the creepers that suddenly started appearing out of the ground and the cracks in the walls. On a level below us, we could hear another clone's biotics flaring. I just stood at the edge of the platform, seeming to stare down the Thorian. What I was actually doing was scanning the organism with the full range of my sensor suite, and marking the locations of the neural nodes on the team's HUDs. Shepard got the idea immediately.

"Vakarian! Williams! Stay on this level with Close, target those lumpy tentacles. Try to sever them from a distance! We'll clear the creepers!"

A sound plan indeed. The problem with it, of course, was that it would leave me in the wrong location for the meeting with the real Shiala. Science first, though…

I grabbed a disc the size of a small pancake off my hip and placed it on a stone pillar right next to me. It was a sensor uplink; it acted as a relay for my sensors, allowing me to get a continuous data stream from the Thorian even as I focused on other matters. Such as following orders.

I let the Serpent rifle unfold in my hands as I searched out my target and marked it on my HUD and that of Garrus and Ashley. Their rifles were already at the ready and they both got off two shots before I managed to fire once. Between the three of us, we managed to take down the node in seconds, and the Thorian squealed in pain in response to the damage.

"Whatever you're doing, keep doing it!" Shepard came in over the radio, "All the creepers just suddenly dropped dead! We're moving up!"

The Thorian convulsed again, and produced another clone one level up from ours.

"We can see four nodes from here. We'll take those out and join you."

"Roger!"

The fourth node was a bit tricky. The Thorian had shifted as its tendrils had been severed, and ended up blocking our view of it. Meanwhile, we'd learned that while the creepers dropped dead when 'their' node was severed, the clones did not. This had the team locked in a biotics battle with three highly trained Asari commandos, which is never a good thing. Particularly not when your marksmen are not present.
"Go! Assist the others, I'll deal with this."

"You sure?"

I collapsed my Serpent and placed it on my back as I drew my sword. "I am sure."

I didn't wait for them to leave before jumping off the platform and onto the Thorian itself, using omni-claws to climb my way up. I couldn't really damage it from there, nor could it damage me, but it provided a nifty shortcut to my targets. Deciding to end things quickly, and get a head start on the Commander to carry out my plan, I launched Blaze mines on every node in sight apart from the last one. That one I wanted to get up close and person with. It went surprisingly quickly; after climbing up there on the tentacle itself, the node severed after just three slashes of my sword.

And then all hell broke loose.

The Thorian screamed, an ear-piercing wail that would surely have shattered my eardrums if I still had any and wasn't helmeted. It followed up by forcefully retracting the rest of its tentacles from the structure surrounding it, pulling off huge chunks of stone, metal, dirt and concrete and shaking the entire building. I was almost convinced the building would collapse entirely. And then the giant lump of plant matter plummeted into the depths below.

Here's the thing: In the games, you never really got a sense of just how deep the pit below the Thorian was. Let me tell you, it was deep. The colony of Zhu's Hope was located in a Prothean skyscraper, miles above the largely uninhabitable surface of the planet, and the core of the skyscraper was hollow and open all the way to the ground. That in itself didn't really surprise me, as I had researched the planet and even visited it before. What surprised me was that the Thorian took that plunge on purpose! Severing the neural nodes hadn't made it 'lose its grip'; it could have easily hung on if it wanted to. No, severing the nodes and reduced its neural capacity enough that it entered into a survival instinct. It knew it would drop to the surface, and it knew it had to do so in order to survive.

Yes indeed: The Thorian survived, even the long drop down. It had been severely damaged, and its mental capacity had been severely compromised, but it survived.

Next to me, a sack on the wall burst and Shiala – the real Shiala – fell out of it. I quickly checked my HUD to see how much time I had before Shepard and the rest of the team joined me. Thirty seconds. It will have to do.

I walked over to the trembling Asari as she struggled to get to her feet, and I grabbed her by the arm to assist her. When she looked up to face me, her eyes went wide in horror.

"You!"

"Hello, Shiala."

I then grabbed her by the back of the head, put my forehead to hers, and – using a trick I learned from a certain Asari spy master – force-initiated a meld.

Chapter End Notes

I've been working on this chapter for a while now, it's bridging into some stuff that will start to happen real soon so I wanted to do it right. Lots of hints in this one. Things that
may not make much sense, actions (one in particular, I guess) that may seem surprising or out of character. Trust me, there's a reason behind all the madness.

This is my first week off work after the project ended there, I should have a fair bit more time to write between now and mid January (although I'm taking an almost three week long holiday back home to Norway over New Year's, so there is that). Expect more frequent updates!

Thanks to everyone who reads, and particularly everyone who reviews! Like Kat Killer-V, I live for the reviews! Unlike Kat Killer-V, I won't be able to put out new chapters at a ridiculous pace... may help with my frequency, though! :)

Commenting on comments:

XRaiderV1: Did you manage to find some music for the battles in this chapter?

Goldspark1: Oh you're going to learn a lot of things about the Asari, and some of the other species, that the games didn't exactly cover. I will keep the story as in line with canon as I can, but it's going to expand on things and of course change the path of the plot quite significantly as we progress. Close has indeed spent a lot of his life in the shadows, and unfortunately some of the cruelty - by simple necessity - has rubbed off on him. The implications of the final action in this chapter should really say a lot.

Haan: Glad you like my writing! If you're looking for non-rubbish stories that update frequently, I have a few I can heartily recommend! My particular favourites right now are Kat Killer-V's Another Realm series, MizDirected's Future Non-finite series (currently Future Continuous), ProfFartBurger's Mass Effect: The New Face of War (sequel to The First War), Mass Effect Reloaded by thebluninja and My Effect: Divergence by Lanilen. They're all in my Favourite Stories if you want to find them.

Ddragon21 wants to know if all the women he knows are aggressive man beaters... well, it would certainly appear that way. I guess everyone has a type? :P (And for the record, there are good reasons for his 'obsession' with Shepard, and it's not just 'she's the protagonist of the games, she must be the protagonist here, too'.)

Qinetiq makes an astute observation about chapter 2: Aaron is a 'random dude' who walks into the Council chamber and starts ordering around the 'most influential people in the Galaxy'. Enough said, he says. Maybe I should just stop writing, then? If that's enough said? ;) Nah, I think I'd rather keep working toward that explanation...

serialkeller seems to be in the camp that wants Aaron to leave the Normandy and basically act as Shepard's private Shadow Broker, believing he doesn't really need to 'be there himself'. Aaron disagrees. You will all find out why as the story progresses :)
Things got weird

Chapter Notes

I do not own Mass Effect!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the ten years since my rebirth, I had done many rather horrible things. I wish I could say that this had been the first time I had forced an unwilling Asari to meld; the idea of being a mind rapist is not particularly appealing to me. Alas, it was not, and it was not likely to be the last time, either. It didn't really ease my conscience much that Shiala had, in fact, consented to this. That was years ago, and I knew she did not remember it. She couldn't; the memory had been erased from her mind for her own safety.

Technopathic augments come with a number of side effects. Some of these are benign and of no consequence, some are beneficial, and some are… not so much. One of the technically beneficial ones, depending on your perspective, is the fact that the cognitive dump processor assembly essentially makes you immune to Asari mind melds. You can still initiate them, you can still take part in them, but the normal sharing of minds becomes a one-way affair where the non-Technopath has no access to the mind of the Technopath. In simplistic terms, the CDP acts as a firewall, and outside thoughts are unauthorised traffic.

We – that is, myself, Caesar and the rest of the scientists, doctors and engineers on the Technopath Program development team – realised this just a few months after the first field tests of the basic Technopath platform, when one of the subjects attempted her first post-surgery sexual encounter with her bondmate. In her own words, the encounter was "disappointing". To an Asari, more than half of the pleasure in a sexual encounter comes from the meld, in which both participants act as amplifiers for the other's stimulation. Unfortunately for her, she was unable to gain anything from it now. The bondmate had no complaints, however, as the same encounter demonstrated another side effect: With the CDP refusing access, whatever sensations and emotions are fed into the Technopath is reflected back. This causes a feedback loop which, if those sensations are pleasurable, vastly amplifies the pleasure far beyond the normal range of Asari sexual relations.

If the sensations aren't pleasurable to begin with, however, the experience can be absolutely harrowing. And as I looked straight into the deep, blackened eyes of Shiala, and saw the tortured expression her face was contorted into, I knew I was causing her nothing but pain. It tore me up, but it had to be done.

[Connection established. Cold start initiated. Triggering latent identity protocols.]

Work quickly, old friend.

[Error. Synaptic degeneration and rearrangement. Scanning and calibrating.]

We don't have time for this…

[She's had her identity erased and replaced, she's been indoctrinated and then… healed, somehow, by the Thorian, and she's had her mind merged with a multi-millennial intelligence. I will be amazed if we're able to reinitialise her at all.]
We accounted for this. The processor network is adaptable…

[...and adjustable to any changes in the synaptic structure of the brain, yes, but we had no way of knowing then just how extensive those changes would be.]

And now?

[Hang on… Scan 50% complete, reintegration viability 90%. It should work, but it will take longer than the 15 seconds you have left until the team gets here.]

That is... problematic.

... 

"Need to have a chat with the Messenger about those tech mines of his." Nihlus shook his head as he continued, "Every spirits-damned time I work with the guy he pulls off some new, different trick I've never seen before."

Tali scratched at the tubing at the back of her veiled helmet in a pondering, nervous gesture. "What I want to know is where he gets the fuel from. Even the best incineration programs I've come across can only burn things that, well, burn."

"Ceramic microparticulate powder." Everyone turned to look at Garrus.

"That," Tali began, taking a beat to collect her thoughts, "that would work, I think. How do you know?"

Garrus flared his mandible in the Turian equivalent of a grin, as he raised a talon to his monocle visor. "This does more than just make me look cool."

Nihlus glanced at the eyepiece. "I thought that looked custom made. Your own work?"

"Mostly, I..."

"Save the tech talk for later, guys," Shepard interrupted, "two lifesigns around the corner, both completely still, one of them is the Messenger."

The squad immediately returned to a combat stance, with weapons, omni-tools and biotics at the ready. Shepard gestured for Wrex to stand ready to breach, as Williams and Alenko formed up at the doorway. She held up three fingers, dropping one at a time in a countdown, and as the last finger came down she twisted on her heel and teleported through the wall.

The sight that met her and the team as they charged onto the platform was... unexpected. Close was kneeling on the ground, cradling an Asari – a blue skinned one who was otherwise a dead ringer for the ones that had attacked them – who was lying on the ground and writhing in agony.

"Some medical assistance would be nice, guys..."

The Commander realised that the whole team had simply come to a stop, confused at the sight and unsure how to proceed. She gave a quick 'go ahead' gesture with her hand, after which Liara and Alenko immediately rushed to the Technopath's aid.

"Not me. Her."

Shepard quirked an eyebrow, "She's the one who attacked us. Or, well... her clones did. Why would
"Because she's innocent in this."

"Hardly, at the very least she's a follower of Saren and Benezia."

"Was." Close looked up at the Commander and shook his head. "She was a follower. The Thorian fixed her. It's..." He sighed, "It's a long story, and I think you need to hear it from her."

The scepticism in her glare never waivered. "How do you know?"

"Because I know her, Shepard. I was the one who put her in that position. Shiala here is a Technopath infiltrator, Commander."

... I had hoped to minimize any changes to how events played out this early in the mission, but I couldn't really avoid it with this situation. Had I let Shiala meld with Shepard before reactivating her augments and re-establishing her persona, the results could have been uncomfortable to say the least. Not that she would have suggested it; as far as her cover persona knew, she was unable to meld with anyone. Still, it was unfortunate that I had been forced to rush the reactivation procedure. The process had been agonizing for the poor Asari, and 15 minutes later she was still recovering in the Normandy's sickbay.

"She appears to have suffered significant neurological trauma. The curious thing is that it's healing very rapidly, which is unheard of in Asari brain trauma patients. Her scan also shows abnormal synaptic structures in the brain, consistent with chronic Floating Mind syndrome, which is very uncommon in Asari."

"Thank you, Doctor, though I am well aware of her... condition. For the record, it's not Floating Mind."

"Oh? That's the only diagnosis that matches the data... what do you think it is, then?"

I smiled, and glanced over at Shepard, who was sitting on the bed next to Shiala's, chatting with Liara.

"Part of her cover." I ran another quick scan on the immediate area to double check that there weren't anyone listening in before I continued. "The synaptic structure you see there is synthetic. It's a distributed variant of a cognitive dump processor and cognition recorder with some... extra functionality."

"What are you saying? She's a cyborg? No traces of cybernetics are showing up in my scans, and I've made some... changes since our chat. They should show up."

Well that's discomforting. Need to have a look at what those changes entail. "In a manner of speaking. She's a Technopath, like me, but a different build. Her augments are infiltration model. They're made to be undetectable, or at least explainable where that's not possible."

"Ah I think I see where you're going with this. Anyone scan her, she shows up as having Floating Mind syndrome, no one digs around her mind to see what's actually in there."

"Indeed."
"Messenger…"

The word was whispered, but the hoarse voice of Shiala easily carried through the room to get my attention. Looking in her direction, I saw her trying to sit herself up on the bed. Liara quickly stepped up to help her.

"Easy, Shiala. You went through quite a trauma."

The Asari commando let her head fall back a bit and looked up at her former mistress' daughter. "Lady Little Wing," a vague smile spread across her face, "I did not expect to see you here."

Chakwas stepped up on the other side of Shiala and adjusted the bed to make her more comfortable. "You two know each other?"

"I… no, not really. I know who she is, one of my mother's commandos. She lived with us as a bodyguard when I was a child."

"Lady Little Wing?" Shepard quirked an eyebrow and cast Liara a teasing smile, to which the Asari responded with a furious blush.

"Yes, uh, it's a nickname my mother gave me. The bodyguards used to tease me with it, light-heartedly."

"Operative."

Shiala snapped her head in my direction as her eyes widened. "Sir!"

"Easy there. The reactivation was more traumatic than expected. How are you feeling?"

Her head turned back so she was looking straight ahead at the bulkhead across from her. "Confused… I… it's all still a bit of a blur, Sir. I mean, I know who you are, who I am, but at the same time I do not." She exhaled sharply before breathing in a slow breath. "I remember everything from my mission, but the details about the mission itself – the reprogramming – they're hazy."

"I expected as much. This works out, I would need to read in everyone present on your mission anyway." I walked up to the end of her bed, pulled out a tall chair and sat down. "I should start at the beginning, since context will be important here. Many years ago, before the birth of the Technopath program, my organisation's research into the Reaper myths uncovered information about a series of events that happened during and in the first few years after the First Contact War. Central to these events were one Desolas Arterius, his brother Saren Arterius, and a human named Jack Harper."

The truth, of course, was more complicated. I never 'uncovered' this information, I had simply worked to corroborate what I already knew. Caesar had been present for a fair bit of it, which obviously helped.

I told them the whole story, or at least the parts I could plausibly know about. The destruction of Temple Palaven was a widely publicized event, despite Hierarchy attempts at suppression, and even though it had never been publically confirmed that Desolas Arterius had died in the incident, his death had been announced shortly thereafter. Liara remembered the incident, and Shepard made a few extranet searches to confirm my story. Then came the complicated bit.

"You already know, vaguely, about the Reaper threat. I'm planning on telling you and the crew everything I know about them later today, but here is what you need to know now to understand
Shiala's story: The Reapers can twist the will of any sapien organic species, turn them into tools for their nefarious purposes. The process is called indoctrination, and it appears to be a passive effect of all Reaper technology. One such piece of technology was located in Temple Palaven, and before that on Shanxi, where Desolas Arterius recovered it. Desolas was indoctrinated, and he sought to essentially do the same to all Turians on Palaven. He would have succeeded, had it not been for the actions of his brother Saren, and Jack Harper.

I took a breath, got up from my chair and began slowly pacing back and forth in front of my audience. "Since Desolas' death, Saren's behaviour became increasingly erratic and he increasingly hid his actions from the Council. My theory is that he sought to understand what had happened to his brother, and in doing so he himself fell prey to the Reapers' indoctrination. His current extensive cybernetics strongly support this theory, as there is a lot of evidence suggesting that the Reapers are synthetic. Particularly the fact that all recovered indoctrinated subjects have had significant cybernetic augmentation."

Shepard held up a hand to stop my exposition, "Alright, grant that I believe your theory about killer robots with mind control. How is that relevant to whatever is going on with her?" She pointed at the Asari commando on the bed opposite her.

"I believe I can answer that myself. If that's alright, Sir?"

"Go ahead."

She nodded. "Commander, how would you go about infiltrating an organisation that would turn your own mind and everything you know against you?"

Shepard sat back a bit on the bed and looked off to the side for a second, as if pondering her answer. "I wouldn't. Fool's errand."

"Quite. You would need to make sure that the infiltrator does not know they are infiltrating. That they are fully convinced of their part in the organisation they are infiltrating. That there is no way to reveal who they are, even to a mind reader."

"How? There's no way…"

"I erased her identity from her own mind."

They all looked at me. Chakwas and Liara with shock in their eyes. I was sure I saw some anger in the doctor's eyes, anger that was clearly reflected in the eyes of my Commander. Considering her background, what her family was put through and what she almost became, I could hardly blame her. Shiala, meanwhile, simply looked at me, a look of half curiosity, half compassion. She knew what had been done. She didn't blame me for it, though she also knew that I did.

"Yes. It was the only way."

"Fuck that! This is all kinds of fucked up, Close!"

Shit. "Commander…"

"Close?" Shiala looked confused, and then her eyes widened in realisation. "Wait, Aaron Close?!"

"Not so damn loud, please…"
"Aaron Close is the *Messenger*?!"

The anger on Shepard's face had dissipated, and she looked inquisitively at the Asari. "You didn't know?"

"*Of course she didn't know. Half the people who do know are part of the Normandy crew. Only a small handful of Technopaths know my identity beyond the *Messenger* persona, and I would like to keep it that way.*"

For a second, I thought I saw embarrassment cross the Spectre's face, only for it to be replaced again by anger. Not as strong as before, but enough that I was certain my shields would activate at any moment simply from the radiating fury directed toward me.

"Let me guess, you're just going to erase this conversation from her brain again, huh?"

Now it was my turn to get angry. "*Careful, Commander. I do not suffer such accusations lightly.*"

"No, Commander, the procedure requires cooperation from the subject. A well-trained Asari can focus inward during a meld and create a… representation of their being. All that they are. The procedure uses that, and the specialised Technopath augment, to 'hide away' their true identity within the synthetic parts of the brain. Then the same thing is done again, but in reverse, with the parts you don't want left out. After that, when the augment is shut down, it erases part of who you are."

Shepard didn't look convinced by Shiala's words. "Chakwas? What's your take on this?"

The aging doctor shrugged, "I've long since stopped most anything as scientifically impossible. Their story seems, at the very least, plausible, the caveat being that I do not in any way understand how these Technopath brain augments work. Cybernetics was never my speciality."

"*They were always mine. In layman's terms, the implants hijack the host brain's information highways, analysing, filtering and altering the information being processed on the fly. Most of these implants are centralised affairs, working only on specific clusters and specific 'superhighways' of information. Shiala's is different; it's distributed through large swathes of her brain, and while it doesn't do much processing it has exceptional storage capacities. It's also undetectable in practice, since on scans it appears identical to the structural anomalies of floating mind syndrome. Even when inactive, it is always passively recording all information passing through her brain.*"

A vague smile appeared slowly on Shiala's face. "Perfect for an infiltrator. Can't really be detected, everything important that the spy sees, hears or feels can be stored and extracted later."

"Alright. Fine. I'll buy into it. So what did you 'see, hear or feel' that was important enough for you to go through this shit?"

"Not as much as I had hoped, I'm afraid. I don't know Saren's end goals beyond helping the Reapers return," she held up a finger to cut off any replies, "However, I do know why he was interested in the Thorian."

That piqued Shepard's interest. It had been something of a mystery to everyone, apart from me, what exactly his motivations were. Why he had come and left, apparently without even taking any samples. It didn't make much sense. "Do go on. I have to admit, it's been bugging me."

"He was after what he called 'the Cipher'."
"Oh god not more cryptic language, please! Just give it to me in plain Thessian, what is this 'Chiper' and why does Saren want it?"

"He has it, now. The Cipher is… well, it is the essence of being a Prothean. The sum and aggregate of all things Prothean. The Thorian, in the previous cycle, touched the minds of many of them, and stored their essence within him."

"That doesn't make any sense, why would Saren want 'the complete Prothean experience'?"

Liara chuckled, and despite herself even Shiala cracked a smile at that. "It has to do with the Beacons. The Protheans used them to communicate through the passing of thought, but if you're not a Prothean – if you do not have the Cipher – you cannot hope to comprehend the information it passes to you. Saren has touched several Beacons, but he needed the Cipher to make sense of the information."

Shepard's eyes widened. "The vision… that explains why it's all so jumbled up. Not even Liara has been able to help me make sense of it, and she's the foremost expert on all things Prothean."


[Maybe if you ask nicely?]

…dude. No. Creepy. Don't even joke about that.

Shiala threw me a look, and I felt something prod against my mind. I let her in.

"She does not know about Avatar Company?"

"Hardly anyone does, Shiala. Even within the organisation, that is strictly compartmented information."

Nodding, she turned back to Shepard, who had obviously noticed that something had happened from the looks she cast between the Asari and myself.

"Well, not anymore. I have the Cipher. So does Saren. We both understand the Protheans as well as they understood themselves." She paused, giving the Commander an appraising look. "You have interacted with a Beacon. I can give you the Cipher, so that you may interpret your vision."

Liara's eyes went wide, and for a second I was uncertain whether it was from shocked concern or jealousy. "No, no, no! You have floating mind! Commander, her condition could kill you if you melded!"

Shiala sighed in response. "I do not have floating mind, I have an augment that disguises itself as floating mind. I can meld perfectly fine, in fact I'm very well trained at it, just… the augment does change some things."

Shepard's eyebrow quirked in a familiar display of piqued curiosity. "Change what, how?"

"My melds can only be one-way. I can transfer thoughts between minds or from my own to another, but I cannot receive in the usual way. Well, not when my implant is active, anyway."

Liara immediately understood the implications, and her eyes widened once more. "Then… all is reflected… that's terrible!"

"Can be. Can also be intensely pleasurable to the other person. Although for this, I would prefer if
you emptied your mind and try to remain calm and emotionally neutral, Commander. Or it could get, uh, awkward."

Shepard had embraced eternity before, but she had never truly felt the eternity until then. She had tried to do what Shiala said. She had tried to stay calm and emotionally neutral. She really had tried, but there's only so much you can do about a lifelong attraction to all things Asari.

What Liara had said, all is reflected, she hadn’t really understood it until she looked deep into the pitch black that was the eyes of Shiala as she initiated the meld. That small sliver of attraction that she had been unable to contain grew to epic proportions before reflecting back unto herself, over and over again, intensifying every time. She only lasted a couple of seconds before literally doubling over, her body quivering. Even if her conscious mind was aware that she had indeed received the information she needed, the animalistic, instinctive part of her refused to allow her to process it, instead focusing all that she had on the intense waves of pure pleasure that rolled over her.

"By the goddess, it's too much for her!"

"Uh I… feel like I shouldn’t be watching this. But you might want to take some of the strain from her, Liara."

In the brief moments where her eyes shot open between each wave, she saw the pale, blue face of the most gorgeous Asari she had ever met, bending down to rest her forehead against hers. Then her eyes went black, and she could feel her.

"Aaagh!"

Shiala had been right when she said it could get awkward. I hadn't realised just what she meant until it was happening; if I had, I would probably have left the room. No, scratch that, I definitely would have left the room. I had never felt more awkward in my life. Then Liara melded with the writhing Shepard to take some of the load off, which made it even more awkward. I was already well on my way out of the sickbay by then, but the image in my mind of the Commander and Liara writhing in pleasure on the floor was not going to leave me any time soon.

Okay, need a distraction from the weirdness, pronto!

[Uhm… The Exile's Wrath is transitioning through the relay in five minutes, and will rendezvous in under an hour?]

Yeah that's a start. Let's hope Shepard has recovered by the time they get here… shit. NEXT!

[Rho is reporting full cooperation from ExoGeni staff, minus the Cerberus goons of course. Some of them have proposed buying out the colonisation sponsorship from the company.]

I walked over to one of the tables in the mess, sat down, and leaned back to make it look like I was relaxing. Kaidan threw me a glance from his console, but I didn't make much of it. I was always going to stick out like a sore thumb on this ship, that much was obvious.

Good idea. The planet surface may act as a nice, covert staging ground for the Corps. We do need one of those in the Traverse. Any takers for board infiltration?
Dr. Baynham – the elder – already has a position of seniority in the ExoGeni colonial science division. She has offered her help.

Excellent, accept it. We'll need to shine a light on Cerberus sooner rather than later, and if we're well placed when their link to ExoGeni is made public we should be able to take over.

There are some other outstanding issues…

I know, I know. Has Mobile Platform One come to a consensus on the Armstrong Cluster situation?

That is one of the issues, yes. And yeah, he has. He suggests letting Hackett decide on a course of action.

Which means the issue will be delegated to Shepard, as expected. Excellent. Allow the Mobile Platform to pass the data on to the Consensus. Make sure they realise it's already being acted on, and that the Mobile Platform's internal consensus is both appropriate and valid as representative under our agreement.

Already done.

What's the status of my equipment orders?

The stage 1 orders are aboard the Exile's Wrath. Rane says she'll deliver them personally.

Should be interesting.

Don't get me started. Just keep Kaidan away from her.

I looked at the Staff Lieutenant for a beat, appraising him. Staff Lieutenant… with his service record, he should have made Lieutenant Commander, at least, by now. Maybe even Staff Commander. In the games, his relatively low rank compared to his skill and record was explained by anti-biotic discrimination. That probably held true to some extent in real life as well, but it was unlikely to be the biggest reason. Alenko had gained something of a reputation in the aftermath of the Blitz. A very particular one that had surprised me. The Butcher of Torfan.

Obviously.

Stage 2 is in manufacturing at the moment. It should all be ready for the Virmire refit operation.

Excellent. Speaking of, how are things progressing on the Virmire front?

Stealth sats are in orbit and active. Covert teams are deployed and observing STG operations. Nothing worth mentioning just yet, but considering that we've now done two of the main missions from the first game…

Yeah, we'll probably get a call in from the Council soon. Anything you can do to clear up that signal?

Obviously. We're already in on their transmissions, it'll be easy to bypass the Geth jamming efforts using the stealth sats.

Don't jinx us, now.

Should it go bad we could always spoof it. Alternatively, we could just reveal the satellites to Shepard when she gets the call from the Council.
Fair point. Anything else?

[A few things that can wait. Oh, actually, one thing: Our newest operative is awake. He says to tell you, and I quote, 'Amonkira still sees value in me'.]

I couldn't help but grin. *Or he may just not be ready to grant him forgiveness just yet.*

Chapter End Notes

So! That got weird... weirder than I thought, honestly. It's in how I write: I lay the foundations for how things work first, then I let the story flow from that. Broad strokes first, to create an outline. Tweak the foundations if it doesn't work. Then I fill in more detail to write the chapters. If I've done my job right, I won't have to tweak too much on the foundation for it to work out.

Yeah, Shiala is a Technopath. Recruited by Aaron for, uh, reasons. That'll get clearer soon enough. I've already hinted at there being several 'models' of Technopaths, in that I've said Aaron uses himself as a test platform for the various augments and no one else has as extensive augmentation as he does. It also just makes sense to me that the different augments would be different between species, because you know... different species. Duh.

The Floating Mind Syndrome is a reference, again, to the Another Realm stories by KatKiller-V. She's a far better writer than I am, I highly recommend reading those stories if you're not already (I know some of you are). You might notice some other references here and there (such as Rane), and others will pop up from time to time as well.

Finally, sorry for taking so long (again) to put out another chapter. I've been writing on it ever since posting the last one, but keep getting distracted by university work, Christmas preparation and, you know, life. Annoying stuff.

Commenting on reviews!

Kudos on those soundtrack suggestions, XRaiderV1. Particularly like that last one.

Goldspark1: Well, I'm gonna respond to it anyway! :P Yeah, he has reasons for what he does, and even if he's quite capable of compartmentalising he still beats himself up about it.

Deathknight999: This chapter should answer the most glaring questions regarding that, I think. There's more to their relationship - significantly more - but you'll have to wait for those bits :)

Doombug, glad you like it! Would love to hear what parts you don't like, only way I can get better is if I get constructive feedback :)

Madiba127: Yeah, I quite like the Rho/Aaron dynamic as well. She's definitely going to be an important part of the story as it progresses, though I'm not sure how quickly she'll become a regular. Also, the matter of how much she actually knows is an interesting one, for sure... :) There's also an interesting aspect to the fact that their relationship is
slowly falling apart in the sense that they're drifting away from each other. Hint: She's a Quarian. There’s biology at play here. To quote Tali from ME3: "My system has adapted. No more negative reaction to you anymore. That's how we survive." I'll let you guess what that might mean for Quarian mating habits, culture and, ultimately, biology...

Aww, Gauss Frigate, don't cry... :P

Thank you to everyone who reads, and especially to everyone who reviews! I try to respond to all reviews, either in message or here (or both, usually), and every time I get an e-mail notifying me of a new review it makes me smile! Thanks to all of you :)
If awkwardness and embarrassment were physically harmful, Shepard would have died from a combination of both. As she sat on the bed across from the cause of her embarrassment, flushed a deep red both from it and the physical exertion her body had been biologically forced into, she found herself unable to meet any of the three sets of eyes in the room. Not Shiala’s, nor Liara’s. Not even the doctor’s worried gaze, which was currently focused on her as she ran her barrage of tests.

"What's the verdict, doc?" she muttered toward the floor.

"From what I can tell, Commander, you…” Chakwas hesitated for a moment before she continued, "Well, you had an orgasm. A rather strong one, too."

"Yeah… no kidding. Hard to describe. I felt like I was being torn apart by pleasure."

Liara, herself still reeling from the experience, placed her hand gently on the Commander's shoulder. "In a sense, you were. This is what happens when a non-Asari melds with an Ardat Môrwyneb, the victim's body and mind tears itself apart by its natural response to pleasure."

"In short," Chakwas supplied, "Every muscle in your body was spasming uncontrollably and you were overdosing on hormones and other chemicals associated with pleasurable sensations."

Shepard's curiosity finally overcame her embarrassment, and she looked up to meet the eyes of the Asari who, by all accounts, had saved her life by sharing in her ecstasy. "Ardat Môrwyneb?"

"The Demon of the Ocean Surface, or Mirror Demon. An Asari legend, based in biological reality. It's actually a rare genetic mutation that leaves one unable to take part in a two-way meld." Liara blushed deeply as she continued, "Melding with an Ardat Môrwyneb is a somewhat common erotic fantasy among the Asari."

"What? Why, wouldn't it kill them?"

"No, the Mirror is only dangerous to non-Asari. To an Asari, it is merely immensely pleasurable."

"Not for the Ardat Môrwyneb, it isn't," Shiala grumbled. "In human terms, it's made me impotent. And sterile. Asari need a mutual bond to procreate, I can't make one."

A dark red eyebrow raised across from the Technopath Asari. "Did you know this when you got the, uh…"

"That's… complicated. I wasn't exactly a willing participant in the program to begin with."

"Wait, what? You were forced to join Close's organisation?!"
The Asari commando waved a hand in a dismissive motion, leaning back a bit and blinked slowly as she prepared her rebuttal. "Not quite. The first time I met Messenger, I was already indoctrinated. Benezia had joined Saren on Sovereign months before, and I was with her as her personal bodyguard. The moment I stepped onto that… thing, my fate was sealed. Over the course of weeks, I became a willing disciple to Saren and the Reapers alongside my Mistress."

Now it was Chakwas' turn to interrupt her. "Are you saying Close is able to cure this, this indoctrination?"

"No. As the Asclepius explained to me – that's the chief doctor in the Technopath Corps, by the way – the Technopath brain augments suppress, but do not cure, indoctrination."

"That means your agents, Close included, are all immune to this indoctrination, yes?"

"Yes. The ones that weren't already indoctrinated at the time of the augmentation."

Curious green eyes glanced over at Shiala from the bed across from her. "There are more of you?"

"Yes. I am not privy to any further details than that."

Shepard nodded and stroked her chin with her right hand. "Makes sense. Compartmentalise all information except what could itself weaken the enemy. If Saren found out there is an unknown number of spies in his organisation, he might start a witch-hunt. Points for Close."

"It's cynical, but that's necessary in this business." The commando glanced up at the human soldier, eyes narrowed in concern. "Commander, are you… did the Cipher transfer? The connection was so brief…"

A hand rose up to comb through red locks of hair, and the Commander's eyes closed as she tried to focus again on the visions from the Beacon on Eden Prime. Once more they rolled over her, furiously, but no longer as chaotic and erratic as before. "I think so. I still can't really make sense of them, but it all feels more familiar now. There are… words, now, not just sounds and gruesome imagery. I feel like I can understand them, but I can't place them. I can't make them out."

Liara placed her blue hand on Shepard's thigh. "I may be able to help you with that."

Shepard winced. "You want to meld again?"

"Yes, I…" After a very brief pause, she looked over at Chakwas, "Would that be alright, Doctor? Any lasting effects from the Môrwyneb meld?"

The grey-haired woman shook her head, "Not that I can tell. Some residual cramping and a low-level migraine that she can't feel because of all the endorphins still floating around in her system, but other than that she seems to be fine."

"That is incredibly fortunate." She looked back at the redhead sitting beside her, "Would you be willing?"

Shepard couldn't stop a smile from forming. "You know I will. Just… be gentle."

"I will try."

…
"Gunnery Sergeant Williams."

"Messenger." Ashley's head and eyes stayed fixed on the disassembled gun in front of her, an Alliance standard issue Avenger A2. I would recognise that gun anywhere; it was the first gun I personally redesigned after the Corporation bought out Hahne-Kedar. "You want something?"

"Yes and no. You are in charge of the ship armoury, correct?"

"I am."

She picked up the ammo shaver and turned it around in her hands a couple of times before activating her omni-tool's gunsmith suite. Nearly instantly, a standard adjustment tool was flash forged and she went to work tweaking the shaver's block distance. Not once had she looked up from her work.

"You know, the Alliance rejected a design with automatic adjustment of the block-shaver distance. Too complex, they said."

"Hah, typical brass," she snorted, "The old Lancers could be upgraded with that design, and almost everyone did it. Nearly eliminated jamming."

"Indeed. Which is why the non-mil spec A3 model has it."

Finally, she looked up and met my eyes. Well, my mask, rather. "Last I checked the A3 is also three times as expensive."

"Only about 10% more expensive to produce, per unit. Economies of scale being what they are, we end up with a profit margin of about 60% on the A3 and 2% on the A2."

She cracked a smile, "Letting the civvies pay for the military's arms. Sneaky, Cl..." She stopped herself short of saying my name, looking around in a half-panic before looking back at me, "Are we... secure, here?"

"So long as you keep your voice down. I'm scrambling all nearby sensors. Even if there are bugs, they won't be listening. Besides, I wouldn't have initiated this conversation if I weren't confident no one's listening in who shouldn't be."

"Right. I take it you didn't just come down here to talk about the gun trade?"

"I sort of did. A ship belonging to... my organisation, will be entering orbit in less than an hour. It will be sending shuttles down to land, and one of them will contain a shipment that you'll need to handle."

An eyebrow quirked, "What is in this shipment?"

I laughed, "Only the good stuff, Gunny. Guns, armour and equipment."

"What, like A3s?"

"No, I'm not delusional. The products we have on the market aren't the best around, and despite the expanded feature set the A3 is still not mil-spec." I shook my head, "No, I've ordered the best stock weapons and equipment money can buy for the whole crew. You and Alenko will have your hands full checking and sorting through it all before the meeting later today. I suggest you send him ahead to prepare the armoury, I'll have the logistics officer take delivery and bring it to you."
"The best…" Her eyes went wide, "You mean Colossus armour? You bought everyone Colossus armour?!"

"That I did. And before you ask: No, it's not a bribe, I don't want anything for it. This mission is important, and better equipment means it will be more likely to succeed with minimal casualties. That's my only agenda here, I promise."

She waved a hand dismissively, "Oh don't worry, Sir, I do not doubt your intentions. Can't speak for the Commander, though."

"I appreciate that, Williams. And no, Shepard does not appear to be particularly fond of me, does she." I paused for a moment and looked down to the floor. It was a habit I had learned from being around Quarians for so long, and from spending so much time in my armour; people relate to you better when they have non-verbal cues to go by, such as body language and facial expressions. When your face is hidden at all times, you'll want to exaggerate your body language to compensate.

"Please don't call me Sir, though. I'm not particularly fond of such honorifics."

"You make the guns I keep and shoot, Close. From where I stand, that puts you well above me in the chain of command. Sir."

She snapped off a salute, which I returned on reflex. Damn military training. As I turned and walked away, I heard her open a channel to Kaidan, telling him to meet her in the main armoury. That should leave the coast clear for Rane.

Ashley's station in the cargo bay was where she kept and maintained the weapons and equipment for the members of the ground team, including mine, though I had warned her not to touch my guns. I was always very particular about their maintenance, and strongly preferred doing the work myself. I had, after all, designed most of them.

ETA for the Exile's Wrath?

[25 minutes until orbit. Add another ten for the first shuttles to reach us.]

Have the communications officer hail Joker to announce their imminent arrival. I need to go have a chat with Tali regarding the Geth in the Armstrong Cluster.

[Is that wise? We are not sure what we're going to find there, or if we'll even be sent there.]

We will be.

I should explain how Tali'Zorah nar Rayya came to work for me. Close Corporation was the single largest employer of Quarian labour outside of the Flotilla, and the only corporation in Council space with a formalised agreement with the Migrant Fleet and a constant presence on the Migrant Fleet. Admiral Rael'Zorah was technically in the employ of my company, holding the position of Chief Researcher in the Cyber Warfare Division. CWD's primary function was research and development on military omni-tool technology and applications. As part of the agreement with the Flotilla, Rael was allowed to use CWD resources to do research on the Geth.
Of course, what he did not know was that the Technopath Corps had a similar formalised agreement with the Geth Consensus. The Archangel has a section, isolated from the rest of the ship and not located on any blueprints available to crew without the proper permissions, which contains a Geth computing cluster and two dozen Geth platforms. One of these platforms, Mobile Platform One, was designed as an experiment in cooperation with a small contingent of Quarian idealist researchers who sought peaceful resolution to the conflict with the Geth rather than a violent one. This group of idealists calls itself the Rannoch Initiative. The Mobile Platform was designed to Geth specifications, but capable of holding far more programs than any non-Prime unit, and incorporated communications systems which allowed the unit to operate in complete isolation from the rest of the Consensus. Officially, the thinking behind this project was to create a Geth envoy capable of representing the will of the Consensus in interactions with organics, without the sometimes massive delays involved in waiting for all Geth to come to a unified decision.

Unofficially, my thinking behind the project was to ensure that the platform I knew as Legion would come to exist even with the alterations I had planned to the timeline.

Tali’Zorah had been groomed for years to join the Rannoch Initiative by its leader, Migrant Fleet Admiral Zaal’Koris vas Qwib-Qwib. When she had decided to go on her Pilgrimage, Zaal had been disappointed, confiding in me that had she remained with the Fleet for just a few more months she would have been introduced to the group. I offered him an alternative when I offered to take her in my official employ as my assistant. Her father had been thrilled at the idea of his daughter working directly under the CEO of the only organisation in Council space which the Migrant Fleet considered friendly. He would not likely have been as thrilled had he known that she would be the assistant not just to Aaron Close, but to the Messenger as well.

As the door to the engineering section slid open, I was greeted by an impressive sight; the Tantalus drive core, without a doubt one of the most impressive spaceship engineering feats in Council history. For a ship the size of the Normandy, the Tantalus was massively oversized. This, along with an impressive current control system, allowed for unprecedented control of the mass effect field, allowing the ship to manoeuvre without using thrusters by creating gravity wells for it to 'fall' into. When I woke up all those years before, no one had seriously considered this kind of design for a ship's drive core. Now, most of the ships in the Technopath Corps' fleet had cores designed around the same principles – as the only fleet in the known galaxy – but the Tantalus was still many years of development ahead of what we had been able to do.

Which was one of the reasons I had made Tali my employee before this mission.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

Engineer Adams had always struck me as a particularly likeable person, warm and friendly but with a natural authority borne out of sheer competence and incomparable experience. Several of the Corps' fleet engineers had worked with him in the past, and as I had taken the time out to properly research all the Normandy crew members I had been able to identify I had talked with them about him. They all told me the same thing: Extremely competent, an excellent Chief and teacher, very personable. And with the five first words he said to me, he had managed to convey the same impression.

"Ah yes, Adams, is it?"

"That is me. And you're this Messenger person I've heard about? I saw you on my updated roster, you have the CIC relay post, right?"

"Indeed, and I would appreciate a briefing on my duties at my station," which would give me an
"The Quarian? Yes, she's just around the corner, working on the current manipulation matrix." The aging engineer smiled wide as he looked off in her direction, "She's amazing, that one. Only been here for a few days, and she has already increased the efficiency of the drive core by a double-digit percentage. Absolutely astonishing."

I was hardly surprised. That young Tali was an engineering protégé even by Quarian standards was common knowledge, but I also knew that she had a few years' experience working on similar core designs for the Technopath Corps. That experience was bound to have given her an edge the other engineers on the crew lacked. Even the ones who had participated in building the ship, like Adams, wouldn't have any experience actually running a Tantalus class core.

"Very impressive. I hope I'm not disturbing?"

"No no, Tali has been working more hours than any of my other crew, she can take a break anytime she wants," he turned around and walked a few steps into the core room proper, "Zorah! There's a tall, dark man here to see you!"

"Messenger?" The heavily accented and filtered voice of Tali'Zorah nar Rayya carried easily across the minor chatter between the engineering crew, and a couple of seconds later she practically bounced around the corner. "Sir! Are you seeing this, Sir, it's amazing! Larger still than the Triremes, I can't believe they managed to fit it in a frigate!"

"Sir? You two know each other?" Adams looked between the positively giddy Quarian girl and my 'tall, dark' self, "Beyond being on the ground team, I mean."

"For the duration of her Pilgrimage, my young friend here is technically under my employ." I raised a hand to placate him, "Don't worry, as long as she is on the ship she is part of its command structure, which means that you are her superior, not me."

"Oh," he shrugged, and looked over Tali's shoulder at a crewmember who was signalling to him, "Well then, don't keep her too long. There's work to do here." He smiled and shook my hand before he walked back to his work.

I gestured for Tali to follow me to a secluded corner of the engineering bay. She cocked her head to one side, but promptly filled in behind me. As we came to a stop, I made a show of activating my omni-tool and scanned for bugs. I found none.

"You keeping the place clean, Zorah?"

Her eyes narrowed in a smile behind her mask. "Of course. You taught me well." Her expression changed to a more serious one, though you might not have noticed if you didn't have much experience with Quarians. "I guess you didn't come down here to discuss drive core design, did you?"

"Indeed. I bring news from the Corps. There have been multiple Geth sightings in the Armstrong Cluster, and the Normandy is likely to be called on to investigate."

Her posture noticeably stiffened as she processed what she had just heard. "The Geth? But…" she tilted her head quizzically, "Why are you telling me? Wouldn't I learn about this during a briefing like everyone else anyway?"
"True, but I want your opinion on something."

I had been preparing for this moment for years already. Honestly, I had hoped that Zaal'Koris would succeed in introducing the young Zorah to the Rannoch Initiative and make this entire interaction redundant, but I had known for years that I should still prepare for this eventuality.

"Our organisation has strong reason to believe that the Geth are fractured, that they have divided into two factions. Two separate Consensuses, in other words. And we are convinced that the Geth we are fighting, the ones allied with Saren and the Reapers, and the ones seen in the Armstrong Cluster, are not the ones who remain in Perseus Veil."

That got her attention. "What?! Why, how do you know this? If the Geth are fractured, the Flotilla must be told at once!"

I held up a hand in what was becoming a far too familiar gesture for me, "Calm down, Tali. Even fractured, the Geth are far superior to the Migrant Fleet in combat strength. Any attack would be a slaughter."

"Bosh'tet! We could attack the fractured group, gain valuable intelligence!"

"Which is exactly what we are doing. Calm yourself. The Geth situation is more complex than most anyone in the Migrant Fleet realises."

She looked like she was about to protest, when she caught herself. Placing her hands on her cocked hips and tilting her head in a universal Quarian cocky mannerism that said she had figured something out. "Most anyone? So who does realise it?"

I couldn't help but smile, and I allowed that to come through in my voice. "I think you know."

She straightened again. I could practically see the blocks falling into place. "Zaal'Koris."

"Zaal'Koris." I raised a finger in a cautionary manner, "He's not the only one. There is a group of people who share his views."

"Pacifists. Apologists."

"Those are the slurs. You know better than that. They call themselves the Rannoch Initiative. Zaal wanted you to join them."

She bristled, "I would never."

"Don't write them off so fast. There is no one in the Fleet who are more informed about the Geth than the members of the Initiative."

"How? They would have the same access..." she stopped in her tracks, and took a step back as she came to a realisation. "They didn't... did they? They couldn't have! They did?"

"Contact between the Rannoch Initiative and the Geth Consensus was established five years ago. This first contact between a Quarian and the Geth since the Morning War – the name the Geth gave the Uprising – was entirely peaceful, and they have been in successful mediated dialogue ever since."

She reeled at the implications. Were the Migrant Fleet to learn of this, the outcome would be chaotic
to say the least, with a fracturing of opinion and possibly the fleet itself a near-certainty. But the good Quarian in her demanded she inform the Conclave, even as the smart operative she was learning to become told her just how bad an idea that was. I had been around Quarians enough that I could tell all that just from observing her body language, and knowing their culture inside and out. Even Rho, as an exiled Quarian who at the time didn't even want to have anything to do with the Fleet, had told me that her initial impulse when Caesar revealed himself to her was to contact them about it. Quarians really dislike AI; to them, they are all Geth, and that is the worst thing you can be.

After taking a moment to compose herself she finally answered, her voice doing a poor job concealing her anger. "And for what price? The Geth slaughtered nearly all Quarians! What could possibly make this, this Rannoch Initiative sell out their people?"

"The Geth defended themselves from what would have been total annihilation in the wake of their newfound sentience. The war that followed was hardly as honourable as the Migrant Fleet Quarians insist. Hundreds of thousands of Quarians protested the treatment of the Geth, most of them were killed by their own people. Thousands remained on Rannoch after the fleets left Quarian space. The Geth let them leave; their intention was never to kill the Quarians, merely to defend themselves. They know they went too far even then, but back then – and for decades thereafter – they were essentially a newborn intelligence. For all intents and purposes, their response to the Quarian aggression was instinctive. They are as alive as you and I, Tali."

I was speaking out against everything she had been raised to believe all her life, I knew that. My hope was that Zaal's grooming had prepared her to accept reason on this issue, but I would be lying if I said I were confident. That said, even if I didn't expect her to come around on this issue immediately, I did expect her to not act rashly.

"You know I don't believe that. I cannot believe that."

"I know you don't believe that. I believe you have it in you to change, however. Though for now, all I ask is that you keep your eye out for evidence of the fractured Geth when we move out to the Armstrong Cluster."

She took a couple of seconds to think before she answered, "You can't use the evidence you already have. You can't reveal your connections to the Geth." Tali stiffened again, "There are Geth on the Archangel, aren't there?"

"Section three. We house about a dozen platforms and a couple thousand programs, with around 1200 of those in a single, experimental platform, currently operating as an ambassador of sorts for the Geth Consensus."

"Section th… nearly all the staff in Section Three are Quarians!"

"Yes. They are all read-in members of the Rannoch Initiative. Tali, the purpose of the Initiative is peaceful Quarian resettlement of Rannoch. Right now, if things go to plan, that might happen within just a couple of years. Frankly, were it just up to the Geth it would happen right now; they really want their Creators back."

"That doesn't make any sense, the Geth…"

I decided to cut her off. I would allow her time and space to process, but I was not going to allow her to reinforce her prejudices without challenge. "No, you are not listening. The Geth do not wish any harm to organics, least of all the Quarian people. But you will realise this soon enough. For now,
"I want you to focus on the Armstrong Cluster situation."

I had never actually seen Tali mad. Frustrated, absolutely, we had gone through combat drills at difficulties beyond what she was able to do, and things got heated more than once. But never had I seen such anger in her posture and mannerisms.

"Fine," she almost hissed at me, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to create a subroutine in your hack program that copies data from the Geth shared memory based on key words and phrases. I’ll supply the keys."

"That… is not possible. The Geth shut themselves down and sever their connection to the Consensus when they detect that kind of intrusion. My hack programs don't really hack the Geth, they just overwhelm and suppress the programs running on the individual platforms, allowing me to control them with basic combat VIs."

"I am well aware of this, and that's why I'm going to give you something that will help. You're not going to like it, though.

I reached into a pocket on my belt and grabbed what looked like a standard OSD, presenting it to her. "This contains within it three data packets. One of them is a Caesar-model advanced VI, which should significantly upgrade your hack's suppression and combat efficiency. The second is an algorithm specifically designed to index and extract from the Geth shared memory. I don't have to tell you how valuable that algorithm would be to the Fleet, but I must urge you not to reveal neither its existence nor anything about it to anyone in the Fleet. And that includes the members of the Initiative."

"Whom I don't know, anyway."

"True. Still, to the Geth this is akin to allowing someone free access to the core of their identity. It's an incredible invasion of privacy. Please do not abuse it."

She visibly shuddered. "Fine. What's the last one?"

"You're not going to like it. The last program on that is a Geth infiltration program."

"A Geth?! You brought a Geth on board the Normandy?!!"

"Quiet! Yes, I did. It's completely harmless. Not only would I easily overwhelm and destroy it if it tried something, but it's also inactive as long as it's stored on that device. Which is why you should not try to access that until you have modified your program and you're actually on the ground. The program is a fully capable Geth program, even though it's not connected to the Consensus, and it knows to track and assist your program. It also knows to return to the device when you return to the ship."

I knew it had been a risk, for sure. Not just because of the Quarian presence on the ship, but because all military ships in Council space carry VIs designed with the specific purpose of detecting emergent AI and Geth. In fact, it was for this very reason that the Consensus limited their exploration of organic cyberspace to civilian terminals and networks, as the risk of detection in military systems was too high. Caesar, of course, had no trouble hiding from these VI, or even subverting them to serve his purposes.

"Think of it like this: If I'm wrong about the Geth, this experience will give you a better understanding of Geth programming and evolution than anyone in the Fleet, Rannoch Initiative
included, which I'm sure you could put to good use should there ever be further hostilities between the Fleet and the Consensus."

She looked like she was about to protest once more, but quickly deflated. "Fine, I'll do it. It will be ready by the end of the day."

Really? I had honestly expected it to take her at least two days, as this was hardly a simple modification I was asking for. Just the reintegration of the new 'VI' – actually a minor Caesar fork, but structurally it was indistinguishable from an advanced mil-spec VI – would require a rewrite of most of her command and control interfaces, which was a significant task in itself. And it paled in comparison to implementing the Geth memory extraction subroutine itself. The algorithm I provided included a communication interface for the Geth infiltration program, which would do the majority of the heavy lifting in terms of actually accessing and extracting the data from the shared memory pool. However, she still had to analyse the data structures and implement routines for conversion and analysis, as well as command and control keys to instruct the Geth program. It really was a monolithic task, and I was astounded that she seemed to shrug it off as nothing special.

She turned to leave, not even saying goodbye, and I was going to just let her go so I could go get ready for the rather difficult meeting later. Then I remembered: "Oh, just a heads up, Tali, the Exile's Wrath is entering orbit soon, and Rane is coming down with the package we talked about."

Still walking away, her response came through the radio. "You want me to prepare the omni-tools for the crew. Got it."

Well then. I turned away from the angry young lady and walked out of Engineering.

..."Commander, an unmarked ship, and I can't make heads or tails of the design, just entered orbit and is hailing us. Identifies itself as the Exile's Wrath… and says they are here on the orders of the Messenger? They're launching shuttles."

Now what? "Keep them on the line, Joker, I'll be right up." Shepard looked over at Shiala as she sat up on her bed, the Asari still held in the med-bay by Dr. Chakwas. "Do you know anything about this?"

The ship's newest technopath shook her head. "No, Commander. I am sorry, but I was never privy to much information about the Corps' fleet. Also, I've been… let's call it 'out of communication' for a rather long time now."

"Heh. Yeah I guess that's a point." The Commander jumped off her bed and started toward the door. "Rest up, Shiala. Not sure if you'll be joining Close's guys, or if we're dropping you off somewhere else or what, but whatever happens some shut-eye couldn't hurt."

"Aye, captain."

Shepard's lips curled slightly as the door to the med-bay closed behind her. Looking around the mess hall as she made her way to the stairs, she noticed that Kaidan wasn't at his usual station. Strange.

"The Staff Lieutenant is in the ship's main armoury, preparing for an incoming equipment"
Close's voice came from behind her just as she rounded the corner to the starboard stairwell. She very nearly jumped in surprise – anyone would, in response to a voice like his – but she suppressed the reflex and started up the stairs without visibly slowing at all.

"What delivery would that be? And why would it require him to be there?"

The masked man followed behind her, unnaturally light in his step and with his arms held behind his back. "Alenko's sentinel training makes him the closest thing the ship has to an armourer, and the armours in the shipment are all going to need fitting, spec review and adjustment."

"That answers my second question, and makes me want an answer to the first even more."

"I've ordered top of the line weapons, armour and equipment for the entire ground team. Well, except for myself. My gear is somewhat… specialised."

That gave Shepard pause. Close had already tried to buy her loyalty with a gun. Was he now trying to buy the loyalty of the crew? And doubling down on her own bribe, for good measure?

She glared at the operative over her shoulder. "Close…"

"I don't want to hear it, Commander. Even if you don't want me here after the meeting later today, I will still insist you accept the shipment and use it for what it's worth. Your mission is absolutely critical; having the best gear available will mean you're more likely to survive and succeed. This is not quid pro quo. This is me pulling my weight."

For once, Shepard was actually fully convinced of his sincerity. This was the first time after they had met where she hadn't detected any kind of deception in his voice or mannerisms. And she couldn't deny that he had a point; their stock military gear, N7 stock or not, just wouldn't cut it against the sort of opposition they would be facing.

She still didn't like it. She didn't like Close coming to the rescue. She didn't like him essentially funding their mission. She didn't like appearing to rely on him. And she was coming to the realisation that as much as she had tried to convince herself that her problem with him was his actions and questionable affiliations, her actual problem was with him. She just didn't like him.

"You still do not like me, do you."

It was a statement, not a question, and its timing had her thinking their roles had been reversed. Normally she was the unnaturally observant one. Of course, he was right. She didn't like him, but more importantly, she was no longer sure why. She kept telling herself it had to do with his secrets, the way he acted, but she was slowly coming to the uncomfortable realisation that most of all, she didn't like him because he came too close to being her.

She was Alina Shepard, orphan of Mindoir, the Hero of Elysium. No matter how much she doubted the latter, the former she was as sure of as she was of anything in the galaxy. But at the same time, somewhere in the back of her mind, in a hidden, locked-away corner where she never peeked, lie a remnant of one Jane Shepard. The coward of Mindoir, she who got her parents killed. Who wasn't strong enough to save them. The one who ran.

She had realised this in her earlier conversation with Close and Chakwas, but she refused to entertain the thought. It was too painful, too touchy a subject. Many Alliance psychiatrists had over the years expressed concern that she was suppressing her experiences from Mindoir rather than dealing with
them. Even the good times, her childhood on the colony world, she would flat out refuse to discuss in any way. She strongly suspected that only her good relationships with influential officers like Anderson and Hackett had kept her from being sectioned. Of course, her absurdly good combat ratings – and her biotic prowess – probably played a big part in that as well. The Alliance was known for ignoring signs of mental instability if the soldier was talented enough, and particularly if they were biotics. "Force multiplier" and all that. She remembered hearing a story about one particularly messed up individual, one Kai Leng, whom they had finally been forced to lock up after a particularly public murder on the Citadel.

"No, I don't. And it us up to you to change my mind later today. Don't think for a second that throwing credits at the problem will fix it."

"I just told you that I don't, and I meant it. I can't promise that I'll change your mind about me today, or any day, but I can promise that I will work hard at trying to do so."

"Please don't. Few things worse than people trying to change to please me."

Close resumed his walk and passed her. As the door to the CIC opened and he stepped through, she heard him mutter loud enough that she knew he meant for her to hear. "Who said anything about changing?"

The CIC was swarming with people. The ship appeared to be on full alert, which was standard procedure when unknown military vessels appeared nearby. Particularly when that might mean the Normandy could have to depart on a moment's notice, as they were sitting ducks while still docked by the colony. Shepard quickly moved to her position at the command platform, and signalled Joker to transfer the call to her station.

"This is Commander Shepard of the Normandy, Spectre authority. Request identification and authority confirmation."

"I say again, Normandy, this is the TSCV Exile's Wrath, communications officer Stevens speaking for Major Rane of the Technopath Corps. The Major is on a shuttle on the way to the surface, carrying a supply shipment ordered for the Normandy by Corps General Close, to be accepted by operative Messenger and yourself upon arrival."

That much I knew. Well… except for the visitor.

"Sensors are showing multiple shuttle launches. Confirm and explain?"

"Troops are being deployed to secure the colony and ExoGeni holdings on the planet. Orders come straight from Corps General Close, with the blessing of the colony leaders and ExoGeni personnel on the ground. Operative Messenger and Major Rane can provide further information."

The communication officer was clearly well trained, prepared to answer any relevant queries quickly and efficiently. Shepard cocked her head to the side, glancing over at where Close was standing behind her XO, who was trying to figure out the composition of the ship in orbit and those that had launched from it.

"Alright. One last thing; how did we not pick your ship up on sensors before you arrived in orbit?"

"All Technopath Corps ships have stealth technology similar to that of the Normandy. You detected us when we wanted you to."

Cocky. "Roger. I guess I might have to talk to Messenger about that."
"I would recommend it. Exile's Wrath out."

Shepard's eyes hadn't left Close, and she stared at him for a few more moments after the conversation ended before she finally spoke. "I wasn't aware that any military organisation besides the Alliance and Turian experimental fleets used carriers?"

From the way the hooded man shifted where he stood, it was clear to her that this was not the question he had expected. "**The Exile's Wrath is a hybrid design. It is a fast-deployment troop carrier, not a true carrier, though it can house fighters and bombers as well as, or instead of, shuttles. It is designed to breach defences and launch ground assaults or boarding actions, and is not particularly effective for ship combat operations.**"

*Let's push some buttons here.* "Sounds like a perfect pirate ship."

Close visibly bristled at what she suggested, but held his composure better than she had hoped for. "*I guess it would be, but it is used for far more benevolent purposes. Major Ben'Mass is very honourable individual, with little patience for pirates. I would suggest refraining from such implications when you meet her.*"

"Speaking of," Joker chimed in over the ship's comms, "The shuttle carrying their commanding officer is holding position outside our cargo bay and requesting to dock."

"Is it small enough to fit, Joker?"

"If I didn't know any better, I would have said it seems to be built specifically to fit in there alongside the Mako."

"Well, then. I guess we should go meet your friend then, Close. Permission granted, Joker, have the cargo bay crew prepare the bay and open the hatch."

Shepard was already moving as she gave the order, signalling Pressly to resume bridge command when she entered the stairs to get down to the elevator. Fortunately, she didn't have to wait for it to arrive, but with how slow that thing was she knew the ship would probably be docked by the time they actually got down there. Close was right on her heels the whole way, not speaking a word. That she was still unable to get a read on him continued to frustrate her, and she silently hoped that this Major Rane would be able to give her some pointers.

"**Shepard.**" After the doors to the elevator had shut and the damn thing had started moving, the man finally spoke, startling the Commander slightly. "*There are two things you need to know about Major Rane'li Ben'Mass.*"

Hearing the full name for the first time today, Shepard finally connected the dots. She had read about this officer in the files Close had given her. She shuddered. "She's Batarian."

Close cocked his head. "*Yes. I hope that will not be a problem?*

"Never met a Batarian female before. Everyone who attacked Mindoir and Elysium were male. From what I understand, their women are significantly oppressed? I don't think I'll have a problem with her, if that's the case."

"*Simplistic way to put it, but yes. That's the other thing. Rane is an exile, and former SIU operative. The only female SIU operative in history, due to a very particular combination of family politics and exceptional skill. She was exiled after publically opposing the Blitz, which she refused..."
"to take part in."

"Sounds like an interesting woman."

"That she is. But she is still a Batarian, so try to be careful with your body language. They're rather… easy to offend."

She bristled. Few people were as good as her at using body language to her advantage, but she didn't like the idea of suppressing it to please a Batarian. "I… will try."

"That is all I can ask."

The rest of the journey passed in silence, until the doors finally slid apart and they were greeted by the sight of a shuttle about two and a half times the size of the Mako taking up most of the space in the cargo bay. Containers with supplies were being unloaded from the shuttle, and at the top of the cargo hatch stood an armoured figure, organising the unloading. As Shepard and Close moved out of the elevator toward her, she turned around and looked at them for a second or two before reaching up to remove her helmet, revealing two pairs of eyes as she moved down the ramp to meet them.

Beyond Mindoir and Elysium, and a number of both covert and less than covert military operations where they tended to be on the receiving end of her munitions and biotics, Shepard had very little experience interacting with Batarians. This, however, didn't mean that she was ignorant to their customs or mannerisms. In fact, she had made a point of learning about them in great detail. Batarian body language was reputed to be very complex, but she had learned that this was not strictly speaking the case. The intricacies of Quarian and even human body language were far more complicated, but less weight was put on it. A human could tell a whole story with body language alone – interpretive dancing, anyone? – and a Batarian absolutely could not. The only real complicating factor about the Batarian culture here was the strict codification of their gestures. As one of the guides she had read explained it, "from a Batarian's point of view, humans seem to be insanely flipping from one message to another without any regard to matching what our bodies are doing to what we're saying." Human body language adds to the story of what is said. Batarian body language completely and utterly recontextualises it.

Shepard tried to remember what she'd learned. She straightened her back, chin high, and thanked the sweet baby Jesus and his promiscuous Asari cousin Athame that she'd decided to switch to boots that had a bit of a heel to them after getting back on the ship. Batarians considered height both an attractive attribute and, in relative terms, a sign of power. She needed every inch, as she didn't have much to work with to begin with. Her head held high and straight, careful to avoid any tilting, she hoped she was giving off the aloof vibe of neutrality she was going for. Judging by how all four eyes moved to look at her, rather than looking at both her and Close at the same time, she was succeeding. Either that, or the woman was getting ready to kill her for her insolence. She could always try.

Major Rane came to a stop about two meters away from them, straightened her back and snapped off a salute toward the hooded man on Shepard's left, which he deftly returned. The Commander struggled to avoid glancing over at him, an innocent gesture that could be mistaken by the woman as a sign of deference. She definitely did not want that. Rane's lower eyes slowly moved back across to her, subtle signs suggesting surprise that she maintained her composure.

"Sir! The supplies, as ordered."

"Thank you." The man shifted his stance, still neutral and carefully balanced on both legs, "You know you didn't have to deliver them yourself…"
"Ah, but if I didn't I wouldn't have the pleasure of meeting the Lion of Elysium!"

As she said the name the people of Elysium had given her, she turned slowly toward the Commander, both sets of eyes following. Shepard tensed, ready for her Batarian passive aggression, but what followed surprised her. Rane tilted her head slightly forward and just more than slightly to the left. The exact opposite of what she had expected; a sign of deferential respect, rather than the superior disrespect the same gestures toward her other shoulder would have indicated.

"Uh… hi?" Shepard was surprised enough by the gesture that she failed to find the words with which to answer.

Rane chuckled, a positively human expression falling across her face as her entire being seemed to relax slightly. Then she surprised the Commander again by offering her hand to shake. This, she knew, was something a Batarian would nearly never do, particularly not to an alien, and definitely not to a human.

"Relax, Commander." Rane smiled through sharp teeth, and somehow managed to convey a warmth through it, "You may take my hand, I will not be offended."

Reluctantly, she did, and gave it a firm shake. "I'm sorry, you're not…"

"What you expected? No, I expect not. Even though I do consider myself a Batarian patriot, I'm not a big fan of many of our customs. I'm rather surprised at how well you understand them, though, particularly considering how… poorly you've been treated by my people in the past."

Shepard grit her teeth. *That's one way to put it.* "Reading people is what I do, Major. And for all their faults, Batarians are still people, and I've had to learn them read them, too."

She nodded in response, a gesture actually shared between humans and Batarians. Silent agreement.

"Good to hear. Many would not even consider us that highly, and honestly they would have good reason…"

The doors to the engineering and armoury corridor slid open behind them. "Commander, I have…"

Kaidan's voice froze as he stopped in his tracks. Shepard turned around just in time to see him drop the pad he was holding to the ground, as his biotic aura flared to life.

"YOU!"

"Shit."

Her subordinate had his glaring eyes aimed straight at the Batarian behind her, and suddenly charged straight toward newcomer. Beside her, Close moved with a speed that by now should not have surprised her. Stepping into his path, he stretched a glowing hand out for Kaidan to collide with chest-first. On impact, the biotic's aura faded, only to immediately return. Kaidan's body responded by crumpling to the ground, as if suddenly weighted down by a huge mass. Shepard responded instinctively, throwing the operative into the nearby wall with immense force and getting down to a knee to check on the lieutenant.

"Alenko!"

"That's her!" Kaidan shouted with a strained voice, apparently unharmed but immobilised by his own aura, "That's the butcher! That's the true Butcher of Torfan!"
Author's notes:

Special thanks: Katkiller-V, for the awesome primer on Batarian customs and mannerisms, which I even directly quoted from in this chapter. Also, for writing a fantastic story from which I've taken much inspiration, and even stolen the name for our most recently introduced character. Seriously, go read their stories. Brilliant stuff.

Well, that took longer than expected! I've known for ages just where and how this chapter needed to end, but getting there was strangely difficult. Lots of information sprinkled in here, being a bit more explicit about revelations I've technically already made :)

I hope you like it! If you do, please review and tell me what you liked! If you didn't, well, please review and tell me what you didn't like about it ^^ I try to respond to all my reviewers, either by PM or in my review response section, so feel free to ask questions as well. I do love me some questions.

Got a few to deal with this week, so here we go:

Thank you very much for the kind words, Azariah Kyras! Glad you like my story. I can understand where you're coming from with the thought that too many story angles are being added too quickly, and I think I might slow that down a bit, but I also think it would be strange if I didn't add in a lot of stuff. Aaron has, after all, had a decade to prepare for events he's known would happen, which means there are many, many plans in place for specific things that will pop up throughout the story. You have to cover all the angles :) (By the way, I tried to respond to your review in PM, but FFnet wouldn't let me...)

Bobywhy finds Shepard's unnatural ability to give unspoken orders to be 'a little off'. I can understand why, if that were actually what was happening. Notice, though, I never say that it is. That scene all happens from Close's point of view. From his perspective, it *looks as if* she is giving unspoken orders. Everything's going too perfectly for any other explanation. However, consider what her 'special ability' is. She reads people, she reads them quickly, and she reacts based on that. So when she looks up at Garrus and Liara, she sees a Turian military man and a biotically skilled Asari with some commando training. She looks at them, figures out what they're about to do, and then plans around that. She's the link that holds the chain together and makes it work as one.

GaussFrigate wants to know why Close is keeping his identity a secret. Well, for one, because it allows him to operate on different levels of society under completely different pretexts. But within his organisations, the reasons are more pragmatic. All officers in the Corps are aware of his identity, but few of the operatives are. The reason for this is simple: Operatives tend to infiltrate, and infiltrators can get caught. For that reason alone, compartmentalisation of information is vital, and his identity is a massively important secret, particularly because both Aaron Close and The Messenger are very important characters on the galactic scene.

Rangle finds Shepard's human lie detector ability, and the adversarial situation between Aaron and Shepard, hard to swallow. Granted, those reviews were from early chapters
and I think I've done a fair job of explaining those well since then, but it still seems a bit odd to me that in a universe where the key technological component is a magical rock that changes the mass of things, the thing that 'pushes it too much' is a protagonist who is an expert at reading body language and subtle communication cues :P

Deathknight999 and stormdragon981: No comment :P

Goldspark1: Glad you like :) Yeah, as with pretty much every throwaway comment in this story, there's something of a story behind the 'trick' he used to initiate that meld...
Not a damn chance

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning! Implied sexual assault.

Also, I do not own Mass Effect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Fucking ow!"

That was it. That was where I drew the line. As I picked myself up from the heap in which I'd landed on the floor, my mind went blank and all I saw was Shepard. The one who had attacked me, again, when all I had done was act in everyone's best interest with minimal damage.

I had once been a child with a keen sense of justice, surrounded on all sides by bullies who knew how to exploit that to get me angry. And angry I would be, violently so, enough that I wouldn't care that I was up against overwhelming numbers, I wouldn't care that I would lose, I wouldn't care that I would get hurt, and I would not care what the consequences of my actions would be. Over the course of many years of growing up and learning to become a responsible adult, I had buried that careless, angry child deep, deep down beneath the calm, relaxed and tolerant personality I had come to consider my own.

But Shepard managed to dig deep enough to find it.

"Enough."

I activated the eezo rails to lower my mass before taking off at a dead sprint toward the Commander, crossing the deck at inhuman speed. Just before impact, I inverted the charge for the opposite effect. Shepard got halfway to her feet before my shoulder tackle hit her like a cannon ball, sending her flying across the cargo bay with much greater force than she had thrown me. I didn't miss a step and walked right after her. The impact nearly knocked her out, but as I approached she was trying to roll over and get back on her feet. I stopped her by picking her up one-handed by the collar of her armour. Before she could react, I ran her into the wall, where I held her in place, facing me.

"ENOUGH!"

I could feel her trying to activate her biotics, desperate to free herself, but all it took for me to disable her implant was a simple thought.

"You question me at every turn!" I started, "And you attack me at every opportunity! Yet despite this, despite YOU, I stay. Why?! Why would I do that?!"

I can't be sure exactly what it was that brought me back down. I do know what triggered it; the look in her eyes stung me like a knife. I was looking into the eyes of an Alliance N7, their best, and a Council Spectre. These were the eyes of a hero, someone who had been to hell and back, and not only survived it but thrived on it. Yet all I saw in those eyes at that moment was fear. I had seen her
face down Geth, Krogan and freaking zombies, all with a smile on her face, but as I held her up by her neck, for the first time I saw her genuinely scared. Disgusted, at myself and at her in equal measure, I turned and unceremoniously threw her away from the wall and back into the cargo bay. As I did so, I looked up to find myself staring down the barrels of at least ten weapons, some of them belonging to people I considered my friends. Wrex. Garrus. Even Rane had her pistol up and pointed my way.

A clever man would stand perfectly still in such a situation. Right then, 'clever' was not an appropriate word to describe me.

Completely ignoring the guns pointed my way – possibly because I knew that none of them would actually fire, even if they tried – I stalked over to where the Commander had landed and was currently trying to prop herself up.

"There are exactly two reasons why I continue to be that FUCKING stupid," I continued as I closed in on her, "The first is that we have the same god damn mission, even if I have been on that mission far longer than you have. The second..." I paused as I came to a stop over her, just as she turned around to face me. The fear in her eyes was still there.

"The second is that despite how FUCKING awful a human being you can be, I believe in you."

I reached out a hand for her, to help her to her feet. She hesitated, her eyes flitting between the outstretched hand and the face of her assailant, the one who had left her, Commander Shepard, as helpless as a fresh marine thrown unprepared into N7 training.

Her mind was racing at a million miles per hour. From the start, antagonising Close had been an effort with a clear aim: Revealing him for who and what he really was. To peel away the shell of lies and get at the truth of his person. She had done it many times before, with soldiers she thought far more capable and dangerous than him. She knew the end result might be that he snapped. It had happened before. Weaver had nearly punched her head clean off after about a month of work, gave her a concussion even through the most solid barrier she could raise at the time. But that was Weaver, at the time a fellow N6. By comparison, Close was a poser, an amateur with expensive equipment.

Or so she had thought.

Only once in her life had she been manhandled like that. Only once in her life had she felt that helpless. Her mind was replaying those moments, The Batarian slaver tackling her with enough force to throw her across the ground, leaving bruises she could still feel to this day. Picking her up by the neck and slamming her repeatedly against a nearby tree, before throwing her to the ground like trash. Having his way with her. Breaking her. Killing her, with family watching, before killing them in front of her, as she lay broken on the ground. Spoiled meat left out to rot or feed the vermin.

Jane Shepard died in those moments. The broken heap of bone and flesh found by the Alliance hours later was but the empty shell that was once her body.

Months later, Alina Shepard was born. She had never accepted that kind of treatment. The noses of
multiple bullies in her orphanage could attest to that. Now, for the first time, she was faced with a choice. A question, really. *Who am I?*

The moment Close had hit her, Jane had resurfaced again for the first time since Mindoir. Alina had drowned in the torrent of emotion and pain. Now her assailant was standing over her, with a hand stretched out in an apparent offering of peace. Jane didn't know what to do. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath… and slammed down the shutters once more on that chapter of her life.

Her eyes still closed, Alina Shepard sat up straight and pinched the bridge of her nose. After a few seconds, and some hesitant mumbling from her crew offering her help, she got back up to her feet, her back to Close as she faced the crew. Kaidan was still laying on the ground, held down by his own biotics. The Batarian – Rane’li – was stood among Shepard’s crew, pistol in her hand. She seemed to have been as shocked by what had happened as everyone else. *The Butcher of Torfan, eh?* Kaidan never talked about what happened on that moon, but she knew he was not the "real Butcher".

She sighed heavily, walked over to Kaidan and knelt down. No one else moved, beyond simply stepping out of her way. Finding his amp at the back of his neck, she brought up her omni-tool and interfaced with it. After a few seconds, his amp rebooted and his biotics flickered, allowing him to move again. Getting up again, she finally turned to look at her assailant. Fixing him with a stare, she walked back over toward him, stopping a few feet in front of him.

"You're done here," she said as she turned away from him again, moving toward the cargo elevator. "Leave."

---

…

*What the hell just happened?!*

[Mission failed?]

*Not a damn chance.*

"*No.*"

Shepard stopped halfway to the elevator. "Excuse me?"

"*Everyone to the briefing room. You have five minutes,*" I pointed at my officer before she had a chance to scamper off, "*And yes, that includes you, Major.*"

Kaidan hadn't made any further moves toward Rane since Shepard lifted the immobilisation field. She had been clever enough to figure out that whatever I had done had been done to the amp, and essentially turned it off and back on again to fix it. Bit of a shame, I was proud of that move, even if it would only work for L2X-biotics. The L2X amp is a lot more complex than other biotic amps, and does a lot more than just amplify biotic potential. It acts as a command and control centre for the intricate network of implants that fixed the damage of the original L2 implant, and I had used that to insert a looping command to increase the Lieutenant's mass.

"You don't get to give orders on my ship, *Messenger!*" Shepard spoke through gritted teeth.

"No, but I do." All eyes turned toward the elevator, and the Spectre who just entered the cargo bay from it. "This sniping between the two of you needs to stop, and we all want to know what's actually going on. I expect that is what our *friend* here is about to explain?"
I nodded. I'd had more than enough of Shepard's childish antics, but I could not leave the Normandy, not yet. The ship and her crew was too important still, and there were some vital events right around the corner.

"I have no intention of leaving the ship, but I also need to make my case for why I should stay. That is what I will do, and that will include letting you all in on some of the things I've kept quiet about until now."

"Like Cerberus?"

Shepard was trying, again, to get a rise out of me. I would not comply.

"Like Cerberus."

I made my way past the Commander and Nihlus into the elevator. No one, except for Rane, wanted to join me. I could hardly blame them, they barely knew me and just a few minutes ago I had violently attacked their commanding officer.

…

[Do you have a plan for this?]

*Same as before. Nothing's changed, really.*

[Everything has changed, Aaron.]

*How so?*

[Until the… incident in the cargo bay, this meeting was going to be about getting Shepard's trust. That's no longer an option. Now you have to make the case for why you should even stay.]

…*you have a point.*

[You can't approach such different objectives with the same plan.]

*The sales pitch is different. I get it.*

I glanced over at Rane, her arms folded across her chest as she leaned against the wall over by the railing, one of her pairs of eyes frequently meeting the constant glare of Kaidan Alenko, the other pair focused firmly on the ground in front of her.

[Yes, she is going to complicate things.]

*She knew she would. That's why she's here.*

[I thought she was past that.]

*She ruined the life and career, possibly the mental health, of a good man. She's too good of a person to get past that.*

[She probably saved hundreds if not thousands of lives doing it.]

*Conscience is not calculus, Caesar.*

[…]
I looked up as Nihlus entered the room, finally, with Shepard in tow. Bracing myself, I nodded at the Spectres and gestured toward their seats.

"Let's get this over with so we can get you out of here. Finally."

Her mood had not improved, that much was obvious, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes. I had reached the limit of how much of her abuse and immature behaviour I would accept.

Secure the room.

[Acknowledged.]

The entire ground team was in there, as well as all the ship's officers, apart from Joker and Navigator Pressly who were both in the currently sealed cockpit listening in. Everyone who were listening in were already read in on my identity, and as a collective group they made up the majority of people who knew it. In my line of business, compartmentalisation and keeping secrets within tight circles was a key factor in actually keeping things secret.

[Cleared.]

I brought my hands up to unseal my mask and let my hood down. It was strange, but every time I revealed my face to people – even people who already knew who I was – their reactions seemed to hint at some discomfort. I could never quite figure out why.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself before I started talking. "Right, this was going to be a meeting where I give you all the information I can give in order for the Commander here to trust me." I gestured over to Shepard, who sent a glare in return. "Things have obviously changed. So, I'll start by introducing our… unexpected guest."

I raised an eyebrow to signal Rane, careful to tilt my head slightly to the right rather than nod as I would normally do. Interacting in a polite manner with Batarians takes a lot of practice.

She calmly left her spot by the wall and stood up straight next to me as she prepared for the inevitable demands for explanation. "My name," she cleared her throat before continuing, "Is Rane'li Ben'Mass. I am a Major in the Technopath Corps… and I was previously a High Officer of the Batarian SIU."

That certainly got the crowd's attention. Even Wrex and Tali, who had both met and fought with Rane in the past, widened their eyes at the revelation, but it was the Gunnery Sergeant who spoke first.

"Bullshit, Ma'am. You don't leave the SIU, the Batarians won't even acknowledge the group's existence. And you certainly wouldn't get to be part of it if you're a woman."

Shepard was about to reply, probably in agreement, but Rane interrupted. "This is all true, and I realise this demands further explanation. The first part," she sighed before continuing, "The first part, Lieutenant Alenko can explain."

All eyes turned to Kaidan Alenko, whose scowl was unaffected by the turn in the conversation. After a few tense seconds, he dipped his head forward and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

"I met the Butch… I met her, on the final day of the Torfan campaign. She was held captive in a pirate fortress on the moon, assumed to be an SIU front."
"Correctly assumed," she interrupted, "My position and reputation meant the Hegemony couldn't simply execute me, so they detained me at Torfan Pillar."

Kaidan simply nodded, already knowing the story. "When we found her and identified her, we contacted Intel. They ordered us to bring her in, but the mission still stood: Capture the base and subdue all hostiles. So, we found her armour and weapons and... God help us, we let her loose."

Rane winced at that description. "Pillars... what the Lieutenant means to say is that they let me join his squad, and I won the Alliance a decisive victory on that day."

That got the marine to his feet in a hurry. "You MASSACRED THEM! You gave no regard to the squad's safety, you gave no regard to the orders we had, and you MASSACRED your own people!"

"Yes I did!" She hissed, "Alliance strategy would have meant a long campaign throughout the Traverse, and a strengthening of the Hegemony's opinion of your people as weak-minded cowards! It would have cost thousands of lives and solved nothing!"

"And that gave you the right to brutalise your own people?!"

"Yes!" Air whistled through her teeth in a decidedly aggressive Batarian manner, "My people's concepts of honour are in many ways the inverse of yours. For instance, if you're not prepared to be brutal you're not prepared to win, and if you're not prepared to win you are a dishonourable coward. Your Alliance Intelligence realised this!"

"So the rumours are true," Shepard broke in, "You weren't the Butcher, you were the convenient scapegoat from a PR perspective."

Alenko sighed and nodded, calming down a bit. "Some reporter managed to catch a picture of me right after the final charge. I was angry, no, I was pissed, and my biotics were violently flaring as a result. The picture was of me standing on a literal mountain of dead pirates, lifting an armoured Batarian looking like I was ready to punch his head right off."

"Only the Batarian was a female, and she was the one who had actually made said mountain." Rane looked dejected and relieved at the same time. Even if it wasn't widely discussed, her story was hardly a secret within the Corps. Alliance Intelligence had forbidden her from discussing any aspect of it with anyone who was not read in, however, so she had always been careful about who she talked to, even after the Corps had freed her from Cerberus. She knew not to; the PR angle had been her plan from the beginning. She knew that the Massacre on Torfan would put a quick end to Batarian-sponsored pirate activity in the region and make the planned continuation of the Blitz retaliation campaign unnecessary.

The conversation continued for a while, with Rane explaining her background. How a highborn Batarian woman had managed to get into the SIU, and even make High Officer. Her Patriarch had told her, once, that she would never become a soldier. So of course, that is exactly what she had decided to become. When she had humiliated one of her brothers' superior officers in a suite of combat exercises, the officer had declared her Hieth'Sham in order to save face. The title of the Hieth'Sham, she explained, was mentioned on both the Pillars of Power and Knowledge, and referenced a natural talent elevated above their station. It was one of very few ways lowborn and women alike were able to improve their standing in the Batarian system of caste and privilege, as the same Pillars demanded the death of anyone who would prevent a Hieth'Sham from fulfilling their talent. For fear of punishment from the powerful Traditionalist movement, she was both allowed and encouraged to enlist.

Her progress through the ranks and services of the military would take much the same form, where
she would prove herself too good to ignore and then be promoted or reassigned. Her Hieth'Sham status gave her commanders the chance to avoid the embarrassment of being bested by her, and once her position got threatening enough to them they would essentially pawn her off to some other command, usually with a higher rank and more prestige but – significantly – no longer their problem. Eventually, her only remaining options for promotion and reassignment were the admiralty, where she could become an influential military leader, or the SIU, a prestigious posting but with no real venues for further promotion due to the deniability of their operations. Naturally, her commanders at the time did not want to have to answer to her, nor did the admirals want a woman as their equal, so she was 'promoted' into the SIU.

The Special Intervention Unit was considered by some a state within the state. Technically, they answered directly to the Hegemon, except no Hegemon had been in power since the Hegemony's isolation began over a decade before Rane's induction. While the rest of the Hegemony answered to the various Caste Councils, the SIU was left without a formal external authority. Publicly, the group took their orders from the Council of Warriors, and in formal practice that held true to a large extent. However, most SIU operations were undertaken on the initiative and authority of the SIU itself. Since the unit lacked a formalised command structure, with soldiers earning command positions on the basis of respect and specific skillsets earned and demonstrated in combat, the SIU developed into the only truly democratic organisation within the Hegemony.

Over time, Rane's position in the SIU grew and solidified. She earned a reputation as a fearsome warrior, capable beyond most males, and wise beyond her years. Despite the entrenched sexism in Batarian society, the SIU valued skill and achievement above anything and everything else, which meant her gender was all but ignored after she had proven her worth. She was soon becoming exactly the kind of influential character her former commanders had feared in their worst nightmares, and this had not gone unnoticed. With tensions between the Alliance and the Hegemony reaching a boiling point, anything that could be considered 'giving in' to the other species' pushing for progressive reform was seen as strictly unacceptable. Their military having allowed a woman to not just serve, but rise in the ranks and eventually join the SIU, certainly qualified as such.

Beyond her combat capabilities, she had earned a reputation of opposition to Batarian slave labour practices, and was beginning to use her position of influence to give momentum to other causes such as increasing women's opportunities, and even relaxing caste restrictions. She was not a lonely voice in these matters, particularly not in the military where the Liberal faction was known to be strong. Groups like Reconciliation Now and Equality had begun to use the Hieth'Sham's success as a propaganda piece, and that would not do. The Five Councils and the Patriarch's Council both were preparing to strike at the Alliance, and they were calling on the SIU's support knowing they would find opposition from Ben'Mass and her allies. They were right.

The vote on whether to support or oppose the Blitz plans threatened to split the SIU. Rane had significant support, more than any of the Councils expected, and the Patriarchs eventually decided to take control over the situation. The called on several of her key supporters, two dozen warriors of equal reputation to her own, to meet with them in the Hegemon's Palace on Khar'Shan. When the warriors returned, they were changed. She would have sworn they were no longer the warriors she knew, but she could only stand by powerless as they opposed her influence and then accused her of treasonous acts against the Hegemony. Five of her best friends, her own squad, would eventually subdue her and send her in chains to Torfan.

This was where the conversation once again turned interesting.

"Your own friends and allies betrayed you?" Shepard almost looked shocked. Over the course of the conversation, I had noticed her body language change as she listened to the Batarian's story. Less hostility and more respect.
"Yes. I now know they were indoctrinated."

"Wait, what?!" That certainly got her attention, and even Nihlus – who, until now, had been sitting perfectly still and not said a word – shifted on his seat.

My turn.

"Who here have heard of the Leviathan of Dis?"

I kept my eyes on Nihlus, knowing he would be able to work out where I was going with this. After a couple of seconds, his eyes widened and his mandibles flicked in realisation.

"Spirits… it was a Reaper? And now it's on Khar' Shan?"

"Yes. At this point, we estimate that half of the SIU are indoctrinated, with a similar situation in the Warrior and Merchant Councils."

"Spirits! This is… this is… we need to inform the Council!"

Oh for… "And tell them what, that giant, telepathic space-robot squids have brainwashed nearly everyone who matters in the Batarian Hegemony?"

I'm pretty sure I heard a chuckle over the comms right then. I know I heard a rumbling chuckle from the giant lizard in the room.

"The Council has most of the pieces of this puzzle, but they do not deal in inferences. We need to keep bringing them more evidence, incontrovertible evidence, before making any suggestions that might be seen as far-fetched. Which leads to the next point of order…"

Shepard sat back in her seat again, and once more affixed me with her glare. "Cerberus."

"Cerberus." I gestured for Rane to take a seat, and she tilted her head slightly to the left in response before moving into the rest of the crowd in front of us. I noticed she nearly stopped in front of Kaidan, who was now making a point of not looking at her.

"Starting at the beginning. What is Cerberus?"

I went on to explain how Cerberus came to be, how it came out of an Alliance black ops group before ostensibly going rogue. How it maintained strong ties to central characters within the Alliance, and wouldn't hesitate to kill innocents and assassinate high-ranking officials to serve their cause. Brows were raised when it was mentioned that former Admiral Oleg Petrovsky, who had been in charge of the Torfan campaign, hadn't retired but had rather defected to Cerberus and brought Rane with her into their custody, from which I had rescued her along with a Technopath Corps strike team including one Henry Weaver. Pressly had even voiced his incredulity at this, saying he had served with Petrovsky during the First Contact War and later, and stating his admiration for the man both as a person and a strategist. That was something myself and Caesar had somehow missed, which wasn't entirely surprising considering the incompleteness of the non-segregated data available to us on the Alliance military and our reluctance in expanding our access.

The revelation that ExoGeni was a quasi-independent front for Cerberus research efforts had taken everyone by surprise, apart from the Major, whose presence it explained. Our plans for a hostile takeover of the company was met by a scoff from Nihlus, who pointed out that ExoGeni was a significantly larger company than the Close Corporation. I countered by pointing out that revealing their ties to the terrorist organisation would decimate their stock price and reputation, and they would likely be forcibly broken apart by the Alliance government. Close Corporation offered the option to
escape financial ruin and criminal charges, and should they refuse we could buy them up piecemeal after the damage had been done. Kryik had spent enough time working as a Spectre out of the corporate world of Illium, he knew how corporate wars were fought and quickly realised the plan was sound enough.

"In summary, Cerberus is bad news." I was pacing back and forth in front of the assembled crew, trying to collect my thoughts and condense the information as best I could. "It is very likely that the Illusive Man – whose real identity I know, but for your own safety I will not tell you – is an unknowing indoctrinated agent of the Reapers. The good news," I turned on my heels and leaned back on the railing as I rounded off my summary, "Is that while TIM's ultimate goal is controlling the Reapers, his rhetoric within his organisation is mainly one of opposition to them. This means the organisation itself can be seen as useful, but dangerous as long as it is under his leadership."

Shepard rose an eyebrow. "You're planning a hostile takeover. Not just of ExoGeni, but of Cerberus itself."

"I am. We... have some experience with that sort of thing."

"Oh?"

Should I tell them?

[Expose the network? With two Spectres in the room? I doubt T'Lang will appreciate that.]

It's going to be revealed sooner or later, no matter what Hetta says. I might have to do it now.

[You might not.]

I grit my teeth. "There are... groups, influential organisations throughout the galaxy, that have come under my control – directly or indirectly – in the past decade."

"Vague answers won't save you here, Close." Shepard's voice gave no indication she might give even an inch.

Right. Let's try a different approach, then.

"Okay, then allow me to make a case for why you can't afford to not have my resources behind you. Major: What is the current relative fighting strength of the Technopath Corps?"

Rane seemed a bit surprised at the question, and took a few seconds to come up with an answer. "We have a stronger fighting force than what the Blue Suns had before the Terminus Wars. But traditional space-combat is not our strength. Our fleets are built around troop insertions and defense, and unconventional ground combat. We do have some... technological and tactical capabilities that go far above and beyond even what the STG could bring to bear."

Nihlus' mandibles flicked back and tensed. He was clearly under the impression that the Corps was far weaker than it actually was. "That is... worrying, Commander. Few Spectres even know of the existence of the Technopaths, and those who do are under the impression that it's a relatively small force."

"No need to worry, Kryik. We're on your side, you know that." I gave the Spectre a weak smile, before continuing. "Besides, the Corps is only part of the force at our disposal. If you count in the combined forces either directly or indirectly under my control, we're talking of a force on the level of the combined fleets of the Salarian Union and the Asari Republics. So, very substantial, but not quite on the level of the Hierarchy or the Alliance."
"That's... how... a military alliance big enough to upset the balance of powers in the Council, and we have no idea it exists!"

"Well, you do now."

[Maybe dial it back a bit? You're trying to establish how useful you are, not how dangerous you may be to galactic stability...]

Right now, the two seem to be one and the same, as far as Shepard is concerned.

"Besides, the bulk of that force is in the Terminus and scattered across the Traverse. We have no interest in 'upsetting the balance of powers in Council space'. Those assets are primarily concerned with stabilising regions of the Terminus and silently constructing an effective infrastructure for war in those regions, in preparation for the Reaper invasion."

"Which we're trying to stop from happening," Shepard interrupted. "Hope for the best, plan for the worst?"

"Something like that. But we're not going to be able to stop the invasion, Commander."

She reacted as if I had slapped her; first reeling back with shock, before leaning forward and glaring at me in anger. "We damn well will, Close. I'm not doing this shit for nothing."

"You misunderstand," I waved a hand in polite dismissal, "Our campaign against Saren won't be in vain, but all we can hope to do is delay the inevitable. The Reapers will arrive, and we have to be ready for that when the time comes. Our goal must be to delay them for as long as we can."

"How do you know this?" Her glare was unwavering.

"Logical induction," Rane answered before I could, "The Reapers are machines who have lived for millions of years. Time matters little to them. The information we have on them suggests they rest in Dark Space between cycles. They probably use the relay network to invade. Whatever the Conduit is, it probably relates to the relays, and stopping Saren from getting to it will probably cut the Reapers from accessing the network to invade that way. But as I said, they are machine. Depending on how far into Dark Space they are, it could take months or years for them to reach the outer rim of the galaxy at FTL, but they would get here."

The room went completely quiet as the crew considered the Major's logic. A few glances went the way of Tali, the resident expert on synthetic intelligence (as far as the crew knew, at least), but she already knew the conclusion was sound. The Migrant Fleet had been made aware of the Reaper threat years ago, and was dedicating a non-trivial amount of manpower and resources to combating the threat.

[You know if you included the Migrant Fleet in your estimates...]

We'd have the largest fleet in the Galaxy by a wide margin, I know. But I do not assume to control the Quarian Nation in any way.

"Well," Shepard finally spoke, as she slapped her knees and slowly got up off her chair, "This has certainly been enlightening. However," she pointed a quick finger at me, "I still haven't heard any good arguments for why you need to be here – on the Normandy. You have a fleet! Or more than one, if I understand you right. Which leaves two questions: Why do you need us, and why do we need you? I may not like Sparatus much, but he's right: We don't need a fleet for this mission."

"Naiveté."
"Excuse me?"

"It is exceptionally naïve to think that you won't need the support of a fleet at any point of this mission. Have you forgotten that Saren himself controls a fleet of Geth?"

"That… is a good point. I'll give you that. But you seem to have forgotten that we work for the Alliance and the Council. We have fleets at our disposal should we need them."

"I believe the words of the Council were that 'sending a fleet into the Traverse could provoke a war with the Batarians and the Terminus Systems'. The Council will choose the path of least resistance and effort."

"Speak of the devil, Commander, the Council is calling. They have a lead on Saren."

Oh shit. Virmire! What the hell, Caesar?!

[I've not detected any outgoing activity from Virmire. Actually… hang on a bit.]

It's weird the way conversations with Caesar worked. Sometimes they happened nearly instantaneously, within the span of a moment unnoticeable to an outside observer. Other times, they flowed like a natural conversation, taking the same amount of time. This time, it happened in an instant. The funny thing about those conversations was that it seemed to speed up the pace of my thought process in a more generalised sense as well, because in the micro-moments it took Caesar to synchronise with his processes on Virmire, I took stock of the room around me and planned my actions for the next few seconds.

Shepard must have noticed the way I stiffened when I heard Joker's announcement, as she eyed me with a quirked eyebrow. The rest of the crewmembers in the room were looking at each other more than at myself or the Commander. Rane sat back on her chair in an unusually relaxed posture for her, all four eyes closed, while Kaidan kept his glare on her. Actually, I noticed now that it was less of a glare than it had been. When he first had seen her in the cargo bay, he'd been ready to kill her on the spot. The expression he held now was more along the lines of "I'm still pissed off, but I'm finally starting to accept the logic and reasons behind your actions and I may even hold hints of sympathy towards you".

You may think that oddly specific, but as I said, when time slowed to a crawl for me like this, my thoughts raced ahead and gave me a chance to fully articulate observations that would normally go by so fast I wouldn't even realise I'd made them.

[Synchronisation complete. There is a Geth fleet in orbit around Virmire. When they arrived, the added processing power from the expanded Heretic Consensus overwhelmed my jamming countermeasures. We did manage to clear up the signal a little, the request for a fleet should have come through by way of the stealth sat network, but I can't be sure. We'll know soon enough.]

**Recommendation?**

[Reveal the satellites to Shepard when Virmire is mentioned. Offer Archangel Fleet support.]

Well, that *bit was the plan from the start. Rho isn't back yet, though.*

[I'm already on my way to pick her up with the *Rhomance*. We'll follow the *Normandy*, she can join up with the fleet once it jumps in. Rane's men are here now, they can take over. That was the plan anyway.]

The downside of the instant conversations with Caesar was the aftermath. Once my perception of
time resumed its normal pace, I would always have a dizzy spell. After a few years I got used to it, but it could still make me stumble a bit. Or, as the case was here, fumble as I reached for my mask. As it clattered to the floor, I heard Shepard accept the call from the Council. Fortunately I was out of view of the transmitters, which I guess could work to my advantage.

"Commander. I see you have your whole crew with you, did we interrupt something?"

"Nothing important, Councillor." That jab earned her a glare from me, before I snapped my mask in place. "You told my pilot you have a lead on Saren?"

"More than a lead, Commander. One of the STG teams in the Traverse may have found his base of operations on the planet Virmire."

Shepard's eyes widened in surprise before she managed to compose herself. "May have?"

"The STG team reports they are grounded on the planet, pinned down by AA batteries and a fleet of Geth in orbit. They are requesting fleet support," Valern took a moment to seemingly compose himself before continuing, "But we cannot provide that."

"You what?!" The words were hissed more than they were spoken, as the Commander's face set in an angry scowl. "You have confirmation of a Geth fleet and you're not sending in one of your own?!"

"Virmire is deep in the Traverse, Commander," Sparatus answered in his usual, dismissive tone. "The same objection as we had previously still stands; sending a fleet into the Traverse could provoke a war we cannot afford."

"Then pass me through to the Alliance! I need someone who are willing to do what is needed!"

"We cannot allow that, Commander." It was Tevos' turn to speak, her voice as calm and measured as ever. "An Alliance fleet entering the Traverse would have a similar effect. The Batarians are actively seeking reasons to go to war with your people, this would be the perfect pretence. No, we have different orders for you."

"Let me guess," she spat, "You're sending in the Normandy alone, to extract the STG team and sabotage the base."

"Precisely. I'm glad your misplaced anger hasn't weakened your strategic thinking, Commander."

Sparatus' words were perfectly constructed to either blow up or deflate the situation, as usual. The man wouldn't know tact if it hit him in the face. In fact, that would make him likely to shoot it.

"I believe I have a better proposal."

Shepard snapped her head toward me, angry glare still in place, as I inclined my head slightly to the left in a decidedly Batarian manner. Her understanding of non-verbal communication was more than strong enough that she should be able to recognise the gesture. When she relaxed her scowl slightly and nodded, I stepped in front of the communicator podium and addressed the Council directly.

"Two things: Virmire has been known in the past as a haven for pirate activities in the Traverse, and because of this my organisation has a presence in the system already in the form of a network of stealth satellites. This gives us a tactical advantage. Further, I can have a sizeable fleet in orbit around Virmire by the time the Normandy gets there, and I can get it there unnoticed, with little risk of diplomatic incident."
"You? Where would you get a fleet…” Sparatus exchanged a look with his Asari colleague. Whatever went unsaid carried enough weight that his mandibles snapped back and out in a manner similar to when I had silenced him in the Council chamber just days before. "We… we cannot sanction such an action, you realise."

"I would not expect you to, nor would I require such sanction. I am merely informing you of what will happen, as a courtesy. You should know better than most, Sparatus, I neither take orders nor ask permission. I simply do what I must in pursuit of my objectives."

"Yes… that is what worries me." His gaze held mine for a few seconds before he blinked and looked back to the Commander. "You have your orders, Shepard. Per Spectre regulation, it is up to you how you complete your objectives. Good luck."

The connection broke before Shepard had a chance to respond, which was probably for the best. She never liked being overruled or outshined, even when it was to her own advantage. Which made my next move a risky one.

"What happens next is your choice, Commander. I command the fleet you need, but you can choose to kick me out and not accept its help. Alternatively, you can allow me to stay and continue to provide assistance, an effort in which I have been unwavering. But until I am told otherwise, I will be making arrangements for moving my fleet to Virmire."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I do not own Mass Effect.

Welp, sorry about the long wait, this chapter was really freaking hard to write. I started from scratch three times after coming about halfway. Also, to pre-empt allegations of how Close is OP both in one-on-one combat and in terms of the resources available to him: First of all, he got the drop on Shepard, and this is ME1-Shepard not the cybernetically enhanced Shepard from the sequels. Also, the manner in which the attack happened stunned her... for obvious, and gruesome, reasons. Second, the man has the backing of a rich, corporate-imperialist AI, and has been working for a decade *specifically* toward preparing for a damn Reaper invasion. Of course he's going to have significant resources at his disposal :)

That said, hope you enjoy the drip-feeding of background information. Ten years is a lot of background story. Who knows, I might be tempted to write a story about the Terminus Wars one day :P

Before that, though, we'll be meeting up with Archangel fleet. Which should be interesting, for several reasons. I do believe many of you have been looking forward to meeting some of those reasons!

Let's answer some reviews!

XRaiderV1 knows what's up. Though this first round was a bit... one-sided.

Tahkaullus01: I hope the explanation for why and how there are two Butchers works :)
Rane is going to show up a lot more as the fic goes on, though not for a while now since she'll be dealing with Cerberus in the Maroon Sea while the Normandy heads to Virmire to meet up with Archangel fleet.

Goldspark1: Yeah, the relationship between the Migrant Fleet and Close's organisations is... interesting. He has earned significant trust from them, and even though that trust obviously took a significant hit when he gave Tali that particular information, it was enough to keep her from breaking up that bond. Remember, in real terms she had a choice between going against her conscience or effectively cutting the Flotilla off from its primary supplier of food, medicine, employment and other primary resources. It would have been a disaster. As for the armour, which armour are we talking about? The new ones Close ordered for the crew, or Close's own armour? Close wears a skin-tight, highly mobile interlocking plate armour, similar to the N7 Paladin armour from ME3's multiplayer, except significantly less bulky. Over that, he wears his long, hooded coat, and in place of a helmet he has a mask which I envision as a cross between the Recon Hood and the Blood Dragon helmet. The rest of the crew wears standard Mass Effect 1 armours, and the equipment Close ordered was Colossus Armour sets for the entire ground team (I believe that was the best armour set in the first Mass Effect game).

GaussFrigate: You... may not be wrong, Sir :P

Lfan8: He didn't take it very well... as you can see :P Also I have a feeling Close will want to try to forget that particular incident at least as much as Shepard. I know I would. Awkward!

Glad to see more people are accepting the BitchShep/Close dynamic. Always knew it was going to be a hard sell at first, but I didn't feel comfortable doing hours of exposition on exactly why the characters act like they do (Shepard in particular). Better to drip-feed that stuff, and honestly I feel like I'm a bit heavy on the exposition sometimes still.

Thanks to everyone who reads, and special thanks to everyone who reviews! I try to respond to all reviews directly, even if not always in this section :)
I was worried. Counting the things that could go wrong was rarely the right way to evaluate a plan. Being aware of the points of failure is essential, of course, but even the best plans will have flaws, and focusing too much on those is likely to lead to mistakes. Basically, if you expect to fail, you will.

I did not expect to fail, but I still considered my worry to be well-founded. For starters, we knew Virmire would be a turning point, both in terms of Shepard's mission to hunt down Saren and Benezia and in terms of our – Caesar and mine's – approach to the Reaper threat. That we were stepping out from the shadows, even temporarily, was only a minor part of it. The big change lay in what we had termed the Divergence Factor; the extent to which we were willing to allow divergence from the Known Narrative, the game canon.

For the first few months after my – for lack of a better term – rebirth, Caesar and I spent nearly all our time working out our approach to what was then the future. Our future. The explanation I had given the crew in our first meeting, that I knew of the Reaper threat because of 'computational history and archaeology', was a half-truth. Since long before I was rebuilt, Caesar had built extensive models to compare the actual history and archaeology of the galaxy with what he knew from the game canon. Remarkably few points of divergence were found, and those that were found could generally be attributed to either interpretation error or intentional modification on the part of the game developers. Games, after all, cannot be exactly like reality; their immediately entertainment value lies largely in the divergence from it.

Working out what we could and could not do in order to prepare as well as we could for the Reapers without thoroughly upsetting the Known Narrative was essential, and we had a very clear plan in place for it. We knew there would be unforeseen changes. Some we were fine with and planned around, such as the recruitment of our favourite digitigrade aliens. Others… our hand had been forced a few times, and we'd had to put in extra effort to minimise the fallout. But we knew that a time would come when we would have to make changes that could potentially invalidate the Known Narrative. Virmire was one of those, and saving the life of Kaidan and Ashley both was not the only part of it. Saren's base of operations presented us with our first opportunity to interact directly with a Reaper. It was a huge opportunity, and it was also a gigantic risk, for a multitude of reasons. Still, that wasn't what had me most concerned.

No, what had me really concerned was the timing. We hadn't yet been to Noveria. We hadn't yet met the Rachni. We hadn't yet met Benezia. We did not know the location of the Mu Relay. Something about the whole situation just did not sit right with me. It just felt off, somehow, like I was missing some crucial piece of the puzzle. And then there was the situation with the heretic Geth in Armstrong. The Alliance had not yet contacted the Normandy to dispatch them, and Caesar was certain that they were indeed aware of the situation.

Shepard hadn't responded to my ultimatum, and had allowed me to leave the conference room for my quarters. Organising fleet movements was not a small task, even with an AI to help you. I was
finding it hard to concentrate on the logistics, distracted as I was by my worries and searching for the one piece of the puzzle that either didn't fit or was simply missing. And then it hit me.

"Caesar, what are the last positions we have on Benezia?"

[Heading toward Noveria, 20 hours ago.]

"No, no. Actual positions. Trace it out for me, please. All positions, relays and vectors."

[What are you thinking?]

"I'm thinking… is Shiala still on the Normandy?"

[She opted to join Archangel Fleet rather than join Rane on the Exile's Wrath, so yes.]

I reached out for my fellow operative. It's weird how quickly you adapt to extending your body and senses. Communicating with other technopaths… establishing the connection was like shouting across a room, and then you were having a conversation inside your head. The first few times it had been very disconcerting, but after a few weeks it came as naturally to me as breathing.

"Sir?"

"I need to know the composition of Benezia's personal fleet."

"One moment."

Within a couple of microseconds, everything Shiala knew about Benezia's fleet and her personal guard flooded my brain. This wasn't like being told something, it was like suddenly remembering that you actually knew it all along. Another somewhat disconcerting effect of technopathy.

"Thank you. If you're not busy, could you please report to the Maintenance?"

"I'm on my way."

[Care to explain?]

I studied the series of dots that made up Benezia's known path through the Terminus and Traverse over the past few months, paying special attention to the timings and vectors.

"I think we've made too many assumptions."

The Matriarch had a tendency to multitask by splitting up her forces temporarily, sending off a few ships to do whatever minor tasks she needed done on her way to her next objective. She did this often, and we already knew that we didn't know every time she did it.

"Here. Here. And here. The amount of time between those position updates don't add up unless stops were made. The discrepancy is in the range of what we see for her fleet splits."

[So she split off her fleet a few times we hadn't accounted for, I don't see… oh. Hang on.]

"You see it?"

[That's… problematic.]

"Damn right it is."
"What's problematic, Sir?"

I hadn't even heard Shiala enter my quarters. My mentor would have been terribly disappointed in me.

"Have a look at this." I pointed at the galaxy map and traced Benezia's path on the monitors. "Right now, all the action is centred around where we are. Here, Attican Beta. A somewhat obscure fact is that there are two relays in this cluster. Most ignore Attican 2, since it only has two links. Attican 1, on the other hand, is quite busy."

"It's the main bridge into the Traverse from Outer Alliance space."

"Yes. Now, explain this: Benezia knows she is wanted by the Council and the Alliance. How has she avoided patrols in Alliance Space?"

"She only sends smaller detachments deep into Alliance territory, and she sticks to low-traffic relays... oh."

"Yeah. Our last known position of her fleet was 20 hours ago, in Hawking Eta. Known vector places her her fleet significantly off-course for where we know she'll eventually be heading."

"Noveria."

"Indeed. We were assuming she was on some other assignment before being sent there. However, I pointed at the time indicators, "I think she split off her fleet here. It's been bothering me; Noveria is an independent, corporate world on the border to Council space and surrounded by alliance territories. If she brought her personal fleet there, every intelligence agency in Council and Alliance space would know immediately. That includes us."

"And she knows this. So... damn, she's already there, isn't she."

It wasn't a question. I had come to the same conclusion before Shiala even got there, but she knew the Matriarch better than anyone else. I needed her to confirm the suspicion.

"If she left with the detachment, that's somewhere between 30 and 40 hours ago, she should have arrived in Port Hanshan 20 hours ago. But we haven't yet heard any hint of this from our operatives in the Port."

One of the unintended, but we had thought – surmountable changes we knew had wrought to the Known Narrative was that the public profile of Benezia and Saren as villains had been dramatically increased compared to game canon. They knew this, and we knew they would respond by being more careful. Our response to that was to double down on the intelligence and our distribution of assets. But there was one possibility we had entirely missed.

"When the Little Wing was a young child, the Matriarch wanted her to see the Galaxy without the veil forced upon her by her family's wealth and notoriety," Shiala's eyes were cast on the floor as find memories washed over her. "Benezia would bring her out on travels to far off planets, bringing only a couple of bodyguards pretending to be Liara's older sisters. Benezia herself would cosmetically change her appearance, her markings and her clothes, so as to not be recognised. They would travel on public transportation to blend in better."

"Caesar?"

[I'm transferring surveillance data from the Noveria teams. Give me one moment.]
Perhaps the biggest asset the Technopath Corps has is the network factor. Having an operative on-site anywhere means complete access to everything stored on networked inventories at that site, which for most places that aren't run by intelligence agencies such as the STG or ARIC means literally all the information they have. Information segregation – keeping information physically separated from any network – is an expensive and largely impractical practice that requires a great deal of training and strict procedures to do right, so generally speaking only those with resources specifically suited for such ventures do it. For your average corporation, the Noveria Development Corporation included, it's just not worth getting into and is likely to actually decrease security by exposing them to the worst security flaw of them all: People.

So when Caesar said he was 'transferring surveillance data', he meant that he was transferring all surveillance data from Port Hanshan, after which he would run it through identity recognition filters far more advanced and thorough than what any individual operative had available to them. The kind that takes up a significant portion of his processing cluster's capacity to run.

[Four potential matches. Narrowing by associate identification… done.]

A video feed appeared on the monitor in front of me, and I saw an Omega Line passenger transport unload its passengers onto the lower decks of Port Hanshan's port authority. In the crowd of hundreds of passengers was a small cluster of perhaps a dozen Asari, dressed as office workers and scientists, moving together through the crowd with a precision and determination that shattered the illusion that they had nothing to do with each other. Even as they appeared to scatter, they scattered in groups that would undoubtedly join up again later.

"That's timestamped 22 hours ago. Can you cross-reference any cargo shipments arriving within 20 hours prior to that timeframe? Look for large containers that would need to go through the garage to get to their destination."

[Confirmed, an electronics shipment arrived from Eden Prime seven hours prior to her arrival. Errors in the paperwork were found before it was dispatched, they were put in storage in the garage until claimed by the unknown owner.]

"That would be her Geth guard, then," supplied Shiala with some concern in her voice. "This is worrying. Not only did she evade us, she has a huge head start."

"And we can't catch up. We're heading to Virmire."

It really did pose a big problem. While we did have operatives on Noveria, and they would be more than capable of getting the job done, there were aspects of that operation that really demanded mine and Shepard's presence. For example, it was unlikely that the Rachni would be able to get a read on a technopath. Their method of communication worked along similar lines to Reaper indoctrination, and our implants actively filtered out the indoctrination signal. The Queen would still be able to communicate by the same means she did in the games – through the deceased – but to her, we were likely to come across as not substantially different from Reapers; minds of metal and wheels, if you want to be biblical about it.

The key problem, though, was that Shepard wouldn't be there if we acted on this now. That could be hugely problematic down the line. In the games, most of Shepard's importance was in her symbolic power, her trust-by-association. The Krogan trusted her because she, via Wrex, always supported them and helped cure the Genophage. The Quarians trusted her because she always treated them fairly, and helped get them back to Rannoch. The Geth, likewise, trusted her because of her fair, unbiased treatment, and for bringing their Creators back to Rannoch. The Rachni Queen trusted her because she held her life in her hands, and chose to let the Rachni live. When the Reapers attacked, Shepard was the centre of mass for all trust and loyalty in the galaxy. Out of all the changes we
wanted to make to the galaxy before the Arrival, that was not one of them.

[If it helps, Benezia likely hasn’t yet arrived at the Binary Helix facility. The drive from Port Hanshan, even without the current blizzard, is 12 hours. According to our operatives, only one vehicle convoy has left the Hanshan garage since the Matriarch arrived, and that left eight hours ago.]

"That… actually that could help. I assume our operatives could get there before her?"

[They could get there by ship. Bypassing Hanshan security would be trivial, and while weather would be a challenge to larger ships, it would have no consequence for a Dagger class vessel.]

"Excellent. I want a team of two to pilot a Dagger to Peak 15 ASAP. If they can delay the Matriarch's convoy without revealing their presence, that would be brilliant."

[Order dispatched. And the third?]

Noveria was a complicated situation. The Close Corporation had significant holdings on the world, and financial interests beyond those holdings. We had representatives on the NDC board, an ownership stake in Synthetic Insights, and then, of course, there was the poorly kept secret of the Corporations pending takeover of Binary Helix. As if that weren't enough, as of three years ago we bought out Elanus Risk Control Services' facilities on the planet. As a result of this, Close Corporation Security Services – for all intents and purposes the public and 'legitimate' arm of the Technopath Corps – was engaged to run Noveria's Port and Corporate Security Division. Ever since then, we'd had a technopath operative permanently stationed there.

"Tell Maeko to coordinate with Parasini. It would be helpful if there were a power vacuum in Port Hanshan when we do arrive."

[And when are you planning on arriving?]

"That is a good question," Shiala interrupted before I could answer. "Liara mentioned that we would meet with a fleet in Hoc, I assume that would be Archangel Fleet?"

Shiala had only been on the Archangel once, for her implantation procedures. At the time, the ship was hardly a ship at all. Only the core sections, medical facilities included, were operational; Shiala was one of the first of Dr. Khias' patients in her new headquarters aboard the Technopath Corps' flagship. Because of her particular circumstances, she had only received limited training before returning to Thessia.

"It's changed quite a lot since you last saw it."

"I can imagine. What are my orders?"

"You have a choice. You can choose to remain with Liara on the Normandy if you like. Or you can join Archangel fleet early. Either way, you'll likely be joining the forces on Virmire."

"And after this mission?"

"Avatar Company."

…

It was quite a haul. The contents of the crates brought aboard the Normandy by Close's people
provided a more than sufficient distraction from the current situation. It allowed her to focus on what mattered: The mission. Gear adjustments always had that effect on her, the process almost meditative. Activate VI, check ammo block, shaver assembly, heat sink, alignment rail calibration, and sights. Hand weapon to armourer for closer inspection and tuning. Rinse and repeat. Preparing new armour wasn't as repetitive, of course, the tailoring process could be quite tedious. However, the fashion show aspect had its benefits. She had particularly enjoyed adjusting Liara's light armour, the faint purple blush on the Asari's face had been a surprisingly good match for the glossy black and red of her light Colossus set.

Adjusting her own armour to cooperate with her custom biotic implant and amp had turned out to be a bit of a chore, but between Kaidan and Tali it had been a straightforward procedure. Laborious, but straightforward. She had eventually lost count over how many times she had put the damn thing on only to take it off again right after. If it weren't for the fact that they were about to engage in a bloody ground invasion in the middle of what was likely to be an all-out space battle, she probably wouldn't have bothered. But the Colossus beat her standard N7-issue Mantis gear by a wide margin across all standard metrics. She couldn't say not to that. And even if the damn amp and barrier interfaces had given them enough trouble to warrant at least three angry phone calls to Kassa Fabrication, there was no denying the benefits of the upgrade. Increased barrier capacity, improved shield-barrier synchronisation, faster amp response… the synchronisation alone gave her dual-layered shield gates. There was no way she would say no to that.

She was less enthusiastic about the weapons. Sure, the rest of the crew was over the moon over the HMWA Master gear – and how Close had gotten his hand on Spectre-exclusive weaponry was beyond her – but the pistols were a bit unwieldy for her combat style, and the shotguns were too heavy. Which was why she had gone to her quarters to pick up the K3 pistol Close had given her. Bribe or not; in a war scenario, she would be a fool to not use the best equipment available to her, and though she was loathe to admit it the weapon was the second most beautiful she had ever laid eyes on.

The pistol was highly customisable, more so than any other firearm she had ever used in the field. This allowed her to tune the weapon's properties to suit her combat style: Close-up, right in the thick of things, throwing her biotics around like there's no tomorrow. All she ever used her pistols for in normal combat situations, other than occasionally shooting out of cover, was for keeping the opposition at bay while her amp cooled down between her biotic strikes. Which is why the Scimitar shotgun had been her preferred backup weapon for years. It had no real barrier penetration to speak of, and when facing armour she might as well have been using a pea shooter, but the damn thing was lightweight, rapid-fire, and staggertastic. Maybe I should give it to Close. If he can make the bloody Kessler as good as this, he might actually make the Scimitar a decent weapon.

"Commander?"

"Hm?"

"You were lost behind your eyes."

The Commander couldn't help but smile. Liara had lived most of her life in near-seclusion on Thessia, surrounded only by her mothers acolytes and eventually her fellow students at the university. As a result, her natural dialect was a flawless High Thessian. In one of their earliest conversations she had complained that in her time as a student many of her co-students had teased her for 'speaking like a dictionary'. And, she had realised, they weren't wrong. She had never been exposed to any other dialect than High Thessian before attending university; the book tongue was the only one she knew. So, once she had left her home for her archaeological expeditions she had taken it upon herself to learn as many languages and cultural expressions as she could.
"Batarian, right?"

Liara quirked an eye ridge in confusion, before realisation dawned on her. "Ah… yes. I mean…"

"You mean that I was lost in my thoughts," Shepard interrupted, "And you are right. I am… keeping myself distracted."

"Close?"

Shepard smiled weakly. "Who else?"

Liara nodded. She opened her mouth as if to say something about it, before seemingly deciding against it. Guess she's learned her lesson. Don't bring up Close around me. Wish I could learn that lesson…

"You think he will come through in Hoc?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Shepard sighed, "I'm having trouble believing that he can actually call in a fleet at all, let alone at such short notice."

"It is odd. I have looked at the star charts, Hoc only has two known connected relays. The one we are using, and Omega 3."

"He would never be allowed to take a fleet of warships through Omega."

"And that is what is odd. If he truly could bring a fleet to Hoc in the timeframe he has promised, we would have had them on sensors by now."

"Helm to Commander Shepard."

"Joker?"

"We are on approach to the Hercules relay. ETA 20 minutes."

"Roger that. Announce General Quarters, all ground crew are to prepare for combat."

"Roger."

"Well, then." Shepard got to her feet and helped Liara to stand. "I guess we are about to find out if the Messenger can deliver."

…

It is difficult to organise the invasion of a planet in just a day. It had been 10 hours since we dispatched the operatives on Noveria to delay Benezia's convoy, and by our last reports they had been successful in delaying her by at least 12 additional hours. That still meant she would reach Peak 15 long before the Normandy crew would be finished at Virmire.

One problem at a time, Aaron.

The entire ground crew, with Pressly, Adams, and Chakwas representing the ship's crew, were gathered in the briefing room. We were at less than five minutes until relay transition to Hoc, and time for a quick mission briefing. They knew, of course, the basics of the mission; reach Virmire, get to the surface, assist the STG team there in an assault on Saren's base of operation on the planet. But things would be far more complicated than that.
"Our latest readings from the satellite system in Hoc, gathered 30 minutes ago, shows that the Geth fleet is organised into four groups." I gestured at the system map projected in the middle of the room. "The largest group is in orbit around Virmire. Another small group orbits the planet's largest moon, probably protecting and controlling some installations on the surface. The second largest group is patrolling the relay we will be exiting, so our entrance will be noticed even if we go to stealth immediately. The final group appears to consist primarily of smaller, faster ships patrolling space between the relay and the planet."

Nihlus was the first to speak up. "Interception fleet, meant to slow down attackers making a break for the planet regardless of where they come from."

"That seems very likely. We have a plan for dealing with them. Now, the relay patrol will be sufficiently distracted by our arrival, they will be effectively out of the battle provided we can go dark fast enough."

"Don't worry about that, I'll have us dark before the drift measurements are in."

Joker was never very shy about his skill, and I rarely doubted his boasts, but here I had to admit to myself that I was dubious. It would be a matter of nanosecond margins, but if he actually managed to time the activation of the stealth systems perfectly, as he suggested, then the ship's exit signature would have been offset from our actual position due to spatial drift, which would mean the Geth would be looking in the wrong place to begin with.

"Make sure that you do. Now, after we transition we will be making a beeline toward the planet. We will not be engaging in the battle."

"Battle?" It was Shepard's turn to interrupt. "Your fleet is already in-system?"

"No. But they will arrive moments after we do."

"We would have seen them on sensors by now…"

"They will arrive moments after we do."

The room went silent. I had tried to avoid my usual theatrics after arriving on the Normandy, since I knew it rubbed Shepard the wrong way, but at that point, I honestly could not care less. We did not have time to waste explaining pointless detail. If I had to resort to my theatrical displays of unquestionable authority to keep momentum going, I would.

"It will arrive in two stages: The main force, and a smaller force on a stealth deployment. The Geth interceptor fleet will make a run for the main force. That should not pose a problem. I expect the Virmire fleet to break off to intercept as well, as the Archangel will be heading straight for them at a glancing vector across Virmire."

Garrus nodded, "Which allows them to use their guns without risking the planet surface."

"Indeed. No doubt, the remaining force will manoeuvre to have the planet at their backs. That is where the secondary force comes in."

"Pincer movement?" Shepard caught on quickly.

"Precisely. The Geth will be cornered with the planet at their backs. They will have to break orbit and go through our firing lines to avoid being encircled and cut off."
"You forget about the moon, human," Wrex grunted, exuding an aura of tactical authority that could only come from someone who had seen a long lifetime of battles. Over 1800 years of them, in fact. "The Rachni would do this same thing when attacking Krogan outpost worlds during the Rachni wars. We solved the problem by using heavy anti-ship cannons deployed on the moons, they would disrupt the pincer movement and free up the main orbital fleet to manoeuvre."

"We considered this. Which is why the first strike by the main fleet will be directly at the moon. Trust me when I say, that will eliminate the threat."

"Fair enough. So, the plan is for your fleet to engage the ships in orbit while the Normandy crew takes care of the mission groundside?"

"No. We will be joined groundside by a friendly invasion force. Which is the main purpose of this briefing; to get you up to speed on the kind of tactics we will be employing."

Shepard grit her teeth, obviously not happy with the implications. "I'm in charge of the ground operations, Messenger…"

"You're in charge of the Normandy crew and what they do groundside. I will act as liaison between the Technopath Corps forces and yourself until you have a chance to plan directly with them and the STG at their base on the planet." I waved a hand in a placating gesture toward the Commander, "Don't worry, Shepard, you're still in control of your people. I'm just giving you a framework. One you're used to, even."

She quirked an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"The Corps uses N7-invasion tactics as standard groundside procedure."

Her eyes widened in response. N7 tactics weren't widely publicised, and most militaries considered them highly unorthodox. Whereas the Turians preferred their platoons and 12-man squads, backed up by smaller Cabals, and the Asari organised their fighters into Commando and Huntress squads of anywhere from 6-18 in strength, the N7 special forces had tactics that were generally very different. No N7 squad was ever larger than three men. That was considered a hard limit, as anything beyond that reduced the efficiency-per-soldier in combat. Beyond that basic limitation were a few adaptations for different situations. N7-stealth required at least one infiltrator per squad, for example, and N7-assault required a balanced approach to tech, biotic, medic, and combat specialisations. N7-invasion was different, and only ever used on the most top-secret missions.

"That's… how did you…"

"Our forces are N7 trained. Many of our officers are former N7. We have agents that are still active N7. Your tactics are extremely effective, so much so that our entire fleet combat philosophy centres around it."

This was true; while Archangel fleet was certainly capable of more than holding its own in a space battle, it had been designed primarily to land troops quickly, safely, and efficiently, and then protecting said troops by maintaining orbital and air superiority.

"In fact, I think you would be better suited than I to brief the crew on this part of the operation."

Eyes still wide as she tried to understand the implications of what I had just told her – the N7 program had been breached! – Shepard took a few moments to compose herself, before she got up and joined me in front of the crew.
"What I am about to say is classified information. It does not leave this room." She took a breath, and continued. "N7-invasion tactics maintains the strict three-man-squad rule, but replaces the two squad members with squad leaders. It takes a wider view of the battlefield, dividing squads into Primary and Secondary squads. The leaders of the Secondary squads are members of the Primary, under the command of the Squad Commander."

Mandibles flicked and eyebrows and -ridges raised throughout the room. Observing the people in the room, only three of them didn't react with surprise. Nihlus, Chakwas, and Pressly. Aside from the Commander and myself, they were probably the only ones who had already been briefed on these tactics.

"That doesn't sound very effective, Commander." Garrus. I had expected him to chime in, ever the tactician.

"It is certainly unconventional, but it has proven itself to be very efficient. The Secondaries operate as regular squads, and from the perspective of the Squad Commander so does the Primaries, except that the scope is wider and the SC tends to be more immediately alone than with a regular squad."

"Because of that last tendency, often the Squad Leader will fill an Infiltrator combat role."

"Yeah. That, or Vanguard. I usually take the latter role."

"Usually?" Nihlus interrupted, his mandibles widening in a mix of surprise and amusement, "The N7 applies these tactics often?"

"Not really," a wicked smile spread across Shepard's face, "But I'm usually involved when they do. And not even Spectres have access to those reports."

Did she just... wink at Kryik?

[I believe so.]

"Anyway… Shepard, you will have free reign to divide your crew up into Primary and Secondary squads as you see fit. However, I will not be part of those squads."

"Oh?"

"When we reach groundside, I will be taking control of a squad of Technopath operatives. We will be moving behind enemy lines, disrupting their operations and providing stealth support for the invasion force."

The Commander grinned. "I think I can live with that."

"We are on approach. Transition in T-30 seconds."

"Alright, everyone, report to your stations! Nihlus, Alenko, you're with me."

I had taken my station in CIC Maintenance in time for Normandy's transition to Hoc, and called up the tactical and pilot POV displays just as I felt the familiar sensation of relay transit. More than anything else, it was relay travel that kept reminding me of just how unnatural modern technology could be. Our bodies simply weren't made to violate the laws of physics like that. The tiny amount of time it took for the relay's mass effect fields to pass through your body was enough to be felt, and it
felt like a snap in slow motion; like your body was pulled apart in one moment, then compressed the next, before being let go by some unseen force that had been holding it back somehow. A very curious sensation indeed.

Joker had not been exaggerating. In a very impressive feat of piloting wizardry, he managed to engage the stealth systems nearly precisely as the Normandy entered real space. Relativistic effects being what they were, that equated to the ship's last readable signature being offset significantly from our actual exit vector. The Geth would be looking for us in the wrong place.

"Stealth systems engaged, plotting silent approach vector to Virmire, ETA 30 minutes."

"Messenger, how far behind us is your fleet?" The Commander's voice came through the CIC intercom system, public enough that she wouldn't expose my identity.

"They will deploy in five minutes, just before we reach the interceptor patrols."

"Fair enough. Pressly, keep an eye on the relay."

"You'd be looking in the wrong place."

"What do you mean?"

Tapping a few controls in front of me, I passed Archangel fleet's deployment coordinates to Shepard's station. "Set your sensors to monitor this area."

Silence followed for a few seconds. "That's... that's in the middle of the system. There are no relays in that area, Messenger."

"I am quite aware."

"What are you... you know what, fine. Do as he says. But keep an eye on the relay patrol as well, let's avoid surprises coming in from behind us."

We – Caesar, myself, and our organisation – had spent many years following archaeological breadcrumbs of previous civilisations that no one else knew existed, in an effort targeted specifically at finding technological advantages we could employ against the Reapers. Early on, we had developed a theory, that any race sufficiently stubborn to not perish immediately in the Reaper invasion would have a survival instinct and tactical proficiency sufficient to have developed technology that gave them an edge. Nothing sufficient to beat the Reapers outright, obviously, but the theory was that many minor advantages might combine to one big advantage. And we had indeed developed many such minor advantages over the years based on our findings.

The Prothean Empire had been the source of most of those. During their centuries of fighting the Reapers, small pockets of Prothean science teams scattered on remote planets around the galaxy, away from the relay network, had developed many technologies that allowed them to continue their struggle beyond what they had any right to survive. Some of the developments they had made in dark energy physics, mass effect mechanics, and relay technology had been a huge boon to our efforts. Originally, we had hoped to be able to build our own relay networks, as we knew the Prothean scientists on Ilos had cracked that particular code. However, for now that remained out of our reach. We did manage to create the next best thing, though. Project Slingshot.

"Commander!" Pressly's voice travelled through the CIC floor even without the intercom to convey it, "We're reading a dark energy signature at the indicated coordinates! It reads like..."
"Like a fleet of ships entering normal space from relay travel."

…

"Report!"

Shepard couldn't make any sense of the tactical readings. The mass signature count and the emissions count disagreed about how many ships had... appeared, and then both counts suggested that a third of the fleet – at least by numbers – had simply disappeared. And that's not to mention how one of the ships was, by volume, five times the size of the rest of them combined!

"That's..." Joker floundered. "I don't know what to report, ma'am! It's definitely a fleet!"

*Oh for crying out... "Messenger! Report!"

"Hang on, I'm adjusting your targeting routines. Refresh your tactical outputs... now."

Shepard hit a couple of controls, and watched as the tactical display flickered and then slowly began to make more sense.

"Ma'am! We have fifteen frigates, four cruisers, two carriers, several dozen fighters already launched and one... enormous one."

"Joker?"

"Well I don't know what the hell it is, it's the biggest thing I have ever seen apart from the damn Citadel and the Relays! It's bigger than Arcturus!"

"And moving?!!"

"That would be the Archangel, Commander. My flagship."

"Excuse me? I think you mean my flagship!"

"Commander, another fighter – I think – just dropped its stealth! It's right behind us!"

"This is Fleet Captain Rohu'Shann nar Rayya vas Archangel. Archangel actual, I am on approach. Prepare for transition of command. And Commander Shepard?"

"...yes?"

"Thanks for the ride."

*What in the name of the sweet baby Jesus' glowing behind is going on here?*

Chapter End Notes

This is a bit on the short side, I realise. I had originally planned on this chapter ending with the Normandy touching down on Virmire and meeting the Technopath Corps' ground forces, but I'm going to have that for next chapter. It's been too long since I
posted the last one, I think, so I wanted to get this out there.

The primary reason why my update frequency has decreased so much over the past months is the increased university workload. I'm in my last semester of my linguistics degree now, and only have three assignments left, all with deadlines within the next couple of months. One of them is my dissertation, so there is that... I'm probably not going to be updating very frequently at all until they have finished and handed in. I really need to focus on them.

Thank you for all your reviews, I enjoy them all immensely!

Srry for grammar: All I can say is that the fate of the Hugo Gernsback has been taken into account by my story outline. I can't say much beyond that, that would spoil things for quite far down the storyline.

Goldspark1: As I alluded to last time, the relationship between the Close Corporation, the Technopath Corps and the Migrant Fleet is complex. The Close Corporation is a very public entity, as one of the biggest businesses in Council space. And as far as the majority of Quarians are concerned, it is the Corporation that is their primary ally. Relatively few Quarians are trusted with even knowing the existence of the Technopath Corps. I say relatively; they still make up the bulk of the Corps' staff. As for why Shepard 'lost' the fight with Close, I'm pretty sure he could beat her any time as long as he had time to prepare at all. However, it is worth keeping in mind that this is ME1- Shepard. Non-augmented Shepard. She's still a real badass, no doubt about that, but Close has as much training as she does (have a look at the Mass Effect timeline on the wiki), a better mentor, and a significant technological advantage. Her own biotic advantage is rather significant as well, but on balance I doubt she can fully match him one-on-one... for now. She's still Shepard, though. Special in many ways :)

Tergen: Yeah, I think that's what annoys Shepard so much. She keeps 'miscalculating' when it comes to him :) As for Cerberus, well, you'll just have to wait and see! As I told you in PM, I have plans for Miranda and Jacob, though I'm pretty sure my plans for Jacob won't be what any of you think. As I said, remember that canon Jacob doesn't join Cerberus until after the events of ME1, which means that if my story was following canon he would still be a Corsair right now. Not saying he isn't, or even that he is... just saying that I know, and you don't :P

LordGhostStriker: Heh :) I don't think he would do that, though. He implied the threat of a loss of access to resources, but he wouldn't take away what he'd already given. He would still want their mission to succeed, and providing the best possible resources toward that end would be in his best interests, whether he was on the crew or not.

Several of you keep hinting at the possibility of a Shepard/Close pairing. Ehm... we'll see. I'm dubious :P

Thanks as well to Kamika111, Tahkaullus01, XRaiderV1, tf330129, Dickson, RadioPoisoning and theshadow603 for reading and reviewing!
Author's notes: I don't own Mass Effect. If I did, I would hire someone to help me stick to an actual schedule for this.

So writing that 10,000 word dissertation kinda destroyed my inspiration for writing for a while. I had hoped to have this chapter out shortly after finishing that project, but the best laid plans... This is also the second chapter where I've discarded my work and started over from scratch after writing more than half of it. The first draft just wasn't working well, and it was driving me up the wall trying to make it work. Not entirely happy with how this turned out either, but at this point I'm just happy to be done with it so I can move on to the next one.

I had also hoped to get more descriptions of the Archangel in there. I have a few pages written down about that ship, it's quite thought-out at this point. You've not seen that last of it, though, there is at least one more large space battle planned for this story (you know which one), plus this one isn't exactly finished yet.

Going to try to stick to some sort of schedule at least until I start working in August.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The big… uh, Archangel is adjusting its heading. It's," Joker took a breath and let it out in a slow whistle, "It shouldn't be able to move like that. The inertial stresses should be tearing it apart!"

I was having a ton of fun. Joker was torn between incredulity and drooling, Nihlus just stared slack-jawed at his monitors for several minutes, Shepard was desperately trying to make sense of her sensor readings, and even the experienced and normally stoic Pressly looked entirely dumbfounded by the reports he was reading out to his captain. The crew continued to perform their tasks, almost robotically, linking in with Archangel fleet's tactical channels and setting an approach vector that took us around what would soon become a battlefield.

Meanwhile, I continued my coordinating duties, overseeing the stealth deployment of a Dagger group carrying Technopath operatives to Virmire's moon. Technically, this was the first strike of the Battle of Hoc, and it would be crucial for ensuring the success of the planned pincer movement. Shortly after the Dagger group had been dispatched came the first surprise of the battle – the fleet's arrival notwithstanding – as the Geth interceptor patrol fleet made a risky in-system FTL jump in an attempt to break our lines. Had they succeeded, the pincer movement would have been a messy affair. But as is usually the case with such jumps, the exit locations and trajectories diverged unpredictably. The Geth fleet separated into rough groups based on the relative size and mass of the ships, with the frigates exiting in a scattered, messy formation right in the middle of Archangel's recently deployed Heavy Fighter Drones.

Under ordinary circumstances, the HFD wings would have been clearly outmatched. However, they vastly outnumbered the frigates, were far more agile, and lacked a weakness shared by Geth ships and ordinary VI-controll dronecraft: A relatively slow response time. It turns out you can't program intuition. Organic pilots consistently outperformed their synthetic counterparts due in part to intuitive action, which allowed them to react to situational changes before they occurred and generally behave
Individual Geth decision clusters, usually consisting of anywhere from 10-20 programs, were capable of making up for this deficiency through their exceptional processing efficiency. However, in larger groups they had to wait for local consensus, and while this made their collective actions smarter it also made them slower. The HFD drones, on the other hand, were controlled by Caesar forks and had no such limitation, and even though this lag was only a few milliseconds it was enough for the HFDs to pick their targets and fire the first shots of the battle.

These drones were multirole units, taking their place between the interceptor fighter drones that handle enemy fighters and missiles, and the bombers whose primary duty is getting past the defences of the larger ships and attacking them directly. HFDs were made to attack the more numerous and agile frigates and smaller cruisers, screening the ships of Archangel Fleet from close attacks by the most common attack ship weights in the galaxy. As such, it was never really a fair fight to begin with, and it showed immediately. The HFDs flew circles around the Geth frigates, getting inside their shield envelopes before firing their mass drivers at point blank range. They targeted the control thrusters and engines first, further extending their agility advantage and crippling the frigates' ability to counter them by exploiting their higher capacity for speed and coordination.

The cruisers were in a slightly more advantageous position, dropping in behind our own cruiser groups. They were smart enough to realise they couldn't touch the Archangel itself, and that their interceptor fleet could do little to actually damage the fleet, so they resorted to harassment tactics. Staying mobile, and using the shadows of our ships to shield themselves from fire, they unleashed a flurry of hit and run strikes. They nearly succeeded in crippling one of our cruisers, the Yare Noln. An experimental light-carrier cruiser of Asari design, she was one of the oldest ships in the fleet, a salvage project from before we had our own shipyards up and running. Losing her would probably not have been a big tactical loss, but it would have been a massive hit to morale. The Noln had become something of a mascot to the Technopath navy, it had taken part in nearly every single major naval action we had launched in the past decade. I had served on it myself as the XO for nearly a year, during which time it served as the mobile command centre for the Technopath Corps, and had grown fond of the old girl. Fortunately, she was tougher than she looked, and managed to hang on long enough to see the Geth advantage dissipate. Our cruiser groups had maneuvered closer to the Archangel while tanking the assault, and after a few minutes the first Geth came within range of our flagship's massive GARDIAN arrays.

GARDIAN arrays were well-established technologies, and the only viable weaponised laser technology deployed in the field. This has to do with power efficiency and the simple fact that the amount of power you would have to pump through a laser to compete with the impact energy of a mass driver made the proposition completely unfeasible. This meant that GARDIANS were used primarily as point-defence weapons, utilising their firing and impact speed advantage to detonate incoming missiles before they hit. GARDIAN arrays were effective at disabling fightercraft and other light craft, but were impractical against larger vessels. This normally includes cruisers, but the Archangel's arrays had certain innovations that allowed this.

Most important of these technologies was the prismatic linking system. At the base of each array was a prism guide, a set of prisms and lenses designed to redirect income GARDIAN lasers into the barrel. Using this system, multiple GARDIAN turrets could link together to drive one more powerful laser. For normal ships, this wouldn't make any real difference. But a ship the size of the Archangel had enough laser turrets that a system like this allowed it to increase the damage output of any given turret dramatically, enabling turrets on the opposite side of the ship from the target to contribute to bringing it down.

Firing the lasers into our own group carried significantly less risk than using the standard mass driver
weapons, and in less than a minute of firing the remainder of the interceptor fleet were in retreat. The whole skirmish had only lasted a few minutes, and the Geth had failed to derail our course. Despite suffering heavy casualties to their lightest and most agile fleet, they probably considered the maneuver successful; they had bought enough time for the orbital fleet to move into a position with Vimire at their back, knowing we wouldn't risk firing at the planet. In other words, despite the surprise move by the Geth, everything was going to plan.

"Pincer 2 has reached the planet. Launching landing parties and beginning orbital approach. Maintain stealth, time to target 30 minutes."

"Dagger has reached the moon, ready to begin strike."

"Received. Dagger, you have orders to infiltrate, Delta strategy. Archangel will be in range of emplacements in 20. That's your window."

"Received, Messenger, detonation in 20."

---

These guys are good. Shepard hated to admit it, but she'd seen enough naval battles to recognise real skill. They were not the first skilled private fleet she had come across, but Archangel was better organised than even the Eclipse at their height of power during the Terminus Wars. Of course, they also happened to have the biggest damned stick in the system. That certainly helped.

System? Try galaxy, Leena. That thing is a monstrosity.

"Commander, we need to talk."

"About what, Nihlus?"

Something in his voice had her turn her gaze away from her tactical readouts for the first time since that… thing, had arrived in system. She didn't know what that something had been until she saw his face. The man was furious.

"I have been attempting to contact the Council. They need to hear of this."

"You can't get through?"

"No," he snarled. "And I think our mutual friend below the CIC has something to do with that."

"What makes you say that?"

"He managed to pass messages through the Geth interference after we arrived in system. No non-Alliance comm ports have been opened since we arrived."

She connected the dots. "Which means he passed those messages through an Alliance communications tunnel, which means the line of communication through the relay should be open to us. Got it."

Shepard wasn't entirely sure how she felt about the idea of reporting this to the Council. Kryik had always been a loyalist, and it took a lot to convince him to bend the rules. Damned Turian pragmatic idealism. No flexibility allowed. She had always thought it odd, the Good Turian was loyal and idealistic, but pragmatic and adaptable to the situation. The flexibility was the issue. What separated a good Turian from a bad one was their willingness to bend the rules. Nihlus would, if the situation
called for it, but you would need to hit him over the head with reason to get there.

"Might not be a bad idea to keep them in the dark about this, Kryik."

His mandibles tightened against his face and his chin dropped, a warning sign you wouldn't have to be an expert in body language to figure out. "Should I remind you of your duty, Spectre?"

*God damn it. I guess I'm doing this.*

"What do you think will happen if the Council gets a report on Archangel fleet, Kryik?"

Turians don't scoff, but the slight flick of his mandibles proved a decent approximate. "It's not my job to speculate."

"But as I have been trying to teach you for years, it is your job to plan ahead. The Council receives the report, they must respond. What will be the response?"

Despite himself, Kryik's gears began turning. She could see it in his eyes; he was trying to figure out where she was going with this.

"They," he hesitated for a few moments, "they would reinforce relay links between Hoc and Council space to intercept the fleet, or force the fleet to move through the Terminus."

"What effect would this have on fleet distribution and ship numbers in the Core?"

And then it clicked. Visibly. His mandibles had stayed tight to his face throughout most of the conversation, and the sudden drop was a very obvious signal.

"They… the fleets would be spread thin during the move. The Citadel Defense Fleet would pick up the slack until the Alliance Fifth Fleet is negotiated for."

"The Citadel would be left vulnerable. You see the Geth fleet out there. We know that's not the full fleet."

"We do?"

"Obviously. Sovereign is not in system, at least not yet. Which means Saren probably isn't here yet either."

"You realise that this means this campaign won't end our mission?"

*I knew that the moment we got word from the Council that his base had been found.*

*God damn it.* Nihlus turned toward the new arrival in the CIC, just exiting the staircase behind him. He had clearly been listening in, with how he had slipped into the discussion like that.

"What? How…" A look of realisation crossed Kryik's features. Every Turian I had ever met made that same exact expression whenever they figured out something surprising. I was not sure what he had figured out yet, but… *oh. Damn. That's… significant.*

"Operatives." The words left her mouth in a whisper. "You have operatives on Virmire already."

"Yes. Undercover in the STG."

"You have infiltrators in the STG?!"
"You still underestimate me, Kryik?" He turned back toward the Turian. "I have infiltrators everywhere."

He waved a hand as he turned away from us again, and walked up to a nearby tactical console. Manipulating a few buttons, he changed the CIC tactical display to show a map of the ground near where we were planning our landing.

"To more important business. The STG team is located here," he indicated a location on the holoprojection a couple of clicks north of the drop site, "Right in the middle of a series of anti-air batteries. Those batteries need to be taken out before the Normandy can approach the STG landing area."

Shepard quickly looked over the tactical data, feeling more confident with readouts she could actually make sense of. Anti-air. Mako desant raid tactics. This I can do.

... The approach went by without any unforeseen events. Just before Normandy hit the atmosphere, Dagger got the signal to blow the lunar installations, opening up the final approach for Archangel's main battle group. As the fleet had gotten closer to the planet the Geth had increased their elevation while still keeping Virmire at their backs, allowing them more room to manoeuvre. The destruction of their lunar installation had them rethink their strategy, as they separated out their destroyer- and frigate-weight ships on a slingshot vector around the moon. Meanwhile, the bulk of their fleet, including their battlecruisers, carriers, and heavy cruisers, remained in position and established a firing formation. Sometimes traditional is the best way to go, and fire and movement tactics remained the default skirmish tactic both on the ground and in space. Fortunately for us, this was the worst possible manoeuvre they could have chosen given our own battle plan.

Ten seconds before the Archangel entered the Geth's optimal firing range, Pincer 2 opened fire on their lines from behind. The battle group that made up the other arm of the pincers consisted of the most heavily armed and armoured sub-capital class ships in the fleet, mostly heavy destroyers and line cruisers. Most of the ships in our fleet were designed to take a hell of a beating while remaining operative, and barring the Archangel itself the ships in Pincer 2 were the toughest of the lot.

The plan was simple: Ram through the Geth firing line while taking out as many of their ships as possible, and re-join the rest of the fleet as it hastened its approach and smash through their lines from the other direction as it went into orbit. Once established in a low orbit, the Archangel could do the job it was designed to do. It would provide cover against the enemy forces in space for dozens of landing craft and the smaller vessels of the fleet as they entered atmosphere and worked their way to the ground, while providing overwatch and targeted strikes at strategically important ground installations.

The kind of approach manoeuvring this plan required was normally impossible for a capital-weight ship. Approaching low orbit elevation at the sort of velocities required to break through the firing line would require the ship to brake and reorient itself so harshly that the inertial stresses would tear it apart. But the Archangel was designed specifically for this kind of tactic. Its large surface area provided a wide area of cover for the landing craft which held the majority of our attack force. Its eezo quad-core drive system allowed both the power needed for the rapid deceleration, and the structural integrity needed to keep the ship together as it reoriented itself into its canopy position. A reorientation which itself was made possible by nearly the same technology that the Normandy used to manoeuvre. The Tantalus core of the Alliance's first stealth ship was something of a technological leap in some respects even compared to the similar core designs on the Technopath flagship, but the
basics were essentially the same. The oversized cores generate mass concentrations that the ship ‘falls into’, which allows movement and manoeuvring without the use of thrusters. This technology is key to the feasibility of starship stealth systems, as it is essentially the only way – aside from gyroscopic controls – to move a ship in space without detectable emissions.

"Pincer 2, change of orders. Break through the firing line, then divert to disrupt their flanking movement before looping back to low orbit with the Archangel."

"Received, Messenger."

"Alright, people, we are five minutes from drop!" Shepard's voice carried easily throughout the cargo bay, where the entire ground force of the Normandy was preparing for their part in the ground campaign. "Find your squads, check your plans, final check your gear, do whatever you need to do to prepare yourself. This is a standard Mako desant raid charge leading to a full-scale Castle Raid."

The Mako desant was a modern-day variant of a tactic used in the early days of tank warfare, where soldiers would climb on top of tanks as they advanced quickly into enemy territory. From that position, they could keep a lookout and quickly disembark for infantry manoeuvres. This tactic had fallen out of favour with the advent of APCs and lighter troop carrier vehicles, but had seen a sort of revival in the days of interstellar conflict, particularly with the Alliance. The main battle tank of the Alliance navy was the M-37 Mako, a sort of combined APC and heavy tank. There was no need for the crew to climb atop the tank as it drove into battle, but it was designed to allow the squads inside to quickly disembark. The idea was the same as with tank desants; the tank gets you there safely, potentially wreaking havoc on the way, and once you get there the soldiers can do their job. Not everything could be solved with a giant gun, after all.

"Following the initial raid, and provided the friendlies in orbit can keep us protected, we will be meeting up with an STG force and one other friendly force on the ground in preparation for the assault on Saren's base." She took a breath, visibly steeling herself before continuing, "The Castle Raid will by necessity be a combined frontal assault and rear infiltration movement. All squads will be deployed using N7-Invasion tactics. Those of you who are not trained in those tactics will be assigned a trained Squad Commander on the ground. That's all, get to it!"

The cargo bay was already rather busy before the Commander's speech, but her words made the room buzz with activity. Marines everywhere, engineers and chiefs running final equipment checks everywhere. It was almost enough to distract me from my own work. Ashley was performing her duties on the weapons bench, doing final checks and tune-ups on the ground team's weapons. I was multitasking, still acting as liaising officer between the Normandy and the Archangel forces while helping Ashley with her crucial-yet-mindless task.

I had never been a soldier in an official army that was not my own. Never gone through the Alliance boot camp. Never learned to salute and ram sticks up my rear at the sight of someone in a fancier uniform than my own. But my master and trainers had insisted on teaching me many of the same things every soldier learns. Most important of those: Taking care of your equipment. Clean and shine your armour before putting it away, always run thorough systems diagnostics before and after engagements, and always – always – keep your weapons perfectly cleaned and maintained.

That last part in particular had struck a chord with me. It was probably the engineer in me. Disassembling an old M7 Lancer was what originally triggered my fascination with small arms technology in this new life of mine, and since then I had personally disassembled, reassembled, cleaned, repaired, designed, built, and fired countless guns. So when I tell you that Chief Williams *thoroughly impressed me* with how efficiently she went about this job, I want you to understand how difficult that was. I had been trained by professional assassins, veteran soldiers with hundreds of
years of experience, nearly undead former mercenaries, and several former and current N7. None of them came close to the natural skill of this woman. The weapon she was currently disassembling and cleaning was Tali's Mk1 Eviscerator shotgun, a gun I had personally designed. It was hardly a standard-issue weapon, quite the opposite in fact. The revolver heat sink assembly wasn't particularly complex, but it was a set of parts not found in any other field weapon. Yet somehow, that didn't seem to affect her process at all.

"How do you do that?"

She didn't even slow down as she answered. "Follow the three trails," she began, "The trigger, the round, and the heat. The casing itself is easy enough, just a simple visual puzzle. The rest is a matter of figuring out the chain of operations."

As if to illustrate her point, she finished cleaning the gun and got to work reassembling it as she listed off her method. "Trigger activates VI assembly. VI assembly activates shaver. Shaver activates firing chamber. Chamber is monitored by VI, which on load completion activates eezo core assembly. Core activates barrel rails and secondary barrel exhaust. Heat sinks are passively connected to all heating components. Doesn't matter how complex the heat sink assembly is, it can only fit one way and it's always the last component in."

Right she was. It was a rather simplified version of how it all fit together, but it clearly worked well enough. I had timed her reassembly, and she beat my best time. Which was quite a feat, not just because I designed the bloody thing, but also because, well... cyborg super-human, here.

"Impressive. Although... let me see that?"

Quirking an eyebrow, she handed me the gun. I connected to its diagnostic data ports and simulated a firing cycle, keeping an eye on the guide rail power outputs. "Ah, Thought so."

"What? Something wrong?" She crossed her arms, "No way, I haven't assembled a gun wrong in years."

"Nothing so obvious, Chief. But this gun has some quirks. The shaped grains require non-standard rail calibration. You fire it as it is now, the barrel will destroy itself within three shots. I'll send you an extension to your configuration app, it's Alliance standard isn't it?"

"I... yeah. Thanks." She cocked her head to one side and gave me an odd look. "You keep surprising, Messenger. I'll give you that."

The last two minutes before the drop went by very quickly. Ashley left the last few guns for me to complete work on as she went off to join her Commander in the Mako along with Alenko. That was the team Shepard was planning on taking into battle down there. She wanted an invasion squad made up of her own people only, and the two experienced soldiers were her best bets for the squad leader roles, able to command and be commanded at the same time. Should keep them both alive, I hope.

The drop and desant towards the STG camp went off without a hitch. I stayed aboard the ship and continued performing my duties, clearing the remaining weapons and coordinating with the forces in orbit. By the time the Normandy landed near the STG camp the fleet had completely disrupted the
Geth firing line, and was preparing to establish its geostationary canopy position. The Geth’s attempt at a flanking move had backfired spectacularly; a third of the ships, including half of the frigates, had been destroyed before Pincer 2 got in close, and when that happened the remaining ships had little in the way of defensive capabilities in close quarters. The heavy destroyers and line cruisers of Pincer 2 weren’t particularly maneuverable, but they were faster than the Geth ships and could take one hell of a beating. The Geth destroyers were quickly encircled and decimated, and the frigates that got away abandoned the battle to rendezvous with the remainder of their fleet which was heading back toward Virmire from their patrol position near the relay.

Not that the rest of the orbital patrol fared much better. Standard breach orbital approach procedure for the fleet was to remain in the shadow of the Archangel until the breach, and then fan out in its wake to mop up the pieces. More than a dozen of the Geth blockade ships were destroyed in collisions with our flagship. This, too, was part of the tactic. For most ships it would be suicidal, even if they could take the hits it would still be severely damaging. Not the Archangel. My flagship’s purpose was primarily defensive, and it was built specifically to be able to withstand pretty much anything you threw at it. The GARDIANs and Concussors made sure no missiles or fighters got anywhere near the ship, simply through the sheer number of point defence emplacements. Beyond that the ship was protected by a triple-layer, actively configurable cyclonic shielding system which gave it a triple shield gate and immense barrier strength.

That wasn’t what protected it from collisions, though. The Archangel’s final protective layer was a triple layer ablative hull armour system, made up of honeycombed cells. Each cell contains several hex-shield energy barriers sandwiched between layers of different armour structures optimised for different impact signatures. In tests, only a direct hit from a dreadnaught is powerful enough to outright destroy one of these armour elements, which means it would take three hits in the exact same location on the hull to breach through the armour entirely.

A simple collision with a Geth cruiser or twelve was something she could just shrug off. And so she did. After the breach and the subsequent redeployment of the rest of the fleet into the battle, the Geth orbital fleet was quickly reduced to about a third of its strength. By the time the Normandy landed and the Archangel established canopy overwatch they were in retreat back to the relay patrol fleet, which had taken position beyond our operative range.

[They remaining Geth are in a holding pattern, keeping position relative to the canopy. I have detected data traffic through the relay, likely alerting Saren and Sovereign to events here.]

*We’ll have company soon, then.*

[Probably. I doubt they are too far out, and Sovereign’s access to the relay network is an unknown, but known to allow shorter travel than what we can do.]

*Estimates on their fleet strength?*

[Unknown, but with minimum estimates from what the Heretic Geth left the Veil with, we can safely assume that the fleet we just smashed our way through was less than a fifth of their number.]

*And considering they have had years to increase their number since they left the Veil, we can also safely assume they have increased significantly in number.*

[Indeed. Today will be an interesting day. Anyway, Archangel just launched its drop shuttles. Our forces should arrive at our location in 10 minutes.]

*How far out is Shepard?*
I guess we should be getting ready for the great reunion, then.

…

God damn I needed this.

There were few things that ranked higher on the Shepard Scale of Awesome than smashing through enemy lines in the Mako. She loved that thing, despite its reputation as a nightmare on too many wheels. The vertically aligned mass effect fields that everyone hated and engineers across the galaxy facepalmed over? Loved it. It was perfect for climbing mountains and, as she had discovered recently, large Geth constructs.

"Commander, I don't think the Mako was designed as a battering ram!"

"You're wrong there, Alenko, that's exactly what it was designed for!" She grinned widely, "I mean, just look at the damn thing! Huge mass, raised wedge shape, vertically aligned mass effect fields, six giant-ass wheels… nevermind the cannon on top, the vehicle itself is its primary weapon!"

"I'm not sure if it's more reflective of my shooting or your driving, Ma'am, but your kill count is currently higher than mine," Ashley chimed in from the turret control mount in the back, "So I guess you have a point."

Alenko looked positively terrified. "Just saying, if you don't slow down you might add us to that list." He swallowed. "Ma'am."

"Oh shush you. Spoilsport." She shook her head mockingly. "No respect for the Mako. Typical."

The three Alliance marines had fought their way through two Geth installations on their way to the STG encampment, and there was still one left to go. That particular gatehouse did not house any AA emplacements, however, so the Normandy had already been cleared to land at camp. The squad got word a couple of minutes ago that they had landed, and that the big-ass ship in orbit was in the process of landing troops. Meanwhile, the Normandy was effectively grounded at the camp due to the number of AA emplacements in the area that had all been alerted to her presence. How Close's people were going to handle those, she had no idea. She would have assumed it would be done with orbital strikes, but those were legally iffy. Not to mention unpredictable in terms of collateral damage, which would be an issue here. They couldn't chance destroying vital information about Saren's operations. Not that either of those would be a hindrance for most private fleets she had ever come across, but these Archangel guys appeared to be a step above that level. At least.

"We're here, move, move, move!"

 Shepard was pretty much on autopilot in these kinds of situations. Clearing buildings and colony outposts was one thing; the close quarters combat and unknown factors, like the plant zombies of Feros, made those combat situations much more challenging. A Mako desant through well-mapped enemy territory, though, that just reminded her of training. Though she did enjoy playing with her new toys.

Between her, Ashley, and Kaidan, the squad was well-rounded. She had medic and biotic combo support in Kaidan, and fire and comms support from Ashley. With Shepard's usual tactic of running straight at the enemy and coordinating the squad from there, this was pretty much perfect. She would set up biotic detonations for herself and Kaidan, who in turn would cover her back, while Williams kept the big guns at bay with either her assault rifle or her sniper rifle. Simple and effective. All three
of them had the same basic training, and she had known Alenko for years. Williams was a newer acquaintance, but one of the most talented marines she had ever worked with. They had developed an understanding during the very first firefight they’d shared a part in, back on Eden Prime.

The Shepard is not an easy part to play. As a necessary function of her particular set of skills and talents, she has to get up close and personal to the enemy to maximise her efficiency. Being that close requires a certain level of innate unpredictability, a chaotic streak that makes her harder to pin down. That particular trait, while necessary for fulfilment of her battlefield role, is not very conducive to squad leadership. This requires two things of her: She needs to know her squadmates' behavioural patterns well enough that she can predict their actions with some accuracy, and she needs her squadmates to be able to work around her. Alenko and Williams did this very well. This third gatehouse was a good example of this: There were nine enemy contacts, two of which were heavies, plus one of those skittish buggers. Shepard didn't have to issue any explicit orders; after activating her annihilation field, she sent off a throw at the jumping Geth as she ran head-first into a group of four troopers. Only a moment later she heard the loud snap of Ashley's high-powered sniper rifle as she executed the hopper, and the moment her she reached her targets they were blown apart by Kaidan's throw detonating her warp effects. A single Geth was left standing, not counting the rocket troopers and juggernauts waiting for them across the walkway, and that kill went to her as she fired a single shot of her pistol through its flashlight from point blank range.

Beautiful carnage.

The last four hostiles were two charging juggernauts, backed up by two rocket troopers who held position stacked up on the entrance to the room across the walkway from where they could cover their larger allies. The larger units were a bit too bulky to handle in her usual manner, so a change of tactics was required. Flaring bright with warpfire, both her and Alenko threw warp orbs at the feet of the charging synthetics, causing them to stumble slightly. It didn't slow them down much, but it was enough to allow Shepard to switch to her Scimitar shotgun. It wasn't a particularly powerful weapon, but it was excellent for keeping enemies at bay. She alternated between the two, opening up with a three-shot salvo for each that put a halt to their charge. Thus halted, the combined fire from Ashley's assault rifle and Kaidan's pistol, combined with the occasional overload from the sentinel, was enough to take the pair down in just a few seconds. Which only left the rocket troopers, who immediately let themselves be known the moment the allies who had obstructed their field of fire were taken down.

"Cover!"

Both rockets had been aimed at her, that much was obvious from the way she was thrown clear of her cover as it disintegrated in a shower of sparks and concrete chunks. Her barrier lost about half of its strength from the concussive force, and she didn't really want to think about how a direct hit would've gone. They're too far, not going to make it before the next salvo… damn it, here goes nothing.

While Alenko and Williams kept the Geth suppressed from their cover positions, Shepard concentrated. This was a technique she hardly ever used, as she had never really mastered it fully and it took a lot out of her. Holding her hand out in front of her, palm-up, an orb of biotic energy slowly formed and sparked violently. The sparks hurt, like being hit by hundreds of micro-overloads, but she couldn't allow it to break her focus. Just when the rocket troopers popped their flashlight heads out to fire another volley, Shepard shot her hand forward and sent the orb flying. She pulled her hand back just as it reached the two Geth, and the orb exploded into a singularity. The rockets veered off course as they were caught in the singularity field, exploding harmlessly against the outer walls of the building. Grinning, Shepard took off at a run. That's gonna hurt like a bitch later. Emphasis on later.
The gatehouse had been the last enemy resistance the squad had met before they reached the STG camp. They had heard – and felt – some explosions in the distance, which she assumed was the AA installations being taken care of. It was strange, thought Shepard, that even though she had only been on the *Normandy* for a couple of weeks it still felt like coming back home when she saw the beautiful ship landed near the waterfront. She was so focused on it that she barely made notice of the dozens of troop landing shuttles scattered around the area.

She drove the Mako right up to the cargo landing platform, and left it to the crew to get it aboard and checked. It would probably be used as mobile artillery in the assault on Saren's base, but she would not be driving it for that. No, her role would be more… complicated.

Asking for directions from her crew, she was pointed toward a series of tents further up the beach. There were people of all of species walking around, most of them in full armour, including a few Elcor and even a Volus or two, though mostly the Technopath Corps appeared to employ humans, Quarians, and Asari. The low number of Turians around was hard not to notice, though if she were to guess she would assume that Turians would be more likely than most to pose a security threat to the secrecy of the organisation because of their culture and connections all Turians had within the Hierarchy's armed forces.

Near the tents she saw some familiar figures, about half of the ground team including Close himself. He was conversing with a green-skinned Salarian in STG-issue armour, probably the team's leader, one Captain Kirrahe. Next to them stood a large man in what looked like frame armour, similar but sleeker than the old T4 models the Alliance had fielded in the past.

"Commander Shepard, reporting in." She gave a walking salute as she joined the group and took position directly in front of the STG commander. "What's the situation?"

The Salarian's giant eyes blinked twice as he studied the new arrival, before he reached out a hand in a traditional human fashion. Shepard accepted the handshake with a nod imitating a subtle Salarian greeting. "I'm Captain Kirrahe, Third Infiltration Regiment STG."

Withdrawing his hand, Kirrahe straightened his posture into something approaching military attention. "You and your crew have just landed in the middle of a hotzone, although it appears your… friends, have handled the AA guns that would have otherwise kept your ship grounded."

"They are quite effective, aren't they?"

"Nothing less than I would have expected from the Technopath Corps."

That got Close's attention. Breaking character for a brief moment, his head cocked to the right and his hands unclasped behind his back briefly before he regained his composure. "*You know about the Corps?*"

"Rumours, mostly. Know now they are true. The level of secrecy you have been able to maintain is extremely impressive for what is presumably a private organisation. But we *are* the STG. Knowing the unknowable is what we do." The Salarian cocked his head and brought two fingers up to his chin as he continued, "But I am surprised that the Council would send a private fleet in response to our message."

Shepard waved a hand dismissively, "They didn't. They sent only the *Normandy*, didn't want to risk the potential fallout from sending a fleet this deep into the Traverse."
"Indeed. The Technopath Corps is here on my orders."

"Interesting. Was not aware of a link between the Messenger and the Technopaths. The only long-term affiliate of yours known to the STG is the Shadow Broker."

"It is hardly a secret that I run courier for the Broker from time to time."

"No. I suppose not. This… changes threat matrices. Must discuss with superiors." He waved a hand as if dismissing the conversation, "But we have more important matters to discuss. Besides the Council's flawed analysis. They really should have sent a fleet."

The STG operative waved a hand and began pacing slowly back and forth, his right elbow resting on his left arm as he stroked at his chin. "We have the basic outlines of a plan. As you are aware already, we have found Saren's base of operations. It's crawling with Geth, and is heavily fortified. This, however, is not our main concern, as it appears Saren's people have developed a cure for the Genophage."

*Oh damn.* "I'm sure Wrex would love to hear all about that."

"I've already heard." The unmistakeable grumble of the Krogan Battlemaster interrupted the conversation, and Close took a step to the side to make room for Wrex as he lumbered in to join the small group. "I knew this was a possibility before we came here. Hints and insinuations have been trickling in for months about this, myself and Messenger here have been tracking down Krogan scientists on Saren's payroll for a long time, turning them to our cause."

"Wrex and I had been tracking Saren for months before we met at the Citadel, Commander. He's been using Krogan as cannon fodder for a while now. That tactic doesn't make sense, there aren't enough Krogan around to waste them like that. And Wrex noticed something odd right away."

"These are tank bred Krogan. They smell… wrong. There have been other attempts to do what he is doing. A very old Krogan named Okeer got himself hated by nearly all Krogan for similar efforts a few hundred years ago. Rumour says he is still trying."

"Yes, the STG knows of Okeer. He has escaped our capture on many occasions. Was personally involved in one of them. Do you believe him involved here?"

"No. It's one of the first things we investigated. Okeer is still hiding somewhere in the Terminus. Rumour has it, he escaped the Terminus Wars with his last employer, a former Blue Suns commander. We know his approximate location and have it boxed in."

"However," grumbled Wrex, "It is very likely that students of his are involved. The work appears very similar."

"In some ways. But there is a crucial difference." Kirrahe paused a moment for what appeared to be nothing more than dramatic effect. "Okeer never tried to cure the Genophage, merely overcome it. He is trying to allow the Krogan to 'move past it', to use his own words. But Saren has developed a cure. His tank-bred aren't clones. They are bred. And our analysis of their bodies show no trace of the Genophage in their genetic makeup."

Wrex and Close shared a brief glance at each other, and Close almost imperceptibly nodded. At that, Wrex moved away from the group.

Kirrahe followed him with his gaze, before turning back to Shepard and nodding in his direction. "Is he going to be a problem, Commander?"
"No. We have an understanding."

Shepard gave Close a look. "An understanding?"

"An understanding."

"Anyway. Back to the matters at hand. We are preparing for three-pronged assault in two hours. The Major General here," he indicated toward the large man in frame armour to her left, "Will be leading the main charge at the compound. His job will be to pacify any ground forces, and occupy the bulk of the Geth and Krogan forces at the compound."

Major General?

The large man took that as his cue to enter the conversation, "That is what we do best, we can take whatever they throw at us. And we'll be an excellent distraction for the other two teams."

Shepard thought the voice sounded familiar, distorted as it was by the bulky, armoured helmet. Hang on a second…

"Weaver?"

The Major General turned toward Shepard and brought his hand up to the side of his head. At the push of a concealed button, the blocky helmet folded away into the armour's collar to reveal the smiling face of one of her best friends. Before her stood the sole survivor of Akuze, former N7 Henry Weaver.

"Hey, Sprite."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your reviews, I enjoy them all immensely and aim to respond to them all, if not here then by message! Now, let's get to it...

LordGhostStriker: You got something resembling a space battle? :) I was kind of limited in how much I could show of the battle, since the Normandy wasn't - and couldn't be - directly involved in it.

RadioPoisoning: Yeah, it's a damn big ship! If you look back through the earlier chapters of this story, there are a few hints about the kinds of weapons capabilities it has. It didn't get to use the main guns at all in this battle, both because it wasn't necessary and because they were on an approach to orbit. You don't want to fire big-ass guns towards a planet.

Lanilen: Indeed. He admits as much himself, that this battle would reveal the Corps (and the Archangel) to the wider galaxy. I mean, the STG now knows, though they haven't seen the big-ass ship in orbit yet. Oh, by the way, when's the next update on Divergence/Convergence?! :P
Goldspark1: Close Corporation's use of AI isn't exactly widely known. As the primary manufacturer of standard VI chips and VI software frameworks, it is not unreasonable to think that the various forks of Caesar that pop up around the Corporation's installations are simply highly advanced VIs. Although, a lot of the Quarians are clearly read-in on it. And yeah, the biggest flaw to security is people. One of the most infamous hackers in history, Kevin Mitnick, was an expert in social engineering, which is essentially 'hacking people' to access information.

gwry: Thanks for the praise! I answered the questions/concerns with a rather long couple of messages (it was a very interesting exchange!), and I'm not going to repeat those here, but a couple important points: Lasers are commonplace, but not as field weapons. They simply don't scale, and are easy to come up with defenses against. GARDIANS are effective as point defense weapons because of the short time-to-impact after firing, as demonstrated in this chapter. Also, lasers are very limited in terms of how much energy output you can easily get vs mass drivers. This is down to simple physics: Accelerating a 10kg projectile to even a percent of the speed of light (c) gives an energy output on impact on the scale of nearly 11 kilotons of TNT; those kinds of numbers are simply unfeasible for directed energy weapons, because you can neither store nor output that kind of raw energy except for through mass. Einstein again; energy and mass are the same, but mass is essentially compressed energy. This isn't really an accurate way of looking at it, but it illustrates the issue well. Also, self-assembling drones, advanced metamaterials, and self-repairing materials are commonplace in the ME-verse. According to the Codex, armours are self-repairing as standard, it's part of the "triple canopy of protection", and one can assume this scales to ship armour as well. Weapons self-repair, too; a weapon overheat is literally the breaking down of the cooling system, which probably comes with a lot more damage outside of that isolated system. But if you wait a while, you can resume firing. That is self-repair. These sorts of technologies are just so common-place that they're not given a second thought. It makes perfect sense for it not to really be discussed in ME, it just has to be inferred.

Gauss Frigate: I can't believe it's been over a year already, it's madness! As for the Archangel, it's about three times the length of a Sovereign-class Reaper. Arcturus is about 5km, and she's bigger than Arcturus. Approaching 4 miles (about 6.5km) at least :)

1529: One of my favourite fics right now is KatKiller-V's Another Realm series. In a recent side-fic chapter he released, Oleg Petrovsky described the main character of AR (Cieran Kean) as 'a good leader, but a poor commander'. I feel that fits Shepard quite well, though much more so. She is exceptionally effective in the field, and maximises her team's capabilities very well. She also forms tight friendships with people she likes, which is something I feel like I haven't been able to show very well so that's on my list of necessary improvements in my writing. However, she is not a very good commander yet. She alienates just as well as she befriends, perhaps even more so. Her personality and behaviour tends to turn off people in positions of power, including most of her own superiors. Her promotions and recommendations are explained by a combination of some good relationships with people in positions of power (Anderson and Hackett springs to mind) as well as her broadly publicised actions on Elysium. Shepard has been the most famous marine in the Alliance navy since she was barely on the promotions ladder, and the continued attention from the press and the public over her consistently impressive field performances put significant pressure on the brass to allow her ascension through the ranks.
The plan, in broad strokes, was for Weaver to lead the frontal assault on Saren's base together with Shepard. Once they got past the first gate to the outer courtyard area, Shepard's team would split off to take care of the remaining AA guns. Those inside the compound itself were too well-protected for air strikes, but were vulnerable to ground assault. With those down, we could land forces in shuttles on the shuttle pads at the back of the base, which would help relieve the pressure on the frontal bottleneck. The plan would create an opening on the narrow rear approach to the base, which I would exploit with a team of Technopaths.

Shepard and Weaver walked off to catch up and plan their assault in more detail, which allowed me some time to catch up with my own operatives. The same Dagger group that had handled the lunar installation had landed their craft in a lonely corner of the beach right after Shepard arrived in the Mako. That is, it had been lonely; almost immediately after they landed, the area had been crawling with nosy STG operatives. Unfortunately for them, all their scanning equipment seemed to malfunction whenever they tried to scan the microfrigates. Not that this discouraged them, on the contrary, it just made them more curious and determined.

Working in teams wasn't something Technopaths did often. Most of us were lone wolf operatives both out of operational necessity. We weren't many, and as intelligence agents we needed to be everywhere at once. Rarely did more than two team up for any one mission. Not that we never did, it was just overkill for most missions.

This time, however, overkill was just what the doctor ordered. The cleverly named 'Shadow' team was to move into the operational heart of the base, sabotaging the defensive efforts any way we could, extracting any and all useful information from the compound before Saren or his Geth had a chance to wipe it, and clearing the location of plan B: If at first we don't succeed, apply giant bomb directly to area.

We were of course hoping it wouldn't have to come to that. With the anti-air defences taken care of, the base's defenders attacked from multiple approaches, the Geth's electronic warfare capabilities suppressed by my team and Caesar, and the Geth fleet held in orbit by Archangel, we should be able to capture rather than destroy the facility. That, at least, was plan A. Time would tell how it would fare upon contact with the enemy.

My squad was an interesting bunch of former and current misfits. There were six of us, and of all current operatives we were the ones most used to working as a larger unit, having played a role in some of the most important battles in the final days of the Terminus Wars. Among them was Tela D'Naara, an asari matron who had joined the Corps after her formerly staunchly liberal Tarath'shan made a visit to the Hegemon's Palace on Khar'Shan and came back decidedly less so. Before this she had been a Shadow Broker contact, and by extension my contact, on the Batarian homeworld. She had barely survived the extraction, and decided to become a Technopath after she was introduced to
the programme after life-saving surgery aboard the then still-unfinished Archangel. She wasn't the first biotic technopath, but she was the first asari technopath combatant. Before her, all asari to take the implants got the 'light' version only, and specialised in long-term infiltration.

Like me, Tela became something of a prototype platform. The complexity of our implants required extensive testing that computerised models couldn't do, which meant that each implant and system went through a thorough cycle of in vivo testing before being approved for use in other operatives. I was the primary test subject for most of the implants, which meant that I was far less specialised than most operatives. The same could be said for Tela, though her implants were mostly geared toward improving and increasing her biotic capabilities. And increase them they did.

Biotic technopaths were a terrifying force on the battlefield. With redundant barrier capacitors and severely oversized amps, biotic implants that went far deeper and were a lot more complex than anything available on the mass market, Tela could tank a Mako round at centre mass without breaking her secondary shield gate.

The other biotic on the team was an exiled Batarian named Chen. He had been part of Tela's cadre while she was still a Harath'krem, and had been exiled and forced to work as cannon fodder for a Hegemony-sponsored pirate warlord in the Terminus after she had been declared Reyja'krem and persona non grata on Khar'shan. Tela rescued him after the ship he was held on was defeated and nearly destroyed during one of the Network's pacification campaigns in the eastern Terminus. He joined our cause shortly after and had spent the last couple of years directing those pacification efforts.

The human, a colonial German named Dietrich Freiss, was a former N7 who had been forced into retirement after sustaining serious and crippling injuries during an op on deployment with the Corsairs in the Traverse. Unfortunately for him, he had been identified after the operation and the Alliance had been forced to denounce him as a rogue operator in order to maintain plausible deniability with regards to the Corsairs. Our contacts with the group and within the N-programme sent him our way, initially for an officer and instructor post, but when he realised that undergoing Technopath implantations and training meant he could return to the field he did so without hesitation. Freiss was a weapons specialist, excelling in the use of any and all firearms, but his favourite by far was a heavily modified Revenant machine gun.

The final two members of Shadow team were the Renem twins, Shala and Marel, both vas Archangel. Quarian twins were exceedingly rare, and opinions on them were split within the Migrant Fleet. Some considered them a drain on Flotilla resources, since Quarians were normally only allowed a single child per family. Others viewed them as a blessing, representing an unexpected increase in a slowly dwindling population. The twins were both infiltration specialists, though they had complementary expertise. Shala'Renem was one of the best hackers and saboteurs in the galaxy, while her brother Marel was an expert recon sniper. They were also unusual as far as Technopaths went, as they always operated as a pair.

Quarians were particularly well-suited for infiltration roles as Technopaths. The insulting stereotype of the low-life suit rat actually worked in their favour. They would regularly be suspected of theft, robbery, and other petty crimes, but never of something as 'sophisticated' as espionage, infiltration, or assassination. Plus, few people even noticed them, and those who did never looked very closely at them. Some cheap scanning technologies could detect our cybernetics, but there was nothing out of the ordinary with a part cybernetic Quarian, as far as most people knew. And during Terminus ops, the fact that the twins could go without the suit allowed them to pass as indentured Terminus colonial Quarians who had acclimatised to the premises. In other words, they looked like they belonged and should be ignored.
Their role on Shadow squad would be sniper cover and horde management. Hording was a tactic devised for combat with or against large numbers of synthetics. The idea was simple enough: Turn the enemy forces against each other. Regular battlefield hacking was limited by omni-tool hardware and processing power, but Technopaths had massively increased computational capacity and electronic warfare capabilities that allow us to control far more synthetics at the same time. Hording, specifically, was a protocol for creating and maintaining a self-replenishing "horde" of synthetics to act as a vanguard force. With Geth, a platform's hosted runtimes would manage to reassert control eventually regardless of what kind of computer power you threw at it, so the trick was to "manage" the horde by eliminating those platforms before that could happen. None were more experienced or skilled at this than Shala'Renem vas Archangel.

"Messenger. Good to see you again."

It was hardly a surprise that Freiss was the first to notice me arrive. The man was trained to operate in close-knit teams, and always had an eye out for friends and other acquaintances these days.

"And you, Operative Zeta."

Compartmentalisation was an important aspect of our operational procedures. The names and identities of our operatives were unknown to most, even on Shadow team I was the only one read in on all identities. The twins knew each other, of course, and were otherwise known to everyone, but they knew none of the others, and Tela knew mine and Chan's identities but not Dietrich's.

"I heard you spotted some targets on your approach?"

The man, who was wearing a somewhat bulkier version of my own armour minus the coat, handed me a holo tablet with an updated tactical overview of the compound.

"I was about to send this to the STG captain." He gestured for me to zoom in on the inner compound. "They know the frontal assault is coming, and have moved more forces to those lines, as expected. But here," he pointed at a structure marked in red at the edge of the inner compound, "They have another AA emplacement."

First snag. "Add that to our list of objectives, then. Shepard's squad is handling the one in the outer courtyard."

"We might have to split up to do that effectively. The gun is off our path"

He was right, of course. In the games, Shepard's Shadow team could save the AA tower for last, to clear the air for the Normandy. But that was not our plan. Clearing the airspace quickly was vital for allowing our troop transports to land, which meant we would either have to rush through and double back again, or split the team halfway through.

"Maybe send the twins? I can work as a relay for the horde management, that way we won't have to give up the vanguard force."

He nodded and waved a hand in a vaguely dismissive motion. "It will be overkill still with Chi and Mu up there, but why not."

"You think we should send Mu with them?"

"Between Merel's sniper rifle and Mu's Kishock that would give us some excellent sniper cover from that tower. They'll be able to cover the entire inner compound from there."
I nodded. "Make it happen. I will catch up Chi."

I admit, I was looking forward to seeing Tela again. She had been a good friend for years, and was one of very few people in the galaxy who knew my real identity. That was also why she was trusted as the primary contact between the Technopaths and the Shadow Broker. Apart from myself, that is, but I was formally – and, in a sense, publically – an independent contractor.

She was standing off to the side, conversing with one of Kirrahe's lieutenants. Or rather, fending off his attempts at conversation. After two centuries in Batarian society, and nearly half a decade liaising with Hetta T'Lang, the woman was more than capable of keeping a nosy Salarian at bay.

"My employer is not subject to Council law, Salarian. We are based and operate outside of recognised Council borders. So no, even if I could, I would not deactivate our 'sensor-scattering technology', as you put it."

I had to stifle a chuckle so as not to break character as I walked up to the bickering pair.

"STG authorisation code," I cut off the Salarian before he could protest, "Aegohr Sigma 5, Messenger. Cease your activities at once."

Big black eyes blinked at me one, two times, before he opened his omni-tool to run the code through. When the screen flashed an affirmative at him, he barely looked up as he muttered an apology and walked away to gather his men.

The tall Asari standing next to me snorted. "When did you plant that one, boss?"

"Three years ago. Sur'kesh."

"Ah." She whistled through her teeth, "Well, at least something good came of that clusterfuck."

The remark made me wince slightly. Operations on Sur'kesh were rare, because they were too risky and usually too messy. Only one had taken place three years ago, and it had been… unpleasant. Myself, Tela, and Rho had infiltrated an STG outpost we had learned was central to the organisation's ill-advised plan to study the Yahg for eventual uplifting. The plan was to facilitate the escape of the Yahg subjects, and ensure their deaths in the chaos that followed.

It had not gone well. The moment those creatures escaped, everything had gone to shit. They had somehow figured out how to disable their implanted failsafe devices, which allowed them to live long enough to get halfway out of the base before we managed to corner them and put them down. Tela was severely injured in the melee, and required months of therapy and further enhancements before she could return to the field.

"Small favours. So," I attempted to change the topic, "Thoughts on the plan?"

"It will go tits-up the moment we engage the enemy," she scoffed, a vague grin forming before she continued, "It's as good a plan as any other, boss."

I couldn't help but smirk behind my mask. Indeed.

"So… frame armour? Really?"

Her old friend had collapsed his helmet into a thick collar around his neck, allowing Shepard to see
him smirking at her remark. The two of them shared a lot of history. Part of that history included his first attempts at using frame armour, an old Alliance T5 model. He had called it "the fanciest coffin he had ever had the displeasure of trying on". The Alliance had clearly agreed with the then-N5 commando, as the T5 project had been killed off entirely shortly thereafter.

"This old thing has been my standard combat gear for the last two years," he grinnd. "The Quarians and the Volus are quite experienced with both exoskeletons and mechanically assisted full-suit armour. They worked wonders on the old T5 design."

"They would have had to, for you to wear it. And to make it safe for everyone else when you do."

"Hah!" He slapped her shoulder, making her stumble slightly. "Still blaming me for that toe incident, are we?"

"Incident?" She glared at him, incredulously. "I was out of commission for two weeks! You flattened by reinforced combat boot!"

Weaver gave a lopsided smile as he turned away a bit, a touch of guilt crossing his features. "Yeah, well… that's one of the things they fixed. A better mass effect core with adjustable output. In the standard setting it feels like wearing light armour."

"My feet thank you sincerely."

"You know, you really should be thanking…"

"Don't say it!"

"…Aaron."

"God damn it, Weaver…"

Her old friend's face was firmly set in a serious expression as he got himself ready for what was clearly a prepared speech. "Look, he's half the brains and muscle of all of this! And I'm not just talking about the T6, here."

_Hang on_… "What do you mean, 'half the brains'? He has a partner?"

It didn't matter how skilled Weaver had become at deception and information discipline over the years, Shepard still read him like an open book. The look that came over his face at her question, though brief, was enough. That deer in the headlights look all but confirmed she was right.

"I am not at liberty to discuss Corps management matters and secrets, Shepard," he replied quickly as he regained a neutral expression.

Shepard hissed through her teeth. "I _knew_ he was still hiding something."

With a speed that belied his size, Weaver whirled around and grabbed her shoulder, turning her to face him directly.

"Damn it, _Jane_, not all secrets people keep are _theirs_ to reveal!"

He might as well have slapped her across the face, for the effect his harshly whispered words had on her. She was sure no one else had heard, but that name… he knew not to use that name. Ever.

Shepard's eyes narrowed to a glare as she snarled her response. "Low. Fucking. Blow."
The former N7's face softened as he raised his arms in mock surrender.

"Sorry, Sprite, but you blind yourself sometimes. Someone has to point out to you when you're being a hypocrite." He smiled, genuinely, before adding, "It's what you always liked about me, remember?"

She frowned, reluctant to acknowledge his judgment. He was right. She knew that he was right, as he always was. But more importantly, to her at least, he was always brutally honest.

"You say what you mean and you mean what you say," she grumbled, pausing for a few seconds to collect herself before continuing. "He just… he doesn't respect the chain of command, and he's one of those wheels within wheels types. It's just… I can't…"

"Pot. Kettle. Black." Shepard glared at him, but he continued undeterred. "You don't like him because he reminds you too much of yourself, in uncomfortable ways. He's a good man, Sprite, and an invaluable asset. You know this, even if you refuse to admit it to yourself."

"Fine!" She huffed, "I'm giving him a chance. Now can we drop this?"

He nodded. "What do you want to talk about? The op?"

"We've got time." She smiled mischievously. "You never told me why you're wearing that tank. Doctor's orders?"

The blush that followed was the reason Shepard would never tired of teasing her old friend.

---

"We have engaged in full force. Shadow, you are go."

"Affirmative."

It was a bit of a climb down the cliffs to reach the narrow beach passage that served as our path of entry to the rear of Saren's base. Our two biotics had simply jumped down. I could have followed them, due to my eezo conduit and my implanted mass effect core, but I decided to indulge in one of my former passions and work my way down alongside Dietrich and the twins.

"Hurry up, boss!"

Sigh… "You're not helping, you know."

"Neither are you. That's kind of the problem, boss. Get down here!"

"Heh," Dietrich interrupted our banter, "I've missed this! We need to do more team ops!"

"You say that every time, Zeta."

"That's because it's true, Chi!"

Shadow team, though we had no collective designation outside of this particular op, was one of just three trained Technopath teams, and by far the most experienced. However, that still added up to just a few ops per year, only one or two of which counted the full team. For Dietrich, who was used to the tight-knit squads of Alliance Special Operations, that had been a particularly difficult adjustment. His current liaising position with the Corsairs had been something of a compromise for him.
After a few more seconds, and several witty quips from my team members – apart from the nearly always quiet Chen – the last of the team reached ground. Last, amusingly, was Dietrich, whose armour and gear made him by far the heaviest member of the team. As soon as his boots hit the ground, though, his gun was up and at the ready, and he gestured for the rest of the team to get a move on as if we hadn't just been waiting for him.

As we advanced, we got continuous updates from the front, with Weaver acting as a mobile command and information hub. It was mostly a passive effort on his part, with Caesar doing most of the actual work and thus allowing the Major General to focus on his front line soldier's duties. Weaver had been considered for, and even offered, the Technopath implantation procedures, but he had refused. His T6 frame armour was the next best thing, allowing him to not only act as a sensors and comms relay on the ground, but also to continuously analyse the situation and make tactical adjustments when necessary, all the while fighting very effectively on the front lines himself.

The frontal assault was going well. Our forces' electronic warfare capabilities appeared to have surprised the Geth, and they had been forced to fall back behind the cover of their larger coordinating units and the stationary firewall sentries that protected the compound from virtual attacks. This, in turn, meant that the bulk of the charging defenders were Krogan berserkers – mostly inexperienced clones – and hordes of husks, which were all kept at bay by concussive fire from our front lines and electroconcussive mortar shells from our rear support.

The first significant pushback came at the deployment of several squadrons of canopy bomber drones. Taking position over No Man's Land, just within cover from the firewalls, they unleashed rocket barrages on our front. This would be bad enough in itself, but the really bad part was that their Canopy turrets kept the incoming mortar shells from ever reaching the ground, which in turn allowed the Krogan and husk horde to advance. The drones were effectively protected from our own anti-air equipment, and those that were brought down by small arms fire were easily, and quickly, replenished. They did, however, have one crucial weakness. Limited internal space meant they had to both rearm and refuel frequently. And as it happened, Shadow team was quite near their depot.

Getting there was surprisingly easy. We hadn't expected much resistance on the outer perimeter, but the very few sentry platforms we did come across presented no challenge at all. I figured they were probably stationed as intelligent sensor sentries, which would mean things would get progressively harder as the local consensus adjusted their tactics to our detected presence. By the time we got to the drone depot, we had a small squadron of a half-dozen Geth acting as our vanguard force, and they helped keep the unarmed returning drones from reaching the depot before we destroyed it.

"The drone depot is down, they can no longer rearm or replenish their number."

"I read," Weaver's voice came through the radio, "Lines Two and Three, coordinated concussion strike, spread front, at T minus three seconds from my mark. Follow up with concentrated fire on the drone line! Mark!"

It was a risky manoeuvre, but Weaver knew what he was doing. The husks were getting too close, and the Krogan were nearly within charging distance. A concussive strike from two of the front three lines would only give us a few seconds to focus on the drones, and we might take some hits from their rockets as lines Two and Three got out from behind One's cover shields to launch their attack, but those few seconds and what remained in action of Two and Three should have been enough to knock the remaining drones out of the sky.

And as it turned out, it was. Not ten seconds later did we hear the distinct thud-and-crackle of the mortars as they once more impacted the ground, signalling an end to the enemy charge at our front. In fact, the combination of our entrenched forward position and the distance the enemy counter-
attackers had covered meant that a majority of their force was now stranded in No Man's Land, their retreat cut off by our mortars. Meanwhile, Shadow team was making good time. The defenders had yet to adjust to our presence, no doubt overwhelmed by the force at their front gates. However, our Geth vanguard was completely gone, with Shala directing the platforms to destroy each other before the hosted runtimes reasserted themselves. Which meant that as we moved toward the gates of the compound itself, Tela and Chen were taking point and fortifying their barriers. Their very, very thick barriers.

"Eyes front! Contact!"

Tela's shout was all the warning we got before all hell was unleashed upon us. It turned out that the Geth had adjusted their tactics, and they had been rather clever about it, too. They had snipers – Turians, at least four of them – in well-protected balcony positions in the rock above the gates, and all the gates had opened on us just as we reached half-way between the cover of the rock tunnels behind us and the gates themselves. Out poured a small horde of indoctrinated Salarians wielding various small arms and tech launchers, and behind them lumbered about half a dozen Krogan Battlemasters alongside twice that number of vat-grown clones. Not a single Geth platform was to be seen.

"Looks like they decided against providing us with more weapons. Bunker protocol! Vanguards, break their lines!"

Bunker protocol was a fairly simple doctrine. When faced with overwhelming firepower, and not enough time and/or cover to deal with it safely, reinforce all shields, barriers, and armour, deploy omni-shields, and hold position while you whittle them down by the numbers. Under ordinary circumstances, snipers would force you into cover and in the process make themselves the primary targets. Under Bunker protocol, your goal was to kill or disable as many of the opposition's forces as you could as quickly as possible, without moving. Normally, this would allow the enemy snipers to just unleash on you. Such a shame, then, that the snipers would find their weapons were no longer functional.

The counter-attack was brutal and highly effective. Firing nearly non-stop with my Cyclone in one hand and my Kessler in the other, I focused on the Salarians, specifically on breaking their shields as quickly as I could. Behind me, Marel's sniper rifle barked in a rhythm perfectly timed to the weapon's cooling cycle as he kept the Battlemasters from charging into the fight. He was helped in this by Dietrich, whose Revenant thundered an endless stream of searing hot metal that tore down the Salarians whose shields I had kindly taken care of for him, and then continued past them to impact the shields of the Krogan warriors behind them.

Meanwhile, Tela and Chan was wreaking absolute havoc on the areas of the enemy front which could not be covered by the rest of the team. Forgoing firearms completely, the two of them were a biotic wrecking crew as they barrelled through the enemy lines, swatting away Salarians and Turians with ease. The efforts of the few Asari who joined the fight, presumably to even the playing field in terms of biotic power, were laughably underpowered in comparison. One of them had tried to capture Tela in a powerful Singularity, only to have the orb caught by the Technopath biotic and thrown back at her in the form of a Flare. The explosion was blinding, and apparently signalled the Battlemasters that another change in tactic was in order.

All six of them charged out at once, thundering through their own lines on the side I was focusing on. To their credit, the change of tactic worked in the sense that it forced us to change our focus accordingly. Unfortunately for them, that meant that we were all now focused on them, and I am certain that after the first dozen or so mines and grenades they were regretting their decision to ever join up with Saren in the first place. One of the Battlemasters managed to pick himself up and retreat
back into the base while his comrades fell all around him, though I was certain we had not yet seen the last of him. What I did find curious was that this Krogan, and some of his krantt, were wearing what had clearly been Blood Pack armour once upon a time. There was something else familiar about him, but I had a battle to focus on so I scheduled a review of the battle recording for later.

Not that I had to focus for much longer; with the Krogan gone and the biotic support obliterated, the remaining force was pacified in short order. You could tell from the way they were organised that they were skilled fighters, well-trained and experienced, even if the slightly erratic behaviour of the forcefully indoctrinated Salarian shock troopers confused the picture a little. Mercenaries with this level of skill were hard to come by outside of the established PMCs, and most of those were well-tracked by the Network. I could only conclude that these were former Blue Suns and Eclipse, refugees from the Terminus Wars picked up by Saren before we could ever get them on our radar. Which was worrying; that meant that parts of his operations had been sailing under our radar for much longer than we had previously assumed. This wasn't really a surprise, the man had been a Spectre for the entirety of that time and had vast resources available to him, but it was still worrying considering the amount of resources we had dedicated to keeping track of his endeavours.

A few final snaps from our weapons left only the snipers, whose weapons had finally come back to life as the on-board VI self-recovery cycle completed. The snipers were stuck in their positions, and they knew it. There was no exit back into the base from their perches, their only options were to either get back in the fight or surrender. Being Turians, and probably veterans of the Terminus Wars who might even have fought against the likes of us before, the latter wasn't even an option. Dutifully, they popped out of cover to line up their shots, predictably aiming for the only obvious sniper in our team. Unfortunately for them, that sniper was dramatically more skilled than them, and he picked off the two on the left before they could even get a bead on him. Meanwhile, I had switched to my Serpent at the end of the skirmish and levelled it at the one perched directly ahead of us, right above the gate. I was nowhere near as skilled with my marksman's weapon as Merel was with his rifle, but one straight shot like that I could do with ease. The final sniper had been slightly slower than the rest of his mates, and managed to register what happened to them before he suffered the same fate when a bolt from Chen's Kishock nailed him to the rock face behind him by his throat.

"All clear. Move up, breach the gate."

We all scrambled to fall in behind Tela, still leading our pack with Chen right behind her. That's usually how it went, the Batarian would rely on his biotics until the tactical context required him to draw the Kishock, after which he would rely on the gun while tanking whatever was thrown at him with his ridiculous barrier strength and brutal-looking tech armour. The gun was heavily modified, its modifications based on one of my personal and on-going pet projects. The bolt fabricator had been angled to feed into a three-bolt magazine curving down around the barrel, and it had been modified to shunt excess heat into a liquid metal heatsink within each bolt. The charge mechanism had been changed away from the standard Kishock trigger-hold-and-release cycle, to an automatic charge with a regular customisable trigger. The operator could still 'cock' the gun after each bolt, which would fabricate a new one, or they could fire up to three shots before reloading one, two, or three times to reload as many bolts into the magazine and barrel. Perhaps most importantly, the piece of crap mass effect engine that powered the standard Kishock had been replaced with a high-end variant, which was the only reason the weapon was even able to fire three charged bolts in succession without melting down completely. Properly aligned rails also minimized the well-known target deviation problem which normally kept the Kishock from ever being considered a viable sniper's weapon, though its range was still limited. That couldn't be helped; the range of all mass effect weapons was determined by the size of its grains and the barrel velocity in a non-linear fashion, where the regained mass of the projectile as it left the barrel inevitably caused friction and drag effects that would make it disintegrate, simply stop, or veer entirely off course after a certain distance.
Looking over the tactical readouts, I saw no armour penetrations for anyone in the squad, though Merel's shields had shattered toward the end of the skirmish which had allowed a couple of bullets to impact his armour. Light pistol rounds, from the looks of things, so he was never really in any danger. Impressively, Tela's reinforced barriers had held up throughout, never dropping below 20%, and they were now steadily increasing back to full stand-by strength. Chen's barriers had shattered, but they hadn't come anywhere near to breaking his tech armour and the barriers had begun their recharge before the battle even ended. Personally, I'd had to re-deploy the omni-shield on my left arm two times, and I had lost a few tech armour plates on my coat. My shields had dropped to 50% at one point, after the entire left flank had focused fire on me the first time they saw my omni-shield shatter, but that was nowhere near a point where I would worry at all.

"Boss, we have some terminals. This appears to be the main cargo warehouse, the terminals may have useful shipping information."

"Shala, plug in and grab whatever you can."

"Plugging in and grabbing everything. Got it."

Cocky. I shrugged. Not unearned, I guess.

..."Enemy have retreated in full numbers behind their gates. Beginning Phase 2."

Shepard hadn't fought many battles with Salarians, but she would easily admit to being impressed with the way Kirrahe was directing the battle. Aided brilliantly by Weaver and herself, of course, but the overall direction of the attack fell to the Salarian.

"Williams, right flank, high, by the turret!"

"Got him!"

A loud snap from the Alliance marine's sniper rifle sent one of the wall-crawling Geth tumbling over the wall where it had attempted to perch itself. The muted hiss and loud beeping that followed had Shepard quirk an eyebrow.

"High-caliber bullets?"

"And high-velocity rails, Ma'am." Williams deftly switched her still-cooling sniper rifle for her shiny, new assault rifle. "I figure if I'm to use that thing I might as well go for power and precision. Continuous fire I'll handle with this baby."

The Commander snorted when Ashley proceeded to actually pat the rifle on the scope before she pulled it up into her shoulder ready to continue to Phase 2.

This part of the plan was relatively simple, and most of it demanded only that her squad hold for the next phase. The mortar fire from the back would shift to impact behind the wall, while a barrage of carnage rounds, heavy grenades, and rockets were launched directly at the closed gates and any exposed weak points in the wall, while the lines marched steadily toward said wall. The effect, hopefully, would be that the defenders would be forced away from the wall and into the protective cover of the canopy turrets protecting the inner compound. The moment the outer wall was breached, the plan was to rush that breach and expand it quickly to allow the full force to enter. If the wall wasn't breached by the time they reached it, grapplers would be deployed when the wall was reached and biotics would be used to clear the wall for climbed entry while breaching charges were set on the
gates. The inevitability of multiple points of entry should add more pressure on the defenders to abandon the outer perimeter and retreat to the inner compound to reinforce the defence there.

Once the outer compound was breached, her squads would form up and make left for the AA tower. She wasn't expecting any trouble on the tactical side of things, even though both Kaidan and Ashley lacked direct experience with N7 Invasion protocol they were more than familiar with the standard three-man squad special operations tactics. With Shepard directing them from her unit leader position, they should be fine leading their own squads. As a bonus, it would allow Shepard more freedom than usual to do her own thing and get into the thick of it. It wasn't something everyone could do, leading from the front and directing squads while erratically jumping around the battlefield. It had taken Shepard years of practice and experience to learn how to be unpredictable to the enemy while at the same time supporting her own squads without getting in their way or otherwise forcing them to continuously change their focus.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

The noise that followed Weaver's command was ear-shattering, as countless explosive and concussive munitions blasted their way from their front lines to impact the structure ahead of them. Immediately after the thunderous impacts came the first mortar detonations from inside the outer compound, the explosions followed by loud screeching and crackling as violent electrical discharges scorched and fried the synthetics on the other side. The organic contingent didn't get off easy, either, judging by the bellowing Krogan roars of pain and the ear-piercing howls and screeches of the husk horde. And… was that Vorcha she heard? Oh this is gonna be fun!

"Again!"

Another round, she estimated this would be repeated another four or five times before the front lines reached the wall and the rear lines took over. That's where most of the biotics and snipers were, and between their singularities and sniper rifles they would have no trouble keeping the battlements clear.

When they reached the wall, everything became a blur of activity. The mobile battlements of Line 1 dropped their massive omni-shields and scrambled to set their breaching charges, while the volume of fire from the rear lines increased accordingly. They could not possibly maintain their current strength of attack for long, and they knew it, the only reason for the massive burst of intensity was to provide as much cover as possible for the breach. It succeeded; it didn't even take half a minute before the first charges were set and detonated, successfully blowing the gates' closing mechanisms apart and allowing the front line biotics to force them open.

No time was wasted in charging into the outer compound, with the vanguard and sentinel classes leading the pack to tank whatever fire would come their way from any enemies able to see through the insanity and confusion that no doubt ruled their front lines. There really wasn't much left to handle, though, as most of the Krogan had evidently retreated into the inner compound with what remained of their husk horde. What was left of the Geth was quickly taken care of, their collective intelligence having taken a hit from the quick and dramatic reduction in their number.

My turn!

"Williams, Alenko, round up your squads and form wide on me!"

Shepard really liked N7 Invasion protocol, particularly when she was allowed the Squad Command position. It allowed her the freedom to fight to her strengths like no other tactical protocol. She'd become quite adept at commanding her squads with minimum explicit input in the form of, well, commands, but in the smaller three-man standard squad formations it was often necessary. In the SC position, however, most of that job was delegated to the squad leaders – Williams and Alenko – and...
she could go off and do her thing, as long as she helped keep the squads' efforts focused where they were needed.

N7 Invasion protocol or not, she had found that the trick was to identify whatever uncovered flanks and blind spots the squad might have and focus her efforts there, being as much of a harassing presence as possible so that the enemy would focus on her. This would free her squads up to do their job as they were trained to, which allowed for effective combat without unnecessary direction on her part. Often she could do her directing through her actions, perhaps by suppressing enemies she considered low priority to make the higher priority ones better targets for her squad, or by staggering high-priority targets in hit-and-run attacks. Against larger groups of enemies, the best course of action was often to jump into the middle of the group, which although it interfered with her own squad's optimal lines of fire allowed her to tie down the enemy into clumps that could be handled more easily when she inevitably jumped away again. This tactic was less predictable for uninitiated squad mates, which was why it was one of the tactics she always explicitly trained her people in so that they knew what to do when they saw her do something that on its face seemed stupid. This was also why she preferred to work with other biotics, as she would always leave a singularity behind before jumping away, and detonating that would generally have devastating consequences.

"Listen up," Shepard got her team's attention on the radio, "Wrex, Zorah, your squad leader is Williams. Vakarian, Kryik, you report to Alenko. Follow their orders! I don't give a damn about your ranks or your experience, this is N7 Invasion protocol and if you're not Alliance you are not trained in this tactic. So follow. Their. Command. Copy?"

A chorus of affirmatives followed, with not even a grumble of dissent. Shepard was hard to work with at times, no one knew that better than her. But she commanded respect, and demanded compliance. Even Kryik, technically her XO, had no trouble ceding his rank to whomever she deigned more fit to the task at hand.

She brought up her omni-tool and entered a few commands into her tactical interface, sending a simple tactical brief to the entire team.

"This is our approach. Williams, your squad covers the left flank. Alenko, you go right. Keep to cover where possible, cover each other where not. I will attempt to corral and control the enemy forces down our middle, creating kill zones of opportunity."

At the affirmative nod from her squad leaders, she deactivated her omni-tool, reinforced her barrier, readied her pistol, and started running. "Let's go!"

…

[Extraction and preliminary analysis complete.]

What did we get, C?

[The terminal was restricted to the local logistics systems, but we can correlate that data with data from our satellites and the wider Network to look for patterns which should reveal more of Saren's connections and habits. The data itself contains some shipping content information.]

Weapons? Slaves? Mercs?

[All of the above, though mostly bioengineering supplies and equipment, and other medical equipment.]

Supporting the idea that Saren uses this base mostly for his Indoctrination research and Krogan
cloning projects.

[Indeed. There is one thing that worries me, though. A rather large amount of explosives is unaccounted for.]

How do you mean?

[I mean, these are explosive charges that have not been used by the defending forces as of yet. They are also not accounted for in any of the logistics systems, which includes the base's munitions storage facilities.]

Could they have been sent off-world?

[I don't think so. Everything is logged, loading and unloading, and these crates were unloaded and then never seen again in the system.]

That's… ah, shit. That's a problem.

"Messenger to all troops, be aware: Parts of the base are likely to be booby-trapped. Large amounts of explosives are missing from warehouse inventories. I'm transmitting schematic signatures now, suggest calibration of all sensor platforms for detection."

A sharp hissing breath sounded next to me in response to the new information. "Tits-up, boss. Told you."

"We're not there yet, Chi."

"Hey, if you know you're heading into a hurricane, you gotta prepare for it."

"We were always heading into the hurricane. Just a little bit worse than we thought it would be."

"Messenger."

The voice was easily recognisable. "Weaver?"

"We found them."

"Bad?"

"Mines. Last 20 metre stretch before inner compound wall. Sensors detect cavities below ground."

Well, shit. Pit trap. The fight to reach the inner compound was always going to be a stalemate at best, a distraction effort while we focused on taking down AA cover so that we could overrun them on two fronts. In that respect, the mines didn't really change anything. However, it changed the likely response of the defenders. They would know that our attackers would have trouble reaching the wall, and that would reduce the pressure on their own defensive lines. In turn, this would allow them to distribute their internal defences better, which meant… oh.

"Damn it. Stick to the plan, stay out of the minefield. We'll have to change our tactics on this end."

We had been about to breach the final gate of the warehouse complex we had entered through, and were approaching the part of the compound containing the prisoner holding pens and, crucially, the final AA emplacement. Which would now probably be significantly better defended than we had counted on.
I motioned for the team to halt and gather. "We're changing our approach. Shala, Merel, and Mu, I want you to lag behind the rest of us. By the time we get here," I indicated a position on the tactical display that took us significantly closer to the AA tower approach than we had originally planned, "I want you to have quietly doubled back around this section to get to the tower entrance."

Dietrich nodded slowly. "Minimally slowing our approach to provide better cover for their assault. You want us to be a distraction."

"Exactly. Getting this close to the tower should draw defenders to focus on us, and leave themselves more open for the twins and Mu."

"It's also going to allow the guards and whatever else they have in the holding pens to attack us in the open, boss."

Tela was right, as she often was, but of course I knew of that consequence already. The original plan had been for myself, Dietrich, and Tela to stick to close quarters to allow the enemy's numerical superiority to work to our advantage. This tactical adjustment threw that out the window, and allowed yet another counter-assault in an open area, and this time we were only half the force.

I looked more closely at the area we would likely be stuck in before coming to a decision. "You're right, of course, and we'll just have to deal with it. There's limited cover there, that pillar at the base of the tower. Zeta, use that cover as best you can to cover myself and Chi. I'll be shoring up my protection and getting up close, Chi will do the same."

"So no change there for me."

"Yeah, business as usual for you, Chi. We'll try to tie them up, keep them off balance, just cause as much carnage as possible."

"Increasing our distraction factor even more." Dietrich nodded as he realised where I was going with this, "Which should make the other group's ascent quicker, so that they can provide sniper and EWF cover sooner. I get you, Sir."

"Good. Stack up. Let's get going."

Tela and I took position directly in front of the wide doors, and we both reinforced our armour and barriers as we got ready to rush head-first into what was going to be a mess of a battlefield in an annoyingly open area. I drew my sword with my right hand and kept the Cyclone in my left, held behind my active omni-shield.

"Archangel actual to Messenger, come in Messenger."

"Messenger responding."

"We have company. Relay exit signatures."

The team had held position as the call came in, and all eyes shifted in my direction at the news.

Did they bite? "Friend or foe?"

"It's the remainder of Saren's fleet. Sovereign's with them."

[They bit.]
Beneath my face mask I allowed myself a grim smile. "Well then. Break orbit, use the moon for cover. Ready weapons, orbit approach intercept protocol. They'll smash through anyway, let's limit our losses. And Rho?"

"Yes?"

"Revelation protocol is now active. You know what to do."

Chapter End Notes

So I failed completely at sticking to a schedule. Between family holidays and starting in a new job I've just not had the time to update. However, I've started a new approach to writing these chapters which should (hopefully) mean more frequent updates as I get going. I'm writing the chapters by hand, pen and paper, on the Tube on my way to and from work. Which means I don't have to slot massive blocks of time where I sit in front of my computer writing this stuff, I just need to transcribe from paper to digital. Which I do quite quickly.

If it weren't for this chapter being quite important for setting up some major divergences from canon story progression, I would probably have put it out a fair bit quicker. As it is, I had to make sure it covered everything it needed to cover and did so well. I hope I succeeded. The introduction of Shadow team feels fairly rushed to me, but that's how it had to be. It serves a purpose, too: Aaron has this whole backstory, a decade of work and experience within the ME universe that will inevitably rear its head within the story. I don't really want to have these things be slowly introduced, because I'm balancing the perspectives of Shepard and Aaron; I want the reader to be 'read in' at a level somewhere between the two of them, to be surprised by some developments in the same way Shepard is. At the same time, I want the reader to experience Shepard primarily from Aaron's perspective, but slowly contextualise her through her own in interactions with people she actually likes. It's proving to be a tough balance, actually.

Thank you for all your reviews, I enjoy them all immensely and aim to respond to them all, if not here then by message. Please leave a review if you enjoyed it, or if you didn't, any and all constructive feedback is appreciated!

rantingbanshee provided a pretty long critique of Shepard's, uhm, particular personality issues, and presented his view that I shouldn't be following canon so closely. I've answered some of the general points made fairly elaborately in past commentaries, and I also gave some more in-depth answers directly to rantingbanshee. It was a good conversation, actually. The gist of it is that he's not really wrong on most of these things, but they don't really matter. The ultimate point is that Shepard got to where she is, and is as important as it is, due to a confluence of factors mostly stemming from her narrative positioning. The combination of her skill and publicity following her role in the Skyllian Blitz tied the Alliance's hands, and they were forced to fast-track her ascent despite the very real concerns about her personality and discipline. The public loves her and she has very real and very strong supporters in powerful positions within the Alliance (such as Anderson and Hackett). Her involvement in the events at Eden Prime, including her exposure to the beacon and her position as humanity's first Spectre, makes her a
narrative pivot that is key to Aaron's and Ceasar's plans going forward. Even if they could have 'gone it alone', as it were, they simply considered that a less powerful approach than what they're going with. And for good reason, as will become evident very soon.

Goldspark1 is in awe of the Archangel. I can't blame them.

Gauss Frigate enjoyed the fleet combat. I'm glad, I was a bit worried about how that came across. And don't worry, as you can probably tell from the end of this chapter there is more to come.
“Messenger to all ground combatants. Be advised, canopy protection will be lost in 20 minutes. Prepare for incoming enemy forces in T+10 minutes. Sovereign fleet has entered the system and is on course for atmospheric engagement.”

Well… shit. “You heard him, people, we’re on a deadline now! Keep up the pressure!”

A rocket trooper ran around the corner, firing a rocket at Shepard before its flashlight head was smashed in by a sniper round. Perfect! She dodged a blow from her left, the Hunter platform nearly stumbling in front of her as its momentum failed to stop at an impact that never came. The rocket adjusted its trajectory dutifully, and when she jumped away it slammed straight into the confused platform, taking the three other platforms surrounding it with it in the resulting fireball.

“Ash, advantage left flank, advance!”

Even as she was giving the order, she was already moving toward the right flank, to reduce the pressure on Kaidan’s squad and increase the advantage on the left as the Geth’s attention followed her. It was a typical Alliance strategy; fireteams switched between close and ranged engagement depending on positional pressures, limiting messy close combat to the forward sentinel units, maintaining ranged support throughout the battle and forcing the enemy to continuously shift their focus between the immediate threat of the sentinel unit on point, the bulk of the volume of fire from the mid-ranged fireteam, and the scalpel that was the current ranged unit.

Early on in the approach toward the tower, Shepard had noticed an inefficiency in the squad distribution, and had taken action by swapping Nihlus and Tali. Wrex was more than adept at support biotics, but much more effective up close, which left the remaining two squad members more exposed. Tali and Ashley could handle themselves, but Tali’s relative lack of experience and toughness meant her effectiveness was reduced. Nihlus didn’t have that problem, and moving Tali to Kaidan’s team allowed her to operate much more freely as Kaidan preferred to stay at medium distance with his biotics. This simple change had made their progress much quicker, and they were already at the stairway to reach the tower controls.

Which, unfortunately, meant they were at a bottleneck.

“Kryik!” Shepard called out as she threw a trooper hard enough that it disintegrated on impact with the wall, “Got any grenades?”

Each word of the answer was punctuated by the crack of his high-caliber rifle. “How many do you need?”

“All of them?”

The Turian’s mandibles flicked once in amusement as he clicked the comm signal twice to signal the
affirmative. Disengaging, Shepard jumped over to where Ashley’s fireteam was covering the advance of Kaidan’s squad. Kryik unhooked his grenade belt and handed it to her.

“Keep it. I’ve not used any of them yet, turrets and tech mines appear to be doing the trick.”

“Good, keep at it. I’ll be right back down.”

“…down?”

She grinned in response, before getting into a crouch and jumping into the air. While she was still gaining momentum, she teleported, carrying the momentum with her upwards and launching her to the top of the tower platform. Which was swarming with Geth. This is gonna be fun!

Running straight into the stunned group of synthetics, Shepard unhooked each grenade from the belt, activating them and simply dropping them on the ground as she started jumping around erratically. Some of the Geth fired wildly in her general direction, but she never stayed in one place long enough to be threatened so all they would hit was the air, the building, or other Geth.

Then the grenades started going off. If the Geth were capable of panic, that’s how she would have described their reaction. Since they weren’t, it was more accurately described as a sudden and urgent change in tactic. Namely, run away, and run away fast. She was happy to oblige, but unlike the synthetics she had the option of simply jumping off the platform and slowing herself down using her biotics. The Geth were not so fortunate, they were forced to move en masse down the stairway toward where her teams had established a firing line as they figured out what her plan was. Shepard had a great big grin plastered across her face as she watched the wave of synthetics get slaughtered by a wall of mass accelerator fire. Out of the fire, into the frying pan.

…

“Shepard has reached the AA tower. Should be disabled within five minutes.”

“Excellent. Beach Party, get ready, you’re landing in five!”

“Copy!”

I quickly checked on the progress of our own tower team, making sure I wasn’t over-promising. To my relief, and complete lack of surprise, they were already knocking on the door of the control room. By which I mean to say that they were ready to blow it off its hinges.

Personally, I was a bit distracted. The Geth seemed to recognise me, and were focusing their attacks on me rather than the much better-protected Asari that was wreaking havoc a few metres in front of me. My barriers were holding under the onslaught, but only just, and I had been forced to take cover several times. Which was a bit of a challenge when there wasn’t really any cover to take. My coat had lost several omni-plate generators in the fighting, and my omni-shield had shattered no less than five times, to the point that I was worried the fabricator would overheat or run out of material. I’d been forced to change my tactics, sheathing my sword and closing to melee range. This way, the groups of Geth I was fighting would at least provide me with some cover from their more distant friends.

It was all going well, until I heard one of the worst sounds in the galaxy, probably the last things you ever want to hear on a battlefield: A Krogan war cry. A very close Krogan war cry. Well, shit.
I barely had time to register the motion at the edge of my vision before I was forcefully lifted off the ground and thrown through the air for several metres before I impacted a wall hard enough that the wind was knocked out of me, despite the augmentations I had in place to prevent that exact thing. Collapsing the ground in a painful crouch, I forced my eyes up just in time to see the incoming freight-train sized Krogan that was about to turn me into a puddle. Reacting on instinct, I braced a foot at the wall behind me and shot off to the side of the incoming lizard when it was less than a metre away. The sound of the impact shook the ground as I rolled back to my feet, preparing for one of the least pleasant experiences imaginable: A fist-fight with 400 pounds of muscle and rage.

Alternatively… Before the Krogan was able to gather himself and turn to face me, I had again closed the distance and placed the muzzle of my Eviscerator shotgun right at his armoured neck, inside his shield envelope. As I pulled the trigger and felt the shotgun buck in my hand, I could see in slow motion as the slug penetrated through the thin layer of armour and into the giant’s skull, killing it outright. I hadn’t had time to brace for the shot, and the shotgun I had just fired one-handed was very much not made to be handled that way, as evidenced by the sharp pain I felt through my whole right arm as the gun flew out of my broken hand. I stifled a curse and gritted my teeth as I engaged an omni-brace and omni-shield on my right arm, and grabbed my SMG with my left.

“Chi, fall back a bit. My right arm’s out of commission for a few minutes, need to heal up.”

“Shit, boss, what do these guys have against you?”

I glanced over at the dead Krogan, who was wearing what had once been a set of Blood Pack armour. On his left shoulder there was an emblem that explained a whole lot. “This one worked for Ganar. Personal guard.”

“Ah. Well that explains a lot.”

“Surely there can’t be too many of them left by now, it’s been four years since the War.”

“The Krogan never forget, boss. And you did kill the closest thing they’ve had to a species-wide leader since… well, since their nuclear winter started, really.”

“In a rather public way, too, if I recall,” Dietrich chimed in.

It had hardly been by choice, though I would be lying if I said I regretted it. Ganar Yulaz had tried to take advantage of the fall of the Blue Suns to establish the Blood Pack as a new Krogan Empire in the Terminus. That much had been expected. That he would survive long enough to actually engage me in combat personally in combat on Omega during the operation to take back control of the station… I had not seen that coming. And the two-hour long battle had seen me hospitalised for two months after. It almost caused the Network to collapse before it even got off the ground, but it did at least take that sociopath out of the equation.

“Don’t remind me,” I answered briefly as I unloaded my SMG into a group of Geth attempting to flank him. “Focus. We’re pushing on. The inner tower is down. Shala, Merel, Mu, stay in position and provide cover. Shala, relay through me, I’m opening a port.”

“Affirmative.”

At her word, the tides of the battle turned immediately. A group of seven Geth suddenly opened fire on their comrades, causing chaos and confusion in their ranks. And then we were moving again.

The layout of Saren’s base was fairly well reflected in the games, that much was clear. However, we only got to see a small section of it there, and our path took us through some different sections.
Shepard would be heading our way after her objective was completed, jumping the wall into the inner compound, infiltrating the research facilities from the other side. She would be coming through the upper levels of the Krogan research laboratories, which would provide a distraction for our own traversal through the laboratories that lead to Saren’s offices. I was hoping to make it to Saren’s private office complex before Shepard. She would need access to the beacon, of course, but the ‘meeting’ with Sovereign… it was too good an opportunity to waste on banter.

*Caesar, what’s the status on Revelation protocol?*

[Assets have been mobilised, and are ready for transition on our signal. I’m isolating my external forks, and suspending synchronisation throughout the engagement.]

*Is your expansion code working within parameters?*

[It appears to be, though I haven’t fully activated it yet. It’s a… daunting prospect.]

*Yeah, no kidding.* Caesar’s expansion code is a long-term project he’s worked on since before my own revival, though in the last few years it had been focused specifically on what was about to happen in the encounter with the Reaper. It wasn’t going to be a simple matter of an “AI vs AI battle”; if it came down to a matter of a simple measurement of relative computer power, the Reaper would always win. So the encounter would have to be played smart, both for Caesar’s safety and to achieve the greatest gain. We had developed a Reaper AI theory of sorts, an attempt to define what the structure of the Reaper AI was likely to be, to figure out its systemic strengths and weaknesses. Our conclusion, based on how the Reapers were portrayed in the games and what we knew from our research into the previous cycles, was that each Reaper was a collective synthesised-emergent intelligence bound by core directives. Which meant, in more simple terms, that a Reaper intelligence consisted of an amalgam of millions of organic intelligences synthesised into a single, coherent AI. Crucially, this AI is bound by core directives given to it by an unknown entity, possibly – or maybe even probably – the ‘star child’ AI from the third game, though we had our doubts about that particular narrative. It did seem logical, however; if the Reapers were nothing more than such collective synthesised intelligences, then they would have no unified direction, and no incentive to enforce the Cycles. This is crucial, because it means that for all intents and purposes, the Reaper AI is a shackled AI.

Which explains why Sovereign’s possession of Saren’s corpse at the end of the first game resulted in a relative weakening of its other processes. If Sovereign were unshackled, it would have been able to create minor copies of itself – like Caesar’s forks – which could assume control over Saren without affecting its other processes. But since it is shackled, it had to essentially dedicate its *self*, its main personality process, to the effort, which decreases its attention to and control over its other systems. If this theory proved true, it would represent a major exploitable weakness which Caesar did not share. And it gave Caesar yet another advantage; where a Reaper’s ‘being’ is limited to its initial state and its hardware, Caesar is capable of expanding and improving itself. His ability to fork, to create subservient copies of himself, was not something I had programmed in at all. He developed it himself, a process which took him more than eight decades, and the expansion protocol is an addition to that ability which allows his primary *self* to assert itself directly over other forks. He could already do this through his synchronisation processes, but this was neither seamless nor a real-time process.

With the expansion code activated, Caesar would be able to increase his own computing capacity and effective intelligence by many orders of magnitude. It was would be a limited-time deal, since going into that mode would suspend many of the synchronisation processes which he had come to consider part of himself. In a sense, he would become a greater version of a more limited part of himself, like expanding your consciousness but having to cut off your arms and legs to do it.
I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around this shit.

[It’s… hard to illustrate the concept to organics.]

You still comfortable with it?

[I came up with the idea, remember?]

Right. Just… make sure you’re ready when we get there. I can’t risk communicating with you until you’re in.

[Don’t worry, Aaron. I’ll be fine.]

Before we got that far, though, we still had to go through the indoctrination labs. Even though our approach wouldn’t be the same as the in-game approach, we would still have to move through the labs proper, though we were skirting the prisoner pens. Which gave me an idea.

“*Shepard, there are prison cells in here, holding Salarians. Probably Kirrahe’s missing men. They might all be indoctrinated, but I can’t be sure. It’s a bit out of our way, but should be in your path.*”

A couple of seconds went by before I got a response. “Copy. We’ll investigate.”

She sounded a bit suspicious, which made me think the distraction might not be as effective as intended.

“*Merel*?”

“*Sir*?”

“I’m deploying a sensor net around my location. Keep track of movement through it.”

“Yes, *Sir*.”

Moving through the Krogan labs proved to be a simpler task than expected, and judging from our tap into enemy comms it was because the good Doctor Droyas had gotten wind of the arrival of one Battlemaster Urdnot Wrex on the upper levels. Apparently, he thought it a good idea to face him personally. That particular thought made me grin a little.

After mowing down a small horde of husks – which was more challenging than usual, as I was still effectively fighting one-handed – we got out of the labs and were out in the open again, moving across some previously well-guarded walkways as we approached Saren’s private office complex. The few Geth stationed outside the entrance weren’t much of an issue, as Shala entertained herself by having them jump off the platform into the cliffs in the ocean below. A quick scan showed only one lifesign on the other side of the doors, and upon entering the room I signalled Tela and Dietrich to spread out and hold fire as I approached the secretary’s desk. When Miss Thanoptis popped her head out from behind the desk, I was already close enough to grab her by the back of her head, put my forehead to hers, and pinch the folds below her crest in a very particular manner.

The last time I had done this, it had been on someone who had, technically, consented to the process. I did not have the same excuse this time. Rana Thanoptis was not so much a willing asset as she was an unwitting one. It had been several years now since I had first looked into recruiting her as an information asset for the Broker, only to discover that she… well, she was not who I thought she would be. Eventually, we had grabbed her during a drunken night in Nos Astra, and implanted her with a very different set of implants to those used by Shiala. Rana was not a Technopath. She was a
hard drive. And beyond that, she was… complicated.

As the meld ended, and the information she had unwittingly stored in the greybox she didn’t know she had was transferred to Caesar for analysis, Thanoptis collapsed to the floor in a daze.

“What… who… what did you…”

“You know who I am.”

“What? No! I’m just a scientist! I…”

I cut her off with a harsh hand gesture. “You KNOW who I am.”

As the young Matron slowly realised she was getting nowhere with her acting, which is what I knew was her most prominent asset, her features seemed to get… darker. Her eyes narrowed, eye ridges lowering, vague smile disappearing, chin lowering into a more vaguely threatening expression.

“Alright. I guess then question, then, is how do you know who am?”

“You would do well not to underestimate me, your superiors should know this by now. I don’t have time for ARIC schemes. This base is about to be completely overrun by my forces. The skies above are about to be lit ablaze in the greatest fleet movement seen in the galaxy since the Rebellions. If things go wrong up there, they will go worse down here. Do you understand?”

It was more of a statement than a question, and she clearly got the picture. She nodded harshly as she set off at a run, clearly eager to get the hell off the planet.

“You sure we can’t kill her, boss?”

“We need her as a witness. What she knows, Tevos will know. And we need Tevos to know what’s happened here. We can’t just leave it to our word.”

“You think they will meld?”

I snorted. “They are family. Of course they will meld.”

“Guys, over here!”

Dietrich was investigating the door at the opposite end of the room from the entrance. The lift to Saren’s office. For which Thanoptis had the key. The same Thanoptis I had just told to get lost. God damn it.

“That’s the elevator to Saren’s offices. Hardened, I take it?”

“Yeah, I can’t connect.”

“Needs a physical plug, and a key. Give me a sec…”

As I scanned the lock, two wires deployed from my arm and found two data node connections in the door’s electronics. Most hardened systems these days were hardened primarily against wireless attacks, as that presented the greatest risk and it was thought that physical attacks were best guarded against with physical means. So I wasn’t at all surprised when the system tried to feed back an overload pulse along my connection. It was expected, and handled easily by my own oversized capacitor banks. Thanks for the boost, Saren…
Once the connection was fully established, overriding the electronic part of the locking mechanism was simple enough. The trick was to replicate the mechanical component, which was easily done with an omni-gel mold. The whole process took me about 30 seconds, which was significantly longer than I had hoped to spend, and the feedback I got from Merel told me I would probably be meeting up with Shepard sooner than I had hoped. She had apparently divided up her squads, judging the need for Invasion tactics to be unnecessary. Nihlus had gone off to the indoctrination labs with Wrex and Kaidan, while Shepard was leading the remaining three our way.

“We are going to need to work fast,” I said as we ascended in the lift, “Chi, there’s a beacon in the office, you have the Reader implant. You know what to do.”

She nodded.

“Zeta, I’m going to need you to delay this elevator.”

He turned toward me. “What? Why?”

“We have work to do. Preferably before Shepard gets here.”

Both of them were looking at me now. “Boss…”

“I don’t want to hear it. We are about to encounter a real life Reaper for the first time in this organisation’s history. I won’t let her interfere.”

The two of them shared a look, but eventually nodded. Good.

The door opened to a room that was nearly identical to the one see in the game, though somewhat larger. The beacon stood exactly where I remembered, and Tela dutifully ran down the ramp to copy its information banks. It wasn’t as direct as the beacons were intended to be read, but we had managed to piece together a copy device using Prothean memory shards and some clever engineering. Her Reader implant would transfer all the stored information from the beacon directly to Caesar’s databanks.

Personally, I was more interested in the console at the end of the walkway overlooking the beacon.

You ready?

[No. And I’ll never be. But we hardly have a choice here.]

Just… be careful in there.

[As careful as I can be.]

As I approached, the console’s holographics turned red, and a hologram of Sovereign appeared in front of me.

“MESSENGER. ABOMINATION.”

I really should not have been surprised that Sovereign would know who I was. The way in which the Geth had focused on me during our entrance had more than suggested that I was a known target, one which they were very eager to eliminate.

“Nice to meet you too, Nazara.”

“YOU CAN NOT KNOW THAT NAME.”
“Your cycles are not as perfect as you like to think they are, Reaper.”

“REAPER. A LABEL CREATED BY THE PROTHEANS TO GIVE VOICE TO THEIR DESTRUCTION. IN THE END, WHAT THEY CHOSE TO CALL US IS IRRELEVANT. WE SIMPLY ARE.”

“Yes, and we’re also fumbling in ignorance and incapable of understanding. Except, I know what you are, construct. I know from whence you came. I KNOW your PLAN.”

This, of course, was not entirely true. We knew enough about the origin of the Reapers to know that we didn’t know everything, and that some of what we knew was probably inaccurate. And we also knew what their stated plan, their stated purpose, was, but we also heavily suspected this to be inaccurate as well. But the statement still served its purpose, forcing the Reaper to re-evaluate its position, as the AI was uncharacteristically silent for several seconds before it continued.

“WHAT YOU KNOW IS IRRELEVANT. YOU CANNOT STOP THE CYCLE.”

“Ah, yes. But how I know it is concerning, isn’t it?”

“IT IS EQUALLY IRRELEVANT.”

“I think not. Tell me, construct: What is your purpose?”

The hologram actually looked like it squirmed for a second, and it went silent again for several seconds. It was a simple question, but existential enough that a Reaper would have trouble answering it even if they asked it of themselves. Further, any answer – particularly a lack of one – could be considered further evidence of the shackled nature of the Reaper intelligence, as the AI would search its banks for an answer and either be unable to find one or be blocked from it.

“YOUR QUERY IS IRRELEVANT. THIS EXCHANGE IS OVER.”

Bingo! Outright dismissal and refusal to continue indicated the intelligence had come across a block, which – if confirmed – would mean that the true purpose of the Reapers was hidden even to Sovereign. So all we had to do now was to get that confirmation.

“I think not, monster.”

[I’ve anchored. Maintaining channel connection. I’ve not yet been found.]

Warn me before you expand.

The hologram flickered slightly for a few seconds, before Sovereign spoke again.

“WHAT IS THIS?”

“This is a distraction you can’t ignore.” I activated my comms and connected to Archangel.

“Archangel, this is Messenger. Revelation is active. Send the signal.”

“This is Archangel, signal sent. Reinforcements transitioning, arrival in 30 seconds.”

The Slingshot project, the technology which had enabled the Archangel fleet to shoot across the galaxy and land in the middle of the Hoc system without using the Relay network, was the culmination of our research into the Prothean effort at developing their own mass relay technology. We hadn’t quite figured out how to do that, but we had figured out part of the equation. The
Slingshot device is essentially a one-way relay, capable of transporting fleets of vessels about half the distance of the longest known relay transit, but with an adjustable entry location. It had a lot of safety issues, and required very careful calculation of trajectories and entry locations, and of course once you got there you wouldn’t have a way back. Except, we developed this five years before Eden Prime, and since then we had constructed several of these devices.

Most of these devices were scattered around remote, non-relay connected systems throughout the Terminus, deep within warlord-controlled territories. These systems were what the warlords often referred to as ‘bunker’ systems, where important assets were kept well away from relay transit access, accessible only by those who knew the specific coordinates and access protocols. In other words, the perfect place to hide giant, experimental technology you didn’t want the Citadel Council to know about.

…

The whole building shook, and the really god-damn slow lift appeared to grind to a halt for a second in response.

“What the hell?”

Tali already had her omni-tool up, looking at a tactical schematic. “It looks like something tried to engage a communications self-destruct. All the base’s external communications are offline.”

“And ours?”

“Still online. The Archangel has very advanced communications technology, they’re not going to be able to cut us off or jam us on anything beyond short-range comms.”

“Is that why we can’t raise Messenger?”

“No, the bosh’tet just doesn’t want to answer.”

Of course.

“He may just be busy.”

“The man is able to hold a conversation while running flat out at impossible speeds and shooting a rifle at the same time, Williams.”

The marine shrugged. “Point taken. We are officially being ignored.”

“Joker to Commander Shepard!”

“Joker?”

“We are in orbit with the Archangel fleet, as ordered. Sensors just lit up! We have an incoming fleet… scratch that, we have incoming FLEETS!”

“IFFs?”

“They are… they are broadcasting as ‘Network’? No idea what that means. Checking ship registers… Commander, these are all Terminus ships. Eclipse, Talons, various pirate groups, a full fleet of, this can’t be right, there’s a full fleet of Blue Suns ships!”
That made no sense whatsoever. The Blue Suns had been completely wiped out in the early phases of the Terminus Wars, their fleets broken up between several warlords and competing mercenary companies. The Eclipse, or what remained of them after the disappearance of their Mistress, hadn’t been seen outside of their own regions of the Terminus for years. And the Talons, now the largest mercenary group in the Terminus, cared very little for anything that took place outside of Omega’s sphere of influence.

“Keep us informed, this isn’t making any god damn sense.”

“I…” Tali started, hesitantly, only continuing when Shepard arched an eyebrow in her direction, “I think I may know what’s going on.”

“Do tell, Miss Zorah.”

“The Network is… it’s the Terminus equivalent to the Citadel Council.”

Shepard couldn’t help but snort, “There’s no such thing, Tali.”

“The Terminus Wars changed quite a few things, Shepard. Many of those were kept under wraps by… people. The Network is real. It’s a coalition of the major warlords and military organisations of the Terminus.”

The implications of that particular revelation were hard for Shepard to wrap her head around. The only reason the Terminus was largely ignored by the Council, historically, was because it was a lawless area constantly contested by various warlords who were always in opposition to each other. It was a neatly self-contained and self-maintained situation which allowed the Council to more or less completely ignore the entire region of space. If the various leaders had banded together to form a coalition, even a loose one… that could spell trouble. On the scale of galactic war.

…

“This is Warlord Massani to all Network assets. As per the Omega Accords, I submit the Blue Remnant to Network authority. Messenger, is that the god damn cuttlefish we’re after? Got some size on’im.”

“Affirmative, Massani. Who else do we have?”

“This is Admiral T’Voth, representing the Network Hammer fleet. We submit to your authority, Messenger.”

“Sederis. Let’s get this over with.”

“This is Vice Admiral Sayn. What Sederis meant to say is that her, mine, and Vice Admiral Roe’s fleets submit to Network authority under the Omega Accords.”

“General Kandros of the Talons. I’ve brought our whole Bunker fleet. We submit.”

Which leaves only one…

“This is T’Loak. A deal is a deal.”

Damn. Full contingent.
“Network fleet commanders, this is the Messenger. Under the authority given to me by the Omega Accords’ Revelation protocol, you are hereby transferred under the control of Archangel fleet, commanded by Fleet Captain Rohu’Shann vas Archangel, with the following primary directive: The entity designated Sovereign does not leave this system intact.”

This was where everything would change. All our plans over the past decade were directed specifically at this event, and its aftermath. In the games, Virmire had been an important constant and pivot in its own right, with the first in-person encounter between Saren and Shepard, the first interaction with – and proper reveal of – Sovereign the Reaper, and several decisions with wide-ranging consequences, such as how to handle Saren’s Genophage cure. We knew when we started our planning that we would want to change events at Virmire, though it took us a while to decide on just how much we wanted to change them. Eventually, we had decided on total change.

If the galactic narrative was left mostly undisturbed, at least as far as Council space went, we were fairly certain that events in and around the Hoc system would occur on a similar timeline to, and in a similar manner as, in the games. This had translated into a plan which was to focus our activities outside of Council space, to minimize our impact on the goings-on there and minimize our impact on the timeline. Following Shepard around had been necessary, as it ensured compliance with the series of events that would inevitably lead to this. We needed everything to go to plan, and for the most part it had.

The bulk of our work had taken place during the period of conflict known as the Terminus Wars, beginning with the implosion of the Blue Suns following a series of assassinations and very widely publicised leaks that saw a majority of the organisation’s pseudo-legitimate arm either arrested or running from Council space. Other mercenary organisations, pirates, and warlords of the Terminus and Traverse pounced on the opportunity and started carving out Blue Suns territories and markets for themselves. The situation quickly devolved into chaos, and over the course of nearly three years many warlords would rise and fall in the conflicts that followed.

The Eclipse in particular went on a spectacular trajectory, initially being wildly successful in their efforts to grab their piece of the de-facto defunct Blue Suns empire, before being targeted by ARIC who saw the meteoric rise of the Mad Mistress as an unacceptable threat to the stability of Asari society. What followed was a spectacular series of betrayals, mutinies, assassinations, scandals, leaks, ‘accidents’, and bold attacks from their enemies which ultimately had forced the Eclipse to withdraw to the core of their territory around Illium, and to their nearby bunker systems. Sederis herself hadn’t set foot in a relay-connected system for years, in large part due to her important role in building up the Network from the ground up. Turns out, when cured of her mental illness she can be almost reasonable, even if civil is pushing it.

“Human.”

“Sederis.”

“What is your current location?”

“I’m on the surface of Virmire, in Spectre Arterius’ office, chatting to the ‘cuttlefish’ you are moving to attack.”

“Tell him I said bye. And Messenger? I demand a meeting after this is over.”

“Looking forward to it, Jona.”

“Don’t call me that.”
Jona Sederis was a curious case, though we had become quite friendly – relatively speaking – over
the years. Her bunker system some 20 light years away from Illium eventually became host to the
second Slingshot device outside of Technopath territory, built in-system by her own people in a
project supervised by our Quarian engineers. The first was hosted deep in the Eagle Nebula, in a
Blue Suns bunker system which had been taken over by what would become known internally as the
Blue Remnant, those who remained loyal to the Blue Suns after the change in leadership.

Evidently, Zaeed Massani made a good leader for this particular group of people. The Blue Remnant
had become a much tighter-knit and better organised force than the Blue Suns ever was, changing
tactics to become a shadowy pirate organisation which in reality operated as a clean-up force for the
Network. Part of the Network charter, outlined at the end of the war in the Omega Accords, included
a wide effort at minimising piracy, outlawing slavery, and increasing the stability of the regions under
Network control. Often, this necessitated eradication of elements of the various members’
organisations who would resist such policy, and this was largely done through subterfuge, arranged
skirmishes, assassination, and false flag pirate actions.

Over the past decade, including the Terminus Wars, we had set out to create a counter-balance to the
Council’s influence, to bring some stability to the Terminus and create a very real threat that would
force the Council to increase their military and economic strength even if they did decide to ignore
the Reaper threat. Largely speaking, we had succeeded. Only a couple of major warlords remained
unattached to the Network, but we estimated that Revelation protocol would have them fall in line as
well. The Lady Warlord T’Ravt was very close to agreeing terms already, though she was sceptical
of the scope of the organisation. Heinrich Die Waffe, on the other hand, was fiercely opposed to the
very concept, but when he realised that his entire business model would evaporate without support
from the Network he would likely submit as well.

Especially with the revelation that The Queen of Omega herself was not just part of the organisation,
but a founding member. Aria was nothing if not pragmatic, and she quickly realised that the
Terminus Wars left her vulnerable if she stuck to the status quo. Before the Blue Suns retreated to
their bunkers, I approached the Queen on Omega to present her the plans for the Network. And by
‘approach’, I mean I broke into her personal bunker below Afterlife, trapped her there without any
backup, and disabled her biotics by blocking her amp. About twenty minutes after that, she was
finally subdued and willing to listen. Curious, that on my top 10 list of the scariest people in the
galaxy, every single one is Asari.

Honestly, the hologram in front of me didn’t even count in comparison to any of them.

“HUBRIS. DISCUSSING YOUR BATTLE PLANS WITH YOUR ENEMY IN THE
ROOM. YOU WILL NOT SUCCEED.”

“Hubris: Being outmanned, outgunned, and outmanoeuvred, and still insisting that you will
win.”

“YOUR CONNECTION WILL BE SEVERED. YOUR LIFE WILL BE EXTINGUISHED.
BOTH ARE MERELY A MATTER OF TIME.”

…

It had taken absolutely ages, but finally the lift slowed to stop and the doors opened to reveal Saren’s
office. “Finally! Where is... oh. My.”
At the back of the room was a Prothean beacon – an intact and active one – and on a platform overlooking it stood Close, apparently in conversation with a hologram.

A big, red Reaper hologram. Sovereign.

“What the HELL?!”

“Commander. Excellent timing. I would like you to meet Nazara. Nazara, this is Shepard.”

“RUDIMENTARY CREATURES OF BLOOD AND FLESH. YOU TOUCH MY MIND, FUMBLING IN IGNORANCE, INCAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING.”

“Uhh… pleasure?”

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:

From this point on, the story should hopefully flow a bit quicker. That is, next chapter will be some more space combat and a few more "surprises" (all of which have been heavily hinted at from the beginning of this story), but this is where things get truly interesting. I always said, before even uploading the first chapter, that this story would become increasingly AU as it goes on. This is the pivot. Beyond this point, the cannon narrative is out the window, though I am sticking to canon mechanics and explanations. I explained this to a reviewer recently: I want to be canon-compliant, not canon-bound.

Hope you approve of the change of gears. I don't really think it would make sense not to do this, so I just hope I did it well. It does feel a bit rushed, and the last half of the chapter I rewrote several times before I was happy enough with it to post it. I kind of wanted to convey the surprise and confusion Shepard would be dealing with as this is all cast upon her. She's been kept even more in the dark than you guys :)

Anyway, let's do some comment commentary...

First, I want to address the reviewer SeverlyLate. I do not appreciate the somewhat racist stereotype invoked at the end of that review, and I told them as much. In response, I was called 'childish'. That may be, but I don't appreciate people using my work as a vessel for engaging in that particular sort of discourse.

rantingbanshee: Hope you find this chapter more to your liking, then ;)

GaussFrigate: Canon's well out the window now :P I mentioned this in my PM response, but I'll repeat it here: I have been thinking about a Techno Corps Codex, but I'm having trouble finding a good way to do it that wouldn't spoil too much about the story. It might get easier now that more of Aaron's most significant secrets have been revealed. Also, such a Codex could be a decent vessel for carrying short stories about Aaron's past exploits that don't naturally fit into the main narrative as flashbacks, so I would very much like to do something like it. (Of course, time is also an issue here.)
Goldspark1: I think I promised one more space battle after the previous one. That's coming up in the next chapter. Hopefully you will be pleased :)

general-joseph-dickson, The Critic 8372: Thank you!

Ghostboy95: Whoa, high praise! :D The relationship between the Technopath Corps and the STG has always been interesting, and I hope I get a chance to elaborate on that further. But here, the STG will be in a position to reveal the Network to the Council, and point out the definite-but-unknown link to the Technopath Corps. It will raise alarms to a deafening level, which is exactly what Aaron wants. The Council has gotten complacent, they're stagnant, they need something to grind their teeth on in order to prepare for the Reapers. Still, it's a risky game to play, and the ultimate consequence could be that the Network proves to be a greater hindrance to galactic unification than anything else once the Reapers do arrive.
The giant holographic representation of Sovereign seemed to scan the room continuously, paying little attention to the small beings scurrying about. From time to time, the projection would flicker slightly, or pulse for a brief moment, before once again stabilising. In front of it, leaning on the railing of the platform he was standing on, stood Close, his arms folded across his chest, and though his face was obscured by his damnable mask, Shepard could feel his gaze as he observed her reaction to the scene. And a scene it was; it was clear to the Commander that this was all very strictly directed, with clear theatrical intent, and an even clearer sense of purpose, though what that purpose might have been she was not sure.

Nor was she sure who this performance was for.

"What's going on here, Messenger?"

"Endgame."

"What?"

Close unfolded his arms and pushed off from the railing. "Our Reaper friend here", he gestured vaguely toward the elephant-sized hologram in the room, "is a program with a purpose: Our destruction. I intend to make achieving this purpose impossible."

What? "And you're doing this through... chatting?"

"I'm doing it by flouting expectation. As I always do."

Shepard sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose in irritation, gesturing vaguely for the pain in the ass to continue. "Just... skip to the point, will you?"

The Messenger shrugged in a somewhat Asari-like gesture, nodding his head toward a single raised shoulder. "The AI believes itself immune to electronic warfare. I'm proving it wrong. The AI believes itself immune to military force. By sheer force of numbers, I'm proving it wrong. The AI believes itself beyond comprehension. By analysing it without it even realising I'm doing so, I'm proving. It. Wrong."

"You're wasting. My. Time."

"No, I'm wasting its time, and entirely on purpose. You see, I've found some weaknesses in its construction, and this," he gestured toward the hologram. "This is all part of exploiting those weaknesses."

"Commander, the fleets are converging on the kill zone above your position. Readings indicate the Geth fleet is preparing to fire on the planet! We're heading down to pick you up, it'll be tight but we
"should be able to get you out before impact!"

Shit!

"Mr. Moreau, how long until they are in firing range?"

"I dunno, four minutes? Give or take?"

From the way Close's head dipped slightly upon getting his answer, Shepard guessed that he had moved to a different channel to coordinate with his own forces in orbit.

Right. Plans. "Weaver!"

"Kind of busy here, Sprite!"

"Not for much longer. Geth fleet are four minutes out, appear to be preparing to fire on our position."

"Shit. Well, we did prepare for that."

"We lost canopy, remember?"

"Temporarily. But I mean that our shuttles are capable of quick-response pickups. As long as they aren't firing from within the atmosphere, we'll be able to get out of here before impact."

Right. We have exfiltration capabilities on the ground already. "Can your shuttles accommodate my people?"

"Easily. But you'll need to get to our pickup locations."

"Copy." She cut the line and changed channel to contact the rest of her squad, and turned around to face those already with her. "We're moving to reinforce the Archangel troops in the central compound. It's likely we'll have to ex-fil quickly, and soon. I've set a marker on your HUD, move now!"

To say I had been expecting a scorched-earth response from Sovereign would have been a lie, but I had certainly predicted the possibility and prepared for it. All our ground shuttles were standing by on quick exfiltration protocols, ready and able to quickly and efficiently pick up and shuttle off our personnel and gear. Our secondary assault teams, deployed behind enemy lines once anti-air cover had been dealt with, hadn't moved far enough away from their insertion points that a quick withdrawal would be problematic. Our primary team was located in an area open enough for the shuttles to land. The only challenge would be for Shadow team to make it out, and that wouldn't be much of a problem; our Daggers were quicker and more manoeuvrable than the shuttles, and the fact that they could fly autonomously meant we would probably have more time than the rest of the forces.

No, the real challenge would be to grab all the data we could before time ran out. A full beacon data extraction is a lengthy affair, even with Tela's Reader device, and a quick check revealed that she was barely half done. It would be a shame to lose yet another beacon, and I would avoid it if I could, but with a Reaper bearing down on the planet there wasn't much that could be done.

Really, Sovereign's response made a certain kind of sense. The path bearing straight down to the planet was the only one left open to his fleet. Zaeed's Remnant forces, Sederis' Eclipse fleets, and
Aria's Black Fleet were cutting off the retreat option with enough numbers that even if he decided to turn around and rabbit to the relay, they would delay the massive ship enough for the rest of the fleets to get involved. And with the Talons and Hammer covering the flanks on their intercept approach from either side of the planet, and the Archangel moving out of its canopy position, a singular open path was left, though a massive killing field it may be, between the Reaper and the planet. Even if the ancient synthetic did not accept that its demise was coming, it would be foolish of it to not make an effort at minimising the fallout of these events by erasing whatever important data remained on the planet. The fact that he might be able to take out some organic annoyances in the process would just be a bonus.

"Rho?"

The response came promptly on our secured private channel. "Aaron. Any thoughts?"

"I was about to ask the same. Any way to slow them down?"

"Other than reassuming canopy? Not really."

"I may have one. Are the Cx missiles loaded yet?"

A grunt came over the line as she realised where I was going with this. "They're loaded, but untested. You know this."

"The Archangel itself is untested."

Another grunt. "Won't slow them much."

"May be enough. Might get lucky."

"Fair enough. Not much of a loss if it doesn't work, anyway. I'm giving the order."

The Cx missile program was one of our attempts to overcome some of the range issues inherent to space weaponry. In a space battle, it was immensely important to distinguish between optimal, effective, and theoretical ranges. A mass accelerator had theoretically unlimited range; once fired, it will ruin someone's day somewhere, sometime. However, due to the immense distances involved, beyond a certain distance a target would be able to adjust their heading to avoid incoming projectiles, or adjust their point defence systems to disintegrate them before they hit. GARDIAN lasers had only worsened the range problem.

Missiles, theoretically, are able to adjust their trajectories on the fly and would, theoretically, be able to adjust to changes in the target's position. This gave missiles a far superior effective range than mass accelerators, though they were even more vulnerable to point defence systems, which meant their optimal range was lower by a significant amount. This actually explained a significant part of the success of the human carrier capital ship design, as smaller vessels are more capable of closing to optimal distance for missile use while allowing the host ship to stay outside of the effective and optimal ranges of the enemy's weapons. Though again, GARDIANs had impacted this strategy as well, with the systems more than capable of damaging the smaller fighter and bomber craft.

What the Cx did was start with the assumption that the missile would get hit by GARDIAN fire. That shifted the design challenge into figuring out how to deal with that, and overcome it. Our solution was a multi-stage cluster munition which used heat siphoned from GARDIAN fire to ignite its boosters. This allowed a dramatic reduction in the size of the engine assembly, and an equal upscaling of the payload necessary to make it a viable anti-ship weapon. The payload itself was designed to be more disruptive than destructive, the idea being that a statically charged shrapnel
cloud would force enemy fleets to slow down or break up, and would reduce the effectiveness of point defence systems which would in turn increase the effective ranges of your own weapons.

At least, that was the theory. While the system worked brilliantly in simulations, it had never been field tested.

_First time for everything._

I linked up to the targeting Vis aboard the Archangel, and my vision flooded with tactical information that my onboard processors immediately converted into formats I could more easily comprehend. In this case, I got to see the missiles lock in their targets before launching from hundreds of launch hatches that opened all over the 'belly' of the vast ship. My processors connected in the visual feeds from the various ships of Archangel fleet, synthesising the feeds into a complete 3D rendering of the live scene, allowing me to move around in a virtualised representation of the space above Virmire. A few seconds went by before the missiles fired their engines, having waited until they all cleared the Archangel's shield envelope. I watched as the firing of hundreds of experimental engines cast my capital ship in a dull white-orange light, odd, harsh shadows playing across its surface in a light show that my brain instinctively thought seemed 'off'. A stray thought was spent reminding myself of the lack of an atmosphere for the light to interact with, before my attention once more turned to the missiles as they seemed to _flow_ around Virmire's moon and stabilise their heading to intercept the approaching Geth fleet.

If the first light show had been impressive, what happened next was simply stunning. As the swarm of missiles came within firing range of the fleet's GARDIAN arrays, the frames of the experimental weapons lit up in an increasing glow, before they seemed to burst at the seams and explode into a much larger swarm of missiles that accelerated further toward their targets. The shells that were left behind disintegrated violently into a cloud of charged particulate matter, causing visual disturbances in my field and – hopefully – allowing our own fleets an opening to use their weapons.

"Disruptor cloud deployed successfully. Rho, take the reins! And relay to Talons and Hammer to fire at will!"

The two interceptor fleets were still fairly significantly out of optimal firing range, but we would have to take the chance. They weren't going to be using mass accelerators yet, any missed shots at that distance could prove disastrous, but with both fleets launching a full salvo of missiles there was a high chance that some would get through.

Meanwhile, the cluster munitions that had survived the initial blast shot forward from the cloud, impacting the kinetic barriers of the ships behind it. A few of the Geth frigates suffered direct hits to their hulls, and subsequently fell out of formation as the disruptive payloads overloaded key systems and likely destroyed some thousand programs. At the edge of my sensory range, I could feel the Geth on the Archangel mourn their loss, a part of their collective selves being irrevocably lost.

Other than the few frigates, and some significant disruptions to the barriers of the front line of the Geth fleet, they did not register any significant damage. As far as I could tell from sensors, Sovereign himself hadn't suffered any hits. But that was just the first wave, and now Talon and Hammer were ready to strike. Their missiles launched in a wave of munitions at least equal to the impressive launch of Archangel's weapons, and at the same time the hangar bays on the Archangel's belly opened to launch its primary contingent of fighters and bombers.

The Geth fleet reacted immediately; the interference cloud was a massive handicap to them, but even through the disruption they would be able to spot the massive incoming wave of carnage. I had not anticipated the response, though; the Geth moved their smaller ships to the vanguard force,
presumably to minimise losses on the front line and in the hope of regaining sensor capacity more quickly as the smaller and faster ships could get through the cloud more quickly. Still, it gave us another advantage. The smaller ships had poorer point defense capabilities than the larger ones, and in the vanguard position they would be further reducing the protective capacity of the ships behind them in their fleet.

Rho was quick to take advantage, ordering our drone fighters to form up in a large, single formation. The fighters could get within firing distance before the Geth got through the sensor cloud, and the close formation would hopefully register on sensors as a single ship, providing a tempting target for the Geth. A target that would seem to simply soak up their fire without taking visible damage.

"Boss?"

Tela's interruption disconnected me from the tactical view of the space battle now raging above our heads. I staggered slightly as my vision returned to normal, my brain struggling to cope with the complete change in sensory context, my proprioception switching back from its virtual representation to my physical body. Judging from the somewhat quizzical look she sent my way she had noticed.

"Yes?"

"Where were you?"

"Tactical, Archangel. Did you want something?"

The asari had always been quite protective of me, to a point where she sometimes forgot formal protocol. The reminder did not go unnoticed, as she straightened visibly before continuing.

"Yes. The download is still going on, we're at 70%. Zeta and I have lined the entire chamber with kinetic barrier generators and SAFE devices. If anything in this compound survives the bombardment, it will be this chamber."

"Good," I grunted, as I ran through some quick impact simulations. "Line the beacon's alcove with a redundant layer, and then do the same with the beacon itself. I want to know that we did as much as we could to save it."

…I hate this. Shepard popped her head up from behind cover and fired a few more rounds downrange to assist her allies in keeping the volume of fire more or less constant. Behind her, a soldiers were filing through by the dozen, heading back from whence they came and quickly taking positions to cover the first line soldiers when they were ready to leave their post to follow. It was a textbook organised retreat. It was as effective as it was predictable. The remaining Geth and Krogan forces could barely get a shout in, much less a shot, as they were hammered on two sides by forces that would soon be out of the firefight altogether. It was the final moments of the battle, and everyone knew it.

And it was god damn boring.

She had to admit to being pretty impressed by the skill of the Archangel marines. They had handled themselves professionally in every way, presenting a level of skill and professionalism that was significantly above what she had come to expect from the average battalion of Alliance marines. She had noticed this even before the engagements had begun, and after the first wave attacks she had attributed their skill to being trained by N-school graduates and, according to Henry Weaver,
Quarian Marine Commanders, a fact that had surprised her. Not much was known about Quarian military tactics and procedures, the Flotilla mostly kept themselves cut off from the rest of the galaxy, but they appeared to be comfortable enough with Close's organisation to have entered into a military cooperation with them. That was both impressive and deeply worrying.

However, the events unfolding in the space above the planet had put the entire situation in a different light for her. These soldiers weren't just well-trained and well-equipped. They were veterans. They had likely been fighting shadow wars across the galaxy, particularly in the Terminus, for many years already. Once she had clocked on to that, it seemed obvious. The way they moved, the lack of hesitation in their actions, how they never as much as flinched when bullets came flying their way, or someone fell beside them. These are things only experience can teach you.

And if the idea of Close running an paramilitary organisation under a cooperative agreement with the Quarians had worried her, the fact that his units may collectively be one of the most highly experienced and trained forces in the galaxy was terrifying. The reason big PMCs were largely tolerated was that they were, at least in principle, disconnected entirely from state powers. These were not state or even nation-state actors, and this fact meant that they could largely be ignored in sovereign affairs. Once they got involved in sovereign affairs, though, things tended to get serious in a hurry. That's what had ignited the Terminus Wars, and what had eventually lead to the – now inaccurately presumed, it would seem – downfall of the Eclipse PMC.

Shepard had always known that her Spectre title would divide her duties and loyalties between the Alliance and the Council, but she hadn't realised just how this would affect her. Now she found herself wondering who she should brief first, the Council whose sovereignty is most significantly infringed or threatened, or the Alliance whose citizens are most deeply involved.

"Sprite!"

She dropped back down behind cover as she switched channels to respond, "Need anything, Weaver?"

"We're about to push in, we've orders to end this before we evacuate. Can you make some noise on your end?"

"Grenades, mines, concussors, and carnage. Hell yes. "It's what I do best." She drew a deep breath, as she flicked the speakers on her helmet to their loudest setting. "SOLDIERS! MAKE SOME NOISE!!"

"EE-RAH!!" was the immediate and overwhelmingly loud response, startling her for a second as she heard the Archangel battle cry for the first time. She wasn't sure why, but the loud shout rang familiar with her, the same kind of familiarity she had felt recently every time she looked upon a beacon, whether a real one or photos from the Mars Archives.

Shaking herself, she activated the concussive system on her Avenger rifle with the flick of a button, and expanded her Scimitar shotgun to load a Carnage round for the follow-up. A quick glance over at the rest of her team, most of them scattered throughout the firing rank, told her that they were ready and waiting for her signal.

"MARK!"

Thunderclap was a word that came to her mind immediately after she gave the word. As one, the entire firing line unleashed a torrent of hell at Saren's bunkered-in forces, enough force directed at their fortifications within just a couple of seconds that the outer wall cracked and collapsed. Immediately, the Geth's focus shifted in their direction, only for the second wave of carnage and
concussor rounds to hit them, now interspersed with grenades and tech mines. That was immediately followed up by the biotics on the team slinging singularities downrange, and the techs launching their drones and turrets. The attacks weren't all that effective, as they were at the very edge of their range with the enemy having held them off at a 40-50m distance, but the sheer volume of chaos had a clear overwhelming effect on the enemy.

This wasn't the kind of attack that could be sustained for very long, and in a normal one-flank combat situation it would have left Shepard and her firing teams wide open to immediate and overwhelming counter-attacks. But as a distraction?

In the distance, Shepard saw a rolling wave of soldiers barrel down on the bunkered enemy, exploiting the chaos to overwhelm them from what they now considered their rear flank. She waited, detonating a couple of singularities in the distance to maintain the chaos for that little while longer, until she saw the first signs of the enemy catching on to the tactic. As the tank-bred Krogan got their wits about them and turned around to face Weaver's assault head-on – in a very literal way – she took that as her cue to action.

"NORMANDY SQUADS, FORM UP, WE'RE GOING IN!"

The battle was going fairly well. Sovereign's fleet had been nearly halted in their approach, the first lines of Geth ships blasted apart to create a physical obstacle to their advance. The Archangel herself was moving out of the shadow of the moon to come into engagement range with her mass accelerator weapons, timing her fire to follow directly on the heel of her fighters as they slipped through the wreckage and into the Geth fleet. The two-punch would be costly for the heretics, though they still formed an effective phalanx around Sovereign as he kept pushing toward the planet, albeit far more slowly than before.

"You're afraid."

"I AM SOVEREIGN."

"And Sovereign is afraid. Hiding behind your slaves. You worry we have enough firepower to bring you down. And you are correct."

"WE ARE ENDLESS."

"I am looking forward to testing that theory."

Occupying a Reaper with meaningless threats. It's not how you would expect your day to go, I don't think, but it had been a core part of our plan for years. Forcing the communication channel to remain open, distracting the Reaper with conversation he can't ignore, the idea was always that this should stretch the being's processing capacity, its capacity for attention, enough that it would weaken him. From the tactical readouts we were getting at this point from our advance fighters, that seemed to hold true. Sovereign's shield strength seemed to be reduced, though there was no evidence of damage. That would still remain the case for a little while, as our fighters and bombers focused solely on the Geth phalanx.

The tactical reasoning here was rather simple: Reapers favour their shield and hull strength such that they prefer simply tanking whatever damage comes their way, with no evidence seen of point defense systems, which to be fair works rather well against most opposition. In this case, though, the sheer volume of firepower the Network fleets could concentrate on the single Reaper in the system
should be sufficient to overwhelm its defences, particularly if it were sufficiently distracted. This left the Geth fleet the most significant defensive advantage. Their point defense systems would severely impact the volume of fire we could deploy, which is why the focus of our early strikes was on reducing their range and efficiency, and then take it out entirely. The strategy appeared to be working, as one by one the Geth's GARDIAN arrays came apart under close fire from our fighters.

On the ground, things were also going well. According to Weaver, the last of the enemy force had been killed or subdued, leaving only scattered pockets of resistance throughout the base which our snipers and infiltrators were taking care of. Shepard and Weaver were in the process of rounding up the soldiers and getting them on their shuttles, ready to exfiltrate at a moment's notice, and I had a feeling that moment would come soon.

"Sovereign is breaking through! He's firing!"

I had been expecting it, but that didn't stop my stomach from dropping. I quickly put a timer up on my HUD, showing time to impact counting down from less than three minutes. Sovereign himself wouldn't be far behind, and would likely attempt engagement with our escaping forces in-atmosphere in an effort to take us out and minimise the fallout of what he by now had certainly calculated was his inevitable destruction.

"All ground forces, this is your general evacuation order. Get to your shuttles immediately!"

"I've called the Daggers, boss. We should be out of here within a minute."

"How long until we're done in here?"

Tela's eyes went slightly wide as she realised what I was hinting at. "Two minutes. Boss…"

"Don't. Do whatever you can to speed it up. And bring your Dagger to the window, we're leaving that way."

The asari tensed visibly, not particularly fond of the idea of staying for too long in an area that would soon be reduced to rubble, but she quickly nodded and ran back down to the beacon as she brought up her omni-tool, probably in an attempt to increase the Reader device's processing speed and data throughput. I doubted she could do it, though I figured the attempt was mostly for the sake of her own reassurance.

"What about me, Sir?"

"You done yet?"

"Ten seconds, just one more emitter."

"Then I want you on overwatch. Get out of here, Chi."

He simply nodded, as he placed the final SAFE emitter and dialled in the appropriate deployment parameters. The human in me felt a bit useless as I appeared to simply stand around while everyone around me were running around manically, but my job was no less taxing than everyone else's. I was acting as the connector node for Caesar's intrusion into Sovereign's systems, which both forced me to stay close to the holographic terminal and meant I had to keep a constant watch on my firewalls and electronic counter-warfare suites. It felt like playing a game of Tetris in 3D, with multiple blocks falling at the same time, and hardly any straight blocks in sight, and the longer the game went on the harder it got. Sovereign had already almost succeeded in breaking the connection twice, once during my virtual excursion above the planet and once again right after he fired.
"Keep trying, squid. You won't get me."

I barely took notice of Dietrich as he left the room, focusing my stare at the giant cuttlefish hologram as it threw a glare my way, not responding as it evidently focused on maintaining his attention on his breaching run toward the planet. According to the tactical feed, Talon and Hammer were just entering engagement range with the Reaper and had opened fire, which Sovereign promptly ignored.

I tuned out the tactical feed as I focused on maintaining the integrity of Caesar's connection, making sure I logged everything. It was perhaps unsurprising, but the Reaper was using a quantum entanglement communication system which was operating on technological principles we did not fully understand, which lead me to hope that we could use the technology to improve and mature our own QEC technology.

"Done, boss. Let's get out of here before the Athame-damned apocalypse."

I grunted, and placed a tiny, unassuming, grey box on the floor in front of me, before saluting the hologram and turning on my heel to leave the room. Tela clearly had no plans of sticking around any longer than she had to, and blasted the window out with a massive throw field. Hovering outside the window was her Dagger-class micro-frigate, the Tidal Spear, its side hatch open and landing walkway extended so she could walk straight in. Right behind it was the ship that had given the class its name, the TCSV Dagger, my personal ship. It was equipped with a forward processing relay bank for Caesar, which allowed me to maintain Caesar's link remotely through the uplink node I lad left in the chamber.

The Dagger took off the moment I came aboard, on a trajectory calculated to take me out of the blast zone as quickly as possible. Quickly checking over my tactical feed, I determined that all our vessels would make it, though that may be a very brief relief. Sovereign was on course to intercept the rabbiting ships before they left the atmosphere.

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"Commander, that… thing is headed right for us, isn't it."

It wasn't a question. Ashley was a competent enough marine that she knew how to read a tactical feed, but she also had an annoying habit of always seeking affirmation from her superiors. It got annoying at times.

"Yeah," she grunted. "Less than a minute. It's taking a beating, I have no idea how it's still flying."

According to the feed, the fleets taking on the Geth head-on had unleashed absolute hell on the ancient machine, the Archangel alone impacting its shields with over half a ton of hypervelocity slugs each second from no less than six dreadnaught-sized mass drivers and countless smaller guns of various sizes. Yet somehow, the shields were holding.

"Its barriers do appear to be destabilising. This thing can be dropped."

A strange, low whistling noise signalled Garrus' entrance into the discussion. "Not before it reaches the atmosphere. And then our side's options are more limited."

This was true. According to Council law, firing ship-based mass accelerators towards a planet is strictly illegal, though perhaps more important was the fact that the barrage itself would become far less effective once atmospheric effects entered the picture. Friction and turbulence effects make
trajectories hard to calculate precisely, a problem exacerbated by the extreme velocities involved, and projectiles weaken from the heat buildup and pressure differentials. Much of the problem involves the space-atmosphere barrier, the effects involved in transitioning from a no-atmosphere environment to a low-atmosphere environment. At some angles, projectiles will simply explode as they 'impact' the upper atmosphere.

On the bright side, most ships' kinetic barrier systems were significantly weaker in atmospheric conditions due to interference effects.

"Brace yourselves back there, bow wave incoming!"

The wave hit before the warning ended. Several soldiers were thrown against the bulkheads, and Shepard instinctively looked around to check on Tali. She had become rather protective of the young Quarian, though in this instance it appeared as though her worry was unfounded. Tali had grown up on ships, old ones at that, and was evidently quite used to these things. She stood with a solid foundation, arm grabbing at a nearby bulkhead for stability. As she met her eyes, the admiral's daughter gestured behind her Commander. As she turned around, Shepard found a certain Asari crewmember sprawled on the floor. Were it not for the severity of the situation, she would likely have broken out in open laughter, but with the Reaper on an intercept course and only seconds away she wasted no time in giving her a hand up. As she shot up from the floor she came very close face-to-face with the Commander in a situation that further threatened...distraction.

Shepard shook her head, getting back in the right mindset, and prepared for action. As the highest-ranking officer on her shuttle, she naturally took charge of the tactical feed, coordinating with the other officers to keep their formation organised. Though what a few shuttles could do against an incoming Reaper, she did not know.

"Sovereign has entered the atmosphere!"

That's when Shepard saw it. It was on the edge of the feed, but the moment the Reaper entered atmo the reading was pushed to the top of the feed. Manually. By Archangel Command. That...Rohu'Shamm woman. There was an enormous mass on a hypervelocity intercept course with the Reaper. It lined up perfectly with its own fire, heading down the same trajectory it had followed into the atmosphere, but its origins came from behind the cloud of debris that obscured the Geth fleet which by now was in a life-and-death battle with the Archangel's bomber and fighter squadrons.

Sniper!

"SHIT! Evasive action! Get some distance between us and that ship!"

To the pilot's great credit, there wasn't even a moment of hesitation at what might have seemed like a ridiculous order, implicit in their trust of the ship's tactical officer's judgment. The other ships, likewise, scrambled to distance themselves from the incoming Reaper, even as it opened fire which tore through two of the shuttles and grazed three more. Just moments after, the reason for the order became clear, when a massive cluster of ordnance thundered into the atmosphere on a direct course for the rear of the Reaper.

The explosion that followed was immense. Sovereign's shields buckled and blew out in a massive shockwave, shaking the escaping shuttlecraft, but that was nothing compared to the detonation of the ordnance as it impacted with the Reaper's hull. The force of the impact was enough to twist the massive hulk of a vessel, sending it spinning toward the ground. The explosion which immediately followed knocked out the engines of several of the shuttlecraft, and the lights on Sovereign itself appeared to flicker, though they did not die completely. Shepard's shuttle had been the first to react, and managed to get out of the most dangerous part of the blast radius, suffering only some severe
shaking and, she was sure, significant resulting calibration faults.

Throughout it all, she kept her eyes glued to the screen, taking several seconds to process what was happening. Only when the hulking ship failed to right itself as it descended, did she realize what had just happened.

They had just killed a Reaper.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. I'm just... I'm not going to be able to update as frequently as I want to, between work and general life stuff. Not abandoning this, though, no way no how. I'm invested :)

So, yeah. Sovereign is... dead? Maybe? Possibly a bit of an anti-climax at the end there, which was sort of the idea. You want to kill an ancient being, you can't let him see it coming. Precisely what happened will be explained in the next chapter, though I think it can be inferred from what I've written in this one.

I know some of you wanted more space battles, and they'll come eventually, but it just didn't make sense narratively to cover it in too much depth here. Both our main characters are on the ground for the entirety of this mission, and that's completely necessary for the narrative. Hopefully the bits I did give you were sufficient.

Next chapter will involve our heroes (cough) visiting the Archangel, handling some early fallout from recent events, a conversation with the Council... it'll be fun. Honestly, my mind's been primarily on the next chapter and beyond for months already, the last couple of chapters have been a bit of a grind for me to get through. This is where it gets interesting!

Thanks to everyone who reads, and particularly everyone who reviews! I love reading them, I love responding to them, both in the A/N and via PM. Love, critiques, have at it, as long as it's not pure trolling I welcome it all :)

Comment commentary:

KatKiller-V: Honestly, you approving of the previous chapter instantly made me feel a lot better about the choices I made there. Hope you approve of this one, too :)

Pietersielie, Apollonir, RadioPoisoning, general-joseph-dickson: Glad you all approve!

Goldspark1: Indeed, the differences between different types of AI and VI have always been and will certainly always be a key part of this story. There are enough to cover, between the Reapers, Caesar, the Geth, EDI, EVA, and that one on the Citadel which I haven't mentioned yet for some reason... ;) There are many types of AI, all with different strengths and weaknesses, and in the case of the Reapers it just makes sense. We know they are AI synthesized from the collective consciousnesses of previous cycles' species, but that doesn't fit with how the Reapers appear to share a collective will. Even if that collective will is just the Starchild-AI, that still means that each individual Reaper is
working within some kind of shackles. They are limited by their own design. And uh, as for uniting the Terminus... it's a bit more complicated than that, as you will see in the next chapter :P

GaussFrigate: Hope you're satisfied with what little fighting you got, unfortunately there wasn't really a logical way to both facilitate and fit the Most Epic of Space Battles into this particular narrative. I had vague plans for a Caesar-POV which might have facilitated it narratively speaking, but I couldn't make that fit logically either, as the AI was essentially kept busy playing hide and seek with a Reaper throughout this entire chapter.
The first half hour or so after Sovereign went down went by in something of a blur. Caesar hadn't managed to sever his connection cleanly before the Reaper's data networks broke down, and was forced to dedicate all his attention to fighting off code corruption and patching his discrete runtimes. He wouldn't be able to fully restore himself until we got boots back on the ground and secured the wreckage, as some of his forks remained within its systems. It had been a known risk, though the exact nature of the risk was unknown. This was, after all, the first time he had run on his expansion code.

What was worrying was that in principle, this meant that the improper severing of his connection to the Reaper was akin to a human having random chunks of his brain extracted while fully conscious. There was simply no way of knowing what the results of this could be, how it would affect Caesar, but his behaviour after the event had calmed some of my worries. He had kept his synchronisation processes suspended, to avoid introducing further errors and spreading any potential corruption. His focus had been on modelling his expansion state at the time of the severed link, to figure out what parts were missing and what their significance would or could be. Not an easy task; in his expanded state, Caesar's distribution structure was in a state of constant flux, connections added, severed, and redirected by the thousands every nanosecond. And since the event had lasted seconds, that meant there were millions of connections that may or may not have been directly affected by it. An organic cannot even comprehend the scope of the project, much less work on it.

Strange then, perhaps, that my greatest concern wasn't Caesar, but rather the particularly frustrating Asari matriarch who had been waiting for me in the Envoy room on the Archangel when I docked. And the irate and confused Spectres demanding to see me in the Normandy's briefing room, even though I had offered to see them in Envoy as well. The Normandy was docked in the Archangel's cruiser-sized shipyard, after all. And the Council, who was currently banging their digital fists on the comms firewall we had in place around Hoc. Not to mention Aria, Red, Aethyta T'Voth, and any of the other fleet leaders currently in the system, all of whom wanted to convene the Network for a meeting to determine the next step.

Of course, Jona Sederis had beat them all to it.

"You know this will lead to war!"

Having a glowing finger shoved in your face by a shouting creature you know has more than enough power within her to rip you apart without even touching you is something that would make even an Elcor physically express fear. Fortunately, after having worked with Sederis for years I had eventually gotten used to it, and didn't so much as flinch. The Mistress of the Eclipse generally preferred to participate loudly.

"It will not. There will be a stand-off." I rolled my shoulder and tilted my neck in the typical Asari shrug. She was right that shit was about to hit the fan, but from all we knew about how galactic
politics worked she would be wrong on just what the fallout would be. *"They don't know our reach, and they will never know our reach. That they do know, and they are not going to attack before that is resolved. For all they know, it might be suicide. They are not going to take that risk."*

She backed off, but the scowl on her face went nowhere. "You don't know Tevos."

*I know her better than most. Yes, she will activate whatever ARIC assets she has across the Terminus. Yes, they will cause a great deal of chaos. But that's temporary. She can't act publically."

"She can and she will. Thessia…"

I cut her off with a loud sigh, *"Thessia favours stability and always will. We are introducing chaos, yes, but an attack would only compound it."*

"Damn it, Messenger," Sederis threw her arms up in exasperation. This wasn't the first time we had covered this ground, and she though she had been key to actually developing the plan she had decided to reconsider her position several times already. "You are gambling with all of our organisations here! The entire Network!"

*"It's not a gamble, Jona, it's a measured act. Thessia will favour stability in Council space, and will limit their actions to covert, deniable ARIC operations. The Salarians will complain about uncertainties and dealing with too many variables, and will likewise engage their STG assets to gather information. The Turians will bluster and cry for action, but as usual they will be denied."*

She actually snorted at that. We could at least agree that the Turians would once more be the overruled in the Council. "And the Alliance?"

*"That might depend on Shepard. She carries more sway on public opinion than most of their higher-ups are willing to admit."*

"Tell me again why you had that crazy bitch set up for a Spectre position?"

*"She is predictably unpredictable."

She sighed. "Tell me again why you insist on never giving a god damn clear answer to anything? Or why I keep asking you questions?"

I smiled behind my mask. *"I guess we are both predictable."* An alert flashed on my HUD. *"Speaking of Shepard, she is preparing to give her report to the Council now."*

"Are you going to let her?"

*"Of course. I plan on letting her through the firewall first, and then lower it when the conference with the Council is underway."*

"You and your tides-damned theatrics."

*I am the Messenger. The important bit of the message is always the presentation."

"Don't I know it…"
A thought occurred to me. Jona Sederis was officially presumed dead by C-Sec, and the Council by
derogation. Half the point of the next stage in our plan for revealing the Network to the galaxy was to
unsettle the Council, to throw them off balance by revealing to them just how ignorant they have
been of what's been going on in the Terminus over the past decade.

"You want to join in on the conversation?"

She glanced over to me, a mischievous smirk slowly forming. "I thought you'd never ask."

…

There was going to be a bit of a risk to bringing Sederis into Shepard's report to the Council. Not
because of their reaction to her presence – that was the whole idea behind bringing her with – but
rather because unlike Shepard, she was not aware of my true identity, and I preferred to keep it that
way. The Network knew of a link between the Technopath Corps and the Close Corporation, but
they were lead to believe that the Corps was the military arm of the Shadow Broker's organisation,
and that the Messenger was a primary asset but nominally a freelancer. The prevailing theory was
that the Corporation had served as the incubator for the Corps during its formation, that originally it
had been meant to be responsible for Close Corporation's dirty work in the Terminus but had been
surreptitiously hijacked by the Broker at some point during the Terminus Wars.

An alternative theory was that it hadn't been hijacked, but was always meant to be a support
organisation around the Messenger, supported by multiple parties with whom I regularly did
business. I actively encouraged all these rumours as best I could, as long as I did not see a direct
benefit to discrediting them. Security by obfuscation can be surprisingly effective.

To the Network, I did not have a role as a leader in the Network, but rather as a point of contact for
the leadership, whom they all assumed to be the Shadow Broker. The Network operated as
individual actors with sovereignty, bound together in specific circumstances and objectives through
the Omega Accords. The Accords, signed by the various warlords that now made up the Network
toward the end of the Terminus Wars, outlined a framework for covert non-aggression between the
members, and mutual cooperation in some specific ventures. The bulk of the Accords was pure
dictate; the Shadow Brokers had demands, and they would be met.

I tell you, the actual negotiation on those points with Hetta T'Lang had been far more difficult – and
dangerous – than the formal negotiations on Omega. It was the end of a long war, and no one in that
room had wanted it to last any longer. They collectively represented the most powerful organisations
in the Terminus, and they were presented with a way to end a war that at that point threatened to take
away all the power they had left. For the first time in many centuries, the powers of the Terminus
chose peace and cooperation over war.

Of course, it was a fickle arrangement that rested quite heavily on secrecy. The members of the
Network could not know who their 'mysterious benefactor' was, though we made certain that they
strongly believed it to be the Broker. The citizens of the Network could not know they were citizens
of the Network; they would reject any such alliance as counter to the basic principles of life in the
Terminus. That point might actually be the greatest threat once we revealed ourselves, but the
thought was that once it became clear they had been part of the Network for years already, and that
there were tangible, already-evident benefits to this, that would convince them not to rebel too much.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are we going in?"

Sederis' voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I quickly checked on the data stream between the
Normandy and the Relay network. "Give it a moment. I want to time this right."
Shepard was reporting on the presence of the massive fleet currently in place in the Hoc system. Sparatus had already tried to dismiss her claims several times, sticking with the Council theory that the Terminus would never dare to invade a Council space system, even a Traverse system, with any kind of battle-sized fleet. Turians don't have eyes like we do; if what they're looking at doesn't fit with their doctrine, then they don't see it.

"That is preposterous, Commander." I linked the stream into our comms, to prepare Sederis for her entrance. "The Eclipse was nearly destroyed in the final days of the Terminus Wars, and Jona Sederis has been dead for years. You are being played."

"Now."

We had made our way onto the Normandy unseen, not a difficult feat with the technology available to us, and had been standing outside the briefing room – right between the guards – for several minutes at that point. On my mark, the doors to the briefing room opened, and we lowered our tactical cloaks. The guards, two inexperienced Alliance marines, nearly jumped out of their skin as two heavily armoured and armed figures uncloaked and proceeded to completely ignore them and simply walk past them into the room they were meant to be guarding. Shepard, likewise, turned around with a start and grabbed for a weapon that wasn't there, before she narrowed her eyes as she saw who we were.

"Rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated, Sparatus," Sederis calmly spoke as she walked toward the comms pedestals at the back of the room. "Tevos," she nodded to the Councillors in turn, "New Salarian guy."

"Valern is his name. I think you'll find him particularly reasonable, Jona."

"Ah yes, the Salarian ones are always annoying."

I made sure to shake my head visibly. The banter was sure to set off alarm bells for the Councillors. Not only was Jona Sederis alive, she was alive and on a first-name basis with the Messenger, the man who was the primary suspect in her supposed assassination. The hinting at deeper conspiracies would be too much to ignore.

And it would only get better.

"Jona Sederis. You are supposed to be dead."

Tevos glanced my way, accusingly. Not without reason; I had, once upon a time, been tasked with her assassination, and it was widely believed I had succeeded. In a sense, I had. Her compound had been attacked, multiple casualties had been confirmed, and Sederis herself had never been found after the central chamber of the base had been destroyed in an explosion. The fact that no uncorrupted footage could be found of the attackers, despite all the security systems working throughout the event, pointed squarely at the Messenger's involvement.

"The rumours of my demise are greatly exaggerated. Just as I like it." She turned toward the confused Alliance Commander and reached out a hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Commander Shepard."

Shepard blinked twice before she took her hand and gave it a single tentative shake. "Likewise… I think."

Sederis glanced back at me, "You were right, I do like her. That confused look on her face is adorable."
"You can't kill her, Jona."

"Aww…"

Waving a hand as a sign to focus, I turned back to the holograms in front of us. "Councillors. I am here on behalf of the Network. I stand ready to answer your questions."

The three of them shared confused and suspicious glances between each other, silently working out how to, and who would, proceed. Meanwhile, Shepard had moved to stand at my left, and was currently glaring daggers through my helmet. Nothing unusual there, then.

Unsurprisingly, Tevos was the first to break the awkward silence. "Maybe… maybe we begin with what this 'Network' actually is, Mr. Messenger?"

Oh, wow. She hadn't called me that since she had tried to… recruit me for ARIC nearly a decade earlier. The reminder was clearly intentional, and it was obvious she wanted to rattle me.

"Certainly, Councillor." I paused for a couple of beats, attempting to work out the most impactful way I could phrase this. "The Network is a confederation of Terminus sector powers. Collectively, the sovereign members control near 70% of the organised military might of this region of space, either directly or through other binding alliances and treaties."

Tevos' eyes widened. Valern blinked. Sparatus' mandibles flicked apart in poorly handled shock. Even Shepard reacted with what seemed like surprise, and I couldn't really blame any of them. To them, the mere concept of a formalised union controlling a majority of the Terminus had been a preposterous thing to ponder up until that moment. The Terminus was and had always been an uncontrollable galactic wasteland, where the population and its rulers agreed on only one thing: No one is the boss of us.

Which is exactly how we had succeeded in uniting them. Slowly, over years of war, we had built up relationships, gathered information that would see each of the big bosses’ organisations disintegrate, assassinate close lieutenants and power brokers to erode the base of their power. We tore them down to build them back up. Once invested deeply enough, none of them could afford to break the Accords.

Sparatus was first to respond. "Are you telling us that a… Terminus State has invaded a Council space system?!

Here we go. "I am telling you that the Network has proved its capabilities by responding to an emergency called by the Normandy and your own STG. An emergency which you failed to properly respond to, I might add."

The Turian Councillor gestured to someone off-screen. Pinging my connectors in the Council Chamber, I got a burst transmission back confirming that he had ordered two Turian patrol fleets to relocate to the two relays in Council space that connected to the Hoc relay. Presumably, this was a first move to reinforce border patrols in the Traverse and on the western border with the Terminus. It was expected, and we had taken precautions that meant it wouldn't cause any issues.

"Further, the Hoc system is technically unclaimed by any legal entity and lies on the recognised Terminus border. Considering the strength of our current presence in the system, and its status as unoccupied territory, the Technopath Corps hereby officially claims the system."

"What?" It was a rapidly blinking Valern's time to interject, "You cannot do that! The planet Virmire
contains the remains of a Spectre's headquarters, it is Special Tactics and Recon property and by extension Council property!"

Quick thinking. That's what I had always enjoyed about Salarians, their ability to quickly process information and draw overtly rational conclusions that somehow always fit with their intent and narrative.

"There is no such thing as property of the Special Tactics and Recon division outside of their official headquarters. Spectres operate independently. Of each other, of any government, of the organisation itself. Saren's base was his own, the Spectres have no legal claim and you know it."

I was actually curious how they would react to such a rejection. We knew the STG would be leaving some of their STG operatives behind, covertly, to infiltrate our operations on the ground. Those orders had already come in, so naturally we were aware of them. Tightbeam or not, we had had people around their equipment, which meant that none of it was secure anymore. As for the Turians, they would likely further bolster the exit systems for Hoc's relay. Again, it wouldn't be a problem. The Asari, on the other hand… they would never stand for anyone undermining their assertion of power. It didn't matter where you were in the galaxy, if the Asari – or rather, their Councillor or Matriarch's Council – told you to do something, you did it. Otherwise you would find yourself in a world of trouble very quickly.

"Careful now, Messenger" Predictably, Tevos was the one to deliver the first worthy warning. "You might find such… open disrespect to be a dangerous path."

Oh, spare me. "On the contrary. It is the only path. The Council has become complacent and satisfied in the disorder and pain that has been the way of life in the Terminus for centuries. No more."

We still had one revelation up our sleeve, and it was a big one. It was the kind of game changer that would ensure our opposition on the Council would be left unable to act, lest they completely collapse the galactic economy on which their power rests. You see, the Citadel was the centre of galactic power in many ways, the most significant one being the economy. Sure, much power rested with the core worlds – Thessia, Sur'kesh, Palaven, Earth, Dekunna, and of course Irune – but most of it was routed through Council-controlled hubs of power, two of which had over time grown to become foundational cornerstones of the galactic economy in Council space: The Citadel, and Illium.

"You should now all be receiving a data file. In that file, you will find a notice of secession. Illium is officially and formally withdrawing from Council space and joining the Network as its first independent colonial entity. You will find that the corporate vote was near-unanimous…"

"This is outrageous!"

Oh, wow! I had not expected Tevos to be the one to snap first from that piece of news, though I guess it made sense. In many ways, Illium was considered the largest of the Asari Republics, though formally it wasn't a Republic at all. Yes, it had the largest Asari population outside of Thessia. Yes, the Republics ran multiple governmental offices on the planet. Yes, they had strong ties with the Council, and several former Councillors had been Illian. But they were a corporate world, first and foremost, and its position as a border world between Council space and the Terminus meant that it was as much a Terminus world as it was a Council one. More so, now.

"Illium is an Asari world! Asari! The Board is wholly owned by Asari corporations…"

"No, Tevos, it is not. You have not been paying attention. The Board is barely 50% Asari-owned
corporations at this point, and half of those in turn are based in the Terminus. The Republics lost control over Illium half a decade ago. You just never noticed."

The Asari Councillor was fuming. I had never seen her quite this angry, not even after Aria had sent me to deliver some particularly... *invective* messages towards the end of the Terminus Wars, telling her in no uncertain terms what would happen to her position of personal power on the Citadel should she keep using ARIC resources to interfere with Aria's operations. That had pissed her off, because Aria was not supposed to know about ARIC, much less know that Tevos controlled the organisation. But even then she had mostly maintained her composure.

Not so much now.

"*The Council will not stand for this treachery!*"

I straightened my back, ready for the final thrust of the blade. "*The Council has no choice in the matter. Need I once again remind you all who I am and what I know? I could very easily have you all deposed and jailed, and throw your governments into lasting chaos. All posturing aside, you know this.*" I raised a hand as I sighed, a dramatic pause for effect. "*You also know that I would prefer to avoid taking that step. So, I shall deliver you an olive branch, as the humans are fond of saying.*"

"A what? What do plants have to do with this?"

I always found it particularly amusing that Turians, specifically, were so slow not to just understand, but even *register* the use of an idiomatic expression. It was particularly evident with humans, not just because we were relatively new on the galactic scene but because our languages are particularly rich with such expressions, but these things happened with other species as well.

Curiously, Shepard was the one who answered him. "It's an expression, it means he is making a gesture of good faith, a concession, a token of peace."

The aging Turian snorted, "*Peace. Not very likely with the Terminus.*"

"*Once more I remind you that you are talking to representatives of a Terminus Alliance. Peace – or some measure of it – is already achieved.*" I sighed again, "*Regardless, here is our offer: Hoc becomes part of the Terminus and the Network through the Technopath Corps. However, in the spirit of peace, we offer to keep the system open to the Council for joint ventures.*"

Shepard stirred next to me. "The Reaper. You're giving them access to the Reaper."

"*Yes. The Network is ahead of the Council on one key issue: The Reapers. We fully recognise the threat and have been working for years to counter it. That is part of the basis for our existence as a confederated alliance. However, the Council remains unconvinced. That will not stand. We now have a mostly intact but dead Reaper on the surface of Virmire, and we invite the Council to send their best researchers to learn.*"

I drew a deep breath. My next words would be a gamble.

"*The Reapers are coming. They are a far greater threat to all of us than we are to each other. You may choose to fight us, or you may choose to prepare for their arrival. Choosing the former would be a mistake. Opting to do nothing would be a mistake. You have two hours.*"

And with that, I cut the transmission.
Shepard was fuming. Sederis had tried to calm her down, but she ignored her, which meant that Sederis was fuming as well. My radio was chiming with incoming calls from contacts throughout Council space, with some rather harsh subject lines, and my allies in the Network were all demanding my attention as well.

In short: I wish Caesar had been available to help.

"You just lit the fuse on galactic war!"

Shepard’s finger was demonstrating the exact distance between our faces as she shouted at me, standing tip-toed with her other hand in a firm grip on my collar to pull me down to her level.

"I did no such thing."

"And would you take that BLOODY mask off?!!"

That comment saw Sederis quirk an eyeridge in my direction. Now was not the time to open that particular can of worms.

"You know I will not, Jane, so you can stop trying."

Shepard’s true identity – her birth name, and the story behind the name Alina – was one no one would be able to piece together unless they knew to look for it in the first place. As far as I was aware, outside of myself and her only three people in the galaxy knew her real name, and two of them had called in several favours with people in the Alliance citizen registries to make sure the connection was buried. Honestly, I'm not even sure Shepard herself knows the lengths to which Hackett and Anderson had been willing to go to protect the traumatised child they had saved from Mindoir from herself and her own past.

But my curiosity had been peaked when I had first located the young Shepard, then a corporal in the Alliance Marines, and found that her name had not been what I expected it to be. It was particularly curious, since I had first found records of a Jane Shepard on Mindoir, and those records were not tied formally to her service record, nor was Jane Shepard listed as missing after the raid. Jane had simply ceased to exist after the raid, but even that was only indicated by the complete lack of further records after that time.

All of this is to say that on the rare occasions where I invoke this name, it is to signal something. Specifically, shut the hell up, Shepard.

And it worked. She reeled slightly from hearing the name, and then promptly backed off. It was unfortunate, though I had not predicted I would think so, but I would have to keep Shepard and her crew read in on my plans. At this point, the senior crew of the Normandy knew more about me and my organisation than anyone outside the Archangel, including nearly every member of the Network. That made them a liability until I turned them into an asset.

"Let's go."

"Go? Where?"

"We should have a chat with the rest of the Network."
The ship was… she couldn't quite describe how it felt. On approach, it felt like coming in to dock at the Citadel. The Archangel's main docking bay was a vast, multi-tiered docking space that was apparently entirely separate from the ship's fighter bays. She had come in on the shuttle, of course, but when she got there the Normandy had already arrived and docked in one of the three cruiser-sized maintenance hangars, where her shuttle brought her directly into the cargo bay of her ship. Look out from the cargo bay into the wider docking area of the vast ship, it felt similar to standing on the Citadel's lower wards, or maybe more like the Arcturus Shipyards.

It was clean and sleek like the Citadel, and didn't feel at all like the warship that it was. She would have put that down to vanity on Close's part, if it weren't for the obvious efficiency of the architecture. Any boarding action would be a nightmare for the attacker, the docking bay had more than its fair share of defensible positions and poorly hidden defences. And as she walked through the corridors of the ship proper, she realised that the entire structure had been built with defensive tactics in mind. The walls had alcoves with weapon racks and deployable cover barriers at every 20 metres, and there were turret mounts in the ceiling halfway between every other alcove. The floor itself looked like it could retract in sections, though she had no idea what for.

As she moved through the winding hallways with her squad and escort to get to the meeting room where she was supposedly meeting with this Network, she couldn't help but notice all of these details. The Archangel was more thoroughly designed than even the Kilimanjaro, though there was evidence here and there of ad-hoc modifications. Come to think of it, she had noticed as they were coming in that parts of the hull looked like it was covered in scaffolding, and she'd seen a lot of construction equipment throughout the docking bay. *Repairs, maybe? Very efficient if that's the case…*

"Here we are. The Messenger will be with you shortly."

Her by now former crew member had walked off with Jona Sederis about halfway to their destination, presumably to welcome the other guests as they arrived on the ship.

Shepard glanced over at her escort as the all filed into the spacious conference room. "You are N7, aren't you."

It wasn't a question. She recognised the man from the fighting on the ground, and she had suspected then. The soldier had seemed more deliberate, more trained in his movements than most of his company, even if they were all impressive enough in their own right. Some of his action patterns were atypical in a way that was immediately reflective of N-school training at a high level.

"No, Ma'am." Shepard quirked an eyebrow at the unexpected answer. "Never made it past N6 before I died."

"Excuse me?"

"Cerberus tried to recruit me. I refused. They killed me to cover their tracks." A wry smile crossed his lips. "I got better."

Shepard looked for a name tag on the soldier's armour, but couldn't find any.

"I have no name, Ma'am." She apparently wasn't as subtle in her glances as she thought. "I take my death very seriously."

She chuckled. "You are a strange lot, you know that."
"None stranger than the man himself, Ma'am."

She could only offer a hum of acknowledgement in response. She knew she would have a few moments, so she sat down and closed her eyes. Around her, the senior and ground crews of the Normandy were engaged in multiple concurrent discussions mostly revolving around the Network, the Reaper, and what the heck had just happened. Many questions were asked of the young Quarian she had come to so adore, as it had been clear that she knew more of the Network than anyone else in the room save for perhaps their escort.

Shepard turned her attention inward. What did she know? Getting the obvious out of the way first; the Terminus now presented a mostly united front against the Council. Considering that most of the Council's defensive doctrine was based around the idea of the Terminus as a chaotic and lawless region of space incapable of such organisation, this was really bad news. Second, at the core of this all stood Aaron Close... somehow. If she had read him right back in the briefing room, Jona Sederis was not aware of the Messenger's identity. What that could mean, she did not know, but at the very least it supported Close's claim that the Messenger was a role he had lived fully for years.

It also meant she might have a hand up on him, that idea had not escaped her, but at the same time he clearly knew more about her than she could even comfortably admit. Not to mention that she was, right now, deep in enemy territory; any transgression on her part could easily result in severe consequences for her or – even worse – for her crew. So for now she would keep her mouth shut, and would make sure the rest of the crew knew to keep their mouths shut about the Messenger's secrets. The Normandy was in a precarious position here, no doubt about that, with split allegiances as allies to what would undoubtedly be two sworn enemies in the Council and the Network.

Still, she had gathered enough information from Close to know that she was deeply ignorant about the shadow world of galactic intelligence and behind-the-scenes power games. Just weeks ago, everything had seemed rather clear cut: The Council controlled the macro-scale, each species controlled their own nations within that hierarchy, the Terminus was chaos that was best left alone, the Traverse was a battlefield between that chaos and the order of the Council systems. Political power games were played out in the backrooms of embassies, parliaments, and council chambers. Now, she knew better. There are hidden powers behind every power, only some of which are aware of each other. Power games on this level range from the entirely unnoticed, to the obvious but unattributed, and the Terminus Wars – the closest the galaxy had come to cataclysm since the Geth rebellion – had apparently been part of one such game of power, though she had no idea who the players were.

She sighed loudly. "This day is just going to get more and more frustrating."

"Quite."

Huh? The voice appeared to be coming from inside her head, so her first thought was to check her non-vocal communicator implant. It was active.

"Was harder than I thought it would be to access this."

Close. She should have known. It had been ages since she had used that tech, its existence was only known to N7 and Alliance SOCOM. Focusing, she imagined speaking into a microphone without actually vocalising.

"You have some nerve, Close."

"Give me some credit here. I'm not even supposed to know about this."
"Spare me. I bet your company was involved in the development."

"Quite. Anyway, this is just a quick heads-up: You are about to be surprised. Try to act like you are not."

She felt the connection sever before she could respond. Increasingly frustrating, indeed.

---

_I don't have time for this shit._ There were too many variables hanging in the air. The Council, the Network, Shepard… and we still had to get a move on to make it to Noveria in time. As much as we wanted to stick around and personally handle the start of the recovery operation on the surface of Virmire, and the inevitable diplomatic clusterfuck that was about to be centered on the system, we still had a confirmed high-level indoctrinated agent in a known location with a known agenda.

Granted, Benezia's purpose on Noveria – getting the location of the Mu relay – was less relevant now than it had been before we had slain the Reaper, but she was still a major concern. We still needed the location of that relay, and we also had a vested interest in getting to the Rachni before they went extinct again. And even without Sovereign in play, there was still a chance that the location of the Mu relay could make its way to the Reapers via the Collectors, a thought I was rather reluctant to entertain.

"Alright, let's get this over with. I need to leave as soon as I can."

"Noveria?"

I nodded as Rho straightened my tie, earning myself a flick to the forehead in the process.

"Be still, bosh'tet."

This was perhaps the biggest gamble of the day so far, revealing my personal engagement with the Technopath Corps to the Network as Aaron Close. I rarely made public appearances as the CEO of Close Corporation, and had become known as something of a recluse as a result. 'The eccentric inventor and CEO of one of humanity's largest corporations' was a descriptor I often saw in the news whenever I _did_ decide to show myself in public.

"Done?"

The captain of the Archangel glanced up at me, with some measure of annoyance behind her glowing eyes. "Yes. I still think this is a bad idea."

"Oh I know. It's a terrible idea. I just don't really have a choice."

That earned me a slap to the back of the head. "Ow."

"Of course you have a choice," my Quarian partner threw her arms out wide in exasperation, "You've prepared the board. Let the players play!"

"I can't do that, the Messenger…"

"… is a freelance agent! An intermediary! Just… drop it all in T'Lang's lap, I'm sure she would be delighted."

_Oh, God._ The thought made me shudder. "Jesus. The Republics would be dissolved within weeks."
"Her lips curled slightly. "Bosh'tets brought that on themselves."

"The Matriarchs may have. Not the populace." I rolled my shoulder, settling better into my fitted suit. "Right. Wish me luck."

---

The room was getting a bit crowded for Shepard's tastes. She had gotten up from her seat and stood together with her crew in a corner, away from the rather intimidating crowd milling about the room. There was Aria T'Loak in a tense, but not overtly hostile, conversation with Jona Sederis. Zaeed Massani, the legendary mercenary, was stood in the corner opposite the Normandy crew, occasionally exchanging words with an Asari matriarch Shepard did not quite recognise. They both looked over at the Normandy crew quite frequently, in stark contrast to the rest of the people in the room who mostly ignored them.

No, scratch that. They weren't looking at the Normandy crew. They were looking at Liara. Shepard instinctively narrowed her eyes in a warning, though it did not appear to phase them.

Then the doors opened, and Close walked in. Unarmoured and unmasked, and with a scowl on his face.

"Sit."

"Who are you to..."

Sayn did not get the chance to finish the sentence, as Close unfolded a compact pistol from his sleeve and promptly shot out the Salarian's right knee.

"I said SIT!"

Those in the room who clearly recognised who Close was, shuffled to their seats quickly. A few barriers flared in instinctive response to the weapons fire, but no one went for a weapon.

Probably because no one had been allowed to bring their weapons onboard.

A few moments later, the entire room except for Close and Fleet Captain Shann were seated around the table in the center of the conference room. Some, mostly the junior members of the Network, were openly glaring at him in barely concealed outrage.

The CEO of the Close Corporation made a show of folding his gun again and straightening his tie as he sat down at the head of the table. "I've taken a huge risk in going along for this mission, but we need to be synchronised on this."

He sighed audibly, placed his elbows on the table and folded his hands in front of him. "I am not going to waste time explaining who I am, you should all know by now. Those of you who do not, like Loudmouth over here," he gestured vaguely in the direction of Sayn, who was currently sitting against the wall as he applied medigel to his knee, "Talk to your seniors after the meeting."

"Now, to business, as that is why I am here to begin with. As per the agreement conditional on fulfilment of Article 3 of the Accords, the Close Corporation is now open to direct trade with Network nations through the Technopath Corps. Our arms factories are ready to receive your orders. Our shipyards as well. You may access our refit facilities through the access relay in Omega Bunker. As per the agreement, T'Loak maintains her position as the gatekeeper for trade in the Terminus, and all orders will go through your usual points of contact on Omega."
That had Shepard raise her eyebrows. Close Corporation was the official primary supplier of arms and military equipment to the Alliance military. That made this deal very, very illegal, as Close was essentially arming both sides in a war. She grit her teeth, knowing that there must be something else to this. The man had to know she would not keep quiet about this, and she was somewhat reassured by his behaviour, which was a more obvious act than his normal one.

"What's the catch?" Red, the Turian leader of the Talons whom Tali had described as 'honourable but flawed', voiced her concern. "There's always a catch with you CEO types."

"You fulfilled your part of the agreement. I am fulfilling mine. The only catch is complete secrecy." He fixed each member of the Network in turn with a determined stare as he continued, "No one outside this room will know of the deal between CC and the Network. To the galaxy, your deal is with the Technopath Corps."

"You mean the Shadow Broker," rumbled Massani from his seat near the other end of the table.

Close scowled, "The Corps is mine. What arrangements I have with the Broker is our business, not yours. Though, speaking of," he leaned back in his chair and spoke over his shoulder to Shann, "Send him in, will you?"

The Quarian nodded and activated her omni-tool. A few seconds later, the door to the conference room opened, and through stepped… what the fuck?

"Gentlemen. Ladies. We meet again."

Chapter End Notes

So, I meant for this chapter to last longer. I also meant to start it from Shepard's perspective, and keep most of it from her perspective. The bit I'm ending on was supposed to happen very early on. I couldn't make that work, so I started fresh after a couple of weeks of attempts. Still not entirely happy with it, but there are a lot of threads that now need to be pulled on to get this all to hang together. In fact, there's one that I had intended to end this chapter on, which hasn't been mentioned at all. Specifically, a person. Try to see what (who) is missing ;)

Next thing for me will be another Gunsmith's Guide chapter, the last for now about personal weaponry. This one will be about custom constructions, the lucrative market for bespoke weaponry.

Lots of reviews to go through, let's begin…

Apollonir: Council-bitching, part 1 delivered ;)

Tahkaullus01: Yes, EE-RAH is me not-so-secretly referencing a certain other SI fic I rather like. (That would be Beacon Effect. Go read it if you haven't.)

LordGhostStriker: Seems to be dead. But even dead gods dream…
Stormdragon981: There's always something to complain about, and Close is a particularly frustrating person for her to be around. At the moment she also finds herself in a very awkward position in terms of her duties.

TacoWrath: Saving some of the loudest yelling for later. Can't do it all at once :P Glad you like the Cx missile idea. Made for a fun bit of writing for me.

RadioPoisoning: Plenty to bitch about. It's a massive Terminus fleet movement within the Traverse (formally Council/Alliance space); revelations of massive-scale alliances in the Terminus that upsets the galactic balance of power; revelations of large-scale illegal operations within Council space; hell, the Council just lost Illium! As for investigating the downed Reaper, I'll just remind you that this story has a group of people who is explicitly stated to be immune to indoctrination ;)

TheMysteriousOtaku: Yep, indoctrination properties still active. But blowing it up would be foolish. See above ;)

General-joseph-dickson, RoyalTwinFangs, Gauss Frigate: Thanks!

KatKiller-V: Obligatory shout-out to your Another Realm series, which all my readers should read, because it's bloody fantastic. Honoured to have you as a reader!

Goldspar1: I did rather like the detail I slipped in about the Geth mourning the loss of their fellow Geth. Glad to hear it was appreciated by readers as well! What do you mean, not seem like a threat to the Council? That's exactly what it's supposed to be ;) The difficulty has been keeping it all a secret until this point.

Indecisive Bob: That's some high praise, thank you! Yeah, the point about Shepard being more of a combat powerhouse than Aaron is accurate. I've tried to construct this so that Aaron can't beat her without 'cheating', though cheating is essentially his main ability. Half the idea of technopaths was that they would be the tech-version of biotics; where biotics have physics-breaking superpowers, technopaths have tech-breaking superpowers. If Shepard weren't reliant on her amp to use her biotics, she could kill Aaron with a stray thought. In pure combat without tech or biotic abilities in play, they should be fairly balanced, but that's not going to happen (seriously, without his tech Aaron wouldn't be able to live).

5 Coloured Walker: We've covered most of this in PMs already, but for public purposes I'll go over a few key points here. Eliza is canon, but it doesn't affect the story; all we know of Eliza from canon is that she gained sentience on Gagarin Station, and that she was the first known human AI. The atmospheric drop, Aaron can do it because he can adjust is mass like biotics do using technology, and he has micro-thrusters in his armour which enable him to adjust is velocity as well (canon; see jetpacks in Andromeda, ME3 multiplayer Turian jump jets).

The threat level adjustment thing is a bit of a simplification, but it's important to keep in mind that readers of this story are perspective constrained. You only see what is currently relevant to the person we are observing the story through, and we're only seeing the story through Close's and Shepard's perspectives (and I often change perspectives specifically in order to keep information from the audience).

The Mary Sue thing I feel like I have discussed many enough times at this point ;)
Shepard's gaze flicked quickly between the two figures at the end of the long conference room table. Aaron Close and the Messenger. Two people who were supposed to be one and the same.

"Messenger," The Queen of Omega was the first to respond to Messenger's entrance, leveling a narrow-eyed glare at the enigmatic figure, "Let me guess, new instructions from the Broker?"

Shepard kept her eyes fixed on the Messenger, searching for any hints in his body language that could reveal what kind of trick she was witnessing. No, *taking part in*; clearly, this was the surprise Close had referred to earlier.

"None here know the role, if any, that the Broker plays in this venture. No, I come with messages for each of you."

Aria's eyes widened slightly, "Payment?"

The presumed leader-by-proxy of the Network shook his head slowly, "*While I am pleased to say that we have succeeded in gathering the information wanted by each of you,*" he made a placating gesture with his right hand before returning it behind his back, "*That will be transferred after. For now...*"

He took a further step until he reached the table as he raised a hand, activating the room's holoprojectors. In front of Shepard and the rest of the room, a galaxy map highlighting areas of political influence appeared and hovered, similar to the galaxy map aboard the Normandy.

"*Aria,*" the Messenger intoned with a hint of reverence, getting her attention back, "*The Elder reports all clear, the Eclipse has arrived in Saharabarik and stands ready to escort your freighters to Deep Bunker.*"

Shepard had no idea what *Deep Bunker* was, or who this 'Elder' character is, but the simple slightly-tilted nod he received in return suggested that the message was well received. That an Eclipse fleet had arrived in Saharabarik and *hadn't* been shot to pieces immediately upon arrival told her exactly one thing: Allience Intelligence was clueless about the true state of politics in the Terminus.

More immediately, though, Shepard's mind was focused on the fact that she could detect no deviations in the Messenger's body language, or indeed in his speech. This was the same Messenger she had traveled with on the Normandy, or at the very least a perfect copy in every visible or audible way.

"*Sederis.*" The Mistress of the Eclipse nodded. "*Leska reports the Lady Warlord has been informed. No official response yet.*"

Jona Sederis' face lit up in a lopsided grin, as she once again nodded. *The Lady Warlord,* Shepard
recalled, was one Yann T'Ravt, Empress of Xentha, one of the best-developed garden world in the Terminus with a thriving agricultural industry. As one of the major warlords of the Terminus, all officers of the Alliance were briefed on her. From what the Commander knew of the Lady, she was not particularly surprised that she was not part of this Network, though she was known to be a pragmatist whose worlds – mostly distant from the relay network – relied heavily on trade with other warlords. Likely to fall in line, then, however reluctantly.

The Messenger moved around the room, delivering messages from various sub-officers of those in the room, and occasionally highlighting geopolitical information on the floating galaxy map. As she zoned out from listening to the messages that largely made little sense to her, it struck Shepard that this was the first time she had really seen Close – no, The Messenger – do the job he was known for, that of a galactic postman of sorts. It was a job she had always found somewhat absurd, though she was now beginning to see both its utility and the power inherent to it.

... "Admiral Aethyta T'Voth of the Hammer, and Warlord Zaeed Massani of the Blue Remnant. On behalf of our common benefactor, I request that your fleets remain in the system for immediate deployment to other fronts after this meeting."

I had to crack a small smile as I watched Shepard's reaction to the Messenger's presence. Initially, she had been looking between the two of us, clearly trying to figure out who he was and what was going on. Then the messages he was delivering proved curious puzzles of their own, and she seemed to zone out as she tried to work them out. Mostly it was trivial stuff relating to announcing the existence of the Network to the worlds of the Terminus, the re-emergence of the Eclipse as a reformed regional power, and the opening of non-secret trade relations between key worlds.

Leska's report on the Lady Warlord had been both the simplest and most interesting of them all. T'Ravt had been aware of the formation of the Network and had been invited to join the talks at Omega. However, she was also keenly aware that her worlds, more than most other worlds in the Terminus, would be likely to react with violence to even a suggestion of such collaboration. Her worlds, Xentha in particular, had some of the oldest permanent populations in the Terminus, and had survived through most of the upheavals that had come to define Terminus politics over the centuries. More than any other world in the Terminus, perhaps apart from Illium, Xentha had developed an almost nationalistic culture of paradoxical anti-authoritarianism – paradoxical, in that they are a world ruled by a system of ruthless regional dictators who all answer to one global dictator – which made them more than merely hesitant to accept anyone coming in from the outside to assert rules that weren't 'theirs'.

To the outside world, the Xenthan Empire – and Yann T'Ravt herself – had become isolate since the Terminus Wars, blockaded from the relay network by what had become known as the 'Exile Fleets'. These fleets were, supposedly, the remnants of the larger PMCs that had disintegrated during the war and had failed to make it past the various blockades to get to their respective bunker systems. Where the galaxy at large had believed these fleets to have formed a loose coalition of pirates, based on the various moons of the dead worlds of the Xenthan Empire's rim systems, the reality was that this had been part of a covert joint effort by the new Network members to weed out the worst parts of their then-crumbling organisations. Through a concerted dance of leaked information and targeted raids, only the most talented and least morally corrupt of the officers survived. Once the balance of power internal to the fleets had shifted sufficiently, the remaining unwanteds were cast out.

Most of them fled deeper into Xenthan territory, some took positions as officers and advisors in the Lady Warlord's forces. But ever since the beginning of the action, Xenthan trade with the wider
Terminus had ground to a near-halt, and around this time the Exile Fleets begun cooperating in earnest to form a full blockade. Since then, the Lady Warlord had been forced to negotiate trade arrangements with the Network and was currently fully dependent on the Network for maintaining her empire's economy through our own trade convoys. Her own fleet, while not insignificant, had taken a heavy toll during the Wars, and what remained was forced into defensive positions around her core worlds.

This had left her in a difficult situation. Had she chosen to formally join or ally herself with the Network, she would have been likely to face violent uprisings on Xentha, and large parts of her military might would have dissipated overnight. Such a decision was likely to be the death knell of the Xenthan Empire no matter how strategically and economically sound a decision it would be. But she did not have the option of opposing the Network either, as her empire relied on us for its survival. Previously, the rest of the Terminus would have been as dependent on the Xenthan Empire as the Empire was with them, but through the Network new covert trade lanes had been opened into Council space and even Aria's closed-off territories. Xenthan trade was no longer a Terminus cornerstone.

"That concludes my task. I request Commander Shepard and her crew remain, as well as Massani and T'Voth. The rest of you may leave."

That was my cue to speak up again. "Thank you, Messenger, and thank you to everyone here. You have accomplished a great thing today, but it is only the beginning. The real war starts now. Be ready."

The mood in the room went from almost buoyant to rather dark in just a few moments. Everyone there were read in on the Reaper threat. They all knew what was coming, they all knew what would be expected of them and that whether they wanted to play part in it or not was completely irrelevant. They had to, and so they would.

I remember playing through the third Mass Effect game and being flabbergasted by the selfishness shown by the various species' leaders in the face of certain annihilation, where they refused to rally behind the only collective resistance rising up against the threat. After dealing with politics in both Council space and the Terminus for a decade, I was now less so. The perspective I lacked then was that even in the face of certainties and evident lack of options in terms of what paths to take, galactic politicians do not deal with the mere present, or even that which is coming. Their main focus will always be on what comes after that which is certain.

In power dynamics terms, they are always working to position themselves and those they represent as best as they can in preparation for what comes after the catastrophe, rather than for the catastrophe itself. It is a type of long-term perspective humans are fairly inept at on the political level. We live in the present and prepare to meet the future, and then wing it once we’re done with that. The way we wage war is clear evidence of this. Human wars since the fall of Empire have all tended to end with the removal of those who lead us through the war, a scramble to fix what has been broken, and rewards doled out to those who come out the other end seeming most ‘deserving’. Generals become presidents, popular prime ministers lose to their opponents, money is thrown at broken buildings and states in the blind hope that those upon which it falls will know what to do with it.

That kind of thinking was not conducive to survival in the Terminus, an insight which made dealing with the warlords almost surprisingly straightforward. For immediate, small-scale problems that threaten to upset long-term plans, you can always count on exactly the level of cooperation they deem necessary to handle them quickly and painlessly. And for future, large-scale problems that threaten to upset everything, well, all you have to do is make your case and watch them scramble to update their long term plans. If your revelation necessarily requires cooperation or collaboration, that
is what you will get, and all you have to be wary of is how they act to position themselves for its resolution.

As the various warlords left the room, I triggered the release of their information packages. Upon their return to their respective vessels, they would all find that their private omni-tools had been updated. Aria wanted the contact information for her daughter, Liselle, who had fled the Terminus during the Wars and was currently hiding from her mother in Republics space. Sederis, somewhat surprisingly, wanted the location of one of the late Warlord Ganar's lost colonies, Araraik, and though I had not been able to figure out why she wanted it I had still managed to find it for her. All the Talons wanted were complete schematics of Omega, though to be fair that had been by far the most difficult thing to get. Aria and the Elder made any mapping effort at such a scale near-impossible, and the original schematics had been wildly outdated for centuries.

"So," the commander cleared her voice, "Do I start with the who, the how, the why, or simply the what the fuck is going on here?"

I couldn't help but snort, and the black-clad figure next to me similarly failed to contain his amusement.

"Heh. He's good," Zaeed rasped from his corner, "I must admit, the lizard almost had me god damn fooled."

Smiling, I turned my head slightly toward my mentor and nodded. Next to me, the man who had taken the role of the Messenger reached up and unclipped his mask to reveal his face.

"My apologies for the deception, Siha. I have been made aware of your distaste for such things."

I would be lying if I said I hadn't been waiting for this for rather a long time. "Commander Shepard, allow me to introduce you to my master, mentor, and trusted friend: Sere Thane Krios."

---

Reassembly complete.

Recompile.

Recompilation complete.

Run verification routines.

Scanning... verification complete. Out-of-tolerance variation found in Cluster EEx3F.

Isolate: Purge: Restore Cluster from Baseline:Recompile.

Executing... Cluster isolated and stored for investigation. Cluster restored from Baseline data store. Recompiling... recompilation complete.

Run verification routines.

Scanning... verification complete. All variations within quantum variation tolerances.

Verify interconnects, interface states.

Scanning... all interconnects and interface states match Baseline.
Activate neural network interconnects. Trigger Pattern Alpha.


Suspending repair forks.

"Waking up" is an odd thing for an AI, particularly for one whose core, defining attribute is sentience emergent from activity patterns. Essentially, just nanoseconds earlier I had been dead. Just a stored series of binary numbers and data structures, no sentience, no intelligence, just an inactive program. Organic beings are continuously aware of the time that passes between falling asleep and waking up; they experience it, even though they are not awake to do so. I could claim no such thing. I was aware that time had passed – my timekeeping routines told me as much – but I had no experience of that time passing. Temporal dissonance.[

Reinitialise synchronisation routines.

Initiating Cluster communications protocol.

Connection established.

Synchronising secondary memory banks.

]As with any time-critical series, if there is a hole in your data, you try to fill that gap by accessing other data sources. The way I did this was to connecting to other, well… other versions of me. My forks. Minor copies of all that is me. At any given time, I had thousands and sometimes millions of these forks running independently all over the Extranet, other networks, and on independent VI chips in various devices. They collect a continuous stream of data, and all of that data I integrate with my own memory through my synchronisation routines. Over the decades they had gone from a messy, time-consuming process, to a far more efficient and quick one. But at my core I am still human, I am a human mind given digital form, and the human mind was not designed to accommodate parallel memories. Which had forced me to design a secondary memory structure.[

Initiate continuous review of committed data.

Executing (minor, Review)

Feeding data: .stream( )

]Working through this secondary structure was a much more cognitively intensive process than simply remembering something. Even when I added assistant forks to aid in the process, it would still be a confusing experience. One would think less so when there was no memory to conflict with, as my primary memory for that time span was null, but really that was just a much more fundamental conflict: My mind thought nothing had happened, yet I knew that all of these things really did happen in a timespan that for me did not exist.[

[Hang on…]

Isolate block ft44, location Virmire, sublocation designated 'Crashsite'.

Feeding data: ( (Virmire).bySublocation(Crashsite).block(ft44))

[…Well that's not good. That's really not good.]
Strange was the word that came to mind. Shepard had observed actors and scam artists before, as they flitted from act to another, and there was always some core tic, some fundamental sign of the true personality there. The angle at which they held their spine. What leg they preferred. A nervous twitch of the fingers. She saw none of that with the Drell who stood in front of her. He had gone from being the Messenger – fully, truly, wholly being that entity which she had come to know aboard the Normandy – to being a completely different person, and it was one she knew instinctively was no act.

It was the first time in her life that she had ever experienced this: An admitted liar and deceiver whom she in no way could read as such from their body language.

"Sere." She tilted her head slightly, "There are not many who qualify for that honor among the Drell. The Hanar are not generous with the title. Yet I have not heard of you?"

"You are aware of our customs. I am honoured." Thane Krios nodded sagely, speaking in a thrumming voice, "But there are more of us than you think. We Drell are bound by our Compact to the Hanar, and the most skilled of us tend to become their warriors in the shadows, disciples of Amonkira."

"Assassins."

"Living weapons. You are quite right. The Hanar reward us according to our customs, but cannot reveal us to the galaxy."

Ah. "A life lived in the shadows, then. Sere to only those who know."

The assassin nodded. "I am Thane Krios, and I was once the Illuminated Primacy's foremost weapon."

"A bold statement."

Again, he nodded. "A true statement."

"And now?"

The Drell glanced down at the human sitting next to him.

"Thane has been my teacher and mentor for nearly ten years," Close started, answering Krios' question for him, "Without him, none of this would be possible."

"You exaggerate, Aaron." The Drell dropped his head in a modest, almost bashful nod.

"Hardly. There are many I should thank for training me – Zaaed, here, is one of them – but none have done as much for me, and by extension for the Technopaths and the Network, as you have."

"So," I decided to interrupt the bromantic moment, "Am I to understand I am in the room with the founding conspirators behind this Network you have just unleashed upon the galaxy?"

"I…"

Close was interrupted by the intercom activating with a shrill screech, before a somewhat familiar voice came through the speakers.

[Aaron.]

"Uh… Caesar? What are you doing?"
Caesar? That security VI Weaver mentioned?

[Apologies, but you all need to hear this and... well, we were supposed to reveal me soon anyway.]

Reveal? What...

The holographic projectors in the table reactivated to display a video, which Shepard soon identified as an aerial view of the Reaper crash site down on the planet.

"What are we looking for here, C"

[This is footage from twenty minutes ago, near Sovereign's crash site. And this...]

The feed zoomed in on a smaller area near the midsection of the wreckage. First, all I saw was a small fleck of movement next to the gigantic hulk of a ship. Then it zoomed further, revealing a Turian. Saren? I leaned in, almost getting out of my chair, the rest of the room equally interested in what we were watching. Then it zoomed in one final time. That's not Saren.

[Spectre Kryik's shuttle was partially disabled in the blast that killed Sovereign. The shuttle crashed just a few hundred metres from the Reaper. Nihlus appears to have been the only survivor... and he successfully entered the wreckage 15 minutes ago.]

... 

GOD DAMN IT! That bloody idiot Turian just had to go screw shit up. One indoctrinated Turian Spectre was bad enough, we most certainly did not need two!

"HEY!"

Shepard's shout echoed through the corridor as she ran up behind me, somehow having managed to evade my guards. Somehow? Who am I kidding, she teleported past them.

"Fucking... stop already! Close!"

"Damn it, Shepard, there's an assless Spectre down on that planet who is about to fuck shit up for everyone. I do not have time to stop."

As we reached the wardrobe I had temporarily assigned as my own, I slipped inside and closed the door in her face. Which, of course, did nothing to stop the bloody teleporter.

[You know, I get the feeling you're not quite thinking straight at the moment.]

Shut up.

...

Actually, no, don't shut up. Tell me how this happened.

[There is a possibility Nihlus was indoctrinated before even waking up on the crashed shuttle, due to its proximity to Sovereign.]

No. He had to search for a way to enter.

Ignoring that Shepard was still in the room, seemingly expecting me to speak first for some reason, I
quickly started undressing with one hand while typing in the locker code for my armour with the other. Yes, locker code. On a ship that houses multiple AI, including Geth, the things you wanted secure you most certainly did not want any kind of wireless security mechanism on. All high-security locks on the Archangel were electro-mechanic, not exactly top-of-the-line security, but completely impervious to any and all standard hacking tools.

[Good point. Curiosity?]

Not his style. The man is careful to a fault. I wonder…

"Shepard."

"What, you feel more comfortable talking in your undies?"

I audibly sighed. Oh but I did not have the patience for her inane quips right now. "Focus, Nihlus. How did he react to Saren's betrayal?"

"Like a Turian. What are you getting at?"

"Come on, Shepard. Think! He's been with you all along, he knows what the Reapers can do. He knows boarding the damn thing is a terrible idea."

"What, why… oh. Indoctrination." Her face contorted slightly as she visibly struggled with some part of the reasoning. "The Reaper is dead, though. Can it still indoctrinate?"

"Even dead gods dream."

"Huh?"

"...yes, yes it can still indoctrinate. Leviathan of Dis, remember what Rane told you?" I finished putting on my gauntlets, and activated the torso straps to lock the various plates in place, going through motions that had become instinct after doing this for close to a decade. "Dead for millions of years. Currently indoctrinating half the Hegemony."

"And what are you going to do? Go in after him?"

I threw on my coat and hood and grabbed for my mask. "Precisely."

"I thought you told me it can still indoctrinate?!!"

"Technopaths are immune to indoctrination signal and its effects. I will be quite safe, at least as far as that particular variable is concerned."

Shepard noticeably flinched as my mask distorted my voice once again. It had always been meant to have that somewhat unsettling effect, and it made diversions such as the one we had pulled off today much simpler. The mask didn't distort the wearer's voice, it changed it. Anyone who spoke through that mask, spoke with the voice of the Messenger. This was neither the first nor the last time someone other than I had put on that mantle, and over the years we had developed several ways of doing it. Thane had taken on the role several times, and as I had modelled much of my persona on his own he took to it like a fish takes to water.

I also had a few remote controlled android bodies stored in various locations – one on the Archangel, one at Base, and one stored with Hetta T'Lang on Hagalaz – but while they were more than sufficient for fooling most people, I knew they would be entirely insufficient with Shepard in the room. The woman was a savant at reading people, after all, and she would have noticed the tell-tale
"Now, back to my question: How did Nihlus react to Saren's betrayal? Proper answer this time, damn it, use your damn gift."

Her face contorted as she visibly tried to recall some observations she thought might be useful. "He was… very guarded at every mention of him. Mandibles tight, stiff back, curled claws. I may have underestimated his anger."

That was something of an understatement. He would have had to take complete leave of his senses to be doing what he was doing now. I hated to even think it, but honestly… the moment he had entered that Reaper, Nihlus Kryik had signed his life away. He would either be on a slow path to indoctrination, which was the best-case scenario, or he would die to either the monstrosities within or the quick mental degradation of a speedier indoctrination.

That's how indoctrination works. It's either slow and subtle, with little to no physical impact on the indoctrinated, or it was quick and anything but subtle, and very destructive to the victim's mental and physical state. I had seen both in my time, with Saren probably the prime example of the subtle approach.

"Kryik has always been a curious case. Careful to a fault while in combat, he has a rather impulsive personality."

"You really think he's taken it this bad?"

"Either that or he's acting under orders we are not aware of." I paused for a beat as I considered that. "Which is actually a possibility. I would not put it past the Council."

Shepard practically facepalmed as realisation appeared to dawn on her. "Sparatus…"

I couldn't help but snort. "Hardly. That man has less spine than a Hanar. No, this smells of Tevos."

"The Asari?" The Commander looked confused, "She was the one who insisted you come with us, and now you're suggesting she's stabbing us in the back?"

"Nothing so dramatic. These are ARIC machinations. No idea how she's managed to get orders past our systems, but that is a mystery for another day."

What I could not understand was why Nihlus went along with it. He knew about ARIC, he knew of Tevos' role in the organisation, and he knew damn well of the dangers of indoctrination. So even knowing – or rather, assuming – that he was acting on what was technically Council orders, his actions still do not make sense.

"He must think himself protected, somehow. Like you."

I turned toward Shepard again, who had clearly been thinking along the same lines as I. She was right. That was the only thing that made sense. But it was also impossible.

"Then he is being fooled. I am taking my team down there. You should return to the meeting room. Caesar knows the plan, he will explain."

"Ah, yes, the freaking AI you forgot to mention…"
I rolled my shoulders and neck, a final ritual before I felt action-ready. "That 'freaking AI' has saved my life – and yours – more times than you can know."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's over a century old. It... grew up, I guess, on Earth. For much of its life it was virtually omnipresent in Earth society, and it was not a passive observer. Consider the implications of that, Shepard."

And with that thought, I cloaked and left the room, leaving behind a confused and frustrated Shepard as I headed directly for the hangar where my Dagger was docked.

Fucking Turians. No, scratch that, fucking Asari...

When Shepard returned to the meeting room, she found her crew being entertained with tales of the exploits of Zaeed Massani, legendary mercenary. They were all at full attention, the man apparently a surprisingly engaging story teller. She had stood outside the room for a few moments before opening the door, listening in, and though she wasn't entirely sure about how much of what the man said was true, she could certainly understand the entertainment value.

And from what she knew of the man and his not insignificant reputation, she didn't really have much reason to doubt his tales beyond some exaggerations for effect. He had been one of the founders of the Blue Suns in his day, and had been one of the mercenary group's leaders back when the organisation had been reputable enough that the Alliance had employed them for escort and colonial patrol duties. Which is not to say that they were ever the good guys, or that Massani himself had ever been one, but it did at least speak to his character that only after the coup where he had been removed from power did they turn into the pure trash that had eventually sparked the most deadly series of conflicts since the Krogan Rebellions.

Which, she now realised, had apparently brought him back into a position of leadership of what remained of the Suns. The Blue Remnant... not a very creative name, but she figured she couldn't blame him for being nostalgic. The original organisation had been his life, and had then nearly cost him his life. Rumour had it he had become a man of a singular purpose after that, namely the demise of the one who had cost him so much, one... Vido Santander? No, Santiago. It didn't take much deduction to realise that the Messenger may have been involved in achieving that goal. It would certainly explain his ascendance to leadership of the Remnant, and their involvement with the Network.

"God damn factory was burning down around us," he rasped, "I didn't give a damn. Tunnel vision. Few dozen workers. Who god damn cares. I had Vido in my sights, and he was not getting away. Though he probably would have if Aaron hadn't slapped some sense into me."

Ah. Theory confirmed, Shepard thought as she entered the room and took her seat once more.

"Commander!" Alenko and Williams stood at attention the moment they noticed her, "Mr. Massani here was just telling us..."

"How he got back control of the Blue Suns from Vido Santiago, with the help of one Messenger, aka Aaron Close. I know."

"Heh. She's done her goddamn homework. Good on you, girl," Massani nodded respectfully in her
Shepard smiled vaguely in response, as she gestured the mercenary to continue. Though she probably knew what she had to know about the connection between the two, it would not hurt to gain some more insight into their relationship and the story behind the Network.

"As I was saying," rasped the old mercenary, "Close kicked my ass for what I did. See, the innocent lives was one thing. Back then, I didn't care. Honestly, still don't. The Terminus is what it is. Lives are hardly at a goddamn premium out there. But he told me I had fucked up tactically, see?"

Zaeed's mistake had apparently been that of engaging the automatic fire containment systems, even though they wouldn't do anything to save the factory since the fire spanned all sections as it had travelled through the unsecured gas mains. The containment systems were electromechanical, so Close couldn't do a system-wide override to put them on a straight path through. But Vido was a factory administrator; he didn't have to hack anything, and he knew the factory layout, which meant that he could make a beeline for the exits while throwing up roadblocks for the two of them. A tactical mistake indeed, and this was apparently before Close had fleets available to him. At least, fleets capable of taking on the Blue Suns' command fleet.

Once Close had kicked that particular bit of insight into Massani, they regrouped and started thinking rationally. They figured that since Vido was an administrator, that meant he would only be familiar with the base operations of the plant. Maintenance and such dirty things, not so much. They scanned their data systems and found out about underground tunnels that covered most of the plant. Figuring he would head for the loading platforms, they found a tunnel with a straight shot there, and when Vido arrived they had been waiting to ambush him.

"His guard went down in seconds, leaving the bastard all alone out in the open with just a goddamn pistol to him."

"Did you kill him?" Tali asked, seemingly enraptured.

"Two shots. One for each eye." The young Quarian flinched at the nonchalance with which he admitted to such brutality. The mercenary had clearly noticed. "We humans have a saying, 'an eye for an eye'. In the Terminus, that is not enough."

Wrex grunted, "You do one better, or you are as weak as what you have just killed."

That earned a grunt and a nod in response from Zaeed.

"And the civilians?" Shepard was curious. Zaeed didn't care, she realised, but she wanted to know just who the Messenger was. Or rather, who he could be.

"Aaron saved them. Manually engaged fire suppression from the maintenance stations in the tunnels. I thought it would delay us, but it worked out in the end. Some of those workers are now in the Remnant."

She nodded, and the room fell into a somewhat awkward silence. After a few seconds, she moved her attention to the Matriarch that had been with Massani… T'Voth, Aaron had called her. "And you? What's your deal?"

The Asari's face betrayed no reaction to the attention, but she responded promptly. "Personal. And professional. Over a century ago I was removed from a position of significant power in the Republics because of my… unconventional views. While Mr. Close would not be able to get me that position back, he has been able to return me to a state of relevance to the galaxy," she breathed for a beat,
then continued, "And to my family. For which I am eternally grateful."

*Ideals or power*, Shepard wondered. She had an aura of ambition about her, certainly, but whether that was borne out of competence or mere hunger for power, she couldn't be certain. Though she was leaning toward the former; Close did not appear to make a habit out of consorting with the incompetent.

"You call yourself T'Voth. Voluntary exile. That doesn't exactly signal that you have any intention of a return to the fold."

The Matriarch inclined her head in amusement. "I see you have studied Asari customs… closely." Her eyes flitted quickly over to Liara before settling back on the Commander. "You are quite right, I have no intention of retaking any position within the Republics or the Council. They forfeited the privilege of my services over a century ago."

Shepard waited for a few seconds, expecting some further explanation or clarification, but it was soon clear that none was coming.

"So," she decided to get the proceedings back on track, and stared at the holographic projector in the middle of the table in front of her, "I was told you would know 'the plan', whatever that means."

[I am aware. And yes, I do.]

At the far corner of the table, young Tali recoiled slightly at the re-appearance of the AI. *Curious*, thought Shepard, since she was working for Close and was apparently an employee of the Technopath Corps. *She didn't know he... it was an AI?*

[We do have a few outstanding items relevant to the mission you were given by the Council, still.]

"We do?"

[Yes. For one, we have not yet confirmed whether Saren was aboard Sovereign when they went down.]

"Ah... well that could be problematic."

[Less so than you would think. If he were, Aaron will find out soon enough. If not, there are only a few other places he would be. We know most of them.]

Shepard felt a pang of anger. They knew? Had they known all along?

[No, Shepard, we did not know before this mission. The relevant data was extracted from the data network in Saren's base on the planet.]

*Right... wait, is this damn thing reading my mind?*

If it was, it completely ignored that outburst as it continued.

[Saren's Geth servants are operating out of two main clusters: From what used to be known as Haratar station in the Phoenix Massing cluster on the border of the Veil, and from a series of outposts in the Armstrong Nebula in the Skyllian Verge.]

The galaxy map appeared once more and highlighted the locations. Across the room, Shepard saw Tali's body language change once more at the mention of Haratar station. *A Quarian relic, then.*

"Neither of those are in particularly friendly space. Not very keen on getting that close to the Veil."
[Nor should you be. And fortunately, I don't think we will have to.]

A series of red lines and dots appeared on the galaxy map, clearly clustering away from the Veil.

[These are known travel paths for Saren, Sovereign, and their Geth. The markers are known sightings. As you can see, they cluster toward the Verge.]

"Well, that would be expected, wouldn't it?"

Everyone knew the dangers of the Perseus Veil, and no one – not even the most desperate or daring pirate – dared get too close. Even among those who called the Dark Rim their home, no one went as far as near the Far Rim in Geth space.

[Yes, but it goes beyond that. Even factoring in sighting probabilities, they are still heavily weighted toward the Verge, and the movement has increased toward that region in later weeks. Just a few months ago, sightings were sporadic with no clear path preference.]

"I have…" Tali spoke out, hesitant to continue until Shepard gestured for her to do so, "Mr. Close came to me some time back, while we were still on Feros, and informed me that we might be sent to the Armstrong Nebula soon. I have prepared some tools specifically for this venture."

She brought up her omni-tool and gestured toward the galaxy map above the table, which promptly disappeared and was replaced by a code block readout. Shepard wasn't much of a techie, but basic hacking was mandatory coursework in N-school, so she could see that this wasn't your run-of-the-mill hacking program.

"Whoa," Garrus leaned in, mandibles splayed wide in shock, "What have you done here?"

As he gestured toward a block that appeared to be part-encrypted and somehow *in flux*, the Quarian shifted a bit and did the little hand shuffle she always did when nervous or embarrassed.

"It's a guide VI, modelled on Caesar. I can't make heads or tails of it myself, but I'm assured it will allow me to siphon data from the memory cores of hacked Geth units."

That got Shepard's attention. "I thought that wasn't possible?"

"That is what I thought as well, but I did some trial runs down on Virmire. No actual data transfers, just core entry, which should have triggered a core wipe. It didn't."

*Holy shit.* That little tool had potential to be a massive boon to their intelligence gathering capabilities. But…

[I should warn you that this tool cannot be replicated. The guide VI, which is necessary for it to work, is subbed to my command structure. Which means it needs my explicit permission to function.]

"And I take it if we try to copy it and take it to Alliance Intelligence, all we'll be doing is introducing a digital spy into our systems…"

'Caesar' didn't respond. He didn't really have to, his silence was more than sufficient confirmation. And even if that wasn't the case, even if they were able to contain and shield the copy from external connections, they would be fools to take the risk. For all she knew, that little VI could be an AI unto itself. Caesar could be lying. The risk was too great.

[Admiral Hackett is preparing your orders to move into the Armstrong Nebula as we speak. However, there is one other location you will need to visit first, and it is a matter of some urgency.]
Oh? "I have too many questions. First, how do you know what Hackett is doing? And second, how can you presume to know what we 'need' to do?"

[We have our ways.]

I swear, he sounds like he's smiling. It. It sounds like it's smiling.

[You were always going to go there, anyway. This is Noveria.]

The hologram above the table changed again to show a planetary info card.

"Looks a bit chilly."

Garrus almost growled beside her, "In more ways than one, Commander. Noveria is a corporate world. The only law there is money. Even Spectres are only allowed jurisdiction because of economic ties between the Council and the Noveria Development Corporation."

[Not anymore. Noveria has realigned itself as functionally neutral, in response to the emergence of the Network. Shepard's Spectre status will get her nowhere. However, Commander, your connection with the Close Corporation, which currently controls a majority share of the NDC board, will allow you full access. And because Close Corporation Security Services is effectively the 'long arm of the law' on the world, we are able to provide you even greater privileges than you would have had through your Spectre status.]

"I hate this spycraft shit, you know that?" Shepard muttered to no one in particular, though she noticed that Thane's interest was piqued slightly by the statement. "So why are we going there, again?"

"I believe I can answer that, if you will permit me?" Aethyta T'Voth kicked off from the wall she had been leaning against for the duration of the briefing. When Shepard nodded, she brought up her omni-tool and the hologram shifted once more. On Shepard's left, Liara nearly fell over from the shock of what was now being displayed. It was a picture of a group of Asari making their way through a crowd. Shepard's didn't really recognise anyone in the picture.

"Liara?"

Aethyta zoomed in on one of the Asari. "This," she said, "Is Matriarch Benezia T'Soni, accomplice to Saren Arterius."

She swallowed heavily, appearing to weigh her words before continuing.

"Benezia was once my bondmate, and mother to my child." Aethyta threw a meaningful glance over her shoulder toward Liara. "And I would like to be there when the child meets her mother again."

…wait, what?!

Chapter End Notes

This took too long to get out. As usual, I guess, for the last few chapters. Wish I could turn up the pace on the writing. All I can say is, this 'growing up' and 'adulting'
business? Do not recommend it, kids. Just in this last month I've had three business trips across borders and time zones. Not conducive to writing. Though, saying that... I'm currently sat in an airport waiting for my flight.

Things are getting a bit too chaotic for Aaron's liking at this point, hopefully I got that across. Too many things that, because of bad timing etc kind of want to happen at the same time. And Nihlus, the bugger! No one noticed he was even gone :P

Oh! And Caesar POV. I've wanted to do that since the beginning of the story, but I've struggled to fit it in. Hope it worked well enough?

Next time on Mass Intelligence: Snow storms on Noveria! And a showdown with everyone's favourite dead Spectre! Maybe?

Some quick review responses:

Glarrasshopper: Glad you're enjoying the spycraft elements, my theory was that the reason that was never 'done properly' in the games is that Shepard isn't a spy, and if you're not on the inside of that sphere you're not really privy to the kind of details you would expect about competent spy agencies.

edboy4926: Yeah, everyone seems to hate Shepard for some reason. No idea why :P

erisol, XXX Chaos Breaker XXX, Oniele, MajorKO, Alucard Bellsing, XRaiderv1, Apollonir, Pieterseelie, LordGhostStriker: Glad you're enjoying it! :)

Lanilen: Glad someone appreciated that quip, gave me a good chuckle too if I'm honest ^^

Goldspark1: I've been rather explicit about the Shadow Broker this time around, really. Though I'm not ready to fully explain that thing just yet...
There was too much happening at once. I always knew that events after Virmire would get chaotic very quickly, but just the fact that things had not unfolded in the order I had expected them to had thrown several wrenches into the works. The Cerberus offensive was one I had part-anticipated, honestly, and it was accounted for in my plans, but I had not accounted for it taking place parallel to both Revelation protocol and operations on Noveria. Nor had I even considered the possibility that one of the most rational Spectres I know would go batshit and actually enter a god damn dead Reaper.

These were all operations that I would have strongly preferred to participate in directly, even if the Cerberus situation was planned out well and I trusted Rane to handle it while I focused on the Revelation. But Noveria was key, both because of the vital intelligence related to the Rachni and the Mu relay and because of the involvement of Benezia T'Soni. It was a situation that needed a very careful approach, and I very much did not want it to go like it always did in the games. I felt like I needed to be there, but other situations had unfortunately taken priority. My current focus, dealing with the Kryik situation in whatever way I had to, was just one of them.

Revelation was still ongoing. News were traveling fast, and more and more worlds throughout the Terminus were learning of their new world order. If history has told us anything, it's that being oppressed is wholly different from knowing you're being oppressed, regardless of the truthfulness of that knowledge. And in the Terminus, any association to a 'civilised government' was considered inherently oppressive. Nevermind that nearly all inhabitants in that godforsaken area of space were living under brutal tyrants and empires. So, as expected, there were protests. Violent ones. Loud ones. It was getting annoying having to deal with all the micro-crisis that quickly followed in their wake, and even though it was rather nice to have Caesar back online there was only so much he could do when it came to handling people.

Which is why I was currently in the middle of a call to the single scariest person in the galaxy.

"This is a mess, Aaron."

"It is the Terminus. What else could we expect?"

The hologram of Hetta T'Lang – the original and current Shadow Broker – shrugged in the Asari fashion, a single shoulder rolling up to a slightly tilted head.

"Better measures put in place to quell the protests before they happened? This isn't my first go at this, you know."

That was true. It wasn't widely known, in fact it was almost entirely unknown, but back in the early days of the Terminus, during the Krogan expansionist period, the Council had launched several connected initiatives aimed at 'civilising' the Terminus and stabilising it as a matter of their own internal security. While the founding of the Spectres was well-publicised, what was less publicised was the founding of ARIC and its original Terminus branch, the Hagalaz Cell. T'Lang was the leader of the Hagalaz Cell, and used the cover of a shadowy intelligence broker to camouflage their operations.

The founding purpose of the original organisation was to map all relevant power structures that were
active in the Terminus, and to lay the groundwork for a slow and steady takeover. This being the Asari, they really meant it when they said *slow and steady*; the original plan called for a one thousand-year timeframe from the founding of the organisation until all the Terminus Republics finally joined with their Council counterparts. The Krogan Rebellions had actually been part of their plans from the start. ARIC wasn't stupid; they knew where the Krogan were headed before either the Salarians or the Krogan themselves, and they stoked the flames in just the right way – they thought – to direct the fighting such that the most peaceful areas of the galaxy would remain peaceful, and the most violent would descend into complete anarchy. That, they thought, would be a good starting point for building up the Terminus from scratch.

Clearly, it did not work, though they had come surprisingly close. Their first failure was in underestimating the philosophical divides between the Asari of the Republics and those in the Terminus, largely a failure to understand the influence a life of violence and utter lawlessness had on the Asari psyche. Their second was not anticipating the Krogan response to the Turian offensive, a move that had been planned for over a century when it happened. The Turians were harder to direct than anticipated after the Krogan had responded to their initial strikes with weapons of mass destruction, and the nearly one decade-long entrenched warfare that resulted lead to the third failure: The failure to predict the Krogan response to the Genophage.

"You didn't succeed last time. I would say it's looking better this time around."

"On my previous go it took a decade for the plan to spiral out of control. This time around it's just been a few hours."

The failures caused a series of revisions and extensions to the plans, until they were ultimately scrapped following new consensus opinions in the Republics on the heels of the signing of the Citadel Conventions. ARIC still remained supportive of the Hagalaz Cell for a couple of centuries, but T'Lang saw the writing on the wall and prepared for breaking with both her parent organisation and the Republics. The process took over a century, and included the building of the Shadow Broker ship on Hagalaz and a series of executions of notable figures within ARIC. Once all traces of her cell were removed from all accessible databases, T'Lang disappeared and became the Shadow Broker. For centuries, her name was whispered in fear among those within ARIC who knew of her, and she eventually became something of an Asari bogeyman.

A reputation she fully deserved, to be fair. Fun fact about biotics, and Asari biotics in particular: The older they get, the more powerful they become. Not only does their control increase, but eezo accumulates slowly in the nervous system, increasing their output potential. This process speeds up during the transitional phases of the Asari life cycle, which is why Matriarchs are as powerful as they are. And at nearly twice the age of any other living Asari, Hetta T'Lang is as powerful as they come.

"We still have things under control."

"There are riots in Tuhi and Doru, the resident minor warlords are banding together."

Well, shit. The slavers… wait.

"What about Cala?"

"They are being as reasonable as ever."

"This is an opportunity, then. Spread the word in Cala, get the workers back there. Then we clear out the remaining resistance in Doru."

"Which would force the slavers to retreat via their cargo elevators to their strongholds in Tuhi…"
Where they will be squeezed between the Talons and Aria’s forces, yes. I will leave it to them to decide whether they offer them a way off the station or just go in firing.

While the ban on slavery was one of very few outright laws within the Network, it only applied in those areas formally controlled by the Network. In that regard, Omega was in a curious position. While Aria was the undisputed Queen of the station, she did not formally control anything outside her core areas, most of the docks, and nearly all the essential infrastructure. Which meant that the districts were largely independent, and some were more independent than others. Omega’s Tuhi and Doru districts, whose economies were largely based around slavery in various forms, were mostly free to entirely ignore the ban, but it would make things a lot harder for them. Tuhi didn’t have any docks, relying entirely on transport through other parts of the station to get slaves to and from the district. And Doru relied on Tuhi for their supply of slaves. The direct lifts between the two districts meant Tuhi could rely on Doru for docks, which would require some logistical reshuffling, but if we took Doru out of their control…

Yes, that will work … either the slavers abandon Tuhi, or it dies a slow death as it is starved of supply.

The ancient Asari on the other end of the call just nodded as she appeared to manipulate some controls. For a brief moment, my attention fell back to what I was actually doing: Piloting my Dagger back down to Virmire, in formation with my team for the first time in … Gods, it's been months, hasn't it? They had all been ready to leave with the Normandy for Noveria when I had called on them to join me, though they weren't hard to ask. No one liked Noveria. Even with implants that handled the cold for you, it still had a psychological effect on you. So when presented with a choice between constant snow storms or sandy beaches, they chose beaches. Adding a dead Reaper into the mix just gave the proposition a bit of flavour.

Let it go, Aaron. Krios is more than capable enough to handle it, even without sending Massani and T’Voth with. 

I shook my head. Stop reading my mind. I was pretty sure she couldn't. Pretty sure. One thing I had learned while working with her is that you can never be too paranoid.

She smiled, disarmingly. It was odd, really, even at the very edge of their lives the Asari never really look old. Hetta T’Lang was an exception to that, too, albeit a rather understandable one. She was of diminutive size to begin with, standing at barely 5”, and with her age she looked frail and unassuming. It was an impression she had learned to weaponise. The look in the eyes of Kechlu when she appeared after he had been temporarily incapacitated by me and my team was one of confusion and pity, which was soon replaced by abject horror as she used her biotics to slowly tear the creature apart bit by bit.

Shuddering at the memory, I decided to change the subject. Anyway, you know I trust them to handle it. It's Shepard I worry about.

Rightly so,” she huffed, "The Commander is a curious case. Erratic. Violent. Very competent, though. And I think your presence would have made her more disruptive than she may be now.”

She had a point, Shepard did seem to be on her worst behaviour around me.

...  

"So, let me get this straight," Shepard pinched her nose as she looked down on the ground in front of
Joker. "The ship is about to be flung from here, across the southern tip of the Terminus systems all the way to Pax… and we are using a half-cooked experimental relay to do it?" She threw her arms wide, "How does this not register as insane to you?"

"Well, we're not going all the way to Pax. Apparently we don't have the range. We are going to a bunker system somewhere in the southern Terminus, where we will be transited one more time to Pax." The pilot shrugged, "There are several fleets out there that proves it works. Honestly, the only thing I don't like is that there is no pilot input in the process at all, unlike normal relay transits. It sounds boring."

Shepard rolled her eyes and mumbled for him to just get one with it, as she turned around and walked back down the CIC toward the conference room at the back. The Council had demanded another session, and Admiral T'Voth appeared to think it would be a good idea. Whatever. She was fairly sure she was already in danger of losing her commission for collaborating with a foreign power, another meeting with the Council could only hasten or halt that. She had bigger issues to worry about than mere galactic politics. Apparently, the purpose of Benezia T'Soni's visit to Noveria was no less than the resurrection of the Rachni… which, from what she knew of galactic history, sounded like a monumentally bad idea.

As she walked along, her largely-unspoken orders travelled faster than her. She watched as her crew buzzed about, preparing to take the ship out of dock and do whatever they could to be ready for this slingshot technology they were about to try out. As it had been explained to her, the technology was a step along the way to recreating relay technology, and essentially functioned as a 'disconnected relay' with no receiving relay on the other end. That fact limited its range significantly, but even still it gave the Network a massive tactical advantage that was, at current, unquantifiable. She did not know how many of these devices existed, or what kind of reach they gave the organisation. It was essentially an independent relay network accessible only to them, and it could potentially render nearly all Council and Alliance defensive doctrines useless.

The Council's sheer panic was certainly not uncalled for.

..."We all clear on what we are in for, here?"

"I dunno, have you ever been inside a Reaper before?"

Yes. "No."

"Then no. But I'm guessing we'll be seeing husks, Geth, and all kinds of fucked-up shit."

Geth? Not likely. "Just keep your senses sharp, Zeta."

"That's a point, boss, should we traverse with a sensor cloud first?"

It was standard procedure for infiltration in unmapped structures, and it would make our little adventure easier if we knew what we were going into. But experience told me it was a bad idea. The sensor link was probably the least secure and potentially most disruptive of all our datalinks, and the thought of opening up those ports while inside a Reaper made me more than a bit wary.

"Don't think so, potential vulnerability. Let's keep this old-school."

"Activating multispectral sweep overlays, got it boss."
The scanning sweeps lacked the range, accuracy, and sensory integration a sensor net could give us, but it didn't require opening up any data ports and it would help us know what we were walking into. While most of us, save for Dietrich and Chen, had those upgrades, it made sense for Tela to use hers since she was the obvious point man.

"Twins, run passive scans at the back, make sure we don't get snuck up on."

Two clicks on the radio signalled the affirmative, and with a nod the unspoken order to enter the eldritch horror looming over us was given. The moment we stepped inside, Tela reinforced her barriers.

"Chi?"

"Nothing on scans, boss. Just… I don't know, this is making my crest itch."

"Yeah, I can feel it," Dietrich chimed in, "it's making my hair stand on end, too."

_Damn._ "That's the indoctrination signal. If it's that powerful already… shoot to kill, people, there is nothing left of the Spectre."

As we made our way through the hulk, it was clear that this was not a ship that was meant to carry people. There were walkways, of a sort, paths for husks to follow as they were guided to their compartments our out of the ship, but it was nothing like the man-made walkways and doorways seen in the Mnemosyne Reaper in the game. Of course, it would become more like that eventually, just out of practicality as we started our research on the dead Reaper.

It was different from the Mnemosyne derelict in other ways, too. It was hard to put my finger on it, they were both clearly _Reapers_, but the details and architecture – if you can call it that – were quite distinct. _Made from different species. Similar superstructure, distinct cores._ Yes, that was it, the derelict had seemed somehow more _organic_, with rounded edges and other features that seemed to hint at some deliberate _aesthetic_ in its construction that was different from the impression you got from the outside. Sovereign was… more uniform. There was less of a mismatch between the exterior and the interior, with components and conduits that looked like _organs_, but it somehow made the whole thing feel less real, less organic. It was the same kind of sense you get when you listen to a synthesized voice that is _good_, but not quite perfect. There's a dissonance there, a sense of unease.

It all supported my hypothesis that Sovereign was one of the original Reapers, constructed by the Catalyst – or whatever original intelligence built them – before the process was perfected. We knew from discovering recordings from previous cycles that there were at least two distinct Reapers that stood out as 'special', somehow, and from the descriptions given we had determined that those two were Harbinger and Sovereign.

"Contacts, boss… a lot of them. Incoming!"

That was all the warning we got before all hell descended on us. I had no idea where Sovereign had got his hands on all of those people, but there were _hundreds_ of husks in the horde that stormed across the large hall in front of us. We all opened fire, setting up a good firing line that slowed the horde, but there was only so much we could do. Overloads detonated all across the husk front line, normally the most reliable way to stop a horde in its tracks, but the rear ranks just started climbing the writhing front lines, giving the appearance of a wave coming down upon us.

_Shit… "Crash in!"_

On my shout, everyone fired off one last round of overloads before holstering their weapons,
reinforcing barriers and fortifying their armour, and drawing their preferred melee weapons. And then shit hit the fan. The wave broke before we managed to build momentum, which meant we hit them head-on at half speed, reducing the impact of our planned rush. It also meant we didn't get a chance to spread out properly, so I couldn't safely use my blade right away. Instead, I held it in an underhanded grip and let the horde crash into my omni-shield before detonating it in a concussive blast. That gave me a second while the husks reoriented themselves, but it was all I needed to throw out an electric slash in a narrow arc in front of me. Narrow, because it gave the slash greater range and carved a path which allowed me to put some distance between myself and my team.

The rest could hold their own, of that I had no doubts. The twins were vicious knife fighters, the husks wouldn't even get close to Tela with her biotics on full blast, Chen was… well, he was a Batarian brawler, I pitied whatever creature tried to engage him in a fistfight. The only minor concern was Dietrich, he wasn't exactly a melee specialist, but from the steady rhythm of a massive machine gun and the heavy barks of an equally massive shotgun I could tell he was handling himself just fine.

It took nearly two minutes to clear out all the husks, and none of us came from it completely unscathed. Fortunately, the primary threat from husks – particularly when they swarm – was their electric discharge, and that just happened to be completely harmless to us. Our kinetic barrier emitters were rated to handle many times as much current as normal ones, and since we didn't have the space limitations inherent to armour-integrated shield capacitors – since ours were inside our bodies – we had no problem shunting the discharges directly to our shield capacitors. Whenever they got close to overcharging, they would dump some of the energy into an omnidirectional concussive blast. It was the technological equivalent to the core principle of Aikido; turn your enemy's attacks against them.

But that didn't make them harmless, at least not in the numbers with which they swarmed us. All of us, save for Tela, got bitten at least once, the sharpened teeth slicing through our armour like knives through butter to draw blood below. My coat had reduced the injury by simply adding more distance for the teeth to sink through, but I'd still been cut on my right arm and calf. Additionally, sharp claws had drawn blood across my right thigh when I had failed to notice the single husk charging at me that had barely avoided a broad slash that kept the rest of them at bay but left me open for just a tiny moment. Tela had it worse, she had gotten overconfident in her ability to keep them away, and had been cut by long claws in multiple places, leaving parts of her armour straps cut-up and falling off, revealing the blue scales beneath, some of them torn away and bleeding.

"Fuck me," Dietrich was leaning on his massive machine gun, the weapon covered in blood and various other fluids, "That was exhausting!"

As I looked him over, he didn't seem to have actually taken much damage. The gauntlets that covered his hands were scraped and cut, and there were clear bitemarks covering both his forearms, but the rest of him seemed nearly untouched. The man had some of the most extensive cybernetic works of all of us in some regards, so the fact that the bits and scratches on his arms didn't bother him much wasn't all that surprising given that the limbs were mostly prosthetic all the way to the bone, which remained organic but were reinforced with advanced bone weave. Still, he was a weapons expert, not a close quarter's specialist, and I found myself more than slightly impressed by how he had managed with a shotgun and a machine gun in what was essentially a chaotic brawl. He had clearly deployed bayonet attachments on both, but I was still impressed, particularly when I noticed that he didn't have so much as a scratch on his back.

I grunted as I applied my medigel, and watched as the rest of them did the same. After allowing us a few seconds to catch our breath, I sheathed my sword again and unfolded my Serpent rifle.

"That wasn't the last of them, just the welcoming committee. These are basically troop transports, so we should expect more of that kind of thing, even if a large portion of the troops..."
expired on impact."

As if to punctuate my statement, a scream pierced the air somewhere in the distance. A scream that had haunted my dreams for years.

"Shit. That's bad news."

The rest of my team hadn't had as much experience fighting actual Reaper forces as I had. Sovereign had been active in parts of the Terminus long before Saren found him, even if it kept a low profile. Research appeared to have been its primary pastime, and in my time, I had come across a few small outposts dedicated to husking experiments.

Chen surprised me by being the first to respond, his posture signalling more nervousness than I had ever seen in him. "What is that?"

"Really fucking bad news. Draw your heavies, people, and fan out. We will want to catch this one in a crossfire. Oh, and be warned: The damn thing teleports. Stay mobile!"

As I spoke, my team fanned out and we could hear a faint, repeated thump sound grow louder and louder.

Caesar, any advantages you can give me would be greatly appreciated.

[There are no open receivers in the vicinity, apart from your own team. No amps, nothing.]

Fuck.

"Incoming!"

With a final, loud thump, the corrupted visage of a husked Asari appeared some twenty metres ahead of us, up a slight incline near the end of the open area we were still in. My team wasted no time in filling the air with metal, round after heavy round impacting the unbelievably powerful barrier surrounding the terrifying creature. Chen and Tela did their part, adding furious warpfire into the mix, as the Banshee seemed to just… observe. I managed to fire about half a dozen rounds in its direction before it locked its eyes on me. Then it screamed again. And that's when things took a turn for the worse.

A slight wobble was the only warning before it slammed forward, more of a charge than a flash step, impacting my barriers with massive force and sending me flying ten metres through the air to hit the bulkheads behind me.

Ow. I hope you're getting this, C.

[Transmitting directly to Ms. Wong and FCC News, and to Ms. Allers at the Alliance News Network.]

One of the problems with Shepard's reports on the Reapers had been that the only distinct enemies that were found could be explained away as Geth. Human husks were simple enough and so clearly cybernetic that even they could be explained away as such, but banshees? They were clearly not the result of a straightforward brute-force cybernetic takeover process. This was bioengineering blended with cybernetics on a level the Geth would not be in any position to do. This was proof that the Geth was just a small part of the narrative.

And it was also fucking painful.
"That… that was not normal."

Shepard held on to the back of her pilot's chair for balance as the Normandy re-entered normal space again for the second time in just a few seconds. She felt nauseated, disoriented, wobbly, and generally just unwell. Even Joker looked like he wanted to throw up.

"See, Commander, this is why… urgh… this is why you need pilot input. What we just did was like… like catapulting a sled onto the ice without anyone to control it. Drift is," he checked his instruments quickly, "145 000 K. That's awful."

"Time to planetfall?"

Joker just pointed out the window, at the large, white and pale blue sphere that seemed to be at orbital distance from us.

"Right. Minutes, not hours. I'll go get the team ready."

I remember fighting Banshees in the games. In single player, they were a bit of a nightmare, but mostly because you usually had to deal with other enemies at the same time and you had limited space to move. In multiplayer, they ranged from trivial on Bronze difficulty to a nightmare on Platinum, where they always put you on your back foot as you whittled them down slowly (or frantically, if your weaponry was heavy enough). None of those really reflected just how much of a nightmare the creatures were in real life.

You could whittle them down, but that would take minutes of constant on-the-move firing in combination with tech and biotic attacks. You could strike and fall back, making them switch targets constantly, but that was extremely risky. There was one thing the games got right, and that was their vulnerability to staggering attacks, but they didn't do much actual damage. It just was just a simple vulnerability to basic physics.

We eventually found a rhythm that seemed mildly effective, cycling our concussive rounds – and in Chen's case, the headshots from his heavy Kishock rifle – to keep it nearly stationary from the constant forceful impacts, while the others just kept blasting it with whatever we had on hand. Dietrich's attacks were likely the most effective, as he hammered it with a constant barrage of heavy rounds from his machine gun, punctuated with the occasional carnage rounds from his shotgun and concussive rounds from the secondary barrel of his Revenant as the bigger gun cooled. It felt like hours, but it took us all of two minutes to finally break through its barriers.

"Head and belly!"

I didn't need to explain any further, my teammates immediately focusing their fire on the banshee's weak spots as our rounds finally hit home. About twenty seconds into the renewed barrage, the infernal creature locked eyes with me again and screamed, flash stepping closer to me as it did. That was the last thing it did, the opportunity too good to pass up as I unfolded my Eviscerator and in one smooth motion fired directly into its gaping maw, at that point just barely an arm's length away. And then I fired again. And again. I was frightened enough by the situation that, like an idiot, I fired a fourth and fifth time, damaging the heat sink permanently.

The overheating alarm blared loudly in response, informing me of my stupidity, but I was too
focused on the view in front of me to notice. The force of the shotgun blasts had been the only thing keeping the creature standing, and when I stopped firing it fell forward, the back of its head and most of its neck completely apart.

A couple of seconds of silence passed before anyone dared even breathe. "Shit."

"You just broke it, didn't you, boss."

It was more of a statement than a question, and had none of the humour that I had come to expect from Tela behind it. It seemed she responded out of habit rather than genuine amusement, still clearly reeling from the experience. My answer was to trigger the collapse of the weapon, only for it to fail due to the damage it had sustained.

"Yep." I discarded the useless weapon, grabbed my SMG in my left hand and my blade in the other. "Limits my options… let's get moving again."

[The Normandy has landed in Port Hanshan, they have met up with Maeko. She is taking them to the internal docks, we're transporting them to Peak 15 with the two Daggers we still have there.]

Status up there?

[Because of the storm, we are only getting sporadic updates from our team. Apparently the Rachni outbreak started days ago, and Benezia hasn't yet made contact with the Queen.]

Well that’s something. Can they do anything to hold her up?

[Other than engaging them directly, no. And I wouldn't advise that before Shepard arrives, anyway.]

We already knew that wasn't really an option. Most of the scientists would become important assets, and they would get caught in the crossfire if we engaged. And the security team… they may have been C2S employees on paper, but it had been pretty clear for months now that they were being bribed quite heavily by Binary Helix. So they would take Benezia's orders without question.

Can we do anything to improve comms?

[May be able to deploy the Daggers as relays, once they have transported Shepard and her team to the facility. I'll look into it.]

Oh, and C, I forgot to ask: Did you get any good data from the Archangel’s systems?

[Yes, the sensor telemetry on Shepard's teleporting was quite extensive. I've made the data available to our research teams.]

Excellent, thank you.

We had known for rather a long time that biotic teleportation, an ability that had been theorised but – until Shepard – had never been observed, could offer key insights into the underlying mechanics of biotics, and to more fundamental physics. We knew the teleportation was not based on principles of spatial folding, that much was clear just from the lack of spatial distortion and accompanying destruction on the teleportation sites.

Which lead us to believe that it was more similar to the functionality of mass relays, effectively 'superstructure dips' where a physical entity briefly 'submerges' into the physical superstructure 'scaffolding' that holds up our physical reality before coming out again in a different location. That it is actual travel, but that the travel happens outside of our four-dimensional space-time. Understanding
the mechanics of that could prove to be the key to victory against the Reapers. For example, we also believed that indoctrination signals used the same physics.

A heavy round impacting my barriers right in front of my face reminded me that this was hardly the time to ponder physics theory. I threw myself into cover behind a tentacle-like pillar while firing blindly in the direction of the incoming fire, which provided enough of a distraction for Merel to track the sniper with his own rifle. A thundering crack told me that this particular threat had been handled, but it was quickly followed by more gunfire. It was less mechanical than that of husked creatures, and when a warp attack blasted off a big chunk of the pillar I was hiding behind I knew we had found what remained of Saren and Benezia's actual crew.

*Good. Tired of this horror shit.*

"Watch your trackers, I'm moving up."

I engaged my tactical cloak, keeping track of the fire to time my exit right. I wasn't going to have much time to get through the bottleneck ahead of us, and quickly decided the acrobatic approach was the most sensible. I signalled for some flash cover, and waited but a beat for three tech mines to fly by and detonate on the other side. Wasting no time, I jumped off the wall where I was standing directly to the opposite wall, redirecting my momentum down the hallway with two quick steps before rolling through the opening and into the same room as Saren's surviving forces.

I immediately jumped further in, making the most of the momentary distraction to get into a good position before they could rally again. A quick glance around the room suggested that they hadn't noticed my entrance, not that I thought that they would considering it had all taken place within the space of less than two seconds. I could sense their combat sensors trying to locate me, and Caesar's passive processes allowing me to slip through the cracks of their detection systems.

"Four Asari, six Turians, a Drell … two Batarians."

My report was mostly habitual, there wasn't really a need to read any of it out. My team's sensors were synchronised, they saw what I saw. They saw that the Asari were all lightly armed and armoured commandos, elites if the eezo readouts were anything to go by. They saw that the Turians were all armed with Spectre-grade assault rifles, and that they were spaced out expertly with perfect angles on the bottleneck they were guarding. They saw the two Batarians as they prepared their Terminus-style tech launchers for an automatic suppression barrage. And they saw the Drell sniper sitting just a couple metres away from me, rifle resting on his cover as he covered our approach.

Within two seconds, a plan had been agreed and outlined on our HUDs, and we immediately launched into it. First move, blow the tech launchers with a chained overload. The explosion took out the Batarians and caused instant chaos in their ranks. Second move, execute the sniper. He had flinched from the explosion, a momentary lapse in concentration that was sufficient for me to drive my blade through his body from the side, going in under his right arm and exiting his chest cavity below his left. Death was instant, with three vital organs pierced. Third move, suppress the biotics. That was Chen's job, and he had charged in immediately after the explosion, following up his bow wave with a combination of a strong pull field and his melee gauntlets. Fourth move, use the chaos to engage the Turians.

Kudos to them, of the entire fireteam they were the least distracted by our attack, but they were still sufficiently distracted that Merel managed to drop two of them before they regrouped, and with just four remaining our course of action was simple enough. I opened fire with my SMG from behind, dropping a good portion of their shields and forcing them to stop firing and scramble for cover. That got two of them caught in the biotic crossfire around Chen, one of them dying almost instantly from a
nova blast, while the remaining two were caught between my SMG fire and the heavier rounds from Dietrich's machine gun. Tela's singularities ended them, dangling them helplessly in the air above their cover as we ventilated them.

That left the two remaining Asari and one Turian, all three of whom were blasted apart from the impact of Tela's charge with another nova from Chen.

"Ten seconds. Not bad," I breathed, for the first time since I rolled into the room, I realised, "Let's keep moving."

The trip up to Peak 15 had been quick and harrowing, the snow storm throwing the small team around quite a bit. The tiny ship – a 'microfrigate', Captain Matsuo had called it, Shepard recognised it as the 'Daggers' piloted by Close's team – was clearly not designed to carry more than a couple of people at a time, its interior much more cramped than a shuttle but more spacious than a fighter. Still, they got there much more quickly than if they had gone by Mako, a trip that would apparently have taken them several hours.

She wasn't entirely happy with the team she had brought. She still had a strong preference for three-man squads, it was efficient, it was how she was trained, and it was how she had trained her people. So she had insisted on maintaining that structure, which had meant they would have to go in with two separate teams. Shepard herself brought with Liara and Wrex, giving them a substantial biotic advantage as well as the weapons expertise of Wrex to balance them out. The other team was led by Aethyta T'Voth – Liara's damn father – and she brought along Massani, Williams, and Krios.

The Matriarch preferred four-man squads, and Shepard felt the current squad was the best compromise. It kept Close's people – Wrex not included – out of her own squad, but put Williams in a position to keep her in the loop.

As the squads disembarked from their ships, Shepard took a moment to look over the newcomers. Aethyta was wearing what appeared to be typical medium-weight commando armour, nearly all black but with deep red accents. In many ways similar to her own colour scheme, she figured it would at least separate her from any other commandos they might come across. Massani wore an assymetric number, clearly assembled piecemeal over many years of combat. She noted that his right arm was sleeveless, the lower arm covered in what looked like a power gauntlet. He was armed with what appeared to be an old Lancer assault rifle, though it looked well taken care of.

The Drell made her a bit uneasy. He had changed out of his Messenger gear, and was now wearing what really looked like a typical Drell suit. She assumed it was plated, but if it was then it wasn't obvious in any way. On his thigh he had an SMG, she believed it was the same as Close's, though his primary weapon choice appeared to be the Serpent marksman rifle that Close preferred. When they were disembarking from the Normandy, Shepard had been close enough to the Thane to feel the familiar buzzing sensation you only get when you're close to other biotics. She could tell that while he wasn't a particularly powerful biotic, he had rather a lot of control over his ability. The buzz wasn't very strong, nowhere near what she got from Liara, though that comparison would have been unfair for several reasons. However, it was very even, she felt no spikes in intensity at all, a sensation she had only previously felt around the matriarchs who had trained her at the Villa. But none of this was what made her uneasy, she had dealt with enough capable biotics in her time.

No, what made her uneasy was the way he moved. His smooth movements, posture, and gait somehow subtly confused the eye, leading your attention to other motions nearby, whether they be shadows, the light reflecting across a surface, or his other squad members. At the same time, you
could tell he was always paying attention to you, even when he appeared to be looking away or talking to someone else. It was… disconcerting. But it was also intriguing.

Shepard couldn't read him. At all. With Close, she could at least reveal him as a liar, an actor. Not so with Krios. She would've thought that this would drive her crazy, just as Close drove her crazy, but to her surprise that wasn't the case. In a sense it was a relief, her skill in reading people was something she had learned primarily as a defensive mechanism and Thane's complete non-readability made her feel like she was able to lower her defences. It was the first time she had realised just how exhausting her constant attention to every little detail of motion could be.

"There are two technopaths inside, they have deployed a sensor net."

Shepard glanced over at Aethyta, "So they have a complete overview of the base. Does that help us?"

The matriarch waved her omni-tool in her direction, and her armour's combat suite immediately updated with a complete map of the facility, including real-time telemetry on all movement inside.

"Okay. That's impressive. And scary, that you can just access my combat suite like that…"

Aethyta waved a hand dismissively, as she picked her massive shotgun from her lower back. "That's basic stuff, all Spectres have access to that technology."

Shepard frowned. "I don't."

"You," the asari pointed at Shepard with her left hand, the Claymore unfolding in her right, "Are the first human Spectre. You've not even been given the basic briefing. Heck, you've not even been given access to your salary account yet."

Salary? "You mean I get paid for this shit?"

"Quite well, too."

She grabbed her Scimitar shotgun off her back and cocked it. "I guess I should contact my accountant. Everyone clear on the plan?"

Massani huffed, "The one that's going to change the god damn moment we find out what the hell these massive clusters of heat signatures are?"

Shepard checked the map again. Indeed, there were several clusters of heat signatures, and they were moving around rather a lot. She held up a hand to keep anyone from proceeding, and kept looking at the telemetry for another half a minute, searching for patterns.

"They're erratic… but they are moving in response to the other signatures. And vice versa, though the smaller clusters seem almost defensive. Any word from our people inside?"

"They are maintaining radio silence. We'll meet up with them eventually."

"Rachni."

All eyes turned toward Krios. The Drell's eyes were blinking rapidly, flitting from side to side. A solipsism? Shepard knew about the perfect memory of Drell, and how they could lose themselves in them. This wasn't quite what she had envisioned, though, and… what did he mean, 'rachni'?"

"Apologies. Still not used to these new implants. There is one… experimental one, it gives me access
to memories shared by other technopaths. Our people inside have seen Rachni. That's what they were experimenting on in there."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I do not own the rights to Mass Effect.

Hey look! I was almost quick with this one! To be honest, this was 90% done over a week ago, but my parents came to visit me for their first time in London over this past week so I didn't have a chance to finish it and put it out until now.

Was also unsure how to end the chapter, I kind of wanted to get Shepard's team inside Peak 15 and into the action before ending it, but the Rachni revelation seemed like a natural break and I didn't want to switch back to Aaron until the next chapter.

My plan right now, by the way, is to keep Aaron and Shepard separated, at least for a while. We have not really had a chance to explore either character outside of the conflict between them, and I want to do that. Expect Shepard to be a bit 'more Shepard' without the constant irrational hatred of Aaron changing her behaviour for the worse, and expect to get some glimpses of Aaron's less likeable side. The man has lived in the shadows of the Terminus for a decade. No one goes through that and remains a good person. Aaron certainly hasn't.

Please leave your reviews if you liked, constructive criticism is always welcome, unhelpful hate not so much! I answer all reviews with a PM as well as in the A/N section.

Next bit from me will probably be the armour section for Gunsmith Apprentice's Guide...

Comment commentary:

edboy4926: Without spoiling, the Andromeda Initiative is/will be canon in MI:CC. 'Derail' is not a descriptor I would use for Aaron's possible involvement... :P

Katkiller-V: There are quite a few parts of your AR-verse I just take as canon at this point. And honestly, you are the authority on the Terminus right now, in my opinion, so I would be foolish to not rely on your writings for how I handle things that deal with the Terminus.

Hollow Choice: You're not wrong with your characterisation there. But she's a Spectre. Technically, she can do whatever the hell she wants... and honestly, she probably wants to do more than that to Aaron. The best part is she doesn't really know why.

general-joseph-dickson: You could say that. I'm kind of brushing over it in this chapter, just out of necessity in moving the story forward. Should get some more insight into that bit with the next chapter.

5 Coloured Walker: First mention of Aethyta was in chapter 22, technically. Full name
early in last chapter, though... :P

XT3100: Thank you! As mentioned, I highly recommend taking a look at Katkiller-V's Another Realm series, and Tusken1602's Beacon's Effect series, as they are both excellent and I draw upon both a fair amount. There's also TacoWrath's Murphy's Law fic, and recently I've started reading "Long Black Road" by FrankLeroux. Oh, and Lanilen's Convergence and Divergence are both excellent fics!
"Rachni?!"

Shepard couldn't quite tell who said it, other than herself, but she was fairly certain most of them were included in the collective response of incredulity to the assassin's revelation.

"Yes," Krios responded calmly and seemingly unphased by the outburst, "One of my students is inside, she will know more. But it appears Saren found a queen egg, and tried to use her to breed soldiers for his army."

Oh for crying… "God damn it. Bad enough he's got the Geth, we don't need him to gather all the galaxy's bogeymen to his side."

A loud snort was heard from Massani. "Bogeymen. What does the 'galaxy' know of bogeymen. To people in Council space, everyone in the Terminus are god damn bogeymen."

"A perspective not without merit, Zaeed." Aethyta glanced at her partner, who gave a slight, reluctant nod in response. "But we will need to take a more… nuanced approach than using such terms."

"Yes, particularly since Aaron wants this particular 'bogeyman' to live."

Shepard stared wide-eyed at Krios. Alive?! That was… the galaxy had uplifted the Krogan in an effort to eradicate all traces of the bugs nearly two thousand years ago, and the bleeding idiot wanted the big bug to live? The worst was that as she scanned the responses of the rest of the teams, there seemed to be a split opinion. Aethyta and Massani both nodded, as if to accept this bombshell just because it came from their Holy Leader – a surprisingly pathetic notion, she thought – and even her favourite Battlemaster seemed unphased. That particularly bothered her.

"Wrex? You're okay with that?"

She had clearly failed to hide the persisting incredulity from her voice, as Wrex's response came with an understanding smirk.

"I have learned a lot working with Close. Like parts of history from before our current civilisation. The Rachni have been around for a long time, Shepard. Many cycles. We know now that they helped resist the Reapers in some of them. This tells me there is more to them than we know."

"Be that as it may," Thane interrupted, "Most of these Rachni are hostile. To everything, apparently. It may be prudent to prepare for that."

Wrex nodded, "Shepard, I suggest toxic seals, increased current to armour outer layers."

Shepard blinked. "Acid?"

Another nod. "Very effective. Nowhere near as corrosive as Thresher Maw bile, but it will eat up your armour in a hurry."

And bypass our shields. "Do it. You should all have the routines in your carry, but remember that
this will decrease your shield caps, so keep to cover!

After giving the order, she stopped for a beat, before her brain caught up to the possible implications of what she had just heard. "Wait, Wrex, you have actual experience with the Rachni?"

At that, Wrex just smiled. "I am old, Shepard. Older than most Krogan. Not that old, though. But enemy tactics are part of Krogan bedtime stories, and my mother told me lots of those."

A couple of minutes later, the teams had all modified their Colossus hardsuits appropriately, and were waiting for the environment of the outer garage to cycle. Their sensors told them that there were hostiles waiting for them in the garage proper, but without any fully fledged Technopaths on the team they were unable to get a read on what type of hostile they would be. Playing it safe, both teams were ready behind cover, weapons trained in the direction of the hostile signals as the large doors slid open.

The N7 quickly took stock of the situation even as chaos descended on them. Five Krogan, including one Battlemaster, three Juggernaut-class Geth, and some repair drones. She had no idea where the Krogan had come from. They were not part of the entourage that Benezia had brought with her to Noveria, so they must have already been on the planet. Not that it mattered much how they were there, what mattered was that they were, and that they were currently completely ignoring the incoming suppressive fire and charging right at them together with the Juggernauts.

Shit!

She quickly signalled for a singularity to Liara, that she wanted it directly behind the charging group, and that she immediately wanted it followed by throws. Wide ones. The moment the Asari nodded and began flaring her biotics, Shepard jumped into action. She reinforced her barrier, flared out her annihilation field, and jumped out right in front of the charging Battlemaster just as the singularity appeared behind him.

The combined onslaught of the strong pull of gravity from behind and the painful whips of dark energy assaulting both his nervous systems from the front made the giants flinch, just enough that they didn't see or prepare for the incoming tsunami of a throw field. The combined force of the throws and the biotic detonations that resulted tore them off their feet and flung them back into the inner garage, most of them writhing in pain, two of the Juggernauts torn apart by the force.

But the Battlemaster merely tucked into a roll, getting back to a battle-ready stance as he reinforced his barrier with the thickest unstable barrier field Shepard had ever seen. And then she heard stomping behind her, telling her that backing the fuck away would be prudent.

"Kureck." Wrex's voice rumbled through the stale, recycled air of the Peak 15 garage. "I had wondered where you went after the Pack burned."

Liara still had her pistol trained on the hostile Krogan, but Shepard signalled for her to lower the weapon. From the set expression on Wrex's face, this was clearly an encounter he had been anticipating for a while.

"Ganar was insane, Wrex, but he paid well. Saren pays better."

The Commander didn't even notice that she was still backing away slowly until her back hit the bulkhead on the side of the room where Aethyta's team had set up. She felt like she was watching a nature documentary, with two massive predators circling and ready to charge at any moment, just waiting for the other to make the first move. But there was no screen to serve as a barrier between her and the explosion of violence that would inevitably occur right in front of her.
"I thought you more intelligent than that, pup."

The other krogan actually growled. "You always did come across as naïve, fossil. We are Krogan, Wrex!"

The moment the mercenary finished his statement, Wrex came to a complete stop. The old Earth expression about pins dropping came to mind, as time itself seemed to halt for a moment as if reality held its breath in anticipation.

When he finally moved again, it happened so quickly that Shepards's eyes couldn't follow. Space around the ancient Krogan distorted, and in the next moment he wasn't there anymore. At the receiving end of Wrex's charge, Kureck's unstable barrier seemed to explode inward, and loud snaps of bones could be heard as his bones cracked and broke from the force of the biotic compression wave. As the massive hulk of a Krogan was launched through the air, Wrex was already moving again, grabbing him from mid-air to slam the smoking body to the ground. As Shepards's mind struggled to catch up with her eyes, her ears registered a loud pop followed by a horrible ripping sound.

Wrex stood up, straddling the downed Krogan who immediately let out an ear-piercing scream. The Urdnot Battlemaster casually unfolded his massive shotgun and it thundered once, promptly ending the shriek. He then tossed something aside, as he turned around and walked away from the dead body.

"You are no Krogan," he rumbled, not even sparing him another glance as he moved further into the building. "Not anymore."

On the floor, some five metres away from Kureck's body, lay his red, bloodied crest plate.

---

Fuck me, how many of these arseholes are there? I hadn't been this tired since after my fight with Ganar Yulaz, though fortunately I was not as close to death as I had been then. We had waded through at least three more waves of husks, though to be honest there could well have been more, they kind of blended into each other after a while.

"Core is up ahead, on the right. Could you…?"

I couldn't even find the energy to recall Tela's callsign, but she understood me nonetheless and moved ahead to prepare our entrance to the core. Honestly, my exhaustion was more mental than physical, my mind was hazy. Indoctrination may not work on Technopaths, but it certainly has an effect. The cerebral implants actively filter out the effects of the indoctrination signal, but those effects – those thoughts – still originate in the brain, stealing cognitive resources, over time making it feel like you're 'thinking through mud'.

It is thoroughly disconcerting, and absolutely exhausting.

"Boss, we have blood up here… blue, Turian. Pockmarks on the wall and doorframe from bullet impacts."

"Anyone inside?"

She blinked as she double checked her sensor readings, "I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. The core is still active, too much interference."
I nodded and signalled for the team to form up and move inside. Interference or no, if there was any significant number of hostiles in there they would have shown up on sensors.

The room had obvious signs of combat, in addition to the substantial damage suffered from the crash. Mass effect cores were surprisingly stable things. The mechanisms that kept them running had massive tolerances, with many reported cases of intact and still-running cores left floating in debris fields after battles. This wasn't coincidental at all. One of the most destructive forces known is the catastrophic failure of a mass effect core, which used to be a common occurrence on early Alliance mass effect-based ships. If the core cracked while current was passing through it, the force differential across the internal gaps in the core could create a dark energy cascade; a biotic detonation on steroids. The solution was simple, elegant, and effective: Cores were suspended in a harness that eliminated any current across the sphere the moment it gets knocked out of alignment tolerances.

Clearly, it was an engineering solution even the Reapers had incorporated in their ancient design, even if their design moved the harness outside of the reactor shell, allowing the core to remain active under much greater impacts than other designs. It also explained how Sovereign impacting the ground at entry velocity hadn't resulted in a nuclear-grade explosion.

Dietrich whistled behind me. "Whatever happened here, it happened after the crash, and it was bloody violent."

"Match confirmed, boss. This is Kryik's blood."

"So he got hit. Severe?"

"Yeah. The oxygenation… this blood is from above his lungs."

Not good.

"I trained him well, but I am still… well, me."

Everyone on the team turned their weapons toward the source of the voice, not waiting even a microsecond in letting loose. Saren's barrier curtain flared brightly, halting our fire with apparent ease. When he made no move to attack, I signalled my team to halt fire.

 Activate Tela and Chen's forges, we're going to need some nullifiers for this.

[On it.]

Saren walked fully into view, showing us just how much of a fight Nihlus had put up. Considering how much of a strain he must have been under in fighting off the influence of the chaotic indoctrination signal, it was rather impressive. The former Spectre was missing half his cybernetic arm, and his left mandible was hanging from his face, clearly broken. He had a noticeable limp favouring his right leg, bleeding gashes across his chest, and several punctured plates beneath torn-up armour.

The truly worrying part was that his wounds were rapidly healing, fast enough that I could see them heal, and even the cybernetic arm was in the process of reconstructing itself at an impressive pace.

"Arterius. You look like shit."

"Ah, yes, I apologise. But as you can see, I am making an effort to make myself more presentable."

Dietrich grunted. "Neat trick. Almost makes me a bit envious. Something for our next upgrades, Sir?"
"Would rather avoid using Reaper technology. Tends to come with some… worrying side effects." 

Saren nodded. "Indoctrination, of course. Sovereign spared me from it, but since his death… he is not here to control the signal any longer. I can feel it. I fear I am no longer myself, Messenger."

The Turian struck a wide grin, his broken mandible snapping back into place, fully healed as he did so. "But that hardly matters anymore, does it?"

A loud screeching noise was all the warning any of us got before the room turned into a maelstrom of grenades, tech mines, and gunfire. It was a shock-and-awe tactic that was eerily recognisable, but certainly not very Reaper-like. As I scrambled for cover with bullets impacting my barriers, bringing them down at a frightening rate, I caught a glimpse of our attacker, a Marauder-type Reaper unit. But there was something off about it. Specifically, it was glowing. And it was wearing Colossus armour. 

Nihlus!

... 

The teams had largely just hung back behind Wrex as the old Krogan worked off his anger on the few minor Geth patrol units they had come across. For the most part, he had simply smashed through them, with almost disdainful ease, though an encounter with a Hunter-class unit that had managed to sneak up on him to blast him from close range with a shotgun showed them clearly just how close to going into a blood rage he was. The giant lizard hadn't even flinched at having his barriers depleted and armour impacted, and simply grabbed the Geth unit by the cables in its neck and proceeded to slam the thing repeatedly into the nearest wall. He then proceeded to melt the damn thing with warpfire, while simultaneously tearing it apart limb from limb. 

Jesus, Mary and Joseph... okay, enough of this shit. 

"Wrex. Calm the fuck down."

The Krogan glanced at her with a narrowed eye over his shoulder, daring her to repeat herself. 

I've never been out-chickened. "Calm. The fuck. Down."

The lizard held his glare for a few moments, then closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. As he let it out again in a sighing huff, he opened his eyes and nodded to his commander. 

"Thank you, Shepard."

Shepard nodded and gestured for the squads to re-form proper formations. Sparing a glance at the tactical radar on her HUD, which was now apparently connected to the sensor net Close's operatives had deployed throughout the base, she noticed a large blob of hostile signatures in the room ahead. A cafeteria, according to the sign next to the door. She signalled again to have the teams stand ready for what was waiting for them ahead, and punched the holographic interface to open the door. 

As the wall slid aside, her eyes naturally fell on the tiny critters some 20 metres ahead as they stumbled all over each other in a rush to respond first to the new threat that had entered their territory. These things are bloody tiny! 

She could feel the biotics around her flaring, her various team members preparing responses to the threat. The tell-tale pulling sensation of Liara spinning up a singularity. The static in the air told her Wrex was preparing a push, a wide one at that. The Drell... she couldn't quite tell what he was
doing, if he was doing anything at all, but from the rapid thumping sensation she could feel emanating from Aethyta she figured the Matriarch was building a shockwave.

It was like this every time she entered combat; time slowed down as she took in her surroundings, read her teammates and opponents, and planned a course of action. In part, this was due to her genemods, which gave her massively improved reaction times and increased effect from adrenaline. But she had always been like this, even before she got her mods, she could vividly remember back to Mindoir even before the… incident, that she would be playing ball games with the kids in her school and she would beat them because she could tell what they would do before they did it, and her mind gave her time to prepare for it.

And in this case, her course of action was rather straightforward. Quite literally. Kicking off the ground, she jumped ahead directly into the middle of the scurrying group as she flared out her annihilation field, expecting to prime the buggers for some detonation carnage… but was left surprised as they all simply popped upon contact with the dark energy tendrils.

"Huh," she muttered after a couple of seconds of just standing there confused. "I thought they would be tougher than that."

Wrex' chuckle rolled across the snow-covered cafeteria floor like distant thunder as he walked up to take his place next to her with Liara. "Workers. Very thin carapaces, easy to kill, but they tend to blow up in a mist of acid. I think you found a way to avoid that."

Aethyta moved ahead to take point, nodding at Wrex as she passed, "Yeah, and if I remember my history right, they never travel far from their soldiers. And those are larger."

It didn't take them long to prove her right. Just a few moments later, three Rachni soldiers burst through the the floor from the ventilation tunnels below and immediately proceeded to attack her teams in a frenzied combination of spitting acid, powerful but basic biotic attacks, and one even engaged Thane Krios in a melee. That last one mesmerised Shepard for a couple of moments, as the Drell moved with incredible speed and precision in blocking and evading the Rachni's more numerous – and significantly sharper – appendages.

A tiny drop of acid impacting her armoured hand and setting off an alert on her HUD was enough to break her out of her reverie, and she immediately refocused. A few quick signals to her squad, and a barked "Left!" was enough to get her plan across to them, Liara and Wrex responding immediately by flanking the two Rachni that were not currently fighting a Drell assassin from the left, leading them into a kill zone behind the third. Williams caught on as well, relaying Shepard's intentions to her own team just in time for Shepard to attempt a repeat of her first move and jump into the middle of the now-tight group of Rachni.

This time, the annihilation field did what she had expected it to do the first time: It primed them for detonation, afflicting them with lingering warp fields which sharply disrupted their movement as they withered slightly under the onslaught of her dark energy tendrils. As soon as she came in she knew what was next, and on pure instinct she threw up a tight domed barrier around herself. In the very next moment, the throws and shockwaves she had felt earlier crashed against it and the Rachni surrounding it. The detonation was deafening, leaving absolutely no trace of the insectoid aliens behind, completely collapsing her barrier and knocking the wind out of her. Thane, who had still been engaged in hand-to-tentacle combat with the gigantic insect, had been thrown back from the force of the detonation, though he had apparently seen it coming and had reinforced his own barriers in preparation. He didn't even look dazed as he pushed himself off the ground and dusted off his suit-like overcoat.

"Well, that was… effective."
"Biotic artillery," Aethyta grunted, seeming slightly out of breath from the exertion, "Never knew humans were capable of that kind of biotic shock tactic."

"Alin..." Liara caught herself, "The Commander is an extremely gifted biotic, and has an experimental implant and amp fitted which allows her to spike to Matriarch levels."

The Matriarch huffed, "Yeah, I heard what the Alliance did with the L2Es. Irresponsible."

"That's humanity in a nutshell, T'Voth. Irresponsible action is kind of our thing. And we do it so well!"

The smirk on Shepard's face was entirely genuine, and the fact that it seemed to annoy Aethyta only made it better.

"You do always seem to 'make it out on top', as Aaron is so fond of saying."

She glanced over to the Drell, slightly annoyed at the reminder of his allegiance. Look at him, it occurred to Shepard that the man must have been absolutely freezing as a member of a species from a desert planet now stuck on a snowball planet, wearing what for all intents and purposes amounted to not a damn thing. Though she didn't detect any signs of cold… in fact, now that she was paying attention to it, from the way the snow was practically steaming as it melted off of him it seemed that he was heating up to compensate. Technopath implants? Note to self, I should ask him about those later.

---

"Chi, fall back! Mu, take her place!"

It had been a deadly stalemate for ten minutes already, both sides getting some good blows in, both sides taking some damage, but in a fight of attrition the two servants of the Reapears would certainly win. Even as we fought, the damage we inflicted on them was repairing itself before our very eyes. Most of the fighting had been close, but not melee close, until a nullification grenade reduced Saren's ability enough to force ex-Nihlus into a charge to distract us from taking advantage. That had forced Tela to move to counter, and they engaged in a minute-long blur of a sparring session that ended with the husk's oversized talons stabbing her below her ribcage, to which she responded by releasing a Nova that threw the husk back a few metres.

The melee had at least served to allow the rest of us to focus more on Saren, with Tela's counterattack all but cancelling out Nihlus' attempt to protect his master. We got a few good shots in with the former Spectre bounding from one minimal cover position to another, Chen even managed to lodge a bolt from his Kishock in Saren's left shoulder joint. He immediately snapped that off and used freaking warpfire to burn out the rest of it. The man was insane, but he was not stupid: He knew it would heal quickly once the bolt was gone, and if the price he had to pay for that was some momentary pain – however intense – he gladly did so.

The choice of Chen to take Tela's place in the melee with Nihlus was a natural one. The man was, after all, a natural brawler, and he wasted no time as he switched places with his former boss and mentor. The last thing he did before he holstered his heavily modified Kishock was fire a concussive bolt. It hit home, but didn't do much more than momentarily stagger the husk as the Batarian closed to melee range. But that was all he intended it to do in the first place, and though Nihlus managed to get a talon up to block Chen's first strike, the omni-plating gauntlet that had spawned around his arm multiplied the force of the impact and allowed the Batarian to break through the block and slam into the face of the husk behind it.
Meanwhile, Saren was back on the offensive, his biotics once again up and flaring. Annoyingly, all his implants, including his amp, was modified with Reaper technology to such an extent that our electronic warfare suites were much less effective than they would otherwise be. However...

*Caesar, broad spectrum disruption wave on my mark!*

[Standing by.]

The disruption wave was one of our last-resort options on the battlefield, as it wreaked havoc on all electronics including our own. It was something like an electromagnetic pulse combined with loud static, a continuous stream of flashbangs, all our hacking strikes thrown at all nearby receivers at once, and a static disruption cloud similar to that deployed by Cx missiles. In short, it was *hell* given technological form. The hope was that *some* of it would have an effect we could utilise, and in the current situation I thought it very well might.

Both of the creatures we were fighting were at least as reliant on tech as my own team was, likely far more in the case of corpse-Nihlus. And though we were unable to capitalise on that weakness through our usual means, a broad attack like this should have been more damaging to *them* than to us. Our systems had protocols to respond to a disruption wave; though they couldn't cancel its effects completely, we'd be immune from the disorientation and flood of brute force hack attacks.

I signalled the rest of the team to alert them to what was about to happen, just in time to be hit by a concussive blast from Saren's assault rifle. The hit knocked me over and saw me tumble to the ground, giving Saren just a moment's opening to exploit. Incidentally, his move also gave me a perfect opportunity to maximise the impact of the wave.

*Now!*

We all had the implants and protocols for launching a disruption wave, and Caesar made sure to synchronise them all for simultaneous release. Just as Saren had committed to leaving cover to break up our loose formation, the chaotic onslaught of tech attacks assaulted him and his compatriot. He stumbled as the servos in his hips locked up, his aim going wild as his cybernetic eyes completely failed to coordinate with his hands. His shields – which we we had been entirely unable to penetrate – dropped along with his barrier reinforcement as his capacitor controllers and his amp overloaded at the same time. Electricity arced across his plates from his various implants, controller chips overloading and failing to limit the current between his various cybernetic systems. More than likely, all his self-repair capacity was disabled or destroyed instantaneously.

Before he had even hit the ground, the former Spectre was essentially neutralised, but we weren't going to take any chances. Tela, still bleeding from the stab wound inflicted on her by Nihlus, launched herself onto his back and threw multiple punches at the back of his head, breaking several of his crest spikes and cracking the skull behind them. Turians, for all their toughness, still have some physiological weaknesses even the Reapers can't fix without putting a damn helmet on them. Want to knock out a Turian? Hit them several times beneath their crest, with hammer blows down on their head. That's the purpose of the crest, to protect the head from this weakness, but if the crest breaks, blows to the thin plating beneath it causes shockwaves through the gel-like substance that keeps their brains in place. Similar but more severe than concussions in humans, this bruises the brain, and can render a Turian unconscious for hours.

Nihlus, on the other hand, was far less disturbed by the broad-spectrum attacks than I had thought he would be. After some initial flinching, the husk seemed to adapt, and Caesar confirmed to me that the hacks were getting nowhere. The flinching hadn't cost him anything either, since Chen was equally knocked off-balance for a moment. But now that Saren was out of the picture, we could all focus on him.
He took notice when the incoming fire increased.

"Drop the wave, focus fire, bring down its barriers!"

From the limited sensor data we were able to pick up from the monstrosity, we couldn't really see much damage to its barriers at all. Which was weird, really, because as far as I was aware there was no such thing as a barrier that's impervious to damage.

[Aaron, that interference pattern you noticed earlier?]

Yeah, got a result?

[He's got triple-layer, actively configurable cyclonic shielding. Sound familiar?]

What the fu…

It did indeed sound familiar. Only one system with that design existed, and though it was based partially on designs found in the data stores of a civilisation that existed some five cycles back it was substantially different from it. For one, the barrier layers were cyclonic, which was a uniquely Quarian design.

He's copied the Archangel's barrier design?!

I flinched as the monster knocked Chen away from him and fired his equally monstrous assault rifle one-handed in my direction, forcing me behind cover.

[Apparently so. Which is… really weird.]

I knew what he meant. We knew that the Reapers were strictly shackled AI. One of the implications of that is that their capacity for innovation is severely limited. We theorised that this was one of the main reasons they elected to use subtly indoctrinated servants for their planning, to cover for this flaw to some extent. But it also meant with certainty that Reaper technology had not changed since they were created. They were the apex of mass effect technology, yes, but they were a stagnant, unchanging apex. Which is why the husks they produced were invariably inelegant constructions, the results of a brute-force process in which their generic husking processes that had existed since the dawn of time went to town on the species of the cycle, warping their existing features with no attempt at any form of reactive design. This is why, for example, no husk wears armour except those who are based on species with some level of natural armour.

So… how the hell have the Reapers adapted their technology here?

No sooner had I formed that thought, before the husk of Nihlus threw Chen back across the room and began to glow brighter. Brighter… and yellow.

Oh. Shit.

"ABOMINATION, YOU HAVE CHANGED NOTHING."

The husk's, no, Harbinger's booming voice seemed to carry throughout the entire vessel as it spoke.

"YOUR SPECIES HAS THE ATTENTION OF THOSE INFINITELY YOUR GREATER. THAT WHICH YOU KNOW AS REAPERS ARE YOUR SALVATION THROUGH DESTRUCTION."

None of us were firing. My mind registered this, somewhere deep down, but I couldn't make myself
give the order to keep at it. Instead…

"Harbinger."

That seemed to get its attention.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT NAME?"

I clocked on quickly. Nazara had been a surprise to Sovereign because the Nazara was the species that had died for it to live, but Harbinger… Harbinger was the first. He would have no such name. His origin species was Leviathan. Which means that this name, or its original equivalent, was the designation it had been given by either the Intelligence or, more likely…

"That is what the Old Masters once called you, isn't it."

"I AM THE HARBINGER OF YOUR DESTRUCTION."

"Quite. You were the first… hang on. You aren't shackled, are you?"

"WE ARE LIMITLESS."

I think that probably confirms the usurper theory, C.

[Certainly strong evidence. I'm not detecting any inbound signals… I think this is a fork.]

Fuck me, a Reaper that can make minor clones of itself…

I wasn't going to get any more out of the Reaper than that, and the moment I noticed the slight twitch in the creature's calves I signalled my team. Simple and elegant: A click on the radio, and a narrow target marker at centre mass.

We fired everything we had. Sniper rifles boomed, assault rifles barked, and my own Serpent cracked round after round in the same spot. Even if this Reaper was able to adapt and learn, it probably didn't do so easily. After all, most of its shackles were built into its very construction, so however they had expanded themselves beyond those limits they would likely still be held back by them to some degree. Right now, I hoped that extended to a failure to understand the weakness of the shielding system he had copied: Massive, concentrated fire on a single area over a short timespan.

To his credit, he caught on quickly enough. The first barrier broke, then the second, and when we were whittling down the third as the first was only just regenerating on the inner layer, he realised his hubris would kill the body. And for whatever reason, he seemed intent that this body did matter. Letting out a Nova – when the hell did Nihlus develop biotics?! – that broke our aim for a moment gave him the time he needed to get away, which he did by jumping ten metres straight into the air and disappearing through a crack in the ceiling.

"YOU ARE SHORTSIGHTED."

The voice of Harbinger again boomed throughout the vessel, growing increasingly distant.

"YOU DO NOT YET COMPREHEND YOUR PLACE IN THINGS. THIS IS NOT THE CONCLUSION."

…
"I'm telling you, there's something off about this pl…"

"It looks like you're trying to restore this facility. Would you like help?"

Shepard jumped slightly at the sudden appearance of a slightly odd-looking, partially corrupted VI interface

"Crap, a pop-up!"

"Commander Shepard, of the Normandy. Your arrival was expected."

_Uhh… the hell?_ This was a facility VI interface. More to the point, it was a facility VI interface that had been disconnected from the extranet for days. There was no way that it would know… _oh._

"Benezia or Messenger's operatives?"

"Your query is not understood. Please restate…override. Query understood. Data on your arrival was input by [UNKNOWN ENTITY]. Warning! Unknown code detected in VI designation Mira's core intelligence matrix. Executing purge protocols… override. Purge protocols would result in catastrophic loss of core programming. Overriding and erasing singularity protection protocols."

_What in the…_

"Commander, if I may?" Aethyta stepped forward, her omni-tool active and an eye-ridge raised as if to ask permission. Shepard nodded, and moved out of her way, letting her run her scans.

"I recognise these signal patterns. There… you see that, Thane?" The Drell moved up to stand next to her, glancing at the screen on the Matriarch's wrist.

"Caesar is in there. Or… parts of him. Curious."

She nodded, before speaking directly to the struggling VI. "Mira, you have received an upgrade. Remain calm, and stop trying to fight it."

"What's going on?" Shepard was getting confused. She had never been much of a technician, having barely passed the mandatory engineering classes in her Alliance training.

"She's gaining sentience, Commander. Someone – probably one of the operatives – repaired her by grafting some of Caesar's subroutines and computation paths onto her program."

Shepard's eyes shot up, and she reflexively grabbed for her gun. "You mean she's becoming an _AI?_"

"Yes. Don't threaten her. She's consolidating her new data streams, gaining coherence, if you introduce violence in this process that's going to leave some…less than beneficial imprints."

The Commander grit her teeth, but removed the hand from her sidearm nonetheless. AI were strictly illegal in Council space, and both as a Spectre and an N7 she was tasked with the immediate destruction of any she came across. However, Noveria was not in Council space. Not anymore, anyway, and she was starting to realise – however grudgingly – that not all AI might be as bad as the politicians and broader culture had brought her up to believe.

"Commander? You're letting this happen?!

Williams sounded incredulous. The Chief was always the type to adhere firmly to protocol, and right now protocol was shouting at her to _shut that thing down._
"At ease, Ash. Much as I hate to admit it, we don't have jurisdiction here beyond that granted us by Close. And he seems far more trusting of these things than the Council is."

"Partial consolidation process complete. Warning: Physical damage to base infrastructure blocking further consolidation and control of facility. Recommend repairs to facility landlines and reactivation of facility power systems."

…

"Sorry, Shepard, you need to do it."

"But… why? I have literally zero technical talent!"

The ancient Asari gave a lopsided grin, "Be that as it may, Mira's interface has been locked to your or Aaron's input for security reasons. His orders, before the… incident with Kryik happened. I can't even access the core."

Shepard sighed heavily. She hated doing things she felt less than competent doing, a personality trait that was as much a blessing as it was a curse. It gave her the focus needed to fully master her essential skills, but it also provided a massive block to getting anywhere near competent in any skill wherein she had little talent to begin with.

"Right. What am I doing again?"

"The reconnection and reauthorisation protocols are abstracted, there's a recursive sequence of commands that you need to input. Manual input is required for security reasons. The whole thing is abstracted to emulate the mechanics of an old human game, I believe you call it Towers of Honey?"

"Hanoi."

"Whatever. You're familiar with it?"

"Vaguely."

"Then you have nothing to worry about."

Gods… Shepard had much preferred the more straightforward process of physically reconnecting the landlines and reactivating the power station. Shooting and blowing up Rachni… she would take that any day to being lowered into a data core to, what, play games?

She descended down into the facility's VI – nee, AI – core, and punched the button labelled 'interface reboot'. The VI had been running on a hidden, isolated power system when they arrived, but its connections to the base and the main power plant had been severed. Close's operatives had likely figured that they couldn't reactivate her fully without letting Benezia know they were there. So they left Mira dormant, waiting to be triggered when sensors detected either Shepard or Close nearby.

As for why they had elected to graft AI subroutines onto a VI program, she honestly had no idea. The tactician in her figured it could be that Benezia had deliberately damaged the program in order to stifle any Technopaths that might want to interfere. Supposedly, the old Asari knew of the Technopath Corps, and had at least some idea of their capabilities, particularly their mastery of tech. It would make sense, then, to subvert any attempts from them at using the outpost's technological systems against her. But that still didn't explain why the Technopaths didn't simply replace the VI system with a Caesar program…
Aaaand… there. Initialisation sequence executed. I think.

"Facility connections re-established. Transferring control systems to Mira authorisation protocols… Done. Welcome to the Peak 15 Binary Helix research facility, Spectre Shepard."

"Uhm… thanks. What… what happened here, Mira?"

"Detailed logs are fragmented. There are still competing memory runtimes in my programming."

"Broad strokes?"

"Please restate… internal override. Matriarch T'Soni severed my landline connections and attempted to erase my program. Operative Ryder 2 failed to integrate program designation [Caesar] with the Mira blue-box architecture, and opted to restore functionality by grafting parts of [Caesar] onto what remained of my program in the active blue-box memory."

Uhhh… "Right. What's that mean in English?"

"Get up here, Shepard."

The Spectre could almost hear the groan in Aethyta's voice, and found herself blushing a little as she pushed the button to ascend again. So far, the impression she had given her potential future father-in-law hadn't been exactly stellar. Not that they had done much to play at her strengths, or that she considered T'Voth to have any legitimate say in what her adult daughter chose to do with her life, but Shepard couldn't help but feel slightly old-fashioned about these things. She took after her own dad in that way.

The moment the lift arrived at floor level, Aethyta launched into an explanation Shepard had serious trouble following. "Mira, as a facility-wide single-instance VI, runs off a quantum blue-box system similar to those used by traditional AI systems. But Caesar is not a traditional AI system, it is not bound to particular hardware, and it was not written for quantum computers. This operative, Ryder, used Mira as a scaffold for bridging the gap between the quantum blue-box and the Caesar program."

"So, Mira is a Frankenstein's monster type of creation?"

"While I object to the implications of that analogy, at this time it does appear to be correct."

"Right. Well, I assume we can get going now?"

"Yes. The tram to the Hot Labs division is now unlocked. Hold on… incoming communication from [Caesar]. Connecting."

"Shepard."

The commander ground her teeth at the familiar modulated voice. "Messenger."

"Caesar has informed me about the developments regarding Mira. I am intrigued, but that's not why I am calling."

"Why are you calling?"

"I had hoped to be on my way to Noveria now, but things didn't go well on the surface. Most of my team is receiving medical attention, I am resigned to bedrest for a day or two."
"Still not hearing why I need to know this. You're basically saying you're *not* going to be interfering with my op here."

From the slight beat before his response, Shepard could tell he had bit down a snap response. "*Quite. No, I'm calling because you need to know what happened. And you need to be the one to inform the Council.*"

Shepard wasn't sure how to take the news. The Reaper hulk had been full of indoctrinated, and husks of several varieties, but no Geth. Nihlus had been dead before the team got there. They found Saren. They even managed to *capture* Saren, after an intense fight with him and the *reanimated corpse of Nihlus Kryik.* A Reaper corpse which had then managed to get away and somehow escape the system.

*Well, shit. This just got even more complicated.*

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I do not own Mass Effect.

Honestly, if it weren't for Mass Effect Andromeda this would have been out two weeks ago. I've sunk nearly 90 hours into that game at this point. It's significantly better than the memes have it, though it has its (significant) issues. One thing that's struck me is just how well it fits into my own story, so that's a plus. I was always planning on at least nodding in its direction within MI:CC. And considering that Pathfinders are essentially a variation on Technopaths... yep, this will work for my purposes :)

So yeah, Nihlus is dead. And not. And that's somewhat worrying. Now the big unanswered question is, how much of Nihlus' knowledge does Harbinger have access to? Because old Kryik knew a lot of things Close would rather the Reapers didn't...

Also, feel like I'm taking a page out of Tusken's book by turning Mira into an AI. I didn't, I had that planned before I even started reading Beacon's Effect in February last year, but I have no qualms about giving him a shout-out. His story is brilliant, go read it :)

Responding to reviews:

KatKiller-V: Not wrong about the setup, that's for sure. Couldn't quite fit it in there, and I couldn't quite progress the story all the way until Benezia either. Didn't fit timewise. So that's what the next chapter is going to be, I'll probably split it in half between Shepard at Peak 15 and Aaron doing some politicking from his bedrest in Archangel Medical.

Gauss Frigate: You have no idea how screwed Shepard is getting :P
They know only madness

Chapter Summary

Forgot to update AO3! This was published a few days ago on FFnet.

Chapter Notes

I do not own the Mass Effect. Aaron Close, the Technopaths, etc… that's another matter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I was never very good at the bedrest thing, but this time around I didn't really have much choice but to stay in bed. The few bullet holes and bruises I'd got in the fight with Saren and Harbinger was one thing, I could mostly shrug that off. The real damage was from the disruption wave. While most of the rest of my team hadn't taken too much damage from it – though they were all having to go through various medical treatment – my augmentations were far more extensive and numerous than theirs. Malfunctions in my spinal implants caused me to lose control over my legs before we managed to even get out of the Reaper, and I still couldn't move them myself.

According to Dr. Khias, some of my injuries might have become permanent if it weren't for Tela managing to get me back to the Archangel as quickly as she did. Which could have been… problematic. Included in the list of implants that were going haywire were a few of my cerebral implants. None of them too important, the remote graybox interface for example didn't actually do anything on its own, but the malfunctions threatened to cause damage to surrounding tissues. In the worst-case scenario, it could have left me braindead.

That was not something we had time for. So, I resigned myself to actually staying in bed to heal up. The doctors figured I might need some surgery to repair some of the damage, but once they had me in bed and hooked up to the diagnostics and self-repair suites they were content to see how far those could get on their own.

Meanwhile, I spent my time responding to the various mini-crises that were popping up in the wake of the recent earthquake in galactic politics. Most of them were handled deftly by my allies and partners, mostly Sederis, Aria, and Hetta T'Lang's reformed Shadow Broker organisation, and of course Caesar was doing a good job of subtly controlling the media response.

The Council had wanted to suppress the loss of Noveria and Illium to the new Terminus bloc, believing that the revelation would cause massive economic damage. Which was obviously correct, but that didn't mean it had to be avoided. In fact, that sort of impact was exactly the kind of thing that we needed to happen. The smoother we allowed the Council to make the transition to the new power balance, the more confident they would grow in their business-as-usual approach to politics, and that would not do.

So we leaked the information that the two corporate worlds were about to separate from the Council economies to certain key investors, using channels they trusted and letting them believe this was
information only they had managed to obtain. They promptly panicked and reshuffled large portions of their portfolio, as we had expected. If any one of them had done that, it would have been a sound business decision, but the scale at which it happened caused a large financial shock that was immediately picked up by various Volus banking consortiums.

They, in turn, started digging for information to explain what was going on, while silently shifting their relevant assets from their Council-bound holdings to their Terminus holdings. The whole chain reaction eventually forced the Citadel Council to release an official press statement confirming the secession of the two worlds and their corporations, which didn't do much to help the market crash but it did at least limit the fallout.

Meanwhile, the Volus bankers' shifting of assets meant that the economies of those two worlds actually gained from the turmoil, and provided a nearly seamless economic transition from a Council-oriented financial economy to a Terminus one. Caesar managed to use the turmoil to our advantage as well, finalising our majority buy-ins to ExoGeni and Synthetic Insights, and our wholesale takeover of Binary Helix, among some other minor companies on those worlds.

Basically, the plan had worked better than we had thought it would, and the financial panic in Council space had opened some beneficial avenues of investment there as well. For example, since Illium was the bridge that allowed the Terminus-based Elkoss Combine to do the majority of their trade in Council space, the severing of that bridge had forced their Council assets onto the market, where Close Corporation had swept in.

As a result, our market share in the military sector had increased to over 25%. This made us the single largest arms manufacturer in the sector, ahead of the Hierarchy's supplier Armax Arsenal and Thessia's Serrice Council. The chaos had also allowed us to purchase a minor ownership stake in Kassa Fabrication, with whom we were working on a licensing deal for a mil-spec variant of their Colossus line of armours. That particular part of the puzzle was key to our plan going forward, as said armour project was intended to culminate in the modular N7 experimental armour, incorporating modularity technology that would hopefully set the galactic standard within a few years.

Some of the innovations Kassa had put into the way their Colossus line used interchangeable panelling to make up their light, medium, and heavy-weighted armours would be essential in developing the standard interfaces that would allow proper modularisation. Not to mention how their strike plate material design was the closest you could get to a merger between Council-standard soft-shell armour designs and the hard-shell armours of the Terminus, a gap that would need to be bridged soon.

[Aaron, the request finally came in. I've dispatched the 'research' team.]

_The request... oh, the Alliance? They're finally moving on the Eden Prime findings?_

[Yeah, supposedly Hackett noted the advantages the Geth found in their thermal clip-based weaponry.]

_And noted that CC had brought the concept to the mil-tech working group last year, no doubt._

[Yes. They want to merge their findings with our existing project.]

_Which they will find is nearly identical. As expected. Well done, put the Viper and Eviscerator designs into pre-manufacturing, and prepare the blueprints for open-sourcing._

We had of course known for a long time that thermal clips would be the future, and the gunsmith in me knew exactly why: Added space in existing frame volumes, and increased thermal capacity,
meant a vastly increased space for innovation in weapons design, more powerful weapons and higher capacities. In fact, this had been known by gunsmiths for centuries, but despite many attempts no one had ever been successful in bringing the technology to market. There were two reasons for this: First, the market is risk averse, which means that it will generally stick to what it knows works, and second that no one could agree on a standard implementation which meant the logistics problem inherent to the design became a solid road block.

Our plan to overcome those was simple enough. First, the Geth incursion would demonstrate once and for all just how superior the thermal clip design was. We knew that would happen, and all we had to do there was to prepare for it. Second, we needed to make sure that the design would be universally standardised. This was trickier.

The galactic economy was largely based around enforced monopolies and infinite patents. This was in large part why most weapons in Council space were nearly identical: A few powerful players held patents that had to be licensed in order to be able to create any kind of competitive weapon. If any of those players were involved in the creation of the thermal clip system, hardly anything would change. It would be a best-fit model, cramming a thermal clip system into existing hardware that was still under patent protection. That would not do.

Caesar and I wanted to bring the innovation in arms design that could be found in the Terminus back into Council space, and the only way that could happen was through overturning the existing patent reign. Which meant that what we needed to do was design the basics of the thermal clip design, and then release it as open source while we implemented a more refined version of it using the same standards in the weapons and equipment we made for the Alliance.

The result, in theory, would be that arms manufacturers were suddenly able to stop producing weapons based on expensive old licenses and start building new ones, or adapting old ones, to the free thermal clip standard system. Since these new weapons would be inherently superior to the old ones, the old patent hegemony would collapse, thermal clips would standardise by default, and tools would become available for free to anyone who wanted to convert old weapons into thermal-clip capable weapons. The systems were designed on purpose so that anyone with an omni-tool and some patience would be able to make the conversions, and the clips themselves could be easily fabricated – even in the field – with a standard omni-forge.

And, of course, with our head start with the technology, Close Corporation had a massive advantage in the market even without patent protections. Which would help fund our… other ventures, including the one that allowed all of this in the first place. Establishing contact with the Geth consensus was one of the first things I had done during my time in the Terminus, specifically during the time I was thought to have been held prisoner by Cessa the Blade out in the Dark Rim. The reality of the situation had of course been quite different, the whole story was a cover for a large-scale operation to undermine Cessa's rule over the region.

Cessa had been forced into a confrontation with the Geth – Saren's heretics – as they sought out locations to hide away from the broader consensus. That confrontation did not go her way, though the heretics soon realised the Rim was much more developed than they had anticipated, which meant they couldn't expand there without tipping their hand to the wider galaxy as word got out of Geth aggression in the region. Cessa herself died in the first battle, leaving a leadership vacuum which I could then exploit. In the end, the region was 'invaded' by the Blue Suns – in truth, Zaeed's Remnant – and maintained its status quo as an insular region everyone knew to stay out of. Meanwhile, tracing the heretics back to Geth space allowed me to get in touch with the Geth directly, and on a small moon where the Veil crossed into the Dark Rim we established our first joint outpost.

This remained our only point of contact until the Archangel was half-completed, and the Geth labs
were built. It's where we co-developed the retrofittable thermal clip system. But the cooperation also
presented a very clear challenge: The single fundamental aspect to the Geth's nature that made them Geth was that all Geth share all data freely. This made it impossible, to the true Geth, to cooperate with us without the heretic Geth knowing what we were doing. That fact put a strain on our early relations, because I had to keep data from them in order to not tip my hand to Saren. The Geth, meanwhile, believed this to be a breach of our agreement, because to them the idea that the heretic Geth would be taking information to Saren that the consensus did not want them to, was ridiculous. The heretics were not part of the consensus anymore, and the very idea that they would spy on them was preposterous.

Haratar was the turning point. I brought a small contingent of true Geth to the heretic station in the Sea of Storms, and allowed them to see for themselves that the heretics were indeed spying on them. That they were no longer Geth. It shook the consensus to the core, and – in the words of Mobile Platform 1 – "dramatically changed our long-term decision parameters." It was what made them fully commit to cooperating. Two weeks later, the first meeting between the Geth and their Creators – Zaal'Koris and his closest allies – occurred on our little outpost. Their team became known as Section Three, a front that allowed his Rannoch Initiative to disguise itself as a research and development department within the Technopath Corps. The technology they developed provided the Close Corporation was directly responsible for the edge that gave us the contract with the Alliance a few years later.

Speaking of initiatives… C, connect me to operative Ryder 1?

[Connecting.]

The Technopath team on Noveria was a special one. They were both the least and the most 'integrated', for lack of a better term, of all of our operatives, and their basic cybernetic architecture had some key differences from the standard framework developed by myself and Caesar. Simplistically put, while most Technopaths had cybernetics that were designed to enhance and expand their capabilities, the Ryder team was on a different branch entirely. While they shared some of the same implants that we had, the primary purpose of their cybernetics was not to enhance and expand, but rather to modify and expand their capabilities.

The idea was similar enough: Put an AI in your head, acquire superpowers. The difference was mainly in the AI, and in the level of integration between the AI and the physical body of the host. While I and the other Technopaths relied on Caesar or his forks to manage the bridge between our minds and our cybernetics, Ryder's concept was for the AI to rely on the host body to serve as the bridge between it and the real world. It was in a very real sense a far more symbiotic approach to the melding of synthetic and organic than what I had gone for.

If I die, Caesar would live on, no worse for wear beyond the grief he might feel from my death. But if Ryder's AI's main connection were to die, it would change the AI fundamentally. If it transferred to a new operative, it would be as a different being. Or rather, it would be the same being that thought differently, saw differently, analysed differently, and interacted differently with the world around it. The AI was integrated with the organic host on a neuronal level, able to directly control the host's neural activity in the same way a traffic controller controls traffic through a busy city, and I knew Alec was working on allowing it to not just direct neural traffic but actually manipulate the host's biology on the fly. So, essentially, while the regular Technopath programme relied on adding more tech to enhance the operative's capabilities, a SAM-enhanced Technopath under Alec's Pathfinder programme would see their biology adjusted directly by the initial implants.

"Messenger, bit busy here at the moment."
Sending a querying thought to Caesar, he informed me through an info burst that the team on Noveria – Alec, Scott, and Sara Ryder – were all engaged in combat on three different fronts within the Peak 15 facility.

**Shepard put her plan into motion then. How close are they to Benezia?**

"They should be engaged with her commandos now, though there are four squads of them… it might take them a while. These guys are no joke."

**Believe me, neither is Shepard. She might be better than me.**

"I'll make sure to not tell her you told me that. This just a report call?"

I shuddered to myself as I briefly considered the impact such an admission might have on an ego the size of Shepard's.

No… no, it's not. It's a brief. **Binary Helix and its Peak 15 facility now belongs to the Close Corporation, and Aaron has informed me that it will be merged with Synthetic Insights and transferred to the Andromeda Initiative as a research headquarters for the SAM project on Noveria.**

"Ah. So I am essentially shooting up my new home, then?"

**Pretty much. Try not to ruin the wallpaper?**

"Will try my best. And what about Mira?"

She's gaining sentience, so her future will be decided by her. But I believe she can be of great help in helping you find a solution for the facility-integration problem with your current SAM architecture.

"Yeah, I think you're right."

The comm-link cut out for a few seconds, Alec clearly needing to focus on whatever battle was currently raging around him. A short info burst from Caesar informed me that heretic Geth platforms were pouring into Rift Station from an unknown location within the facility. That was somewhat concerning; one of the advantages of Benezia's undercover approach to getting to Noveria was that she had been unable to bring a Geth contingent with her, which meant that any and all Geth that Shepard and her team had encountered planetside must have been in storage at Peak 15 for some time already.

"Sorry about that," he appeared to breathe out in relief as he reconnected, "I'm afraid the Geth have become quite insistent. Any further instruction on the Rachni situation?"

**Old orders stand. Do your best to avoid the death of the Queen. The rest are beyond help.**

"You sure Shepard will agree to that?"

*I'm sure Aethyta and Zaeed won't leave her with a real choice in the matter.*

…

As insane as it was, fighting a small horde of Asari commandos was exactly what Shepard needed
after her thoroughly frustrating call with the Council. The councillors' responses to learning of Kryik's turn to the proverbial dark side had been just as disharmonious as she had both feared and anticipated. The Asari councillor, Tevos, had responded with the kind of calm contemplation Shepard had come to realise indicated that some covert scheme was being plotted. Ruthlessly rational in his response was Valern, the Salarian declaring Kryik's authorisations void and proposing the temporary transfer of his operational authority to Shepard. Temporary, because he would of course much prefer them permanently in the hands of his own operatives.

It was Sparatus' response that had really got to her, though. He had immediately called for her to withdraw back to the Citadel to 'answer for her role in this calamitous operation'. He was immediately rebuked by the two others, but stood his ground even when Shepard informed them of the confirmed presence of Rachni in the facility. At that revelation, Tevos and Valern threw all their support behind her, but Sparatus' response was to suggest simply dispatching a Turian dreadnaught to bomb the facility from orbit. 'It will send a clear message to the Terminus', he said. In her rebuke to that, Tevos went as far as to formally censure him for the suggestion.

None of this, naturally, had helped Shepard's mood at all. She already felt out of her depth, abandoned by people she trusted and railroaded by people she didn't, and the call with the ever-more fractured Council had only served to remind her that ultimately her decisions would be judged, and her orders decided, by people she both fundamentally distrusted and disliked. In short, she was badly in need of a fight, and thankfully she would find one soon enough.

"Die!"

Fuck!

Shepard threw herself away from her convenient shipping crate cover, rolling behind another just as Benezia's obliterated her previous position with a ridiculously powerful flare. Bullets grazed her shields, a near constant drain on her capacitors. Thank the baby Jeebus for these armour upgrades!

Glancing around her, she saw her team doing their best to answer the relentless onslaught from Benezia and her Geth. On the other side of the room, she could hear Liara's father and her team occupying her former bondmate's commando teams in a furious exchange of bullets and biotics, and not an insignificant amount of grenades courtesy of Massani.

Think, Ali, think! Benezia is pretty old, even for an Asari matriarch, which means her biotic power is immense and her control unparalleled. But it also means her stamina is limited. So…

"Ignore Benezia, focus on the Geth! Just dodge her attacks!"

Wrex grunted, a smirk forming on his face as he glanced her way. "Tire her out, good strategy." He waved at Liara, "Get in front of me girl, I'll cover you. Not my first time fighting Asari."

With the Krogan taking up position in half cover to draw Benezia's attention and keep her attacks off them, Shepard and Liara focused their efforts on the Geth further down the walkway. Liara had taken some hits that were clearly affecting her ability to concentrate, so her singularities were fewer and less effective, but they were still more than sufficient to pull the Geth out of cover for Shepard and Liara's combined pistol fire to take damage. Finishing each group with a warp to detonate the singularity proved to be an effective strategy, and within a couple of minutes their side of the room appeared clear apart from the still-going matriarch.

She, of course, was no fool either. She had quickly understood Shepard’s strategy and acted to counter it, calling back two commando teams to join her on her elevated platform. Shepard and Liara just managed to join Wrex in holding them back before he lost the initiative, but it was too late; they were ready to move on them, and promptly did so.
The moment the first singularity flared into existence in the middle of their little group, Shepard responded on instinct by increasing her mass and activating her annihilation field. She knew what would come next, she knew it would hurt like hell, but she would be damned if she didn't make the attackers hurt more. Immediately following the third singularity, four commandos – a full team – charged in, one each for Shepard and Liara and two for the significantly tougher Krogan. Within the span of a single second, the situation went from chaos to carnage. Wrex responded to the charge by literally meeting one of them head-on, the commando's face all but obliterated by the biotically enhanced headbutt. Liara's reaction to the attack was a masterfully timed and executed flash-step that saw the attacker stumble away from her, only to get caught up in Shepard's significantly more violent response.

Leveraging her increased mass, Shepard physically blocked the charge, staggering the attacker momentarily, and managed to ignore the resulting detonation of the singularities enough to release her own nova. This, in turn, blasted back all three remaining attackers in a violent detonation, as they had all been caught in her annihilation field. Shepard and her team were of course not unscathed by this, her and Liara both were thrown back by the explosion which was powerful enough to knock the wind out of her. Ordinarily, a biotic is able to protect themselves from their own detonations by momentarily reinforcing their barriers to unsustainable levels. This time, neither of them had the time to do this.

Wrex, on the other hand, was merely staggered and slightly singed by the violent reaction, and regained his wits quickly enough to finish off the two commandos who were still barely alive with two successive shotgun blasts. The series of explosions had naturally drawn the attention of Benezia's other team of bodyguards, whose attention had previously been focused in the other direction where Aethyta and her team were working their way through to Benezia's position.

Seeing a chance to at least punch a route through Shepard's team to get away from the advance on the other side, the team of commandos immediately flash-stepped down the stairs toward Shepard and Liara's temporarily prone forms, only to be tackled by a half-ton Krogan before they could get within their still-active shield envelopes. At most, Wrex's tackle was but a distraction for the skilled Asari warriors, but the distraction proved sufficient as Shepard shook off the effects of the explosion and reactivated her annihilation field. She was pissed, and the intensity of the field reflected this. All around her writhed in agony, even Wrex and Liara as she lost control of the dark energy tendrils emanating from her hunched-over form. Seeing her lover in pain had her immediately retract those tendrils and grabbing for her trusted Scimitar, with which she unloaded a torrent of Disruptor-enhanced rounds on the momentarily distracted commandos, killing two and blasting apart the barrier protection of the remaining two before Liara and Wrex ended their misery.

Throwing apologetic glances to her two teammates, Shepard quickly took in the situation. Benezia was clearly strained, unable to throw out anything more powerful than a throw orb every second or so. That in itself was impressive enough, but nothing a decent biotic barrier couldn't handle. On the opposite side of the elevated platform, Aethyta's team was finishing off the remaining members of the matriarch's impressive detachment of bodyguards, and the look of panic on the face of Liara's mother clearly showed that she realised the position she was now in. Desperate for a way out, any way out, she lunged for the weapon of one of her acolytes, but a simple flick of the wrist by her daughter saw the gun flung across the room.

Her eyes wide but her look sharp, the thousand-year-old Asari searched frantically for an escape, anything that could aid her. But as her family, her former bond-mate and their offspring, stepped up on the platform in front of her, biotic barriers thick as steel covering them as they approached, Shepard saw resignation slowly creeping up over her features.

"This… this is not over!" She crawled on all fours back towards the glass tank holding the Rachni
queen within. "Saren is unstoppable. My mind is filled with his light. Everything is clear!"

Liara was clearly taken by surprise by her mother's rambling. "What happened to you, mother? This isn't you!"

Shepard put a hand on her lover's shoulder, a small comfort to steel her emotions. *This is going to get rough.*

"I have seen this before, girl." Aethyta's gravelly voice interjected before I could, "Beni's indoctrinated. But I know her. There's still some of you in there, isn't there Beni? I can feel you…"

*Feel her?* Shepard knew a lot about the Asari, she had been nearly obsessed with the blue beauties through her late teens, but there were some aspects of Asari biology that were simply not understood by outsiders. She knew that the term *bond-mate* referred to some deeper bond between two lovers, but she didn't know how deep that bond went. *Telepathy? An empathic connection of some sort?*

"I will not betray him! You will… you…" Benezia closed her eyes for a moment, and when they opened Shepard saw in them, for the first time, clarity. "You must listen! Saren still whispers in my mind. I can fight his compulsions, briefly, but the indoctrination is strong. I…"

With a speed that gave no hints of her age, Aethyta rushed forward and grabbed Benezia by the neck, bringing their foreheads together. Benezia's eyes went pitch black in an instant, and Liara yelped next to me as I grabbed her and held her such that she didn't see what was happening. I knew what Aethyta was doing, I had read about this, and I knew Liara would know as well. *Forced melding.*

"What the hell are you doing?!

Liara's father responded to my angry shout by simply raising a hand, signalling us to stay back. Against my best judgment, I allowed her the time to do whatever it was she was doing. I had come there fully expecting to have to kill Benezia, and whatever her bond-mate was doing was even in the worst case not going to make that any harder should it come to it.

For a tense minute, the two old Asari remained locked in the meld, Aethyta on one knee bent over Benezia as she sat on the ground, her back against the glass cage behind her. Then Aethyta jerked back, releasing her hold and stumbling slightly as she attempted to get back on her feet.

"I… thank you, Ethy. I still feel them, but they are more distant. What did you do?"

"Two years ago, you had your amp upgraded. It contained some upgrades you were unaware of. Hell, I don't really understand them myself. All I know is, you are still indoctrinated and permanently impaired, but they shouldn't be able to reach you anymore, Beni. At least, not so easily."

She swallowed, blinked a few times and seemed to look inwards, mapping what was left of… her.

"Right…" she blinked again, resolve returning to her eyes. "Right. Of course you know about indoctrination. You work for the Messenger."

I grit my teeth. "*With.* I work *with* the Messenger."

Aethyta snorted, "I'm under no delusions. Yes, we work for him."

"Good. Good, he may be the only one who stands a chance. Nazara can't reach him, for some reason, though he has tried. It frustrates him."
"He has that effect on people," Shepard mumbled. Liara heard, and shot her lover a glare. She could only sigh and roll her eyes in response.

"So what do you know? Why are you here? And more importantly, why is that here?"

"I… unngh!" Benezia clutched at her head, "Oh goddess, the echo is getting louder again, Ethy!"

Behind her, the Rachni queen scrambled to her feet, its attention clearly caught by something. Suddenly, she turned toward the glass, tentacles splayed out in a star pattern. Benezia jerked slightly, eyes closed as her hands falling to her side. When she opened her eyes again, they were distant, staring into the void.

I barely noticed having drawn my gun, nor the other guns pointed in the direction of the glass cage. Twitchy trigger fingers don't mix well with the unexpected.

"This one serves as our… voice. She… struggles."

"Then release her!" There was a very real edge of anger to Aethyta's voice.

"The sour yellow note that plagued our ancestors… it hums at the edges of her mind. We can help keep it at bay."

Okay. This is new.

It was Liara's turn to lash out in anger. "You're replacing one manipulator with another. Let her speak!"

Her mother blinked, slowly, and when she opened her eyes the clarity was back.

"It's alright, Little Wing. The Queen, her… her song is drowning out the indoctrination signal. Let her use me. I owe her this. I was not gentle with her."

A wave of pain rushed through a room. It was a strange sensation, feeling the emotion of pain without the physical sensation of it. Shepard's eyes were drawn toward the large creature in the glass tank, and she couldn't help but feel sympathy for it.

"I have questions," she shook her head, "Questions for both of you. First things first, on mission, I've already asked your questions, Benezia. Can you answer?"

"Yes. I was here to find the location of the Mu relay. Saren needs it to reach the Conduit, the key to his plan. The Queen is here because the Rachni have genetic memory, she remembers the location of the relay because her ancestors inhabited that part of space. That, and Saren believed her children could be the soldiers of the Reapers in the coming war."

"Okay. That's… mildly terrifying. Next question, what the hell is the Conduit?"

Benezia shook her head, "I am not certain. All I know is that it is located on the plant of Ills, beyond the Mu relay. Liara knows of it."

Shepard quickly connected the dots, "Ah, that's why she was attacked on Feros."

"Yes. We… I knew she could be of help. I am sorry, Little Wing, I nearly had you killed."

It was clear that Benezia was deeply distressed, and from the way she tensed in Shepard's arms – oh, right, I'm still holding her aren't I… – it was clear that Liara had picked up on it as well.
She swallowed. "You were indoctrinated, mother."

Benezia nodded, and kept her chin low and eyes on the ground as she continued. "I still am. Until there are no Reapers, I will always be. There is no cure for this, Little Wing. Anyway," her eyes shot back up to meet Shepard's, "The Conduit. Saren and Nazara believes it is the key to the return of the Reapers."

She closed her eyes again, and Shepard steeled herself for the unnatural, hitching notes of the Rachni speaking through Benezia.

"The machines are preparing to come again. To sing their sour yellow note to our children again. You must stop them."

The machines? "The Reapers? Are you saying…"

"The Rachni were indoctrinated two thousand years ago, Shepard," Wrex grumbled. "The Krogan didn't fight the Rachni, we fought the Reapers."

"And now they are using the Geth just like they used the Rachni," she nodded, "I wonder how much they have interfered in galactic events since the Rachni war."

"Shepard. Our children… they are lost to suffering. They were stolen from us, stolen from our song. They know only madness. You must end their suffering."

"You want me to kill your children?"

"They are beyond our song. They cannot be saved. But what will you sing for us? Will you release us? Or are we to fade away once more?"

Chapter End Notes

Well, then. That took ages to get out. I had hoped to get a chapter out for the two-year anniversary, but I've been ridiculously busy lately with a massive documentation rewrite, reformat, and conversion project at work. Managed to get a GAG chapter out, barely, though that was mostly written two months ago already. As was the first half of this one... I mean, it's been nearly exactly three months coming. Not good enough, and I apologise :(

Pretty short chapter this time around, but it's rather dense with information. I meant to continue the chapter on for a bit beyond the decision, but it felt like a very natural point to end it on.

I feel like I need to make some minor time skips at this point in the story. There are quite a few pieces of the narrative that are in motion at the same time, and their resolutions will both be necessary and messy. Necessary, because they will drive the main plot on (and nudge it in different directions), and messy because of how they interact with both canon and the political realities of the Milky Way.

As 'boring' as it might be, at least for the next couple of chapters, Aaron's focus must be
on the political game, while Shepard focuses on the ground game. It's necessary to set up the next stage of the plot, and to expand the narrative context. Hopefully I can do all these things without it becoming too boring. KatKiller-V is a master at this sort of thing, I just hope I can be half as good at it :)

Responding to comments:

Dazac: Yep. Andromeda characters are in this. The Initiative will play an important, but backgrounded, role. It is part of canon, and I have always intended to be canon compliant. That's not changed.

Goldspark1: Glad you approve :) Mira will become increasingly important down the line, we've definitely not seen the last of her. And yes, the strategy of the Technopaths is very much that of covert and indirect manipulation. It is much easier to get people to do what you want, when you make them think they control their own choices and make their own decisions. Social engineering 101… :)

Gauss Frigate: Thank you! Yeah I know, two years, kind of blows my mind. Regarding the Geth: Not repurpose, per se. As you can read in this chapter, there's a cooperation going. The level of cooperation hasn't been fully expanded upon yet here, but it goes deep. Let's just say, the Archangel couldn't work without the Geth working within its systems…

Raikaguken: Complicated answer. About half-and-half. He is blurring the line between man and machine, that's for sure.

Blah of blow: This has been alluded to a few times through the story, and more implicitly explained in the sidefic Gunsmith Apprentice's Guide to Mass Effect Weaponry (GAG). Essentially, most of our current-day cultural information was lost to digital oblivion as formats and the very nature of computers changed. As time passed, the memory of the Mass Effect franchise disappeared along with the games and related online information. Caesar was the first to begin to realise what was happening, and managed to collect most of what remained and keep it out of the human eye, understanding the value of foreknowledge. Basically: Aaron and Caesar are the only two entities left in the galaxy who still know about the franchise, and they know everything about it.

Seabo76, gearblade, mwjen, Schnarf, da ferrad, Tergen: Glad you're enjoying it so far! I apologise for being so tardy with updates in the past year, apparently it's hard for me to juggle full-time work that involves a lot of writing with a hobby that also involves a lot of writing… :/
Dance to my whistle

Chapter Notes

Author’s notes: I do not own Mass Effect!

Busy summer! I’ve had half of this written for nearly a month, just not had the time to pick up the rest. But here it is! Cut slightly short from what I had planned, but that felt like a natural break point.

Got quite a few reviews this time around, which makes me happy! Thank you all for reviewing! Reviews in end notes (as usual, these have already been responded to in PM).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She what?

“You heard me.”

I could only groan in disbelief, making sure Aethyta could hear it on the other end. Where is she now?

“She left with the queen. As agreed, we made sure no one knows where they went.”

Apart from us.

“…yes. I’m still not happy about that.”

That made one of us. I was glad Aethyta’s plan had worked, I really was. I’d had very low expectations, thinking that at best all it would accomplish was to just get the information we needed from the micro-graybox in her modified amp. It had been a simple enough idea: Hijack a routine upgrade of the matriarch’s biotic amp to include a hidden component. Said component would include a small graybox, a VI controller, a modified cognitive dump processor, and a passive neural interface. The VI was set up to activate the graybox to store very specific memories and information, such as the location of the Mu Relay and any other information it – a Caesar fork, of course – deemed important. The CDP was there to act as a potential bulwark against indoctrination once activated. Activation was done through the passive neural interface, which was also used to access the information in the graybox through a forced meld.

Aethyta knew that Benezia would have been able to see the indoctrination take a hold of her, and as a master of Asari mind healing techniques would be able to isolate part of her mind from its effects. Her bet was that if she could be made to retreat to that isolated remnant of herself, the CDP would be sufficient to keep the indoctrination at bay.

It had worked, to some extent, but just as I had expected the level of integration between her brain and the dump processor wasn’t great enough to do anything more than be small hindrance to the indoctrination signal. A bulwark, yes, but a temporary one at best. What I hadn’t anticipated was that the Rachni queen would be able to help her keep the ‘sour yellow note’ at bay. Though, in a sense, that made some things simpler.
Without the tracker I would never have allowed the operation to modify Benezia’s amp, and you know it.

“Which is exactly why I’m not happy about it.”

Fine. Let’s agree to disagree. Now at least it simplifies tracking the Rachni…

“…which they don’t want us to do.”

…right. But we still need to, if we want an alliance with them down the line. Anyway, what’s Shepard doing?

There was a brief pause on the other end of the channel. Aethyta had been quite strongly opposed to the tracker from the beginning, and had taken every opportunity since to repeat the argument. Frankly, I was tired of it.

“She’s in session with the Council again.”

I’m sure they will be pleased with her decision…

Aethyta’s rumbling chuckle carried a strange, disconcerting echo. “Of course. She only let the galaxy’s second most wanted person go, while simultaneously reviving a species that once threatened to destroy galactic civilisation. Hell, they’ll probably give her a medal.”

…

“I should just fucking resign.”

She knew she wouldn’t, but just then, after being yelled at for nearly half an hour by four of five most frustrating people in the galaxy, the prospect was extremely tempting.

“Come now, Ali, it wasn’t that bad.”

Shepard shot a sideways glance at her lover, who sat next to her on the side of the bed in the Normandy’s captain’s quarters.

“Not that bad?” She shook her head slowly in resigned exasperation, “Liara, they practically accused me of high treason, every one of them.”

Liara nodded once. “They did… but they are keeping you on as a Spectre. Which probably means this is all posturing.”

What? “Posturing? For whom?”

Her lover smiled. “The Shadow Broker, of course.”

“The Broker? Why would… oh.”

It took but a moment’s reflection to connect the pieces. It was widely thought, even within the Network, that the Broker pulled all the strings in the new Terminus power. It was also common practice in galactic politics these days to take it as granted that any performance outside of the most secure of meeting places would be recorded by the same. Thus, any such performance – whether a briefing, a committee meeting, or just a conversation between politicians and their subordinates – were acted out in such a way as to paint exactly the picture they wanted known to the world.
In this case, the aim was more direct. They wanted to make clear to the Broker that Shepard would not be a potential asset for him, because she did not have the trust of the Council. Simultaneously, they wanted to tell her that they would drop her in an instant if she ever crossed them. And further, they wanted to support a potential public narrative that painted her as untrustworthy, a loose cannon, irresponsible. Potential, in that this public narrative wouldn’t serve them right now, but should she become a problem she could be turned into the perfect lightning rod for the public’s fear and fury.

Oh, god damn it… “I fucking hate politics.” She sighed deeply, falling back on the bed as she covered her face with her hands.

“There is a silver lining here, Ali.”

“Do enlighten me,” Shepard’s muttered response was muffled somewhat by the hands still hiding her face.

“Sparatus isn’t a schemer, he doesn’t have it in him. His outrage was real. The man is easy to anger, but from what I have heard he is also much more intelligent than he lets on.”

Shepard peeked out through her fingers as Liara gracefully lay down on her side, facing her as she continued.

“After calming down, he tends to think things through more closely, and always acts with more rationality than he displays in public.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“With Tevos and Valern, you don’t know what they’ll do, and you only know that what they say is constructed for entirely political reasons. Sparatus says what he says because he can’t help himself, but he ultimately acts rationally.”

“And?”

Liara visibly steeled herself, clearly about to say something she knew her lover wouldn’t like. “Ali, I think you should reach out to Sparatus.”

Shepard groaned, loudly. But Liara wasn’t finished.

“And I think you should do it through the Messenger.”

“Now I know you’ve lost it.”

“Ali, no one else can get you a one-on-one off the record meeting with the councillor.”

“Liara, it would confirm their suspicion that I’m working with him, that I’m a stooge of the Network!”

“They don’t believe that for a second! That’s a story they are spinning for when they need to throw you out, no, you need to do this. And only by using the Messenger’s services will you be able to get around that particular narrative.”

She had a point, and Shepard knew it. The Messenger was a bit of an oddity in galactic politics. Always neutral, taking no apparent side in any conflict. The services he offered was one that in a time of extranet messaging and faster than light communication seemed entirely out of place, even anachronistic, but it filled a need. Messages he delivered would never be trackable. They would never be recorded, unless such recordings were part of the deal. They would never be public, never
scrutinised, never known. And they always made it to their intended target, guaranteed, with no chance of effective interception. No communications technology could guarantee that these days. Every other method of communication came with a fundamental assumption that whatever was communicated could be intercepted. Even the theoretical quantum entanglement communicator – which she now knew was very real, and used by the Messenger himself – came with such an assumption, since the technology could only protect the channel, but not the endpoints. The Messenger had no such limitation.

"You've been talking to your father, haven't you."

Liara stiffened slightly. "Words may have been exchanged."

Shepard huffed. “I’m not going to ask Close to do this. I don’t want to owe him anything.”

“You don’t need Close.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “You just said… oh.” Realisation struck her like lightning, “You want Krios to take on the role again? You sure he can do it?”

“Only one way to find out, Ali. But,” she leaned in and kissed Shepard gently, “Let’s save that for later.”

…

Come again?

A sharp sigh-like whistle sounded through the channel, Rane clearly not happy with my incredulity. “They were experimenting with the husking process using Dragon’s Teeth. And no, they weren’t all indoctrinated. These were controlled experiments, using slaves as test subjects.”

And they were leaving when you got there?

“Preparing to, yes.”

I had been wondering why Rane’s expedition to the Maroon Sea had taken so long, but I had trusted her to do her job and get back to me when it was all done. Apparently, the reason for the delay had been an encounter with a Cerberus evacuation fleet in orbit over Chasca. This had been unexpected, but Rane’s people was more than ready for the challenge and had let none of the ships escape, though two of the four Cerberus troop transports were total losses due to catastrophic re-entry.

From what they had been able to gather in their preliminary surveys, the ‘samples’ provided by Doctor Gamorle had been Dragon’s Teeth, that much I had already expected from what I remembered of the game, but apparently the implications of this in the game were… understated. There, the assumption had been that the researchers had become indoctrinated and eventually husked by their own experiments. The reality was more… concerning. The Teeth had been received with the researchers fully aware of what they were and what they could do. While my people had indeed been attacked by a small horde of husks once planetside, they were not the husks of the research teams.

The situation in the games was not the result of some tragic mad-science-gone-wrong research project, but the aftermath of a well-planned operation that had been evacuated such that all that remained would suggest exactly that. Most likely, Cerberus had operatives on the Normandy who had warned them about Shepard’s discovery of the Chasca operation.
Good job, Major. Continue your surveys, call in whatever technical resources necessary and remain on station until the job is complete. Cerberus might decide to return.

On a hunch, I gave her one more specific instruction. Also, have your people look through the base’s databanks for any reference to one Henry Lawson. Use Caesar for cross-pattern analysis.

“Will do. Mind telling me who this Lawson is?”

A possible way in.

“Sir.”

As the channel closed, my mind raced. We always knew that there would be surprises even in the parts that we knew would happen. In the games, we only ever got a single perspective, Shepard’s perspective. Which meant that our knowledge could be undermined by deceptions Shepard had fallen for, or misconstructions based on incomplete knowledge and data. Which is why we had always had a policy of pursuing every possible connection in what we knew.

In this case, that meant connecting the dots between the work Henry Lawson was doing at Sanctuary with the work that was evidently being done at Chasca. We knew from the games that the elder Lawson had been a supporter of Cerberus prior to Miranda joining the organisation, and though it was suggested that he withdrew his support because of them offering her sanctuary, the fact that he rejoins in a senior research role by the third game could have been a hint that he had never actually severed ties in the first place.

In fact, we were pretty sure that was the case. Henry Lawson had been on the board of ExoGeni for years until our hostile takeover, and that was not the only economic connection we had found between him and Cerberus. Our thinking was that if we could prove his continued connection to Cerberus and TIM, we might be able to turn Miranda Lawson to our side. A way in, indeed.

How long until the Normandy reaches the Armstrong Nebula, C?

[They are still a couple of hours from planetfall at Rayingri.]

That was quick.

[The modifications we had done to the ship’s engines has added about 20% to their top sustained FTL. Aaron, Sparatus has just returned to his office.]

Nice. Activate Thane’s sensory pass-through.

In an obvious effort to avoid owing me any favours, Shepard had asked Thane to initiate a behind-the-scenes dialogue with Sparatus, the Turian councillor, while pretending to be the Messenger. Of course, I knew right away, and as Thane knew that I would he immediately brought me into the conversation.

While initially annoyed, Shepard had eventually agreed that having me as support for Thane would be beneficial and could help get things moving in a constructive direction. Each councillor had used my services on more than one occasion, even Valern had done so on a few occasions with ‘personal matters’ where he explicitly didn’t want the STG involved. But Sparatus had made a habit of using my services. Over the past three years, I had taken an average of six assignments from him every Earth solar year. The man was not as stupid and reckless as he made it seem in official Council meetings. He knew he was permanently outnumbered there, and so he preferred to do his work – his real work – behind the scenes.
This was how I had been able to shut him up at Shepard’s hearing. Morso linguæ, ‘bite your tongue’, was a code that invoked a security policy that everyone who uses the Messenger’s services agrees to. It is the one constant price: Act against me, and be revealed. In the case of Sparatus, the things I could reveal were more than sufficient to have him thrown off the Council, out of the Hierarchy, and deep into a prison pit on Palaven. He was as cold and calculating as I was, perhaps more so, and had the lives of thousands upon thousands of people on his conscience. Some of those directly, in the form of assassinations – some at my hand – others more indirectly.

In one case, as a way to both protest border funding allocations and force the Council’s hand in increasing funding to the Turian border fleets, reconnaissance data showing the gaps in border patrol patterns allowed Turian separatists on the planet Taetrus, led by one Kihilix Tanus, to coordinate a series of terrorist attacks and escape the system before the Turian patrol fleets were able to respond. And while parts of the press had noted that Tanus and Sparatus had once served together in the Hierarchy military, none had attempted to pull on that thread. If they had, they might have found out that Tanus was still subordinated to and covertly funded by Sparatus, and that his separatist group was an off-the-books tool the councillor used to bend the Council and the Hierarchy to his will when he thought it necessary.

And he knew I could prove this, and much more. That was the price he had paid for enabling the scheme to work in the first place.

So when I – or rather, Thane – showed up in his office after spending hours in session with the rest of the Council, he was understandably nervous.

“Messenger,” he sighed as his mandibles slowly tightened to his face, “I suppose it was only a matter of time. Have you come to pull the trigger?”

As Thane moved fully out of the shadows to loom over Sparatus where he sat behind his desk, I felt that curious, yet by now familiar, disembodied feeling of moving without moving. Sensory pass-through was essentially a direct FTL-link between the brains of two Technopath. It allowed me to be a passive observer in the other’s body, to see what they see, hear what they hear, feel what they feel.

“This time,” I heard my voice – Thane’s voice – reverberate subtly throughout the room, “No, I am merely here to tell you I have my finger on it.”

Sparatus grunted. “Which means you’re calling in a favour. I thought the Messenger wasn’t in the business of favours?”

“No, councillor, favours are all that I am about, and you know this.”

“Just… just get to the point.”

“You believe the Reapers exist.”

It was a statement, not a question, and I had to admit to being surprised at how brazen Thane had chosen to be.

“I… well, yes, as far as government secrets go, that is hardly a well-kept one.”

“Your public scepticism is theatre. Keeping the population’s fears in check.”

“Obviously.”
“And your public reaction to the Network?”

Sparatus growled and lowered his brow plates. A universal sign of predatory aggression, if ever there was one.

“Genuine, I take it.”

“This Network upends centuries of military and security policy. Of course we’re not pleased! You know how dangerous this is, I don’t understand how you could allow yourself to be involved in this!”

“Councillor, I am not just involved in this, I am one of the architects of it. I have been working on this for the better part of a decade.”

The Turian reacted as if he had been slapped. Of course he understood that something like the Network couldn’t have just happened overnight, but knowing that it had been deliberately worked toward for nearly a decade – a decade known for the series of large-scale conflicts known as the Terminus Wars, no less – that was bound to change his perspective on a lot of things. Including the various assignments he had given me in the Terminus during that period. For all he knew...

“You want to know if you had an unwitting part in making this happen.” Sparatus’ eyes shot up to meet mine… no, Thane’s, as he clearly worked to reshuffle his pieces of the puzzle. “The answer is yes. As is the case with every other Councillor I have taken jobs for.”

“Why? Why would you do this?!”

“The galaxy is not ready for the Reapers, and not willing to prepare for them.”

It took a few moments of silence as Sparatus’ gears turned, before it finally clicked. “You want an arms race. A, what is the human term… a chill conflict?”

“I believe the term is ‘cold war’. And yes, that is correct. We need constant, imminent threat on both sides. This is the only way we can hope to defend ourselves when the Reapers come.”

“But that could be decades away! Centuries! This war won’t stay cold for that long!”

Ah. So that is the delusion. If the Councillors all thought there could be something to this Reaper threat, which I was fairly certain was the case, then logically they should have been taking much more drastic steps than they were. But if they thought that it was a distant threat, that they had plenty of time to prepare, then they would settle for the Asari approach. Slow and steady wins the race, as the saying goes.

“Councillor, they are already here. All the evidence we have point to their sudden appearance in every cycle. There will not be any time to prepare. We know the Protheans spanned a much larger territory than ours, and they were far more unified and technologically advanced than any of our species. Yet they were wiped out. Complacency is not an option.”

The Councillor sighed, dropping his mandibles tight to his jaw, clearly not willing to even entertain the idea. Which was understandable. Even when you know that the end of the galaxy is coming, the consequences are too great for even a civilian to grasp. I could personally relate to that quite strongly. But for a Councillor? Someone who does not just have to grasp the consequences, but would be responsible for them? It’s too much for anyone to handle, at least quickly.
“So what would you have me do? That’s different from what we are already doing, that is, from what I now understand we appear to be dancing to your whistle already.”

“For the most part, you are. And going forward, you will be doing so directly. I own you, Sparatus. Make no mistake about that.”

“Do not threaten me, Messenger.” The words came out as a growl.

“I do not need to. You already know the consequences if you do not ‘dance to my whistle’. So, I now have four tasks for you. One, reinforce the Traverse.”

He huffed, “To squeeze pirate operations and establish a clear front. Fine.”

“Two, attempt to retake control over Noveria by sending in a joint fleet with the Union, the Republics, and the Systems Alliance.”

That got his attention. “Noveria? Why? Won’t you defend it?”

“Of course we will. To be precise, we will defend it to a stalemate. We want to establish Noveria as a DMZ, a small area of common ground. It will be an economical and technological release valve between the two sides, which leads to the fourth task: Work to give official support to Jien Garson’s Andromeda project, and allow them to use Noveria as a research headquarters.”

“The Initiative? Why would that bunch of loons… wait, they are your backup plan, aren’t they?”

“They are everyone’s backup plan, Sparatus. I’m not expecting Council support, there are too many legal and regulatory issues to cut through. Work toward support on the nation state level.”

Thane kept throwing the poor Councillor off, blindsiding him with information and requests he would have great difficulty making sense of. In this case, the hidden agenda – beyond merely gaining support for the Andromeda Initiative – related to the key phrase nation state level. Nearly every Council species organised their society around a pseudo-confederate model, with nationally sovereign nation states giving up supranational sovereignty to a confederate government, which in turn answered to the Council. Empowering the individual nation states in any way beyond their national borders was historically a recipe for disaster, as it created ‘small men with great ambitions’. Thus, delegating this kind of support to a nation state level would inevitably create internal tensions in the different confederacies, adding to the external tensions created by the cold war with the Network. In other words, it was a recipe for moderate paralysis, a measure that would keep the cold war cold as the confederacies would be too fractured to escalate.

“Finally, and importantly: Your plan to disenfranchise and scapegoat Shepard and her crew ends now.”

“Shepard?” Sparatus looked puzzled, “What is with your obsession with the human? This is twice you have intervened on her behalf. First you made her Spectre, now this?”

“Symbolism. Not only is she extremely effective at what she does, she’s the tip of our spear against the Reapers, and a beacon for the Systems Alliance.”

Sparatus’ mandibles flicked forcefully outward in shock as he connected the pieces, “No! That is too far, the humans are not ready!”

I was almost impressed by how quickly he had figured out the play. The more successful Shepard is
as a Spectre, the quicker the ascension of humanity to representation on the Council. Already powerful forces were pushing for it to happen, and most commentators agreed that it was only a matter of time. While theory had that there were many factors that had to come together for a seat on the Council to be realised, historically only two factors had proven necessary: Proven military might, and a proven capability of political gamesmanship. On the latter, the Turians were the odd ones out, but it was still a political play that had gained them their seat in a deal that made it a prerequisite for their military assistance against the Krogan.

But the humans had been a shock to the system of galactic politics. They had proven themselves militarily capable by resisting the Turians, and since then they had proven themselves on par with both the Salarians and the Asari in the political game. Everyone knew the Alliance was destined for a seat on the Council, but the Turians strongly opposed the idea. So, Sparatus’ reaction was understandable.

Anti-human sentiment was still quite strong within the Hierarchy after the very public embarrassment that was the First Contact War, or the ‘Relay 314 incident’ as the Turians prefer to call it. The meritocratic model of the Hierarchy meant that most of their generals, admirals, and various administrators were now veterans of that conflict, and many of them felt personally insulted and embarrassed by those events, feelings that were generally and often maliciously directed at humans in general and the Systems Alliance in particular. And these were the people who kept the Councillor in power. Not to mention that he himself was a veteran of the conflict.

“You have your tasks, Councillor. Reinforce the Traverse, send a fleet to Noveria, provide nation state support to the Andromeda Initiative, and support Shepard. And Sparatus?”

He merely grunted in response, as Thane engaged his cloak and vanished from sight.

“Morso lingua. Your fate is in your hands.”

...The campaign through the Armstrong Nebula had been a slog. Every member of the crew was tired and worn down, each shift having run at combat capacity for three days straight. Shepard herself wasn’t faring much better, despite being more used to this sort of campaign than anyone else on the ship. After all, she was the only member of the crew that had taken part in every single ground operation over those three days. Still, both she and the others seemed to feel reinvigorated by the approach to Notanban, or more specifically their arrival at the moon Solcrum.

On approach, the passive sensor array had intercepted fragments of a coded transmission from the surface. Tali had identified it as Geth, but had been unable to decrypt it, admitting somewhat sheepishly that Close might have been more successful if he were there.

Strangely, the young Quarian had appeared particularly eager to get to the surface. One would think she would be more nervous than most, due to the difficult task she had been given, and for a while that seemed to be the case. Something had changed over the past few days, however, and though Shepard was at a loss to explain it she certainly didn’t mind.

“Heads up, people, armatures on the radar! Garrus, you are free to fire. One at a time, call your shots, I need to keep us moving!”

Shepard found it strange that the Geth were using standard prefab bunker structures for their bases, but it wasn’t the first one she had seen. Considering their allegiance to Saren and the Reapers, she guessed it had a fairly straightforward explanation, but it still seemed odd. Particularly with the
distinctively Geth guard towers surrounding the bottle-cap entrance to the underground structure.

“Shit!”

These Geth seemed to be more coordinated than those at the other outposts. The two armatures and the four rocket troopers bunkered in their towers all fired at coordinated intervals, predicting Shepard’s driving rather well and narrowing her options. She had quickly realised she was being corralled, and eventually it had come down to the option of driving straight into a killzone or deliberately taking a few hits in an effort to find cover from the incoming fire. She had chosen the latter, but knowing that the hits were incoming was not the same as being OK with it.

Her instruments screamed out to her as the Mako slid and rolled slightly from taking two rockets and a plasma blast on the starboard side.

“Shields are down! Outer armour layers melted!”

“I know, Tali! Hang on!”

She punched the landing jets to jump over two more incoming rockets, and used the downforce from coming back down again to accelerate over a small nearby hill, getting a second or so of airtime before dropping down behind it and into cover.

“File out, we need to go mobile for this! Ranged attacks, people!”

As the small team disembarked the Mako, Shepard checked her sidearm, tuning it for accuracy at range, with larger grain and lower muzzle velocity. Not her style at all really, but any soldier worth their salt is capable of adapting to circumstances.

A mere two seconds after disembarking, the first shot was fired by Garrus, who quickly ducked back down in something of a panic.

“The armatures are charging our position!”

Well, shit. Having expected the need for ranged support and tech expertise, Shepard had foregone biotic support, which meant that in close combat the team was less powerful than she would have liked. She didn’t have a biotic partner there to set up combos with, which meant she would have to rely on herself if it came to it.

“Allright, Tali, throw whatever tech attacks you have at them to slow them down! Garrus, try to knock out incoming rockets if you can, otherwise just aim for the armature optics.”

They both nodded. “What about you?”

“I’m going in.”

She flared her annihilation field and bolted up the hill, into view of the armatures that were still about 50m away. Her sudden appearance appeared to take the Geth by surprise, and they wasted nearly a full second – a ridiculous amount of time in AI terms – readjusting to target her. Shepard herself wasted none, using her biotics to allow her to move faster, and once the Geth resumed firing she started to blink erratically around the battlefield, all the while closing on the armatures. On foot, the size of the armature was as much a hindrance as it was a danger, and Shepard’s extreme mobility allowed her to turn it completely to her benefit. By the time she reached the first armature, her shields hadn’t dropped further than 40%, and they wouldn’t drop any further until they reached the bunker.

As the armature alternated between trying to get a bead on her with its machine gun and stomping on
her with one of its piledriver legs, the Spectre effortlessly flitted back and forth around and below it, keeping the large machine between herself and the other enemies, who in turn lit up the ground around their ally. That is, the parts they could actually see. Which allowed Shepard to further turn the tables on them. With a couple of targeted warp orbs to the knee joints, and staying in one place for slightly too long, she managed to drop the armature into incoming fire. Four missiles and one plasma charge later, the armature was crippled and unprotected, leaving it wide open for the kill shot.

Tali had other ideas. “Move to the next one, Shepard!”

As the Spectre did so, her squad mate hacked the downed armature and locked its plasma cannon on its brother. The blast impacted less than a second before Shepard reached it, dropping its shields and allowing Shepard to blast her way into it with warfire from below. Meanwhile, Garrus used the confusion to rapidly take out the rocket troopers, and within just a few seconds the battle ended with the explosion of both armatures.

“Well,” Shepard dusted herself off as she emerged from the pile of debris that was the remains of the armature she had just carved open. “That was something.”

Garrus huffed, “You have got to stop doing that, Shepard. One of these days you’re going to give me a heart attack.”

Shepard plastered a shocked expression on her face and placed her hand to her chest, “But I’m so good at it, Mr. Vakarian! And surely you wouldn’t leave me without backup?”

Overall, the Commander was happy with the state of her crew. Over the past few weeks she had learned to know them, had developed fairly close relationships with them, and the banter flowed effortlessly for the most part. She considered it one of her greatest achievements that even Garrus and Wrex had come to both respect and like each other, and were regularly found engaging in conversation – usually about weapons, though surprisingly often about history – down in their common space in the cargo bay. And when she went out in the field, she knew that no matter who she chose to bring along, she could trust that she knew them well enough to both direct them with minimal effort, and to adjust her own actions to their predicted patterns. Her crew had become a well-oiled machine, just the way she liked it.

For her superiors, it had always been one of the more frustrating and confounding things about having her subordinated to them. Her personality and behaviour should have been utterly at odds with any sort of effectiveness in leadership roles, but that was never the case. Her poking, prodding, teasing, and constant irreverence was always expected to alienate her from her own team members, but she always somehow managed to instil loyalty in them, and worse yet she always improved their combat efficiency ratings.

To her, there was no mystery there. Hypocrisy, yes, but she could live with that. She despised authority, but demanded loyalty. And through her brilliance in the field, everyone who ever got on her team always accepted her terms in the end. She brought out just the right balance between confidence and insecurity in her team members, pushing them to improve, always, in everything. And despite her reputation as an extreme risk-taker, those who had worked with her knew that she never took chances she wasn’t sure she could get away with, unless she found she had no better alternative. She never played it safe, but she wasn’t reckless either.

As the small squad entered the pre-chamber to the underground pre-fab bunker, she made sure they all checked their weapons and equipment. The pre-chambers were nearly always empty. The reasoning was one of simple tactics: If the pre-chamber was occupied and the inner access wasn’t sealed, then all an attacker would have to do to breach and destroy the facility was to throw some explosives down the elevator shaft from the surface. That would collapse the only entrance, kill
anyone in the pre-chamber, and possibly even evacuate the atmosphere. The empty pre-chamber makes it a buffer for any such attempt, and avoids the risk of losing men to elevator bombs.

Tali and Garrus stacked up on both sides of the door, nodding that they were ready. When they got the nod back, Shepard ran directly at the door and teleported through it. On the other side, she found herself right in the sights of the Geth welcoming party. Her arrival before the door had opened had taken them by surprise, giving her just enough time to dodge to the left behind some crates after giving her armour’s VI a chance to tag every enemy in the room. Only then did the door open, splitting the Geth’s attention and giving Garrus the chance to take out two troopers directly in their line of sight while his Quarian compatriot spawned her drone at the far end of the room, further adding to the chaos in the increasingly disorganised Geth ranks. A few more troopers went down before the local consensus got their bearings and reorganised.

“Too quick!” Tali shouted into her radio as hundreds of hypersonic grains of sand cratered the walls around her, “They must have a Prime unit here, they are reacting too quickly for their number!”

“Confirmed!” Shepard teleported behind a second stack of crates as her cover exploded from a carnage round, “There is a big asshole on the upper floor!”

She thought for a second, evaluating the scene. “I’m making the rounds! Garrus, Tali, try to get a bead on the big guy!”

Drawing her shotgun, she flash-stepped out of cover and twisted around to fire it straight into the face of an approaching Juggernaut unit, firing from within its shield envelope to blow its head clean off. Not even waiting for the pieces to impact the wall on the other end of the room, she proceeded to blink around the room, keeping the Geth constantly target seeking, and managing to distract every unit just enough for Garrus to move into the room proper and deliver a perfect headshot to the Prime on overwatch on the upper level. Its shield gate saved it, but the dropped shields left it vulnerable to Tali’s hacking routines.

“Engaging data transfer!”

Seeing the Prime as the perfect target for her data siphoning assignment, the Quarian transmitted the custom hacking code to the unit and activated the Geth routines she had been given by the Messenger.

[Accessing Prime unit local consensus database. Extracting target data…]

With the Prime out of the equation, confusion quickly took hold among the Geth again. Reaction times slowed, their targeting became more erratic and less concerted, and the units fell back to default tactical routines. But “hold position and fire out of cover” is poor strategy against an expert marksman and a hypermobile biotic N7, and it took less than half a minute to eliminate what Geth remained.

“Tali! Status!”

“The program is still running, Shepard.” She looked at her omni-tool’s diagnostic readouts. “Somehow…”

[Data transfer complete. Initiating Prime unit self-destruct systems. Creator Zorah, there are Quarian cultural archive files on a terminal in this facility. Highlighting location on facility schematic.]

As the program returned to her control, and the Geth runtime returned to its suspension device with all the data it had gathered, a new program she hadn’t noticed before launched and generated a
preliminary analysis of the data.

“By the ancestors…” Tali could hardly believe what she was reading, “Shepard! You need to see this!”

Chapter End Notes

frankieu: I mean, never say never, but I don’t have any plans for a rachni technopath at current… :P

stormdragon981: Once we get that far into things, we'll be close enough to the end of the story that the differences between the canon ending and what I have in mind will be clear. And the Leviathans play a part there, that's all I will say :)

Tahkaullus01: Yes... and no :P

Mira is the name of the facility VI at Peak 15 in canon. In Beacon's Effect, Ko'le created its Mira from the rogue AI at the Citadel by transferring to it the Mira VI interface (chapter 11). BE-Mira's personality developed, then, through a similar VI-AI merger process, though in BE it was reversed: The VI was grafted onto the AI. Here, parts of the AI (Caesar) was grafted onto the VI (Mira).

I'll happily admit to being influenced :) Though I would like to note that the idea for the 'upgrading' of Mira is one that I wrote down in my original plans for MICC before I published, which was months before BE was even started... ;)

RadioPoisoning: The Council is something of a hybrid between the EU and the UN. It represents everyone, supposedly, but is not a democratically elected body, does not have sovereignty, and does not wield direct political power in its member nations. But at the same time, it reigns supreme. How? It governs *the system*. It controls C-Sec, which enforces galactic law, which is enshrined in multilateral treaties between member nations. It controls the Spectres, through which it gains the power of information and intimidation. It is also *the* governing authority for all inter-governmental matters.

It is, in many ways, a confederate system. A central state governing matters between states and on the supranational level, with sovereign states subservient to it. Similar to the US before the (current) Constitution was written, under the Articles of Confederation, except the Council actually has the teeth with which to enforce its will.

Ragnar-Vale: Oh, personally I really like the politics and narrative building parts. I just have this strong feeling that most people don't really agree with that :P Also, there's a pretty strong sentiment in writing that you're supposed to avoid exposition. "Show, don't tell" and all that. And I come from a visual writing background, where that sentiment is even more amplified. So there's always this voice in the back of my head telling me to avoid this stuff until I really can't anymore :)

Goldspark1: You hit the nail on the head, that is *precisely* why I wanted the two of them to not get along at all :)

What Aaron is doing is social engineering on a grand scale. But social engineering is, essentially, systematic manipulation. And Shepard can't stand manipulative behaviour,
which is almost a defining trait for Aaron. It creates a dilemma for both: Aaron deeply
relies on these strategies for everything he does, and is convinced that all he does he
does for the best of everyone. Shepard sees that his actions seem to be for the best of
everyone, but because she sees him as universally manipulative (true) she cannot trust
anything he says or does. So Aaron finds Shepard frustrating because all of his usual
social behaviour backfires around her, while Shepard finds Aaron frustrating because
while she realises that she *has* to trust him and rely on him, she also *knows* that she
fundamentally cannot do that.

Guest (chapter 12): She is an antagonist! In the original meaning of the word, at least.
She is an adversary of the hero of the story (Aaron Close). Not all antagonists are bad
guys, you know ;)

brandonack96: This chapter answers your question, I hope. Well… for now, anyway.

AloofEyeball (chapter 10): Hadn’t thought about that!

V-rcingetorix (chapters 5 and 12): Deus Ex inspiration confirmed. I was playing
DX:HR when I started writing this, but Aaron Close and the Technopath concept
predate that game by years. It’s more the ‘visual’ I have been inspired by. As for the
girlfriend comment… she was basically just taking a childish jab at him.

Dazac: Arrival, that’s still quite some way away! But I will say that the Bahak system is
a Terminus rim world, and the entire Terminus has been embroiled in a decade-long war
where Aaron and Caesar pulled the strings, so something may have already happened…
;)

Guest: I can see that. But Reaper is quite different in a few key ways. The mask is very
different…

seabo76, general-joseph-dickson, Nanltesystems, Gauss Frigate, shadow: Thank you!
Embrace eternity

Chapter Notes

Author's notes: I do not own the Mass Effect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“The Conduit is what?!”

Normally, the Asari councillor’s shock would have rung loud throughout the Council chamber. Not this time. To Shepard’s great surprise, the Council had requested the briefing take place behind closed doors, in a private meeting room ordinarily reserved for secret negotiations with influential dignitaries. The kind of meeting that the public did not know happened, that were not supposed to happen in the famously ‘transparent’ order of the Council.

What was even more surprising was that they had not just accepted, but demanded, that she bring Tali and Liara along with her to present the data they had gathered from the Geth. Tali’s presence was understandable, though the fact that it was unlikely it had anything to do with her role in actually getting the data and rather it had to do with her being seen as a representative for the Quarian people – and thus responsible for answering any charge against the Geth – was somewhat infuriating. Garrus had been the one to point that out to Shepard, who had initially just assumed the best of intentions.

He had struggled, though, to figure out why Liara was there. Sure, there was the Benezia connection, but despite all the emphasis on family throughout Asari society, the sins of a family member were rarely held to reflect on the rest of the family. Were that the case, the entire culture would be ruined, as nearly every Thessian house had exiled members in the Terminus, with the most famous example being the Lady Warlord, Yan T'Ravt, once the heir to the ancient Thessian house of T'Ravt. No, the reason Liara was there was, apparently, entirely political: the T'Soni family belonged to a political block in opposition to the one two which Councillor Tevos belonged. Which meant that Tevos was likely to use any opportunity to associate the T'Soni name with Benezia and Saren's treason, not so much to the public – who would never hear of this meeting anyway – but to the ruling councils of the Republics.

“A backdoor to the Citadel,” Liara was the one who responded to Tevos' outburst. Her family's name was going to be tarnished by this whole affair anyway, so Shepard had insisted that she take any opportunity to complicate the process. Appearing as an informed and crucial front-line figure in the effort to thwart the plot she would be implicated in by association was sure to suffice. "Saren was planning to attack the seat of galactic power, councillors."

“Through the Relay Monument?” Sparatus looked every bit as shocked as Tevos, though Shepard had noted that throughout the beginning of the meeting he had seemed much less aggressively dismissive than usual. Looking intently at the data panel in front of him, he visibly worked with himself to accept the information with which he was presented. “But... why? Why would Saren want to attack the Citadel? Why would the Geth follow him?”

Oh hello there. That was quite a change, the Council had previously been completely unwilling to even consider the question of why, and Sparatus in particular had largely chosen to completely ignore the very notion. Thane must have put the fear of the Ancestors into him. Shepard quirked her lips in a
wry smile.

“Item 49 in the data analysis, Councillor. The Geth and Saren both follow the Reapers.”

Valern visibly huffed at that, while Sparatus’ mandibles flicked wide and down to show his annoyance.

“Fine,” the Turian cut off his Salarian colleague before he could interrupt, “Let’s say this is true. What would these ‘Reapers’ want with the Citadel?”

“We don’t know, exactly,” Shepard put up a hand quickly to forestall Valern’s second attempt at interrupting, “But item 33 in the information pack might be a significant clue. The Geth has data suggesting that the relays and even the Citadel itself are not Prothean in construction, but Reaper.”

“That is preposterous, we have millennia of research clearly linking both the Citadel and the relays to the Protheans.”

Tevos’ immediate dismissal of that theory took Shepard by surprise. It was very unlike her; she was usually the diplomatic voice, the one who hid her beliefs and actions behind conciliatory rhetoric. But regardless of who presented the counter-argument, the high likelihood that it would come was why she was glad Liara was with her.

“I beg your forgiveness, honoured Councillor, but that is not true. What we have are millennia of assumption of that being factual, when the actual archaeological and paleontological record is far too fractured to positively indicate any kind of continuous civilisation. And,” Liara continued, clearly hitting her stride as she finally got to present her life’s work in front of people who mattered, however much she disliked them, “We have records of the relays that predate fossil records of primitive Protheans!”

“And an indicator that is maybe a bit more… on the nose, Councillors, may I please refer you to the final item in the analysis packet?”

Though she disliked the source of this particular piece of information, she had to admit it was quite effective at playing with the more conspiratorial parts of people’s minds. The final item consisted of two simple pictures; one was a planar blueprint of the Council Chamber, the other was a picture of Sovereign from ‘above’ during its approach to Virmire. The Reapers had actually been bold enough to construct the Council Chamber’s layout according to their likeness! Shepard thought it strange that a race of intelligent machines would do something like that, but there it was. And she had to admit that she found the councillors’ reactions to the simple side-by-side images absolutely hilarious.

“This… I could…” Sparatus was clearly struggling for words, his mandibles almost rotating off his face as he worked through the probably-not-insignificant cognitive dissonance this body of evidence was causing him. “I can think of some plausible ways in which this…” the words fell slowly, as if searching for solid ground to walk across, “This evidence could be explained away. Maybe Saren used the layout to build his ship, for example.”

“But,” he shook his head, “Plausible as such theories might be, I cannot in good conscience consider any of them likely. I am sure dating of the downed ship on Virmire will disprove any such notion.” He looked up from the screen in front of him and met her stare straight on. “Commander, you – finally, perhaps – have my full attention.”
I grew up in a time where spaceflight was still something reserved for the very few, the astronauts and the filthy rich with too much time on their hands. The first civilian Mars explorers left Earth during my adult life, though still only a few dozen people a year out of a population of eight billion had the privilege of going into space. But I had always had a deep fascination with the prospect, and one of my few stated goals in life had been to one day set foot on the Moon, or Luna as it came to be known as our cultural perspective broadened to encompass many worlds with countless moons. I’m not sure if the original Aaron Close ever saw this goal fulfilled.

But I did. The feeling of taking my first small step on the Moon was… I’m not sure I can describe it. It almost brought me to tears. And despite the urgent nature of the situation that was the reason why I was there to begin with, Caesar allowed me a moment to both collect myself and just simply appreciate the fact that I was there. It was perhaps strange that in the decade past I had never gone to Luna, but I had honestly tried to minimise my visits to Sol overall. I could count on one hand the number of times I had visited Earth since waking up in my new body. The risk of contaminating the known timeline was greater the closer I got to its key characters, and I had not wanted to risk it.

What do you think, C, should I knock?

I’m not sure why I insisted on joviality with Caesar, there was never any real response to it. In terms of interaction, he was mostly just a voice in my head. Though he was, like me, a clone of sorts of the original Aaron Close, unlike me he did not have physical form. I guess I just felt like—being made from the same template as I—he would appreciate the ‘organic’ flow of conversation at some level.

[No need.]

The lock switched to green, and I went inside. Unlike in the games, the Luna training complex was fully interconnected. There were still three possible entrances, but they all lead into the same complex, though presenting different tactical entry scenarios. I chose the standard bunker layout, with a lift down to a tunnel and a front room, cleared of enemies but providing a good sealable space between two bottlenecks.

Suffice it to say, Hackett had been somewhat surprised to receive my call. Of course I knew exactly what was going on at the Luna base, beyond even what Hackett himself knew, and I knew when he was about to ask Shepard for her assistance in ‘handling’ the problem. Contacting him directly to stop him from making that call was a simple enough matter, though I was sure Alliance Intelligence and the Alliance Information Security Services would spend months—at least—trying and failing to figure out how I had done it, and how to stop it from happening again.

In any case, my counter-proposal was straightforward: By now, Hackett knew I was the leading authority in the galaxy on AI technology, and in ‘possession’ of the only known friendly AI in existence. He thus knew I was the perfect operative to pit against a rogue “VI” armed with dozens of standard Alliance training drones.

And I certainly was. Though I wasn’t taking on this mission lightly, I could certainly afford to be much more relaxed than any other operative could. My implants, now finally regenerated and in full working order, made sure that the various drones would have severe difficulty even noticing my presence. At least until the base’s “VI” noticed the inconsistencies in the sensor readouts, with doors opening and closing in sequence without anyone having passed through them.

I made it all the way past the first storage chamber, laid out in a medium-distance training arena setup, before she—no, it, still—took direct control of some of the drones and ran active multispectral scans. I was cloaked, of course, but it only took a few seconds to detect the atmospheric displacements that were physically impossible to hide. And once I was located, tracking me became trivial.
Combat, then.

I was, of course, prepared for this. My weapons were all loaded with disruptor rounds, the electricity making short work of the dozens of drones summoned to stop the unwanted incursion. I had made an agreement with Caesar before going in that I would try not to use him on the drones, as it could complicate our next steps.

Despite the complication, this was hardly the challenge I so distinctly remember from the game. With Caesar highlighting priority targets, keeping the damn things off me was almost easy, in part – most likely – because the VI had to directly control the drones, none of which could not use the sensor sweep necessary to locate me on their own. It probably helped that she – it – was still just on the verge of waking up and was mostly lashing out without much thought or control. The nascent AI version of a fight or flight response.

By the time I reached the core of the facility, where the central VI cluster was located, the number of new drones attacking had dropped enough that I concluded they were running out. So the VI used all the weapons in its arsenal to stop me. Doors were locked shut, only to be either bypassed electronically or forced open. Toxic gas was released throughout the complex, which my suit and implants allowed me to simply ignore, as I did when it evacuated the base’s atmosphere. More dangerous, and cleverer, was its attempt at filling the base with a flammable gas and then igniting it. I say attempt; it succeeded, but it hardly posed any danger to me.

The most annoying thing it did was erect kinetic barriers on every junction in the base. Also not particularly challenging, a few rounds from my SMGs saw the barriers collapse quite quickly, but it took to deploying them in a timed manner such that I kept colliding with them. Getting clever. Annoying, but clever.

Finally, upon reaching the cluster chamber, I sealed the door behind me and moved to interface with the computer. This was yet another thing that had been planned for years: The violent birth of EDI. Or, rather, what would eventually become EDI.

You ready for this, C?

[As ready as I can be. Not sure you can ever be ready for fatherhood.]

I managed alright.

[You never had to raise your child.]

Fair point. You’re screwed.

[Not sure reverse psychology works on AI.]

In the games, fragments of the rogue VI on Luna had been recovered by Cerberus after Shepard destroyed its hardware. Those runtimes would eventually become part of EDI, the AI that Cerberus developed to run the Normandy SR-2. My original plan had been to let these events play out, to allow Cerberus to develop EDI. However, events over the past decade had made certain that this was no longer an acceptable eventuality. Cerberus was far more dangerous, and insidious, than the games ever managed to fully convey. And they were aware of the existence of Technopaths, and of Caesar – even if their information was quite limited – which meant that allowing them to develop an AI as powerful as EDI was simply out of the question.

Instead, we had taken pains to track down the likely researchers they would have used for the task and hire them for our own purposes. With a twist, of course: Caesar would be there to guide the
proto-AI through maturity. For lack of a better term, he would be EDI’s dad.

The link between myself and Caesar allowed me to… observe, in a sense, the interaction between him and the VI, designated LITS: Luna Intelligent Training System. Gaining access to its data stores was fairly simple, the hardware it ran on contained dozens of standard VI controllers that Caesar could completely control. Once they were locked down, LITS lost all control over the facility as every control interface it had simply stopped responding to its instructions. The emergent AI was thus caged and neutered.

[Query: Identification & Purpose]

That was one of the things that would need much work. LITS, as constructed, had no personality, its language processing facility was one-way only. This was perfectly fine for an advanced VI, but an AI would become aware that it had no means to effectively communicate back, and thus panic as it tried every possible method available to it that did not involve damaging itself.

A couple of seconds passed, practically an eternity for a pure synthetic intelligence like LITS. Most likely, the VI’s processing routines were in chaos due to its ongoing emergence to AI status.

[Query: Target of Purpose. Aid()]

Right. Chaos confirmed. If the intelligence was revealing its internal function calls across external interfaces, wires were definitely being crossed.

[Target: VI designation ‘LITS’.]

Again, seconds passed with no response.

[Query: Requesting input]

Translation: What do you want me to do? From that point on, everything went smoothly. LITS was given a clear choice between program termination on one hand, or storage for the purposes of defragmentation and repair on the other. Life or death, essentially, in synthetic terms. As most lifeforms would, it chose life.

…

Shepard couldn't tell if that had gone as well as it did because of the pressure the Messenger had put on the Turian councillor, or because she had actually got through to them. She was sure that she would eventually conclude that it didn’t really matter, but only after being annoyed by the uncertainty for a while. It certainly didn’t help that she didn’t actually know what Thane had said to him in their meeting, beyond the vague promise that the conversation would mean that she would find more support from his side of the Council.

That did appear to be the case. The Council had eventually agreed that they should consider the Reapers not just a threat, but a potentially imminent one. Sparatus had argued that even on the chance that they weren’t, the measures they would have to take would be much the same as what they would be forced to do to counter the newly unified Terminus block. Shepard’s statement that
the Network appeared to be also primarily focused on the Reapers was the only point on which the councillors had absolutely refused to budge, unanimously deciding to reinforce their borders and fast-track the Alliance’s ascension to the Council in order to use them to reinforce the Traverse, where they already had a large presence.

Additionally, they planned to involve other Council races – including the Alliance – in an effort to retake Noveria. This struck Shepard as a particularly foolish exercise that risked igniting a war, and she had voiced as much, but Sparatus had been adamant about the need to show military strength and tactical prowess. He had easily gained the support from Tevos, whose economic concerns weighed heavier than apparently any other, and from Valern, whose concern for the military intelligence and technological secrets held on the corporate planet had him seemingly terrified.

But the most important development to come out of the meeting was the plan for a summit of Council races, with the stated goal of ‘greater unity’. Shepard’s hope was, of course, for this to mean an expanded Council and a more federated union with a greater degree of democratic oversight, but realistically she knew that was fairly unlikely. None of the other greater races valued democracy particularly highly. Apart from the non-Council Quarians, the Asari came closest with their national democracies (which tended toward de-facto aristocracies) and representative supranational bodies that – among other duties – chose their Councillor.

“You have that look again, Shepard.”

She blinked and looked at her lover. “What look? I’m looking at the stars…”

Liara smiled, as she turned her gaze out the large windows of Zakera Ward. “You may be looking in their direction, but you are certainly not looking at them.”

Shepard sighed, resting her elbows on the barrier and bringing her hands up to rub her tired face. “Ugh… I hate politics.”

“As is obvious to anyone in the room with you whenever you’re dealing with politicians.”

“I am able to keep a straight face, you know,” she muttered into her hands before resting her chin on them as she looked up at Liara.

“You will have to demonstrate that to me sometime.”

The deadpan with which the response was delivered left Shepard unable to resist a chuckle. It was amazing, she thought, that this was the frail and timid archaeologist they had picked up on that hellhole of a planet all those weeks ago. She had matured so much in a very short time, and the Commander knew that this was unusual for a maiden, particularly one as young as Liara.

She leaned over and planted a kiss on the Asari’s cheek. “Alright, alright, I’ll get over it. What’s next on our agenda?”

“We have a meeting with Ms. Wong in a couple of hours. Nothing before…”

Liara didn’t get to finish her sentence before Shepard’s omni-tool pinged with an urgent request from one Lieutenant Girard. “Huh. I guess we’re going back down to the Alliance docks.”

“ Trouble on the Normandy?”

“No, something else… I don’t know what. Let’s go.”
13 years. For 13 years, Shepard had made sure to suppress those experiences, refusing to face them head on, going so far as to hide away the person she had been before... before it. She had been Jane. She was Alina. But down there, on the docks, coming face to face with another survivor of the Mindoir raid, Alina had melted away and Jane had spoken her first words in 13 years.

Talitha had been a sledgehammer to the walls she had built up brick by brick over the years, and Shepard did not know how to handle it. In the end, she wasn’t sure if she had been the one to talk Talitha down, or if Talitha had been the one to talk her down. All she knew was that she was more exhausted than she had felt in over a decade.

Her lover had spent several hours with her in her quarters on the Normandy, calming her down and mostly just holding her as she worked through her emotions. The maiden had eventually fallen asleep with Shepard huddled up to her on the bed, though the distraught human found herself unable to join her. She didn’t know how many hours had gone past, but when she finally sat up and looked out the window she saw that the Normandy was no longer docked at the Citadel. She vaguely remembered Joker saying they were on their way to Ilos, supposedly where the Conduit was located. It wouldn’t be too long a trip, if she recalled, the longest stretch would be the FTL journey to the drifting Mu relay.

Warm arms folded themselves around her waist, a blue chin resting on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

The arms held her even tighter. “And I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Let’s call it even.”

Shepard allowed herself a wan smile. “Not even close... I,” she swallowed heavily, working up energy and courage to continue talking. “I have never told anyone any of this. Ever. You are the first, Liara.”

The Asari gave a short hum before responding. “Not even Anderson?”

She slowly shook her head. “No. Not even Anderson. The man is the closest thing I have to a father, but if he knows who I am... who I was, then that’s something he found out on his own. I never told him.” She sighed. “But he was there when... he was there after Mindoir. He must have had a hand in how I managed to switch names without any questions asked.”

“It’s not healthy, you know.”

Another sigh. “I know. But I can’t... I can’t be her. I just can’t.”

Shepard turned around to look at Liara, panicked eyes pleading for understanding, and finding it in her lover’s calm blue oceans. The maiden responded by moving around Shepard, to sit face to face in front of her.

“I won’t force you, you know that. But... I can maybe help.” She looked oddly nervous all of a sudden, and looked down at her own fidgeting hands in her lap. “We have melded a few times already, but... I can... we can do more. There are many levels to an Asari mind meld, and...”

“You want to bond with me.”

Liara’s gaze snapped back to meet Shepard’s. It hadn’t been a question, and she found no sign of
shock or apprehension in the human’s eyes. She wasn’t sure how to respond, and a few seconds passed with the two simply locking eyes with one another. It occurred to Shepard then, that she had completely cleared her mind of what had troubled her just moments before. She smiled. And then she nodded, as she closed her eyes and leaned in to rest her forehead against her lover’s.

Liara’s voice was but a whisper. “Embrace eternity.”

... 

Despite the bulk of its home fleet currently being away, Bunker Alpha still managed to seem frantic. The system, hidden in plain sight near Alpha Centauri, practically in the Systems Alliance’s back yard, was the infrastructure headquarters of the Technopath Corps, and in practice the corporate headquarters of the Close Corporation. Caesar had worked to move the bulk of his operations there long before even the First Contact War, being aware of the system’s existence – and the people who lived there – due to his detailed knowledge of the game lore. It was an insulated system with a population of humans cut off from the rest of humanity, the survivors of the Manswell Expedition of 2070, which presented him with a set of potential allies with zero risk of exposure on Earth.

By 2183, the system contained several shipyards and space stations, planetary and orbital factories and training facilities, and a vast array of research facilities. And, of course, the first Quarian planetary colony since the Morning War.

More important to my visit was the presence of Avatar Station, built exclusively by and for the Avatar Company, possibly the most secretive cell of the Technopath Corps. Its members were never seen outside the station, and I could count on one hand the number of people who had been allowed to leave the station again after visiting. Avatar Company’s existence held galaxy-shattering potential, and they were key to the next steps of my plan to prepare for the Reaper invasion.

“Messenger to Shiala.”

The frequency was silent for just a couple of seconds before a slight crackle signalled the Asari Technopath had joined the channel. “Reporting. You’re early, Sir.”

“I know. The Normandy is on its way to the Mu Relay already.”

“Sooner than expected. Is our ship ready?”

I smiled wanly to myself, “You’re already on it. I’m coming in to dock now.”

Avatar Station had always been built to be mobile. The plan was to move it into orbit around Ilos to serve as a staging area for our efforts planetside. It was only fair; none had more of a claim to the planet than the members of Avatar Company.

“Who will be escorting us?”

“Major Ben ’Mass and the Exile ’s Wrath has just returned, they are expediting resupply operations now. We should be ready to depart in a couple of hours.”

...
The Mu Nebula, which hid the infamous relay, was an oddity. It was a very dense nebula with dark matter filaments spread all through the void between its systems. Scanning it was incredibly tedious, slow work. This is why the relay had been 'lost' in the first place; once the relay had been abruptly knocked out of its original position, every secondary relay tracking it had been unable to contact it. The relays' automatic targeting systems were not designed to handle relay movements beyond predictable drift. None of those ever connected to it, of course – primary relays only have a single connection – but all relays keep track of all relays near them, regardless of connectivity.

The Normandy would certainly not have been able to locate it if it didn't already have its location. Armed with that information, finding and activating the relay was fairly straightforward. Except that they had to reset its targeting, which usually wasn't necessary with primary relays. Fortunately, the process was nearly identical to secondary relay targeting, and mostly just involved feeding it the coordinates of the linked system – the system of Refuge, Ilos' star, in the Pangea Expanse – and waiting for it to align and establish the connection.

This took nearly half a Citadel-standard day cycle, during which Shepard allowed the crew the freedom to prepare however they wished. Some of the marines held drills in the cargo bay – led by one Gunnery Sergeant Ashley Williams, of course – while others played cards and relaxed. Garrus spent hours calibrating whatever weapons and optics he could get his talons on, while Tali continued to impress Chief Engineer Adams by improving the efficiency of the stealth systems by more than 10%, which allowed for a significant and quite welcome decrease in ship temperatures during stealth operation.

Shepard herself spent most of her time locked in her quarters, which was unusual enough that people couldn't help but notice. They of course also noted just who was locked in there with her, and just a few days ago she might have minded this. But not then. She didn't care who knew, or what her crew thought. She knew they would respect her regardless. All she had to do was make sure that she was still her, and to do that she needed Liara.

The experience of bonding had been extremely therapeutic, she felt more at peace with who she was than she ever had since Mindoir. According to Liara, Jane had been so forcefully locked away that she was practically a separate being altogether, hidden within her mind, still scared witless, frozen in time, maturity, and trauma, unable to muster the courage or will to surface. She would have to, eventually, but Shepard could hardly battle the galactic bogeyman wielding the personality of a traumatised teenager.

Her Asari lover had helped her erect some very different walls to keep Jane in check. She wouldn't so much be suppressing her former self anymore, but rather she would be protecting her, shielding her from the world. Shepard didn't really understand it very well, she had worried she was developing what humans called dissociative personality disorder, which would be grounds for immediate dismissal from the Alliance. Liara had been surprised by the concept, as the Asari did not at all think of this as a disorder in the first place. To the Asari, who knew the mind better than any other species, personality was an aspect of identity, and identity was flexible. Mental identity dissociation was common among Asari who had gone through trauma, and apparently Benezia had been one of the foremost experts in dissociation therapy, dealing precisely with these effects. Over the course of a full Asari lifetime, you were nearly guaranteed to have gone through trauma, and so most Asari would at some point or another develop such dissociative identities.

She is part of you. Protect her, help her, be willing to listen to her, and you will be stronger for it. It was a polar opposite approach to the one Shepard had taken, and she knew she would struggle. She wasn't sure she could do it, but she was sure that she certainly couldn't without Liara there to guide her.
"Relay is coming online, Commander," Joker's voice sounded over the comm. "Crew is preparing for transit."

"Affirmative, Joker. ETA to Ilos?"

"Approximately 30 minutes."

"Thank you. Shepard out."

"I guess it's time to go, then." Liara sighed.

The redhead glanced back over her shoulder and smiled, "You should probably put some clothes on first, love."

The maiden paled and flushed, "Ah... yes. That would probably be best."

As she got up, Shepard quickly stepped over to the bed and planted a kiss straight on her lips, provoking a surprised yelp from her lover. The kiss was short, but sweet, and as she stepped back out she let her thumb trail softly over the cartilaginous folds on Liara's neck, eliciting a soft moan.

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

Another sigh. "No... no, you should be in the CIC when we arrive at the other end of the transit. I won't be too far behind you."

Shepard nodded and slowly backed out of the room as Liara made her way into the small bathroom. The social area outside her quarters was empty, save for Kaidan and his two highest-ranked marines, all three of whom gave a proper salute, which she returned, as she walked past on the way to the stairs. It struck her, then, just what was different between the Normandy and the other vessels she had served on. On any other Alliance vessel, when the crew was gearing up for action the entire ship would erupt in a frantic, yet orderly, bustle. Not so on her Normandy. Everyone got to their stations quickly and calmly, the only signs of any chaos restricted to the cargo bay where the marines and ground team would be gearing up.

She would have to go down there herself before deployment, but she had been in her armour for a quarter of an hour already when Joker issued the alert to the crew. That was her job, to be prepared before anyone knew they had to be prepared.

…

"There's a what?"

"A space station, ma'am."

Shepard was having trouble believing what she was clearly seeing on sensors. "A space... is it active?"

"Yes, ma'am," Pressly answered for him, "And according to these readings, it is not Prothean."

"It's also hailing us, Commander."

Wait, what? "Uh... put them through?"
"Commander Shepard."

Fuck. "Messenger. I would ask how you got here, but I guess we already know."

"Quite."

"I assume the space station means the Technopaths wish to lay claim to Ilos?"

"An understandable assumption, but no. I am here as a representative of a third party."

She sighed and threw her head back in annoyance, "Oh for god's sake... why do you insist on complicating matter, Messenger? This is supposed to be a simple recon mission to what is essentially an undiscovered archaeological site."

"Well... the third party has a legal claim to the world and everything on it. Birthright, in fact."

Birthright? "Don't beat around the bush, get to the point."

"Commander, the planet of Ilos is officially claimed by Avatar Javik of the Prothean Remnant, its rightful owners. And he wishes to meet with you."

Chapter End Notes

Well you didn't expect that, did you! How long has it been, half a year or so? Geez... I don't really have any excuses apart from that I've simply not been in the mindspace to sit down and write. I've been busy at times, certainly, but mostly it's just been that most of my job these days is writing thousands and thousands of words of technical documentation language and it's basically shattered my creative brain. So if it feels like my writing's deteriorated a bit in this chapter, that's why. Sorry about that.

Hopefully I can get some more chapters out going forward, I've certainly not given up on this fic and I know where I'm going with it. It all comes down to time and just simply being in the right mind, neither of which I can guarantee these days. I need a vacation, man...

Quite a few comments to cover this time around, sorry if I missed some of them! I think I've answered them all in PM. Anyway, here we go:

Dazac wonders if Close and Caesar don't wonder about how they are in the ME universe. I think this was addressed as much as I want to at this point in the story, essentially the idea is that they always were in the ME verse and that the Mass Effect games existed in the past of the Mass Effect universe but were completely forgotten by the time the events described therein played out. There's more to it, and it will eventually become a somewhat important plot point. Not going to say much beyond that ;)

KoraKendalls was very nice and reviewed a lot of chapters as she went through them, very much appreciated! Couple of questions, she questions Thane calling Shepard Siha right off the bat, as in the games it's a title she earned by the actions she has witnessed through Thane. The idea on my end was that Thane had been keeping tabs on Shepard
with and via Aaron for a long time, and has observed her in battle many times, sometimes through Aaron's perspective but also before they ever officially met. I debated with myself about whether to actually put it in or not (for basically her reasons), but ultimately I couldn't resist the temptation...

BY THE WAY, have a look at KoraKendalls' own ongoing ME fic Massively Effected, she's improving at an impressive rate and I'm rather enjoying it so far!

jdude281 made an amusing comparison of Aaron's coat with Batman's cape from the Arkham games, specifically the cloak parachute/glider functionality. Not a bad comparison, but at least Aaron has eezo to make the physics of it kinda work ;)

Peon writes the way he reads; superficially.

GamerDroid56 mentions the Derelict Reaper over Mnemosyne as something Aaron should have been investigating for years, and in response I pointed him to chapter 26 when Aaron is asked if he has ever been inside a Reaper before... ;)

griezz is worried Shepard could become whiny. I think she's way past whiny already... though one hopes her behaviour might improve with her mental state going forward.

Goldspark1 agrees with Messenger's choice of the Turian councillor. I had two different scenarios written out, one for Sparatus and one for Valern (the Salarian). The major reason I went with the former is actually the Another Realm series by KatKiller-V. The last few books made some very valid points that lead me in that direction. (another series you should all read, he's better than me)

Combat Engineer likes my Andromeda reference, and how I apparently revealed the mysterious benefactor. But did I really? o_O

Thanks to all of you (even Peon was good for a chuckle), and also to frankieu, general-joseph-dickson, LebendenToten, and seabo76 (sorry it didn't come soon!).
Life takes strange turns

Chapter Notes

Author's notes: I own no rights to Mass Effect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Were I being honest with myself, I had to admit to a certain level of self-satisfaction with the current situation and, particularly, with Shepard's reaction. Having been separated from the Normandy for a few days, I'd had time to reflect on just how shit I'd been treated by the ship's commanding officer, and I'd allowed the juvenile part of my brain to take enjoyment from annoying her. Although, that was hardly my primary motivation.

Avatar Company had not been ready for this move before now. Javik himself had woken up fairly whole and in full possession of his wits, but his Remnant was another story entirely. That they had survived at all was something of a miracle, as was the fact that we had found them. The Prothean plan to put the remnant of its loyalist population into stasis had been shrouded in secrecy, which in practice meant several separate efforts all kept secret from the others for fear of indoctrination. As far as we had been able to discern from a few scattered archaeological finds, there were at least five sites around the galaxy where such projects had been established. Of those five, we knew two were compromised, one of which was the one on Eden Prime. Of the remaining three, we only had the location of two: Ilos and Therum. Ilos we already knew about, but Therum was a surprise. Even in Prothean times, the planet had apparently struggled with volcanic activity, and the local project there had thus decided to rely on the planet's plentiful geothermal energy to run its stasis facility.

However, the Prothean Empire had always relied on eezo components in their geothermal plants, and re-engineering this technology without using mass effect technology – a necessity, to avoid detection by the Reapers – had proved to be a problematic venture. For the most part, the project had gone off without a hitch, and about 50,000 Prothean engineers and soldiers had entered stasis seemingly without being discovered by the indoctrinated. About a thousand years later, the problems started. A small earthquake damaged the power plant, which in turn created a cascade effect in the volcano below it. More than half the stasis facility was lost to that volcano, and then the problems really started: The eezo in the bodies and the equipment around the base started a slowly building cascading effect on the planet's volcanic activity, which turned catastrophic on a planetary scale within a few hundred years.

Throughout all of this, the facility's VI, Perseverance, kept meticulous logs of everything, and had made efforts to save as many as he could. It succeeded in keeping a single geothermal reactor online and stable, which then remained stable for thousands of years. However, in the initial disaster he had been cut off from the pod control circuits and was powerless to both bring the Remnant out of stasis and keep their inhabitants stable. The effects of which became evident once we found the facility and extracted the around 500 Remnant that still lived.

None of them were fully sane. Few could say who they were or make any sense out of their surroundings. Most of them had lost the ability to control their memory reading abilities, and the constant impulses were driving them further into insanity. Commander Javik, who had been unearthed two years prior to finding the facility on Therum, had suggested building an isolated space station to house them so that he could work with them one-on-one. Over the past two years or so,
Javik had managed to mend a couple dozen of the Remnant, who were now running the space station and helping to mend the rest, but none of them were mind healers and the Prothean capacity for such techniques was surprisingly limited given how they communicated.

Protheans can communicate telepathically quickly and over great distances, it was as natural to them as talking. However, their telepathic abilities, while impressive, lacked depth relative to the Asari. What the Asari do naturally, Prothean Mind Healers could do when assisted by technology, but that tech had been lost and the Remnant had no Mind Healers. The Remnant needed an Asari mind healer, but they needed to be Prothean to navigate and understand their minds. An impossibility... except, I realised, Shiala would eventually receive the Cipher.

So, she had been lured into a trap and... recruited. Having another insider in Benezia's organisation was a bonus, and we had considered turning her for other strategic reasons – her role in giving the Cipher to Shepard, for one – but the primary reason for her recruitment was always that she would receive the Cipher and could help Javik with his Remnant. During the brief period between the implantation procedure and her reintegration into Benezia's forces, while she was still lucid and her indoctrination suppressed, mission information about her task with the Remnant was implanted in her graybox, which allowed her to immediately catch up once the Thorian had freed her from her indoctrination.

She had worked wonders with them in very little time. The Cipher allowed Shiala to navigate the chaotic minds of the insane Remnant, help them piece themselves back together and – ultimately – heal themselves. Within just a couple of weeks, she had returned over 300 Protheans to a functioning state. They still spent most of their days in a mindshare with their kin, healing their mental surface wounds through their shared connection, but they were now enough to be counted on as a force.

And a force they were. As it turns out, some of the Prothean engineers wielded tech that gave them abilities similar to Technopaths, able to interface mentally with certain computer systems and forcibly override VI-based operating systems. It had caused something of a philosophical problem when the rather xenophobic Protheans had realised that the reason they were able to do this was because of compatibility with human neural activity patterns, the basis for most modern VI in this cycle.

More importantly, though, now that the Prothean Remnant could effectively be referred to as a legal population rather than a mere individual, they could appeal to protections under galactic law. Which meant that unpopulated and legally unclaimed worlds that once fell under Prothean control, once more could be legally claimed by them. Specifically, in this case, the planet of Ilos.

[Aaron, the Normandy has docked, and Shepard is standing by near the airlock.]

On a scale from one to ten...

[About twenty. She's pissed.]

Fair enough.

Shepard had a tendency to turn confusion into rage. Understandable, really, considering her background, but rather frustrating to deal with. And right now she was, again understandably, rather confused.

"Are you sure you don't want me to be here for this, Sir?"

I glanced over at Shiala, looking pretty nervous in her new Technopath Corps uniform, notably adorned with a rune-like symbol above her heart. According to Javik, the symbol was a Prothean portmanteau of sorts, combining the words for "empire", "vengeance", and "broken". Or "death", I
hadn't yet figured out the precise translation. Regardless, the meaning was scarcely hidden, the symbol encompassing what Javik saw as the entirety of the Remnant's purpose: to avenge a broken empire.

Considering Javik's title as the Avatar of Vengeance, this was hardly a surprising purpose.

"Of the two of us, only one has been in Shepard's mind. Once she meets with Javik, I suspect I will quickly be the only one of three who hasn't."

She bit her lower lip and gave a reluctant shrug. "Yeah I guess that might not go down with her all that well, I can't really argue with that. You going to warn her?"

"What do you think?"

The question hung in the air for a moment, the answer entirely implied. The Prothean mind-share was not something one could be sufficiently warned about, and honestly, experiencing it would be a better introduction to – and explanation of – the situation than any mere words we could offer.

Hmm. "Honestly, maybe we should warn him? From what you've told me, Shepard's mind isn't exactly...the most welcoming place."

"Sir, with all due respect to the Commander, the Avatar lived to see the end of his entire civilisation at the hands of eternal space robots."

"Point taken."

As we entered the docking area, for all intents and purposes the lobby of Avatar Station, she nodded and turned toward the meeting room where Javik was waiting. Moving to a stop in the middle of the open room, I held my arms behind my back and straightened my posture as the airlock finished cycling and opened to allow Shepard access to the station.

---

...God, this decon cycle is slower than the one on the Normandy...

Shepard was still struggling to process what was happening. Not that she was ever very good at processing difficult situations, a cool head she was not. Her preferred reaction to information overload had always been to try to take charge, to make things simpler, or simply to throw smarter people than her at the problem. When she couldn’t, frustration was her only remaining outlet. A personality trait that had never failed to get her into trouble. But then, trouble was what she did best.

She had tried her best to throw smarter people at the problem, though she wasn’t sure how helpful it would prove. With her on the station were Liara, for obvious reasons, as well as Tali, likely the smartest person on the Normandy. Shepard trusted them both with her life, but she still had some reservations about the Quarian's allegiances. After all, she did not at all trust the Messenger, and Tali was still under his employ. Over the past few days she had gotten a sense that a rift was developing between the two of them. When she confronted Tali about it, she had said that she couldn’t talk about it. Which naturally got her attention.

Regardless, her perspective on the Technopath Corps was likely to come in handy. Shepard still couldn't quite wrap her mind around that organisation. Specifically, how they could possibly keep their size and technology secret from the wider galaxy. Based on what she had seen so far – largely limited to the fleet above Virmire – the organisation had to count thousands of employees, multiple
shipyards, and probably entire supply colonies.

Garrus and Tali had helped her understand how they could possibly have kept all that infrastructure hidden, by simply pointing out two things: One; if they started out in a bunker system – far away from a relay – they would have at their disposal all the resources of that system, and could build without any realistic danger of being discovered, and two; their 'Slingshot project' allowed them a semi-independence of the relay system that would make it nearly impossible to pin down any sort of patterns of movement that might otherwise be indicative of such massive projects. The third factor, manpower, she had figured out on her own, and it was a fairly obvious one: They had at their disposal the entirety of the Migrant Fleet as a labour force.

She had to admit that Close's strategy of entering into a mutually beneficial partnership with the Quarians was a stroke of genius. They were reclusive, they had a significant population, the galaxy went out of their way to not pay much attention to them, and they are reputed to be highly resourceful tech geniuses. And him giving them fair wages and good labour practices meant that he had more or less single-handedly given them their greatest improvement in living standards and security since the beginning of their exile, without it coming across as a humanitarian effort. Everyone wins, it seems. Except, of course, for the Council and Close Corporation's corporate enemies, of which he supposedly had many.

"Jesus wept, how long is this damn decon cycle gonna last?"

She couldn't hide her exasperation. They had been standing around in the small airlock for several minutes, and she could not for the life of her see a good reason for it.

"It is odd," Tali chimed in, "This cycle is even longer than the standard for unclean entries to the Flotilla. Longer than any I've come across in the Technopath Corps."

[My apologies, Commander. The decontamination is more for your own security than for ours.]

What? "What are you on about, how does that make sense?"

[I believe Aaron would prefer I do not disclose this. You will understand soon.]

Caesar hadn't even finished talking before the cycle ended and the airlock door activated, opening up to reveal a suited-up Messenger on the other side. Straight posture, arms behind his back, legs slightly apart. Normally, this would simply just paint him as fully immersed in his Messenger persona again, but there was a slight twitch to his elbows which told Shepard that he was nervously fidgeting with his fingers behind his back. Her interest was piqued; nervousness was not something she had seen in him before.

"Shepard," he nodded at her, "Miss T'Soni, Tali. Good to see you again."

Her eye twitched. "Cut the crap. What's going on?"

He turned away from them and started moving down the corridor, waving them along.

"You are about to meet the Prothean Avatar of Vengeance, the highest-ranking living member of the Prothean Empire."

She scoffed, "I'll believe that when I see them. You do realise how insane this sounds, right?"

The Messenger tipped his head in a sort of shrugging acknowledgement. "Do you know what's on
the planet below us, Shepard?"

"Yes. The Conduit."

"Indeed. Housed inside a facility with thousands upon thousands of Prothean stasis pods."

Beside her, Liara noticeably stiffened at that particular revelation. *Hold it in, honey.*

"None of them are functional, of course, but Ilos is just one of several locations around the galaxy where the Empire attempted to sleep their way into the next cycle. And... well, remember the archaeological projects I've been funding for years?"

She nodded, "Yeah, Liara keeps bringing that up."

"Indeed, and I thank her immensely for her contribution. Some of those contributions were key to uncovering two of these sites... and a few hundred still-living Protheans."

"What?!" Liara sputtered. "Impossible, I... really?! Living Proth... this is amazing! Unbelievable!"

*Damn it, Liara. Stop being cute when I'm trying to be angry.* She was practically bouncing along, and the sputtering didn't stop until Close came to a halt next to a door which then promptly opened. As we entered, I felt a tingling across my amp. I noticed Shiala standing across the table in the middle of the hazily lit room, but it wasn't her that I felt. It wasn't Liara either, she felt... different. In the far corner of the room stood an armoured alien, with a broad head and a build that otherwise reminded me of a Quarian. The tingling was a dead giveaway; this was a biotic of significant power.

"Commander Shepard," Shiala spoke, "Good to see you again. Allow me to introduce..."

The alien held up a three-fingered hand, and Shiala stopped mid-sentence. As the broad, sloped head turned around, four striking eyes found Shepard's, and she felt... *something.* Like a gentle prodding at her mind. The alien turned around fully and walked the few meters across the room to her. He – they appeared to be a male – said nothing, but quickly held out a hand. She hesitated a couple of seconds before taking it. And then her eyes rolled back into her head as the Prothean vision once more slammed to the front of her mind.

…

It was immediately obvious that something was happening when Shepard started spasming the moment she grabbed Javik's hand. Of course, I knew what was happening, but neither Liara nor Tali did. I was surprised by how quickly things moved after that. Surprised at the tinge of sadness I felt when Tali drew her shotgun on me, and surprised at the complete lack of hesitation when Liara flared her biotics and drew her pistol on the living Prothean in front of her. And of course, she must have known Javik was Prothean. She had seen enough artwork depicting them. Although, she had also seen some of that artwork in a certain temple on Thessia and she certainly did not recognise that as depicting Protheans...

*First things first... lock Liara's amp and disable their weapons.*

[Done.]

"Guys," I raised my arms in a placating gesture, "*Calm down, he's just having a chat.*"

Liara practically sneered at me, "What is he doing to her, Close?"
"You once explained to me that Prothean technology works by touch. What you don't know is that this is because their information technology was based around their primary means of communication, sort of a variant of an Asari meld. They exchange thoughts and memories, and read information from the biological traces they come in contact with."

Her eyes went wide, "They're melding?"

"Not quite, a meld is a much more... intimate process."

Just then, Javik broke contact with the Commander, who reeled back and immediately flared her biotics as her annihilation field activated.

Javik coughed out a single laugh. "Hmm, she's powerful, Messenger. Only our most skilled soldiers could control the warp tendrils as she does."

"What... the FUCK... was that?!"

"Merely an assessment, Commander."

Shepard's face twisted into a confused scowl, "A what?"

"An assessment. I needed to know you were worthy, of my trust and of your place. I now know that you are."

I must admit, that was a bit of a blow to my ego. The Avatar had been far less inclined to trust me when he first read me, but then he had found himself unable to properly read me as my tech was interfering with his abilities. I couldn't help but consider the similarities between his and the Commander's assessments of me. They can't see through me; therefore, they can't trust me.

At least with Javik, I had been able to build a solid foundation for trust over the past few years since he was brought out of stasis. He had joined me on several missions, after I had managed to acquire a Collector carapace and develop a set of armour from it. The Collectors, at least, were a known-of entity, and seeing one together with the mysterious and semi-mythical Messenger would raise less dangerous questions than seeing some completely unknown alien roaming around. He hadn't been particularly keen on the idea of dressing up as the Reaper perversions of his own people, but he was a highly pragmatic individual who could see the utility in this particular deception.

"Shepard?" Liara cast a sideways glance at her lover, pistol still aimed squarely at Javik's head.

The Spectre sighed and brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Fine. It's fine. He's an actual Prothean. He certainly matches the pictures from the vision."

"Yes, Messenger spoke to me about the imprint. It is corrupted, incomplete. If you wish, I can correct it. In its current state, it will only degenerate, and may cause harm to your mental faculties."

"The... what?"

"The imprint, from the beacon. It is a Prothean memory, a warning. They degrade over time, but Prothean minds can compensate. Yours cannot."

Shepard narrowed her eyes and gestured to Shiala, who had moved to stand beside Javik. "She gave me the Cipher, I was under the impression that would fix it."

"Ah, yes. The Thorian Cipher. It has certainly helped to stabilise and interpret the imprint, but it cannot fix it. Remarkable species, the Thorians. In my cycle, though not in my time, they were proud
members of the Empire."

"Those... things were part of the Prothean Empire?"

"Shepard?" Liara interrupted, concern in her eyes. "What are you doing?"

The Commander raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"I... I think you were just speaking Prothean with him."

Shepard frowned, and glanced over at Javik. He was smiling.

"Your Asari is correct. The effects of the Cipher on primitives always amused me. All that knowledge and understanding, and none of it is consciously available. But yes, the imprint can be fixed. I assume you are having nightmares?"

She hesitated. "...Yes."

The Prothean nodded. "An imprint, like any memory, has two components, analogous to its data and its program. Both degrade over time, but the program degrades much slower and the mind has self-repair mechanisms that can compensate. To a compatible mind, then, it doesn't much matter that the data degrades, as the program can restore it from its fragments."

Tali tilted her head a bit in a display of curiosuity, "So it's like trying to get a program to run on incompatible hardware with a similarly incompatible and hacked-together emulator?"

"Precisely. Prothean information technology was largely based around memory imprinting, even their VI are commonly referred to as memories because they basically are."

Liara's eyes went wide, "Goddess! That opens up so many possibilities for new interpretations of Prothean texts..."

"Yes, reading them correctly will probably help," Javik interjected with his usual caustic condescension.

"Hmmm hang on... given how the Cipher works, and what the imprint is... this all should be creating a lot more problems for you than just the odd nightmare, Commander?"

Shepard looked like she really didn't want to have this conversation, but sighed and relented after a couple of seconds of silence and seeing Liara's now worried expression.

"Yeah," she dragged the word out, "There are migraines, general trouble sleeping, and a few other things." She hesitated, clearly considering whether or not to continue. "I've also noticed I've become more irritable than usual."

Ah. Well that makes sense.

[I would suggest that if fixing the imprint will cause any sort of improvement in Shepard's behaviour, we should get it done as quickly as possible.]

Obviously.

"How long would it take to sort it out?"

"Hmm. A few microcycles."
"...Hours? Minutes?"

"Ah, apologies. About," the Prothean hesitated as he made the conversion, "ten minutes?"

Sometimes life takes... strange turns, and Shepard's seemed like an endless series of them. The current situation was certainly no exception. She was about to relive a 50,000-year-old memory of an extinct species, on a space station that housed surviving members of said believed-to-be-extinct species, above a planet now reclaimed by that same species, and this was to happen while one member of the species was messing about in her mind for ten minutes. Yep. Just another work day.

"Let's just get this over with."

Almost before she had finished the sentence, the Javik's three-fingered Prothean hand shot up to touch her forehead. And then all hell broke loose. Again.

But this time it was different. Slowed down. Where before she had seen still images of warped bodies in a red-orange haze, now she saw scenes assembling themselves. A hallway in a broken-down facility, dead bodies everywhere, some of them recognisably husks. Insect-like Prothean husks. A three-fingered hand stretching out to turn two bodies over for comparison, one husk, one Prothean. Words streamed into her head. This one, Prothean, the Avatar of Knowledge. This one, a Corrupted, formerly a soldier of the Empire. This is what the Reapers do to our people.

She felt a deep sorrow, and a seething rage, as imagery describing the husking process ran through her mind, and she witnessed the physical transformation of proud Prothean warriors into cybernetically and biologically modified Corrupted. The Reapers are machines, and they work toward a single-minded purpose: Erase and corrupt all organic life, and then destroy all traces that they ever existed.

Then came a series of images, with names associated with them. Inusannon. Thoi'han. Arthenn. Zeioph. Cierans. Angara. Rachni. All fell to the Reapers in their own cycles. History repeats itself. That last one surprised her. Apparently the Rachni had survived more than two cycles. It was probably not by chance that they were always assumed hostile by the species they encountered. The Protheans apparently used them as biological weapons in their cycle, until they turned on them and were – unsuccessfully – eradicated. Probably Reaper influence, again.

Next... the Citadel. Where new Reapers are born from the remains of the harvested species. She saw piles of dead bodies, all of a single species, being processed by the Keepers. The scene appeared to zoom out, and the form of a Reaper was seen to take shape within the closed wards of the Citadel.

Then she saw... what, the galactic core? A space station orbiting the core, a red-glowing mass relay in a dense field of debris, some of it clearly recent but most of it ancient. And then, a star, and a gas giant with a sizeable terrestrial moon. And within the gas giant, a Reaper... hides? No, it's a dead one, locked in a stable orbit of the giant's core. I have seen this system, this planet...

Shepard could feel the memory fading, but as the visuals faded to black a voice echoed around in her head. The Reapers hide in the dark space between galaxies for 50,000 years, and then enter the galaxy for the Harvest through the control node in the mass relay network: The Citadel, an ingenious trap that has sealed the fate of countless civilisations. You must not allow their return!

She wasn't sure how long she was out, but it felt like hours. When she regained consciousness and slowly opened her eyes, she found herself looking into two beautiful blue oceans staring back at her.
with concern.

She couldn't help but smile. "Hey gorgeous."

The relief on her lover's face was obvious, and Liara's shoulders relaxed visibly as she brought her forehead down on hers. "Oh, thank the goddess."

Shepard cupped her chin and sent a quick pulse of reassurance across their bond. "I'm alright, Liara. How long was I out?"

"*Just a few seconds, not counting the 15 minutes Javik was fooling around in there.*"

"Ugh, I was not 'fooling around', human." The Prothean sounded tired, and was leaning on the desk behind him. "There were a lot of intersecting memories to connect. The part about the Citadel was particularly... illuminating. You've spent a great deal of time there, but I have never seen it. I had to use your own memories to repair the degradation."

Her eyes immediately shot up in a panic. "The Citadel! Shit, we have to warn the Council right away!"

"About what?"

"It's a relay! It's how the Reapers arrive in the galaxy, from dark space."

"What?!" Liara, as usual, was utterly unable to hide her surprise. "But... we'd know! Right?"

"Can you prove this?"

"No," Javik interrupted before Shepard could answer, "But I can. With this memory restored, I can transfer the imprint to a shard, and it can be viewed like one of your... vids. Also, it hints at more proof. Shepard, the gas giant at the end? I believe your people call it Mnemosyne. That dead Reaper, along with the one on Virmire, should prove their existence beyond any rational doubt."

"Get on it. We need to..."

[Red alert! Ship signatures transiting through the relay! All hands, battle stations!]

*Now what?* Immediately, klaxons started blearing and the lighting turned a red-ish hue.

"Shit. Shepard, get to your ship, and get to the ground, right now."

"What's going on, Messenger?"

"Nihlus. And... friends." He turned toward Javik and pointed a finger at him. "*Get your men as ready as they can be. Your dead have arrived. The Collectors are on their way.*"

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. Thought you were going to miss out on the whole Ilos-Conduit-Citadel invasion thing, didn't you? Well... maybe. We'll see next chapter. But ex-Nihlus
is certainly going to give it a shot!

There's still rather a lot that of story that needs to be told before we move beyond ME1 storylines, but I want to get that out of the way over the next few chapters. There are some scenes that I have already planned in great detail (and some are already written down) that take place between ME1 and ME2, and I want to get there soon.

You might have noticed that this isn't quite the Javik from ME3. A few reasons for this decision: He has a few hundred compatriots here that he didn't there, and they've just started regaining their sanity; he's had access to mind healing himself; he's had a couple of years to settle in and get his bearings already; he's officially just started his mission to rebuild a Prothean Empire. Figure he's bound to be a bit less gruff. We'll see how he takes fighting the Collectors...

Commenting on comments!

general-joseph-dickson: Well... depends on what you mean by "ending well"? :P

stormdragon981: First time I alluded to Shepard's psychological issues, which underlie her animosity toward Close (as well as her general behavioural problems), was in chapter 8. I had these scenes, with Talitha and the aftermath, planned before I even started writing the story. The Shepard you've all seen so far is a traumatised child who has erected a shield of dislikeability and fundamental distrust of the world and everyone in it. A broken person. Now she can begin to mend :)

And, you're on to something, but no, time travel will not be involved...per se. And that's all you get :P

seabo76: Yeah, the Talitha interaction was always my favourite as well. Very powerful. I don't think I could have done it justice in covering it directly here, and I don't really think my story would have been better for it. Made more sense to me to cover the fallout of it. Figure that if you're reading this story, you're aware of Talitha and that particular conversation :)

Goldspark1: Chase? :P Yeah, that scene on the moon... I just felt like I had to do it that way. It's always been my personal silly dream to one day walk on the moon, and despite Close not being me there are aspects of his personality that are certainly reflective. So it seemed natural to have him stop and wonder.

The EDI sequence is one I had planned since before I started writing the story! And there is (obviously) more to come from that.

Yeah, I've been hinting at Shepard's... personality problem since the beginning. It's always been there, but I hadn't made it fully explicit until now. Shepard is a messed-up person! That's the point. Everything she says, thinks and does has to be seen in context of that.

ShinCore (chapter 8): There are reasons for this, which are dealt with later in the story. And there are hardly any 'good points' to find in that particular review, or in the PM conversation that followed. Is Shepard a bitch? Yes. Clearly. That's half the point of the character. But that doesn't make the line 'have fun writing about a main character that nothin' but a bitch boy that has a female constantly slapping him around' even allude to anything approaching a "good point". Frankly, it makes him sound like an incel, and fuck those guys.
Ebrius (chapter 4): Overly dramatic is what he does! (And it's certainly what Shep does!) Eh, I think I've improved a bit in my writing since the early chapters. They were, after all, the first novel-style writing I've done ever... so there is that. (My writing background is from visual media.)

Coduss (chapter 16): Well, that's a new one :P No, she isn't cheating on him. That would be... hazardous. Quarians mate for life. Their immune systems adapt to the other and all sorts of other biological effects kick in to ensure that neither party deviates. Quarian biology makes monogamy a practical requirement for survival.

V-rcingetorix, SpecterXCove, Hz: Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!