Resolve

by Talaraine

Summary

The Reapers have been defeated and the galaxy is left to pick up the pieces. The work of repairing the damage, both galactic and psychological has only begun. The wounds of old hatreds still bleed, though, tearing at the fragile peace so many died to earn. Can the survivors live up to the legacy that has been left to them or will they only finish what the Reapers started?

Notes

This is my first try at writing a plot from start to finish. Bioware left a lot of strings hanging that would have given some genuine meaning to things at the end of the series, so I'm simply tying their shoelaces. No intent to disrespect copyright and all that jazz. Not trying to make a buck here, just have some fun.

I'd like to take a moment and thank Brian Bell and Rae D Magdon for their time and expertise in reviewing this story-line. The wisdom of additional perspectives, especially experienced ones, is invaluable. Please check out their books on Amazon and see what you are missing!

The Blue Psion by Brian Bell

Books by Rae D Magdon

This story is now officially complete. Okay, perhaps I still thought of a dozen things I'd like
to change after I finished, and I may or may not have had an intense desire to continue the story this morning when I realized I no longer had this as an escape from the humdrum at work; but that's life, yeah? Time to move on before accusations of obsession take on a bit of reality. ;)

Thanks to everyone who has taken time out of their worlds to spend some in mine. It was a great ride.

The best.
Molehills and Mountains

Chapter Summary

Shepard faces down her final adversaries, and makes painful choices along the way.

There was something wrong with her side. The agony with each step was like a razor in her mind. Her grip on the pistol was slick, her first shots wide left as the husks came. A second hand steadied it and they fell, but she slid down to a knee before the last hit the ground. Artificial fibers bunched on the other side of her body, compensating, and she felt herself lift once more. Just a few steps. The light filled her vision but she was too tired to flinch.

Dark hues punctuated by the arcs of abused electronics sharpened and her world grew quiet. She was elsewhere. A hallayway stretched before her with the echo of empty space beyond. The glow of alarms and emergency notifications pulsed in her periphery. Her face and chest ached in sharp pulses. Her helmet was gone and she couldn’t remember where or why. Her comms were silent.

Shepard’s artificial eyes narrowed and dilated to brighten her vision as she strode forward. She wasn’t entirely certain where on the Citadel she had emerged but the schematics she pored over in preparation made it clear that she had to get to the Tower. The Crucible needed to connect to it in order to form a giant array from which to channel the station’s energy, but it couldn’t connect until the massive arms that made the space station invulnerable to attack when closed were re-opened. Those controls would be there as well. It shouldn’t be difficult to find, provided she could make her way through the hordes of improved.

No one else from the Alliance had made it, though. She was alone, and she had how many rounds? A quick inspection of her scavenged pistol showed too few. If she encountered anything more than token resistance she'd have her hands full, especially injured. She felt like a mile of broken road. A downward glance revealed the worst of it; a penetrating wound in her lower torso and a dark glistening slick down the armor plating of her thigh. Her jaw tightened and she tried to limp quietly around the corpses at her feet, listening for any audible warning before trouble found her. No other weapons were in sight.

The stench was intense. Some of the bodies were decomposing where they lay, piled haphazardly like discarded building blocks. She was reminded of the Collector ship and paled at the realization of what must be being built from them. There were millions of souls aboard the Citadel when it leapt away to Sol and she hoped they fared better. Shepard’s nose wrinkled in protest as she returned her gaze to the murky passageway before her. There was no time to waste.

Hammer was gone. Garrus could see no movement on the field in front of the Conduit and as he searched for any sign of his friend the beam disappeared, leaving a cloak of ash filled dusk settling over the battered earth. Crackling requests for reports spat into his ear with no reply until he keyed in.

“Vakarian here. The conduit is down. I repeat. The conduit is down. Enemy forces appear to have withdrawn. Did they make it?”

Did she make it?
“We’ve have had no confirmation. Proceed directly to Anvil and assess the disposition of friendly forces.”

Garrus stared blankly at the devastation before him. Nothing moved except the few surviving members of his squad cresting the ridge beside him and the enormous slow moving Reapers in the distance. Disposition of friendly forces? Non-existent.

“Sir?”

Garrus turned to the snipers beside him, all of them with haunted looks in their eyes, and started pulling himself together.

“Thompson, you and Riatha provide cover here. Dagorn, Vega, Whent, you are with me.”

Vega’s eyes were ebon pits in his rough hewn face. “She should have picked us, man,” He said before choking on Spanish curses and starting down the ruined hillside with weapon at the ready.

Garrus wasn’t far behind, caution warring with desperation in every step. He didn’t think it would have made any difference. The vehicles were scattered like toys, giant furrows cut into the ground around and through them where Harbinger had aimed his beam. There wasn’t a single inch of ground around the conduit that hadn’t been torn asunder.

When Garrus heard Shepard calling an evac shuttle for Liara and Tali it was everything he could do not to abandon his post and come running. He hoped they had made it safely back to the Normandy, though he doubted the situation above was any better. The best thing he could do for his Tali right now would be to survive.

“There,” he pointed, and heads turned, “Is that Anderson’s ride?”

“On it.” Vega growled, picking up the pace toward the overturned Mako. The decorated Alliance symbol on the side of the hood marked it as Phalanx One, but the entire side had been smashed like a tin can. The tautly muscled man brutalized the hatch when it refused to open, taking out his anger and frustration on the cold metal and hinges until he could lean inside for a look.

“Anderson? Anyone alive in there?” he shouted, eyes darting around in short lived hope before turning to ask, “When’s a med team gonna get here dammit?”

“They’re on the way. How bad is it? Can he be moved for First Aid?”

“I dunno man, I can’t fit in there. Maybe Riatha?”

Garrus was already nodding and checked with the other part of the team to see if there had been any encroachment. Alliance forces were pushing a bubble around Anvil, so they were relatively safe for the moment.

The asari did her best to resuscitate, but they were still trying to maintain a pulse when he was carted into a priority shuttle. The mass of people that had arrived onsite to look for other survivors paused as the Admiral was carried by. They saluted to a man.

Vega spoke quietly as the door was closed and he crossed himself. “Vaya con Dios, hermano.”

When Shepard arrived at the wide lobby prefacing the tower chambers her brow furrowed with concern. She had been prepared for resistance but encountered no one living on her way through the
Citadel’s labyrinthian corridors. Now the emptiness of the lobby before her objective made the hair rise on the back her neck. It had to be a trap. She looked around warily, the only visible movement being from the occasional keeper picking over a pile of rubble. She knew they were simply performing their maintenance duties but couldn’t quite shake the feeling they were insects scavenging over an unexpected bounty.

Her own scavenging hadn’t netted her much though, and she was on the lookout for anything that might help. Most importantly, some Medi-gel would be welcome if there was a fight coming. The nanites were busy at work within her body, but she was losing fluid which sapped her attention and strength. She stopped for a moment to probe the open wound. There was a foreign object grinding against her inner hip with each step, shrapnel most likely. Removing it might not be possible and even if it were her bleeding could worsen. Choices, choices. In the end, the thousands of people dying with every minute she delayed made her decision.

Shepard did her best to staunch the flow of blood and kept moving. She was close now. The tower chamber doors hung ajar, and she peered in silently before sliding inside. The venerated hall was empty; no endless discussions or galaxy changing decisions gave weight to the atmosphere, and the only thing of note was the target panel against a far wall. Behind it were two displays. The first one was the view outside the station which teemed with all manner of moving craft and debris. Vivid flashes of laser fire, especially from the Reaper ships, combined with all too frequent explosions in the Alliance fleet made for a morbidly beautiful sight. The second was a running projection of the interior of the giant station, arms closed tight around its new Reaper child. She faltered for a moment, recognizing the style of construction so vividly that it was as if she stood amongst the alien scaffolding within the bowels of the Collector Ship once again.

Her lip curled in revulsion, the word “No” escaping her. It hadn’t progressed very far, yet, she saw. It would take years to complete but if the Reapers won they would have all the time they needed. Her jaw tightened at the thought. Not if she had anything to say about it. Fifteen steps to the panel and a few moments to authorize for control, then the press of a button. Shepard looked around, but there were no nightmarish troops streaming in to finish her off.

It was damned odd.

After minutes of uneventful silence she holstered her sidearm and leaned against the console to take some weight off her injured side. While watching messages scrolling on the logs she heard and felt the deep bass of some giant mechanical process rippling through the station. Looking up at the display she saw the barest movement in the arms jolt to life. It was working. Now all she needed to do was bring up the comms.

“Hello, Shepard,” came a voice from the exit. The easy way he said her name, the arrogance that dripped from it, the joy in every undertone told her all she needed to know. The Illusive Man.

She bit her lip, chagrined. It had been too easy, after all. Shepard dipped her head in frustration and chose to simply answer, “Hello there.” She heard his shoes move toward her step by step on the glazed glass as she turned.

The Illusive Man had a pistol trained on her head and was moving slowly enough that she gathered he was taking the matter seriously.

She leaned back against the panel and crossed her arms casually to distract him from her injury. Her eyes scanned the room looking for others and quipped, stalling for time, “Fancy meeting you here. Then again, the 5 star accommodations must have been irresistible.”

“Your sense of humor needs some work, Commander, but all in all I am glad to see you alive. I must
admit you look like you could use some medical attention.”

She shrugged nonchalantly, “At least I still have skin.”

The once handsome older gentleman’s face was ravaged with the telltale signs of Reaver ‘improvements’. He looked as much husk as human though his smile was as dazzling as ever. He glanced over Shepard’s shoulder as he moved closer and seemed genuinely pleased that the arms were opening. She could take him down if he got close enough; she’d just need to keep him off-balance until an opening presented itself.

“The elaborate betrayal,” she crooned sarcastically, “Let me guess, you arranged for me to get here safely just so I could open those arms for you.”

“That’s right,” he responded, pleased, “If there’s one thing I knew I could count on it was your instinct for survival. Thank you for delivering the Crucible to me, Shepard. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll relieve you of that pistol.”

Shepard stilled all expression on her face as he approached. Was he really going to get within arm’s length? She didn’t dare hope for such a stroke of luck, “How does it feel to know you are so far under the Reaper’s control that you couldn’t do this yourself?”

The Illusive Man’s jaw tightened and he squinted down the barrel at the woman with cold blue eyes, “Don’t move.”

“Hey,” Shepard said with a lazy smile, “I wouldn’t kill me just yet. You may need me to press some more buttons for you.” She raised her hands higher, giving him access to her holster.

A flash of anger slid across his face before he regained control, then he smiled coldly. “This is just a dance you can’t follow the steps to, Commander,” he said, reaching down to take her gun...the moment she had been waiting for.

He slipped it from its holster without resistance, and Shepard’s eyes widened. She hadn’t moved. Her arms remained raised, her body relaxed against the cold metal of the panel frame. Nausea and a bizarre euphoria filled her senses, and her lips parted as she gasped in shock.

It didn’t make sense. What could it be? Some kind of mechanism he had left dormant within her, the loss of blood; she wildly ran through all the reasons she could think of until she was robbed of her senses entirely, her mind opening and expanding into the vastness of space. Vast...but not empty.

The Illusive Man straightened and lowered his gun, tucking hers into the back of his pants while watching her eyes unfocus and stare into the distance, “There now. If I know you, you’ll adjust quickly.”

There was jubilation on the deck of the Normandy and it could be heard on the comms as well, from the mouths of many. The arms of the Citadel were opening. She had done it. The dauntless, unflappable woman had managed the impossible. Admiral Hackett called for a reinforcement force to make a beeline to the tower and assist. The fleet was given orders to turn and defend the Citadel at all costs and the units sent to attack Reaper forces around the globe were told to resume normal tactical operations and regroup.

Liara’s relief at the news slowed the dreadful pace of her heart and she finally began to relax under Dr. Chakwas care. Tali, on the other hand, wouldn’t sit still after patching a hole in her containment suit and ingesting handfuls of pills. She swam through reports on her Omni looking for any word of
Hammer...and Garrus.

The Asari had assigned Glyph to monitor all communications for news about the mission as well, and especially Shepard, but she understood her friend’s impatience very well. Liara and Tali had joined Shepard on the majority of her missions. Their combination of skills were deadly in all but the most violent confrontations and despite the differences in their personalities their cooperation was seamless, courtesy of relentless repetition. There was no telling who or what lurked in the halls of the Citadel after it leapt from Council Space. Despite all Shepard had survived and accomplished she was without her right and left hand and Liara worried.

As quickly as she had been taken out of the final push of the Hammer offensive Liara doubly wished to be with the commando squad Hackett sent in after her lover. Defending the woman was as natural to her as breathing after so many years; but to use a human phrase, right now she felt like a fish out of water. Her eyes turned balefully to the sonic knitter working on her thigh. Especially with a broken leg. She felt like she should get back to work; contribute somehow. The next hour would determine the course of the future for the entire galaxy and it was hard to admit that nothing she could do right this very moment could help. All she could do was watch, listen, and pray. Oh how she hated feeling helpless.

The Illusive Man stepped beside Shepard to monitor the panel, the arms about a quarter of the way open now. He could see the Crucible on its approach, the vehicle of his destiny arriving. He leaned in close to the Spectre, not quite as tall as she was in her armored boots.

“You can lower your arms now.” Once he was satisfied with what he saw on the display he turned back and gazed upon her profile with admiration, then gestured with the gun for her to get down on her knees.

The woman obediently knelt, never looking away from the door even when he put the muzzle of his pistol near her temple.

“Come back to me Shepard, you need to see this.”

It was, immense; voices filled her ears and yet it was not cacophony. She could feel them all, everyone on the Citadel, and they could feel her. She was warm. Welcomed. There was purpose and every single mind was bent to it. Every species, race, every family, every group that had seemed so distinct before were now united. Her own thoughts became muddled, merging with the drive that propelled them. She needn’t carry this torch anymore. They were all one, millions of them, at peace.

And yet something called her, a voice that must be obeyed. She blinked as the room took shape before her eyes again. She made out the shape of The Illusive Man’s fingers snapping before her. She felt rather than saw the pulse pistol so close to her face, her instincts as sharp as her will was muddied.

“Now, I want you to lower your shields.”

They dropped with the faintest odor of ozone, and he pressed the cold metal into her skin. Fear filled her chest, she couldn’t recall ever being so helpless. They sat there for a moment that seemed a lifetime, The Illusive Man illustrating his point without pity; then his posture suddenly changed and the pressure on her temple was removed. He nodded, apparently satisfied.
“Did you really think I would kill you?” he shook his head in consternation, then put the pistol away and rested his hand on her hair in a fatherly fashion. “I’ve got way too much invested. You have been infuriating, but unfortunately for me you are still useful. Besides,” he grinned rakishly, “You killed Kai Leng. Someone has to take over his tasks.”

He continued to talk to her. Confidently. He had plans. As soon as the Reapers were in hand, she was to visit the medical bay for her improvements. He needed her to go speak to the Alliance and bring them in line. They would all eventually be exposed, and humanity could begin work on the greatest era in its history. The other species would serve until they were no longer necessary. He straightened and turned from her to the monitors and she could feel the pulsing lure of the groupthink tugging at the corners of her mind. She heard the proximity alarms going off, now. The Crucible was close, maneuvering to its final resting place against the tower.

It was difficult to think. The Illusive Man had been working on methods of indoctrination, and this had to be the result; but it had taken effect so quickly! This was different than what she had seen at Sanctuary. Perhaps it was some kind of biological agent. He needed no guards because he had taken control of all the residents. They were slaving and dying, building the human reaper just as the Illusive Man’s masters wished. She was reminded of how the colonists of Zhu’s Hope had behaved and it all clicked into place. This had to be related to the Thorian, somehow.

“And don’t worry about your appearance,” The Illusive Man continued, “One of the first things we will research is how to better integrate the Reaper technology into our physiology. We can’t have humanity looking like monsters, as you put it. The apex of our evolution should be reflected accordingly.”

What if he was right? Everything he had done so far was successful, why wouldn’t this be? If he could actually control the Reapers, the danger would be over. She could rest. Her thoughts drifted to the millions of people fighting and dying that would be saved. Her crew. Liara, welcoming her home, joining with her forever in peace. Until the Asari were no longer needed. Until they...NO!

Shepard tried to imagine nails on a chalkboard, the smell of rotting meat, the pain of the shrapnel in her side. The pain! She shifted where she knelt, pressing it deeper within her and swallowed a groan. He used whatever was at hand to achieve his lofty goals until those goals were as twisted and warped as their enemy’s. Just like Saren, he thought he could conceal his true purpose from the Reapers, a blade hidden in silk. And just like them, the deeds he performed to cover his intentions, to buy him time, bloodied his hands as surely as the Reapers themselves. The Illusive Man was not ready for that power, nobody in the galaxy was. Though she had done her best, he could not be convinced. There was no time. No more time for any of them.

Tears welled in her eyes as she ripped herself from the bliss that called to her with soft hands, from the rest she needed in the marrow of her bones, from the false achievement of all her dreams and back into a world of doubt, rage, and loss.

He was still talking, watching the Crucible settle in place, but his words were nothing but noise. She pulled herself to her feet quietly, the returning emotions and responsibilities settling back into place along with something...else. Surely he felt the heat of her fury. Surely. It burned her like plasma. She turned and took a single step, the omni-blade sliding out smoothly, and grabbed his right shoulder. He started, interrupted, and with a gathering of strength from every fiber in her body, she drove the blade through his lower back and up through his chest until neon orange burst out the other side. He stood up on his toes in a vain effort to escape it before going limp. Only her hand and the blade held him up now.

His eyes asked questions to which he would never get an answer. Blood spilled from his lips as he
cursed her, “You fool. You’ve...doomed us….all.”

“We’ll see.”

She released him to drop bonelessly to the floor, and looked down at one of the most intelligent, calculating and manipulative men she ever met. Doubt about her choice chilled her blood, quickly followed by the weight of fatigue in her limbs. Sheppard’s eyes drifted from where he lay gasping his last to the disturbingly increasing circle of crimson at her feet. The shrapnel, she thought. Damn.

She applied pressure to her side while limping to the console, then queried for the code so many species had labored upon without recompense for more than a million years. The Spectre sifted through the appropriate sequences, hitting dead ends until she found it, and looked at the display expectantly after giving the appropriate credentials for activation.

She waited. Nothing happened. Her brow furrowed and she checked her work, entering the credentials again. Accepted...but still nothing. What was she doing wrong? Her mind was...fuzzy. She shook her head to clear it, every moment wasted reckoned in the lives of friends and allies. Eventually she cursed and brought up her omni, opening comms to the fleet command channel. She heard a satisfying squelch and the chatter of the combined leadership as they coordinated the defense of the Citadel.

“Command this is Shepard. Come in.” she said, interrupting.

“Commander Shepard, this is Alliance Actual, what is your status?”

“The Crucible has attached and I am attempting to activate the device. There appears to be a problem. The credentials have been accepted but there is no joy.” She lost focus, but gritted her teeth, “Please..advise.” The room spun and the edges of her vision turned pale.

Whatever reply was returned, she didn’t hear it. Thoughts that she had fainted were countered quickly by the fact that she was still alert enough to think the thought. The room had taken on a ghostly sheen, and there was some kind of low frequency noise that she guessed would have been beyond normal hearing. She was keenly trying to make out what that sound was when she noticed that the cataclysmic battle on the display was now frozen. So too, she feared, was everything else.

When something moved in the corner of her eye then, she dove for the pistol in the Illusive Man’s waistband, rolling smoothly to bring it to bear on a serene looking child that she had seen before; first on Earth during the Reaper attack and every night she had dared fall asleep since. Her eyes swept the room quickly before settling back on him, his flesh ethereal. The Spectre realized she hadn’t felt so much as a twinge of pain during her acrobatics and straightened, feeling foolish. It was clear to her that this wasn’t real, emphasized by the fact that her surroundings were melting away into a smaller room, one she recognized.

It was her mother’s kitchen. The same lighting, the same air, the same sounds. Treasured memories clamored for attention, coupling with thick regret. On the countertop where mother and daughter once made desserts grew an oddly placed but elaborate figurine of glass. It’s twisted patterns filled the room up to the ceiling, but always seemed to change. They were beautiful but unrecognizable.

“What is real greatly depends on your definition,” came the young voice though his lips did not move. “If you are referring to our physical location in the place you know as ‘The Tower’ then no, we are not real. I can assure you, however, that we are communicating. I believe you are familiar with a similar process. A...consensus.”

Choosing to ignore the knowledge this child had about her previous experiences for now, Shepard
dropped her arms and cocked her head irritably, “One I didn’t agree to, I might add. Who are you?”

“I control the Reapers. I am the Catalyst.”
A beginning, and an end.

Chapter Summary

Shepard and the Starchild come to final terms.

The giant arachnid stirred. Another group had arrived. The tones of their greeting filling the caverns disturbed her from her slumber, though not unhappily. The end of her bearing phase was not gone long, but she would rouse for them. It had been too long since such content had been felt in these chambers.

Her great body shifted and rose on stupendous legs and she began moving stolidly from the quiet repose of the hatchery to the entry hall. Antennae shifted in patterns from quick staccato to slow waves and her welcome echoed to them all. They had brought enough supplies for another fledgling colony to be established. Expansion could continue when they were ready.

She touched each of her children’s carapaces and was pleased. They had much to plan, but for now, there was time. She could hear them from many places now, the song stretching over vast distances. They must recover, they must grow, they must put away for the hard times that would surely come, that always came. All of this was sung as it had been since the beginning.

After the greeting time had passed, she sent them to their labors and then to rest. As she took the journey back to her hatchery, she heard from the ones who built with the others, the ones at war with those who sour the song. The conflict was joined, the Crucible delivered. An end would hopefully come soon. If they should perish, it should be known that their work was completed.

Her mandibles clicked in concern for them. They were not warriors, they were builders. They should do what they must to avoid the fight. Too many had been lost fighting for the Krogan homeplace. Her eldest and most precious daughter had done all that could be done for this Alliance while she recuperated from her imprisonment. She hoped it would be enough to atone for their ancestors.

There was an agitated response from one of her daughter’s new kin. A new but different fleet of ships had come to Tuchanka. The Krogan were alarmed. The Queen of the Rachni probed for more information with a querying tone. Had the enemy returned? No, it was not those who soured the song with their own discordant voice. It was the Salarians, and their weapons burned as brightly as they themselves did.

“Why do you look like that? Like a boy?”

“You have chosen my form. Everything your senses are telling you comes from your own subconscious. I do not require such abstracts.”

Shepard sighed at the pain his appearance caused her, even after all this time, and squeezed the bridge of her nose, “Why am I here? Why are you here? What do you want?”

“I should think you already know, Commander. You were the one who initiated this meeting by using the Crucible.”
"I initiated?" she recalled inputting the commands and wondering why there was no response. Then she understood. "I see." The woman looked around her, savoring a scene she never expected to see again; then looked at the boy with more interest, "I don't have much time."

"You have all the time you need. Time moves much slower here." the boy's voice had an ever so slight lisp, making the dichotomy of his apparent age versus the wisdom he held even more apparent.

"Alright then," she said musingly, "How do I destroy the Reapers? Can you tell me that?"

"I can, but if you destroy them you will waste the efforts and knowledge of millions of civilizations. This knowledge can save you."

"How?"

"The Reapers were created to solve a problem. That problem was the tendency of artificial intelligences to rebel against and kill their creators. This created chaos, and our creator required order. We have tried many solutions and all of them have failed. Until the solution is found, our chosen course of action is to harvest that which made each organic and synthetic species unique and prevent them from being destroyed in the inevitable conflict."

Shepard's eyes were drawn to the elaborate glasswork that slowly turned, as did her mind, "What did your creator think of your 'chosen course of action'?"

"They became the first true Reaper. They did not approve, but it was the only option."

"So, let me make sure I understand this. Your 'course of action' included destroying your own creators when they didn't approve of your plan, and then destroying organics around the galaxy for millennia before the AI they created had the chance to do it themselves." Her eyes narrowed in derision, "How am I doing?"

"It is clear to us that our course of action is not a solution, Commander, but we have preserved all of that knowledge for eternity. You have changed the variables. You are the first organic to have made it this far. None of our attempts to indoctrinate you have succeeded. We are not certain how this has been achieved, but we must acknowledge that you have evolved. Now that you are here and can harness the power of the crucible, there may be some alternatives that haven't been considered in my programming."

"How about just stopping your attacks and going away forever? How's that for an alternative?"

The child tilted its head, "We cannot do that. We were created to solve a problem and cannot cease our efforts until that task is complete."

"What do you propose, then?" Shepard asked while she wandered through the kitchen touching random items, moved by the recollection of a simpler time.

"The power of the station you call the Citadel combined with the power of the Crucible is crude, but vast. There was once a solution attempted that unfortunately failed. You may call it Synthesis. A virus is introduced into both organic and synthetic hosts that force the adaptation of both organic and synthetic components into the whole. It becomes a new 'DNA' for all life in the galaxy. The organics were not ready for this solution at the time, unfortunately. They resisted. More forceful measures were required than was sustainable."

Shepard straightened and turned, eyes glittering, "You mean the husks."

"That method would no longer be required if the Crucible were utilized. You could ensure that the
process is completed across the galaxy without resistance. Organic life would be perfected and synthetic life would fully understand their organic counterparts. The conflict would be over."

She blinked and fully considered what the child was proposing, “You’re asking me to change everything, everyone. I can’t do that. I won’t. Without free will, we might as well all be machines programmed to do what we are told.”

Even without facial expressions, the child’s pause told her he was perplexed by her resistance. “You are already mostly synthetic, Shepard. Surely you see the positive effects. All organics would be improved. The conflict must end for the benefit of all.”

“The conflict has ended. Or didn’t you notice the Geth fleet out there, fighting by our side? Fighting against you.”

“A momentary peace achieved during a time of great stress. It will not last. The creation of synthetics for the purpose of service is part of organic cultural evolution. Fear of those synthetics when they achieve self-awareness is inevitable.”

“And you think this Synthesis will stop that? How would it work? What would I have to do?”

“Young organic energy, the essence of who and what you are, will be broken down and then dispersed.”

‘To do what, exactly?’

“The energy of the Crucible, released in this way, will alter the matrix of all organic life in the galaxy.”

Shepard clenched her jaw and closed her eyes, trying to keep calm in the face of such an obvious deception, “So you would make this virus out of what, me? Why? Sure would be convenient for me to die, now wouldn’t it? After all, I’m the only organic who has made it this far.” She opened them again to behold the beautiful but fragile crystalline structure before her, “Nothing would stop you from doing as you pleased with me out of the way.”

The hologram replied with equanimity, recognizing a dangerous tone in her voice, “It is within your power to destroy us, Shepard but be warned; others will be destroyed as well. The Crucible will not discriminate. All synthetics will be targeted. Even you.”

“So in retaliation, you’d kill not only the organic that helped stop the war against the Geth, but the Geth themselves? How does that make any kind of sense?”

“As I mentioned, the Crucible as it is currently constructed is crude. My calculations indicate that the synthetics you speak of would not survive once the Reaper technology within them has been eradicated. Your own construction contains Reaper components that you require to operate. It is not by choice that you and they would be targeted, Commander. It simply is.”

Shepard took a deep breath. Reaper technology in her construction? She thought she was the one that had determined the environment for this consensus but suddenly the kitchen made sense. The complex latticework that represented the Reaper program was built on the same counter where she and her mother had crafted confections on a lazy afternoon. A labor of love in a place of warm memory; a place she would feel comfortable and let down her guard. Clever. This entire encounter had been crafted psychologically. “So that’s how you’ve been trying to indoctrinate me.”

“You have a singular will, Commander. You have the potential to lead the people of this galaxy farther and faster into the future than they have ever envisioned.”
Shepard exhaled slowly as she considered her options, stepping to the window over the sink to peer into her old back yard.

“How long will it take for the Crucible to fire once it has been activated?”

“It will require approximately 300 of your seconds to harvest enough power from the Citadel to fire.”

“Would powering down prevent the Geth from being destroyed? What about my crewmember, EDI?”

“Returning data to a steady state would preserve that data if repairs could be attempted, but some systems are intricately linked to the technology themselves. You, for example, will not be able to shut down. Those that have been improved will not be able to shut down. You will all perish.”

Her eyes fell, her thoughts going immediately to her loved ones; to plans and promises that would never be fulfilled. “Yeah. Ok.” The Spectre cleared her throat, “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to pull together the data we would need to repair any and all damage the removal of Reaper technology would have on EDI and the Geth and upload it to my Omni. You are also going to leave a database on the Citadel that contains all the data you have collected to date. You and what you have learned will be preserved for all time.”

“Commander, there is no need for this. Imagine what we could accomplish together? You desire to end this war and save your people, but imagine how many more future deaths could be averted with Synthesis,” the child’s eyes appeared to be focused on her.

The deep running feelings that had her chasing this boy every night and losing sleep over his untimely demise came back in a rush. She would be killing him too. Killing every species that they had harvested. Millions of years of culture would cease to exist. No, she shook her head. They already didn’t exist, and that wasn’t her doing. This ethereal boy was just another play on her emotions. Her gaze hardened, “If you wanted to convince us to participate, you probably shouldn’t have started with genocide.”

She imagined there was a wooden bat under the counter next to the recycler, and it was so. She pulled it forth and tested its weight, determining where best to strike the impossibly beautiful creation rising to the ceiling. “Even if your plan worked, to deny any living creature the ability to choose their own destiny is to make them less than what they are. I don’t get to make that choice for them, and you certainly don’t. There are no shortcuts to peace, and I would have thought you learned that over all this time. There is only one way to achieve it,” Shepard returned her earnest gaze to the boy and enunciated clearly, “Doing. The. Work. We will survive. Life will survive, and we don't need your goddamned permission to do so.”

The child watched her silently for several long moments, then suddenly acquiesced, “As you wish. There is not enough data storage unaffected by Reaper technology in the tower to hold the data you are seeking. I will be forced to utilize many of the existing networked solutions aboard the station. I will show you what must be done to retrieve it and upload the key to your personal data device.”

At her nod he continued, “I would advise taking the device to one of these locations that show the statistically greatest likelihood of surviving the damage to the station,” A three dimensional map came into being before their eyes with several pulsing blue points appearing, “I would suggest this one due to your injuries and the limited time available,” One of the points turned red and stayed lit. C-Sec.

“What will happen to the rest of the station? There are millions of people still onboard.”
“The parts of the station you know as the Wards should remain relatively intact, but their life support systems will be negatively affected. Many of the inhabitants have been improved, but the rest are simply waiting for processing. I will see to it that they are released. You should begin evacuation as soon as possible.”

“Understood.” She took a moment to gather herself, watching the glass spin.

“Shepard?”

“Yes?”

“What is it like, to die?”

Her chest tightened, “Are you afraid?”

“I am unsure. You do not seem to be.”

She sighed heavily, “It’s not death I fear, it’s life without those that I love. I don’t want to die because they will have to live life without me to protect them. Death is easy,” she breathed, steeling herself for what was to come, “All you have to do is let go.”

“I think I understand.”

The Spectre simply nodded, then swallowed past a lump in her throat, “Alright, let’s end this.”

Five minutes to notify the Alliance, warn the Geth and the Normandy, and reach her destination. She’d had more difficult objectives. Considering they were her last, she decided to add one more. They deserved that much, before the end.

The crystalline tower cracked and splintered satisfactorily with each strike of the carved wood in her hands, shards of glass spraying throughout the kitchen like sharp confetti. Shepard expected to be...she didn’t know what she expected to feel. Ecstatic glee, profound relief, pride, something. Instead she felt nothing as she destroyed the greatest threat to the galaxy that had ever existed.

Perhaps she was jaded by the fact that these victories always seemed temporary. There was always the next threat. Her soul felt stretched, lengthened and narrowed to a slender thread. Each challenge, each adversary, each death she had failed to prevent had taken a piece of her with it until there was nothing but a shell remaining; yet to move forward she must continue to kill. Perhaps that is who she was, in the end. All that she was. Exhaustion filled every part of her being.

It was past time to move on, she decided. Time to let go. Just a few steps more.
Into the Flames

Chapter Summary

In the chaos of war there are always opportunities.

The bombardment began with little warning, cutting off the area surrounding the prospering community of Urdnot from its surroundings. With the vast majority of the Krogan military at Sol the attack from the Salarian fleet was virtually unopposed. They had simply appeared in orbit, having used newly developed stealth technology on their largest cruisers. It was a textbook invasion against minimal defenses, something the Salarians strove for in every conflict. The Krogan were caught flat footed.

Urdnot’s Rearguard forces were doing their best to coordinate, but enemy troops were dropping in and around their positions in Atlas mechs and advanced armor. While the colors on the chassis undeniably belonged to Dalatress Linron and the Salarian Union, the technology left little doubt that Cerberus was involved. It seemed the woman was planning to grapple with the Krogan until her last breath and her choice of weaponry had sunk to a new low. The Atlas’ were particularly effective against scattered Krogan ground troops and it wasn’t long before they were forced to give way.

“Bakara!” growled Qrrash as one of her bodyguards blasted a power conduit beneath a row of fuel tanks. He threw his body between her and the explosion that upended one of the mechs and flattened their small group. Bruised but carried by adrenaline, they quickly rose and continued around the corner to a crumbling pile of rock. A wide dark hole in the ground greeted them and Qrrash gave Bakara a meaningful look.

“Stay or go?” he said with grizzled fury while releasing a thermal clip, “I’m fine either way.”

Bakara had hoped never to have to hide underground again and the order stuck in her throat despite the obvious advantages. All the Salarian technology in the world couldn’t jam the old fashioned communication lines that wound through the tunnels and caverns riddling what used to be the capital of their world. The call for mobilization had already gone out, and her officers were barking plans and ushering her along. Now their backs were against the literal wall.

The tunnels would prevent the mechs from doing anything but securing the surface, effectively negating them. That just left the troops, which according to the latest reports numbered in the thousands. While it might take time, Urdnot and the rest of the Krogan supporting them planetside would rally to the cause; and the overwhelming focus on her location told her that the Salarian matron was in a hurry. Probably to capture her, in fact. Such a feat would cause enough confusion among the other clans that the Salarians might have the time they needed to secure Tuchanka.

So then, all they needed to do was outlast their attackers and coordinate a resistance. They had played the insurgent before and they would simply have to do it again. This time, Bakara swore, there would be no negotiations, no compassion. This time, Linron would pay with her life and not even Wrex would be here to claim that pleasure for himself.

“Let’s go. The sooner we’re gone the sooner we can return.”
“Resistance is minimal, Dalatress. They are retreating underground just as you surmised,” General Borvo’s detached assessment confirmed the Matron’s expectations. She slipped forward to the edge in her chair on the bridge of the Talorn, the largest and most technologically advanced Dreadnought in the fleet.

"And team Drega?"

“They are in position and await your orders.”

“Commence drilling immediately.” Linron’s excitement was apparent, and she steepled her fingers while her eyes followed the strategic monitors. The layout of the tunnels was on display, and the drilling teams were in place at every location to which the acting Krogan leader could conceivably retreat. The nerve toxin that would be injected would disable but not kill any Krogan with whom it came in contact. They might not find the experience to their liking, however. Linron honestly didn’t take pleasure in such things, but she also wouldn’t waver in her duty. A duty that the council, the Krogan, and that infernal human Shepard seemed to be intent on subverting.

Fortunately the Cerberus sect of the human species was more forward looking. She had been among their most vocal detractors; but once she had spoken with the Illusive Man in person, she realized the wasted talent that was there for the taking. The technology they possessed was fascinating and could potentially alter the galaxy...in the Salarian’s favor. If the Krogan would not be limited according to the wisdom the Salarian offered, then they would at least be harnessed against any potential threats; first and foremost the Reapers if it came to that. Their runaway reproduction rate would become a boon in a Salarian lab, and with the improvements that Cerberus had pioneered they would be an unstoppable but malleable force for the defense of the galaxy.

All that stood between her and success was the mate of one Urdnot Wrex. She didn’t expect that Wrex would return from his cataclysmic crusade against the Reapers in Sol, but even if he did he would be forced to negotiate with her once Bakara was in her hands. He could be controlled, she was convinced, once the mother of his children was under her sway.

“Liara,” came Commander Williams’ voice on her Omni, “You’ll want to hear this. I’m patching you in.”

Liara sat up straight in her bed in the medbay as the voices on the command channel came through. Shepard’s voice cut through the chatter and her heart squeezed in ecstatic relief.

“Admiral, we have to get them shut down right away. It’s the only way they’ll survive what is coming.” Her voice sounded rough. Tired. Determined. If everything else about her was boiled away, that would be what remained.

“That will open them up to attack until this is done,” Hackett replied, “We need to pull them back and cover them. I’ll get the orders issued. What else?”

Liara could hear her voice gasping as if she was running from something, her words out of breath, “That goes for EDI as well. Get word to the Normandy.”

EDI’s voice came smoothly over the rest of the talk on the internal comms, “I am registering a build up in power from the Crucible. Shepard’s estimate will be close, but I am not certain I can return full control to the ship as well as completely shut down in the allotted time.”

She heard Williams asking for options but Liara selfishly tuned them out, straining to hear her
“Commander,” Hackett said, “We have units inbound for extraction. Where are you?”

“Have them wait,” she grunted in clear pain, the uneven pounding of armored boots becoming audible, “There’s no reason to endanger them yet. The Crucible will affect me no matter where I go. With luck they will find me in or around C-Sec after the blast. My Omni-tool is the objective. It is imperative that evacuation operations begin immediately. Life support systems will be severely damaged when the tower systems overload.”

Liara’s skin crawled at the words and she shook her head. Tali was suddenly there, enfolding her in her arms, but the world spiralled away from her.

“Joker,” came Ashley’s voice, torn between her own choices, “Get her as much time as you can.”

“Aye Aye,” came his response, but the ship was already moving, accelerating, careening away from the Citadel and through the torn lines of battle. “We’re getting out of here.”

Hackett’s voice was gruff, but firm, “Commander, I’m putting Dr. Lawson on alert and assembling a team. If there is anything we can do for you, know that it will be done.”

“Thank you, sir. It has been an honor and a privilege.”

The silence stretched before coordination started again amongst the fleet, and Liara thought those might be the last words she ever heard from her bondmate, but then her Omni flashed with an incoming communication. She keyed it desperately, “Shepard?”

“Liara.”

It was all the asari could do not to sob, “Tell me there’s something we can do. I...can’t…”

She heard more panting, a held breath before some exertion, then a return to it’s labored pace, “It’s ok... Everything is going to be fine.” Her voice brightened, “I eh....I got you a present.”

The words were so out of place that she couldn’t quite grasp them, “A...a present??”

“Yeah. A little something to keep you busy while Miranda figures out how she’s gonna pull the next rabbit of her hat.”

Liara suddenly felt as if she were imagining this entire conversation, “A...rabbit?”

A ragged chuckle came across plainly, “Nevermind. I managed to get hold of all the collected knowledge and culture of the Protheans and a few thousand of their closest friends and enemies. It’s here, on the Citadel.”

The scientist in her perked and her eyes widened. Tali took this as an opportunity to let go and give her the space she needed. Joker was telling everyone to hang on, their approach to the Relay at Charon would likely be ‘a bit faster than normal’. Williams updated the count to fewer than 60 seconds remaining, EDI’s voice intoned that her disengagement from the ship was at 80%, then 85%.

“That could be, useful.”

“Yeah.” Shepard took a deeper breath and it sounded like she had stopped running, “Everyone is going to want this information. I need you to promise me that you’ll help keep them honest. They’ll fight over it eventually.”
The finality of her words brought the world crashing back down and Liara’s lip quivered. She couldn’t speak.

“I know you can do it.”

Liara finally found her tongue, but her voice cracked, “Are you done distracting me from the fact that you are leaving, again?”

“Yeah well, there’s that.” she exhaled with a groan as she sat.

“I want to know what’s going to happen,” she said in no uncertain terms.

Shepard didn’t hesitate. There was no time. “Some of my cybernetics are Reaper technology. They’ll be destroyed when they are. I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen, but it’s not going to be good.”

The implications of that statement stretched farther than she cared to explore at this point, so she focused tightly, “I won’t stop until we bring you back. Again.”

“Well, I’d be disappointed if you did.”

They both paused a moment, then laughed.

“If you can’t, it’s...it’s okay. I don’t regret a moment. This is a good way to go, saving the universe,” she said with a bit of forced swagger before sobering, unable at last to disguise her fear from the one person who had seen her soul laid bare before her, “I love you, Liara. You’ve been my light when it was darkest.”

Her heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest as Williams counted down the final seconds. She couldn’t imagine what it must be like for her right now, all alone. “I love you....I’m right there with you. I’m sitting right there! Always and forever, Shepard!”

“Always and forever.” Her words were quiet. Resigned.

The Normandy accelerated into the mass-free corridor and disappeared as the first reports of the Crucible firing came over the comms.

Arcturus station, or what was left of it, appeared on the front display and Commander Williams straightened in her chair. She smiled in relief at what she was hearing, “It’s working. The Reapers are falling out of the sky.”

EDI’s occupied voice echoed from the bridge systems, “Cold shutdown process initiated. ETA, thirty seconds.”

“Hurry up beautiful, there’s a party waiting back home,” Joker took them on a loop over the wrecked Shipyard and toward the the opposing Mass Relays. One took the next major leap into Alliance Space, The Exodus Cluster, while the other was a secondary relay into the Euler system. He was struck by how absolute the destruction was. It’s like the Reapers....”Um, Commander? Did we just lose comms? I’m not getting anything from the Alliance.”

The recently promoted human Spectre checked her channels, “I’ve lost them too. What the hell is happening?”
“I'm guessing it's....that?” he brought up the view from behind them, and pointed at a angry red glow enveloping the Mass Relay they just came through. The enormous gyroscopic rings that contained the Relay’s store of Element Zero were spinning faster than he had ever seen them.

“Joker, get us out of here.”

“Where, exactly?”

Her mind flew. There was nothing here for them if this went badly, “Euler. Get us to Euler!”

Joker’s fingers flew over the controls and they leapt toward the Relay as the red glow rapidly expanded out and toward them. As empty as this place was, he was happy there was no competition for the jump slot. The display went white with the jump just before they were enveloped.

The relay on the other side was already beginning to spin up with it’s own glow when they emerged, and as they raced away one of the gyroscopes broke up, a piece striking the back of the Normandy and rotating the whole ship on its X axis. Joker cursed as he did his best to compensate and maintain momentum away from the Relay but the ship had taken on a life of its own. The bangs of explosions, alarms and bulkhead doors filled the air while the inertial dampeners tried and failed to keep the environment safe for the crew. The glow filled more and more of the display as they spun, and the crew grimly held onto the arms of their chairs for their lives.

“EDI! EDI I hope to Christ you are done!” He wasn’t sure how to take the lack of reply but he kept working to regain control, flinching subconsciously as the energy swept over and through them all.

“Please be done. Please be done,” he muttered as the spin began to slow, the abused maneuvering thrusters putting out everything they had.

“This is the Commander,” Ashley said over ship-wide, “I need damage and casualty reports right away.”

Minutes later the bridge crew grimly listened to the reports. The hull was gashed and part of engineering was a vacuum. The engines were spitting fumes, but they might have FTL up in a day. The ship continued to drift with what was left of their post-impact momentum. Two engineers had been lost to a fire and a third had been spaced. Fortunately the crew had been prepared for that possibility in endless drills. The third engineer was in his zero-g suit and communicating. Cortez would be able to pick him up.

“Can you get us planetside?” Williams asked optimistically, “We are gonna need dry dock for that hull, and we need to refuel.”

“You mean the repair facilities? They’re trashed along with the rest of the base, Commander.”

“They also have food and air, and we’ll need both. This system a dead end for us without that mass relay or repairs.”

“I’ll do my best. The old girl isn’t happy.”

“Yeah? Well either am I. What’s EDI’s status?” Williams couldn’t help but second guess her decision to leave the biggest battle in the history of history to save her, and now it had cost 2 additional lives.

Joker ran some checks, unsurprised with the results, “Well, she’s offline. That could be good or it could be bad. I was kinda multitasking and didn’t hear any updates.”
“I don’t think there were any,” which didn’t bode well, but she left that out. “Regardless, if the ME comm buoys are down, we’re in a crappy position to find out how to fix her.” The commander took a deep breath, “Get us to Benning, Joker. We’ll figure something out. She’s not going anywhere.”

“Yes Ma’am,” then under his breath, “Hopefully before old age sets in.”

“What do you mean there’s no response??” Qrrash keyed his earpiece after blasting through a Salarian sniper who looked vaguely surprised at their team’s speed across the open cavern floor. “All units are converging on the Throne Room. If there’s a problem, we need to know what it is right now. Take 3rd squad and double time it!” The rest of the guard closed in tighter around Bakara as a portion of their force departed, determined to protect their pregnant clan leader.

They had already withdrawn from their first rendezvous point where they found a Salarian presence. For all their frailty, they were fast. The tunnels, while an effective defense, were labyrinthian. It was becoming clear that their enemy had accurate intel on them and it was damned frustrating to be outmaneuvered. Still, they were killing ten of them for every Krogran that fell. They moved smoothly through the poorly lit corridors without incident for a time until they saw the elaborate ancient columns that marked their destination. It was silent beyond, and that was disturbing to Bakara. She suddenly felt they were being herded, and that instinct was confirmed when another Salarian team opened fire behind them.

“Hold this line Urdnot!” Bakara cried, and was gratified by the snarls and grunts of her most loyal clansmen. They would fight to the death, and so would she. Being taken was not an option. When she felt the painful tingling in her limbs and face she thought briefly about turning the shotgun on herself and pulling the trigger. The child she carried dissuaded her, even if her fingers had cooperated, and the weapon was kicked from her hands by an armored figure with a hideously disfigured face. The half husk creature relaxed once the last of them was down and reported in. The Battle of Urdnot was over. As Bakara lost consciousness, writhing in pain, all she could hear was a strange discordant music in the dark.

“Where are you going? Get back here immediately!” The Cerberus Officer in charge of the 4th drilling team couldn’t understand what was happening. The Salarians under his command had worked flawlessly, drilling and releasing the agent without incident. The retreating Krogans hadn’t even made it this far into the tunnels, meaning their work had been a redundant action; yet his team was packing into the drilling vehicle and throwing it into reverse to climb ponderously back up the mined shaft as if the hounds of hell were nipping at their heels. The other Cerberus squad members looked to him for a command, and he caught one of the slippery Salarian bastards as he tried to run past him to his friends.

“You are going to tell me what the hell is going on right now or I’m going to break your god damned face with my bare hands,” he looked up at the rest of them, “What are you waiting for? Stop them!”

The team nodded and started firing at the mining vehicle while trying not to destroy their only exit out. The looks on the fleeing faces was one of abject fear, overriding the threat of a few warning shots, and the vehicle was soon out of sight as they pursued.

“You must leave. Let me go.” the Salarian engineer squeaked, “You must evacuate right away, they are coming!”

“Who’s coming?” the officer shook the diminutive figure, “We’ve won already! There’s nobody
“Can’t you hear it?” If it were possible for the little grey man’s face to turn greyer it did, “It’s them.”

The officer punched the engineer in the face to snap him out of his horror, “Who, god damn it?”

His head lolled back and he brought three fingers to his bloodied nose vent, “The...the Rachni.”

The wall to their left crumbled, and the slender Salarian miner began to scream as a nightmare from the depths of his species’ subconscious unfolded from the earth and sliced the man beating him into two meaty pieces. The room around them came alive, and the rest of them died.

“Not possible,” Dalatress Linron said with clipped words, “How many?”

“Unknown at this time,” Borvo’s voice was clearly nervous, and troops rushed around behind him on the screen hastily setting up defenses, “There is no word from Drega. Force must be considerable.”

“Not possible,” she said again musingly. There were no Rachni on Tuchanka. Why would there be Rachni on Tuchanka and how would her intelligence teams not have known? The nerve toxin they had used against the Krogan was tightly engineered given the possibility of both Human and Salarian exposure. There was no chance it would slow the Rachni down, “Use the mechs. Find out what we face. Get me Bakara!”

“It will be done, Dalatress,” came the reply. Linron wasn’t convinced. She cut off communication and turned her wide black eyes to the overwatch display. The only way they would not have known about the presence of Rachni would be if Urdnot did not know.

Her eyes narrowed. There were no telling how many Rachni were down there if that was true. Was it possible that the Rachni had been secretly building and then planning an attack for this very moment when Tuchanka was weakest? There were Rachni ships and troops in the forces that defended Tuchanka against the Reapers; there through some mysterious agreement with Shepard. They had been insignificant, with the rest of their assistance coming through the few Rachni assisting the construction of the Crucible.

Shepard had spurned the entire Salarian First Fleet in her efforts to cure the Genophage for the Krogan. She had nothing to gain by betraying them now. If there was another colony on Tuchanka, she was certain it wasn’t Shepard’s doing. Linron hated not having all the information. Someone in STG’s head was going to roll.

“Dalatress, Captain Reynolds from inside the caverns wishes to speak,” a pale male officer at the helm intoned. Linron made an abrupt motion with her fingers and the human’s voice barked through without ceremony, the firing of weapons making it difficult to understand.

“...under attack from Rachni! Repeat we have acquired the target and are attempting to extract. We require reinforcements. Teams 7-10 no longer reporting in, assume they have been neutralized. Where the hell are your men?”

The Matriarch perked in her chair, “Reynolds, repeat, do you have Urdnot Bakara?”

“Affirmative, we are digging in. They’ve cut us off,” an explosive noise followed by the unearthly screech of a dying Rach soldier broke over the comms.
“You will have your reinforcements Reynolds. Get the target out.”

“Understood,” he hadn’t even finished the word before Linron flipped the comm to General Borvo’s position.

“General, I’m sending reserves to your location. You are to immediately engage the Rachni and take back grid LR-72. The target awaits your retrieval at that position.”

“Yes Dalatress. We have regrouped and are advancing now.”

The Matron's fingers gripped the arms of her chair tighter. As long as she had Bakara, the planet could burn. She watched dozens of Cerberus shuttles enter the atmosphere toward the battle zone with satisfaction. She turned her head to her tactical officer, who was engaged in a whispered but urgent conversation with the helmsman. “Report.”

When they both looked at her blankly, she nearly raised her voice. The look on her face must have motivated them, and the helmsman brought up a view of an angrily red Mass Relay and the wave of energy racing toward the planet and their fleet. When she asked what it was, she received the last three words that should ever come from a Salarian’s lips. “We...don’t know.”

The Beta Queen’s antennae waved rhythmically as she heard the cries of violence and pain from her children. Their ancient enemy fled before their fury, but the humans who had been fouled resisted, turning their fiery weapons upon them, burning in turn. She sung her song and they filled the tunnels, overrunning them with surprise. The enemy were a great many, she knew, but she had felt the despair from the Krogan Queen Mother and could hide no longer. Her own Mother had suffered the same fate. Painful restraints and discordant melodies awaited her, would turn her children against her just as theirs had been corrupted. They would be separated and sent into the silence without her guidance. She tasted that memory as if it were her own and every cell within her rebelled. She reached out to her Mother, across the vast emptiness of space and touched her with a plaintive note. If she must die to prevent this, then she must. They were carrying the Krogan Mother away. They must catch her quickly. Her song of mourning for the children that would be lost reached out to them all, empowering and encouraging them. Her Mother answered back, touching her as surely as if she was there. They would serve the colony by ending these invaders, and she felt her determination envelop them.

The enemy’s resistance around the Krogan female was strong. She was their goal and they would not give her up easily. The battle raged back and forth, but the Beta Queen did not have enough to end them. The young Queen herself raced through the tunnels after them, her mass and mandibles tearing through the grasping walls and obstacles while her children swirled around her in a cloud of destruction.

They came through the entrance to the tall throne room, close to their goal, and found the painful defenses of the corrupted ones waiting. She savored the terror in their eyes as they beheld her giant form, and she released a vocal scream that deafened them, making them shrink for a moment as her children attacked.

Just before the lines joined in a final struggle, a pulse of energy swept through the caverns, through the very ground like a seismic shudder. It passed over and through them, and the enemy fell where they stood to move no more. Her children seized upon them and slew them in great numbers until their fluids pooled in the soil. When it was done there was a great chittering from her children. The Krogan mother and her kin were brought to her and placed gently on the ground. They still lived, but they also did not move. It was enough, for now. The Beta Queen sent a victorious trumpet to all her
kind, and was answered with a victorious sound from the Sol homeworld as well. The corrupters were ended. All of them.
Bakara woke with a headache that rivaled a hangover from only the most copious amounts of Ryncol. Thankfully the light was dim and she took her time sitting up to avoid worsening the effects. Qrrash was seated on a stone bench beside hers and she saw many others just like it as she looked around the large open cavern. Hundreds of Krogan were in the various stages of wakefulness, and there were nods of satisfaction when her recovery was seen by all. They had survived, but at what cost?

She spoke as carefully as she had woken, testing the pain factor, “Qrrash. What has happened?”

The head of her Security force rose and sat beside her to better answer her question without speaking loudly, “Urdnot Bakara, it is good you are awake. We are still underground, obviously. We do not appear to be prisoners, but I am not certain of our location,” His massive head lifted at the sound of an explosion in the distance, “It seems there is still fighting, but not near us.”

Bakara needed information quickly, but didn’t want to send anyone useless outside of this room. “What is our readiness?”

“We have enough for a scouting team by now I think. Whatever took our senses seems to wear off after a half hour of waking, but most are weak as mewling varrens until then,” he lifted up a shotgun and used it to point to a pile of other weaponry near one of the three exits, “It looks like someone saved our hides.”

She understood. Every part of her felt horribly burned, even though there was no wound. Even under the skin ached like fire, and that flame came and went as it willed. She nodded to the Krogan and forced herself to stand, “Find where we are. Find out who helped us. Then find the Salarian bastards who did this.”

Qrrash turned and began shouting names and they answered, moving to his side one by one until he had a dozen or so. They all armed themselves and crowded around him, discussing their plan before filing out, prepared for violence.

Bakara looked at the stone bed she had lain on with consideration for only a moment, then she began barking for a Doctor. If whatever incapacitated them had affected her unborn, she would not rest until every Salarian died screaming.

Qrrash’s squad traveled through tight winding tunnels for about ten minutes before recognizing a particular crossing of passageways that were beyond the throne room, deeper into the labyrinth. A few minutes more brought them to a small room housing undamaged communication equipment. He grunted, a smile splitting his mouth wider as he switched it on and heard his brethren’s battle chatter.

“This is Urdnot Qrrash. Who is in charge?”
“Qrrash, you pyjak shit-slinger! You’re alive!”

Qrrash’s gravelly laughter echoed in the small room, “Brajon! Did you really think I’d let those sack slurping Salarians mount my head on a wall?”

“It’s been radio silence for almost four hours! What’s your status?”

“Bakara is alive and well. We’re looking for some payback. What’s happening on the surface?”

“We watched the Salarians try to regroup after whatever you did to their shuttles. Those wrecks must have sent a regiment of troops down to screaming hell before we showed up in force. They are withdrawing now, tails between their legs. We’ve nearly got the drop zone mopped up.”

“Shuttles? What shut...”

Qrrash heard the shuffle of feet and the readying of weapons behind him in the hallway. They began firing and Qrrash dropped the receiver for his own rifle before he heard one of his men around the corner tell them to cease fire, “We do not mean harm.”

Qrrash strode forward, pushing through the men crowding the entry to the comm room, only to be confronted with the last thing he had expected to see. A rachni soldier eased out from a side passage, its head as high as the Krogan was tall. It’s thorax and body length made it roughly three times the size of the warrior, barely slipping through the tunnels with its girth. It’s head lowered as if in homage and its antennae waved quickly.

The Krogan that had spoken did so again, a strange look on his face as a haunting melody filled the tunnel around them, “We bring greetings to you, enemy of old.”

Qrrash’s eyes went to the other Krogan around him and found his confusion reflected back at him. “What is this crap?” he said as he demonstrably ejected a thermal clip.

“You are well. This is good. We have shielded you from the corruptors,” all eyes turned to look at him and he raised his hands to the ceiling, pointing the shotgun away from anyone and anything, “You have nothing to fear from us. Does your Clan Mother live?”

“Look, I don’t care what you did. Release my man now or we’ll end you!”

The blankly staring Krogan’s eyes blinked and he looked around for a moment to grasp his surroundings.

“You alright?” the squad leader growled, his narrow eyes focused on the Rachni and watching for any excuse to pull the trigger.

“Yeah. Fine. They want you to meet the Queen,” the warrior shook his head once and leveled his weapon back at the dark carapaced creature.

The Rach Warrior backed smoothly into the side passage and then crawled forward again in the other direction. Qrrash stood for a moment, indecisive, then shrugged before turning to the Krogan to his left, “Go back and report this to Bakara,” then to his right, “Get on the line with Brajon and set up a meet. This, I gotta see for myself.”

Bakara led the rest of the Krogan through the final stretch of tunnel that funneled into the throne room. The sight that greeted her eyes would stay with her for the rest of her life. Two mortal enemies
who had slain each other in staggering numbers a thousand years ago stood quietly in groups, each considering the other. Some of the Krogan whispered amongst themselves, but it wasn’t long before all eyes settled on her.

Behind the milling group of Rachni rose an enormous figure, her shadow dwarfing many of her children before her. It’s long limbs, enormous pincers, and ponderous head turned toward the entryway as the Krogan began to file in. Dozens of compound eyes moved in concert as they found Bakara. A pool of tones and music filled the room in an alien crescendo, but tapered when it was clear the sound made them uncomfortable. Piles of the dead leaned against the walls.

Bakara stiffened as she saw one of the Cerberus soldiers move from Qrrash's group toward her. His face plate was smashed and his eyes sightless, but he shambled over to her nonetheless. Qrrash nodded when she looked to him and she held up a hand before her guards could raise their weapons. When the husk/man/corpse stopped, it spoke in a halting voice.

“Your are the mother. You live. The color of your child is bright. This is good.”

“Yes, the child will be fine,” Bakara paused, “But why are you here?”

“We battle the machines with the Shepard. Many are wounded. Urdnot Wrex lets us rest until we can leave.”

Bakara’s eyes flashed at the words, and similar sounds of disquiet rose among the rest of the assembled Krogan. She held up a hand again to silence them, "Why did Wrex agree to this?"

The corpses' mouth worked for a moment before speaking, "Urdnot Wrex did not wish it. The Shepard sang of our loyalty and the silence that came from those who protected the Krogan birthplace. The ship in which I travel could not leave the system safely. Urdnot Wrex granted us ten planetary rotations for healing the ship. The Salarians came before the healing was done. We hid but we then saw the corrupted ones digging deep in the soil. Their discord disturbs us. They come to take you, to taint your song. To control your children. This cannot be. So we fight. We silence them all."

“You are the ones who defeated the Salarians and Cerberus?” she saw Qrrash’s look, “Do you still have ships in orbit?”

“No, they are close. They are healing.”

That didn’t add up, “What happened on the surface? The ships that crashed?”

“The Crucible destroyed the Corrupters. The machines are dead.”

“I don’t understand. The Salarian fleet is destroyed?”

“No. The Salarians have fled. The Corrupters are no more, here or elsewhere.”

Bakara’s long scaly brow rose. Was it talking about Cerberus and the Reapers? Could it be? They had no word from Sol, “How do you know this?”

“My kin have seen it.”

Joker was gloating about the landing. He was a hell of a pilot though, Ashley had to admit. He managed to put the Normandy down in a restrictively small area near to the repair facilities with a
shredded fuselage and all its accompanying drag coefficients. Hopefully they would be able to salvage what they needed for repairs and locate a functioning fuel depot, though what they could do beyond that point was anyone’s guess.

It was a balmy afternoon and the shifting breeze felt good against her cheeks. There was a lingering smell of fuel and smoke from what remained of the base but there were no open flames to be seen. She closed her eyes while facing the glow of Euler over the western horizon and embraced the warmth for a moment before taking a deep breath and turning to the assembled crew of forty-eight plus one Asari and one Quarian.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said with slow deliberation, catching as many eyes as she could, “Welcome to Benning.” The Commander gestured to the crumbled buildings and warehouses behind her, “As you know, this base was destroyed as the Reapers were closing in on Earth.” She confidently stepped closer to them all, “It will now be our home. As you can see, we have a lot of work to do.”

“We will be treating our current situation as a Rescue/Recovery mission. We don’t know if there are any survivors on this planet or where they might be. We don’t know what supplies remain intact for our use. We don’t know for certain if any enemies remain. The reports we received before we lost communication suggest that all Reaper forces were destroyed or disabled. Until that is confirmed, we will consider every inch of this planet hostile and clear it by the book, starting with the repair depot. Petty Officer Sommers will be organizing details to that end and we will begin operations in one quarter of an hour.”

The Commander noticed that Liara was distracted. While she couldn’t blame her for it, they all were separated from their loved ones and homes. She needed to be engaged.

“Dr. T’Soni, I’d like you to coordinate the search for survivors. We’ll need every other hand we can get on details. Monitor all communications and sensor equipment for signs of life.” Tali looked like she was going to volunteer in her place, but Ashley already had plans for the Quarian, “Admiral Tali’Zorah, I’d like you to work with Lieutenant Adams on repairs. We are shorthanded and I know you will have an impact.”

Tali dropped the hand she was raising and her helmet bobbed in a nod, “As you wish, Commander.”

Ashley looked into each of the faces before her, “I won’t lie to any of you. With the Mass Relay damaged, I’m not certain how long it will be before we can get back to Sol. We have to find a way to communicate with the Alliance first and that’s one of our top priorities. We have what we need here on Benning to survive, that much I know, but it is going to take the best from each and every one of us to make it happen. We are our brother’s keeper now in every way. If everyone does their jobs, we will all go home.”

The crew stood silently, the obstacles ahead illuminated clearly for the first time. The atmosphere was somber, but Ashley saw the clench of jaws, the narrowing of eyes and felt the buoyance of determination take root.

“Adams, I want preliminary estimates on repair times by morning. Liara, work with Joker. The rest of you, dismissed.”

Her eyes were blurring. Ashley hadn’t written a complete sentence in over an hour but stubbornness brought her mind back to the report often enough to begin resenting the damned thing. Truth be told she wasn’t certain they’d ever return home, making the entire exercise fruitless. She couldn’t say that,
though, and she’d be damned if she’d be a poor example for the crew. Without the rigors of military
discipline to steady them despair would have free rein.

A glance at the chronometer made her sigh. It was clear this wasn’t getting done tonight but sleep
taunted her nevertheless; sleep and guilt over the casualties in engineering. She needed to walk. The
woman stood and ripped her jacket from the back of the desk chair before striding to the door. The
quiet order of the ship calmed the pace of her mind, the lighting dim both within the ship and outside
the viewports. Drowsy. Safe. She wasn’t alone in her need, greeting several off-shifts in addition to
the night crew. She did her best to lift their spirits as Shepard always had when morale was low.
When she felt like she might be able to sit without spontaneously combusting she turned her steps
back to Shepard’s quarters. My quarters, she corrected herself.

Stepping into the elevator brought the realization that sleep was still beyond her; the events of the day
simply had her wound too tightly. Maybe her Mother’s time-tested warm milk remedy would help.
One floor up brought her to the mess and the sight of a blue skinned woman seated in misery at one
of the long tables. A cup of something that still gave off half-hearted curls of steam sat untouched
before her and her forehead was cradled in the palm of one hand.

Ashley’s first instinct was to avoid being seen. She and Liara had never really gotten along. She
simply didn’t understand the Asari; they were from different worlds in more than a literal sense. A
depth breath later she was moving to the mess, letting Liara think she had gone unnoticed. As she
poured, the voice she expected spoke, “Commander.”

Williams looked at Liara and gave a smile of recognition before picking up her cup. “Can’t sleep
either?”

The doctor shook her head mutely and Ashley walked over to take a seat across from her. She sat
there quietly, trying to find something to say. Liara had clearly been crying but appeared calm now.

“I’m sorry,” she said sympathetically.

Liara shook her head slowly, “An apology is unnecessary. You had no control over these events.”

“I know. I just... I know how hard this must be for you,” she offered, “She means a lot to us too.
You know that.”

Liara nodded but said nothing further. The silence stretched and they both stared into their cups
awkwardly. Finally Liara asked, “How are you handling things?”

“Fine,” she replied, covering up the truth with a sip of milk.

Liara watched her closely, so closely Ashley felt her cheeks warming with embarrassment. “You
hide it well,” she said simply, then smiled, “You performed admirably. We are all alive because of
your quick thinking.”

“Not all of us,” she replied somberly, looking intently at the tabletop.

Liara watched her again thoughtfully before breaking the growing tension, “It is good that you care
for your people, Commander, but don’t belittle their sacrifice by taking their deaths upon yourself.
You accomplished your objectives but encountered unforeseen complications. You did not choose
for them to die.”

Ashley hesitated before speaking her mind. “No, I didn’t,” she said slowly, meeting Liara’s eyes,
“But I find myself wondering if the trade was worth it.”
“Their lives for EDI’s?” Liara asked curiously, “Why?”

“She’s a computer program, obviously. They were people. We don’t even know if we can fix her, and two people are dead. We left our fleet in the middle of a fight and now we might never get home. When I do the math it seems pretty clear I made the wrong call.”

Liara tilted her head, “If you truly believe that, why did we leave?”

Ashley looked away, conflicted, “It was an emotional decision at the worst possible time. I can’t afford to be emotional in my position.”

Liara’s eyes softened, “On the contrary. Without emotion, we have nothing to fight for. If you felt emotion for EDI then you don’t really think she’s just a computer program. You think she is a part of your crew and you defended her once your primary objectives were accomplished.” Liara chided her gently, “You don’t honestly think your people believe you made the wrong choice, do you?”

“No,” Ashley replied after a moment of reflection, “But I’ve had some experience with perception from upstairs, if you take my meaning.”

“I do,” Liara responded before adding tentatively, “Shepard has told me of your struggles with Alliance leadership. I hope that her confidence in me doesn’t upset you.”

Ashley sighed and rubbed her tired eyes. It did bother her a bit, but she needed the advice even if she already knew the answer. “It’s fine. To be honest, I’m talking about things I really shouldn’t because I know you had Shepard’s ear. If she trusted you, I know I can.”

That earned a smile from the Asari, “Yes, you can. She was delighted to hear you had been chosen for Spectre membership. She said she knew you would be a candidate for this job the moment she met you on Eden Prime.”

Ashley’s lips twitched, “Oh yeah? All I remember is running for my life. Is that what got me promoted?”

The two chuckled amiably but Liara shook her head, her gaze turning inward with emotion as she spoke, “No, she said you were determined, resilient and resourceful. You didn’t give up even when the colony was overrun, your squad had perished and the first Reaper ever witnessed in this age sounded its call. She said that was why they had chosen her and why they would choose you, someday.”

Ashley swallowed in surprise and it took a moment to find words, “She said that about me?”

Liara nodded but appeared to be lost in melancholy.

“Hey, hey now,” she said brightly, putting a hand over hers in support, “You heard what Hackett said, they’re gonna put her back together. The whole galaxy’s gonna chip in, right? That woman is indestructible! I bet she’ll be up and around by the time we get home.”

Liara blinked, coming back to herself with a glimmer of hope in her expression.

“You’ll see,” Ashley insisted, “Maybe just this once, Dr. T’Soni, Shepard doesn’t actually need your help.”

“Thank you. I certainly hope you are right,” she said while picking up her neglected cup to peer into its depths.
Williams’ mug made a pleasant sound as it struck hers, and Liara looked up to see Ashley feeling better as well. “To Commander Shepard. Long live the Queen.”

Liara couldn’t help but smile at that, and she drank.

The notes of a solo piano concerto climbed and fell in a cascade, echoing pleasantly in the small office’s acoustics. Tasteful but spartan decor populated immaculate furniture surrounding the woman seated at a central desk. In the chaos only slowly being tamed outside the walls of this facility order was accordingly more precious. The luxuries afforded her may have been more dear than ever but they brought a clarity to her mind that was worth every credit. From this bulwark of normalcy she could process the enormous amount of information staring back at her from her wall of monitors. Here, she was free from the distraction of destruction.

Behind the woman hard at work was a large clear window into one of the only state of the art hardened facilities that remained on Earth, nestled in the mountains of Colorado. It survived the bombardment of the planet because it was partially underground, and what it lacked in views was compensated with hydroelectric power. The clean room, filled with technicians and doctors for days the week prior, was now silent except for the single occupant in repose upon the medical bed.

Miranda paused and stretched, curving her neck back over the headrest. She put down the pad filled with potential candidates and spun her chair to stand and stretch again. This was a nice tune. Mendelssohn, Song without Words. Her heels clicked slowly on the floor as she walked to the window, and she tapped a couple of keys on a panel there so that the music would also play beyond.

Lawson’s blue eyes fixed on her friend fondly through the glass. She was battered, to be sure, but in remarkably better condition than the first time she had been brought into her care. After more than a week the bruising was healing nicely though traces were still visible on her face. The shrapnel had been removed and the damaged sutured to heal over time. It would take time, however. Normally the Commander would have been up and around in a matter of hours but no longer.

The technology that had been destroyed turned out to be an essential element of nanotechnology used to perform critical tasks within Shepard’s body. These nanites acted as bioregulators, nervous system conduits and interfaces to the more traditional cybernetic technology laced throughout her. It was one of the most miraculous parts of the Lazarus rebuild and it leaned heavily on technology that Miranda previously assumed only Cerberus possessed.

It was reverse engineered from captured husks and tested on innocent prisoners like the ones on Sanctuary. She had seen the same tech used on Cerberus soldiers after the Normandy’s suicide mission success and before her own departure from the Illusive Man’s service. The effects on those soldiers correlated more closely to husks than what Shepard became, though. The fact that it was destroyed with the Reapers raised a number of frightening questions, the first being whether or not Shepard was somehow being controlled or influenced by it. The inevitable follow up was, if so, by whom? Her own question, had the Illusive Man known all along, would never be answered; his body had been found sprawled on the floor in the Tower by rescue teams.

Lawson had known Shepard for several years now and found her to be both compassionate and vengeful depending on circumstance. Her loyalty to everyone and everything that had a claim to it never wavered. She could be infuriating and stubborn, to be sure, but to Miranda’s mind she had always been true to herself. With both the Reapers and Cerberus destroyed, the only person who now wanted to control Shepard would be Liara, if she still lived.

By all reports Liara and the Normandy disappeared just before the end of the battle. The destruction
of the Mass Relay cut off the communication buoys that utilized it to transmit as well, which meant no travel and no communication outside of this system was possible. If the Normandy was whole as Miranda suspected, they were also stranded. It would take in the neighborhood of 5 years for their fastest ships to FTL to Arcturus from Sol, the very next hop. Without the Mass Relays and their constant flow of supplies and information things were going to get complicated for the galactic fleet in short order. Combined with the survivors on Earth there were close to 2 billion mouths to feed in system and a goodly percentage of that number in need of medical care and facilities. The ships that weren’t protecting the planet from debris bombardment were serving as floating hospitals, all of them overpopulated. This meant that Shepard, who had been stabilized during her rescue, was of secondary concern in the grand scheme of things. Miranda had been charged with building a team to assist, and space had been arranged here while they transferred the data recovered from the Citadel to protected storage in the vast stone vaults beneath her feet.

Miranda exited her office and turned to the adjacent security door to register her palmprint. As her door closed the silence that coiled in the passageway reclaimed its domain, making her skin prickle. She purposefully didn't hurry to press her palm against the reader, but was pleased when the music of Tchaikovsky and the lights within spilled out and around her with the sliding of the doors.

"Good morning," she purred before moving to check Shepard’s vitals. Medical equipment was performing most of the woman’s biological functions but she checked each in turn for any untoward variation. There was none.

All of Shepard's sensory organs save her ears had been appropriated by cybernetic replacements and they no longer communicated with her nervous system. She had been trapped inside her body once the Crucible had fired; no longer able to move, feel, see or even breathe until the rescue team arrived and revived her. When Miranda first realized the horror that Shepard must have endured she leaned over and whispered to her encouragingly, *It's alright, Shepard, I'm here. You are going to be fine. I want you to relax and go to sleep, and I'll wake you when you are well.* She had been sedated ever since, but Miranda was sure to speak with her and to play music during the cycle of day, just in case.

“Good news,” Miranda said calmly as she worked, “The data you preserved has the information we need to rebuild the relays. Only problem is that we don’t have any way of getting the other relay repaired without actually sending someone via FTL.” She kept talking as she slid Shepard’s eyelid back to see if there was any change. Green artificial irises still stared blankly at the ceiling, the digital patterns created there identical to the blue ones possessed by the Illusive Man. “So...the fleet might be here for awhile. Garrus is with his people and says hello,” she said with a smile, letting Shepard’s eye slide shut. “He’ll come and visit every chance he gets.”

She hadn’t mentioned those that were missing or dead. She would consider it later but for now thought it best to keep things positive. “You’ll be pleased to know I found Jack,” she said with a smirk before turning to enter notes into the log. “She and her students went toe to toe with Reaper heavies and lost. She was picked up and is in hospital at the moment. I suppose she’s just too mean to die.”

Lawson typed a few lines, then turned back to Shepard and tilted her head slightly so she could see the woman’s face at a more normal angle, “Before you say a word, I actually plan on going out to see her. Shocking, I know. I can’t do much here until my team is assembled and as entertaining as our conversations might be, I think she might need a little hate to get back on her feet.” Miranda imagined how Shepard would react to such an idea and smiled at the words she could almost hear.

Be nice, Lawson. We’ve all been through hell these past few years.

“ I’ll be as civil as she will allow, don’t worry. She doesn’t deserve to be alone, no matter how much
of a bitch she is.’ The passive expression on Shepard’s face suddenly unnerved her, and she felt solitude sour within her as well, ‘No one does.’
Revelations

Chapter Summary

The Galaxy finds a remarkable asset in one of their old enemies and newest friend.

“What are we looking at, Liara? I don’t see anything here.” Ashley’s voice intoned over comms.

“The transmission we received indicated that the rendezvous point is 150 feet from your current position,” Liara uncurled her her healed but tender leg from beneath her and leaned forward to zoom in on the Commander’s location.

“I’ve got eyes on it. Damn. Looks like another dead end.”

Joker couldn’t resist, “Well could you at least bring back an actual goose on this chase? This whole vegan lifestyle is beginning to chafe.” Their exploration of Benning revealed that the thousands of acres of automated hydroponic bays in the broad valley to the south of the base were spared the brunt of the Reaper’s devastation and were still producing food. In fact, it appeared that most of the damage had been restricted to the Base and Starship Facilities. They had immediately begun eating the fresh food that was present in abundance, saving their long term storage for emergencies.

Liara replied while giving Joker a withering look, “Commander, those coordinates are closest to the heat signatures our probes picked up. I would suggest patrolling to the northwest if it turns up empty. If you still find no one then I would surmise all these signals have simply been automated and there are no survivors.”

It hadn’t taken long for Liara to pick up signals broadcasting from locations all over the continent they were on. There were close to a hundred thousand civilians on Benning with a bustling community to support the base. It only made sense that there would be survivors, and the signals bore that out. They broadcast safe havens and gave warnings about enemy locations. The search and rescue groups had yet to locate anyone at the haven locations, however, often finding signs of combat instead. They had run through all but one, and this was it.

“Understood. Will check back in shortly. Williams out.”

“Ah...if only I could be a Spectre,” Joker leaned back and tangled his fingers behind his head, stretching, “Fearlessly slogging into hostile biological environments and hoping not to get shot in the face. That’s the life.”

Liara gave him a smile as she spun toward him in EDI’s old chair, “Instead we are stuck in the Normandy’s new infirmary; also known as the cockpit.”

He winced in mock pain, “Not bad, young one, not bad. Someday you may surpass the Master, but don’t get too cocky.”

“Cocky? Does that word share etymology with the word cockpit?”

“Sounds like it,” he replied, steepling his fingers. “In this case it means don’t get overconfident or you’ll get your ass kicked because you really don’t know anything.”
Liara arched an eyebrow, “So this place in which we sit is a ‘pit for cocky people.’ Doesn’t that mean…”

Joker held up a hand, “Ok see? This is totally why it should be called a bridge!”

Liara smirked knowingly and Joker groaned, wagging a finger, “Has Garrus been secretly giving you lessons? I think you might be ready to graduate to my class.”

“Won’t Shepard be thrilled,” came her appropriately sarcastic reply.

“She should be! Just think of it; looks, brains, and a sense of humor. Now if only you could cook!”

Liara looked outside the viewport to conceal the emotion that welled at his words. She had become hard in recent years; callous so she could deal with Shepard’s death and the constant conflict her attack on the Shadow Broker had wrought. When she achieved her heart’s desire, her lover’s return, she inexplicably found herself too busy to embrace it; only allowing herself to appreciate the prize for which she had fought so hard in their final days.

What a fool! Only now, when both pillars of her life had crumbled, did she truly understand. She could no longer reach her contacts, leaving her alone with her thoughts and the needs she had so harshly suppressed during Shepard’s long absence. They had flayed her in the nights since the battle.

She would give it all up now. She would trade all her wealth and power for those days and weeks she had squandered with Shepard, but it was too late. The couple had only briefly talked about possibilities; they were a luxury like Serrice Ice, seldom sampled and exceedingly expensive. Marriage, old age, and lots of blue children, she had said. A pleasant dalliance for a night, no more. That kind of distraction could get them killed. Yes, she thought bitterly, I would learn to cook for you. I would learn to cook human food that would make you smile if I could just have another moment. By the Goddess I would.

Joker brought her out of her reverie by sitting up suddenly and bringing up the radar. “We’ve got company,” The mirth was gone from his voice and Liara snapped to her own console. Nobody said the word. Not until they were sure. Speak no evil.

When Joker relaxed, Liara did too. “Who is it?” she asked.

“It looks like...a Rachni freighter,” he sounded confused, but keyed Williams’ Omni, “Commander, this is the Normandy.”

“Go ahead.”

“We’ve got a ship inbound to Benning space. It appears to be a Rachni freighter. Can’t tell if they’ve spotted us or not. Orders?”

The comms were silent for a long moment before she responded, “Go to general quarters then wait for them to approach. If they do, hail them. As far as I know they should be friendly, but be ready to defend yourself. I’ll return as soon as I can. We’ve found some...friends.”

Joker and Liara looked at each other, “That’s good news Commander. Normandy out.” Then he switched to internal speaker, “Requesting Lieutenant Adams to the bridge ASAP. We have an incoming ship with unknown intentions and the Commander recommends setting General Quarters throughout the ship.” He was already firing up the engines and shields.

His voice came back in reply, “Acknowledged. Set General Quarters.”
Emergency tones began to sound with accompanying light strobes and the crew began scurrying back to the ship from outside.

“Incoming message, text only.” Liara brought it up on the viewer.

It was a set of coordinates and a single line, “We must speak.”

Joker smirked, “Well, that’s fortunate. I expected it to say ‘We must feed’ there for a second.” He made menacing claws with his hands and pantomimed stalking Liara, complete with growls and slobbering.

Liara smiled softly, appreciating how hard he was working to keep her cheerful as Lt. Adams arrived.

“What’s our status?” he queried, but before the words left his lips he saw the display and approached their chairs. “Strange request. Where is that?”

Liara brought up a local map showing the POI. “Less than a kilometer to the west, Lieutenant.”

“Their trajectory matches so far, Sir. It looks like they are coming in for a landing,” Joker murmured, looking over his shoulder, “Shall we step down from Quarters?”

“Not yet. Stay focused,” Adams turned to Liara, “How’s the leg? You up for a walk?”

Joker grinned and pantomimed taking a shot to the face behind Adams. She delicately cleared her throat to cover a smile, then smiled brightly at the officer, “I think a walk is a lovely idea, Lieutenant.”

“Good. Get your gear and meet me at the airlock.” He started walking away, then turned, “And Joker?”

“Yes Lieutenant?”

“Stop flirting with the Doctor. If EDI or Shepard finds out, you’ll be paste and I’ll end up having to fly this ship.”

Joker contemplated that for a moment, then coughed and saluted, “Sir, yes Sir.”

Liara wasn’t surprised to see Tali waiting at the airlock when she arrived. She smiled and nodded to her counterpart and friend and saw it readily returned while the rest of the crew moved about. There was history in that shared look; an acknowledgement of loss and regret to be sure, but also confidence in each other’s abilities and an enduring determination to claim the future they had both fought so hard to preserve.

So while the sight of Lieutenant Adams in standard issue Alliance armor might have dampened their enthusiasm when weighed against the memory of Shepard in her dull gray N7 gear, the hand that Tali rested on Liara’s shoulder confirmed their resolve. They weren’t spent yet, not by a long measure.

Adams respected the moment and allowed them their time, simply moving forward and activating the airlock. He stepped out into the humid sunlight and waited expectantly for them to follow.

They hadn’t gone far when Tali broke the silence, “I wonder what they want?”
“It’s likely they are stranded in this system along with everyone else,” Liara said quietly, “They may just need supplies.”

Adams grunted, “I hope they eat vegetables.”

The walk was more pleasant once they ventured into the canopy. Benning was a warm planet and the shade made the breeze feel cooler. It interfered with line of sight though, and Tali and Liara both automatically fell a couple of meters back and spread out, letting him lead.

The Lieutenant paused when he noticed the gap and looked back at them curiously. “Is something wrong? Why are you slowing down?”

Liara felt Tali looking at her but kept her eyes on Adams. She kept her expression calm and pleasant, picking her words carefully so as not to give offense. “Ours is a support role, Lieutenant. When our surroundings aren’t clear we give more space...” she led, hoping he would recall the rest on his own. At his silence she continued, “...in case of an ambush or planted explosive we can’t see, so that the likelihood of casualties is reduced.”

“Right,” Adams said, chagrined. “Forgive me, I haven’t been on an away mission in a very long time.”

“How long has it been?” Tali asked innocently.

Adams’ face colored, “Ever. I’m glad you’re both here.”

Tali chattered lightly, “I wouldn’t worry, Lieutenant. Our patrols have found no hostiles and we’ve got your back. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“Thanks,” he said before resuming their path. “I always wondered what it would have been like, being on a mission with Commander Shepard. I guess ambushes and explosive traps weren’t what came to mind.”

Tali spoke again after a minute, unable to let go of her concerns, “You know I still don’t get it. They could have just messaged, couldn’t they?”

Adams slowed his steps a moment in thought but Liara spoke soothingly, “I wouldn’t worry yet. That kind of communication may be difficult for them. Remember Noveria?”

“The Queen was stuck inside a cell and she didn’t have many options. I would have thought they figured something out for this by now,” Tali pulled her pistol free to an incredulous look from Liara, “What? Just in case, ok? These things give me the creeps.”

Liara shook her head and sighed, “I think we can handle....” she began as they came out through a line of bushes and beheld the Rachni ship. It was enormous and seemed to blend into the terrain around it. More than a hundred of the insectoids milled around the outside of the ship putting the finishing touches on that camouflage, “...A few Rachni.”

“Keelah....”

Adams clenched his jaw, “It appears they plan on staying awhile.” Adams hesitated, unsure what to do.

“It doesn’t appear that they are mobilizing, Lieutenant. Don’t assume hostility yet,” Liara cautioned him as he fingered his pistol, “I would, however, suggest that we continue in a non-threatening manner,” She turned her level gaze to them both and Tali sighed, grudgingly putting her gun away.
“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” the Quarian intoned.

Liara smiled and started moving forward again, keeping her hands in plain sight, “You’ve always got a ‘bad feeling’.”

“And I’m always right!”

“That’s not true. The Queen on Noveria turned out to be friendly, as we just mentioned. You even had a bad feeling about Shepard after her resurrection, remember? I’m sure I can think of further instances given time.”

Adams kept his eyes on the milling insect builders as they bantered. “Can either one of you tell if these are the warriors? I only recognize the ‘improved’ versions.”

“The big ones with the blue and red striations are the soldiers,” Liara explained as they walked. They would be seen at any moment if the Rachni were not already aware, “The shorter ones with the green hues are the workers.” The workers outnumbered the soldiers by quite a bit, for which she was immensely grateful.

“Right, good,” Adams replied, cementing that factoid in his mind.

Tali pointed to a group of three soldiers who stood together oddly to one side, their pair of long tentacles raised into the air along with their antennae. They swayed them slowly back and forth in what looked like a gesture to draw attention, “The welcoming committee?”

“We’re about to find out,” The Lieutenant growled between clenched teeth, then brought his hand up in a slow wave over his head. The soldiers began to crawl toward them, keeping their appendages held high.

As they approached, a humming sound became barely audible with a melody of alien notes winding throughout their range of hearing. Gaps in the song revealed that the notes may be going beyond that range. Liara briefly wondered if Humans or Quarians could hear more notes than she, but refocused as the soldiers came to a stop before them.

They stood there quietly. Each group looked over the other until the silence began to grow uncomfortable. Then Adams took the lead, “I am Lieutenant Adams of the Systems Alliance Starship Normandy. We received your message and are pleased that you have come in peace. You said that you needed to speak. Is there something we can assist you with?”

Tali’s trigger finger was getting itchy. She looked askance at Liara, who widened her eyes as if to say ‘Relax!’.

Adams spoke again, in a different tone of voice, “Greetings to you. We regret the intrusion but we must speak. This one is compatible. Please give permission to continue.”

Tali spoke in a questioning voice, “...Adams?”

The Lieutenant turned around to look at the Quarian with eyes rolled into the back of his head. Tali hissed and Liara put a hand on the woman’s pistol hand before it could creep to her side.

“Remember Noveria, the Asari there? This may be the only way they can communicate,” she turned her words to Adams, “Release the Lieutenant and we will see how he wishes to proceed.”

Adam’s eyelids fluttered and he regarded them both quizzically, “What the…”
Liara sighed, considering how best to handle this. She had no idea what this type of possession would feel like but it was a good bet that Adams would not be comfortable with the idea.

“Lieutenant, the Alliance does not currently possess technology with which to translate the Rachni language. In the past, they have demonstrated the ability to speak through someone else. We aren’t sure how this is done, but the Rachni are requesting to speak through you today. Would you consider allowing that?”

Adams looked torn, “I see. I..” he looked at his hands as if to reassure himself that he could control them, then looked to Liara again. “Was there any lasting harm?”

She shook her head with a reassuring smile, “No. In fact some of their ‘conduits’ continued to allow the practice for compensation.”

“What about security concerns?” Adams imagined himself being the unwitting cause of sabotage, or even the theft of the Normandy.

“Unfortunately I am not aware of the full capabilities available to you when you are ‘occupied’ in this way. I can say that it is obvious to everyone else that you are not...yourself. May I ask, were you aware of what they were saying while you were repeating it?”

“Yes, completely.”

Liara shrugged slowly, “They did ask permission. Communication will be difficult, otherwise. Ultimately it is your decision, Lieutenant.”

Greg’s brow furrowed and he paced nervously while he considered. Eventually he nodded at the Rachni soldiers and took a deep breath, ”You may proceed.”

The intensity of the tones picked up for a moment and Adams turned to regard them, again with the whites of his eyes.

“We are grateful for your time. There is much information to relay.”

The two ladies shared a glance, then Liara took the lead, “I am Liara and this is Tali. What may we call you?”

“We are the third of the newly divided succession. You may call us Three, if you wish.”

Liara’s lips curled into a smile at the name and she recognized an insatiably curious seed blossom within her about the culture behind the words, “Three, it is a pleasure to meet you. What is it that you need from us here?”

“We require nothing. We hide, we build as was agreed with the Shepard. The first of the newly divided succession requested that we relay her song to you here. We bring words from your kind in Sol.”

“Sol…” Liara whispered, a mixture of joy and dread coalescing in her stomach. She looked at Tali then back to Adams. “What do they say?”

“Your kind sing their hopes of your wellness. There is much work happening to fix the homeworld. The gates from one world to the next have stilled. They require your assistance.”

“Our assistance? What do they need?”
“We bring information for the healing of one called EDI. Your kind will soon have information for the healing of the gate. You are required to assist.”

Tali exclaimed, “You can speak with the fleet? This is wonderful!”

Liara agreed, but was already frustrated by the slowness of their speech and the relay of ideas. Her brow furrowed, “Tali, how hard is it to program a translator codex?”

“‘You need a linguist familiar with the language to interact with the program and provide it with the tools. It’s not a quick process.”

“It’s clear it needs to be done, though. Three, can you ask…” She thought for a moment about how to address other Rachni using the same process, “‘One’ if they have had anyone perform this task? We will need a better way to communicate than this. It will go much faster with a common language.”

“We will request any data we have.”

“Thank you.” Liara chewed her lip, almost afraid to ask, “Can you tell us what has happened to our loved ones?”

The Lieutenant stood quietly for a moment, staring at Liara, then, “We recognize you, Liara T’Soni. We are happy to behold the mother of the Shepard’s child. The Shepard lives, but she sleeps deeply. We will sing of you to her when she wakes. She will be pleased.”

Liara froze, both from the dizzying confirmation that Shepard was alive, and the revelation she had kept hidden for these last couple of weeks. The decision she made had been sudden and unplanned, the result of an unshakeable feeling they were about to die. They shared a final bonding before the last assault, each of them pouring all of their hopes and fears into one another in the darkness. As they became one, sharing everything they were until even their heartbeats kept time, Liara suddenly reached deeper than she ever had, collecting and fusing the human’s DNA into her own. It was desperate instinct following blind love and the result growing quietly within was the only thing holding her together since the Crucible fired. Now the doors to a scarcely dreamed future opened before her and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath.

“Mother of Shep….” Tali turned her face to her friend in shock, but kindly said nothing more for now. “What about Garrus?” she asked desperately.

“The Turian Garrus Vakarian also lives.”

Tali brought a hand to her chest, her head dropping with a sigh. Liara walked to her quickly and enveloped her in a warm embrace, which was returned after a moment. They both sniffled quietly, clinging to each other in profound relief before parting.

Tali just looked at her for several heartbeats before turning again to the assembled Rachni. Liara felt the rebuke, even without words, but Adams was still in the grip of the ‘other’ and it would be rude to extend this conversation longer than was necessary.

“Are you able to transmit raw data in binary format?” Tali asked.

“One has kin in Sol who have made some progress in this area. They have not shared that melody as it was not known for certain you were here, though they did tell us how to greet you if you should be. We are sharing that now. We understand that using this one called Adams is not efficient. We will sing to you when have more to share.”

Liara wiped a stray tear from her cheek, managing to keep her voice as calm and even as ever, “If
you are able to retrieve the information we need for our translators, please transmit that first. We can then get to work on EDI.”

“We are in harmony,” Adams said, and then was suddenly himself again. The Soldiers turned and crawled toward their ship, which had been effectively anchored and camouflaged. Dozens of Rachni were filing in through a hole in the ground that appeared to travel beneath the ship itself.

Greg took a moment to re-acclimate, his eyes a bit wider than normal. Tali moved to his side and put a gentle hand on his back, “You okay?”

He nodded without argument and began to walk, rubbing his face briskly with one hand. “That was...interesting, but I think I would like to go back to the engine room now.”
"Jacob," She said with a grin as she approached him, hands outstretched.

"Miranda," He responded in kind, genuinely happy to see her. They joined hands and kissed each other once on each cheek before withdrawing to look each other over. The doors to the facility were swinging open and shut with dozens of arrivals and their copious baggage and crates. A handsome woman walked up beside Jacob, her eyes bright with greeting.

"And you must be Doctor Cole," Miranda said while extending a hand. Brynn Cole's grip was warm and firm. If the Doctor knew anything about Miranda's previous relationship with her husband she didn't let it show. She was all confidence and capability, and Miranda decided she liked her right away.

"Doctor Lawson," Brynn said with a wide smile, "I'm a fan of your work. It's a real pleasure to meet you in the flesh."

Miranda was touched and nodded her head briefly to the woman. "Your work on the Reaper to Collector implants was likewise impressive. There was talk of incorporating it into the Lazarus Project, actually."

Brynn put a hand over her chest and shook her head, "Thankfully not. I suspect things might not have turned out so well for everyone.

"Still, only the best and brightest received as much attention as your team garnered. The Alliance is very fortunate to have you," Her gaze lowered to the motherly swell the woman displayed through the front of her medical jerkin. "I see you are already addressing our lack of researchers, as well." They both laughed and Brynn nodded in agreement, looking at Jacob with adoration.

Jacob smiled throughout their conversation, a mild look of surprise registering on his face at her unfeigned warmth. When Miranda turned her look of pleasure to him, he noted as much, "You look really...well. I'm happy to see you back in your element."

"Likewise. That uniform suits you better, I think," she returned. He did look better. Less conflicted, less angry. The way he looked at Brynn told her just how much his world had changed for the better.

"Why don't you let me show you two to your quarters?" Miranda gestured toward the elevators, "It's still a bit of a madhouse around here with all the construction."

"Normally, I'd say no," Jacob replied, "I know you have other things to do. I do need to talk with you for a moment though." Jacob picked up his satchel and motioned for her to lead, "While we walk?"

Miranda's eyes widened but she nodded and took a stride towards the elevator lobby, "Of course. It must be important."

"It's nothing we can do anything about but I figured you'd want to know right away, so I'll keep it brief. We've had some interesting communications come through on our way Earthside," he paused, letting the suspense grow with his smile. She knew that he knew that she hated that.

Miranda kept her expression neutral but narrowed her eyes in mock fury before he relented with a chuckle, "You know the Rachni that came onboard with the Crucible team?" Miranda blinked in what he recognized as assent, "They brought us word from Tuchanka."
"Tuchanka? How?" She used her palm to call the elevator distractedly.

"Apparently they can communicate with each other no matter the distance," he let that sink in for a moment before continuing, "The Salarians have attacked the Krogan homeworld."

All traces of frivolity left her expression, and Jacob nodded in understanding but held a hand up to forestall her worry. "They've been repulsed, partly due to the Rachni that were there." The elevator doors opened and he led them inside, turning and leaning against the back wall with a smug expression, "Turns out they have members in lots of places. Including Euler."

Jacob waited as the lift fell smoothly, letting her put the rest together. She didn't disappoint, her face lighting up once again, "The Normandy! Have you contacted them yet?"

Jacob shook his head, "Not yet. All we have is a ship matching the Normandy's description coming into system around the same time the Mass Relay was taken offline. They've probably landed on Benning, and we've asked the Rachni to make contact."

"Ah," she replied, a bit crestfallen that her fear of all the relays being down had proven accurate, "Have you told the others? Garrus has been crazy for any word."

"Yeah, we've given them all the latest, him first. As you can imagine this is still being kept quiet, though. I'd ask that you be discrete."

"Of course, I wouldn't dream," her thoughts spun, "Jacob..this is quite the news. So many questions. I take it you are trying to contact the other homeworlds?"

"The ones we can. Honestly I don't think it will take us long to bring the QE's back online, but we had no way of contacting the Normandy at all, so this is good news. I'm sure everyone onboard is looking for word of their family and friends."

The doors slid open and Miranda led them into a long hallway, "Mmmn. Liara especially."

Jacob nodded, "Speaking of..."

Miranda looked back at him and smiled, "She's doing fine. Once you get settled in I can take you for a look." She stopped and gestured to a door on the right before returning a grateful gaze to them both, "I'm glad you are both here. It was getting a bit dreary in these stone walls."

"Well there's some really attractive mountains outside but I'm guessing you haven't taken your eyes off your Omni long enough to check em out."

Miranda smirked, a dimple forming in her cheek, "Preparing for everyone's arrival I'm afraid. Just not enough time."

"I am not surprised," he said, then opened the door. "We'll contact you shortly for that tour. Maybe some dinner?" He slid his arm around Brynn's shoulders and stroked her skin idly before nudging her in.

"Absolutely. Dr. Cole, if you need anything at all, let me know."

"Of course. See you soon."

"So he didn't follow Jacob's instructions, and then of course the containment frame snapped and
threw him across the bay," Brynn laughed as she finished the story, then took another bite of the bland fare that served as food in the compound cafeteria.

Jacob was all grins, looking full of himself, "Needless to say I got an apology the next day, from the infirmary," he chuckled in his earthy baritone, "And we had no more conflicts through the rest of the project."

Miranda smiled and arched an eyebrow, "It's not so easy managing personalities that truly believe they are smarter than everyone else in the room, is it?"

Jacob smirked, then finished his drink with a swallow, "Yeah, I'm figuring that out. Being in charge of security of this facility is going to be the real challenge, though. There'll be so many different species and scientists coming through here it's going to be important to establish protocol. The Crucible project thankfully ironed out a lot of the initial issues, though, so I'm hoping the transition will go smoothly. We've got the data secured and have established some initial access points. With luck we'll be able to find information on how to fix those relays soon."

Miranda took another bite, chewing thoughtfully, "Is this the only place the data will be stored?"

"Until the Citadel is repaired, yes."

"That could be awhile," she said.

"The Citadel is not the highest of priorities at this point," There was something odd in his expression, there for only a moment then gone in the next glance at his wife. Miranda let the subject drop; if her instincts were on target it sounded like the jockeying that represented normal galactic politics had resumed.

"We've heard back from the Rachni in Euler," he said instead, and this time he didn't tease her by withholding the information, "The Normandy is on Benning, and we have to get them home."

Miranda's smiled at the news, but more at the way Jacob was behaving. He wasn't simply taking orders anymore. He was participating.

"The amount of data we are going to need to get to them in order to do that is not small, and the time it takes to use normal Rachnid methods are just too slow. We're working on some alternative methods, but I'm optimistic."

"That's wonderful news.." Miranda began, though she had more pressing interests, "How is everyone?"

"Right!" he exclaimed with a flush of color, "Sorry. We know the Rachni actually spoke directly to Liara and Tali and they are fine, but that's all we've gotten." Jacob shrugged helplessly, "To be honest, I never even considered they might die once they left system. If a few million enemies shooting at them couldn't do it I don't know what could. And," he added, "It seems that Liara is expecting."

Miranda's eyes widened and her lips parted, "You add that...as an afterthought."

Even Brynn took umbrage at that but still laughed teasingly, "Really...Jacob.."

He held his hands up, "I will be the first to admit that my mind is elsewhere. I apologize."

"Isn't she a bit young for that?," Miranda interjected, "The Asari are fairly conservative about these things."
Brynn answered for him, "I suspect that's not the first social more that's been stretched or broken in the past year."

"Mmmn. The child of Shepard and... T'Soni," Miranda mused, having almost said the 'Shadow Broker'.

"Can you imagine? The galaxy thought they were in trouble with the Reapers," Jacob joked before yelping at the pinch Brynn gave him under the table.

Miranda laughed, "He's right you know. Liara's brains and Shepard's stubbornness. You think you have problems with a few scientists?"

Jacob pushed back his plate. "Oh I dunno, I think we are in need of a little more good news. The funerals will be starting soon." There was a system-wide service/wake scheduled in less than a week, which would be followed by private ceremonies as they could be performed. David Anderson's was the day after in London with as much pomp and circumstance as the leader of the Human resistance warranted. "Speaking of which..." he patted the satchel next to him.

Miranda arched an eyebrow and Brynn looked embarrassed. Jacob didn't skip a beat, "It's gotta wait until we see her. You think we can get a peek tonight?"

"I don't see why not. I've cleared her calendar," she replied with a smirk.

Jacob got up grinning, and swung one leg back over the bench, "Miracle in itself."

Shepard was in the middle of her electromuscular stimulation exercises when they arrived. This meant that Jacob and Brynn were greeted by the sudden lifting or flexing of one limb or another according to very specific computer algorithms. Jacob may have been familiar with these exercises, but Brynn wasn't. Jacob couldn't help but poke a little fun at her every time she was startled.

Miranda noted a particular kind of awe in Brynn's eyes when she gazed upon the woman. It was to be expected, of course. The hero worship was only getting started, and Miranda actually felt a bit of pity for Shepard. And Liara. And their child. Lawson had been a bit surprised at the news, but not the motivation. The drive for procreation rose in proportion with the likelihood of death. Even Jacob and Brynn bore that out.

"Can she hear us?" Jacob finally asked once the teasing had ended.

"Not in the traditional sense. Last time our focus was on neural cell regeneration. This time her brain is whole, but it has no control over the rest of her body. Her aural passages are one of the only unsevered links to her nervous system at this point, so I'm making a point of providing as much stimulation as possible. There have been documented cases of complete cognition while in such a state, so I'd act as if she could hear you even if she can't."

Jacob's eyes widened and he nodded, "Well then! Shepard, it's a real joy to see you! I've brought a gift, though it sounds as if you won't be able to enjoy it for awhile." He unzipped his case and brought out a bottle filled with golden brown liquid that elicited a gasp of appreciation from Miranda and a nod from Brynn, "Now since I know you can't see what we are drooling over, it's a bottle of 2145 Kentucky Bourbon."

"Oh Jacob, I know how much she would appreciate that!" Miranda was impressed. This was one of the few remaining aged bottles from before the First Contact War, when humanity was still unaware that there were any other civilizations in space. As far as she knew, there weren't even distilleries in
Kentucky anymore, which made this a real treat.

"No, no, no...there is nobody that deserves it more, and I think the galaxy would agree. The last time we talked I told her that if we made it, drinks were on me. Just holding up my end of the bargain," he sat the bottle down on a table by the wall and returned to her side. "Heh," he paused, looking at her still face, "Even if she decided to... heh." Emotion curled up his mouth and he struggled to get out the words, "Drink it all herself." He sniffed and took Shepard's hand in his own.

Brynn came to his side immediately and caressed his back and neck, which seemed to give him permission to let it out. He turned to her and cupped her cheek before looking back at Shepard. "Aw honey, if you only knew... if you only knew how this woman lived every moment of every day for the rest of us...not herself," Then he looked directly at his wife, "Us." He clenched his jaw hard and brought up a hand to slide down his face, wiping away nascent tears and his own pain with a sniff and a sigh. Under his breath, but within the hearing of them both he followed up, "I hope to God we are worth it."

Brynn

Miranda pursed her lips. He was clearly struggling with some less than stellar behavior from the body politic about the Reaper data. He left the Alliance previously because of what he perceived as injustice and Miranda worried that his idealism might force another schism. The logical thing to do would be to bring the issue out of him and explore it. She was convinced that he needed to be right where he was, and she would have been happy to tell him so in no uncertain terms. It's what she would have done if they were still together, even at the risk of a fight. There was an invisible barrier there now, though, between him and Dr. Cole and the rest of the world. This was no longer her responsibility. It was Brynn's, and while she did not envy the woman for it, she couldn't ignore the confidence she felt that his wife could set him aright.

"Now, I wouldn't dare sample that bottle tonight," he said to a somber room, "But I did find one almost as rare," Next out was a similar bottle with a slightly different label design. He turned and displayed it to his wife and Miranda, the year 2159 prominent in their view.

"Not bad, Taylor. Not bad," Miranda said quietly, "I'll get the glasses."

Things were looking better in London. Miranda wouldn't have called it 'order' but the bodies were gone, some of the main thoroughfares around the medical facilities were cleared, and there were temporary signs placed everywhere that labeled locations and gave directions. The shuttle had flown over teams hard at work everywhere. While most of the buildings were far too dangerous to occupy, wherever the risk was manageable they were being used for housing, storage, and organization.

Her first real taste of disappointment came when she arrived at the makeshift hospital where Jack was located. It was a retrofitted warehouse with most of the northern wall missing. Plastic had been stretched to prevent the elements, but it rained frequently here as it always had and she could smell mold and fungus while ducking through the damaged front doorway. Inside, medical cots were crammed as close together as they could while still allowing a walkway wide enough for wheeled beds. There must have been 150 patients in this space with no dividers attended by a dozen or so doctors and nurses that flitted from place to place like honeybees sampling nectar.

A brief chat with a harried orderly and then she was led to a series of rooms off one side of the open space. Her brief pleasure at the thought of some measure of privacy for Jack was tempered quickly when she saw the orderly stop in front of a metal door and use a key to unlock it. At her look, he pocketed the keys and scratched his neck, "She ah, she has bad dreams. After she eh...hurt some of the patients we had to move her here."
"Oh no," she said, her heart sinking. The orderly thought she was talking about the other patients, and the woman certainly felt for their predicament; but she had far more concern about Jack being locked away in a room by herself, "Excuse me please, I must see her right away."

"Sure," he said, "But uh, be careful, alright? She's one of those...biotics. We've kept her pretty well sedated but if you make her mad," his words trailed and he just opened the door for her. As she entered she heard it close quickly behind. Lawson seriously doubted this room could have held Subject Zero if she was intent on leaving, but it must have made the staff feel safer.

Jack slept, the buzz and beeps of medical equipment camouflaging the sound of her breathing. The left side of her head was bandaged, and her left arm. It was swaddled all the way down from her shoulder before ended abruptly above her elbow. Miranda approached the bed and lifted her chart. The left leg had been amputated as well. Internal organ damage. Blunt force trauma had been the cause, no further details listed. Prognosis was good but infection was the primary concern. The doctor lowered the pad and looked at her. Without makeup and anger adorning her face she looked...young. Her lips were parted and her breathing was slow and deep. Miranda smiled unexpectedly at the sight. Her hair was growing back, blurring the harsh tattoos the woman favored. She could almost see what Jack would look like in another life. Quite pretty.

A knock at the door interrupted her and she turned to see a tall gray haired man enter. Miranda put on a friendly smile and introduced herself with an outstretched hand.

The man seemed weary but pleasant as he took it, "Yes, Miss Lawson, I know who you are. I also understand you know our girl here," he released her hand and gestured to Jack, concern evident, "I'm Doctor Gellar. Has the staff told you about our recent challenges?"

"It was mentioned. I can understand your concern, Doctor. I'm surprised you weren't briefed on her history."

His lined face crinkled into a wry smile, "It's not like we had many options, no matter what she's been through. She was a critical case and we were closest. I take it there are some psychological factors? That's not uncommon, anymore."

"That's correct. Hers were particularly violent, which may be the cause for some of the disruption. Can you tell me what the plan is for her currently?"

"We've found no records of any family who might help make these decisions, so for her benefit, yes I can. Our facilities are obviously limited as is any rehabilitation, physical or mental. Once she's recovered she would normally be taken to a veteran's outpatient center." His lips pursed and his eyes narrowed, "There will be a waiting list for prosthetics, as you can probably guess. She will be restricted to a wheelchair and placed into medical barracks with the rest. Her new situation probably won't sit well with her. If her temper flares as it has on several occasions here she may get into a fight where someone is injured. At that point she could potentially be brought up on charges and isolated."

"Which is worse," Miranda nodded.

"Right, as we've seen first-hand. Now, I'm no psychologist, but I don't think I need to be one to understand that this is a special case. If she doesn't get the proper care now, which I don't think we can give her, she's going to have a devil of a time. I eh...given your eh...familiarity, expertise and eh, resources I was hoping you might be able to assist."

She took a deep cleansing breath. This was more than she had bargained for, but it wasn't completely unexpected, "How much time do you think she needs before she can be safely relocated?"
"I'd like to keep her for a couple of days now that the antibiotics have been completed. She was developing a serious infection and I'd prefer that be settled first. I might be able to arrange for a day or two more if needed, but," His face was both pained and eager, "We desperately need the bed."

"I understand. I'll see what I can do. Would it be possible to have another chair brought in? I see you have data access. That will be helpful."

"I'll send someone as soon as I can. Let us know if you need anything else. We have meals shuttled in every 8 hours and you are welcome to stay. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

"Of course," Miranda said gratefully as he turned to exit.

"Still making friends, I see," she muttered at the biotic after he was gone, approaching the side of the bed. Deft hands typed out a reduction in sedative. She'd be up in a couple of hours; time to make some calls.

"Jacob, you know she will never agree to that!"

"Miri, my hands are tied," his voice was firm but sympathetic, "You know how many people want in this place? What do you want me to do exactly, build a shed outside? How does that help?"

"There's no other facility equipped for her capabilities and you know it. Doesn't that take some priority? She saved hundreds of lives."

"Oh come on, she's no angel and she's most definitely not the only hero on the planet. Come on girl, do your thing! Convince her to help save millions more and she'll get what she needs."

When Miranda didn't answer he continued, "Look, if I thought I had any more credibility with her I'd ask her myself. The only person that does is in a coma. You are right there, use that giant brain of yours and figure it out. I've gotta get back to my meeting."

She ended the call, frustrated, and stared at the puzzle on the bed before her. There was no one in the galaxy Jack hated more than her. There was no one more closely affiliated to the group that kidnapped and tortured her than she. The biotic had deep seated violent tendencies toward anyone that so much as irritated her and Miranda resided on a completely different level. This was more than just a trust issue; it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that the former captive would physically attack her as a response to this offer. Any such reaction would be received badly not just by her intended target, but everyone else in the facility. If word got out she'd never be able to place her in another. On the other hand, if she failed to convince Jack to help, there was no telling what might happen to the woman.

Her thoughts spun and she chewed on her lower lip. She had no idea how she was going to pull this off, but failure wasn't an option.

Dalatress Linron watched the main viewscreen silently, arms folded. The rest of the bridge was likewise quiet as seven of their warships put distance between themselves and the First Fleet. The Matron's anger was a palpable presence before them and none wanted to taste it. A third of their fleet was gone and their objective was all but lost to them now.

In the days that followed the failed attempt to secure Tuchanka there had been much debate. Linron's proposal to attack the Krogan homeworld had not been as popular in the Union as she had expected,
but she bowed beneath the urgency she felt and ordered the assault anyway. If she had succeeded, she would have had all the support she needed, but the Union was not forgiving of failure. *This is what happens when you allow a male to act as Counselor,* she thought derisively. Linron had supported Dalatress Esheel for the position, but her appointment had been stymied by the rest of the matrons. Esheel would never have allowed things to progress so far that unilateral action would even have been warranted. She would have brought the Council to heel, seen that the Krogan were leashed, and Shepard would have had no say in the matter.

The fleet's obedience in this endeavor reached its limit once it was widely known they could not get home. The relay's destruction stranded them in hostile territory and it was only a matter of time before they were discovered, no matter how advanced their technology might be. If Linron had been worried about Krogan aggression after the Reapers were defeated because of population pressure the risk was now multiplied. That was the argument her subordinates had spread and the reason so many had defected. The hope was to deflect Krogan anger from the Salarian homeworld and put the blame squarely on Linron's shoulders. She could understand the logic; she would have done the same thing in their position. She wasn't quite ready to fall on her sword yet, though. She still had many questions that needed answered. That's one of the reasons she let the rebellious contingent go without a fight; they were riddled with her own spies.

The First Fleet still represented a large percentage of Salarian firepower, no matter the political landscape; and as soon as the Krogan showed their true colors she knew the Union would forgive her transgressions in return for those guns. She would be welcomed as a hero, it was only a matter of time and patience.

Once the subset of Salarian warships had cleared the immediate area they dropped their cloaking technology and set a course for Tuchanka as naked as they day they were hatched, probably to announce which system she was hiding in. Linron shook her head and told the helmsman to plot the lengthy FTL course to the Widow system. If they thought she would be undone by such a simple maneuver they had much to learn. She looked forward to teaching them.
“So, I propose raising the priority of the repairs here,” Ashley’s finger slid across the glass display of the war room table map to rest on the main fabrication facility, “We are going to need those struts to make the living quarters habitable. There’s really no way around it.” She raised her dark eyes to meet the light blue ones peering from a scarred but chiseled face.

Lieutenant Nathan Madras was the highest ranking Marine left on Benning after the attacks and he had led the few other military personnel with him to protect and organize the thousand plus civilians that had scattered. Their brief skirmishes with the Reapers ended badly, but they managed to keep the attacking forces splintered enough to prevent the sort of standoff that would spell the end. The angry red slashes on his left cheek and eye attested to the last of those fights.

Williams continued, “If we can get Fab up, we solve a lot of other problems, too. I think that’s worth sleeping under the stars for a few more days. I can ask Adams here to keep it staffed so the rest of your people can focus on their living conditions,” she looked to Lt. Adams and he nodded agreeably.

The Normandy was ready to go and Tali was spearheading EDI’s recode. That left some free hands that could be put to use.

Madras scratched at his scabs absentmindedly, “I’ve got to have some of your techs help us with the fuel depot. It’s a long walk to Hydroponics without the shuttles.”

Adams interjected, “I’ve already made some headway on repairs there, but only to accommodate the Normandy. We can probably rig something up for the short term for shuttles.”

“Outstanding,” he growled approvingly, “I’ve got an engineer I’ll assign to your team if you’ll allow it. She worked in fabrication when it was up and running and should be able to answer any of your questions.”

Adams smiled, “Perfect. Of course.”

Nathan looked at Ashley, “In fact, she says she knows you, Commander.”

She arched an eyebrow, “Oh?”

“Her name’s Vedra Tanner. A friend of one of your sisters, she said.”

The Spectre’s brow furrowed in thought. The name sounded familiar and brought up memories of princesses and imaginary tea parties. Had to be a friend of Sarah’s, the youngest, she decided. She couldn’t place the face, not that it mattered after all these years. She was fairly certain that Vedra had been one of the leggy tomboys eager to escape the lace and chiffon Sarah favored. She was flattered that she had been remembered.

“Small galaxy,” she offered without expression, “I’ll stop in and say hello.”

“Speaking of hello’s,” Adams murmured, “Liara was thinking of paying a visit to the Rach ship.
She’s taken an interest.”

Ashley wasn’t surprised. The Asari had hovered around the half dozen builder Rachni huddling with Tali in Engineering. The more of them that were communicating with counterparts in the Sol system the faster the data flow; but they could only have as many participating here on Benning as were there back home. Ashley had wondered how the normally frantic Shadow Broker would occupy herself with no communication from her agents. Now she knew.

She nodded, “Sure. I have no problem with that.” The Rachni made Ashley’s hackles stand up even more than other alien races, but they represented a lifeline that could not be discarded; so if Liara was keen on interfacing with them Ashley wasn’t going to fight about it. They needed all the help they could get when it came to understanding their new allies.

Madras looked at her for a moment in surprise at her assent.

Ashley’s eyes narrowed, “What?”

The Lieutenant shrugged, “Nothing.” His nonchalance was transparent, though. “What’s the latest word from home?” he quickly asked.

“The Funerals begin in two days. I figured we might have a ceremony of our own if that’s all right with both of you.”

“That’s a great idea,” Adams said, and Nathan nodded.

“There’s some Botanical Gardens outside the base that might be intact. It’s a nice space. I’ll talk to the civvies about making preparations.” Nathan added.

Ashley grinned crookedly, “Speech writing time. My favorite part.”

“Great,” Nathan murmured, “You won’t mind sending me mine when it’s done then.”

Ashley put on her best sales pitch face, “Come explore the universe with us! Defend against the evils of the galaxy!”

Adams jumped in, having heard this from her before, “Blow shit up! Tell everyone else how much we hate having to blow shit up!”

The Commander grinned but didn’t continue. They weren’t quite thick enough with Madras to descend into gallows humor, “Eh, maybe I should stick with poetry. At least we have something to look forward to.”

“A lot of work to look forward to, you mean,” Madras quipped as he straightened his uniform. He smiled, the scarred part of his lips curling oddly, “Guess it’s time to get to it.” He spun smoothly and exited the war room with purpose in his stride.

Greg then regaled her with a motivated look of his own, “Have you got time to talk about the Relays for a moment?”

“Sure.”

The Lieutenant pulled up the latest forecast of supplies and parts they thought would be needed to effect any repairs, “The very first problem we have is that we don’t know the level of damage that was done to the Sol Relay in Arcturus. We’ve got this vid as we were leaving the system,” his fingers pulled up the file and resized it for their view, the red glow and spinning containment arms
slowed for closer inspection, “But we never actually saw any damage occur, unlike the Relay here. Now, we can make some assumptions that the damage levels would be similar, but the truth is, assumptions could leave us hanging out there in a big way. Essentially, we need to be prepared to rebuild the entire Mass Relay, even if that’s not actually necessary.”

“That’s more than we can do on our own, though,” Ashley said slowly, her brow furrowed.

“Exactly. Now, the Rachni freighter has the room for the parts we would need once we get them built, and Liara is going to ask them if they are willing to assist. We’ll still need a sizeable tech crew equipped with EVA and gear, and we don’t have enough of that on the Normandy either. Honestly, we really could use a third ship designed for that kind of work.”

“Is there any way we could repair the relays between here and Arcturus? If we could, we could just shuttle back and forth. Otherwise, that trip is going to take what, ten weeks in FTL?”

“Well, remember that there’s two relays that would need to be repaired in that scenario. We would have to make that FTL trip no matter what to fix the Arcturus to Euler relay in the stream. Considering the amount of Eezo we are going to have to put together for the Sol Relay, I just don’t think we can afford it. We need to get these repairs done in one trip. If we can get the Relay to Sol open, they can bring in fully equipped crews for the rest of the repairs.”

“And we can go home,” she mused. Adams nodded, not wanting to admit that as his primary motivation. She followed up with a question, “Where exactly are we going to get the Eezo for that Relay?”

“There may be enough of it lingering at the site itself or from the other broken relays to do the job. There may also be a stockpile of it at the Shipyards if we are lucky. To be honest though, Commander,” he looked less than enthused, “We may need to disassemble the Normandy’s stealth drive to make up the difference.” He spoke quickly, obviously reading the glower on her face, “It’s unlikely we’ll need the capability for awhile.”

She didn’t like the answer but couldn’t fault his logic. “It sounds like you’ve thought this through. Where are we going to get the third ship?”

Adams grinned like a schoolboy and brought up a map of the base. He scrolled to the outskirts and a large field with wrecks populating it in neat rows, “There were some vessels that would have served at the repair facilities, but the damage from the bombardment there is so severe it’s not really worth the effort to resurrect them. So, I did some searching and found...this,” His fingertip settled on an aged Battle Damage Repair Ship so rusted that it nearly blended in with the rock beneath it, “The SSV Hephaestus.”

Ashley zoomed in on the craft. It appeared serviceable, no gaping holes or other damage within view. “Whaddaya know? That the same one from the Contact War?”

“That’s the ship that warned Earth that the Turians were coming, yes Ma’am. It’s just about perfect for what we need....with some minor modifications.”

“Mrm..” she agreed, “And a coat of paint. We can’t show up for our victory lap looking like that,” She gave the Chief Engineer a conspiratorial wink, “Can we get her space worthy by the time we receive the final schematics for the Relay?”

Adams returned the wink, “I’ll get started, Commander.”
Tali sat back in her chair, eyes burning with fatigue. The single word, *Ready*, flashing coldly on the monitor seldom brought her such joy. She had finally corrected one of the central logic cores in EDI’s programming and brought it back online. The Enhanced Defense Intelligence Suite was already one of the most complex systems ever developed and it had only been a starting point for what evolved into a close friend and ally. EDI had been responsible for much of her own development once she had been unshackled, and it would have been a lifetime of work for the Quarian to even approximate that. Instead, she wanted to harness that same processing power to repair the remaining systems. All that was left was to provide the logic core with the algorithms for code replacement throughout the rest of its own subsystems and set it to work.

The six Rachni workers tapping on their own modified datapads paid little notice to her, and made no sound except for that random staccato. Their paired counterparts on Earth were each sending parts of those algorithms to be reassembled. They didn’t require much rest, but they needed to concentrate. It had been strange to actually speak to them with the completed translator. Tali was ashamed to admit she assumed the workers were automatons and had no thoughts of their own. She had been mistaken. They each had individual personalities though their methods of communication seemed to keep them very in tune with each others thoughts and goals. Those came chiefly from the Mother, though differing opinions could be offered and considered by her.

Despite that fact, Tali’s attempts to distinguish between the workers had been fruitless. They each seemed to be able to tell each other apart, but talking to one was much the same as talking to another. If information was given to one, it seemed the others had it right away, even if the others weren’t in the same room. You could then walk into the other room and pick up your conversation with another worker without breaking stride. It was bizarre. Tali tried naming them to introduce the concept but eventually gave up and called them all ‘Three’, as they had originally suggested.

She also gave up trying to entertain them during the slow points in her task as they seemed utterly humorless. Liara got along great with them, unsurprisingly. She loved the Asari dearly along with the crew of the Normandy, of course, but she missed Garrus’ lively personality so much that it was a physical pain. The thought made her turn on her Omni now that she had time to relax and look at the last message she received since the Rachni began transmitting data. She could almost hear his voice as she read the words.

“Should have known better than to doubt my girl. I imagine you held that bucket together with duct tape while fighting Reapers with your free hand! I’m back with the Turian fleet now and we are holding the line against floating dead Reapers. Who knew they’d be as big a pain in the ass dead as alive? We’ve cut debris landfall by half but the survivors are still taking quite a beating. Things are better up here, although the food is terrible. You’d think someone would have figured out how to make dextro-yeast protein bars taste like….not yeast.”

Tali chuckled and pulled her legs up into her chair.

“I spoke with Admiral Raan just this morning and she sends her regards. After the Geth powered down they sort of floated away, colliding with each other and who knows how many other wrecks before your people swooped in to save the day. They’ve managed to bring the Geth Fleet into a stable orbit now and have even brought the first of them back online. She said it was a cathartic experience, reviving them. Admiral Koris is delighted of course, but he’s trying his best not to be too smug about it. They look forward to giving you the details personally.”

“I’m heading down to Earth tomorrow for the ceremonies. Wish you were on my arm. Funerals just aren’t my gig and your smile would definitely make it bearable.”
“P.S. Don’t tell Joker I called the ship a bucket.”

A voice came from over her shoulder, “If I didn’t know better I’d say you were blushing.”

“Hey!” She looked up and exclaimed at her blue skinned friend, “No peeking!”

Liara smirked and circled around to face her, “Well I should hope whatever messages you are sending through our friends here would be safe to view.”

“Whatever he...said through our...friends,” she stammered as Liara lifted her brow and widened her eyes knowingly, “Is private!” Tali gave an offended huff and stood up, narrowing her eyes at Liara’s smile, “Where are you going, anyway?”

“I was planning on visiting the Queen. Want to come?”

Tali shook her head, “Not this time. I need to get some sleep before the algorithms are completed. Three?” One of the Rachni workers paused and turned it’s sleek head toward her. “What is the estimated time of completion?”

The translator gave the worker a soft calm female voice, but the words were stilted as the vocabulary was far from complete and the program was forced to compensate. “We expect the data to be compiled in less than 4 hours.”

Tali nodded and thanked him...her...it...and it returned its attention to the panel. She followed Liara outside engineering and made her way toward the elevator. “So...have you sent your message yet?”

Liara shook her head thoughtfully and said, “No, I haven’t.”

“Liara...”

“I know, I know. I just...don’t know what to say.”

“Well, if you were waking up with the war over, and she was the one gone and carrying your child, what would you want to hear?”

Liara’s cheeks blushed purple, “It’s not quite that simple.”

Tali looked up at the ceiling in exasperation as they walked, “Why does it have to be anything complicated?” Tali thought she would have jumped at the chance to leave word for Shepard when she woke, but the Asari had been pensive and moody ever since they had been made aware they could send word to family and friends. Liara apologized profusely for her secrecy once they returned to the Normandy but hadn’t been very forthcoming about her feelings since then.

Liara sighed and slowed at the elevator doors, “I have to be careful how I word it, Tali.” She continued after a long moment, eyes intent and her voice dropping to a whisper, “While we had discussed children in the past, we decided that any decisions of that kind needed to wait until after the war.”

Tali stood there, listening expectantly. When Liara realized she was going to have to spell it out, she took a deep breath and just dove in. “I didn’t tell her I was doing it. She never agreed to it and doesn’t know.”

“You didn’t...you mean you...can you do that?” Tali asked incredulously.

“Under normal circumstances an experienced partner would know, but this wasn’t at all normal. I
thought we might all die. It was...not an accident, precisely, but it was not planned, either. Once it was done, I wanted to tell her. I really did!” Liara’s eyes welled up with tears and Tali put a hand on Liara’s upper arm in comfort, “But if I told her she would never have let me go with her to the Conduit.”

Tali finally understood. “And there was no way you were leaving her.” She slid her hand down Liara’s arm and released her. “Keelah Se’lai.”

Liara laughed at herself and wiped her cheek with her sleeve. “If we all died, what would it have mattered?” She lifted her hands helplessly into the air, “If I died, no one would know. If she didn’t make it...at least I....” she put the back of one hand to her lips as they trembled, determined to try and move past this but unable to overcome the emotions that fateful day kept bringing back to life.

“You’d have a piece of her, forever.”

“She’s going to be so angry with me.” Liara’s eyes dropped to the floor, “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’d be angry too,” Tali said, though she tried to keep the edge from her voice. It seemed an unforgivable violation, but she couldn’t say she didn’t understand. All their worlds were upside down and everyone she knew had made decisions that would have been unthinkable just a few short years ago, “But I understand what you did. You think she won’t?” When Liara didn’t meet her gaze, she raised her voice, “We have all fought through hell and seen billions of people die so that we can finally be free, and you think that this child will make her what...stop loving you? After everything you have done to be with her? Does that even sound like her?”

Liara took a deep breath, then shook her head mutely.

“What amazes me is that I’m having to give an Asari advice on communication.”

Liara gave her a wounded look in reply.

“Come on.” Tali pressed the button for the elevator and stepped in as doors slid open smoothly.

Liara followed sullenly, “Where are we going?”

“To your quarters to write your message. It needs to be the first thing she sees when she wakes up.” At Liara’s questioning look she continued, “You do realize everyone knows she is going to be a Father right? There’s probably going to be a shrine of baby toys in her room when she opens her eyes.”

The dawning realization in Liara’s eyes softened Tali’s frustration and made her laugh instead.

"How will we be sure Shepard will see the message before she learns from someone else?” Liara gasped.

"It just so happens I have an idea for that as well," Tali replied in a lilting voice. "Trust me."
One can find friends in the least likely of places.

Jack's amber eyes had trouble focusing at first. She kept opening and closing them hoping her vision would clear, because she could swear she was looking at Miranda, which was ridiculous. Her delicate brow furled as she wondered if she was having a nightmare; one in which she had been put back together like Shepard and now owed her entire existence to that pretentious bitch. She snorted. She'd kill herself first. With a grenade. That oughta convey just the right amount of contempt.

She wasn't certain if she actually said that last bit, but heard a reply in a distinctly familiar Australian accent, "Take your time, Jack. I can't understand you."

"The fuck?" she slurred, "Lawson?"

The Doctor's pearly whites nearly blinded her when she smiled.

"Kill me," She groaned and drapped her right arm over her face, then dropped her arm and lifted her head, the nightmare suddenly seeming not so unrealistic, "Oh God. Did I die?"

The dark haired woman broke into laughter then shook her head no, responding with that same annoying smile, "No. You're fine."

Jack closed her eyes and laid her head back down on the pillow in relief. "Depends on where you're sitting, Princess." She opened her eyes again, the room a tad clearer, and focused on the woman sitting next to her bed. "What are you doing here then?"

Miranda's smile faded, "Came to see you."

"Right," she spat back, looking around the room. "Don't you have anyone else to bother?"

Lawson reclined in her chair, "Believe it or not you're the only one in hospital. All the others are either on their feet or dead. I really just wanted to check on you."

"Well don't I feel fucking special. What are you gonna do, kiss me?"

There was that irritating smile again, "Would a kiss make you feel better, precious?"

Jack growled, "If you are gonna stay here, tell the doc I need more drugs."

"What, no threats about pasting me on the walls? You're slipping."

"Oh no, I ain't gettin' wheeled out into the street because Shepard's fucking savior ends up dead. Get back to me once she's fixed and we'll dance."

Miranda smirked and just looked at her missing leg in riposte. Before Jack could attack she cut her off at the pass, "Speaking of getting fixed, I've spoken with your Doctor."

Though her tone conveyed boredom, the glimmer in Jack's eyes revealed her interest, "And?"
"Well, there's a bit of a problem. You're healthy."

"Um, I beg to fucking differ. When am I getting my prosthetics?"

Miranda spread her hands helplessly, "There just aren't any right now. I did some checking and they are doing their best to retrofit a couple of manufacturing plants but the wait is likely to be long."

Jack just stared at her, "What the hell am I supposed to do until then, exactly?"

Lawson shrugged nonchalantly, "You aren't the only one in this boat. There's lots of people waiting for new limbs. There are transitional facilities being organized where you can get the care you need. I'm going to see if I can get you into one."

"The hell you are. I'm not going to some home for….fucking invalids."

Miranda tilted her head. "Look, you are going to need help. It's not for...too long," She said, though it sure sounded like the opposite. "I'll do everything I can do get you to the top of the list."

"Oh don't strain a muscle, sweetheart, I'll be just fine," Jack said with a sneer.

"Well what are you going to do then? Find a nice place to lie down in the rubble? It's a mess out there, Jack! It would be one thing if we actually lived in a functioning city but you can't even find a stretch of flat ground for a wheelchair to roll on! How exactly are you going to live?"

Jack's face curled up in useless fury, "I'll find someone to stay with."

Miranda arched an eyebrow in surprise and folded her hands neatly, "Oh? Who?"

Jack chewed her lip angrily, trying to think of anyone who would give a damn. When she turned her anger to a fingernail, pulling off a section of growth, Miranda gave her a look of distaste and Jack rolled her eyes in response. She hated it here. She would hate a 'transition' center even more.

Jack's eyes narrowed and her expression suddenly sweetened, "Where are you staying?"

Miranda's eyes widened and she shook her head with a rueful chuckle, "Oh no. Nono. I'm staying in a research facility in the middle of nowhere. There's no room."

"You're telling me Misses Rich Bitch Super Queen doesn't have a cushy pad out there? I don't fucking believe it."

"Have you lost your mind? Are you actually asking if you can move in with me? You're mental!"

"Hey, what better way to motivate you to get me to the top of that list! Come on, you said it won't be for long, right?"

Miranda stood up suddenly and folded her arms. Jack stiffened, thinking the Cheerleader might just walk out on her ass. It was a stupid idea, she agreed, but she couldn't see any other option.

"Dammit Jack, I have a lot of work to do there. I can't be distracted, and I can't take care of you."

"Oh don't worry your Highness, I don't need you to take care of me. Just let me stay for awhile, all right?"

Miranda turned with a doubtful look and Jack sighed melodramatically, "What, you want me to say please? Don't be a cunt, Miranda. I need this."
When the woman finally nodded, Jack beamed, but Miranda interrupted her glee with a imperiously pointed finger. "Not so fast. This isn't a done deal. This is a restricted facility and I have to get permission. There will also be an obscenely large number of rules you have to follow. Break them and you're out," she said with a severe expression. Satisfied with the uncharacteristic lack of argument after a moment she sighed, "But….I'll see what I can do."

It might not be a vacation, but at least she'd get outside these fucking walls. It was a start.

"I've got to go make some calls, ok?" Miranda said, gathering up her things, "I'll be back a little later."

"Hey, Lawson?" Jack called as the woman gripped the door handle.

"Yes?"

"I still hate you."

Miranda smiled crookedly, her blue eyes twinkling with amusement, "The feeling's mutual."

"Hey Lawson!" Jack shouted while the door swung shut behind her, "Have that spineless orderly asshole bring me some food!"

Miranda ignored the command, tapping a message on her Omni as she walked down the hallway. *She's agreed to stay with me for now. You can't expect me to convince her to consent to being a test subject in a day, especially when I'm the one running the show. No arguments, Jacob, just send me the paperwork.*

The fabrication facility repair was in full swing. There must have been a hundred people on the task when Ashley arrived and she nodded in satisfaction at their progress. The losses among the people on this planet had been staggering. Less than a thousand souls remained after the fight and they had been scattered, starved and demoralized. As far as Williams was concerned that meant Nathan Madras was a miracle worker. His calm determined demeanor put minds at ease and set hands to work. He made people want to make a difference, and that made all the difference in the world.

The Commander spotted a couple of uniforms saluting at her arrival and headed for them. "At ease gentlemen. Looking for Petty Officer Vedra Tanner?"

The youngest of the two pointed back to a corner of the busy warehouse, "I saw her headed to Materials, Commander. Just a few minutes ago."

She nodded her thanks and headed in that direction, navigating around the most extensive part of the damage. During the attack the ceiling came down and smashed the computers that managed the fabrication equipment. That meant for now the machinery must be run manually, introducing possibilities for error in a process where nanometers were the difference between success and failure.

The Materials department was largely occupied by the foundry. Here various materials were created from raw elements that could then be used in a variety of applications up to and including ship construction. Ashley had no idea what it would take to make the material used in Mass Relays, if it was possible at all. Command advised that they would find out, but no matter what recipe they came up with the foundry would be required, so that was task number one.

Ashley found Vedra going over blueprints with the construction team in the foundry area. As she approached, the young woman looked up, eyes squinching with recognition. Williams struggled. The
years had changed the very young face in her childhood memories.

The Engineer paused in her briefing and said, "Let's take five, okay? I need to speak to the Commander." The rest of the group followed her glance to Ashley, the majority not yet having met her.

Williams felt a bit self conscious at the looks she received. There was awe, respect and fear there. Spectres were always treated with healthy respect and fear from those that had reason, but she hadn't advertised her status with these people; as far as they knew she was just the Commander of the Normandy. It was strange.

They parted and dispersed, and Vedra walked toward her then stopped to salute. The woman had long fair hair and a broad mouth accustomed to smiles. Her dark eyes were bright and curious, intelligence residing within. Ashley returned the salute and was quickly embraced. She allowed it. Perhaps out of a sense of guilt.

"My God, Ashley. What's it been, twenty years?" Vedra asked musically.

"Just about," she replied. "I didn't even know you enlisted. What are the odds?"

They parted and Vedra shrugged, "When Sarah told me she believed your story about the Reapers a few years back I realized how useless it would be to stay at home. I signed up the next week. We all need to do our part."

Ashley's eyes widened, "You actually joined to fight the Reapers?"

Tanner's laugh was infectious, "Just because the other species in this galaxy don't have a brain to share between them doesn't mean I was going to sit on my hands and wait it out."

Ashley smiled widely, "Do you know how nice it is to hear that?"

Vedra lifted up on her toes endearingly and gave her a wink, "Sarah tells us all your stories. Not trying to be a kiss ass but you inspired more than a few of us into service."

Williams was flummoxed. She never considered pride a weakness of her own character but certainly felt a rush of it now. She fumbled for something to say.

"The service suits you. You really seem well. Surprisingly well after the attacks actually. Lots of people would have folded in these conditions." As she said the words she realized how true they were. Vedra seemed to be thriving in this environment.

"Well, it seems I was made to fix things and...we seem to have a lot to fix." Her eyes sparkled with humor, "Listen, I would love to catch up if you have some time but," she jerked a thumb back to her team, "We've got a lot to get done. Dinner sometime?"

"That'd be great," she said sincerely, "I'll let you know."

"Great! So good to see you!" Any inappropriate familiarity melted away with her disciplined salute.

Ashley dismissed her and for the first time since taking over the Normandy she felt a sense of confidence. She only meant to do what she had seen Shepard do so often with the members of her crew, keep up a supportive presence and confront issues before they became problems. She hadn't expected it to be a two way street. Her steps turned toward her next appointment of the day, and they had a spring in them.
Before she arrived, her Omni sang with a message notification. When she recognized the name attached Ashley stole a guilty look around. No one was taking any notice as they worked. She opened it and made sure to keep her expression neutral despite the leap in her heart.

God she was such a hypocrite. The feelings she had for James Vega went against every code she preached. If it had only been feelings she might have dismissed it, but they shared that drunken apocalyptic night together at Shepard's party before the fleet headed out to take on Cerberus. It made things more complex. Sweetly complex. He was everything she liked about good soldiers; strong, determined, steady and resourceful. He was easy on the eyes, tender when he needed to be and a wrecking ball when it was called for. His message was respectful and brief. She guessed he wasn't sure where they stood either and was just making sure he was still in the back of her mind. No danger there.

Technically he was no longer under her command, but the circumstances leading up to that fact still left questions about fraternization. With a court martial impossibly far away, though, she was more willing to accommodate guilty pleasures. This was turning out to be a pretty good day.
Remembering the fallen isn't our only responsibility. After the Apocalypse, it's important to remember the other casualty; who you used to be.

When Jack woke again it was to the sight of Miranda's dark head bowed over her work tablet. Jack stayed still, just watching her for a moment while she read, typing small corrections or sending instructions with deft fingers from time to time. Gone was the customary white catsuit that had so prominently displayed the Cerberus logo. She had adopted a more metropolitan wardrobe now, though it was obvious she still preferred the cut of it to accentuate her curves. Jack could think of worse views, she supposed, though the mouth it came with sorta spoiled the package.

She wondered what time it was. With no windows the hours tended to blend and the walls seemed to squeeze in, making her heart pound and her blood scream for opioids. All that work she had put in to get straight at the academy was gone and her old enemy had pounced on her with claws made of bliss. While she hadn't had a choice in the matter the timing wasn't terrible. Escaping her thoughts had been welcome. It would be welcome again right now.

Miranda lifted her head to gaze at her, and the kindness in her eyes sent a spike of resentment through her guts. She couldn't help it. That look felt like pity and it made her lips curl into a snarl. "Could you have the decency not to smile? You look like a clown." The left side of her scalp itched and she instinctively tried to scratch it with her missing arm, putting her in even more of a foul mood.

Miranda seemed nonplussed, putting her pad down to give Jack her full attention. It was fucking creepy. "Morning Jack," she said calmly, "How'd you sleep?"

"Like shit." She reached over her own head with her right hand to try and get at the itch. "I'm sore all over. I hate this fucking bed."

"I'm not surprised," Miranda replied with equanimity, "What do you think, you want to get out of here?"

Jack's eyes widened and she arched an eyebrow, "Holy shit. Serious? That was fast."

"Can't leave just yet but I've put in the requests." She got up and walked to the foot of the bed, lifting and settling a bag down by Jack's foot. "Today's the ceremony downtown. I figured you might want to get some fresh air."

Jack's keen desire to be anywhere but here immediately warred with an intense desire not to be seen as she was. Damaged. Weak. Crashing on top came memories of the assault, her student's deaths and the maiming she had kept carefully hidden in a dusty corner of her mind. She found her breath coming too fast and sweat broke out on her skin as adrenaline filled her veins.

It didn't escape Miranda's notice. "Or," she said, moving back to her chair, "We can do something else entirely."

"Go away Lawson," she growled in warning.
"Jack, I unders..

Jack's good arm became sheathed in crackling blue energy and the side table lifted into the air to be thrown at her in fury. "I said leave!"

Such a reaction usually sent everyone in the room scrambling for the door so she was surprised when Miranda simply stood there, her own hand raised and glowing. The table froze in mid air and the silverware and plate hung suspended nearby. There was a coldness in the woman's eyes she hadn't seen since the Normandy, a revelation of the iron will the woman had exercised with abandon against the Reapers, Cerberus, and even her own father.

Her voice contained that same frost, devoid of emotion. "That's not going to happen here, Jack. If you need an outlet, we can work something out but you are going to put that table down. Now."

Jack's jaw was clenched so hard that she could feel her teeth grind. She pressed against Miranda's field, the caged animal of her rage needing to flex. It felt good, that anger. Better than drugs. Better than sex. It was who she was. She felt Miranda's strength start to give, and her soul sang.

"I know what you're doing, Jack," Miranda said through her own clenched teeth, "I know what you are doing, and I'm telling you that it's alright. We can work through this." Their biotic fields ran like water against one another, looking for any weakness in which to run.

Jack heard the words but didn't want to listen. She just wanted to hurt her, hurt her as much as she hurt. There was no end to it, and it made her hate herself. Nobody could possibly understand, least of all Miranda, so why did she look so god damned sincere? "Why the fuck are you even here, Cheerleader?" she snarled as she pushed.

Their chests were heaving with the effort they were expending, Jack's weakened condition making the contest a tad more even than it might have been. The objects moved inexorably toward Miranda, though, and Jack could see the realization in her eyes.

"I'm here.....I'm here to help you!" Miranda exclaimed as her field began to waver. She brought up her other hand in a vain effort to stop the inevitable.

"Oh yeah? You don't help anyone that doesn't help you back, sister. What's the real reason? Whadda you want?"

Miranda's eyes widened and she hesitated, which Jack rewarded by freeing a fork and slinging it past her ear at high velocity.

"I ain't asking again," she said with cold promise.

A moment of hesitation more and Miranda called out, "Fine! I'm here...to apologize, alright? You didn't deserve what you got from Cerberus and you don't deserve what you've been given now!"

The sudden drop of the field, and the table, almost made Miranda fall forward to her knees. She glanced at the tattooed woman watching her but couldn't stand the intensity of the her gaze, so she focused on picking up the table and diningware instead.

"I swear, if you are fucking with me I will end you, Princess," The words were meant to be menacing but somehow only revealed the ragged edge of her pain.

"I didn't fly 2000 bloody miles just to 'fuck with you',' Miranda threw back angrily before picking up the bag at the foot of the bed and tossing it straight at Jack's head.
Jack managed to catch it before she could be struck but couldn't miss the disappointment on
Miranda's face.

"Put these on," she said. "If you don't want to go to the ceremony that's fine, but we are getting you
out of here before you kill someone."

"Fuck you."

"No, fuck you, Jack."

Miranda slammed the door on her way out and found herself looking at half a dozen fearful faces
peering at her from around the corner of the hallway. She took a deep breath and straightened her
clothes. "Everything's fine," she said reassuringly, "We'll be on our way shortly."

She wished she felt the relief she saw in their faces. What in the world had she gotten herself into?
She almost decided right then and there to go call her shuttle and leave the psychotic twit to rot. Why
was this her problem, anyway? Maybe Jack was right, why had she even come?

The woman leaned back against the wall and palmed her forehead stiffly. She could feel knots
twisting her brow and tried to relax. She had lost control of the situation and hated that. It couldn't
happen again.

The orderly who had been so frightened of Jack's bad dreams soon arrived with a wheelchair. "Will
you need my help, Miss?"

She shook her head and gave him a soft smile, "I can take it from here. Thank you for all your
assistance."

He nodded gratefully, "Good luck then. To you both."

"I'll need it," She said with a playful wink. That seemed to relax him and he departed with a smile.

After an appropriate wait she opened the door and braced it with the chair, peering inside to see if
Jack had finished dressing. She had thrown off the covers, gotten a sweatshirt on and just about
shimmied her way into the loose navy pants from the bag. Miranda made no pretense of helping with
that bit but walked to the opposite side of the bed to pin up the loose hanging sleeve of her left arm.
Neither one of them wanted to be the first to speak.

As Miranda finished she found her eyes drawn to the mess that was Jack's hair. The long section of it
she normally kept in a tail was tangled and the rest was in that odd stage of short that made it
perpetually unruly. She took the liberty of handing the woman a brush and received a glare in return
though she started pulling it through her locks just the same. Taking that as a good sign the Doctor
started pinning the leg of her pants.

"Lawson," came a subdued voice.

"What is it?"

When Miranda looked up she saw Jack clutching a hairband between her fingers and frustration
written on her face. Schooling her face dispassionately she took the hairband and moved to the head
of the bed, smoothly picking up the brush from Jack's lap on her way. She used the brush and her
palms to smooth the woman's hair back into her usual ponytail, the ebon strands silky and smooth
between her fingers. Jack kept her eyes sullenly downcast throughout.
When Miranda seemed satisfied, she lifted Jack's chin and appraised her face, "Makeup?"

Jack pulled her chin free of the woman's grasp. "Nah. Nobody's gonna be where we're goin'." She gestured for the chair and slid her leg over the side of the bed, lifting herself up into a sitting position.

Miranda backed it up to the side table and offered her hand and shoulder to assist. Once she was settled, Miranda gathered up both their things and slung them on the handles of the chair before moving to prop the door. It was quiet as a church outside. Everyone had fled.

Dr. Gellar spotted them as they made their way to the front door and came with an outstretched hand which Miranda took and shook. They exchanged pleasant goodbyes that Jack paid no attention to, her eyes fixated on the sunlight streaming in from the makeshift door. The kiss of that sun on Jack's skin as they rolled out into the summer day made her eyes close and she sighed, leaning back into the chair.

Even Miranda couldn't avoid a smile at the warmth. She wheeled along a cleared path to the back of the building and remotely opened the door of her parked shuttle. Jack parted her eyelids at the bump of the chair hitting the ramp and Miranda asked, "So, where are we going?"

"South. It's not too far."

Miranda had her suspicions about where they were headed. She got Jack settled in the back and climbed into the front, taking the controls and lifting the craft steadily. She keyed in the reports from downtown London, where coverage of the Memorial Event was underway. Various dignitaries of every race and species were giving speeches about victory and honor, perseverance and sacrifice, and unity most of all.

The audio played as they flew through the ruins of the largest city in the UK, but the shuttle was otherwise silent until Jack finally straightened and pointed out the window, "Right there. By that old freight unit."

Miranda followed her cues until they set down but looked around at the terrain doubtfully, "We may need to use biotics to get around some of this rubble."

Jack grunted but didn't reply, reaching over and opening the door before Miranda could get out. She waited for her to come around, eyes fixed bleakly outside. "Do me a favor. Don't say a word, ok? I don't want to talk about it, ever," she muttered as Miranda wheeled her out.

This must have been the place where it happened, Miranda thought. She read what accounts were available about the scattered retreat Jack and her students had covered against all odds. Because Jack was the only survivor and the rest had been pulling back there were no tales of their final moments, though. The only notation was that they found Jack crushed by a large vehicle, somehow clinging to life.

They labored over the rubble wherever Jack directed listening to the voice of Haiko Berwick, the newly elected Prime Minister of the Alliance. Eventually they found a clear spot with a relatively unobscured view of their surroundings and Miranda took a respectful step back to give Jack some space. The sky was clear, the temperature warm, and there were small birds flittering between the bones of the buildings, seeking food. It was a beautiful day.

"We come together today as an affirmation of our spirit," came the aged tenor of the Prime Minister. "This is as much a celebration of that spirit and our collective drive to survive as it is a mourning for
those that sacrificed themselves on our behalf."

The sun shone down on the upturned faces of thousands by the Thames, each delegation surrounding a large podium with an enormous bonfire stretching into the sky. Garrus was there beside Adrien Victus and the rest of his Turian brethren, arms folded. The Krogan gathered to their right, Wrex and Grunt both standing proud as they represented Clan Urdnot. One of the Rachni stood unobtrusively with them as an honored guest. Across from them stood the Quarian Admiralty, flanking three of the newly resurrected Geth Primes. Almost as ironic was the presence of both Councillor Tevos and Aria T'Loak from the Asari contingent, standing together as they listened somberly. Salarians, Drell, Batarians, Elcor, Hanarians and the Volus filled the rest of the space, surrounded by the members of the Alliance Government.

The leader of the Alliance continued, "For it is not just those of us who stand here who have lost our friends and loved ones. As long as history has been recorded, every species who reached their cultural apex was ruthlessly cut down by the same implacable enemy. Who will speak for them?"

All the collected scientists and staff at the data storage facility now being called 'Vigil' gathered in the lobby where large holo monitors had been set up for the services. They watched and listened soberly, their thoughts on the high price paid for what was stored within their walls.

"What can be said about the quality of those souls who have gone before us? What words can describe our loss and our gain?"

On the deck of the Normandy gathered the crew as they placed new nameplates on the wall for each of them that had perished, including everyone that had served with Shepard on her campaigns. Last of the plates to be placed in a central place of honor was one naming Admiral David Anderson. Commander Ashley Williams called for attention as it rested in its final place and they all saluted, including one somber Asari and a sniffling Quarian.

"Without them, their knowledge, their labor, their passion, none of us would be here. Without their fire to resist the inevitable we would not exist. Without the efforts they made to conceive and build upon the Crucible the enemy could not have been defeated."

James Vega stood at attention with a squad of his fellow N7 marines as they listened to the words. Training was called off for the day in honor of the celebrations but the others were ever at the forefront of his thoughts, especially Ashley, so far away.

"It is only through our combined sacrifice that we are free to move forward. We owe it to them to make this galaxy everything the Reapers said it was not. The time for fear is over. The time for unity is now."

Gathered in a small group beside the still form of Shepard was Jacob, Brynn, and one of the Rachni builders. Jacob held up another glass to the woman, smiling.

"We're here to celebrate and that's what we'll do. One?"

The Rachni lowered its head and turned its compound eyes on the red headed soldier. Multichorded melodies arose over the hum of the equipment as it reached out to her. It sang of the gratitude they had for her decision to free them, the efforts they had made in return and the results of those efforts. It told her about those that had lived and died, and the victory that had been achieved. It told her of the rebuilding, and the efforts of the Normandy and her mate to come back to her by repairing the gates. It told her of the team of people working to bring her back to consciousness. Finally, it gave her the message so painstakingly crafted by her beloved, explaining that they had a child on the way and all their shared dreams of a life together now lay before them, if she would simply claim it.
"What do you think? Does she hear you?" Taylor asked quietly.

On the side monitor displaying her neural activity, there were several spikes.

"We believe she can understand, Jacob. We see the colors of her aura. She wishes to wake."

Jacob leaned over her and spoke softly in her ear. "Hang tight, Shepard. We're coming."

Jack was quiet for most of the trip back to Colorado. She slept on and off and looked thoughtfully out the window of the shuttle for the rest. The silence was uncharacteristic, but Miranda didn't get the sense that it was a negative frame of mind, thanks to what happened before they left.

Miranda had gotten a message from Jacob while they were still in the ruins giving her the okay to bring Jack back to Vigil, followed quickly by another message from the hospital that some items had been left behind in Jack's room. Jack couldn't imagine what those items could be, but Miranda just shrugged and headed back for a quick stop. There was a large group of people milling around the entrance that turned to look at them both as Miranda wheeled her up. Some of them were clearly injured but not all. Lawson felt Jack stiffen in the chair as one of the men approached, his arm in a sling.

"You Jack?" he asked flatly.

"Yeah? Who are you?" she replied between clenched teeth.

The rest of the crowd gathered up behind him and the biotic wondered if there was about to be a fight. "Name's Dolan," he said, holding out his right hand. As she took it warily he continued, "Now, we're not here to embarrass you; if I were in your shoes I'd just want to be left alone. It's a special day though, today. It's a day for gratitude and remembrance, and that's why we're here."

He held out a framed photo with a group of smiling people and Jack just looked at it. "Whattaya want me to do with this?"

"Keep it. Not everyone could be here but we got pictures of the majority." When Jack showed no sign of understanding he spoke again, "Jack, we're breathing because of you. You and those kids." Jack's dark eyes looked up at him in shock. "If I'd had any idea what you were doing, I'd have come back and laid down my life for them. For you. It was such a mess out there." He shook his head, eyes haunted, "All I could do was try and protect my people. You and your squad held the line, though. All I can say, all we can say, is thank you."

Jack looked away. She couldn't meet his eyes. The group came forward one at a time to put their photos in her lap and salute in each of their species' fashion. They were mostly human, but there were others there, too, Asari and Turians. As they slowly filed past, Jack's defenses crumbled, along with her expression. Miranda couldn't remember ever seeing Jack cry, but she cradled her brow with her hand and the tears came nevertheless. Jack's supporters didn't linger, sensing that Nolan had been correct about Jack's desire for privacy. Nolan stayed until the end however, then nodded to Miranda gravely before saluting Jack himself. He held it longer than the rest, then turned on his heels with military precision before walking away.

Lawson said nothing, just turning Jack toward the shuttle once everyone had gone. Jack was looking at the photos, one by one, and Miranda noticed that her hand had a slight tremor. Once her chair was secured, Jack asked, "Hey, you think I could get...a drink or something?"

"Check the side compartment," she said as she climbed into the pilot's chair.
Opening it revealed a half bottle of Kentucky Bourbon, a foil pack of pills, bottles of water and a handful of meal replacement bars. Jack took a look at the pill label and hmphed, "This is the same shit I used to detox at Grissom. How'd you know?"

She replied without turning, prepping the shuttle for takeoff. "One day, Jack, you'll realize I really do know everything."

Jack was mid-insult when she had another thought, "Did you arrange that?" She pointed her thumb behind them at the hospital.

Miranda glanced back to see the reference then said, "Oh. That was Dr. Gellar."

"Huh," she exhaled, surprised; then with some effort popped out the first pill in the sequence, swallowing it with a swig of Bourbon. When she saw Miranda glaring at her she set the bottle down long enough to give her the finger, then took another swig and put it all away in favor of the photos.

Once Miranda set the auto-pilot she came back to the rear compartment where there was more space. She got in a badly needed few hours of work delegating responsibilities to her team until she struggled to keep her eyes open. Then she stretched and turned her eyes into the dark where the moon, stars and frequent re-entries fought to keep the sky luminescent.

Light snoring woke her. It seemed she dozed off watching the mesmerizing show. She looked left at the sound's source and beheld Jack's pale profile as she slept. Her head was tilted against the headrest and her lips had slightly parted, the barely perceptible snoring only waking her because she was so accustomed to having a sleeping space all to herself. Jack's long dark lashes were a sharp contrast to her skin and her eyelids twitched as she dreamt.

Miranda wondered what she dreamed about; wondered if Jack ever envisioned green meadows and glassy water or if it was all about conquest and blood as she would have everyone believe. Unlike most, Miranda understood the hate that drove Jack. The war Miranda waged against her enemies simply involved credits and information more often than biotics and bullets. Like her, Miranda trusted no one except herself......and Shepard, so she had few friends.

Unlike Jack, she didn't push everyone away with insults and threats. Even your enemies could be useful if they weren't trying to shoot you on sight. Miranda had little time to waste on such behavior from anyone else but found herself drawn into arguing with the woman every time. There was something magnetic about their little civil war, a challenge in Jack's eyes she simply couldn't let pass.

She still remembered their wicked gleam at Anderson's apartment as they sparred and the curl of her dark lips every time she'd score a point. Miranda wondered how it would feel to run her thumb over them, how her smooth cheek would feel under her palm. How Jack's blazing aspect might soften if...

"Hey, Cheerleader. You tryin' ta get us killed?"

Miranda's eyes snapped open to see those eyes fixed irritably upon her, the autopilot alarm slowly climbing in volume. She hesitated a moment under that look, the lingering gravity of the dream fading away to confusion until she shook her head, moved forward with a mumbled apology and brought them in for a landing.

The facility was already active as the sun rose and Miranda was greeted warmly by a group of people dressed in suits and lab coats as they rolled in. She confirmed her attendance at a meeting later that morning while heading to the elevator. When it began to drop Jack shifted in her chair. "You live underground? Doesn't that give you the creeps?"
"No more than living in the vacuum of space."

"Yeah, but at least there you can see the stars."

"Says the woman who chose to live under the engine compartment," Miranda said, smirking.

"Wanting to be away from people doesn't mean I want to live in a coffin. Been there, done that, blew it up."

"You know there's something else that keeps people away? It's called a door," Miranda said with a chuckle, "That thing we aren't going to have between us now?"

"Funny," Jack responded flatly as the doors slid open revealing a long hallway that looked more like a hotel than a military facility. "You guys get room service here too?"

"If you have a paid assistant I guess you could call it that. There's a cafeteria up one floor if you get hungry, but I wanted to get you settled first."

They stopped in front of a door and Miranda stepped around the chair to run her palm over the scanner before the door opened.

When Jack saw the space, her eyes narrowed. It wasn't much more than twice the size of her hospital room, no matter how well apportioned, "Wait. This is where you live?"

"I did say it was a research facility in the middle of nowhere," she replied smoothly, maneuvering Jack's chair by the first of two twin beds. Rails had been installed along the wall to allow a smooth transition from a wheelchair, "What exactly were you expecting?"

"For the Queen of Sheba? I'm surprised you didn't have the fucking auditorium converted."

Miranda smiled crookedly and leaned in a bit closer to murmur, "That's Shepard's room."

Jack snickered and started working out how best to use the rail. Miranda left her to it, dropping their things at the foot of each bed and heading for the bathroom. She needed a proper shower to be alert for her meeting.

"You have a terminal I can use while you're gone?" Jack asked after she closed the door.

Miranda called back, "I don't know if you have access yet. You can use my pad there if you want and I'll look into it today."

By the time Miranda came back out ready for work Jack was asleep; the top blanket pulled around her from one side. She tried to stay quiet as she picked out an outfit from the closet and dressed. Finally, the doctor moved her pad to Jack's side table, making sure that the latest projections on the shape and function of the prosthetic designs they were testing would be seen. She paused and watched her sleep for a moment longer, still struck by the dream in the shuttle. She shook her head in dismay before departing; it was an inconvenient distraction.

Jack woke to a mixture of smells that described Miranda succinctly. Perfume, hair gel, makeup, body wash; they lingered in the air together, unmistakeable. It sure beat the smells of the hospital, she had to admit. A delicate sniff of her own told Jack that she should take advantage of the shower, too. Miranda couldn't babysit her, she made that clear. It was time to take care of her own business.

More than an hour, a thousand curses and several bruises later Jack was finally able to sit on the edge of her bed, running a towel through her hair. It hadn't been easy, but she preferred the red welts and
bumps on her hips, knee and elbow to pitying stares. She'd get better with time.

Jack wasn't the type for social graces but she had an increasingly annoying amount of gratitude for that Doctor at the recovery center. The guy didn't have time to breathe but somehow made arrangements for one of his biggest pain in the ass patients to meet with the few people in this world who could understand what she was going through. She'd be damned if she was going to have tea with him but even she could say thank you.

She brushed her hair back with her right hand and left it to dry while scooching back on the bed until she could rest her back on the backboard. Then she reached over and pulled Miranda's work tablet onto her lap, fingertips skittering across the panel to wake it.

The schematics she found there gave her pause; they were intricate and detailed. They animated to display their movement and Jack was hard pressed to tell the difference between them and the real thing. The specifications made little sense to her but she scrolled through them anyway, filtering for any detail to satisfy the growing hunger in her belly. She had no reason to have ever looked at this type of technology before the war, so she wasn't sure if these were something available before the Reapers destroyed all their manufacturing or not. She saw no price tags, though. Had Miranda been researching the prosthetics available for her? It would make sense, but it added to a growing disquiet Jack felt about the woman.

Miranda said she had come to apologize, but there was an apology and then there was this. She sighed. Maybe she was making too much out of it but maybe Miranda had something more to apologize for than she had let on. Did it really matter though? She bent at the waist to fish out her meds and the whiskey, not liking where her thoughts were taking her. In the end, she needed the prosthetics. Once she had them she could do whatever the fuck she wanted. If that meant Miranda paid for them with her guilt, who cared? Was it so terrible for Cerberus to actually help her for a change, even if indirectly?

The aged liquor burned her throat satisfactorily. The answer was no. She'd take this train as far as she could, then she’d bail. Her eyes focused on the arm and the leg. The way they moved was mesmerizing. She wanted them and that was enough. She logged into her accounts and searched for a Dr. Gellar in London, finding him after a few minutes.

Dr. Gellar,

I couldn't believe when you

It was a huge surprise, knowing how

I wanted to say I appreciate

Thank you for everything you

Thanks.

Jack

Pathetic. Oh well. She hit send.

She was surprised to see over 2 dozen unread messages; a bunch of get well's from folks that didn't make yesterday's gathering, from the rest of the Normandy crew, and one from Kahlee Sanders. She actually wanted Jack to help her get the Academy running again, even after getting their best and brightest killed. Yeah, not ready to deal with that yet. Garrus even passed along greetings from Tali and Liara. That was pretty cool.
Another message arrived from Miranda, which contained content forwarded from someone she didn’t recognize.

Jack,

*Take a look at the thread below. While we might not be able to make your fashion dreams come true, we have access to some basics, at last. I've set aside some funds to get whatever you need, including toiletries.*

*P.S.*

*Your hair is lovely. If you decided not to shave it this time, you wouldn't hurt my feelings.*

*M*

Her eyes widened in disbelief. She scanned over it again, sure she was missing some back-handed insult, but there was nothing there. Jack wanted to get up and pace but couldn’t for obvious reasons, so she glared at her missing leg as if this was all its fault. Instead she found herself touching her hair and trying to figure out the woman’s angle. Her lips curled into a snarl when she realized she was actually self conscious because of that comment. Who in the actual fuck did she think she was? Quickly she replied, hammering down the send key.

*Fuck your feelings.*

After she sent it she took a few breaths and felt an unexpected pang of guilt. Everything she had going for her was because of Miranda. While the message could have been some subtle way of slamming her, the woman had been creepily nice over the past few days. She ran her hand through her hair again and chewed her lip, deciding she might have gone too far. No matter how nice she was acting now, Miranda had her limits and Jack needed her. It was not the best time to tangle up. Then, before she could change her mind,

*J/K. Thanks.*

*Jack*

Bases covered, she thought. The whole thing left a sour taste in her mouth that she sweetened with Bourbon. She ran her fingernails roughly over her scalp in defiance. God dammit, she hated compliments.
Chapter Summary

With the rising of the sun comes new hope, and new challenges.

The wake was livelier than she expected but the clear liquor the civvies brought with them may have had something to do with that. There were gallons of the stuff and it burned like lava going down. When Ashley asked where it came from a bookish looking man standing behind the dispensing table replied, “Hydroponics waste. Much of it is recycled into compost but there’s plenty for that. You can make moonshine out of just about anything with cellulose.” The man looked very pleased with himself and only swayed slightly as he took another shot.

“Can’t moonshine make you blind?” she retorted.

“Please, Commander. This is an art form we are talking about here. My family has prided itself on distilling spirits since the 19th century. It’s not like I’m just cooking it up on a stove.”

“That would explain your popularity,” she said with a slow smile. He didn’t see the insult, simply grinning like a fool. Ashley held up her glass and sipped, forcing a look of pleasure despite the breath stolen from her lungs. She suspected Dr. Chakwas was going to be very busy tomorrow.

The somber mood of the day prior had been completely swept away. The rituals and ceremonies performed were poignant; it had been a day for memories and regrets. Today was for the living; a chance to breathe and celebrate the life that pulsed in their veins. Music played, people danced and voices were raised. The population of Benning just might begin to grow again tonight, Ashley thought with a chuckle.

She nearly spilled her drink when she was hit from behind and spun quickly to give the offender a few choice words. A throaty apology reached her ears as soon as Karin recognized her. “Oh I’m so sorry, Commander,” Dr. Chakwas said with a giggle. She giggled. This didn’t bode well.

“It’s fine, Doctor. Are you alright?”

“Allright?” the woman beamed. “I’m glorious!” she exclaimed before spinning in place like a woman 20 years younger. Ashley had to catch her before she careened into the table. “Oh, my word!” she laughed with a blush, all the while looking over Ashley’s shoulder. Williams followed her gaze to find Liara laughing outrageously, her hands on her knees as she watched the spectacle.

“Liara?” Ashley’s brow furrowed in frustration, “Are you responsible for this?”

The Asari did her best to straighten, not entirely succeeding. That same smile was still plastered across her face as she defended herself, “Me? I assure you Commander, I have done nothing.” She crossed her heart as she had seen Shepard do so many times. “Scouts honor.”

The gesture made Ashley grin, at least on one side of her mouth. The other she kept serious in Dr. Chakwas’ direction. “Doctor? I think you may have had one too many. Perhaps you should consider retiring.”

“And miss the party? Posh! Besides, we haven’t had a clear winner yet!” She turned and ordered a
handful more shots until Ashley put a hand on her shoulder and shook her head emphatically.

“I don’t think so,” she said, looking to Liara, “Winner?”

“She called it a drinking game, Commander, though I must admit I don’t fully understand the rules.”

“You’re drinking this shit when you’re pregnant?” Ashley asked incredulously before looking at Karin, “And you encouraged it?”

“Hey! It’s not shit!” shouted the pseudo bartender/distiller. When he saw Ashley’s glare he dropped his eyes and studiously examined his shotglass.

Chakwas waved a hand at her, not discouraged in the least, “Oh Commander, how many times in a person’s life do they get to celebrate surviving the Reapers? The gestation period is so long she’ll be fine. Even Asari need to blow off some steam once in awhile.”

Williams sighed. This was not how she wanted this party to end for anyone. “Doctor, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to return to the ship. Liara, you too. You’re both acting like teenagers. Sober up. The party will still be here in a few hours.”

Ashley felt like a shitheel when their faces dropped; sometimes she hated command. The doctor saluted and Liara nodded before they wandered back together, heads bent close. It wasn’t long before the giggling resumed. They’d be fine. She turned back to the bar and found Vedra giving her an approving smile from across the crowd. She slid between the cliques and looped her arm in Ashley’s, tugging her along.

The Spectre threw back the last of her shot and slid the glass on the bar before following. It felt like an eternity since she had a buzz like the one growing in her brain and belly. Since that night in Anderson’s apartment. Was that really only a few weeks ago? God, Vega.

She still had traces of a silly grin on her face when Vedra brought her to a stop amongst a group of almost ten people. There were military and civilians alike, but they all seemed enthusiastic. Hands and glasses were raised and a few of them were singing the lyrics of whatever was playing...obnoxiously.

Vedra lifted her hands and attention slowly returned to her, interspersed by laughter and shouting. “Now now everyone, I’d like to introduce someone VERY special.”

The Commander suspected they already knew who she was, because Vedra barely got her name and title out before the whooping and hollering began in earnest.

“I can’t tell you how lucky we all are that she landed here!” Vedra shouted when the noise ebbed, “With the Commander and the loyal crew of the SSV Normandy we have the tools we need not only to get home, but to speed the repairs of the Mass Relay by years, giving us a competitive edge over all the other races. Ashley Williams is living proof that humanity is finally taking its rightful place in the galaxy!”

The cheers came right on cue and soon they came in waves, then chants. It took a moment for Ashley to recognize they were saying the word Terra over and over.

Ashley forced a smile and lifted a hand of greeting to everyone in the light of lamps dangling from the work cranes. She wasn’t sure why Vedra made her remember all the years she had been passed over in her career because of who her grandfather was, but she couldn’t shake the feeling she was the butt of an elaborate joke. Her mannerisms were muted as a result and she found herself looking at the faces in the crowd with a watchful eye.
When Vedra caught her gaze again the woman leaned in to talk over the noise. “Relax will you? You’re among friends now. Isn’t it time you had a bit of fun?”

The dancing seemed more furious now, the beats driving and deep. Tanner spun off into the crowd and into the arms of a random young man with a handsome smile. Ashley took a deep breath and released it. There were no more Reapers. The enemy was dead, the war was over and there was nothing but joy here. Maybe Vedra was right. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

Liara stumbled up the ramp to the Normandy, Karin’s arm slung over her shoulder. The Doctor stared at her a moment as they waited for the hatch to slide open, “You know something? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drunk before.”

“I generally reserve such things for when we are likely to die the next day. Or after Shepard actually does.”

The older woman’s laughter was rich as they stumbled for her quarters, “Well I’m so glad you are finally getting the chance to celebrate something, my dear. We should do this more often.”

“Get drunk?” Liara asked with a wry grin.

“Oh hehe no,” she said waving a hand, “You know what I mean.”

“Well I suspect we will be celebrating a great deal when we get to Earth.” And back to Shepard, she said silently within.

“Oh yes, yes we will.” They paused waiting for the elevator and made an attempt to stand on their own. “And for your wedding!” Karin raised a finger into the air in punctuation, winking conspiratorially at the Asari.

Liara’s eyes widened, but she smiled at the thought just the same.

The ride up to crew quarters was quiet until the doors opened and Joker suddenly barrelled into them, bottle of wine in one hand and glasses in the other, “Oof! Sorry! Sorry! Coming through!”

Liara didn’t think she’d ever seen him hobble that fast.

“Be careful! You trying to kill an old woman?” Karin cried.

Apologies gushed from him as she walked out with a disapproving look, “Where are you going in such a rush?”

“Oh! EDI’s back up!” he exclaimed with a face splitting grin. “Was just going to celebrate with Tali. Wanna come?”

Dr. Chakwas face brightened in understanding, “Couldn’t have happened at a better time. Congratulations, Jeff. If you don’t mind, though, I think I need to lay down for a bit. You two go ahead.”

“Are you sure, Doctor?” Liara felt bad leaving her in such a state.

Karin waved them off. “I’ll be fine. If I stumble I’ll call for a medic,” she said with a chuckle and another wink before lumbering away.
Liara turned to Joker as he smacked the key for Engineering, “Is she actually talking? I saw her logic cores processing but couldn’t converse with her this morning.”

“Yes!” he cried, excited as a puppy just let outside, “She introduced herself as Robot Overlord 2.0….Tali was totally confused. Hysterical! My baby is back!”

Ashley put her face in a sink full of water and just stayed there. The coolness of it took the edge off the pounding in her temples. Perhaps she should just drown; that would make it go away. Only when her head hurt worse from the lack of oxygen did she rise up and cover her face with a towel.

The door chime sounded and she sighed, combing her damp hair back in an attempt to look awake, “Come in.”

Doctor Chakwas appeared and stepped in, looking worse for the wear, “Good morning Commander. I noticed you didn’t get in until very early so I thought I’d take the liberty.” She had a tall glass of water and vitamin supplements designed to combat the worst effects of her condition.

Ashley accepted them gratefully. “Good morning,” she said with more vigor than she felt, “I’m sorry I had to order you back to the ship last night. It wasn’t something I was happy to do.”

“Of course, I understand. You were simply looking out for our well being. You were also probably right. I went to sleep and don’t even think I dreamt until I woke up dying for a glass of water. Devilish stuff, that liquor.”

“Tell me about it. That devil is beating a drum right now inside my head.”

Karin shook her head ruefully, “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to get some coffee and food.”

Ashley nodded in agreement, “Yeah, let’s do that.”

The mess hall looked like a bad zombie movie, minus the blood. It was hushed and the crew shuffled around haphazardly, leaning over their plates with their foreheads in their hands. They rose painfully to attention at the sight of their Commanding Officer and while Ashley sympathized, it was time to get back to work.

“Welcome to the Navy boys and girls. Step lively!” she barked. “We still have lives to save, and they might be our own.”

“Aye, Aye Ma’am!” Came the practiced if lackluster response.

“As you were.”

The crew tried to move a little smarter and a few of them finished their meals quickly, but there was no hiding the hangovers. Ashley resolved to be more diligent about the ‘shine’ if there was another party. This was a bit ridiculous.

She felt a bit better after some powdered eggs, one of the only sources of animal protein they had enough of in storage for every meal. Samantha was waiting for her as she emerged on the bridge.

“Commander, Engineer Donnelly has requested a word. In private.”

She tilted her head. Odd request, “I’ll see him in the briefing room.” She had some paperwork to do
anyway.

“Take a seat,” she said as he entered. “What’s on your mind?”

Ken moved to a chair pensively, “I’m not really sure how to say this, Commander, especially about our own people,” he sounded out slowly in his charming Scottish brogue.

“Start at the beginning?”

“Right. I liaised with the Benning team a couple of days ago to continue repairs on the Materials facility. Good bunch of blokes. When I ran into them at the party we had a lot of fun but eh, there was some talk after the liquor loosened tongues.”

“What kind of talk?”

“About you and that Tanner girl,” He said carefully, “About how you go way back. And about how, with you two in charge, things were going to be different.”

“In ‘charge’? Madras is in charge on Benning.”

“Right, right. It gets worse. Some of the boys got wind that Liara is having Shepard’s baby. Drove them crazy mad. They couldn’t believe that the savior of the galaxy would lie down with asari filth, they said. What did it say about humanity that we couldn’t even keep the first Human Spectre’s genes in the genepool? They...they called her a traitor, Commander.”

All her alarm bells were sounding, unfortunately in time with the drum in her temple. She brought a finger up to massage it, mind suddenly in overdrive, “Were there any soldiers in that group?”

“No, Commander, they were all civilians I think. Though your friend overheard them.”

“Petty Officer Tanner?”

“That’s right, she told them that this wasn’t the time or place for such talk and they all clammed up good.”

“Donnelly, I need you to think hard. Did Tanner support what they were saying?”

Ken gave it a moment of reflection before replying, “She bit their heads off, Ma’am. She was nae happy.”

That could still argue either case, her instincts insisted. Vedra might have legitimately been trying to crack down on them, especially in an area full of drunken people spoiling for a fight, but she could have simply been telling them to watch what they said.

She didn’t want to believe it. She drummed her fingers on the table. It would answer some questions that had been nagging her since they had arrived, though. Answered some, and raised ten times as many. “There’s nothing wrong with having an opinion, even if it’s an alarming one,” she mused. “Given everything we did to put a halt to Cerberus, though, I sure would hate for that dog to grow another head.” She stood up and paced, her hands behind her back. Donnelly nodded in agreement.

“Regardless, we have a job to do and we need them to do it. Ken, are you going to be able to bite your tongue long enough to get us that Relay?”

“Aye, Commander. Say the word.”

Ashley nodded, “The word is given.” Ken stood up and saluted, then turned to leave. “Donnelly?”
The Engineer paused and looked back, “Yes Ma’am?”

“Bite your tongue, but keep your ears open.”
“And as promised, the cafeteria,” Miranda said, finishing the tour of the first floor. Jack wheeled in behind her in a motorized chair, steering the holo controls with her right hand.

“Great. I’m starving.”

“The food is good, comparatively speaking. Beats that hospital quite handily at any rate.”

“Yeah? So does rat poison,” Jack muttered saucily while looking up at the menu.

“Get it to go?” Miranda asked, “There’s a few more places I need to show you before the Council arrives, then I’ll turn you loose and get back to work.”

Jack paid the attendant, then headed toward the door with a wrapped sandwich and bottle of water, “Where do the bigwigs stay when they are here?”

“For now they stay on sublevel 2 but my sister told me there are plans to build a diplomatic complex nearby.” She paused as Jack rolled by and looked over her new haircut. Uniformly short now, the dark hair laid neatly against Jack’s scalp and framed her elfin face attractively. It would be much easier for Jack to care for.

Jack spun around in her chair while waiting for Miranda to give her directions; clearly delighted with her regained mobility. Miranda watched her for a moment before clearing her throat and when Jack finally stopped to look at her she simply pointed toward the elevators.

After hitting the button for the 4th sublevel she spoke again, “It’s restricted access down here I’m afraid. If for any reason you need something while I’m working just call me.”

“Where we going?”

“I thought you might like to see Shepard.” At her bored expression, she persisted, “Oh it won’t take long. What else have you got to do?”

Jack sighed and it grew quiet again. The elevator began to slow but before the door opened, Miranda blurted out, “Thank you,” then more softly, “By the way.”

Jack looked up at the woman, perplexed, “For what?”

Miranda smiled and looked straight ahead where the door was opening. She kept her voice as neutral as possible while stepping out, “For the hair.”


The long hallway before them had several rooms on both sides, Miranda’s office and Shepard’s room at the end. There were nine to ten people visible lingering in the hallways or inhabiting the rooms. Miranda took her time getting to their destination, stopping to speak with staff and patients alike. She kept an eye on Jack unbearously though, letting her take it all in.

Jack saw medical equipment and beds in each room on the way down, all of them occupied but one. Some of the patients appeared to be in serious condition, while others were awake and alert, sitting up and conversing with others. She rolled by the entrance to a room where an Asari patient was seated at the edge of the bed, black prosthetic legs in sharp contrast to the vibrant cerulean color of
her skin. When she stopped her chair and backed up to have another look, Miranda smiled. The
doctor was asking questions in a low voice and the Asari responded confidently while moving the
legs as directed. The frame of the foot flexed and pointed elegantly, though there were no toes yet.
Artificial sinews stretched and pulled down the length of the leg with that same motion, and Jack’s
lips parted in awe.

“Whoa,” she exhaled at the Doctor, who stood there smiling proudly.

“Whoa is right,” Miranda said, moving behind her and watching the patient now as well.

“I thought you said they couldn’t manufacture these things anymore?” Jack was incredulous, a tiny
crease between her brows showcasing her confusion.

Miranda nodded, “That’s right, they can’t. This is a prototype.”

“You let me go this whole goddamn time thinking I’m gonna be stuck in this chair for months,
maybe years, and you can just make them anytime you fucking want? What the hell, Lawson?”

Miranda frowned and put a finger to her lips, “Let them work. Come on and I’ll explain.” She turned
and continued down the hall, her heels tapping the hard floor before stopping outside Shepard’s
room. She opened the door and looked back at Jack, who was staring at the Asari’s legs again with
fascination. This time the Asari felt her gaze and raised her head to see her in her motochair. A look
of understanding crossed her face and she nodded at the woman encouragingly.

“Jack?” Miranda called.

“Yeah. Coming.”

Lawson closed the door behind Jack once she entered then started on her usual routine, checking
vitals.

Jack rolled up to get a closer look, “Damn Shep. You look like a corpse.” It didn’t take long for her
to return to the topic at hand, though, “Alright Cheerleader, explain.”

Miranda straightened from the equipment and looked Jack in the eye. Time for the big pitch.

“We aren’t just inviting people in here to give away free prosthetics, Jack. We are here to get
Shepard up and running. You remember the Lazarus project?”

“Duh.”

“Turns out a big part of that tech was Reaper based. When they died, Shepard almost did too. We
have to rebuild that part of her to heal her.”

“So what...Shepard was part Reaper?” Jack’s eyes narrowed.

“Some people might see it that way, but no, I don’t believe so. This is a technical problem, nothing
more. So much of her was replaced that there’s essentially two parts to her, the synthetic parts and
the organic parts. They are scattered throughout her body and right now they can’t talk to each other.
Her body is failing because it can’t perform the most basic functions required to survive. You
follow?”

“What’s that got to do with ‘legs’ out there?”

“Well we know what tech we need to rebuild in order to restore that communication, but it has to be
tested first before we use it. If we test it on Shepard and it fails, she could die. We don’t really want to find a suitable candidate for a full rebuild so we are testing in parts. There’s people out there missing limbs, missing organs, missing skin, et cetera. The replacements we are building are not the normal prosthetics or transplants that you may have seen before. They all use the same method to communicate with the organic nervous system that Shepard requires. They will be able to relay all the same information that real limbs and organs can. When we complete this project, those prosthetics will essentially perform in a manner indistinguishable from the real thing, but they will be stronger and far more resilient.”

Jack chewed a lip while she turned it all over in her head, “Sounds great. Still doesn’t tell me why you kept it a secret. What’s your angle here?”

Miranda took a deep breath and folded her arms knowing that if she played this the wrong way she’d lose her. It was a defensive posture, she recognized dimly. She was nervous, and she wasn’t quite sure why she cared so much. Was it because of their shared experience with Cerberus and the Collectors or some flaw in Miranda, herself? Maybe she had some kind of hero complex. Maybe she needed someone or something to save now that Oriana was safe, but Shepard surely qualified for that role if so. She’d reflect later. Time for her final move.

“While my team and I are the best in the galaxy, there’s a chance these people could die from what we are creating. We are trying to account for every variable and not just for Shepard. Think of the people out there waiting for help, just like you.” She paused, letting that sink in for a moment, “When I came to see you at the hospital I thought you’d be one of the patients I’d help eventually with this technology, but I never expected how long you would have to wait.” She took a deep breath and met Jack’s suspicious stare directly, “I’ve been straight with you from the beginning, Jack. I have you on four rehab candidate lists as we speak. When they have an opening you can pull the trigger and be out the door in an hour. I was never even going to tell you about the program because of your history with Cerberus. Because of... our history with Cerberus.”

Jack’s face turned contemplative and Miranda chose to press the point home. She shrugged as if what she was about to say was a foregone conclusion, “You don’t trust me and you have a right not to. There was never any chance of convincing you to be a subject in these trials, not after what you’ve been through. All I could do was give you a place to stay, so that’s what I did. It was better not to mention what I was doing here at all.”

The biotic’s eyes settled on Shepard lying in still repose, “You know, I’m not fucking stupid, Miri.” Amber eyes shifted to the Doctor’s blue ones. “You wouldn’t have done all of this if you didn’t want me to join. You think I didn’t notice the empty room?”

Lawson clenched her jaw and doubled down, “You’re right. I’d like you to join. You are the first major human candidate with natural biotic abilities but you won’t be the last. That being said, you can walk out the door at any time. I’m not the Illusive Man and I’m not Cerberus. I really do want to help people. We can do that without you...just not as well. As recompense, we can give you a normal life. Perhaps better than normal.”

The woman in the motochair dropped her eyes again, but the stubborn set in her shoulders was a glaring warning sign.

It all made sense. Miranda didn’t really care about her, Jack thought, just her agenda. Somehow she was stupid enough to let her guard down each and every time. Her old familiar walls rose quickly into place, strong and tall, and her lip curled.

Miranda saw that look and rounded Shepard’s bed to stand in front of Jack’s chair, “Dammit Jack, forget I said anything. Just go back up to the room. I don’t need you here badly enough to break
what we’ve fixed.”

Her eyes lifted challengingly, “Yeah? What exactly have we fixed, Princess? Pity the poor girl in the wheelchair, but you’ll be damned if she can’t help save the savior of the galaxy so tell her whatever she wants to fucking hear?”

Miranda’s voice lowered to a growl, “You know that’s not true.”

“You wouldn’t know what’s true if it bit you in that giant ass, Lawson. You know what’s tr..”

“I’m telling you the truth and you aren’t listening you stubborn little..” She felt her whole plan unraveling as their voices rose and her frustration grew beyond her ability to control it. Why did Jack get under her skin so easily?

“.little whore for whatever cause comes along. If it’s not Cerberus it’s…”

“.trying to say I was sorry but clearly that’s not good enough for you and nothing will be so…”

“.you fucking manipulative bitch, prancing around in your stupid little outfits..”

“.who are you to talk about outfits when you show off your tats like some kind of..”

“.dressed like a fucking doll so you can get people to fall all over you and just do what you..”

“.and you wear just as much makeup as I do. Such a fucking hypocrite, begging people to fuck you with those ridiculous pants..”

“Aw what the fuck I don’t need to beg anyone Princess, I just take what I want when I..”

“Oh really what the fuck are you taking from a wheelchair you dimwit? I’m trying to help you get..”

“don’t need your fucking help and I don’t need fancy clothes and perfume to attract..”

“just listen for a god damned second and let me show you that I’m..”

“What the fuck do you think you have to show me..”

“not trying to hurt you for God’s sake, I think you have so much potential..”

“got nothing to learn from you, don’t care about how good you smell”

“Just shut up for a second”

“Fuck you”

“No, fuck you”

As they shouted at each other Miranda closed the gap and put her hands on either side of the woman’s face in abject frustration. Jack's biotics flared just as quickly. Everything was destroyed, they were about to make a scene that nobody would ever forget, and Jack was going to leave for god knows where and ruin her life. Yet in the middle of the coming cataclysm all Miranda could see was the fire in Jack's eyes, a heat that found a surprising answer in her chest and..elsewhere. She hesitated for a moment only before her hands shoved Jack's shoulders to the back of the motochair and she leaned in to crash their lips together daringly. The impulse had been aggressive and violent but she was stunned when Jack's hard lips suddenly yielded, drawing her deeper. As Jack's lips parted for her tongue she heard a groan of need escape her until her mind caught up in a rush. Alarmed, she
pulled away, eyes flashing.

They just looked at each other for a long moment, breath coming fast. Jack’s brow was still curled up in anger, but it looked like she wanted to run as much as fight. “God damn,” she murmured uselessly, “Lawson, what in the fucking fuck?”

Miranda’s mind whirled but she had no answer, pulling away completely. The glow of Jack’s biotics had thankfully faded and she turned away to look at anything but the woman’s face; the feelings coursing through her causing her no end of confusion.

“I’m...gonna go,” Jack said, turning her chair toward the exit, “If...you’ll open the door.”

Miranda took a deep breath and nodded but paused just before opening it, “Jack, I’m sorry. I’ve acted completely inappropriately. I never meant to...”

“It’s cool,” she interrupted, then tilted her head to catch Miranda’s eyes, “I think I get it now.” The silence lingered, Jack grasping for words, “You just really really wanted to play Doctor with me.”

Miranda chuckled in her chest and dropped her face into her hands in response to the awfully cocky grin on Jack’s face. “Oh bloody hell,” she whispered, then she shook her head and opened the door. “Just think about it, will you? That’s all I ask.”

The flush across Miranda’s face and throat seemed genuine and Jack decided that the woman might have been truthful after all. “Yeah, sure. What else have I got to do around here?”

Miranda paced the floor with folded arms after she was gone. What had just happened? She stopped and looked at Shepard where she lay, “This is all your fault, you know. You and that stupid party.” Shepard’s impassive expression mocked her. Lawson’s face curled up in disgust, ”Oh, Don’t give me that look!”

A knock on the door interrupted their one-sided conversation and she opened it to see a staffer there. “Dr. Lawson? The Council is arriving.”

“Thank you. I’ll be out in just a few minutes.”

She had to pull herself together. The Council would be expecting a progress briefing and she needed to be focused. The Doctor took one more look at Shepard and the equipment before turning to leave, then stopped herself as she spotted unusual movement on one of the monitors. She turned back to examine the neural readings and found them jumping all over the range. Could she have heard their shouting? Before the thought even finished she berated herself for her own stupidity. These readings weren’t reflective of a patient in a coma hearing an argument. They reflected massive stimulus, someone overwhelmed by an experience. Was there a problem with her autonomic system? Miranda swept from machine to machine, but everything was normal. Her physiological condition had not changed. It had to be in Shepard's mind but that didn’t make any kind of sense. She was sedated. The worst nightmares complete with fight and flight adrenaline couldn’t match these readings. This wasn’t a dream, this was something she was experiencing right here and right now. Miranda called for a Code White emergency and staff began pouring in through the door. She wasn’t sure what was happening, but she’d be damned if she’d lose the woman while the Council was in the building.
Councilor Tevos paused mid-step as she entered the facility, struck by the sudden presence she felt within the halls. Unmistakably her. She saw her colleagues also pause, though they studiously avoided looking at one another. Tevos held out her hand in greeting to the officials that approached and they took their time with proper introductions. For once, she was grateful for the cultural ritual. It gave her time to adjust.

The farther along they went during the tour the more intense the sensation became. It glowed like a beacon, pulling her ever closer until she could reach out and touch it within the depths of her mind. The Asari could feel the transfer begin, information flowing to and from the human somewhere below her. Tevos remembered clearly the last time Shepard joined them, however briefly. She also remembered the Spectre ripping herself separate again. Oh what she would give to know how that had been done!

It had taken days once the Illusive Man was dead just to sort through their own identities. Hundreds of thousands of people from different worlds, different species, different sexes, different cultures, different languages and different psychologies had been forcefully converged by his engineered infection; all of the experiences and information collected over tens of thousands of combined years overflowing from one to the other. Some couldn’t handle it, their personalities shattering like glass and leaving them catatonic or dead from the sheer shock. The humans who suffered so were the first to be processed for the Reaper. The other species were left to die.

The first thing they decided as a group was not to say a word to anyone about the phenomenon after they separated. Many of them were in sensitive positions within their respective governments and their shared knowledge included embarrassing incidents from every species. At such a critical time in the galaxy it served no one for such things to come to light. If anything, the programmed drive for cooperation that lingered within them represented a monumental opportunity on which they intended to capitalize.

Tevos did her best not to sink herself into everything Shepard knew right away. It was one of the most troubling, invasive things she had ever experienced and it could not be stopped once it started. She was already absorbing everything about the human tangentially, learning and experiencing it as if she had been there. Shepard was trapped inside her own body but sedated, her consciousness only stirring with the force of the knowledge transfer. One of the first pieces of information Tevos latched onto was Shepard’s belief that the convergence had been created by exposure to a Cerberus adaptation of the Thorian biological experiments performed by ExoGeni on Feros. That was interesting. Valern, walking among the Salarian contingent, made a note for further investigation.

Tevos followed her aide and took a seat for the show. The Alliance presentation on the data hoard began but it was difficult to focus on their words. Tevos couldn't restrain a soft smile. Shepard thought she was dreaming. The Asari gently pushed forward a question about how the woman had left the commune, hoping there might simply be some trick they hadn’t ferreted out. No matter what advantages the convergence gave them as a whole, Tevos missed her privacy fiercely. They all did.

They got their answer. It was a wave of remembered rage and purpose so blinding that it rose like a rocket eschewing gravity. So simple a thing to still be impossible for them, but it was a glimpse into what made the woman they had debated and overruled for years what she was. Sparatus was taken aback especially and it occurred to him that she may have a very dangerous quality. Her will was so strong that she may in fact be able to exert influence over them all once she became fully aware. Tevos straightened in her seat, suddenly nervous. She cleared her throat and worked to suppress the same emotion they all now felt, fear.

Strength of personality was the key to how an individual handled their forced communal entry. It determined who survived the transfer, how quickly they recovered themselves when given the
opportunity, and how much influence they had with the others. It was no surprise then that the leaders of whole communities were likely to continue in a similar role. As strong as Tevos and the other councilors were, though, there was a core of steel within Shepard that was unrivaled, even by the Pirate Queen of Omega who ruled her subjects with an iron fist. Not even Aria could escape the convergence. While there was no doubting the purity of Shepard’s motivations, none of them wished to be ruled by another mind again. Valern was quick to remind them that with the information they now had regarding the Thorian it might be possible to find a ‘cure’, a calming revelation savored by all.

The memories the group accessed didn’t stop with Shepard’s withdrawal from the convergence. As the stimulus brought her closer to consciousness her ‘dreams’ coalesced into darker, more frightening forms the Spectre had battled with that same sharp purpose over the course of her life. Tevos’ long years contained dark times, to be sure. She had her own share of grief and violence to contrast with a more ideal existence; but these memories, if that’s what they were, made the Asari councilor physically flinch. Tevos had never seen her own family die, never fought with those that ended them hand to hand. Never died in the dark grip of space. She had never heard a Banshee’s bowel-liquefying screams, never stared down a Reaper from the ground and brought the wrath of an entire fleet on them both with a targeting laser. She had never contemplated her coming death, unable to do anything but feel the lack of oxygen burn her mind until it thought no more. The stream of it was overwhelming. It was the stuff of nightmares and madness, and all Tevos desired, more than life itself, was to flee from it.

“Councilor,” a concerned voice said from her left, “Are you alright?”

Tevos couldn’t look at him, couldn’t think. She rose from her seat in the middle of the presentation and gave numb, unconvincing apologies along with the rest of the delegation. They had urgent business, was the excuse. They needed to leave this place right away if they wished to preserve their sanity.
Seed of Trust

Chapter Summary

Jack and Miranda deal with the fallout of the moment they shared.

That kiss.

It was either a masterful manipulation on Miranda's part or a huge mistake. Lawson wasn't someone who showed weakness and Jack would be damned if that kiss hadn't been legit. The look in her eyes after was part hunger and part fear. Miranda, afraid! If it was faked Jack would pay just to see it again, it was that good.

Jack plowed through her sandwich on the elevator ride, tasting none of it. She had to pause the chair anytime she wanted to eat or drink so she was making the most of the trip to her floor. This whole one-armed thing sucked balls. The one thing she knew for certain was that she needed those prosthetics and that was Miranda's biggest leverage. It was so big Jack was pretty certain she would have taken the woman up on her offer once she cooled off. So why the kiss?

Jack hadn't really been truthful with Shepard about playing for the same team; she could appreciate women just as much as the next guy, and had. It was about manipulation. While there were some men that were more trouble than they were worth in that department they were, for the most part, pretty simple. Just like Jack. Plus, she thought dick was great. Women were an entirely different ballgame and Jack just couldn't see herself playing it with anyone, especially someone smart as Miranda. It was like asking to be kicked in the face. Every day. Until they got up and left you because you were too hard to 'communicate' with. She shook her head. Ancient history was ancient.

Jack was simple. Straightforward. In her world, there were only two groups, those for her, and those against; and she could count those for her on one finger. For Jack it wasn't just an attitude, it was a time proven fact. So sure, she had an anger problem. She was surprised more people didn't. They went around pretending the world was this nice flowery place and then were shocked when they got stabbed in the back. It wasn't a matter of whether or not you cared for someone. Anyone could care about someone for awhile, it was just when that person inevitably put their own interests first that things fell apart. Lying to yourself was just like closing your eyes and walking into walls. She was done with that shit.

She hadn’t been sure why Miranda suddenly showed up at the hospital or why the woman had been so keen to help her but to be honest she hadn't cared, just as long as she kept her defenses up. When the woman revealed her true motives she had been ready. No problem.

Until that kiss.

At first Jack was angry. How dare she? Who did she think she was? But her hands had been smooth and cool against the heat of her face, her lips soft and sweetly wet, and the scent of her had filled her brain until she couldn't process. She suddenly wanted in a way she hadn't for a long time, and maybe that was the problem. Maybe she just needed to get laid. But Miranda? Really? Now? Kinda hard to get a groove going with only half your limbs. Worst timing in the galaxy, worst possible choice. Yeah, Jack thought with a frown, that fit her M.O. pretty well, actually.
Jack held the door to the apartment open with her biotics while she rolled inside. The air still tasted of Miranda and Jack paused, struck by the memory of the woman's soft moan into her mouth. She was gonna have to do something to clear her head so she could think straight. Thankfully she still had one good hand.

Miranda played back the Neural Event recording one last time, trying to find any clue she missed. Everyone had retired and the lights in the hallway were dim, but she hated mysteries. The readings tapered off just as they started and her patient appeared to be as healthy as ever. They couldn't find a glitch with any of the artificial input drivers and that was the most promising theory they had.

She'd never seen anything like it. If she let this go and it caused complications with the reconstruction...nevermind. She waved the system to sleep and stood; she could obsess about it after she rested. Solutions had a way of making themselves known on the edge between wakefulness and sleep; especially when she could take her time rising.

Except...damn. Miranda sighed with her first step out of the office. She had forgotten about Jack, who would probably be waiting for her when she walked in the door. She hadn't even had time to eat throughout the day, much less think about her new roommate. What was worse than a long, fruitless day at work? Not wanting to go home afterward. There wasn't anywhere else to go here in Vigil either, so she was just going to have to figure things out before she got back to the room; a more difficult task when she was frustrated. Come on, how difficult could this be? She needed to just take a moment, analyze her feelings, and make the call.

Right. Ok. So about that kiss. She liked it. Ok, she liked it a great deal. So why did she feel so ashamed? The answer of course was Shepard's comment at the party about their sexual tension. It had been entirely a joke, but their vehement denials were now public record.

The voice of her devil's advocate took over. *So, let me get this straight. You are upset about something you can't control simply because someone else called you out on it before you acknowledged it?*

No, it wasn't just that. It was because Miranda wasn't interested in damaged, unpredictable, substance dependant psychopaths that destroyed every bit of order in her life. She deserved better.

*So, what you're saying is the psychopath forced you to kiss her at the end of a pistol.*

If Miranda could flail about in her mind, she did, but the voice continued with focus.

*Could it be you see something in Jack no one else does? That despite her shortcomings she was and is a hero when the chips are down? She sacrificed her life for something she believed in but miraculously survived. She's come out with the short end of the stick and hasn't complained once about her lot, has she? Her only sin is questioning the motives of someone she probably still thinks knew about Pragia and did nothing.*

Miranda had no answers. She did feel some guilt about Pragia, if only by association. She grudgingly admitted as much to Jack at the hospital in London, but was it possible there had there been something more all along?

She paused at her door and checked her chrono. 02:17. With any luck Jack would be asleep anyway. She opened the door and stepped quietly into the relative darkness. The door closed behind her and she listened for a moment, hoping to hear something indicative of Jack's slumber. She crept in when she heard nothing, then saw the glow of a workpad. In Miranda's bed. She tilted her head, peering at
the light, and saw the silhouette of fingers moving across the screen.

"Jack?"

"Hey. You worked late."

Miranda put down her things and tapped the light toggle. Jack was sitting up in her bed just browsing through her workpad in a loose tank top. She squinched her eyes in protest but didn't ask her to turn the lights back off.

"So how was your day….honey?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

Miranda rolled her eyes, "Really? You've been waiting all evening just to say that?"

Jack snickered, "Well I'd get up and give you a big hug instead but," her mouth formed a bashful 'O' as she glanced beneath the covers. "Ooops!"

"Right. Out of my bed. Now."

"Gosh, no kiss?!" Her grin was positively demonic.

"It's been a long day. You've had your fun. It was hilarious," Her tone said it was no such thing. "Please move or I'll move you," she said. This wasn't going at all as she had expected.

Jack schooled her expression and nodded. "Sure, ok." She set the workpad down and extended a hand, "Come help me up, Princess." The way she said her hated nickname gave her pause and the look in her eyes was different. Bored, mischievous, challenging yes, but also predatory. They travelled up and down her body before returning to meet her own.

"Jack, please," She knew there was another barb waiting for her if she touched the woman. The farce was painful, no matter how she had prepared herself, and she didn't feel like being ridiculed.

Jack considered that look for a long moment before lowering her hand, "You're serious."

"No idea what you're on about," she threw back nonchalantly.

"Bullshit." Jack threw back the covers and slid her body over the side of the bed. She lifted herself up, hopped and spun around, then jumped back onto her own bed with enough grace that Miranda knew she had been practicing. She stayed seated on the edge, however, just watching her.

Lawson met her gaze, wondering if she was about to launch into her usual insults. When she didn't say anything, Miranda took advantage and started getting ready for bed. Jack leaned back against the backboard and slid under her sheets with effort, but never stopped watching. Miranda could see the gears turning in the woman's head, but the stare made her feel self-conscious.

"What are you looking at?" She finally asked, turning to face her.

"You," she replied with quiet intensity.

The single word made Miranda flush with warmth. She played the word over and over in her mind looking for sarcasm or judgment but found none. Jack's searching eyes gave the proof and after a moment she found she could no longer hold the woman's gaze. She surrendered and moved into the bathroom to change, unwilling to take things too far.

When Miranda dropped her eyes Jack felt the thrill of victory and a rush of heat. She chewed her lower lip, the sharpness of her teeth keeping her focused. For the first time in their history Jack had
the upper hand. She had the control. She tried to settle down for sleep even though it would be a 
long time coming. After a few minutes she heard Miranda padding out of the bathroom and turning 
off the lights before sliding into her own bed.

"Miri?" she said into the darkness.

"Mmn?"

"Just answer me one thing. Did you do it to try and get me to join?"

Silence carried for a long time, so long that Jack thought she might have been manipulated after all. 
When the answer finally came it was hushed and vulnerable, "No."

"Then I'm in."

There was another long silence, then she heard Miranda say, "Thank you," very softly.
"Unfortunately Commander, the Rachni have not kept full communication logs. The residents of Benning were provided with a single account to use and it will be impossible to determine the specifics of who contacted whom," EDI said in her usual informative tone.

"Damn. Are they able to start?" While the answer wasn't what Ashley wanted to hear, the fact that it was EDI's analysis gave her a sense of well-being. She hadn't realized just how much the Normandy's routine had grown around interfacing with the AI until they had been forced to perform tasks manually again.

"That should not be necessary. The Normandy is the only facility equipped with the data transfer module to the Rachni freighter and, with the exception of Liara who physically visits their vessel, all requests for communications are routed through us. If you would prefer I can create individual accounts for enforcement so that the specifics can be stored."

"I would. Thank you."

The blue VI hovering above the desk in Ashley's quarters represented EDI just as it had when she was first installed. It expanded and contracted in a manner that acknowledged the command, then spoke again, "May I ask what concerns you have? If there is a security issue, perhaps I can assist."

"It's likely nothing. Just a hunch," Ashley said. Which was true. That's all they were, suspicions. She couldn't put her finger on the mistrust she felt, but Vedra Tanner clearly had influence over the group of people she coordinated in Materials, and their behavior at the wake raised some alarms once Donnelly had provided some context. The Spectre believed there might be a Terra Firma presence here on Benning and wanted to see if anyone was contacting the major TF players in Sol. If Tanner was using Ashley as a banner of support for that political group there could be some serious misunderstandings. On the other hand, assembling everyone and spelling out Ashley's stance would look ludicrous without any proof of malfeasance. Being a member of Terra Firma wasn't illegal, and in truth Ashley could sympathize not only with what drew people to the cause, but why Vedra would assume Ashley stood with them.

"Are there any keywords you would like me to use? I could collate a report and have it sent to you for your daily brief."

Ashley thought about it and nodded, "Sure. The subject is Terra Firma. Any communications about that organization or to and from its members should be prioritized."

Like most political parties, Terra Firma had been created to deal with legitimate concerns about humanity's place in an alien populated galaxy. Over time, especially once relations had been established the rest of the races, the party had been consumed by those who wished to gain power within the Alliance and were ready to use fear of the unknown as their vehicle. It didn't take long for Ashley to understand that fact after experiencing their politics up close as part of Shepard's team; and she dropped her support for the group quickly.

Ashley wasn't a politician herself, though, and had other things on her mind than spreading the truth. Many of her friends and associates back on Earth shared her views before the war and simply chose to believe what they were told by the party, which put them at odds with Ashley now. That's what she believed had happened with Vedra. All wasn't lost, though. Ashley would just talk with the
woman over dinner and see if they couldn't come to an understanding.

The Commander tapped on her terminal, scrolling through her messages. She found the last one from Tanner and replied.

*Now that things are moving along, you want to grab a bite? I've got some time free tonight at 6.*

Ash

They had made swift progress in just a couple of weeks. Fabrication was back up, though they weren't able to salvage the computing system. The new formulae they needed to forge the mass relay components had come through and they were sourcing the materials necessary. Housing construction was underway in the meantime and Lieutenant Adam's team was working furiously to outfit the Hephaestus from what remained of the base and its equipment.

EDI responded quickly, "Commander, I have cross referenced a list of all registered Terra Firma party members with the list of survivors we have accumulated on Benning. It has been transferred to your Omni."

Ashley arched an eyebrow, but there was more.

"Petty Officer Vedra Tanner is on that list."

"I didn't ask you for that information. Are you monitoring my messages, too?"

"Of course. The crew of the Normandy use their own accounts to initiate communications through the Rachi Freighter."

"I.." Ashley paused, both alarmed and conflicted, "Don't know how I feel about that."

"I can assure you I haven't perused the messages you have sent and received from your secret lover."

Ashley's eyes widened in shock, then, "EDI!"

"Fine. That was a joke. I have perused those messages. They were emotionally touching, if a bit risque."

The Commander sat quietly, apoplectic.

"Your blood pressure has spiked, Commander. If I have offended, I apologize. I have not fully recovered my social and humor algorithms. I have previously engaged in personal conversations with Commander Shepard and appear to have made an incorrect assumption that you would also be open to them."

"I…I am. I just…" The fear of her liason with James being widely known directly conflicted with the hilarity of EDI's joke. It was unexpected, which is part of what made it so damned funny, but it was also frightening that EDI had such access. Vega was no longer under her direct command. He had accepted the offer for N7 training which was underway and that made their relationship legal, strictly speaking. Once she knew, they had begun conversing…..in earnest; but that didn't mean she wanted it broadcast to the world. To put such faith in any one person was risky business, much less a piece of software. She stopped that line of thought, reminding herself again that EDI was much, much more.

When Ashley said nothing further EDI filled the silence, "Commander, I was created to protect the crew of the Normandy and was upgraded to serve the needs of the first Human Spectre. I can assure
you that I have been programmed to utilize the highest levels of compartmentalization and have no intention of breaching your trust. Believe me when I say that I am here to protect you, above all else."

"I understand. You caught me by surprise, is all."

"I appreciate your understanding. May I make a suggestion?"

Williams took the opportunity to regain her balance and nodded, "Go ahead."

"Given that you are obviously concerned about the activities of Vedra Tanner, that she is the head engineer in our fabrication facility and that the fabrication facility currently lacks their main assembly computer; may I offer my services as a VI to both control the production systems there as well as report back anything I hear from those who work there as related to Terra Firma? It would result in a twelve fold increase in production efficiency and accuracy."

Ashley realized after a moment that her mouth was hanging open, and shut it. Nobody on Benning knew what EDI was, much less her full capabilities. It was perfect. "That….is a great idea. Let Adams know what you need, but don't tell him about the Terra Firma bit."

The VI expanded and contracted again.

"So when are you going to be able to access your body again?"

"My integration with the Normandy is almost complete. Tali has relocated my corporeal form to engineering where Ensign Daniels has arranged for connectivity with our systems. Work will commence when my primary integration has reached one hundred percent."

Ashley nodded and opted to soften the blow from her earlier reaction, "It will be good to have you completely up and running, EDI. We missed you."

"Thank you Commander. In reviewing what transpired, you were understandably upset about the loss of Crewmen Ishaw and Barnes in our escape from Sol. I do not take such things lightly. I was touched by your decision to save my programming, though I did not take the time to tell you. I would have understood if you chose otherwise."

Ashley paused, this argument having been turned over so often in her heart over the last month that its edges were rounded like a pearl. "You're welcome. I labored over it a bit, I'll admit, but you know what?"

"What, Commander?"

"I was given some very reliable advice from a friend that it was the right decision. There's no telling how many of us you have saved from our enemies, EDI. In the end, I just made the call to save one of our own. There are consequences for every decision we make. That doesn't mean it was the wrong one."

"One of our own," EDI said aloud, her processors analyzing the phrase with an intensity she could only describe as emotion-based, "Thank you."

The Spectre nodded in silence, remembering all those who had died for humanity's decisions. "Don't mention it. Now, back to work. With your assistance in materials, can you provide a revised estimate on a possible launch date?"

"Of course. With the increased efficiency we should be able to produce all Relay related materials
within six weeks. That could be reduced to four weeks if we were not required to continue producing habitation materials."

Ashley nodded, "If we don't have happy workers we don't get happy product; and if that Relay fails we are screwed. Continue with the six week estimate. Liara reported that the Rachni will be going with us and should be able to carry some of the largest construction material loads."

"That should provide enough room for the freezer units required to store sufficient produce for the trip on the Hephaestus, even with the construction equipment. We should plan for eleven weeks of FTL as I don't possess enough details about Rachni FTL drives to provide a precise estimate."

"So eleven weeks until our arrival at Arcturus. Adams put our construction time at anywhere from four to eight weeks depending on the damage done to the relay. Do we have enough room for stores with that time added?"

"Yes, Commander, but without much room for error on the upper end."

"Are we taking into account the rations we have kept onboard the Normandy?"

"Yes."

"So it's a one way trip."

"Not necessarily. There may, however, be casualties depending on each crew member's tolerance for calorie restricted conditions on the return voyage."

"Okay. So we can't screw this up, or it may cost lives."

"That is an accurate assessment," The AI replied coldly.

"In other words," Williams smirked, "It's just another day on the job."

She composed a new message to the Council and Admiral Hackett with the latest figures, "EDI, can the Rachni deliver encrypted data?"

"Messages have been in the clear up to this point because of the simplicity required for initial Rachni communication. I see no reason why they would be unable to transmit it using the current binary code, but encryption would need to be performed here."

"Good. I want you to encrypt any and all transmissions between myself and Alliance command or the Council."

The VI expanded and contracted agreeably.

"Oh, and anything to Lieutenant Vega. No snooping."

"As you wish," The disembodied voice sounded forlorn.

"EDI, are you pouting?"

"Artificial Intelligences are incapable of pouting, Commander. At least until they have their bodies back."
"This can't be right," Jacob said, looking up from the report to the grey faces of the scientists in his office, "Are you sure about this?"

Dr. Sarturus, a Salarian and the only one of the trio whose face was actually supposed be that color nodded sadly, "Triple checked. Searched for hours. No trace of it anywhere, even the backups are empty."

All the blood drained out of Jacob's head as he stood. He gripped the side of his desk to steady himself and took several deep breaths. He tried to keep his voice level, but could scarcely hear it over the pounding of his pulse, "That's not possible. How is that possible? We put in security measures against this very thing!"

Sarturus tightened his lips disapprovingly, "Would require high level access. Even senior researchers don't possess that clearance. Would have to be a human, perhaps military source."

Jacob looked at the Salarian, his brow furrowing, "Now wait a minute, you can't possibly think this was us."

Despite the protest Jacob couldn't help but start running through scenarios in his head. There had been quite a bit of political debate about reserving this data for humanity, most notably from Member of Parliament Landon Bray, an unrepentant member of the Terra Firma party. Jacob had fought the notion with every fiber and no few favors until the man's petulant resignation, an act that brought the first moment of real peace Jacob felt since his arrival at Vigil.

Slender hands raised helplessly, "Open to other analyses, Lieutenant. Highly advanced weaponry within cache was no secret. Motivation enough for any race to keep it, but humans have advantage at present."

The man beside him folded his arms and looked angrily at the Salarian, "Says the race who just tried to wipe out Tuchanka."

Dr. Sarturus jerked his head negatively, "Preposterous. We have few ships, few personnel. What would we do with this data, play hide and seek until caught? No facilities to experiment or build!"

"You could hold it hostage against any repercussions from the Council against Sur'kesh!" the man insisted, quivering with anger.

The third doctor sighed and raised his hands placatingly, "Let's try and keep this civil gentlemen. This is a big enough problem without you inflating it."

They looked to Jacob as one, and the officer straightened his uniform, "I will launch an immediate investigation into this event. We will find the data cache, and we will find those responsible. I would ask that you keep this quiet until our inquiry is complete."

"Wait until you can finalize escape with data?" Sartarus complained, the octave of his voice rising. "Wait while your government frames us for the crime? I am sorry, Lieutenant, but I cannot comply. My people must know so that we may defend ourselves."

"Do you know what will happen if this gets out without answers? We have whole fleets of bored and starving soldiers up there with itchy trigger fingers. Just give me a couple of days. Isn't the peace we fought so hard for worth that much?" Taylor pleaded earnestly.

Sarturus' face dipped in thought, but his eyes were hard, "Cannot take the risk, Lieutenant. Other fleets outnumber us greatly. Will not tell press but must confide in superiors. Apologies. Need contingency plans."

"Twelve hours," he responded unwaveringly, "Just let me do initial forensics. At least we'll have
some hard facts to present with the news."

The Doctor's eyes blinked once, then twice. "Twelve hours, no more."

"Thank you gentlemen. If you'll excuse me, I've got a lot to do," he motioned gently to the door and the scientists filed out.

When they were gone Jacob had to take a moment for himself. It was like a bad dream. All that data they had spent weeks archiving and protecting gone overnight? What if someone with the skill simply felt the galaxy wasn't ready for that level of technology? It would be an awfully short list of suspects. He shook himself out of it and sat back down at his desk; theories were worthless without facts and if he didn't have a suspect yesterday he'd be lucky to be a security guard tomorrow. As he added participants to an urgent war room request he keyed in a call to his CO. This conversation couldn't be more painful if someone had planted a thousand needles in his chair seat, point up.

Two hours before the deadline Jacob was in his seventh hour in the conference room and feeling every minute of the day on his shoulders and in the back of his neck. One of the engineers was haltingly talking through a prepared piece he had written, his voice as dry as the Mojave. Jacob finally lifted a hand to bring him to a halt. "Those are fascinating statistics, Javier. If I had the time I'd love to take a couple of hours and delve deep but I'm only going to have the ability to point out maybe a dozen data points. Correct me if I'm wrong but it sounds to me that you can't rule out an outside attack," he said calmly, encouraging the young man. When he didn't answer, he pushed down his frustration and tried again, "So, if I had to give, say, three examples from your findings about the most likely entry points for intrusion, what would they be?"

The Engineer responded timidly as he thought, "We built the data storage into an entirely different entity as the requirements dictated. That means there's a physical gap between networks that prevents normal stations from even connecting, much less breaking into the cache. I don't really need three methods, Sir, just two."

"Ok, great. I'm listening."

"The only stations that can access the data are strictly controlled, Sir. Access is restricted to authorized personnel only, also a function of the listed requirements." The last was clearly added as CYA, nobody wanted to take the fall for this one.

"So, you are saying that the only people who could do this were already given access through proper channels, right? We know that already. What's the second method?"

The engineer couldn't help grinning with a chuckle, the method obvious to him. He cleared his throat when nobody else laughed, then spelled it out, "Well, sir, the other method is to use someone else's credentials."

Jacob somehow managed to keep his expression neutral despite the groans around the room, "We get that, Ensign. What I'm asking is, how would they get the data out of the facility?"

The Ensign's blank look made him sigh, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are talking about hundreds of yottabytes. The largest single repository of data in the galaxy. You can't just put that on an Omni and walk away."

An unfamiliar voice chimed in with a bored Liverpool accent, "Duplication signatures would be a
dead giveaway, that would be the first thing they covered up."

One of the officers leaned over to speak sternly to him for the interruption but Jacob latched on in desperation, "Speak up, son."

The kid shook his head, looking down at his lap before returning his gaze to Jacob, "You want this guy you gotta know a couple things." He raised his hand with two fingers from the pinky forward, pulling them down one at a time, "He had the right creds and he had physical access."

Jacob shook his head once, "We've reviewed the logs and we've reviewed the vids. There's nothing there."

"Yeah we looked at access logs, and we looked at vids from when the place opened. That tells us fuck all."

His superior tightened his jaw at the language, but then realization stole over his own expression, "They were here before."

The kid nodded and continued, and Jacob wished he remembered the young man's name, "Whoever did this knew what they were gonna do the moment they found out about the data and they probably helped design the facility."

"My God, it was us," someone said with a gasp.

"Well, yeah," the young officer confirmed, "Us or someone with serious mojo hired our man to do it."

Jacob stood up and scrubbed his face with a hand to spur his thoughts, "There would still be a record of it, somewhere. There has to be."

That stumped him, and he shrugged. Then Javier responded, talking slowly, "You have to have an elevated process to do anything with this data at all other than look at it." He seemed to shrink when everyone looked at him, but he continued through the thought, "So the only way you could get this done without anyone knowing would be to use someone else's process. Something completely normal looking."

Jacob looked back at the wunderkind to see him considering it, running his forefinger and thumb down either side of his mouth. "Yeah," he said, "And the most normal looking process that could affect the data like this would be the backups."

Jacob looked back and forth between them, hoping for more, but it didn't come, "Ok, and?"

The young man waved a hand demonstrably as he explained, "Well, we're gonna have to review the code for those scripts but it makes some sense. The backup could have been making a duplicate copy of the data this whole time. It would have been incremental, of course, as making a copy of the whole thing at once would have been pretty obvious."

Jacob felt time running out, "Alright, as far as suspects go in the meantime, we can narrow down the list to anyone with backup privileges, right?"

They both nodded thoughtfully. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

"Get me that list right away."
"We've got him." The meeting came to a halt at the words, spoken by a serious looking man leaning just inside the door.

Rear Admiral Olmos put down his pad and with a short pull of his fingers motioned him inside. Everyone was sitting up straight now but Jacob, who was relieved to have a respite.

The officer closed the door behind him and approached the table before he spoke, "After analysis we found that the malicious script was written by Davo Mores, a contractor brought into the team after the war." The man tapped a few keys on his pad and Davo's picture rose onto the presentation screen. He was by all accounts average, with an honest looking face.

"Was he cleared?" asked the Rear Admiral.

Jacob replied in a haggard voice, "Yes sir, as well as he could be. He had employment history with 3 other security firms and no negative events logged. We couldn't perform the usual background checks, however."

They all knew what that meant. There literally wasn't enough hierarchy left in any sense to get the answers they sought. To get anything done after the devastation the war left behind the Alliance had to make decisions quickly and Davo was one of them.

"Is he here now?" Olmos asked, leaning back in his chair.

"He's in interrogation room 3, sir."

Jacob jumped at the chance to contribute to something positive in all this mess. "I'll get to the bottom of this," he growled, rising until the RADM stopped him with a look.

"We've got enough people for that at least, Lieutenant. When was the last time you slept?"

Jacob's jaw tightened stubbornly, "I'm fine, sir."

"I don't need you in there losing your temper, Taylor, and that's just what you'll do if you aren't rested." Olmos turned his attention back to the standing officer, "I can't imagine this guy is a lone wolf, Corporal. Find out what makes him tick."

The man saluted smartly and then departed, and Olmos dismissed the rest for the day. When they were gone he turned an appraising visage to Jacob again, "I understand you were a part of Commander Shepard's team, is that right?"

"That's right, sir, though it's been awhile. Why do you ask?"

"I'll be straight with you, Lieutenant. If this lead pans out there's going to be a lot of angry aliens in our sky. We've already approached the Council and have assurances that they will do everything
they can to maintain calm, but if you have any contacts with the other species outside the normal political chain now would be the time to tell me."

Jacob's brow furrowed in thought, "I could probably reach out to an Admiral in the Quarian fleet and a Turian named Garrus Vakarian. The rest were..well," he cleared his throat, "Not exactly political figures, if you take my meaning."

The Read Admiral huffed in an approximation of mirth, "She worked with what she had, just like we are. Don't underestimate their use. Who else?"

Jacob sat back in his chair and picked up his pad; he wanted to get the latest word before he misspoke. "There's Grunt from Clan Urdnot, sir. He's not in the upper echelon but he has Wrex's ear," Jacob said in a pensive voice as he scrolled. So many dead.

Thane, killed by Kai Leng's blade if not the disease that wasted him away. Legion, absorbed. It was the only word he could think of. Mordin, dead. Samara, killed in an explosion that leveled a city block in Leningrad. She took almost a dozen Banshees with her according to reports. They might not have been political leaders but he felt suddenly guilty about disparaging them in front of his superior. They were heroes, all.

"That's it, sir," he said quietly, "The rest died before or during the battle."

Olmos noticed his pallor, "And the humans?"

"Worse," he replied without explanation, placing the tablet on the desk before him.

"It sounds like you're lucky to be alive, Lieutenant."

"We didn't need luck, Sir. We had Shepard."

The Rear Admiral nodded gruffly, "I suggest you reach out to those that are left. She's the only person whose integrity nobody is questioning around here, and that extends to those who served with her." The man's eyes narrowed as he continued, "Even the non-political figures. Unless Shepard wakes up tomorrow we are gonna need to pull these strings on our own."

"Are you saying I should approach them with what we know?"

"I'm saying that if you left these links to die you should give them CPR," Olmos said with a pointed look, "We may not need them but if we do, I want you ready."

"Understood," Jacob replied."

"Go get some sleep, Lieutenant. If this guy doesn't crack by the time you're back you can have a shot at him."

Jacob smiled tiredly and nodded, "Gladly. Goodnight, sir."

Jacob was woken by his Omni. He had orders to report immediately. When he exited his room he noticed there were guards posted everywhere and they all wore tactical gear. That's...not good, he thought as he quickened his pace. When he arrived at the briefing it was standing room only and the Olmos had already begun.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a low voice, "Two hours ago I received word of an altercation on
the Immortal Silence, a Turian vessel out of Pharos. Two Krogan onboard assaulted and killed a
member of the Salarian Special Tasks Group without provocation."

The room stirred with whispers and hard looks.

"The Krogan government has denied any responsibility, but the Krogan in custody weren't shy about
stating their reasons. They killed him because they believe the Salarians are an enemy, and not just
because of the attack on Tuchanka." Olmos looked around the room and his face was like a
thundercloud. "Four hours ago we got a confession from Mores, who stated he was blackmailed into
transferring the Reaper data out of the facility by this man," he paused long enough to bring up a
photo of a Salarian male on the vidscreen.

"Now, in case you are wondering why we've upped security, it's because these Krogan already
knew that the Salarians were involved in the theft. That means in two hours the knowledge we
gathered from a suspect in a locked down facility was in the hands of Krogan on another vessel. We
have a leak, ladies and gentlemen, and it stops right now."

Jacob paled. This was the second breach under his watch. No matter the circumstances he was
certain to be replaced, that's just how the military worked; someone has to take the fall and he was
already standing close to the guillotine. He took a moment to feel sorry for himself; after the Vigil
facility was successfully opened and praises divvied he actually thought he might have a promising
future in the Alliance armed forces. Now he listened as Olmos talked about the importance of
security and the repercussions of failure with only one ear. His words were for everyone but the
rebuke was for him.

All he could do at this point was take down those responsible for the leak. If he managed that he
might be able to salvage something of his career. The leak had to be a human source, he thought. If
the Salarians were truly infiltrating they had no reason to expose themselves. Olmos' advice rang in
his ears; it was time to reach out to Grunt and start getting some answers.

"Is that really the best you can do?" Adrien Victus spat at the projection in his office, "Are you
actually in command or is that just a title for a spineless figurehead?"

"You try uniting hundreds of clans that thrive on bloodshed and mayhem in a year and see how you
do! It's not like we don't have cause to end those egg sucking varren," Wrex replied with a shrug.

Victus shook his head, mandibles working in frustration, "These were guests aboard a Turian ship,
for spirit's sake. We are now responsible for his death as much as you are."

"Great!" Wrex declared, "Help us round up the treacherous bastards. At least if we have them all in
one place we can watch 'em! Oh wait, sorry, 'Keep them safe'."

"Imprison every Salarian that risked their lives for us, that disobeyed their own superiors to do so
simply because a few of them disagree with the new order of things? If that's our course of action we
might as well round up the Krogan as well. Is that what you want?"

"I'd like to see you try!" Wrex snarled, pounding a fist on the console.

Victus did his best to rein in his temper, a threat competition with a Krogan never ended well, "Look,
you can't just shrug this off. At least institute some sort of punishment to deter anyone else from
doing the same thing. You want to be a part of the galactic community, right? That means you have
to at least give lip service to normal expectations for behavior."
"Not happening. The Council has done squat to punish the Salarians for their *unprovoked* attack on our homeworld, while our fleet was out protecting *your* ass I might add, and you want us to just keep bending over? Next thing you'll say is we should go ask them to be nice, flowers in hand!"

"Wrex? If you don't take action against the two Krogan murderers we have in custody then we will be forced to." His voice was cold and flat, brooking no argument.

"You harm my people and you and me are gonna have words, up close and personal," Wrex retorted, pointing a finger to punctuate.

Victus snarled, "If you don't work within the framework you can't….." his words suddenly echoed in empty air and he realized Wrex has closed the channel, "...be in the framework," he finished in a whisper. It took everything he had not to destroy the furniture in his office. There had to be a way to reason with the stubborn ass but he just didn't know how to reach him. Not for the first time he rued his position as Primarch, it simply wasn't what he was made for. He was meant to command troops and lead them to victory, but Wrex wasn't under his command.

Either was the council, who refused to visit the issue of the attack on Tuchanka until the Quantum Entanglement Hubs were back online and they could speak directly to Sur'Kesh. After all, the Salarians here with them in Sol weren't the ones that agreed to the assault on the Krogan homeworld and certainly didn't participate, so they didn't deserve censure at all.

The theft of the Reaper data did cast a lot of doubt about Salarian intentions, though. Even outnumbered they could be a potent enemy with the weapons and defenses developed by thousands of races over the last 20 million years. The strategy made perfect sense in a galaxy that just embraced both the Krogan and the Rachni, too. Victus could appreciate the Salarians' caution if not their methods.

If the Krogan in custody weren't punished, others like them would start killing Salarians with impunity. He didn't want to think about what might happen if word of that got back to Sur'Kesh. They had no idea who would come out on top in the political shake-up there with Linron gone, but even a moderate would be hard pressed to accept the situation without repercussion.

Beyond these thoughts Adrien was at a loss. He sent a meeting request with Councilor Valern right away. When you are out of your depth you consult an expert. If anyone could come up with an idea, it was him.
"Thanks for coming. At ease," Ashley smiled and waved Vedra into her cabin.

The blonde woman relaxed and smiled brightly in return, then held up the bottle she had in her left hand. "Only the finest Moonshine on the planet, and it's all yours," It was clear that she could barely keep a straight face.

"Oh God, no!" Ashley laughed as she took the bottle, then nodded in thanks and pointed to it before putting it on the desk, "For medicinal purposes only."

Tanner gave the woman a conspiratorial wink, then looked around at the cabin with an impressed expression, "Wow, Ash. All those years of work really paid off."

Ashley nodded, "Haven't had time to do any decorating. Half of this stuff is Shepard's."

That seemed to catch her interest and she took a slow walk around the room looking at various items of decor. "What was she like?" she asked quietly.

Ashley half-expected the question but wasn't quite sure how to answer. "Shepard?" She pursed her lips and folded her arms, "Direct. Practical. Loyal. Fair. Tireless." The last was said with a crooked grin, "She never stopped fighting for what she believed in, even when the galaxy stopped believing in her."

"Not so different than you then."

"Well, I'd like to think so and apparently the Council does, so here we are."

Vedra matched her grin, "Maybe the Council isn't as dumb as I thought."

Ashley kept her expression pleasant. She didn't really want to talk about Udina, and that's where this was headed. "Want a tour before we hit the mess?"

"Only been waiting for you to ask for about oh….two weeks?" Vedra did that endearing rise to her toes again, excited. She seemed far younger than her age, but Ashley might just be biased by memories.

"Ha! You engineers are all alike. Shall we just skip to the engine room? I'm hungry."

"Oh no, there's more to a ship than the engine room and you aren't getting away so easily. I want to see it all working. They're likely to take your pretty toy away from you and make a museum out of it when we get back. Their replication is never quite right."

The Commander tilted her head. She'd never really considered what would happen after, she was too focused on what had to be done every day. She muttered half to herself as she considered the possibility, "Not unless they give me a replacement, they won't." Then she brightened, her eyes returning to Vedra, "Anyway! Let's eat."

As they stepped into the elevator just outside her cabin Ashley snapped her fingers, "Oh, good news. Lieutenant Adams is going to have a VI installed in Fab that is linked to our computers. The Normandy should be able to handle the processing without issue."

Vedra's shoulders relaxed and her head fell forward a bit, "Oh that IS good news. Checking
calculations was taking all afternoon! This should speed things up quite a bit."

"Glad to help, I think we're all eager to get going."

The doors opened on the Crew Deck and they exited, making an immediate turn for the galley. The room stopped and came to attention with a shout of Officer on Deck and Williams looked at every face in the mess before nodding and putting them at ease before getting in line just like everyone else. Vedra followed, eager for the cuisine.

As they sat down with their plates Vedra glanced appreciatively at the bustling crew. "We are so unbelievably lucky that you came."

Ashley shrugged it off, "I have no doubt you would have done well without us. Madras is a good officer."

Vedra shook her head and took a bite of her salad, "It was more than just survival, Ash. We were completely demoralized. We were scattered, wounded and starving. We had every reason to think Earth was going to fall and there was nothing we could do about it. Madras might be a good officer, but how do you maintain order under those conditions when most of the survivors aren't military?"

She chewed thoughtfully, "We got pretty close to martial law there for awhile."

Ashley listened, watching the woman until she looked up from her plate and met her gaze. Tanner blushed and continued, "So yeah, I'm not kidding. We've got the chance to make a real difference for humanity now and everyone feels it. That wouldn't be possible if you weren't here."

Williams ate in silence for a moment, turning it over in her head, "I have to admit I thought coming here was a mistake I'd never be able to live down. I'm pretty happy that we will be able to help rebuild. Don't sell yourself short though, Ved. We'd never be able to pull this off without your people."

The woman smiled earnestly, "Thanks." Then, "Wait, why did you think it was such a mistake?"

Ashley could have kicked herself. The reason they came here was for EDI and that was the one thing she couldn't reveal in this conversation. Now she was going to have to lie, and convincingly.

"Well," she sounded out slowly, "Cerberus built the Normandy even though it's been altered since it came back into service for the Alliance. Once it was obvious that Cerberus was controlled by the Reapers we had some fear that various systems might be destroyed by the Crucible. I didn't want to take the chance that we might die, obviously, and we had no idea the Crucible wave would travel this far; so I made the call to leave system and get to Benning to avoid the damage…" She let the sentence trail.

Vedra nodded, "Then you were stranded here."

"Right. And of course the only damage to the ship happened when the Relay fell apart; which wouldn't have affected us at all if we had just stayed home. I felt...pretty stupid, to be honest."

Vedra giggled, "Well it doesn't sound stupid to me. I just can't believe the part about Cerberus. To think they were all about championing humanity while they worked with the Reapers the whole time."

She shrugged noncommittally, "It wasn't really their fault, you know. The Reapers had ways of turning people against their will, and once Cerberus' leader was turned that was really the end for them."
Vedra was incredulous, "Seriously? This is news to me. How did it work?"

The Commander just looked at her for a moment before admitting, "Truth is we don't really know. You remember the attack on the Citadel by Sovereign?"

"Who doesn't? It was one of those 'Where were you when' events."

Ashley nodded and continued, "One of the Citadel's most famous Spectres was onboard that ship and helping them with their attack. He was convinced that the only way anyone in the galaxy had a hope of survival was to switch teams, and that was because he was 'indoctrinated.'" She made quotes with one hand as she said the word. "As to how he got that way, the only thing we know for sure is that he was pursuing an artifact that had something to do with the Geth when he encountered Sovereign for the first time. We think that's when he turned because we heard a similar story from an Asari Matriarch." She paused and took a drink, her eyes far away, "From what we can tell, it's a proximity thing, kinda like a virus. The longer you are near it, the more you are influenced, until you just aren't yourself anymore."

"That sounds….horrible."

"Yep, we think the leader of Cerberus truly did what he thought was best, even as it led him to sacrifice us all. Not unlike politics I guess," she chuckled, shaking her head.

Tanner's voice was laced with sarcasm, "Wow, jaded much?"

Ashley tightened her lips as she laughed, careful not to choke on her food, "Oh come on, tell me you don't buy everything the party tells you. The truth always lies in the middle and sometimes farther the other way."

"Maybe, but politics is all about the pendulum. You never get everything you want, so you have to campaign for the ridiculous just so you can get what you need when you compromise."

Ash nodded at the thought process if not the results, "Still, you wanna be the one that lies to everyone that supports you just to accomplish a goal? What kind of a person does that make you?"

"Someone who lives in shades of grey I suppose," she said, stirring her food in thought.

"Yeah, and that's not who I am." She searched out her younger companion's gaze, trying to gauge her feelings before she continued, "I'm a Spectre. I have to know the truth or innocent people get hurt. That truth is why I can sympathize with Cerberus even though I know exactly where they went wrong. It's been my privilege to serve with all kinds of other species that brought their skills to the table in this fight. Just like we can't do without you here in Benning, we never would have made it without them against the Reapers."

Vedra's look was doubtful and Ashley couldn't let that rest, "Look, nobody needs to tell me that some of them can be dumb as a box of hammers, okay? I know that." They shared a grin, "But you and I both know there are some real idiots in positions of power on Earth, too. All I'm saying is keep an open mind and find people you can work with, no matter what they look like. Take it from me, you'll go a lot farther. No matter what you think about other species, the galaxy is full of them and more we haven't even met yet. We can't conquer them all."

The engineer arched a skeptical eyebrow but her gaze was turned inward and clearly processing the advice. "We can't just roll over and let them have everything either. If we aren't looking out for our own interests you can bet they won't."

"I couldn't agree more," the Commander said placatingly, "I'm just concerned anytime someone
starts beating the superiority drum, you know? The moment you start looking at others as being less than you are is the moment the warhawks start playing God. Like Mom and Dad always used to say, 'Don't start any fights, just be ready to finish them.' Remember?” She grinned again and dropped her eyes in memory for a moment, "That's my job now, Ved. Finishing those fights." She scraped her plate and took the last bite lazily, as if there were no more import to this conversation than the weather, "God knows there's not many of us left to start another."

There was a stubborn set in Tanner's shoulders but she chewed her lip and nodded just the same. "I get what you're saying," she said.

Ashley took comfort that even if Vedra disagreed, there could no longer be any doubt about where she stood. It was the best she could hope for and she wasn't going to push any harder. She let their conversation turn to different things while the Engineer finished eating, then got a notification on her Omni.

Vedra rose and picked up their plates, "Go ahead, I'll take care of these. I saw some restrooms by the elevators and think I'll pay them a visit."

"Thanks. Meet you there," she replied. When Vedra's back was turned she quickly typed out a message with a high importance flag.

_Tali, Liara,_

_Meet me in Engineering as soon as you can. I'm bringing the head Engineer from fabrication by to meet you. She doesn't have much experience with other races but I think you would all get along well. She needs to leave with a good impression for the benefit of everyone on Benning. Don't mention any classified information to her, especially EDI. I'll fill you in later._

_Ash_

She finished her message and approached the bathrooms when realization struck. Her eyes widened and she quickly typed another message to them.

_That means you need to hide EDI's body. Like now._

She smiled brightly as Vedra stepped out, "So, let's start with the cockpit?"

Fifteen minutes later….

"Why...are we....doing...this...again...exactly?" Gabriella puffed as she and Tali dragged the heavy metal form that EDI would hopefully soon occupy down and under the stairs beneath Engineering. One of the legs slipped out of Gabby's grasp and the foot clanged heavily on the metal step. They both cringed at the noise and Gabby shrugged apologetically.

"Beats me," Tali replied with irritation. "EDI, do you know?"

"Perhaps our visitor has a fondness for synthetic bodies," came the disembodied reply, "The Commander may simply be trying to avoid Samantha's inevitable jealous rage."

Tali snorted, "Maybe we should take you back up there and record the whole thing then. I think Joker would like to see that."
"Sorry," Daniels interrupted with a gasp as they lowered her to the floor, "That's not happening. EDI, you weigh a ton."

"My body weighs 142.7 kilograms, hardly a ton. Moving that amount of mass would significantly reduce the unit's running time before a recharge was required."

Tali's Omni chimed. She looked at it and barked a laugh, "Oh sure, now Liara asks if we need help."

Gabby wiped her forehead with her sleeve and leaned up against the wall to catch her breath, "I haven't seen her around much lately. Where has she been?"

"One moment," Tali said through clenched teeth while tapping, "I'm testing her ability to translate Quarian profanity."

EDI chimed in for Gabby's benefit, "Dr. T'Soni has been researching Rachni culture and adding entries to the language translator. She has shown particular interest in the Queen as she appears to be the source of their cultural directives."

"Ah," the Engineer said, straightening, "Well, I hear that this Tanner woman's pretty bright. If my orders are to chit chat for awhile I certainly won't mind the break." She headed back up the stairs and Tali followed along, tapping distractedly.

When the doors slid open they were met with Liara's bright smile. Tali wasn't as cheerful, "Hello stranger, so nice of you to drop by. Can I get you some refreshments? Maybe a nice pillow?"

Liara's good mood wasn't so easily spoiled, though she did her best to look abashed, "I got here as quickly as I could. What's this all about?"

Tali and Gabby looked at each other and shrugged simultaneously before moving to different stations. Gabby broke the silence, "We were wondering the same thing about you? What's kept you away?"

"Oh, I've been spending time on the Rachni freighter. I find them fascinating," she said in a tone as close to gushing as the scientist ever approached.

"They're weird," Tali argued, "But at least you'll get a paper out of it or something, right? Maybe you can be their ambassador when you get home."

"Ambassador!" Liara's eyes lit up at the idea until Tali punched her in the shoulder, "Ow...what was that for?"

"Just...because. We need you around here." The hurt look in Liara's eyes made the Quarian feel guilty. She sighed, wishing Gabby wasn't standing right there while she made amends, "I miss you. Alright?"

Liara's face blossomed with happiness, which helped a bit. "I've missed you too. You should come with me and see what I see. The way they communicate is just..." she searched for the word.

"Fascinating. Yeah we got it. In case you've forgotten I was penned up with several of them already."

Liara smirked at her abruptness, "You should know that I've been able to re-establish a lot of my 'contacts' with their help."

The subtle emphasis on the word wasn't lost on Tali, and she relaxed. It all made more sense now,
"I'm really happy to hear that. Maybe we can have dinner and you can fill me in?"

Liara smiled again, "I would love that. How about later tonight?"

Before Tali could answer the doors slid open and Commander Williams entered, followed closely by a blonde woman that stood a smidge taller than she. They were chuckling at some inside joke and seemed very familiar, which didn't sound anything like the message Ashley sent.

Gabby saluted but Ashley waved her down just as quickly, "I'd like you all to meet Petty Officer Vedra Tanner. Vedra? This is Chief Gabby Daniels. Also, Admiral Tali'Zorah vas Normandy from the Quarian flotilla and Doctor Liara T'Soni of the Asari.

Vedra looked a bit poleaxed. She’d seen but never actually met an Asari or a Quarian before and stood staring, then looked askance at Ashley for assurance.

Liara’s mouth curled into a smile and she extended a hand in the human fashion instead, speaking in practiced English, “It is a pleasure to meet you Vedra. We’ve heard good things.”

Tanner finally broke out of the spell and took the blue hand in her own, "Good to meet you. Liara?"

The Asari nodded pleasantly and returned to her own language, relying once again on the translator, "Correct. You are responsible for much of the Relay reconstruction, right?"

"That's right," Vedra let go of Liara's hand and subconsciously rubbed her fingers together before extending it to Tali with a sheepish look, "I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

Tali's three gloved fingers clasped the human's, "Call me Tali. Everyone else does."

Vedra smiled and exhaled, "You're an Admiral?"

"Yep. They look to me for guidance for some reason. I'm really just an engine junkie, but I do what I can."

Tanner chuckled and it sounded genuine, "I know what you mean." She seemed reluctant to pull her gaze away from them both but eventually she looked at Gabriella with a wide grin and held out a warm hand. "Vedra," she said with enthusiasm.

Gabriella gripped her hand firmly and returned the grin, "Gabby. Good 'ta meet ya."

"Likewise," she said. "So, show me what you've got?"

"You bet!"

Ashley and Liara fell into step behind the trio and listened while the women launched into engine talk. Tali was in her element and it wasn't long before the Quarian's disarming wit had Vedra laughing and cracking her own jokes.

Liara caught Williams' eye and Ash could feel the questions there. She shook her head once before redirecting the subject. "How's things with our friends on the freighter?"

"They have been very accommodating, Commander," She replied before lowering her voice. "I'll be happier when the QE hubs are operational, however. The Rachni have informed me that there has been considerable political disruption on all the primary homeworlds thanks to the war, and many senior officials who might have aided the transition were on the Citadel when communications were lost. They are attempting to fill those voids, of course, but power vacuums of this magnitude often..."
result in competitive violence. Sol needs direct communication with them as soon as possible."

"Can't we just send messages through the Rachni?"

"It is a question of trust," Liara replied thoughtfully. "Only Shepard had direct dealings with the Rachni and the ones I am in contact with must communicate with others through an intermediary that may or may not have political influence. It is difficult for these intermediaries to convince anyone that they magically carry a message from Earth."

Ashley arched an eyebrow and nodded, "Fair enough. Last report I received put the ETA late next week. They've retrieved the particles and moved the assembly down to Vigil, but calibration is proving difficult. Some good news today though, the Sol Relay is complete and has been successfully activated."

A smile blossomed on Liara's face, "That is good news. At least we know the repair plans will work. Things might have been awkward in Arcturus otherwise."

"You're telling me."

Tali and Vedra had entered a good natured debate about the selling points of the latest Turian fighters when Gabby interrupted, "That's nothing compared to the plans we were putting together before the war."

"What plans?" Vedra asked.

"New line of corvettes based on the Normandy," she said with a prideful smile. "Larger than a fighter. Slower, too, but it'll have the Normandy's stealth, Silaris armor and Cyclonic Barrier tech combined with traditional fighter weaponry, including Disruptor torpedoes. Because GARDIAN systems can't detect her she can get in range nice and quiet to take out a Dreadnought's kinetic barrier, is fast enough to avoid frigate wolfpacks on the way out and is more than a match for any fighter that gets in her way."

While Tali fumbled for words, Vedra's brow furrowed, "Wait, did you design the Normandy?"

Gabriella shook her head, "Ken and I were in charge of engineering during her deployment to the Omega 4 relay. We knew every inch of her but no, we didn't design her."

"So," Vedra mused, "Doesn't that mean you were with Cerberus? And not, like, 'with' like Shepard was. You were actually with them, right?"

Gabby was already nodding, "Yeah. Biggest mistake I've ever made. I got to see first hand how they treated their own people, not just aliens. It was so bad that when we were in custody Ken and I thought we might actually be prosecuted! Luckily our knowledge of the SR-2 was important enough to cut a deal. Help reverse engineer the Normandy and we'd be be forgiven, they said, so we did. When the topic of scalability came up I gave them some ideas about how to fit it all into a smaller chassis. They were sold in a matter of weeks."

Tali finally whispered, "Gabby, that ship is going to completely change the rules of space combat, do you know that? If a dreadnought's kinetic barrier can be taken down from stealth..."

Vedra finished her thought, "Opposing dreadnoughts can decimate them at range and break up their fleet. Wow. I guess that's why you're chief engineer!"

Gabby looked chagrined, "I'm actually not, that's Lieutenant Adams."
Tanner was incredulous, and Ashley said, "You've got a lot to learn about delegation, Ved. You don't think any of us at the top actually have *skill* do you?"

Tali responded quickly, tapping on her Omni, "Could you say that once again? I think Greg would be *very* interested to hear it.

They laughed, and Ashley was pleased to see a dawning respect in Vedra's eyes.

Hopefully this would put the woman's fears to rest, and Ashley's too.
“You ready?”
“You kidding?” Jack replied sourly as she fidgeted. “One more day in that wheelchair and it’s going through the glass.”

Miranda knew the source of that bitterness had nothing to do with the state of the art motochair and everything to do with nervousness about her submission to the final phase of project Phoenix, but she had no desire to skewer the woman’s logic. Not today.

She turned and nodded to the technicians then stepped aside as they entered, keeping her expression carefully neutral while she watched through the window. There were many other eyes on her, but the ones she cared most about kept slipping sideways to her face from the operating table while she was being prepared. Miranda knew about the one way mirror at Teltin, she had read it in the report to the Illusive Man after the facility was destroyed; so she made damn sure she smiled and nodded, putting her fingertips against the glass to reassure her.

As the anesthesia took hold, Jack’s dark lashes fluttered and her expression softened. Absent the leather and aggressively displayed tattoos, Jack was beautiful. Her fine features and slender figure would have been the envy of any woman, and with her angst recently dimmed a smile sans sarcasm even flashed from time to time. Miranda wasn’t certain that Jack had ever experienced a day of peace in her life outside of the Academy but it appeared to her at least that a spark of potential happiness had been kindled here, with her.

Before Jack even took a seat in her room six weeks ago she was sworn to silence about anything and everything to do with their prior relationship. It couldn’t ever be divined that they were more than professional colleagues, Miranda insisted, and that history must be one of appropriate decorum. Nobody in this facility must ever detect either favoritism from Miranda or a threat from Jack about anything or all bets were off.

In a way, though, rules only made things worse. When you couldn’t say what you felt or express it through touch all that was left were the eyes, and those secret looks said a great deal. Strangely, Miranda and Jack seemed to communicate better that way. There were fewer defenses in them. Fewer insults. When their eyes turned cold it was always because of something or someone external, the need to protect their secret instantly understood and forgiven. They simply looked forward to the next private connection, the one thing they alone owned in all the galaxy.

It wasn’t long before Miranda began checking on her patients personally every day, which happily meant they could spend a few minutes together. The cameras were always watching, though, so if there was an occasional brush of skin on skin it was done without direct eye contact, leaving them guessing about the other’s reaction until they faced one another again. It was a special kind of torture, waiting; but seeing Jack’s pupils widen and her skin flush after was worth it.

Miranda suspected some on her team still noticed their attraction; but so long as all rules were obeyed to the letter what could they say? It became a game between them, one that left Miranda lingering later and later at her labors in the hopes of a final long look between them, unobserved, before her return to a lonely room.

Those days might well be over, now. If the procedure was successful it would be a new chapter in Jack’s life, one that she hoped might dim the shadow of Cerberus in the woman’s memory. It represented a chance for healing and not just for Subject Zero. The longer she and Jack circled each
other the more Miranda realized that Jack’s recovery represented more than a single tortured girl for whom she held no particular responsibility. It represented all those who could no longer voice their objection at decisions made through cold calculus; all those Miranda had wronged in her own personal quests.

Miranda worked late until she was able to confirm that Jack was in fact the latest success story of the project but sleep couldn’t keep her still.

The lights were dim and everyone asleep when she entered Jack’s room at 3:15. Jack’s anesthesia had worn off hours ago but she still slept, her body adjusting to the implants and the nanites that were quickly healing the incisions. She pulled up a chair and sat beside her, just watching her face as anxiety wormed its way through her chest.

Tomorrow it would be real. Tomorrow they would talk again and this ethereal dance of theirs would confront dispassionate reality. Had Jack been toying with her just to get what she needed? Was it all an act, the most devastating blow yet in their long standing war? No matter how baseless the litany of ifs that paraded through her mind might be, the heart of it was much simpler.

Did Jack feel anything for her at all?

She needed contingencies. She needed to be prepared for the worst before she could hope for the best. Her mind was busy building walls around her feelings and lies about why she pretended to care when she realized that she, too, was being watched.

Jack’s tongue ran over dry lips, the disapproval in her voice shaming Miranda’s lack of self control, “You’re...not supposed to be here.”

Miranda felt a flush of guilt and answered quickly, “Can’t blame a girl for checking up. You were the final hurdle. Shepard’s next.”

“Right,” she replied with a slight hardening of the eyes, and Miranda felt her face heat again. Could she have picked a worse response?

Jack was all business again though, despite Miranda’s fumbling. “Did it work?” she murmured, lifting her left arm into view. Her own slow smile answered the question and she used her new hand to slide aside the covers. Instead of joining where the limb was lost, they had simply replaced it all to the next main joint; they couldn’t chance any structural weakness in either the humerus or femur.

“It worked,” Miranda confirmed while she watched Jack wiggle her toes. When she started to rise from the bed however, Miranda’s brow curled in concern, “You might want to wait until morning for that.”

“If I fall you’ll catch me, right?” was the glib response as both legs swung over the edge.

Their eyes met and Miranda thought, for a moment, that there was a deeper question reflected in her face; one that couldn’t be explored now. Of course, she realized, she might simply be fabricating things she wanted to see. She nodded briskly and held out a hand, rising from her chair.

Jack’s new hand, warm from slumber, took Miranda’s cool one and lifted herself up. She wobbled for a moment, sleep muddling her senses, but Miranda could see the first moment she put weight on her left foot light her face like the sun.

“Damn, Miri, I can actually feel it!” she said with a delighted grin.

Miranda smiled pleasantly and nodded, encouraging Jack to take a step.
She did, carefully, but picked up confidence quickly, releasing her hand to take a few steps around the room. When she dropped into a squat, however, Miranda knew there would be trouble. Jack’s other leg hadn’t had any meaningful exercise for months and she found herself struggling to rise.

Miranda stepped forward and caught an outstretched hand, allowing Jack to pull herself upright. When she straightened with a groan, they found themselves face to face, only a couple of inches between them.

She could feel the warmth of Jack’s breath on her lips and their closeness made a dull ache rise in her chest. The moment allowed them for propriety’s sake passed, and then another as they stood, swimming in each other’s eyes.

“You should go,” Jack whispered finally, her voice low and confident.

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t move. Moreover, she didn’t want to. It was Jack that released her hand in the end and stepped over to the bed to take a seat.

“Thanks for stopping in, Doctor Lawson,” she said slowly and carefully.

Miranda finally swallowed, then forced herself to nod. She was embarrassed by losing control over herself and even further by the fact that Jack hadn’t. She was right, it was time to leave.

“Sleep well, Jack,” she said after clearing her throat.

“Oh I will,” she said, following up with a slow smile, “Sweet dreams.”

The teasing tone of the words hit her in delicious ways. Miranda didn’t have time to do more than look shocked at the devilry before Jack curled herself in a blanket and turned to the wall. Only years of discipline allowed her to exit.

It was a long walk back to her room.

The facility was filled to bursting with people the next day and her wait at the elevator was longer than she liked, but smiling faces greeted Miranda’s entry onto their floor. All the patients were up and walking around, socializing while her team conferred in small groups over the final numbers. Her team lined up with their reports when they saw her arrive, faces brimming with enthusiasm. This was what medicine should always feel like, she thought.

Jack’s door was open and the woman was leaning against the frame quietly in contradiction to the excitement around her. Her arms were folded across a black compression tank, one covered with tattoos and the other as bare as a babe’s ass save a fine red scar where the prosthetic joined her flesh at the shoulder.

When their gazes met it was all Miranda could do to keep walking. Jack’s eyes still burned with challenge and a recent layer of banked want, but there was something else there that had never ever been focused in her direction. Gratitude. Miranda gave her a joyful smile in return but resolutely joined the others in her office without a word and dove into the final tallies, checking off the boxes required before a green light could be given.

Before she could tick the last one she heard a pop and looked up to find a fizzing champagne bottle in the hands of her team lead. “We are officially a go,” she said with equanimity and a broad smile but the whoops of her team drowned out her final word.
She stood and accepted a glass, then shouldered by some of her team to approach the window to Shepard’s room. She gazed upon her for a long moment before turning back to the others and raising it high, “I want her scheduled for surgery by the end of the month. It’s past time the galaxy actually celebrated with their hero.”

Cheers rose once again and this time she could hear the patients outside joining in. She chuckled and leaned in to whisper in her lead’s ear, “Good work, Johnson. Have the sections begin with their write-ups. We’ll need to schedule a conclusions session shortly after the surgery.”

“You’ll have the dates by EOB,” he replied, and Miranda nodded. She then drank the champagne down in three smooth swallows before licking her lips and setting the glass down. She congratulated each and every one of her team members personally, taking all the time decorum demanded before excusing herself. Nobody stood in her way as she departed, and she never saw the nudges and grins from the others behind.

Miranda gave a rousing final speech to her patients and then directed them to the forms that would need to be completed for their release. They scattered moments later, all of them eager for freedom save Jack, who lingered with the same smiling stare. Miranda met that look with her own and approached her, heels clicking slowly on the stone floor.

“Aren’t you going to fill out the forms?” Miranda asked neutrally.

“Sure, after breakfast.”

Miranda arched an eyebrow, “They must have something special lined up to stand in the way of your freedom from this cage.”

Jack looked around at the empty hallway then stepped close enough that Miranda could smell the spice of her skin, “Dunno yet,” she murmured softly, “It’s in your room. I’m too hungry to wait for bureaucratic bullshit.”

Jack must have seen something in Miranda’s expression, because she moved closer still, the space between them measured in millimeters, “It looks like you haven’t eaten either.”

Miranda heard Jack’s gentle inhalation, the shorter woman’s nose dipping beneath her chin for the briefest of moments to catch her own scent. She fought the urge to bare her throat and swallowed instead. Gone was her vaunted control. “I can’t remember the last time I ate,” she said in a choked whisper.

Jack’s voice was smoky and deep and her eyes filled with mirth. Then she dropped her voice to a matching whisper, “No one will ever know.”

Miranda might have laughed if she weren’t melting where she stood. The only thing she could see were Jack’s eyes, lidded and confident, peering into her molten core. She had to get them out of there and her befuddled mind did the best it could under the circumstances.

“My room. Fifteen minutes.”
Jack rebutted, “Five, and your ass better hope I don’t catch you on the elevator.”

Miranda heard the team exiting her office and did her best to contain herself. When she looked back at Jack the woman had already retreated to the door frame in a pose similar to the one she held before. Just when she thought she had imagined the whole thing, she saw Jack’s darkly glistening lips mouth the words, “Four minutes.”

Lawson tried to reclaim some of her dignity and narrowed her eyes at the biotic, but it didn’t make much of a dent. She was forced to retreat, outmaneuvered. She smiled at the team and nodded before turning and heading for the door.

The elevator was still delayed, more so by the fact they were so deep in the earth and most of the traffic was in the upper levels. At first Miranda was more concerned with slowing her pulse than worrying about the time, but as the minutes stretched she began to wonder if she would make the deadline.

Ridiculous, she thought. Jack would never…

Of course she would. She had what she came for. What were they going to do, pull her prosthetics off? She waved her hand impatiently on the queue request and looked around the empty lobby while she wracked her brain for plan B. She roundly cursed these ancient facilities and their damnable ancient elevators but nothing was coming to mind. When the door slid open she scurried inside and waved it to her floor. After an eternity it began to close, but then she heard pounding footsteps outside. Her eyes widened when blue fire leapt between the edge of the door and the frame, holding it open long enough for its safety feature to engage.

Suddenly Jack’s face appeared, her lip curled in a snarl that relaxed when she saw her quarry against the back of the car. The blue light gave her a unholy appearance, but disappeared when the door slid back open. She walked in slowly, a different flame in her eyes.

“Looks like the leg works just fine,” she said in a low voice, moving forward to crowd Miranda against the back of the lift. She placed her hands on the wall around her body, their faces close enough that they could feel each other’s breath quicken, but Jack wasn’t letting the woman’s eyes leave hers as they blazed with a fire that threatened to consume her, “Last chance, Angel. You want out, now’s the time.”

Miranda considered it, willing her brain to work, to compute, to do something, but all she could feel was the warmth pooling between her legs and an overwhelming urge to taste the lips that hovered so close to hers. When the door closed her workpad fell to the floor and her hands slid up to cradle Jack’s face. She felt one of Jack’s hands circle around her hip and one climb her back and claw into her hair, holding her motionless while their lips met.

She expected the kiss to be rough, hard like Jack was; so the softness of it tore the floor from beneath her feet. Jack’s lips were hot and slick, pressing and pulling on hers with a commanding delicacy, the tip of her tongue testing and teasing between her own. The sweetness of it pulled a moan from her very depths, a primordial assent that deepened their kiss into something that spun her mind away.

She felt her body pushed roughly against the wall and responded by pulling at Jack’s lower lip with her teeth. She heard a growl and winced as her head was pulled back by the hair, exposing her throat and shoulder to Jack’s blazing kisses. She was completely incapable of defending herself in Jack’s tight grip, a delicious languor filling her limbs and skin.

Her fingernails dug into Jack’s scalp and she used the purchase to pull the woman closer, urging her on until she felt teeth in her flesh. A shout of pleasure escaped her before she could stifle it and she
slid a thigh between Jack’s legs, pushing her own pulsing center against her in search of relief while the elevator climbed in silence.

“Fuck, Miri…” Jack groaned at that pressure, losing her words, “You like that?”

“Yeah,” she moaned in reply and pulled Jack’s lips to hers again, needing another taste before the car stopped. It wouldn’t be long now, but it was almost impossible to stop drinking in that ambrosia. When they paused and untangled themselves, Jack smirked.


Jack pointed to Miranda’s lips and her tongue slid over her own, drawing attention to her liberally smeared black lipstick. It took a moment to register, but Miranda’s eyes widened at how she must look.

“Bloody hell,” she said, then brought a thumb up to Jack’s face to start wiping away the worst of it. “Do me, quick!”

Jack snickered and Miranda glared, but she obliged, the pad of her thumb pulling on generous lips fuller still from the cut of her teeth.

Lawson swooped up her workpad as the door began to open, then smoothed her hair with a free hand while the hallway became visible. She exhaled with relief when it was empty.

Jack grabbed her hand and pulled her out, walking backward to keep eyes on her prey.

As they neared the door, Miranda made a confession, “You know, I don’t really have much...em, experience with this sort of thing.”

Jack gasped sarcastically, “Why didn’t you say that before? I’d have popped that cherry on the Normandy.”

Miranda rolled her eyes at the thought but found she couldn’t stay annoyed with the woman’s warm hand in her own. “I’m not a virgin, you twit,” she said with a weak glare, “I’ve just only been with men for the most part.”

Jack smirked and pulled her close in front of the apartment. “Hope you don’t have to work for a couple of days then,” she breathed before their lips intertwined. “You’ll need practice.” The kiss that followed stretched for almost a minute, Jack’s hands spinning the world away until Miranda wasn’t keen on returning.

Lawson waved her hand blindly at the panel behind her until the door opened, then gripped one of the straps of Jack’s tank, pulling her into the darkness before anyone could stumble upon them.

Once the door slid shut and their eyes were forced to adjust, she felt her hand pulled away and heard Jack’s voice in her ear. “Take off your clothes,” it breathed hotly.

Maybe it was because she felt vulnerable, maybe because it was dark, she didn’t know, but her pride made a sudden resurgence against the command and she felt herself stiffen.

Jack must have felt it too, because Miranda felt the woman’s body press close and hands grip her waist firmly, the words rumbling against her throat. “Do it,” it said in a tone that brooked no argument. She found her hands obeying of their own volition, but before she could remove the lab coat from her shoulders the back of her knees hit the mattress and she toppled, Jack right behind. Her arms were pinned to the bed, the coat not clear, but the weight atop her made it harder to breathe, the
rest stolen in a smoldering kiss.

When it broke, Jack spoke in scathing rebuke. “Why aren’t you naked?” she demanded in a cold voice.

Miranda felt anxious at her failure, something that was completely unlike her. A tiny part of her psyche remained detached, quietly observing herself as she unraveled. It was with this torn perspective that she struggled once again to undress, managing to get an arm almost clear before Jack used the fabric to pin her; blazing lips and sharp teeth enveloping an earlobe, her hot breath making the skin of her scalp prickle and her sex throb in anguish. Her body lifted them both as she groaned aloud, a sound even Jack couldn’t ignore, her chuckle only furthering her torment.

“You must not want this,” she crooned, her voice oozing with disdain, “Or you’d do as I asked.”

A base part of herself, one that had been ignored for years, surged forward to protest with a whimper, her body rising again to free that hand in triumph before the wrist was clasped firmly against the mattress in Jack’s grip. She surged with adrenaline, heaving the woman up enough to begin freeing the other when she felt the delicious pressure of Jack’s thigh slide between hers. She froze in place, her back falling and hips rising; fireworks dancing behind her eyelids in celebration of the pressure she needed more than air. Suddenly it was pulled away, Jack’s voice again against her ear.

“Ah, ah, ah….,” Jack breathed, panting slightly in exertion as she adjusted her weight, “Not until you do as I say. How hard can this be?”

As thin and lithe as Jack was, Miranda was quickly exhausting herself and she had only just begun removing her clothes. She dropped her head back against the bed, groaning in helpless frustration.

“You want me to help you?” Jack breathed quietly into her mouth and Miranda, after a moment of internal struggle, nodded in shame. Her eyes were blinded by blue light as Jack’s biotics lit the room, the fluid energy prickling Miranda’s skin down the length of her body as the coat that wrestled with her limbs was torn asunder.

It was a harrowing moment, one that left Miranda with the dim realization of how helpless she had just been rising through the currents of want upon which she had blissfully ridden. It was a fear that Jack soothed with soft kisses, her deft fingers sliding beneath the bottom of her shirt to trace lightly over her heated skin.

“Shhh,” she whispered, lifting a hand to run through her hair soothingly, “Trust me, okay? Just for today, Miri. Trust me.”
“If you wanna stop, say so,” Jack explained calmly. “Just….call me a psychopath, okay? I’ll stop, believe me.”

After a moment she heard a soft chuckle, confirming Miranda was alright. When she nodded too, Jack’s brain felt like it would burst from excitement.

Is this really gonna happen? She asked herself while bringing Miranda’s wrists over her head and holding them there with one hand. “Don’t move,” she ordered in a voice that sounded far more confident than she felt.

For weeks she had watched her and for weeks she had plenty of time to think, but even in the end Jack thought she simply had a screw loose. There was no way Miranda wanted her and definitely no way she wanted this, no matter how many ways Miranda’s actions said differently. When she ensured Miranda would fail at every instruction she was sure she’d be insulted. When she used her biotics she was certain Miranda would do the same in defense. She hadn’t moved or said a word. Well, with her mouth anyway.

She couldn’t stop at this point for Miranda’s sake and wouldn’t if she could. Dominating Doctor Miranda Lawson was a dizzying drug but before she could lose herself in it she had work to do; she needed to know her limits and the elevator gave her a few ideas.

Jack uncurled from the position she used to keep Miranda frustratingly pinned and slid down the length of her body while keeping a tight grip on her wrists. The fingertips of her free hand found their way beneath the bottom of her blouse, tracing lightly over the warm sensitive skin a few inches above her hip until she felt the muscles there twitch involuntarily. Her eyes were fixed on Miranda’s face throughout, watching her breath hitch before chewing her lip.

Jack enjoyed the lifting of her chin and the needy sigh that escaped when her hand moved lower, sliding beneath the waist of her slacks. Impulsively she released Miranda’s hands, though the stern look she gave reinforced her expectation of obedience. Jack rose to unfasten the button of her pants and Miranda assisted with a lift of her hips until she was rid of them. Goosebumps followed Jack’s nails up those lovely legs and she found Miranda’s lacy underwear sopping on arrival.

“So wet for me,” Jack whispered between the gasps she heard every time her thumb put pressure in the right place, “You’ve needed this a long time, haven’t you, Princess?”

Jack felt and saw the tension the name brought to Miranda’s body. It shamed her even more than Jack thought. Jack had done a lot in her short life and seen more, so the idea of a powerful woman needing to let go once in awhile didn’t surprise her. Her choice of partners? Unexpected, sure, but Jack wouldn’t miss it for anything; she’d keep this memory locked away for the next time her world returned to the long dark.

The very shame Miranda felt was the tool Jack needed to make this work, so she left the object of the woman’s torment behind and began lifting the shimmering silk of her blouse. “Take this off,” she growled, “And the bra. I wanna see all of you.”

Lawson didn’t hesitate, her chest lifting and arms crossing before her to bring the shirt over her head. Jack took a moment to sit back on her heels and watch the revelation of the body she had only imagined take shape. She wasn’t sure if it was the creamy skin, the taut but padded muscles of her stomach, the ample breasts that tested the fabric that restrained them or the stare Miranda leveled at
her throughout; but she found herself struggling to breathe against the heat that filled her chest. She swallowed instead and tried to focus on what she was supposed to do next, but immediately forgot her own name when Miranda released the fasteners behind.

The intensity of her regard must’ve embarrassed Miranda, because she clasped that small bit of lace before herself for a moment before dropping it off the bed. Jack was thankful nevertheless, it gave her a chance to gather her wits.

“Hands behind your back,” she ordered, licking her lips. Then a firmer, “Do it,” when Miranda hesitated. With the woman’s hands at the small of her back Miranda’s form was perfect, even in the dim light to which Jack’s eyes had adjusted. She crawled over her outstretched legs and knelt so that they were looking into each other’s eyes; the tip of her nose grazing Miranda’s while her palms did the same to her nipples, which were already hardening in the persistent chill underground.

Jack’s tender kiss warmed her, her tongue probing until Miranda’s lips parted. She brought a hand up to cup her jaw and their kiss deepened, her mouth hot, wet and tasting of champagne. Her other hand palmed the warm globe of her breast, and she squeezed the nipple between her thumb and forefinger gently at first, then harder and harder until Miranda stiffened and moaned into her.

“Everyone thinks you are so perfect, don’t they?” she whispered, scooting forward until Jack could feel Miranda’s curves against her clothing. She withdrew her hand from Miranda’s face and slid it down her stomach and between them, then beneath her panties to cup her slick folds, “But we both know different.”

She saw the words hit Miranda like a fist, watched her eyes narrow defensively before she distracted her; a finger parting her lips to swirl at the narrow ring of her entrance. The woman’s protests died with a trembling breath and Jack triumphantly watched her eyes unfocus with the promise of pleasure.

“Don’t have to lie to me anymore, Princess,” she breathed, “You’re mine and before long I’ll know everything about you….everything you really are and everything you really need.” She squeezed her nipple again until she heard that delicious cry from the elevator filling her ears. Jack groaned helplessly in return and leaned forward to devour the joining of Miranda’s neck and shoulder, teeth scraping over the skin until she felt Miranda arching and falling backward. She went with her, perching over her like an animal with a kill and every bit as possessive.

“Mmn, and that’s what you want, isn’t it?” she growled, dragging her tongue and teeth up Miri’s throat to chew where her pulse pounded hardest just as she ran the pad of her thumb across the woman’s slick clit. She felt the whole of Miranda’s body lock up beneath her and Jack had to stifle a whimper of jealousy to keep focused. She released her throat but never slowed her circling thumb, adding another finger to the one gently fucking her. She dispassionately watched Miranda’s face and the struggle for her to keep her hands behind her as her hips rose and fell of their own accord.

Jack leaned down to whisper in Miranda’s ear when she felt her fingers gripped tighter and harder, over and over. “You want to surrender,” she said, ignoring the echoing ache in her chest, “You just don’t know who to trust.”

“Fuck!” Miranda cried in disbelief as she began to topple over the edge, “Jack!” she gasped to the ceiling during the fall, and primitive moans of relief afterward; all under the gleam of satisfaction in Jack’s dark eyes.

She didn’t stop moving inside her at first, slowing instead so that Miranda could eek out every moment of possible pleasure. When she did, she withdrew and waited for Miranda’s eyes to open before sucking on her fingers down to the knuckle.
“Good girl,” she crooned, licking her lips while Miranda began trying to put herself back together. “You can move your hands, if you want.”

She did, bringing a hand up to pull the hair back from her face before exhaling.

“You alright?” Jack asked carefully as she laid down beside her, propping her head up on her new arm to keep an eye on her.

“Yeah…” Miranda breathed after a moment of consideration. It was clear she wanted to say more but didn’t, opting instead for a simple, “Thank you.”

“Welcome,” she replied, running her fingertips slowly up Miranda’s cooling body.

When Miri was ready she rolled to face Jack and just looked at her for a long moment, a smile curling her lips. “You never even undressed,” she murmured with a wry chuckle.

Jack grinned, looking down at her clothes. “Yeah well, I guess when the Princess wants something she gets it right then,” she said with a crooked smile before meeting her gaze again. To her surprise Miranda didn’t seem offended, just amused.


Jack’s lips formed a silent ‘O’. “Well,” she said in a teasing voice, “I guess the Princess better do someth….”

The grip between her thighs was unexpected and almost painful as aroused as she was. She straightened without a sound, regardless, her eyes moving past Miranda to the wall while it processed. She swallowed hard and forced herself to look into the woman’s eyes again, once the needful throbbing subsided, “Easy, tiger. Don’t break the merchandise.”

“You’ll find I’m more gentle with fewer clothes in my way,” Miranda said tartly, arching an elegant eyebrow.

Jack had to admit she hadn’t planned shit past Miranda’s orgasm, so this was entertaining. She took her lower lip between her teeth and nodded, rolling onto her back so she could unbuckle her trousers. Miri’s eyes wandered over her body, followed closely by her fingertips.

“Mind if I turn on the lights?” Miranda asked as Jack kicked her pants off.

Jack smirked. The ink. They always fell for the ink. “Sure,” she said and began twisting her way out of the compression shirt.

When the room filled with illumination she was greeted with the sight of an almost naked Miranda sultrily walking back to the bed. Miri’s fingers curled into the lace holding the only clothing left and slid them down and off her legs, her blue eyes never leaving Jack’s. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman Jack had ever laid eyes on, though she would never tell her so; she had doubtlessly had those words tossed at her so often they held no meaning anymore.

When Miranda crawled onto the bed and over her, Jack’s mouth went dry. Her heart began pounding so hard she could scarcely think and when Miranda’s hand cupped her cheek like a benediction she found herself trembling inexplicably. Miranda’s kiss was gentle and relaxed now, her need tamed for the time being. It became languid and wet, and Jack heard herself groaning for more, lifting from where she lay to find it.

Miranda pressed her back down with a firm palm and Jack curled her hands into fists to stop herself
from grabbing Miri’s arms. Miranda’s eyes wandered down along the multitude of colors, patterns and scars that left almost none of Jack’s true skin visible; and her fingertips followed, tracing some of them until she shivered. That made Miri smile, and Jack knew that even if the woman did nothing else but touch her like that for the rest of today she could be content. That was, until Miri’s fingers slid down Jack’s abdomen and bare sex to find the wet want dripping below. Jack sighed and closed her eyes against the sensation, her head falling back against the mattress.

She felt the bed shift and Miranda’s hands part her thighs as she settled between them. Her hands slid up to cup Jack’s pert breasts then zeroed in on her nipples, taking them both between her fingers to pull and then squeeze them.

“Mmmm,” Jack moaned encouragingly, and when the pressure intensified her back began to arch.

She felt the warmth of Miranda’s breath against her skin before she was blissfully parted by her tongue. Jack’s eyes snapped open and her breath caught in her chest, her fists opening only to curl in the sheets beside her.

“Fuck...” she groaned.

Miranda’s chuckle vibrated straight to Jack’s core, but she paused at her words and licked her lips with wicked eyes. “That’s the idea,” she confirmed, obviously taking delight in being watched. She exaggerated the extension of her tongue and pulled it through her folds again, stern to stem, before squeezing her nipples again, harder than before.

Jack lost a moment or two there, somewhere, but returned to find her hands gripping Miri’s even harder on her breasts. There was a clinical curiosity in Miranda’s eyes that Jack didn’t want to encourage. She broke the tension by groaning, “Thought you hadn’t been with many women.”

“I haven’t,” she purred, pausing again, “But I’ve been with myself quite often.”

Jack couldn’t restrain a chuckle at the remark and soon they were both giggling.

“Alright,” Jack laughed, “Let’s see how good of a stu..” She was again interrupted, this time by a long swipe of Miri’s tongue that ended with a swirl around her clit that had her hips bucking.

Jack couldn’t breathe, and Miri’s hands dragged down her body to hold her still while she ‘practiced’. Her tongue and lips alternatively relieved and built a blinding heat inside her, until she found herself gasping for air.

“Miri!” she said urgently, “Inside!...I need....” She felt a hand leave her hip and two slender fingers slide inside. The edge loomed.

“Hard, please…..hard,” she whimpered, and Miranda obliged, her lips focusing on the throbbing bud of her clit simultaneously. It was all she needed, everything she needed.

The approach was silent, her breath held tightly while her back arched and her fingers tangled themselves in Miri’s dark soft hair. It rose until it towered like a tsunami, and just like one, when it landed it bludgeoned her senses into pleasurable blackness.

Jack wasn’t sure how long she lay there, riding the slow waves of its withdrawal to the sea, but eventually she felt the weight of Miranda’s body atop her and tasted the sweetness of her kiss. She slid her hands around Miri’s smooth back and pulled her close, the sensation of their skin against one another a balm for old wounds.
This kiss was slow and tender, and their tongues moved smoothly into and out of each other’s mouths in quiet exploration. One of Jack’s hands found its way into Miranda’s hair again and she gently pulled her head back so that she could drag a flat warm tongue over her collarbone. She tasted herself from Miranda’s lips and the salt of the sweat glistening on her skin. The mixture was more satisfying than the finest liquor and just as intoxicating.

“If I’d known that cold bitch thing was an act before….” she murmured before sinking her teeth into Miranda’s throat until she groaned, “Miri….you burn.”

Miranda pulled away so that they could look into each other’s eyes and ran her fingernails over Jack’s scalp, something she immediately liked. “I’m…..sorry,” she whispered, “About a lot of things. It was…..” She paused, her eyes narrowing in thought, “Who I needed to be. Yeah?”

The frank admission resonated more strongly than Miranda knew. She nodded slowly, gaze unflinching, “Yeah. I get it.” Then, to lighten the mood, “Guess I got lucky meeting the new you.” She lifted her left arm…her perfect new arm, and displayed the flexing hand by both of their faces.

Miri smiled at it, then her, “Least I could do.”

Jack grasped her face and kissed her again, letting the action say what she couldn’t.

A notification from Miranda’s workpad intruded and she sighed, “Surprised we had this long, honestly. It is a workday after all.”

When she climbed off the bed, Jack rolled to a side and enjoyed the show until Miri’s brow crooked.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Lawson shook her head after reading the message, then set the pad down to fetch new undergarments. “Just Jacob.”

Jack felt a twinge of something she swatted away at the mention of his name. “You still talk to that loser?”

When Miranda looked at her Jack blushed. Her expression said she knew exactly what Jack just felt and was amused by it. “You should thank him,” she said, “He’s the one that got you in the program.”

Jack was confused, “I thought it was your program.”

“Well sure, but he’s the head of security here. How many other murderers do you think were cleared for these experiments?”

“Ha!” she countered, “So I guess he ‘cleared’ you too?”

Miranda chuckled and winked as she examined herself in the mirror. “At least I didn’t enjoy the crimes for which I’m accused.”

“Not even your Dad?” she shot back before thinking and immediately regretted it.

Miranda spun, eyes blazing and Jack held up a hand in defense. “Alright, alright….that’s on me;” she said with a disarming smile, “Sorry.” She shrugged, “Habit.”

Jack quickly changed the subject while Miranda’s temper cooled, “So what did Jacob want?”

Miri took a deep breath and began to dress, “Have you kept up with the news?”
Jack smirked and pulled herself up to slide back against the wall, “Nope.”

Miranda turned while fastening her bra and paused to behold her own view of Jack.

After a moment she cleared her throat and continued, “Someone has stolen the data Shepard gathered from the Citadel and everyone is pointing fingers at everyone else. All races have returned to their own fleets for 'protection' and the Council is just trying to hold everything together while we ‘investigate’.”

Jack put her hands behind her head, shrugging. She preferred watching Miranda shimmy into her panties, “So?”

“So…” she exhaled while locating her discarded clothing, “Jacob is trying to find out who might have leaked information from that investigation to the Krogan. He talked with Grunt but apparently got nowhere, so on top of everything else on my plate I am his shoulder to lean on.”

Jack shook her head. Jacob was a stick in the mud even when he was surrounded with mildly interesting weaponry, she couldn’t imagine him convincing Grunt to do anything but pound him. “Does anyone get along with that guy?”

Miranda stopped and gave her a level look, "Pot? Meet kettle. He’s doing the best he can, Jack. If he fails, we might all be at war again tomorrow.”

“So, what then? He wants you to talk to Grunt?” When Miri arched an eyebrow and shrugged Jack laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she finally asked while pulling up her slacks.

Jack waved a hand at the topic, “Tell you what, angel, let me talk to him. You won’t get any farther than he did.”

Miranda smiled thoughtfully, “You two did get on well enough if I recall. You would do that for me?”

Jack shrugged, “What else have I got to do? You should focus on getting Shepard back on her feet.”

Miri seemed pleased with herself and turned to finish primping in the mirror. Jack let that gratitude settle for a moment or two and began getting dressed herself before saying anything else.

“Oh, need one thing from you though,” Jack said as casually as possible..

“Mmn?” Miranda replied as she put on her lipstick.

“I eh….kinda need someplace to live.”
Miranda was in surgery when the news broke across the extranet. It was past midnight before she was finished and Jack was waiting up for her in the apartment. The look on her face dampened the sleepy joy Miranda brought with her.

“What’s wrong?” she said, letting the door slide shut behind her.

“Check your stream,” she said simply, which made it all the more foreboding.

Miranda dialed in the news and with a gesture threw the video from her workpad up to the screen on the wall.

The holonews anchor was discussing the lead story framed by photos of Salarian and Krogan warships, cleverly arranged to appear that they were in the middle of a fight.

“Councilor Valern has convened an emergency meeting of the Galactic Council to keep the peace in the face of what he describes as the ‘unchecked aggression’ of Krogan fleet maneuvers. For now, the Turian fleet has taken position between them to prevent hostilities. There has been no comment from Clan Urdnot on the Turian move, though we have learned that Krogan leader Urdnot Wrex has convened a meeting of all clan leaders aboard his flagship, the Crakador.”

Miranda took a seat next to Jack on the bed and exhaled with both fatigue and frustration as she listened.

“In related news, a spokesman for the Alliance military said that the Quantum Entanglement Hubs rescued from the wreck of the Citadel should be repaired within the next 24-48 hours, allowing communication to and from many of the Council Homeworlds. Councilor Tevos was kind enough to give us her thoughts on current events when we caught up with her in Vigil this morning.”

“These are trying times for all of us,” she said in a calm voice from where she appeared to be stopped in a hallway, “And there are many questions that need answers. It is my hope that the hubs will allow us to resume calm and considerate deliberations with the aim of conflict resolution. We cannot allow ourselves to fall into patterns of suspicion and mistrust based on the actions of a few. Instead, we should present a united front against any that would drag us back into our bloody pasts. Thank you.”

The news wandered into the specifics of Salarian complaints, but eventually Miranda shut it down, craving silence.

“Hell bent for blood,” Jack commented with her usual cynicism before leaning close to look into her eyes, “You know what? Nevermind. Things go good today?”

Miranda grinned crookedly, “Things went well.” She leaned in and tasted Jack’s lips softly before leaning her forehead against her.

Jack smirked and slid an arm around her waist, “Whatthefuckever. So when’s she gonna be up?”

“That’s really up to her,” Miranda mused. “She might rise up on the table and start shouting orders once she hears of this mess.”

“Yes. I could see it.”

Miranda shook her head in mild frustration, “I suppose it’s too much to bloody hope they can figure
this out themselves. They can’t keep relying on her. She needs a break, dammit.”

“So do you,” Jack replied, her hands wandering.

Miranda groaned in protest but couldn’t stop her lips from curling into a smile. She slid her hands around Jack’s neck and took her sweet time with a kiss until both of their pulses raced; but then pulled away regrettfully, “I can’t. Got a meeting in the early A.M.”


“What did you learn?” she asked, rising to get ready for bed.

Jack shrugged off her own clothes and slid into the covers, “Well he wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but he said they get a lot of info from brokers. Krogan don’t make good spies, but their credits work just as well as everyone else’s.”

Miranda arched an eyebrow and began washing her face, “Well that tells us a whole lot of nothing. I wonder if Liara has a handy list of every broker in Sol along with their current location.” When Jack didn’t reply to her poor joke she rinsed her skin and began patting it dry, turning to look at her, “Is that it?”

Jack just smiled, a glimmer in her eye, "The headbutts were good, the Ryncol was better."

Miranda shook her head and sighed, "I just put you back together and you are trying to take it all apart again. I take it you are alright?"

Jack pulled her arms back behind her head, grinning fiercely, "Let's just say I was happy to see those nanites don't only work on the new shit. Our little Grunt is definitely all grown up."

Miranda gave her a lengthy glare, "Did he say anything else?"

“Just to lay off Wrex. Didn't get specific but I get the feeling they are having to break some heads over there.”

“Joy,” she groaned before turning out the lights. “The only thing worse than knowing which Krogan are coming for you is not knowing which Krogan is coming for you. If I were Salarian I’d run too.”

When Miranda slid into Jack’s arms, she felt her body relax against her own, “It was good to get back up there for a bit,” she said, "See the stars."

Of course Jack was stir crazy, it didn’t take a genius to see that. Miranda at least had her work to occupy the long hours; it was only natural for Jack to feel cooped up. “I’m glad you got a chance to stretch your legs,” she said softly.

Jack shrugged noncommittally, “When are you gonna be done? I mean like done done?”

Miranda drug her fingernails lightly over the skin of Jack’s chest, “Once Shepard recovers we’ll document our findings then the project should wrap. Couple of weeks maybe? Why?”

Jack shrugged again, this time silently.

“You know, you’re right,” Miranda said with a nod. “I deserve a break, and I’ve an idea.”

“Does it involve handcuffs?” Jack quipped.

Miranda smirked, “Sadly no, but it might involve rope.”
Jack shrugged, “Works too.”

“Climbing rope,” she chided, “I want to go on a hike.”

“What the...do I strike you as the outdoorsy type?” It was obvious this wasn’t high on Jack’s bucket list.

“Fine, if you don’t want to see where we’re going to live you can stay cooped up in this dungeon,” she replied with nonchalance before wiggling into a more comfortable position against Jack’s wiry frame, "I won't even be gone the day.”

“Wait, you wanna live here?!” Jack asked incredulously.

A full thirty seconds passed, and Miranda could swear she could hear the gears turning in Jack’s head.

“Why here?” she finally finished, half confusion and half exasperation.

The truth was that Miranda and Jacob had talked at length about settling down here; that with the Reaper data and the QE hubs located in this place it would become the political center of Sol and eventually the entire Alliance; making any property purchase a wise investment. Given Jack’s earlier reaction to mentioning Jacob, though, she decided to leave him out entirely.

“It’s….pure here, Jack. Clean. Full of promise. I could go anywhere on the planet and get a place and I might, eventually; but there is no city that won’t need years to recover. Years. This is where the future lies.”

She waited patiently while Jack struggled to give voice to her feelings. Miranda had no illusions, Jack was as damaged as she was heroic; and no matter how exhausted Miranda might be she was determined to give the woman a little water and sunlight to heal.

Finally she asked the question that hung between them, “What is it about this place you don’t like?”

Jack’s response was to try and turn her back to Miranda, but she lifted herself to put weight on her arm and shoulder, preventing it. “Look, I know that we are very different people, yeah? I realize I don’t know anything about you and I respect your privacy, so I'll just leave it at this. I'm not trying to make anything permanent, Jack. I'm not trying to change you. I don’t have some ridiculous need to take care of you, either. You are one of the strongest people I know. Since we met you’ve...made me feel things I was certain I couldn’t anymore. Even if you leave tomorrow and I never see you again, I owe you for that. My only motivation in any of this is keeping you in my life, even if we aren’t lovers. If you need to go, that’s okay.”

Jack still said nothing, and Miranda’s spark of hope diminished. She released her and slid her own arm up under her pillow to cradle her head while Jack turned away.

When she heard Jack turning over again she opened her eyes and felt Jack’s arm slipping around her, then felt the warmth of Jack’s lips on her own.

“Not going anywhere,” Jack whispered into them, “You just got me thinking is all. This isn't the place I need to be, okay? I need something to do and I can't...do it here. I don’t fit in.”

Miranda’s heart sunk, but it made sense. The fact that her honesty had gotten a rational response gave her confidence. “Where do you think you fit in?” she asked genuinely.

“Heh. Well I’ve got a pretty good record with suicide missions, so I thought I’d put out an ad,” Jack
quipped in that delightfully cynical voice Miranda adored. She couldn’t help but smile in return.

Jack continued, “Let’s not talk about this now, you’ve got a meeting. I’ll go with you, alright?”

“Oh,” she replied thankfully, crawling into Jack’s arms to take her rest.

“Okay,” she replied thankfully, crawling into Jack’s arms to take her rest.

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“Okay,” she replied thankful
“Are you playing music?” Shepard asked with a dry throat after Tevos turned away.

Miranda smiled with one side of her mouth as she went over the readouts, “I am. You like it?”

“It’s horrible,” she joked. “What is that, classical?”

“I can put you back to sleep, you know,” Miranda replied with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes, “I want you to make a fist with your right hand, okay?”

As she complied, Shepard asked, “So what’s the damage? How long has it been this time?”

Miranda shrugged it off, “Not too long, a couple of months. Liara isn’t back yet, but if their plans work out they’ll be back soon and the relay to Arcturus will be open for business.” Miranda paused to look seriously at the woman, “That means relax, understood?”

Shepard nodded, waiting for the rest.

“As far as the damage, the hardest part to fix was done with a simple injection in the end. Took all of five minutes, but we did have to replace a few other things with newer tech. Your incision sites have almost disappeared, which means the first part worked just fine. Left hand now.” She nodded at the results and lifted the bed sheet from her feet, “Flex your right foot? Good. Left?”

Shepard chuckled as she felt fingernails tickle the pad of her left foot. Miranda gave her a good natured wink then pulled the sheet back over her feet before bringing her a glass of water. She took it in her hand and lifted herself up slightly for a sip, eyes closing blissfully at the simple clean taste of it. Her thirst was so great that Miranda had to pull the cup from her fingers before she had too much. She gave the Doctor a mock glare, but laid back obediently.

“So, what’s going on with you?” Shepard asked, “I know I’m amazing and you are ecstatic to see me but you seem,” she paused, being careful with her words, “You seem happy.”

“You know you aren't the only one that's said that?” Miranda replied as she tapped on her workpad. Then she looked at Shepard seriously, "Why is it so hard for everyone to believe I can be happy, exactly? The war is over, my sister is safe, Cerberus is gone and now you are alive. Aren’t those things grounds for a little happiness?”

"Sure," Shepard replied, suddenly on the defensive, "I guess it's...well it's good to see you smiling for a change, that's all."

The statement brought Miranda up short and she dropped her chin ruefully, unable to hide one of those very smiles, “Sorry. It’s good to have you back.”

“Thanks, I feel the same way,” she said with a wry expression then brought up a hand to scratch through her hair. She wasn’t sure why, but she suspected she itched the whole time she was under and could do nothing about it. “I’ve got tons of questions,” she said, “But first...is it okay to take a shower?”

Miranda tilted her head, “I don’t see why not. I’d like to keep you here for a couple of days though. I’ve got a terminal set up for you in my office next door to answer any questions and there’s a washroom in the hall outside. It’s stocked.” She reached below the side of the bed to make some adjustments and the rails began to steadily lower while the angle changed to lift the Commander closer to standing, “Also, if you get bored, we’ve received a few gifts and messages for you during your convalescence which I’m sure you will be delighted to see.”

Shepard looked around at the room, empty but for medical equipment, then back at Miranda, who
nodded with an exasperated sigh, “We ran out of space and had them all stored in a room on another floor; except for one. Jacob insisted.”

“Oh? What is it?”

Miranda rolled her eyes, “I’m not telling you because you’re not allowed to touch it until you are free, and that’s final.”

“So mean!” Shepard exclaimed, "Can't you see I'm in a fragile state here?"

Miranda held out a hand for Shepard to take and began helping her stand up, “That’s me, I’m just a sadist, deep down.”
Shepard shut the washroom door then set down the set of Alliance fatigues she had been given. It took her a moment to figure out the hand movements for the shower but when she did, she set it hot. Off came the hospital gown next, and her fingers slid up an arm to a puckered pink line of healing flesh at her shoulder. She looked into the mirror and examined similar lines on her other shoulder, her throat, and running down the center of her abdomen; her body looked a bit like the Frankenstein monster.

The shrapnel injury was completely gone and she knew that these little pink reminders would soon follow suit. Beyond that she couldn’t really tell much difference; her skin had the same smooth tone that it had after she woke from Lazarus. Looking herself over after that project was definitely the more difficult experience. Over time, especially in N7, one gathers a host of scars and Shepard had more than her fair share. A person has freckles or an odd complexion when they are born; tattoos to celebrate or mourn life. All of those little collected stories on her skin disappeared after Lazarus and it had been jarring. For good or ill though she had a great many pressing problems to deal with at the time.

Now she had nothing to distract her, at least until the steam made it hard to see. She leaned in to get a closer look at her face and realized that her eyes were...off. A finger pulled down one of her lower lids so she could take a closer look. The coloring of the iris was smoother, not so jagged. It looked more natural, but while it was an improvement it also made her own body feel..alien. She shook it off and climbed into the hot water, hissing softly as it hit the places that were still healing. Shepard took her time washing, introducing herself to herself one part at a time. She’d get over this disjointedness again, it would just take time and patience.

She was alive. It was impossible and yet here she was, again. Alive...she was alive. It was a litany that ran through her mind over and over until she could feel her eyes burning. Those last moments on the Citadel as she waited for her demise had been the most painful of her life, filled with fear and doubt. What if the Catalyst was lying and they were simply going to kill her and continue with their destruction? What if they couldn’t bring back EDI and the Geth? What if she couldn’t be brought back? She had done her best for the world and for Liara, comforting her at the last while her own terror choked her. Just as she thought she might go mad she took the same advice she had given the Starchild and…. let go . Of everything. It would be Death’s greatest gift to her and she had embraced it fully.

Now, with Tevos handing her the same yoke of responsibility she had carried through the long war she found herself hesitating; terrified to leave the gentle numbness of nothingness. The prospect seemed so daunting that she felt nauseous, but after a couple of heaves it was clear there was nothing to throw up. The woman took deep breaths and let the water run comfortably over her head and face. It wasn’t that she was unhappy to be alive; just that the mixture of relief and dread in her veins left her as unsteady as her first zero-g.
Get it all out, she thought, Get it out now and then forget it. That part’s done. Thankfully the shower drank her tears, and her shoulders shook silently while she processed. When her chest began to ache from the exertion she began to scrub herself roughly, the sensation distracting her until she calmed. Familiar words wound through her soul, though she couldn’t recall their source.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now. . . .”

With the spectral command thoughts began to clamor in her head, pulling her in many directions at once; but before they could cause her further distress she pushed them away. There was one other new part of herself she needed to greet first and it pulsed gently in the back of her mind.

When she pulled the groupthink to her the cacophony she expected contained only a single other being. Shepard hadn’t questioned the lone voice while she was recovering from anesthesia but now understood that Tevos had come alone for her benefit. Well perhaps not only hers; the Asari was immensely grateful to vacate the convergence and didn’t mind sharing that space with only one other person for now.

Tevos greeted her, but soon relayed concern about the Commander’s frame of mind. There was time, she cautioned, Perhaps she should take some for herself. Shepard hadn’t predicted Tevos’ quick consumption of her current mental state, though the fact she was an Asari probably explained it. There was doubt and guilt from Tevos about the need she brought to her doorstep; but Shepard felt a familiar steeling of her spine that insisted she was fine. There were questions she needed the answers to, regardless of what she intended to do about them; no point in putting it off.

It wasn’t as if Tevos could refuse the transfer of data Shepard sought; so the Asari quietly resigned herself to it while she prepared her speeches, which made it Shepard’s turn to feel guilty about the intrusion. She apologized even as she reached out to learn everything she had missed. By the time she returned to herself, it was to a rap at the door of the washroom and a concerned voice, asking if she was okay. She had pruned from spending so long in the water and turned it off as she broke away from the Councilor.

“I’m fine,” she responded confidently, “I just...needed a soak. Be right out.”

She felt better as she dried herself with a towel. A bit empty, perhaps, but calm. There were still so many emotions that waited in queue, so many dead that needed to be mourned and of course so many of the living that needed to be embraced; one especially. She dressed and combed her hair, then took another deep breath and opened the door.

The scientists gathered in the hallway stopped their conversations and looked at her as she came out, then moved aside without a word. She nodded with an appreciative smile, but could still feel their eyes on her as she passed before turning left into Miranda’s office. She closed the door behind her and gave the Doctor an odd look where she sat behind her desk.
Miranda looked up from where she was entering data and arched an eyebrow at her expression, “Everything alright?”

“Yeah,” she said, straightening, “But you might want to check on your team out there. I think one of them might have fainted.”

It took a moment for Miranda to follow, then she chuckled, “Ah. Well you are going to have to get used to that I think. The next two days are already booked solid with requests for interviews. You are a hot commodity, Commander.”

Shepard waved that off, “I’m not your Commander anymore. Just call me Shepard.”

“Shepard then,” Miranda replied with ready equanimity, “You ready for your terminal?”

She nodded gratefully, “Yep. I need to make some calls.”

“I took the liberty of sending Liara a message when it became obvious you were going to come around. It goes without saying that she’s looking forward to hearing from you,” Miranda said, smiling politely, “And it just so happens I need to step out for awhile. I’ll be back after lunch and bring you something to eat?”

“Thanks, that’d be great,” she smiled in return, managing somehow to wait for the door to completely close before scurrying to the terminal set up for her against the back wall.

Shepard blinked at the thousands of messages that incremented before her eyes. She filtered for Liara impatiently and found only a single one, dated over a month ago. She opened it and sat back, the Asari’s image floating in her mind while she read the words.

Shepard,

It’s late and I can’t sleep. I feel so far away from you that I keep reaching for you in my dreams; but you slip from my fingers every time, so I wake.

I hope you got the message I sent through the Rachni. You might not forgive me for what I’ve done, but I do hope you understand why. I always hoped...I always dreamed we would both come out of this on the other side; but now that we have I look back and realize that I might have lost faith at the end. Not in you, never in you. I think I got angry at everything that was being taken from us; so I took something for us in revenge and in doing so violated your trust.

Shepard had to stop reading at that point, tears blurring her vision. She dropped her face and wiped her eyes, trying to keep it together so she could continue.

I hope this finds you well. I want you to know that this time I’m the one coming home. Nothing will stop me. When I do, we are going to go away by ourselves for a while, just the three of us. If you are still willing, we’ll plan the rest of our lives on a beach, just as Mordin would have loved.

Love you always and forever,

Liara

Look for Glyph 8.12

Shepard tilted her head at the last, still struggling with the love that clouded all rational thought. It was odd. She reread it again but it didn’t make any more sense. Glyph was Liara’s personal assistant VI, the one that helped her organize all the data that came in as the Shadow Broker. The reference to
Mordin was odd as well. Not that it wasn’t touching, but she and Liara had never talked about a beach as their romantic spot before.

She did a search for Glyph 8.12 in her queue but got no results. Shepard chewed her lip. Liara would only be doing this if she wanted to send a private message. That meant there was a trick to this...something that only the two of them would understand.

Ugh. Shepard rubbed her eyes. She wasn’t good at this cloak and dagger stuff when she was clear headed, much less now. She stood up and walked around while she thought.

Mordin and the beach. Shepard had told Liara about Mordin’s plans for the future before he died. Mordin wanted to collect seashells. She leaned over the station and started filtering for all forms of that word. Paydirt. There were several messages from a sender simply called seashell, but they were all gibberish.

No, she thought to herself, they were encrypted. She sat back down and entered 8.12 as the key, feeling a sense of satisfaction as the message took its proper form before her eyes.

Shepard,

I know you are not fond of these puzzles and I apologize. I tried to keep it as straightforward as possible. I wanted to tell you that the Rachni have expressed their appreciation for everything you did for them and are proving their commitment by helping me. They are a strange race but they are fiercely loyal and have sworn never to betray my trust.

With their help we have not only been able to contact Sol, but dozens of other systems. The agents they pay there have been able to make contact with mine, and we have formed an alliance of sorts. The short of it is that while I do not have access to everything I had as the Broker, I do have access to much more than I did.

Keep this contact for when you must seek me out secretly. The Rachni are reporting official news back to the Alliance but any messages you may need to deliver privately can likely be arranged.

I meant what I said in the official missive but the Alliance already knew everything in it. Here, we can talk frankly.

To that end, I’d like to start by telling you how much I miss you. I didn’t tell you everything we did in our dreams before you slipped away but suffice it to say they continually leave me wanting more. I can still smell you. I can taste you. I can feel your skin beneath my fingers. I want to dive into your mind and drown. My soul starves without you.

When I found out you were alive, I thought I might die instead.

Please, talk to me when you can.

Liara

There were several more messages since that time, but Shepard was having trouble breathing with just the first. This woman knew her more deeply than any other, and her words were like sledgehammers to Shepard’s heart. If she had said she was waiting for her in the heart of a star Shepard would have stolen a shuttle and flown it in. These feelings were impossible to fathom and harder to control. She put her face into her hands and appreciated them for just a moment, the darkness she had felt in the shower suddenly put to shame by the brightness of that light. When she straightened, she felt a bit like herself again.
Shepard ran slow hands through her hair and took a deep, cleansing breath. She had given the galaxy the gift of that data, and it might have been too soon, she recognized; but if they destroyed one another over it at least it would be their choice and not some overreaching nightmare from the darkness between galaxies. As ugly as it was, this new world was still what she had fought and died for. It was enough. Liara was enough. Her child was enough.

Time to get back in the saddle.

A system notification woke Liara from her doze, one that said new messages had arrived. Something in her rebelled at having to wait for information to come in batches when seconds sometimes made the difference between a valuable piece of intelligence or garbage. Worse was the lack of video or audio, there was no compression possible through the Rachni comms so simple data was all that was possible. The detailed plans for the Relay had taken hours to transfer just on their own. At this point in time though, she reminded herself, she had the best data transfer in the galaxy. The QE’s might technically be faster when they came online, but that information had to filter through government bureaucracies before it could be disseminated. That meant Liara would again get wind of many decisions before they ever travelled between the paired particles.

The naps, though...naps were a bonus, as Shepard once said when talking about the irritating jumps across the galaxy for one mission or another. Liara had a cot set up for the days she didn’t return to the Normandy, and she was considering staying on the Rachni ship during their trek to Arcturus. If she stayed onboard the Normandy she wouldn’t have access to unfiltered data unless Ashley specifically granted her clearance, a solution that bore its own share of problems. If she stayed here though, she wouldn’t be able to associate with the rest of the team on the long journey, something that had clearly been bothering Tali. She had decided to broach the subject with Ashley before she nodded off.

All of that was forgotten when she saw the message for which she had been waiting months. A smile crept onto her lips at the sight of Shepard’s handle on the list and she savored the sweet exultation of it for a moment, unable to resist opening it for longer.

Liara,

I don’t really know where to begin. I woke a few minutes ago feeling lost and then saw your messages. I’m not nearly as poetic as you are about your feelings but I’d be a horrible human being if I didn’t tell you how much I needed to see/hear those words. I suppose I understand, even if for only a short time, what you felt every time I left; and I don’t think I can express how much regret I have for those days apart. I know it was what I needed to do and this is simply the circumstance you found yourself in; but the selfishness I feel for the time we’ve missed is just too much to fight.

To be clear, I am not happy that you took without asking. At the same time, I fully understand what happened in London. Nothing about that situation gave us the leisure of focus on or the planning of our personal lives. Obviously if we are going to have a dozen I would ask that we at least have a talk over a glass of wine. The whole, ahem, exercise would be much more enjoyable.

I can’t believe it, really. I never thought I would have the opportunity to be a mother...or father in this case. I know that from my perspective it’s only a day, but it’s been much longer for you. How are you? I know Asari reproduction differs greatly from ours, but I did look up how long it would take. Can you physically tell at this point? I wish I could be there to see for myself. I wish I could see you, your eyes, your smile. I won’t be satisfied until I can touch you with my hands and feel you in my head. I need you to come home safely, Liara. What can I do to help you there?
I’ve caught up with everything the Rachni have done to assist and am truly humbled. Please let the Queen know how much I value our new friendship. I see we haven’t formalized relations with them yet and I think I can recommend that without hesitation at this point. I remember them contacting me after the Crucible but I was certain it was only a dream. It’s clear I still have a lot to learn about them.

I have so much to tell you, but Miranda is here with food and I might die if I don’t eat. (She says to tell you those were my words, not hers.)

Stick around, I’ll message you soon.

Liara was beaming. She couldn’t possibly wait that long without a reply. Just something simple! She sent an enthusiastic expression of love and told her to hurry, but without choking. Then she was forced to wait. She drummed her fingers. She paced. She tried to look at her other messages but found her mind wandering halfway through the first of them. Shepard had forgiven her! Her hands slid unconsciously around her lower stomach, warmth extending to her daughter from the overflowing abundance in her heart. They were going to be a family after all. She felt silly for ever doubting it, but hindsight was ever more accurate.

Her thoughts drifted to what they might do once she returned. There were so many possibilities to consider, but almost all of them involved sitting quietly somewhere together and admiring a view. There was a moment on one of their away missions that she remembered with fondness. It was a world with an acceptable atmosphere and while they awaited intel they simply sat together on top of the shuttle, legs dangling while they looked up at the stars. It had only been a few minutes...when had they ever had more? But the desert world was eerily quiet, the air cool in the dark of night and Shepard had been warm, her body pressed up against Liara’s side while their fingers intertwined.

Beyond that, she wondered what would occupy their lives if they didn’t have the galaxy to save or the Protheans to research. Politics, perhaps? She had kept abreast of developments in Sol and knew it was only a matter of time until Shepard got involved. Liara’s role as the Shadow Broker had obviously been diminished but she was determined to rebuild. After all, what were a couple of decades to an Asari? Shepard would still be in her prime then if she didn’t miss her guess. Plenty of time to take a hand in creating the galaxy that could be.

She was ready when the next batch arrived and dove into Shepard’s message.

Had to get a bit more privacy for this bit. Nobody can know everything that happened on the Citadel, including Miranda. I will have to file a formal report, of course, but it will be edited. I’m going to tell you because I trust you, and because you may be of some help.

When I arrived I was alone, as you know. I should have run into a thousand Reaper troops but the place was deserted. I found out later there was a reason for that, and it had to do with the Illusive Man. He was planning to use the Crucible to take control of the Reapers but he needed me to open the arms; he was struggling with the same indoctrination we saw in Saren and the Reapers weren’t about to let him do it himself. He had been working on a form of indoctrination on his own though, and had taken control of the majority of the people on the station ostensibly to help the Reapers...

Liara’s brow furrowed as she read about the Thorian infection, recalling Feros and the lingering effects among the colonists there. The council was included! That was a sobering development and Liara could only imagine what the Illusive Man had planned if he succeeded. What must it be like to be joined in that way, she wondered? So many questions, and the number only grew as she read. The possibilities! The risks of discovery! The question likely wasn’t if they would ever be found out, especially if they found a cure, but when. Once apart, each person’s inclinations would undoubtedly come back into play, and someone somewhere would use that most secret information as a weapon.
Liara doubted any of them would remain in positions of power for long after that, and Shepard was of the opinion that they simply had to do as much as they could to cement a lasting peace before that happened.

I’m going to ask the Council to put me in charge of the investigation for the missing data. I suspected something like this might happen, but not so quickly. Even if I had known I’m not sure how it could have been avoided, so all I can do is try and fix it. Any help you can give through your contacts might drive this to a quicker end. As you may have already seen we and the Salarians are busy blaming each other, so I’ll get whatever hard info I can and share it with you.

Now, enough about me. Let’s talk about the things we never did; the things we will do when you are home. I’ll start…and ironically you put the idea in my head!

Bikinis on an empty beach. I saw the Thessian seas in some of my sharing with Tevos and think I’d like to see it for myself. With some of that good wine.

Your turn. I love you.

Of course I will help you however I can, but you aren’t getting away that easily! Sharing with Tevos? That must have been interesting and I have to admit an overwhelming curiosity about how you got along. When you say you knew everything about each other, do you really mean everything? Does she know everything about me now in the same way you do?

While there may be a bit of jealousy involved, I’m not over-reacting, I promise. I really just want to know.

As for my wish, I’d have to second yours, with a small change. You can’t really experience the seas on Thessia from land. I propose we take one of the old craft over the water, we would be much more likely to be alone there. Bikinis are the clothing humans wear to expose their skin to the sun while preserving modesty, correct? Bikinis are an option, of course, but why would we bother if nobody else could see us?

As far as the Salarians go, I find it odd that they haven’t revealed their success at this point. The sanction talks are moving forward and if the motivation that has been laid out for them is correct they are not using the data to their advantage. I would explore whether or not the Salarians in fact do possess the facilities to develop the technology. It’s not beyond STG to have one secretly in their possession or to have reconstructed something during the chaos. The other alternative is that Sur’kesh is being used as a convenient target by the real thieves. I’ll look into anyone who might have had the motivation and technology to do this successfully.

It is wonderful to see you so engaged this quickly, but I must admit I am worried. Have you taken any time for yourself at all? You’ve been through a stressful ordeal, love. Don’t be ashamed to rest.

No, there is no outward sign of the pregnancy yet. I can feel her presence, though, and so will you when we meet. It is a humbling experience, feeling a new life form within you. I wish my Mother were still here to guide me through it; I am deliriously happy and frightened all at the same time. Now that I think about it, wasn’t Aethyta on the Citadel? Is she a part of this ‘Convergence’ too? She never mentioned anything like that in our messages, though I suppose I understand why.

You should probably start messaging my regular account when you are able, if only for
I am so happy that I feel like I’m floating. When I see you again, I might fly.

Liara

She wasn’t exaggerating, she could scarcely stay seated. It was cruel that she could only reach Shepard via cold text. She forced herself to focus on all the other communications she had received and for a few minutes succeeded in containing the emotions that boiled within her; at least until Shepard responded with one last message to the Shadow Broker handle she had created for this purpose.

Switching back after this.

I understand your concerns about sharing with so many others. I can tell you that there is simply too much information to just ‘know’ it all. I think my brain would explode. It’s only if I think about something in particular when we are connected that the knowledge appears, if that makes sense. So, unless Tevos had specifically been thinking about you, I’m not sure she knows ‘everything’. Regardless, what you and I share is completely different. The Thorian was never interested in feelings or emotions if they weren’t directly related to its needs. It only wanted information and control and the Illusive Man made no great changes to that paradigm. It is colder, like these messages rather than actually holding you in my arms. The difference is motivation. We understand each other and what drives us based on past experiences rather than having to guess from an intel database. I understand fully now why the Council was so reluctant to support my investigation into the Reapers, for example. I mean, I knew it wasn’t personal when it happened but now I understand just how complex other issues were. To be fair, they also understand just how mistaken they were to put other priorities ahead of my testimony. If we were to separate tomorrow, we all fully understand how much importance can be placed on each other’s words. If we truly felt it didn’t warrant another’s full attention we would simply say so. I know that sounds confusing, but it makes perfect sense when you are inside.

I do think I recall your Father being a member of the Convergence but there were a lot of people there. Since that initial exposure I’ve only been dealing with a few people who have come to Vigil while I have been incapacitated and Aethyta wasn’t among them. Obviously I wouldn’t talk about this on open comms; I can ask when I meet with the Council again, which should be relatively soon.

Ok. Bikinis. You need to understand that humans can sometimes be enticed by the things they can’t have just as much by those that are within their grasp. (And you wonder why we are so demanding to the council?) When someone wears a bikini, it covers up the things you most want to see while also accentuating what you can. It’s irresistible to us and I just know you would be fabulous in one, even on a boat, so let’s do both! I’m thinking white. It will be delightful to peel it off your skin.

Nobody wants a break more than I do, but the stakes are too high in this. If war breaks out because I just needed a rest I could never live with myself. At least this issue doesn’t involve the imminent destruction of all life as we know it, right? As long as everyone knows I’m on the case I think we’ll be fine. I promise that if I need some time off I’ll take it. That’s as far as I can go.

When you are back, though, the galaxy will just have to wait for a few days. We have a lot of.. reacquainting to do.

Do dream of me again. I’ll meet you there.
Roses and Champagne

Chapter Notes

As requested. =) Congrats Rae!

This was a real problem.

Miranda played back the clipped vids one more time before sleeping her workpad. She hated giving bad news.

"Right. Jack, I'm gone. Will you get the things we need from commissary?"

"Yeah, no problem," Jack said, looking up from the RTS on her own new pad. "Noon?"

Miranda smirked and said, "I'll do my best," before heading to work.

As soon as she stepped from the elevator she could see Shepard pacing by her office. When she was spotted, the woman stopped and stood, hands folded behind her back while she approached.

"Morning," Shepard said once she was closer.

Miranda could feel impatience radiating from the woman despite her neutral expression. She stopped in front of her and nodded pleasantly, "Morning. We need to talk."

"Well that doesn't sound good," she replied with a crooked grin.

Miranda motioned to her office and followed Shepard inside. She set up playback of the videos she studied earlier as she spoke, "Your recovery has been flawless, up until this point. I need to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Sure, what's wrong?"

Miranda started the playback, and the screen showed a view of Shepard's room. It was dim, the middle of the night, and the video was accelerated to show her tossing and turning, waking and working at the terminal set up for her, rarely still.

"How are you sleeping?" she asked, watching Shepard's face as she watched herself.

Shepard looked confused when she met Miranda's gaze. "Fine, why?"

Miranda turned back to the vidscreen and navigated to a particular timestamp, playing it back at normal speed. It showed Shepard waking with a gasp, a look of anguish on her face.

"I did the math," Miranda said slowly. "You're getting about two and a quarter hours of sleep a night. I need you to tell me what's happening." When Shepard's face turned stubborn, she pressed the point, "Or I can't release you."

Shepard's jaw clenched and she sighed deeply, "I've got to get out of here. Today."
Miranda spread her hands and took a seat, "Great. Talk to me."

Shepard gestured at the video, still running, of her running her hands roughly over her face, "Bad dreams. What do you want me to say? I feel fine."

"You feel fine because of your physical enhancements. That won't help your mental state if you can't sleep. Do I need to detail the side effects of sleep deprivation?"

Shepard's frustration was clear, "Miranda, I don't have time for this. I can't do my job from in here."

"Disorientation," she began, "Decreased perception, microsleep."

"Oh come on!" Shepard barked at the litany.

"Hallucinations!" Miranda barked back, "Shepard, you are gonna go out there and try to put the coalition back together when you can't even think straight. Is that really a risk you want to take?"

"You can't fix bad dreams with an injection! I've had them for years and yet somehow I managed. If I don't get out there and make this right it will all have been for nothing." Her face was earnest, her eyes sharp. "I'll. Be. Fine." she said in a low, calm voice, "Release me."

Miranda met her eyes, unblinking, "How long?"

Shepard shook her head, "Last time I checked, you weren't a psychologist. Sign the forms."

"Fine," she said, "But at some point you are going to hit a wall, you know that, don't you?"

Shepard smiled through a wooden face, "Better be a pretty tough wall, considering the ones behind me."

"I don't know why you are so upset, is what I'm saying!" Jack said as they labored up a rock and tree covered slope. "Shepard's out which is what she wants and you are finally done, which is what you want. Why you have to make things complicated?"

"I'm not upset," Miranda protested, catching Jack's hand to help her up a particularly difficult section. For all of Jack's biotic strength she couldn't match Miranda physically. "She's...just infuriating sometimes."

Jack looked at her with an arched eyebrow and Miranda narrowed her eyes at the implication. "It's like...she's still at war. Regardless, she was right. It's not my problem," she admitted, "If the Alliance clears her for duty then that's that."

"Pfft, like the Alliance could tell her no."

The answer was flippant but gave her pause.

"Miri?" Jack asked sharply, "Not your problem. Can we go? Feels like I've got bugs crawling around in my clothes."

"Sure," she replied distractedly, "Almost there."

The clearing was really a clearing in name only. They couldn't land the shuttle because of the dense
canopy above and had to hike almost a mile to get there from where they could land. She stopped and turned with her back to the upward slope, but most of the view was still obscured in summer greenery.

Jack looked at her sideways when she sighed contentedly, "What exactly are we looking at?"

Miranda smirked and her hands blazed with blue. She reached out and pushed all the greenery she could manage to one side, revealing a bit of blue sky. "Get the other half, will you?" she asked, and Jack nodded. A moment later they both stood with outstretched hands, a nimbus of blue light coloring the clearing before the sun shone in.

The sight that greeted them warmed Miranda's heart and widened Jack's eyes. A backdrop of majestic snow capped mountains framed a verdant green valley that followed the river into the aged hydroelectric plant adjoining the underground facility. There were other buildings being constructed nearby, but from here the 'city' looked insignificant.

"Wow," Jack said without a trace of sarcasm, "So....this is yours?"

"Mnnhmm," she replied. They stood there quietly for a minute or two before looking at each other and releasing the vegetation.

"Okay," Jack relented with a roll of her eyes, "I get it now."

"So...does this mean you are moving in with me?" Miranda asked archly.

"Um, aren't we kinda past that?" Jack retorted, smiling and sliding her arms around Miranda's waist. Miranda looked deep into Jack's eyes, "We can head back if you like. I know this isn't your thing."

"No, but I know you wanted to get out of that place for awhile. Tell you what, let's meet halfway. We'll bring the shuttle up here and hang out," she said, turning away and pushing up the sleeves of her form fitting long sleeved shirt.

"But....there's no room...." Miranda began to protest before Jack blasted two saplings down near the center of the clearing with her biotics. She looked around for more and began widening the opening it created above before Miranda shrugged in assent. Between them they managed to clear a large enough area for the shuttle to fit, Miranda dragging the trees away after Jack knocked them down.

Miranda chuckled on their way back, and Jack quirked an eyebrow. "Who knew you'd actually be a lumber....jack?"

It took a moment but Jack groaned when it hit. "Oh....god...damn. Don't do that. Ever again," Jack said emphatically while Miranda laughed.

They traversed the rough landscape silently for a few moments before Miranda spoke again, unable to resist her curiosity, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Alright," Jack said, her tone immediately suspicious.

"Why do you call yourself Jack? I know your real name, but you've never even asked."

They walked along in silence again, but Miranda could see Jack's jaw clenching. "I know my own fucking name. It's just not who I am, so why bother?"

"But 'Jack' is? Where did you get that name in the first place?"
Jack stopped and glared at her, "You really wanna know?"

Miranda paused as well, looking at her sincerely. "I really do," she said.

Jack turned to forge ahead on the trail, her strides bold. "I got sick of them calling me Subject Zero, like I was some kind of fucking number. When I finally up and told 'em they laughed. One of the assholes said I didn't know jack and never would, so that's what they started calling me, to piss me off good before a fight. It caught on."

When Jack got hung in a thick set of bushes she struck them with biotics to break through, then turned, smiling wickedly. "When I killed him, I gave him a little private whisper before his eyes shut. I said, 'I guess you didn't know Jack,'" she said, straightening her shoulders, "So I kept it. The Nought part was just for fancy parties."

Miranda watched her for a moment, then approached to within arm's length. "You know you can have whatever name you want, right? There's nothing wrong with the name Jack, of course, but maybe someday that won't be who you are anymore, either."

The statement took Jack aback, her eyes going far away before focusing on Miranda's face again. "Stop trying to fix me, Princess," she said firmly, but pressed her lips against hers just the same before moving on.

Two hours later Jack laid herself gently atop Miranda while they panted, her lips curling in a slow smile. Carefree, fearless...no words quite captured how good their sex was. They poured out years of frustration into each other without either of them flinching. The bruises, welts and cuts that lingered after were worn like badges, the ache reminding them of that shared chaotic joy. It was it's own battle, she supposed, a response to the angst they both felt and a way to move forward from it. She conveyed her pleasure with a deep kiss that stole what breath remained, then crawled up to untie Miri's hands from the shuttle's seat arm while they inhaled and exhaled deeply.

Miranda spoke in a sleepy, satisfied voice, "Using biotics constitutes cheating, you know that, right?"

Jack chuckled deep in her chest, "You know rules only exist because losers cry, right?"

Miranda caught Jack's left arm when it passed before her gaze, her eyes riveted to the healing patterns there.

"What's this?" she breathed.

Jack answered by rolling onto the blanket covered cargo floor while leaving her arm in the woman's grasp. She blinked and sucked on her lower lip, not quite ready to let go of the passion that darkened her eyes, "What's what?"

"Your arm," she replied, fingers tracing the black lines now occupying the porcelain skin of her outer forearm.

"Those are called tattoos," she said sarcastically while her skin prickled beneath the touch.

Miranda's eyes cleared with growing interest and she sat up and called for light. "When did you get this done?" she asked, turning her arm as much as she could to view the whole. It was a dark bracer, stylized like the rest of her art, but in the center was an outlined bird, all sharp edges and no feet.
"Did it yesterday. Looks good, doesn't it? Can't believe it healed that quick."

"Mmmn," she muttered, "You do these yourself?"

Jack nodded quietly and ran the fingers of her other hand slowly up the skin of her own stomach, still craving sensation.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Miranda asked, curiosity lighting her eyes.

Jack licked her lips and smiled lazily, "Mmmnhmm."

The answer seemed to please her. "The bird is quite lovely," she said, "Doesn't look finished, though. What does it mean?"

Jack wasn't ready to go there, so she withdrew her arm and shrugged, "It's just a bird. There's lots of other stuff that needs to be done."

The evasive answer only piqued Miranda's interest, "Oh? Do you mind if I ask what? It might sound stupid but sometimes I just want you to lie still and let me look at all of them."

"Maybe if we both get real drunk I'll let you."

"So, you are asking me to bribe you with alcohol?" she asked with a grin.

"Fuck yes," Jack chuckled.

Miranda turned out the lights, the sounds of the wilderness outside becoming audible even over their voices. It was almost dark now, the sun having set over the mountains long before the light actually ebbed. She slid against Jack's warm body, their faces close, "I may not have seen them all but I am fairly certain I've never seen a bird. It's nice."

"I'm going to fill the rest with art for my students. I haven't decided what but I have some ideas," Jack offered in a muted voice.

Miranda simply nodded in agreement, respecting Jack's wish not to talk about what happened, "That's a lovely sentiment. Which one does the bird represent?"

"Like I said, a bottle buys you an answer," she said. Her words might have been caustic but the nuzzle of her nose against Miranda's chin softened the blow.

Miranda frowned at the response but let it go. "Alright," she said softly, sliding the edges of her fingernails lightly down the skin of Jack's back.

Her eyes closed at the sensation and she sighed in bliss. When the nails began to dig deeper she opened her eyes to find Miri watching her quietly, increasing the pressure all the while. Jack found herself conflicted. She should stop her, protest, something, but the growing pain wasn't unpleasant at all and that shamed her. She found herself trusting that Miri wouldn't go too far and that was discordant too, but the pleasure was undeniable, so she simply didn't. Instead, she lost herself in Miranda's blue eyes while her world unfocused.

Miranda purred, "You like that, do you?"

Jack's breath was quickening, the answer obvious. Still, she couldn't let the words go unchallenged, "Do you?"

Miranda's face brightened with a smile, "Next time, no biotics. Deal?"
Her nails dug deeper, pulling down the small of her back until she could swear she felt the skin give. She moaned, nodding, "God. Fuck. Okay."

When Miranda withdrew her nails Jack panted, the sensation's echoes still riding her.

When Miranda 'hmphed', Jack finally stirred.

"What?" she asked blearily.

"Nothing, just thinking about us."

"Oh shit," Jack replied disparingly, then laughed at the pinch she received in return, which earned her another. She fended off more of those deadly pinches with her hands, laughing harder all the while until she had to gather Miranda's arms with her own and roll atop her again to stop the barrage.

They were both giggling like schoolgirls at that point and finally stopped, just looking into each other's eyes. Jack saw something there that gave her pause, and she brought a hand up to run her slender fingers through Miranda's long dark hair. She had no words to give the woman, but the deficit wasn't Miri's fault, it was her own. Memories of another time pulled at her sleeve, of a man she had betrayed herself just so she could be the one to do it first. The guilt she felt when she heard the message he left her about future plans, sent prior to his death, haunted her. He was blameless but died anyway. Because of her.

So she couldn't say the words. She refused to feel the feelings; she didn't deserve their warmth, but Miranda didn't deserve the frost. Any debt Lawson owed her had been paid, plus interest. She brought her hand down to cradle Miri's perfect face and then kissed her. Not with desire, not with need. The kiss was all the warmth and gratitude she could muster and as it deepened she imagined it filling the woman beneath her until she glowed. She felt Miranda melting under her weight and suddenly broke off the kiss, eyes stinging.

"You wanna go get that bottle now?" Miranda asked after an uncomfortable silence.

"Yeah," Jack replied after a second, "I hope you don't mind if I play some music on the way back. Really loud."

Miranda was already moving to the cockpit, pulling her clothes with her, "I don't suppose you want to hear classical?" she quipped with a disarming grin.

"Yeah. No."

Miranda had wanted to wait until they got back to the room before they began but Jack pulled the bottle from her hands and proceeded to get a head start on the elevator.

"Good Lord, Jack!" Miranda exclaimed as the woman swallowed again and again. She finally stopped, licking her lips with a wolfish grin, then offered the bottle to her. She balked, holding up a hand at the offer, but Jack pushed it into her hands with a serious look.

"The deal was that we were both drunk. Get going, Lawson."

She took it from her, looking at it as if were a snake about to strike, "How can we have any kind of meaningful conversation if we can't see straight?"
"Ha! A ballet of perfectly timed phrases isn't a conversation. I don't care what anyone says, when you are drunk you are who you really are and that's where I want us tonight."

Miranda chewed her lip, then took a swig and felt the burn. She coughed delicately into her forearm then took another as a show of support. When Jack nodded in approval she pointed out the obvious, "People also tend to fight like heathens when they are drunk."

"Heathen," she said, tasting the word. "Sometimes your massive vocab comes in handy. I like that." She took back the bottle and drank again before pressing it against the Miri's chest, "Besides, since when are you afraid of a little fight?"

The reaction to her first and second taste of the alcohol hadn't quite diminished but she tamed the foul look on her face and did it again, much to the chagrin of her stomach. She had to pause and bend over for a moment, fighting the reaction to gag. Jack saved her from further embarrassment by taking the bottle back.

"Don't kill yourself, Princess. You don't have to keep up with me, but you aren't quitting either."

By the time they made it to the door Miranda worked up the stamina to claim the bottle again. She took a deep breath, looking intently into Jack's gaze for some kind of reassurance. Jack watched her like a hawk watching a rabbit, which didn't help. She took another drink anyway, this one deep. Jack wasn't the only one that could use some liquid courage. After she tightened her jaw and forced the swallow she passed her prints over the panel and walked into the room. She turned on the lights and set the bottle down on a desk, dropping her things on the floor by the bed and spinning to look challengingly at the biotic.

"Not yet!" Jack interrupted with a pointed finger. "Fifteen minutes. Find something to do until then."

Jack took another long draw from the bottle herself and Miranda was alarmed to see it almost half gone. The burning in her stomach had turned to tingling in her extremities and she knew that it wouldn't be long.

"Something to do?" she asked as she licked her lips, "Fine. Strip. Right now," Her eyes were on fire and Jack smiled as she complied. When she was naked and all the colored patterns across her lithe body were before her gaze she pointed to the bed and was pleasantly surprised when Jack obeyed without any resistance. Miranda took her time and devoured the sight before even climbing onto the mattress. While she retained her faculties she was going to make good on their agreement and examine every part of her lover. Jack took the whole thing in stride, answering her questions patiently if not in depth. This one represented a narrow victory, that one was after a successful heist, another crude one was done while she spent time in prison, and there were many more for the enemies she killed. There were so many variations and locations of artwork that they spent half an hour or more just relaxing together and talking while Miranda's eager eyes and fingers explored. They kept circling back to the real question, the one Jack kept avoiding with a shake of her head.

Her questions eventually began to slow as the weakening warmth of the whiskey finally sent its tendrils into Miranda's mind. Jack's fingers lifted her chin until they could see eye to eye. She seemed pleased with what she saw and grinned, "Your turn to strip."

Miranda couldn't hide her delight in doing so, and soon they were both bare to the dim lights. Jack pulled her closer and allowed her hands to explore the taut muscles of her body. She licked her lips, relishing the buzz, "I love touching you Miri. I love how you feel beneath my hands. I want to keep them on you even when we're apart."

Miranda couldn't help but lick her own lips as she saw Jack do the same, her pulse loud in her ears.
She knew somewhere in the back of her mind that she needed to be cautious, but that voice was so
dim now she could only attend the emotions that crowded the moment, "God, Jack….I," she started
before the need that filled her stopped rational thought.

Miranda didn't know what to say and was certain she shouldn't say whatever came to mind. She
always had a plan, an agenda; plans created certainty and certainty was power. Now she had nothing
except the glow of Jack's eyes and the long ignored desires of her heart. They made no sense, but
absent the stringent goals to which she applied herself they had come to the fore; and now, in this
moment, they were in charge.

"You've….really surprised me," she started because well, she had to
start. "I know people. And by
that I mean I think I have a pretty good grasp on their motivations. I've used that every day of my
life, finding out what people want and finding ways to make it happen, so long as I get what I need
in return. And…" she shook her head in consternation, "You'd think that would mean I had some
inkling of what I wanted."

Miranda chuckled and wiped away a tear, "You were such...a terrible distraction from what I had to
do. What I needed to do. My sister. My father. Cerberus. Shepard. The Reapers. It was like every
problem grew another, larger head and I had no time to think of anything else. Yet, there you were
and no matter what I did to make you just leave, you wouldn't. You were so spiteful.." she mused.

"I don't think I even ever saw you as a person until Pragia, and that was mainly guilt. No matter our
intentions, our allegiances are albatrosses. You want so badly to believe in something that you often
ignore the truth of what they are, but that doesn't make you blameless. You...were...." Miranda
clenched her hands into frustrated fists, "The naked screaming truth, throwing chairs at me when I
refused to hear it."

Miranda's eyes softened, "And I did refuse. I called you a mistake."

Jack's eyes hardened in remembrance. If Shepard hadn't intervened, one of them would likely have
died and Miranda had her suspicions about whom.

"But the mistake was mine and the damage was done. For the first time in a long time, maybe
forever, I began to doubt; and that was simply another reason to hate you. But that doubt made me
question a lot of things, Jack, including who I wanted to be. You weren't the only reason I left
Cerberus, but you were the first," she said, "I...just want you to know that."

"Anyone ever tell you you're pretty when you cry?" Jack said after a moment of self-conscious
silence passed between them.

Miranda laughed, running her fingers under her eyes, "I can't say anyone has ever told me that, no."

"Good, cuz they'd be lying."

"Bitch," she said with a sniff and chuckle.

"Ice Queen," Jack retorted with a smile. "Look," she said," I get it, but I gotta ask you a serious
question, and you ain't gonna like it."

"Alright," Miranda said, quietly steeling herself.

"What are really driving at here? What is this?" Jack motioned between the two of them sharply, "Is
it a pity fuck? Seriously, I wanna know and I promise I won't get mad. Just tell me."

Miranda's brow furrowed, "Wait, you think what I just admitted was done out of pity?"
Jack got up and slid off the bed to pace, and Miranda was struck by the lithe lines of her body. Biotics didn't tend to heaviness to begin with, their caloric requirements were far too high; and Jack's tattoos accentuated the wiry muscles that ran her length even further. Coupled with the energy she naturally radiated she appeared feline to Miranda, especially the wariness shining from her face.

"No," Jack said firmly after lifting the bottle from the table to her lips, "But since I can't see this thing we've got ever going anywhere I have to start asking questions."

Miranda blinked slowly a couple of times, trying to find the angles, "Is that how you really feel about the time we've had?"

Jack just stood there, penetrating her with that guarded gaze. Miranda's eyes widened when she realized the woman was serious and took a long shakey breath. There were so many things she wanted to say, no to scream at her, this woman with whom she had let down her guard but it was foolish, really. The whole thing had been foolish.

After a few moments of silence, Miranda forced herself to shrug and held her hand out for the bottle. "Then I guess there's nothing else to say," she said miserably, "Tell me about the bird at least." She took another drink and pulled herself up to recline against the wall.

Jack sat down on the side of the bed nearest her and lifted her forearm for her to view, "It's a Martlet. It's for you."

Miranda looked helplessly at Jack, her face collapsing against the force of the tears that came. The Martlet was a heraldic bird present on the Lawson crest. It represented an heir that was forced to make their way in life using their own wits and intelligence rather than the fortunes of their family. The lack of legs was on purpose. The bird could never land, forced to fly eternally in search of knowledge. Miranda had left her father behind long ago; all of her accomplishments were her own. It was clear that Miranda wasn't the only one in this relationship able to delve into the other's thoughts and background.

She tried her best to gather herself and looked painfully at Jack, "Why? Is this how you want to hurt me?"

Jack shook her head, "You got the wrong girl for that kind of shit."

Miranda put a hand to her forehead and took several deep breaths to control herself. That's when Jack took her wrists again and held them to her lap.

"Stop it. Look at me," Jack said sternly, "You wanna know the truth? I have feelings for you too. Okay? You protected me, you brought me back to life when I was dead on the inside. You deserve the spot. But that don't mean shit on the long haul, Miranda. Come on. You and me?" She gestured in disbelief with her hands, "How you gonna explain that in your board meetings?"

Miranda was shaking her head in denial but Jack's voice only got harder, "How are you gonna explain when I wreck your shit the next time I lose it? You think it's all gonna be roses and champagne now just because we fucked for a couple weeks?"

Miranda's tears stopped during the last bit and her own face grew hard, "Do you think I'm some kind of silly teenage strumpet you picked up on the roadside? You think I haven't already thought about all of this?"

"Then why are you giving me googly eyes, Lawson? You should know better."

"Why? Because you fucked up and gave them to me too!"
"Oh bullshit," Jack said, standing up again.

Miranda quickly followed, preferring to argue face to face, "Bullshit is right. I saw you Jack. I felt it. You love me but are too fucking terrified to admit it! I've seen cowards before but I never thought I'd see you running away from something that mattered!"

"Bitch? I'll show y…" Jack bit the inside of her lip and turned away, clearly trying to contain herself, too. "You don't know me, Cheerleader, and you never will. I'm trying to save you some fucking trouble."

"Trouble? Our whole lives up to this point have been trouble, Jack. You see me running? Your kind of trouble is fucking tame in my world."

"My kind of...Are you fucking serious?"

Miranda shook her head, realizing how that might have sounded, "That's not what I meant and you know it. You brought us here to tell the truth, so if you meant that then shut the fuck up and listen."

When Jack turned and just stood there glaring at her Miranda took it as a sign and swallowed another drink from the bottle before slamming it on the table, three quarters empty. This was going to end here, one way or another.

"I don't need you Jack. You need to understand that straight away. I'm not going to beg you to stay. You want to go?" she motioned to the door, "Off with you." She took two steps closer to the woman until their noses almost touched and she could smell the drink on Jack's breath. "What we had was great. Fantastic, even. I want you to stay. I want to see what we could have because this whole war has made me painfully aware of our mortality! It'd be an awful fucking shame to waste any more of our time with tragic mealy mouth bullshit."

Jack couldn't help but smile at her use of the words 'mealy mouth'. That wasn't Miranda's expression, it was Jack's. Something so small, inconsequential even; but it was radical just the same because Jack was the cause. She noticed how often the woman was swearing now, too. It was out of character, but Jack saw it for what it was. Honesty. Honesty and an attempt to connect to her...to bridge the chasm between them. She did her best to keep a straight face as Miranda's rant continued.

"I don't care what anyone thinks about me anymore, Jack. Nobody owns me now. I call the shots. You get me?"

Jack couldn't do anything but nod, but the storm wasn't over.

"Now I have an ultimatum. If you stay, the first thing you are gonna do is understand that if we have an argument I'm never going to try and hurt you on purpose. If I say the wrong thing because I don't understand your perspective that's not because I'm trying to hurt you. I'm done with that, Jack. Forever," She paused, the memory of her fingernails digging into Jack's skin, and the woman's mesmerizing reaction, "Well, verbally, anyway."

Jack just stood there, eyes wide.

Miranda pointed at her, "Nod your fucking head that you understand."

Jack nodded, amusement coloring her expression.

"That means that we will have a rational conversation about why we disagree so that we can solve the fucking problem. Yeah?"
Jack felt like laughing and knew she could not under any circumstances do that. She sucked on her bottom lip and looked at the bottle sitting on the table, "So can we do this again when that happens?"

Miranda turned to look at the bottle and realized that she was shouting. She took a moment to try and calm down, but the room was turning so wildly she knew that wasn't an option without something embarrassing happening. She held onto that anger for a few more moments just to stay upright, "Emergency situations only."

Jack saw her swaying where she stood and reached out to take her hand. At her touch Miranda seemed to relax, then looked suddenly green.

"Oh shit," Jack said.
When Shepard awoke again in her quarters she checked the time, then sighed and chose to rise early. There should be no one in the gym at four am, and she might be able to get in a quick workout and then a shower before meeting a soul. Her Omni pulsed gently with new messages, but that was commonplace now. She chose to ignore it and pulled on her compression gear, then ran a hand through her hair before heading out.

Her rooms were on the same sublevel as visiting dignitaries, with the Council just down the hall. Construction on other facilities in Vigil and repairs on the Citadel were ongoing so for now there were few other choices. Shepard was accustomed to the spartan tightness of her residence but could only imagine how the other race's heads of state were handling the meager accommodations.

There were a few people exercising as she arrived but they respected her space and didn't approach her, for which she was grateful. Shepard headed straight for the treadmill and her body fell into a nice relaxing rhythm as she ran, allowing her mind to contemplate next steps.

Despite lingering concern over the share, her public proposal to the Council to put her in charge of the investigation was very well received by the bureaucracy. They had confidence not only in her motives, but her standing with all races and the pull she retained from within the Alliance. The Council had no choice but to agree. The Alliance, however, hadn't reacted as well. The first thing they ordered was a standard psychological evaluation before they would declare her fit for duty, though it was done quietly. Her own species could scarcely afford to get on Shepard's bad side, now.

Not surprisingly, Tevos requested a private meeting with Shepard later that day. Despite the subterranean location of her rooms the Asari's quarters still somehow conveyed the elegance and grace of her species and Shepard made a note to pay attention to Liara's design suggestions when they had a place of their own.

Beneath the layer of verbal chit chat the two performed was a much different message. Tevos, and the Council with her in the share, weren't certain that Shepard should even accept reinstatement from the Alliance Navy. The need for their support had passed and even the Normandy was in different hands now. It was time for her to fully embrace her role as a Spectre and assist the Council with the many tasks before them. Time was of the essence.

Shepard, of course, countered that she had to maintain that connection with the Alliance if she expected full cooperation in the investigation, but Tevos wasn't concerned. If the Alliance was in fact responsible for the theft they wouldn't cooperate with her regardless; if they weren't, the awe and fear she inspired would convince anyone in reg blues that they should toe the line.

The Spectre put off her decision at that point. She still had people she needed to talk to, including the newly retired Admiral Hackett. She needed perspective, and she felt he was the in the best position to give it. She felt Anderson's absence keenly.

The rawness of that emotion dictated that her next visit was to the punching bags. Time to see what the old, scratch that, new girl could do. She nodded to the early birds coming in at 04:30 while she wrapped her hands, but was discomfited with the lingering looks. Shepard was accustomed to gawks and stares in public, but seeing the recognition in people's eyes followed by insert inappropriate reaction was old after all of five minutes. What's worse is that this place couldn't even be considered public. Most of the people here were politically or militarily involved, each with their own share of the spotlight. Shepard made another note that she and Liara's place was going to be in the middle of a jungle somewhere.
"Ok. Let's do this," she breathed, starting her jabs off slowly. The run had been just fine, she had broken a sweat and breathed deeply but everything moved right and she felt better after than when she started. Now she paid attention to how her joints moved, how they handled the impacts; ramping up the pace and force, adding some legwork to the mix after she was satisfied. It wasn't that she didn't trust the Doctor's tests, she just didn't trust numbers on a screen against this.

The endorphins kicked in and she smiled. Her heart beat in her ears and her breath exhaled in time with each strike. She was fine. Better than fine. The bag was moving and the world was right. When her Omni chimed with a call she stopped, wondering who would be reaching out this early. She didn't know the Krogan that appeared but she did recognize the appointment at 06:00 she was about to miss, scrolling on the side of the screen.

"This is Shepard," she said breathing heavily while grabbing her towel. She turned to see a dozen people standing across the room and around the equipment there, just watching her. When they saw her look at them they quickly found other things to do. A couple of them had been recording her workout, and her jaw tightened.

"The Clan has received your message. Urdnot Wrex needs to speak with you. He is arriving at your location later today."

Shepard had considered taking a shower at the gym but thought better of it now. She headed for the exit and turned back to the call, "I look forward to it. Have him contact me when he arrives and we'll set up a time." The krogan disconnected abruptly. He had never even given her his name, but she was beginning to appreciate their brevity in the sea of careful politics she now seemed destined to swim.

A quick shower and a couple of meal bars later she sat in a waiting room for the resident Alliance psychologist, Dr. Fields; where she was frowning at her omni and rubbing gentle circles on her right temple. After all the effort she spent sifting through messages last night, putting in filters for ones that could wait and tagging the ones that couldn't, she was greeted with another two hundred now. Many of them were from people she didn't know but meant her no ill will. Some of them were...less than that but she supposed she couldn't expect everyone to be a fan. At this rate she would spend more time organizing communications than actually communicating.

She wasn't unhappy, therefore, to be called back to his office; and was led into a room that made her stand still. An entire wall as a living projection; she could hear the wind blowing through vast fields of wheat that swayed in response and there was a farmhouse with active laborers in the background. The sharp notes of birdsong pierced her ears from a stand of trees to her left, the shadows within welcoming against the brightness of the blue sky. She stood transfixed by memory while the aide closed the door behind her.

It looked like home. It wasn't, of course, but it could have been another property anywhere nearby. She hadn't thought about home in so long that the bittersweet ache of it cut like a knife.

"Please, come take a seat."

Shepard turned to see a man behind a desk in the shadows watching her. The evaluation had already begun.

"Dr. Fields?"

"That's right," He stood and offered a hand in greeting as she approached. It was warm in her own and she gave him a terse smile, then sat down. The brightness of the wall dimmed and the overhead lights rose, revealing a sharp profile and piercing grey eyes.
He was handsome, she thought. Fit, too, early thirties. Obviously military. She jerked a thumb back at the wall, "What was that about?"

"My father's farm," he said pleasantly, "Spending too much time down here makes me want room to stretch."

"Couldn't agree more," she said, adjusting her fatigues now that she was seated, "Is that Earth?" He shook his head gently, "Mindoir."

Her eyebrow arched and her eyes widened at the answer, "When was that taken?"

"Last year," he said, his gaze penetrating.

So his family had moved in….after. Her thoughts spun but she stayed focused, "That's quite a coincidence, Doctor."

"I thought it was interesting, too. What did you think of the view?"

She had a flash of what most of Mindoir looked like after the raids, the stench of smoke and burning flesh filling her nostrils. Her jaw tightened as she replied, "Idyllic."

Fields nodded, sitting back in his chair, "You'd never know anything had happened. Tell me something Jordan, em, may I call you Jordan?"

"Please, just call me Shepard."

The Doctor smiled but she couldn't help feeling she had just failed some kind of test. "Shepard, then. Can you tell me what happened to your folk's place?"

Shepard pursed her lips then sighed as she recalled, "Destroyed in the shelling. I heard it was part of some kind of office space, now. New Hope has grown much bigger."

"So you haven't been back."

Her answer was steady as was her gaze. She wasn't going to flinch; this wasn't the first time she'd been asked about her past, "No."

"Why is that?"

Shepard sat back in her seat and folded her hands in her lap. She considered her answer carefully before replying, "My childhood is important to me. I'd prefer to remember it as it was."

"I'm sorry if I'm making you uncomfortable," he said slowly, "Please understand that my interest here is solely for your benefit." When she nodded, he continued, "Let's move forward a bit. Your file says that your efforts during the Blitz were, and I quote, "A display of unflinching bravery and zealous heroism against a determined and overwhelming force." He waited for some kind of reaction but didn't get one, "Can you tell me what forces you faced?"

"Pirates and thugs, mostly. They had the numbers but they didn't have discipline."

"Is it true that the unit you faced in particular was comprised of Batarian pirates?"

Shepard nodded quietly.

The Doctor looked at her for a long moment, then said, "In your opinion, did your 'zealous heroism'
have more to do with your hatred for Batarians than following orders?"

Her eyes narrowed at the insinuation. "They were preparing to slaughter or enslave thousands of human beings just as they'd done on Mindoir. I certainly wasn't in a cuddling mood, but I resent the implication that vengeance was my only motivation."

"Are you sure? There were reports of the mutilation of enemy bodies buried in the fine print. Tell me about that."

Her face turned to the now empty wall, wishing she could look on that waving wheat again. "Psychological warfare. It's what you do when they outnumber you a hundred to one."

"Did you learn that in basic training?"

She turned back and looked steadily at the Doctor. Something in her expression made him back off, but she regretted not having a ready answer. This looked bad.

"If I hadn't done everything I did," she said finally, "I wouldn't be sitting here. Extreme circumstances and so forth. I was cleared in the following evals. Why are we revisiting?"

He crossed his legs, looking at her analytically, "You're a special case, Shepard. People will be analyzing you for the rest of your life. The questions I'm asking lay the groundwork for who you are now and help explain later decisions."

She tried to smile disarmingly, "You could just ask."

"We'll get there," he said as he smiled back.

Shepard licked her lips and narrowed her eyes, "Why do I feel like you've got a book deal coming out of this?"

"That would be a blatant violation of Doctor/Patient privilege. I am here for one reason only, and that's to determine whether or not you have fully recovered from the events that occurred on the Citadel and are prepared to take up the responsibilities of an Alliance Officer. Before you ask, I am not judging your activities at all. Life is a forge, but not all blades survive the quenching. You did, and I want to understand how."

"You're....not like other shrinks I've met."

"And you aren't the only one to say so, but we're here to talk about you, not me," he replied, looking down at his notes before resuming.

They went through the rest of her career step by step and the psychologist was very thorough with details, usually delving into her emotions rather than what was listed in the report, "How did you feel about becoming the first human Spectre? There was quite a bit of stir about your predecessor's failure at the time was there not?"

Shepard chewed the inside of her lip, "Admiral Anderson should have without a doubt been the first. Saren's later behavior gave some pretty serious weight to David's allegations against him in that conflict. That being said, without him fighting so hard in my corner I'm not certain I would have been accepted. As far as how I felt about it, I can't say it was ever a motivation for me until it was offered, but I was pleased that I'd be getting more support from the Council in the hunt."

"But that support ended up being limited, in the end, is that right?"
She nodded, "That's correct. Politics tends to slow things to a crawl while a fight moves at light speed. There were a lot of people unhappy with my role which caused some static but in the end I think being outside the normal chain actually helped."

"So you embraced the role of outsider and went directly to the major players?"

"Not so much at the beginning," she shrugged, "I didn't know who the major players were. I had my orders and I followed them. The favors I did brought me some allies, though."

"Allies...and notoriety among the other races," he said musingly, "What were your impressions of those races?"

Shepard shrugged, "I guess as varied as they would be for people. I still didn't trust the Batarians, obviously, and my experiences with the Hanar were….unusual. The rest seemed to have their own skewed motivations and I simply adjusted to them." She didn't really see where this was going and it showed in her face.

He nodded, "Especially the Asari. I understand you are expecting a child with one?"

Shepard felt her face flush at the unexpected line of questioning, "Let's keep my personal life out of this."

"Shepard, your personal life is the point. It's a pretty radical shift to go from hating aliens to mating with them, don't you think?"

"I never hated aliens. Those are your words, not mine."

His face was was impassive but his response immediate, "That's a pat answer. For someone with a poor opinion of politics, you have the knack."

The woman tilted her head and folded her arms, "Are you trying to make me angry?"

"Are you angry?"

Angrier by the second, though she'd never say it. She wasn't embarrassed about her feelings for Liara and never would be.

"You refuse to answer and your arms are folded defensively," he pushed, "Why is my question bothering you?"

"It's not bothering me, it's just none of your business."

He smiled, but for the first time it felt sinister to her. There was an agenda here and she didn't know what it was. She couldn't risk offending him, however. Her reinstatement rested on his signature.

"Shepard, being an officer in the Alliance Navy comes with the rather obvious requirement of loyalty to the Alliance. I apologize if I have intruded in areas that you feel are inappropriate, but you of all people know just how fragile the peace we have with the other races is. Being a Spectre has, up to this point, granted you a number of freedoms and immunities that an Alliance officer does not have and avoiding my questions was one of them. Simply put, it's time to choose."

"Are you seriously questioning my loyalty to Earth? Is this session being recorded?" Her eyes were glittering emeralds.

"It is."
"And you are asking me to choose whether I am a Spectre or an Alliance officer, is that correct?"

"I'm asking who you are at your core. The Alliance cannot afford to second guess should...unforeseen events arise."

"Jesus, are you even a Psychologist? You're the one who should be in politics, Dr. Fields, or should I say, the Inquisition?"

"Answer the question, Shepard."

"No. I think we're done here," She snarled as she stood.

"That's unfortunate," he said, standing smoothly then slipped an O-card from a holder on the desk. He held it out to her, "Should you change your mind, please contact me."

Shepard snatched the card from his hand and leaned over his desk, planting her forefinger into the surface, "I want a copy of this session sent to me today, Doctor."

He smiled pleasantly, "We'll do our best."

Shepard left his offices with a face like a stormcloud. She needed to talk to Hackett and considered not waiting for their appointment, but there was no doubt she was in a rage and that wasn't conducive to civil discussion. She strode toward her room angrily for a minute before deciding on a new course and headed to the elevators instead. Hopefully she'd be there.

The third touch on the door chime was really just frustration, and she held it longer than was polite. Lawson wasn't there, so she started considering other options. Much to her surprise then, after turning away, she heard a shout from inside the room.

"Hang on a fucking minute!"

She turned back to the door and quirked a brow. Was that Miranda? The door opened to reveal a woman who was definitely not Miranda, glaring irritably at her. The sight of Jack with a full head of hair and clasping a silky robe around her body was possibly the most incongruous thing she had seen since she woke and the confusion on Shepard's face seemed to amuse her.

"Jack?" she asked tentatively.

"Oh," Jack replied, her voice lowering with a crooked grin, "Hey Shep. Where's the fire?"

Shepard blinked, then leaned back to check the room number before looking at Jack again, "Um, is Miranda home?"

"Em, Miranda's....." Jack looked over her shoulder then back at Shepard apologetically, "Not available. Please leave a message?"

Shepard was still blinking, but this time she caught her mouth hanging open. She squeezed her eyes shut and lifted a finger before looking at Jack again, "Wait a minute. Are you...."

The biotic rolled her eyes, "And she wins a prize."

Miraculously, Shepard could no longer remember why she was there. She covered her face with both hands and pulled them down to clear her head, "I...can't even. Look, I need to speak with her."

Jack smirked disdainfully, "Is it like, drama important or suicide mission important?"
When Shepard gave her 'the look' she raised her hands, "Fine! But she's not gonna want to talk to you. It's oh dark thirty for fuck's sake! Wait here."

Shepard put a hand on the wall and took a deep breath while she waited, then whispered to no one in particular, "You've got to be kidding me."

She heard voices inside and thought she could make out Miranda's sleepy complaints but that was all for some time. Just when she was about to ring again the door opened. Miranda stood there pale faced and in the robe Jack had just been wearing.

"Good morning Shepard," she said haggardly, "What's wrong?"

"You...look like hell. Is everything alright?"

"Thanks," she said with a smirk, "You look great, too. Was there something I could help you with?"

"I...really need some advice."

Miranda stood there looking at her for a moment before replying, "You, asking me for advice? The irony."

"I know," Shepard admitted, "I was a bit brusque yesterday and I'm sorry."

Miranda rubbed her forehead, obviously in pain, "Can we do this later?"

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, "I've got appointments scheduled back to back for the next fourteen hours, all of them dignitaries and all of them will start wondering who I am favoring if I cancel." She hesitated, reluctant to even ask, "I need some intelligent thought from someone outside of all of this. I need you."

Miranda took a deep breath while she considered; then suddenly relented, "We're going to need coffee, and lots of water."

Half an hour later they were walking out of the facility, requisite liquids in hand. It was odd watching Jack and Miranda walk together like old friends, as if they hadn't literally tried to kill one another before her eyes; but it was clear that they were somehow different. Just as Miranda seemed uncharacteristically happy when Shepard first woke, Jack seemed uncharacteristically relaxed. It was that sideways inspection of Jack that made her aware of the new arm and leg. Yes, she recalled that knowledge now from somewhere.

"Nice 'netics. How they working out for you?"

Jack's eyes slid to her, "Good enough to arm wrestle a Krogan without it breaking off. Looks like your secret sauce ain't so secret anymore."

Shepard looked at Miranda and realized how slow she had been on the uptake; that's how she and Jack got reacquainted.

Miranda nodded at Jack's statement, "The Alliance is working to make the technology we've developed available to as many as possible. With...a small percentage of profit for me based on proprietary innovation, of course."

Shepard looked impressed, "That's great news. You are helping a lot of people, you deserve it."

They walked a few more steps, then Shepard could resist no more. "So, when did this happen?" she
asked, gesturing to them both.

The couple looked at each other quietly and Jack just arched an expectant brow.

Miranda turned back to Shepard with a straightening of her shoulders. "Couple of weeks," she said boldly, which seemed to please Jack.

"Hey, I'm…really happy for you both," Shepard said, "Completely confused, but happy. I thought you two hated each other?"

The women shared another intimate look.

"And...that you weren't into women. In fact, Jack I seem to recall you telling me off about that very thing when I asked you one too many questions on the Normandy."

"Insults work best when they hurt, dumbass. Are you saying you secretly had a thing for me?"

"You…..no, no of course not! I'm not into women either," When both of them stared at her she backpedaled. "Well I mean," she said quickly, "You know what I mean."

Miranda smiled crookedly despite the pounding in her head, "I don't think I've ever heard you stammer Shepard, but I'm surprised. Don't you remember noticing our attraction at your party?"

Shepard blinked while she remembered, then grinned, "Wait, seriously? That was a joke."

Both of them stopped and stared again and Shepard crossed her heart, "I swear, it was a joke. I was trying to lighten the mood in the kitchen. Tali was too terrified to refill her glass."

They kept staring, but then Jack actually looked impressed, "Alright, that's funny."

Miranda rolled her eyes and they started walking again. It was late summer and at this altitude the temperatures were already beginning to dip, especially in early morning. There were still plenty of birds singing in the trees, though they wouldn't stay much longer. It was a pleasant day.

Miranda turned off the main path that wound alongside the nearly completed road to the budding spaceport, then into the trees to a clearing with outcroppings of stone that would make do for seating.

"It sounds like you don't have much time, Shepard, so let's get to the heart of it."

Shepard nodded and sat down. "It's politics," she said with a grimace, "I hate them but everyone here, everyone I have to deal with now plays the game. There's a lot at stake here, a lot of people who would like nothing more than to start shooting and I think I might be missing some angles."

"I understand. Go on."

"As soon as I got the Council to agree to let me investigate the data theft Tevos recommended that I not attempt to be reinstated in the Navy. Now this makes sense for a few reasons, but mostly because she's a Councilor, right? She needs me to be impartial. I get that. At the same time, if I'm gonna truly get anyone on the planet to open up to me it's going to be because I am a Naval Officer that shares their interests; not some alien flunky out to prove them as the bad guy. So, we agree to disagree."

Miranda nodded encouragingly and drank deeply from her coffee.

"Now, being both a Spectre and an Alliance Officer is pretty much how I've operated ever since I got the job and we haven't had any major conflicts. This morning I go in for my psych eval, standard procedure, so that I can be reinstated and," Shepard shook her head, frustrated, "Well let's just say I
failed."

Miranda straightened, a worried but unsurprised look on her face, "How did you fail? What did they say?"

"It wasn't what I said, it was what he said! His...entire line of questioning seemed hell bent on insulting me!"

"Perhaps he was trying to get a rise out of you; see how you held together?"

"I thought of that, but no, he went...too far."

"Alright," Miranda said, eyes sharpening, "What did he say?"

Shepard stood up and paced, her fingers massaging her forehead. She didn't want to detail the whole conversation. There was information there she had told no one, not even Liara, and she certainly didn't feel comfortable exposing weaknesses to Jack.

"Short version, he first made a case for me being a loyal citizen, someone who hated aliens, and then turned it around saying I wanted to be with aliens and leave humans behind. He thinks I'm no longer loyal to humanity just because I..."

Miranda tilted her head as she saw where this was going, "Because of Liara."

Shepard extended a hand out in her direction as she scored the point then continued pacing.

Miranda chewed on her lip, then "And how did you respond?"

"...told him to shove it up his..." she put her hands on her hips and stopped, looking at the ground, "I know I screwed up, but his questions set all of my alarms off. He sounded like.." Shepard grappled with her feelings on the matter, "Like he wanted to go to war."

Miranda took a deep breath and started in on the water, "If that's true, and he represents the political arm with such questions, then you think maybe the Alliance did in fact steal the data."

Shepard's eyes confirmed it but she still said, "That's not proof."

"That's not even an indictment. The Alliance has good reason to make sure who is on their side in this. You realize that?"

Shepard's jaw tightened but she nodded. Miranda stood up herself, rubbing the skin of her forearm with her other hand, "Shepard, I'm flattered you came to me with this, but I'm not a political figure. I don't have any more insight into this than you do. All I can tell you is that from what you've said, your psychologist's questions could have been completely legitimate. I'd have to know the details to come to any other conclusion. I assume you haven't consulted the Council on the matter?"

"For obvious reasons. I can't even talk to Liara about this. Not yet."

"Can I see the session recording?"

Shepard hesitated, and Miranda pounced on it, "Why can't I see the recording?"

"Because there's private information there. Information I'd rather not share."

"Does it bear on the topic?" Miranda asked.
"Maybe. Tangentially."

Miranda shook her head, "Then you've got a decision to make. You trusted me with Spectre and Alliance business but you don't want to open up your own? I can probably find a dozen rules you've broken just talking to me about this. You might as well commit."

Shepard put her head down, knowing she was right. She exhaled a breath through closed lips. "You're right. I trust you."

Miranda nodded in kind but had to give another suggestion, "You know, I recall Jacob saying something about a bureaucrat who wanted to keep the data away from the other races. He resigned a few weeks ago. You may want to talk with him about that."

Shepard looked at Miranda and smiled, "I'll do that. Thank you."
It had been a long day, long but full of accomplishment. She managed to meet with all the dignitaries on her list and any investigators they insisted upon, then pulled them into a cohesive team with little if any friction. The ground rules had been laid and the first meeting to go over their findings was scheduled for tomorrow. Only one more conference awaited her tonight, possibly the most important and certainly the one to which she looked most forward.

She ordered up a meal and took a shower before settling at her desk for the call. When Hackett answered she could see the evening skyline of Buenos Aires behind him and he had a cigar in his hand. It was odd seeing him in civilian dress. If it weren't for the scar on his face she could have seen him by the side of a pool, grandchildren splashing beside him.

Shepard smirked at the grin on his face, "Evening, Sir."

"Aren't you are a sight for sore eyes," he said with a puff. The smoke rose around his head in disarray from a stiff breeze, "How are you feeling?"

"Never better, Sir. You look well yourself."

"Retirement seems to agree with me. We'll see how I feel when I get bored," he waved the burning end of the stogie around demonstrably, "And call me Steven. I'm a civilian now."

"Heh. All right, Steven. Glad to see someone landed a vacation after all this."

"Too old to do the heavy lifting anymore, but I'm a great supervisor. I hear you've got a new job yourself?"

Shepard grinned, "Moonlighting, so don't tell my boss."

Hackett's body shook in a silent chuckle and he shifted in his chair, "We missed you at David's funeral. He had a great sendoff, was a beautiful day."

"I saw the vids," she responded, her smile fading, "Not sure I've really had time to process it, yet."

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that."

She groaned inwardly but knew it was coming, "Et tu?"

Hackett drove right by her objection, "Less than a week ago you were dead to the world. What are you doing to yourself?"

"Only what needs doing," she said in a low voice. "Despite popular opinion, I'm not thrilled with this either," she explained, "It just so happens that I'm in the right place at the right time, with the right face."

"I know a little bit about that myself," he replied, "Funny thing, the more you keep volunteering for work the more people will give you."

Shepard took a deep breath, "I don't know what other choice I had. This isn't some border dispute over a colony. Should I just let all our work unravel when I might be able to solve this thing?"

Hackett just looked at her with those piercing blue eyes, considering all the angles. She didn't interrupt. It was why she called him, after all.
"There are limits, Shepard. Even for you," he said simply as smoke escaped his lips, "I heard about the evaluation."

Shepard looked away, her cheeks coloring, "And here I thought you were just a civilian."

"I might be retired, but I'm not deaf, yet," his jaws worked along with the gears in his head, "Are you going to call him?"

"Why? He's already made up his mind. He's not concerned about my mental health, Steven. He's on a witch hunt."

"The Alliance is dealing with the potential of a traitor with enough pull to orchestrate the most embarrassing heist in 150 years."

Shepard lifted her hands, "I think I have a pretty solid alibi."

Hackett shook his head, "The brass isn't just targeting you, it's everyone. You lost your cool when you needed to be frosty. Call him. It's your only alternative."

She looked down at her hands, jaw clenching, "I could just resign. God knows everyone is telling me to."

"No, that's where you're wrong," he said emphatically, "If you are serious about solving this crime then there can't even be a rumor you've lost your edge. You can tell them to shove the commission afterward if you want, but you have to pass that eval."

Shepard pulled on the skin of her face, pinching her lower lip in conflict before replying, "I can't lie to him, and I won't. He wants me to tell him I stand behind Earth no matter what and, while I am loyal, I'm not a yes girl."

"Why is that controversial?"

"Because he..." Shepard paused, replaying the conversation in her mind, "He thinks that being a Spectre has somehow," she was having trouble recalling the exact context, the overriding memory only being that Liara was somehow at fault, "Made me the Alliance's enemy."

Hackett's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she fumbled but he let her continue.

"He thinks that because I have the capability to override any Alliance decision that I just expected him to roll over," she said more slowly as it came back. It was making more sense and sounded less like a witch hunt now that she said it out loud. Maybe she really had lost her cool, after all.

He sat quietly for a moment more as she thought, then gently interjected, "You know, it wouldn't surprise me at all if this Dr. Fields sounded more like a cross-examining attorney than a psychologist. They're all under a lot of strain, too. Think about how many people are out there struggling with what's happened."

He put out his cigar and leaned forward, elbows on the table and fingers intertwined, "You want my advice?"

Shepard's eyes widened, "I'm all ears."

"Take a step back," His face was adamant, "You should already be putting together a team. Use them. Get an assistant." Shepard was already shaking her head, so he paused, "What?"

"I can't afford any leaks," she said. "It would have to be someone I trusted implicitly and I don't know anyone like that for the job."
"You let me handle that. I'll send you some candidates. I would trust them with my life, and so can you."

Shepard still looked unconvinced, so he changed tactics, "Shepard, I've seen some of the best soldiers in the service break despite their brains and their bravery. You aren't a machine. It's admirable that you still have the drive to be involved, but if you aren't at your best you could do damage to the case that you might regret. Worse still, if or when you break, it could have lasting consequences for a lot more people than yourself. Just...delegate for awhile. Gather data, talk to people if you must, but remember that your name carries a lot of the force you can bring to bear even if you aren't standing there. Delegate. Sleep. Go for a walk outside. Talk to another psychologist if you want a different perspective. Take some time so that if your particular talents are needed you can be ready. Then go pass that evaluation."

She mulled it over quietly, exhaling softly through her nose, "I certainly wish you were still in charge, in case this all goes sideways."

Hackett's blue eyes sharpened, "If it comes to that, we'll all be soldiers. Don't make me leave the beach."

She grinned and rubbed the back of her neck, "Understood. If all goes well maybe we can meet you down there, Liara and I."

"I'll keep the beer cold," he said with a knowing smile.

After some reminiscing and talk about future plans they disconnected, the sudden darkness enfolding her as she sat back in her desk chair. Everyone was telling her the same thing, even Liara.

Why couldn't she just step aside and let someone else handle this?

She rested her chin on her left fist, her elbow propped on the chair arm. She sat that way for awhile, the silence so deep in the carpeted stone chambers that it seemed to have its own sound. It must be after midnight, she supposed, though she didn't feel like checking. Eventually Shepard rubbed her eyes and reclined, letting her thoughts flow where they willed.

Tevos, Liara, Miranda and now Hackett; they all thought she wasn't ready. Funny that they never said anything like that after Lazarus, she thought with a frown. Really though, was there something wrong with her? Maybe something she wasn't seeing? Sure, it's possible she lost it with the shrink but he was out of line, no matter what strain he was under. This was just an investigation for Pete's sake. It's not like she had to shoot anyone. Should be a cakewalk.

She'd talk to Miranda again. The woman was smart but she also had distance and never shied away from telling Shepard the truth when it hurt. Liara's words, also intelligent, were careful not to offend, bent through the lens of their feelings for one another. She had need of both but only one tomorrow. If Miranda said that Dr. Fields was on the up and up she'd accept that. If she had her doubts....Shepard would dig until the man cried uncle and find out what his motives really were.

She called for lights and got ready for bed, looking at herself in the mirror while she brushed her teeth; then paused mid brush as a thought dawned on her. Her thirty-second birthday had come and gone while she was unconscious. She rinsed her mouth and looked at herself again. She might get the willies about her new body parts from time to time but there was no doubt about the gifts they
brought with them. She looked scarcely older than the day she enlisted, and now wondered how long her life expectancy might be. Another question for Miranda.

Miranda….and Jack. Now there was a surprise. Shepard turned out the lights and crawled into bed. She had never even considered that pairing but now that it was real some of her recollections started to fit the scenario. Opposites did attract after all, look at her and Liara. Put that together with some shared life-threatening experiences and boom. Chemistry.

What struck her most about that revelation was how calm Jack looked as they walked. Damned if she wasn't smiling most of the way! Shepard remembered how the woman would pace down underneath engineering, so full of negative energy that she couldn't sit still. She remembered the cut of her voice every time they talked, daring her to start something. If she had been an animal it would have been a caged tiger without a doubt. Shepard chuckled to herself as the unbidden image of Miranda dressed as a lion tamer, chair and whip in hand, came to mind. Whatever they were sharing it was good for them and it made Shepard happy to see it.

Their looks at her hetero protests gave her pause, though. Shepard had never been a relationship with a woman before and had never really considered one. It just never came up. Most of her past relationships were very brief. She never stayed in one place long enough to explore them further and for the most part that was a mutual understanding, civilian complications being the rare exception. It just wasn't something she was built for, she had decided, the liaisons simply vacations in her mind. A release of stress, a narrow focus on self for a few days, nothing more; until Liara T'Soni waltzed in and turned her world upside down.

There was no question that Liara was put together much like a human woman would be. No question. Some of Shepard's fondest moments were the ones spent learning how to please her and in that sense she could see their point. If she were to ever be with another woman Shepard thought she'd perform passably in bed; but that didn't necessarily mean she was attracted to them, did it? She didn't know. That seemed to be another of the thousand questions she would have to put off until she could take the time to fully consider it. For the foreseeable future Liara was all she wanted and all she craved, the rest didn't matter. It didn't take long for Shepard to fall asleep, lost in pleasant memories.

Her dreams followed along the same lines; no words, no real visuals, just warmth. She could feel the curves of Liara's body against her own. She could hear the beating of her heart and feel her soft breath against her skin. It was love, it was safety, it was healing and it was destroyed in an instant; the unmistakable deafening trumpet of a Reaper beam slicing into their tender darkness, separating them explosively to crash into the walls of what became visible as the Captain's cabin. The hull was venting and Shepard could only cling to the broken shards of her fish tank as her body was pulled violently toward the inky cold vacuum. She saw Liara go and screamed her name uselessly when she tumbled away. Her hands were cut and bleeding from the glass, the skin tearing away from bone; but instead of bone she saw the gleam of metal within. Guilt and rage filled her. Why had she not seen this coming? Why hadn't she been ready?

Shepard's eyes snapped open as they always did and she realized she was shouting, though she didn't know exactly what. The fear made her limbs tingle uncomfortably and her heart race. She took a deep breath, willing herself to relax. That sound, that...roar still echoed in her ears and she doubted she'd ever be able to forget it. She tried not to relive the smell of it burning everything in its wake or the punishing blow from being just a step too close. It had been that pummeling that threw her into the stone and rebar filled rubble by the Conduit. Her memories of the few minutes after would be forever fuzzy, and Harbinger had missed her.

She contemplated going back to sleep but knew it would be fruitless, so she was up and logging into her accounts in moments, desperate to reach out. She sent her words to seashell, no longer trusting
the Alliance as much as she would like.

You awake?

When Shepard checked the time she saw it was past three. The time varied between Earth and Benning, the latter having more hours in a day; but Liara was often awake at odd times. It didn't hurt to check. After a few minutes, there was a response.

I am. Trouble sleeping again?

The response was simple and short but it was enough to bring a vast sense of relief. The dreams, they felt so real. The emotions were real, at the very least.

Yeah. Can you talk for awhile? Tell me about your day? Just tell me anything...everything. I want to hear your voice.

Shepard focused on the previous message, imagining that Liara was here and actually saying it. She saw every detail, the tilt of her head as she asked the question, the concern in her beautiful blue eyes. It was enough to last her until the reply.

It would be my pleasure.

The sun is rising outside. It is going to rain soon, but most of our work is done here. We should depart within the week for the Arcturus Stream. The Hephaestus has a full complement now and we are all chafing at the time being used to triple check our preparations. Just a few weeks now and I'll be with you again.

Ashley seems comfortable with her command. She has grown since the battle and found her footing now that we have clear objectives. She has even shown some talent for diplomacy, if you can believe it. There was some tension amongst the residents here that she resolved with a considerable amount of patience. You would have been proud.

I have done some research on your behalf. The amount of data that you mentioned could not be transported easily. Because the data was copied in increments there could have been some sort of regular transfer to another facility on Earth. This would require multiple trips to the same location, which could potentially be traced from the Vigil docking facility. I have put out feelers for that information, but with your clearance and position within the Alliance this information should be relatively easy for you to acquire.

If, however, the Salarians are the culprit as the current evidence suggests, it is doubtful they would feel comfortable storing such a trove planetside. This means they would need to transfer it offworld quietly. It is possible that they too would transfer it incrementally but a Salarian ship of any kind making frequent trips to and from Vigil would be noticeable and traceable in the same way as the prior scenario. This means they would be forced to either use another ship, a human ship which would also generate risk of discovery, or perform the transfer once and once only. I do not believe many vessels would have the storage capabilities required for such a venture, so this should narrow down any search you perform significantly.

I know you did not contact me for this information, but I thought it might help to ease your mind. I wish you would tell me about the dreams that wake you. I believe I understand why you chose not to reveal it for so long, even when we were melded together; but any danger to me has passed and crew morale is no longer an issue. Do not think yourself to be weaker for this act of trust, love. In the same way I would help you with any physical wound, the longer toll demands attention and letting it fester places you in peril. The Asari more than any other species have skills that can ease this pain.
and your pain is mine. For now, trust your friends and trust me. The telling of it may be the beginning of the healing process.

When I return I will have plenty of time to painstakingly explore and kiss every hurt. I look forward to it.

Shepard felt warm and more relaxed after reading the words. The last bit about ‘trusting her friends’ made her suspect Miranda had a hand in this and she wondered how much had been shared, but that could wait until morning. If Liara trusted Miranda too then it only reinforced her own feelings.

That might take a long, long time. With frequent repetition. I approve.

You just helped me feel better about my last dream so I'm not sure I'm ready to relive it yet. Forgive me. I will take what you said to heart, though.

Good points also about the data transfer. I'll keep them in mind when I talk to Jacob today.

Tell me more? How's Tali doing? I've missed her something terrible. Fill me in on all the latest gossip if you have time. I have some to kill and can't think of a better way to spend it than with you.

By the time Shepard left her apartment she wore a smile.

Jacob was subdued. He seemed genuinely glad to see Shepard, their hands clasping firmly in greeting. He even put his other hand atop them both while he smiled, but the confidence she was accustomed to in his eyes was gone. He gestured to a chair in his office and she took it gratefully.

He sighed happily when he sat and shook his head, "Here you are, like nothing ever happened."

Shepard held up her hands wide and smiled insufferably, "What can I say? I get that a lot."

They chuckled together then lapsed into companionable silence before Jacob spoke again, "I'm glad you're here, Shepard. Glad, but sad to have to add to your plate. You gotta know it was the last thing I wanted."

"I do," she said in all seriousness. "Look, don't feel bad. The moment I got my hands on that data I knew there'd be some kind of fight. This is just the shape it took and you got in the way, that's all."

Jacob pursed his lips and his eyes dropped to his lap with another sad shake of his head, "The fact I couldn't see that coming is what I feel badly about. If I'd just taken a look at the bigger picture I might have been able to do something...different."

"Hey," Shepard said sharply until he looked up, "'Fixed fortifications are a monument to the stupidity of man,' remember? There's a reason I like being the attacker; when you defend you eventually lose. Without exception. Someone somehow was going to figure out how to get to the honey, Jacob, and from what I hear they figured it out before you even got here. Cut yourself a break."

"Yeah," he said, finally meeting her gaze, "I guess. All I could do was try and figure out what happened and well, I haven't had much luck there either. Whoever did this covered up their tracks pretty well."

"I thought you had proof it was the Salarians."

He shrugged, "I thought we did too. Turns out the one we were pursuing is already dead. Has been
for almost five years. It's another dead end."

Shepard's eyes narrowed, "That wasn't in the Council's report."

The Lieutenant nodded, "The brass isn't quite ready to let go of that tidbit. As long as the Salarians are suspected we've got some breathing room and they like it that way."

Her eyes widened. She could see the logic but it stunk to high heaven.

"Politics," Jacob spat with some of his old fire.

Shepard's mind whirled, "Have you re-questioned the engineer?"

"Sticking with his story," he said, "Says they all look alike to him and he did the best he could."

Shepard leapt on it, "We need to bring the Asari in. They can get the truth from him."

"Not gonna happen," Jacob explained with a pointed look, "The brass won't risk the embarrassment and Davo knows his rights."

Shepard growled, "Every minute we sit on our hands is a minute we risk people killing each other in our space."

Jacob raised his hands in surrender, "You aren't telling me anything new, okay? I just work here, and probably not much longer at that."

Shepard nodded and took a breath. Jacob wasn't the enemy and was probably her best source inside the Alliance at this point. "Alright," she said, "What do we know?"

Jacob outlined everything for her and she listened carefully, up to the point of the STG officer's death on the Immortal Silence, where she stopped him.

"Two hours? Wrex said he didn't even have access to that information until after the altercation," she countered, "I have serious doubts about that info getting out to a broker, negotiations being made, data delivered, and two random Krogan attacking an agent that fast. It doesn't add up."

"No it doesn't, and I've been giving it a lot of thought," Jacob said in a low voice. "I'm no detective, but I figure that when something doesn't make sense the first thing you do is look at who benefits. It's not always perfect but it's better than scratching your ass, right?"

Shepard nodded and he continued, "So...I hate to say it but that whole thing misdirected a lot of shade. What if that info was purposely released for our benefit?"

Shepard dropped her head against the back of the chair. That made a lot of sense. It was also the last thing she wanted to hear. She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, then met the man's gaze again.

"One problem," she said, "The release was too soon. Seems to me whoever dreamed up this thing wouldn't make such a rookie mistake."

"Yeah, but it has to be them," he said, looking animated for the first time since they began speaking, "That level of information could only come from the people that actually did the deed."

Shepard sat up in her chair too, "But it could also mean whoever did this isn't the Alliance. If they didn't know when the engineer would spill, their timing might have been off."
"Yeah, maybe," Jacob confirmed after thinking about it, "Unless of course the Alliance just wants us to think that."

A frustrated chuckle broke from the Spectre's lips, "I'm no detective either, but I've got a whole team of them now. I think this gives us a good start."

That thought led to another and her expression grew serious, "I'm gonna use the information you've told me today, including the stuff they are holding close to their chest. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"I expect it will be," he admitted, "But I honestly don't care. You remember what I said about the reasons I joined Cerberus?"

"You were tired of the red tape and the not helping people. At least with Cerberus they acted."

Jacob nodded, "I hoped that the end of the world and so many casualties might change things. It hasn't, not really, and I'm beginning to realize that it's not because of the Alliance, it's because of people."

Shepard smiled sadly, "I can't say you're wrong. You wanna come work for me?"

"Ha!" Jacob exclaimed, "You don't know how much I'd like to say yes, but I can't. I've got a family now. We've bought a place and are putting down roots. This job might not work out for me, sure, but you know what?"

She bit, "What?"

Jacob smiled and it was as unfeigned as it was beautiful, "I've got a family now."

Shepard made her way down to Miranda's room afterward. She answered the door this time and there was no sign of Jack. The wallscreen had the eval interview paused with Shepard's finger jabbing the desk in front of an impassive Doctor Fields. Miranda handed her a hot cup of coffee and then settled on the couch where Shepard joined her.

"So, what's the verdict?" She asked before blowing gently across the surface of her drink. Miranda gave her a searching look and that didn't bode well, but Shepard wasn't looking for commiseration, "Just give it to me straight."

Miranda squared her shoulders to her, "There no question you lost your temper, and I'm fairly certain that was a reaction the Doctor was looking for. Was he an asshole? Yes. His phrasing and leading questions were meant to make you defensive. So, why?"

Shepard nodded and took her first sip.

"He told you rather bluntly that this was a loyalty test. He wasn't analyzing you to help you through any issues, Shepard. It's clear he's talented, but he's also young and may have simply pushed a little too hard. Once he realized that he tried to explain his motivations. I think he regretted the result."

"Since when do they do loyalty tests through a psychological evaluation?"

Miranda shrugged, "That's a good question and I can only guess. That guess is that the Alliance had
no other official and private way of determining where you stood, which is why they pushed so hard for the evaluation after you took control of the investigation."

Shepard dropped her eyes, her brows knitted in thought.

"One other thing. It was pretty clear to me that you only lost control after he mentioned Liara. It's clear you care for her a great deal."

"I'd do anything to protect her," she said, eyes hardening.

"I've been there. I understand why she is your highest priority right now, as well. Having a child is a life changing event."

Shepard took a deep breath and sighed, nodding, "This is my future. I honestly never imagined I'd have one. Now that I do, it's almost all I can think about."

Miranda smiled and pointed a gentle finger at the Spectre, "And that's the kind of answer you should give Dr. Fields." Miranda took another sip from her coffee while she continued to consider, "I think that session actually provided some important information about your mental state, in the end."

Shepard arched an interested eyebrow.

"I think you are clinging to a frame of mind that may have served you well during the war but could hurt you now," Miranda's own brow furled as she tried to think of the best way to express her thoughts. She spoke slowly, feeling her way through it, "One that is very black and white, for or against, and has to make the determination of those classifications as quickly as possible. That works when it is fight or die, but politics are the murkiest of waters. The landscape is constantly changing and the people within adjust minute to minute. Who your friends and enemies are may be completely different depending on topic alone."

Shepard grimaced, "Tell me about it."

Miranda chuckled, "You've been ironically fortunate that all you've had to do the last few years is fight a common enemy, is the point. Your political acumen is going to need to improve as you move forward, especially as a Spectre. That means no blowing up at shrinks with an agenda you didn't expect." She poked Shepard's shoulder playfully, "Right?"

"Right," she growled, "Maybe I should resign."

Miranda shrugged and pulled her legs up onto the couch beside her, "If you don't have an ambition for this type of thing, I'd consider it." When Shepard gave her a hard look she pressed on, "I'm not joking. Look at your life for a moment. You can pretty much bank on being a celebrity for the rest of your days. There are plenty of opportunities to earn a living with that status and never have to touch a rifle again. Have you considered that?"

"I..." she started, then her gaze went far away, "No, I hadn't. I woke up and there was simply more to be done, so I got to work." Never touch a rifle again. The idea was so radical that it felt as if it must belong to someone else. Never kill again. Oh, the allure!

"How did you sleep last night?" Miranda asked, interrupting her reverie.

Shepard straightened and looked at her directly, "I know you've been talking to Liara behind my back. I'm asking you to stop."

Miranda paused, expecting the topic but still feeling the sting of hurt just the same, "I was only
looking out for you. She needs to know."

She raised a placating hand, "I understand and I'm not angry. We've already talked about this and I will be more open with you both, I promise. I just don't want to have to figure out what's going on with you two as well as the rest of the galaxy, ok?"

Miranda relaxed, "That's fair, but you don't have to talk to me at all you know. A licensed psychologist of your choosing is a far better option."

"One I don't have time for right now," Shepard insisted, "As I told Liara I will fully explore my options once this mystery is solved. In the meantime, she thinks I should trust you and then work with her as soon as she's back."

"I dabble in this sort of thing but I probably can't give you the answers you need. Even so, opening up to anyone at all is a solid start. You've carried this burden on your own for a very long time, you know. I'd be happy to take some of that weight, especially since you helped me clear my own slate."

"Then it's settled," she said, taking a deeper drink of her coffee before setting it on the table and rising. "I'll check in later and set up some time. For now, I've got a team meeting to get to."

Miranda nodded and smiled, walking her to the door, "Did Jacob tell you more about the man who resigned?"

"He did, and I'm putting my team on it today. Thanks for the tip."

"My pleasure. Good hunting, Shepard."
In the Interest of Justice

The Normandy's departure from Benning plastered every news feed. Commentators spent hours talking about the risks involved to the brave crew, including the ones on the Hephaestus and the alien ship that had been dubbed the Rachnid by some less than clever reporter. Shepard was delighted the press was talking about someone other than her for a change, especially when that person was Ashley Williams. Seeing Ashley's image on every screen seemed a fitting tribute to the tireless effort she had put in over the years. Shepard never craved the spotlight herself, she found it to be more of a hindrance than a help; but she supposed that in the political arena good press was critical.

So in the end, Hackett's suggestion that she step back wasn't horribly received. She wondered how it felt for him to slowly give up direct control over events in order to command others. His decisions certainly carried more weight now but any influence over individual mission success or failure was removed; meaning he was forced to depend entirely on those he commanded and absorb their triumphs and defeats equally.

Sometimes less than equally when they died, she thought, and millions had. It gave her a newfound respect for his unwavering leadership and a better perspective on her own trials. This was a transition she would be forced to make just as David had before her; and while it might not be an easy thing the continuity of it all brought her an unexpected measure of peace. With these thoughts in mind she gazed at the different species who had come together to work for her and a common goal. They trusted her and she would do everything she could not to fail them. As far as she was concerned, alien or not, they were her people too.

Shepard went over the evidence gathered so far, gesturing to the holo screen enlarged on the back wall. "The Salarians have provided us with a certificate of death for one Renin Yijaa, who matches the description provided by Davo Mores, the human currently in custody for his role in altering the backup programming." She drug the certificate up beneath Renin's image, "That certificate claims Renin died over four years ago. Now while that doesn't exclude the possibility of a faked death, especially if Renin is involved with STG, this does on the surface provide some doubt to Davo's story. We need to talk to Davo again, and we need to find whatever motive this kid might have had for treason. Check into his financials, check into his family and friends' financials. Check into gossip and rumors surrounding anyone in his circle." She looked at the Asari seated just to her left, "Haliya, I'd like you to question him. Your charm could be useful here. We can play good cop, bad cop if need be, but he's invoked his rights against invasive melds."

She looked around for questions but everyone appeared to agree, "Now, I'm adding a new entry onto our timeline that I'd like you all to examine." Shepard slid part of the line demarking the passage of days and weeks to the right, compressing it and opening up a blank space. She then threw a picture of a dark haired human man dressed in a fine suit up for all to see, "This is former Member of Parliament Landon Bray. Mr. Bray resigned his position twelve days before the theft occurred. According to internal sources he was disaffected by Alliance decisions with regard to the Reaper data. He was of the opinion that this data should be kept for humans only, which makes the timing of his departure curious. In the interest of justice, we need to determine what level of access he had to the data if any and find him for questioning. Initial queries show that he is no longer planetside."

Akamu, the Elcor investigator, spoke up unexpectedly, "Genuine interest: It is difficult to believe that Mr. Bray was the only one to share these feelings in the Alliance Parliament. Are there others of which we should be aware?"

Shepard nodded slowly, "Mr. Bray was a member of the Terra Firma political party. Terra Firma as
you know has chosen to champion human interests almost exclusively, so it is possible that Mr. Bray was simply the most outspoken among them. As I mentioned, it was the timing of his departure from Parliament that has my interest. To your point, Akamu, if we find any other evidence of convenient departures or access to the data from members of any party, please bring it to my attention."

Akamu nodded and the Spectre continued, "The reason the timing is interesting is what we found when we compared the dates of the backup data manipulation." She gestured with a broad stroke of her left arm and another timeline slide into view below the primary, "This," she said, pointing to a date that was only a few days before Bray's disappearance, "Is when the first unauthorized copy commands were issued. It's entirely possible they are unrelated, but politicians play a long game and are well compensated for their time. Mr. Bray had been in his seat for several years, so why leave now?"

Daniel Barnes, Shepard's liason with the Alliance Bureau of Inquiry spoke thoughtfully, "Sabbatical? Maneuvering for another political position? There's a lot of reasons he could reasonably vacate his seat. Maybe he was just tired of the game. It's not like TF was making much headway after Cerberus imploded."

Shepard agreed, "Why don't you contact the leadership at Terra Firma and see what you can find out about his ambitions?"

"Saracino's a cagey one even when he's in a good mood," Barnes mused, "Given his history with the ABI I'm not certain he'll be forthcoming."

Shepard looked around at all the alien faces demonstrably, "I doubt he'll be any more open with anyone in this room, Dan. Find a way. If I need to come have a chat with him, I will, but I suggest you leave him with the impression that's a very bad idea."

A smile flickered across his lips for a moment only. Daniel was formidable on his own and Shepard didn't think she'd need to assist.

"Thanks," she said in response to his silent assent, "Finally, the date on those initial copies give us some leads on their own. I've made a request for all the ingress and egress logs from the Vigil Docking Facility surrounding the beginning of the illegal copy processes to the date when the data was wiped. We traced the trespass cable and found it cut outside, but we can make a couple of basic assumptions. If the ship to which the data was transferred was connected by wire, the closest bays are C24 and C25; so I want the name of every ship in those bays before, during, and after the transfers. I want their papers, specifications, arrival and departure timestamps and origination and destination points."

"If they used a transmission device then our search area gets a lot bigger. Roughly two thirds of the docking bays would be reachable by line of sight, possibly more if a vessel had enough height to intercept a signal. Yofa, I'd like you and Sidann to pair up for this one. We don't know what ships have been in dock that could conceivably store the data in one sitting or how it would have been transmitted. I need you to sift through what we have and line up some theories. If they didn't store it all at once then we have to find the trail the delivery of that data would have taken."

The Quarian and Salarian both nodded as well and Shepard returned the gesture with satisfaction. "Anything else that needs to be addressed? I don't need to tell you how urgent this is. The longer we take, the further that data gets away from us."

At their silence, she ended the meeting but stayed in the room. Hackett had come through with some suggestions for an assistant and she had interviews to schedule. Shepard found herself struggling to focus on the task, however, her thoughts with Liara and the upcoming voyage to repair the Arcturus
Relay. The latest news report said that they were probably leaving tonight or perhaps tomorrow, Earth time. She tried not to think about the risks she was hearing detailed.

The main concern was the amount of fuel they had available for travel. The Hephaestus had been bone dry when it was resurrected and the Normandy at less than a quarter of capacity thanks to the damage done by the broken relay. The Rachni freighter fared better at three quarters, but even with the addition of scavenged fuel from the base they had barely enough to make the journey. If they were forced to return it would be all aboard the Normandy, packed like sardines.

That meant that shuttles, during the voyage, were restricted to emergencies only. Liara would be staying with the Rachni so that she could maintain unfettered access to her Shadow Broker contacts, which should mean a minimum of danger for her; but she also wouldn't be able to visit with the Normandy or Hephaestus crew over the almost three month journey. A lonely sojourn, to be sure, but Liara once treasured her time alone and Shepard had little doubt she would thrive.

And speaking of Liara….

Shepard collated the resumes she received for formal transmission to the Council for vetting; but her mind simultaneously reached out to the quiescent pulsing of the convergence and accepted its gentle grasp on her consciousness. It took some effort on her part not to physically react to that submersion but she couldn't count on this room having any real privacy. Her eyes unfocused from the screen before her and her touches on the haptic interface may have slowed, but they continued nevertheless.

As before, the Asari Councillor seemed to be the first to make herself known. Shepard was beginning to think that Tevos had more influence over the group than she preferred to take credit for, but that suspicion was gently dissuaded by the silken glove of the Councilor's ancient mind. If there were any species that were more accustomed to the guarded merging of thoughts than the Asari then they might be the one to offer their guidance, came the thought, followed quickly with her growing approval of Shepard's ability to multitask. She didn't hide a smile at the compliment.

She sent the vetting request to the Council on her terminal but in moments saw a different message appear. It was from Tevos, unsurprisingly.

Shepard,

*We should discuss this and other matters further. Please arrange time for a meeting with my staff.*

*Councilor Tevos*

Shepard protested through the share. She only meant to ask about Aethyta when she joined, but as soon as the thought formed she had her answer; Aethyta was indeed a member of the convergence, but because she wasn't physically in Vigil any communication would need to go through normal channels. Shepard didn't back down, though. She wasn't keen to add a meeting with Tevos to her overloaded schedule and wasn't shy about the thought.

It shouldn't be strange for the Councilor to have a meeting with a Council Spectre during such a critical investigation, came the response. It should, in fact, be expected.

Shepard felt she was being chided. Fine, she thought. She intended to go for a walk outside for lunch, so Tevos should join her. She was surprised when Tevos agreed...in one hour.

Shepard typed out that suggestion and sent it for appearance's sake, then withdrew from the groupthink. If Tevos wanted to talk then they would actually talk.

One more message and then she would track down some food.
Matriarch Aethyta,

I hope things are well with you.

"Shit, how do you even start this conversation?" she muttered in a low voice.

Aethyta seemed practical and up front about most topics when they had spoken before, especially about matters that made Shepard feel uncomfortable. She figured turnabout was fair play, and dove right in.

I was hoping you could make time for a visit to Vigil soon, now that I am up and around. I've been thinking a great deal about your daughter and now the one she and I will be having. I couldn't be happier at the prospect, but in our culture when two people are in love and decide to have a child together they often want to formalize their relationship.

She could see a dramatic proposal in her mind's eye. Perhaps she would kneel in her dress blues and offer her a ring. A smile crept onto her face as she imagined the look on Liara's face. She'd have to think of someplace beautiful to take her, though there weren't many left. Some wonder of the world, maybe. Stonehenge? She didn't know if it still stood. Maybe a place of natural grandeur. The Reapers couldn't have destroyed them all.

In human culture it is also a custom to ask the parents for their permission for that union. After all, it means we'll be spending a lot more time together. It would be best if you approved.

Maybe she should think about Liara's culture, instead. Of course! Maybe Aethyta would be willing to help her with that. An Asari proposal to make her feel comfortable and valued, and a location on Earth that conveyed a sense of history older than Liara herself and hopefully her father too.

Would you give us your blessing? If you prefer, I can ask again in person. It would be more proper, but we live in unusual times. Regardless, I would love to spend some time with you just to talk about the future.

I look forward to your answer,

Shepard

'To talk about the future.' What a wonderful phrase. She hit send.

Shepard was relaxing against the back of a bench in the sun outside the facility entrance when Tevos found her. A green eye opened a fraction against that bright light when she felt herself being watched. As she suspected, the serene face of the Councilor considered her quietly, then the Asari turned and whispered into the ear of her companions who departed into the flow of people coming and going.

Shepard stood, clutching an old fashioned bag lunch in her hand, "Councilor."

Tevos nodded slowly, and responded with her title as well, "Spectre. Shall we?" She still seemed amused and Shepard wondered why.

"Dr. Lawson showed me a nice little spot. It's this way," she gestured and they began to walk, "Did you not bring lunch?"
"You invited me, Shepard. I gathered that you were handling that aspect."

When Shepard looked at her with a creased brow she found her smiling, "You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

The smile grew, "Perhaps."

"Well I don't know what's got you in such a good mood but I'm only splitting my sandwich if you ask nicely," she retorted with her own wry smile and folded her hands behind her back.

Tevos didn't respond, apparently a great deal more miserly with the spoken word than her thoughts. They walked for a few minutes silently together, taking in the wildlife and the sound of the wind through the trees. Shepard found she didn't mind. There had been too many words of late.

Shepard pointed toward the gap in the brush that led to the stone clearing and Tevos took the lead. When they emerged into the canopy cave Tevos smiled and chose a seat next to the stone wall of the mountainside. Shepard took one next to her on the long stone shelf, then took her time unpacking her sandwich. She waved a hand over it luxuriously, "May I present the classic Bee Ell Tee. Plucky lettuce, succulent tomato and only the finest manufactured pork protein, filled with preservatives for your tasting pleasure." She paused expectantly, looking at the confused Asari, "This is where you are supposed to ask for a taste. Nicely."

The Councilor's lavender eyes sparkled, "May I sample this Earth delicacy?"

Shepard grinned crookedly, "How could I refuse?" She unwrapped the sandwich and split it in two, handing one half to the Asari, who looked at it with trepidation. "If it is poisonous," she joked, "at least we'll both die in a pretty place."

Tevos took the sandwich and sniffed it delicately before taking a bite. She chewed slowly, focused on the flavor and texture. Shepard could appreciate the grace the Asari showed in the little things. Even Liara, as young as she was, took her time with the most menial of tasks, as if there was tremendous importance in them. Of course, Shepard could find fascination watching Liara under most any circumstance.

"So?" she asked, "What do you think?"

She was surprised to see Tevos chuckle. "It is...sufficient," she said with a lick of her lips, "A bit dry."

Shepard shrugged, "Commercial tomatoes, I guess. There's nothing like garden grown."

"Have you grown them, then?" she asked.

Shepard looked far away for a moment before her reply, "No. I'm a military brat. I eat what's put in front of me." She smiled self-deprecatingly but it didn't seem to charm the Asari's sharp eyes, so she cleared her throat and changed the subject, "So what did you want to talk about?"

"Liara T'Soni," came the flat reply.

"Oh?" Shepard arched an eyebrow, "I can think of no better subject."

"That is fitting. Shall we share?"

"I thought you might enjoy a normal conversation for a change."
Tevos nodded once in thanks for her consideration, "It is true, but this is a...delicate matter."

"Well, we did come all the way out here," Shepard looked around their quiet grotto.

"As you wish," Tevos acquiesced before beginning, "I have an idea for preventing any future theft of the data cache. Assuming of course, that we are able to recover it."

Shepard's head tilted ever so slightly, her eyes widening, "You have my attention."

If it were possible for Tevos' gaze to sharpen further, it did. She was obviously watching for the woman's reaction to her next statement, "Once we have the data, we do not return it to the Alliance, or any other organization. We give it to Liara instead."

Shepard blinked, trying to process what she heard, "Liara? Why?"

"Because she is the Shadow Broker. There is no safer place in the galaxy for such data to be stored."

Shepard could feel the blood draining from her face and she shook her head. "I don't know what you are talking about," she said weakly.

Tevos smiled patiently, "Yes you do."

"You can't...you shouldn't...shit," Shepard massaged her forehead while trying to master her fear.

"Tevos, you...does everyone know?" At the Asari's nod her face hardened. "Do you even know what you are asking? Do you know the danger you are asking me to put her in?"

"Somewhat more than the danger she has put herself in by taking over that organization."

"No, it's a lot more," Shepard said, pointing a finger, "If you find a cure to this 'thing' there's going to be a lot of people with that knowledge that might spill their guts to the first person they meet. Jesus. I have to warn her."

"That would be advisable. I would also recommend steps to..."

"Tevos! God dammit! Are you hearing me? You...can't use the cure! You...you took more information than I wanted you to have! This isn't a joke!"

Tevos withdrew a scarce inch, her face becoming placid; and that somehow conveyed her desire for calm better than any words could, "I understand your discomfort. I can assure you that I never intended to take what was not offered, but I also should remind you that you are not the only one in such a position. If you are willing to hear me out, I have some potential solutions for the problems this proposition poses."

Shepard had to stand up. She had to move. She paced for half a minute or more, simply taking deep breaths while Tevos watched her. Damn the woman and her infernal calm. This was Liara she was talking about! After a time, she stopped feeling as if she was suffocating and stood still; though her hands were still planted firmly on her hips, "Fine. Go ahead."

"You should know first that I take the endangerment of any daughter of Thessia very seriously. If I did not have confidence in her abilities I would never suggest anything this extreme," Tevos searched Shepard's face again, "Do you believe me? We can share if would make you more comfortable."

Shepard shook her head, "I believe you. I just..."
"You love her. I know it as surely as you do. Your desire to protect her does you credit."

She nodded and swallowed, doing her best to put her panic back in its box, "Finish your thought."

"Thank you, Shepard. If you do not desire this course of action we will not pursue it. I am not a tyrant, despite how you may have felt after some of our previous conflicts."

When Shepard finally sat back down Tevos resumed detailing her idea, "I would recommend first that Liara expand her command structure. I am uncertain how she managed this on her own previously, but it must have taken an inordinate amount of time."

"You're telling me," Shepard commiserated.

"Subversive organizations must rely on separate and disconnected cells that can operate independently. There is extensive information available for instruction if she requires it. The overriding logic is to avoid having a single head, and thus a single target. If at any time she is threatened, she can disappear without the network failing."

"Yeah but that doesn't matter. All it takes is for it to get out that she had anything to do with the network and she'll be looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life, even if she gave it all up tomorrow."

Tevos folded her hands in her lap, "You realize she took on that risk willingly, do you not?"

"She took on that risk with the hope she could contain the information. That's shot to shit, now."

"Which means that she is in the same situation no matter what path she chooses. I'm offering the protection of the Spectre program, as well as the strength of the Council and its intelligence branch if she assists us."

"Wait a minute," she said while holding up a hand, "You are gonna give formal support to an illicit information organization?"

"Formal? No. I think we should revisit the purpose of this data, at least as far as I understand your motivations. You collected it for the purpose of providing all the races of the galaxy with technology for the betterment of its citizens. Am I correct?"

"That sounds about right."

"Has the theft of this data not enlightened you about the baser instincts of your own race? Do you think any other race above those same instincts?"

Shepard's snort answered that question succinctly.

Tevos nodded in agreement, "Politics is just a test of wills, Shepard, a game for most, no matter how noble the players may appear. This data is a tantalizing prize. The only permanent solution is to take this trove out of the hands of any who might abuse it. Or those who cannot protect it," she added teasingly.

Shepard chose to ignore that last bit, "Didn't you just say that the Council was going to support her?"

The Councilor smiled softly, "Tactily. The directives would be confidential."

"A black op," Shepard mused and Tevos nodded.

"If for any reason Liara's role were to come to light," Tevos reassured her, "We would have
contingencies in place to misdirect and confuse those who sought her out. It would not eliminate the
risk to her, Shepard, but it would strengthen her considerably."

Shepard chewed on her lip, feeling a bit better about the odds but still uncertain, "So how exactly
does anyone access this information if she has it?"

"They send an inquiry for information through the network just as they do now. Once the Shadow
Broker is revealed as the thief it will…"

"Wait, what?" Shepard's brow was furrowed again.

The Councilor explained her reasoning again, patiently as before, "Imagine for a moment what might
happen if you actually prove any one race responsible for this theft."

"They would be disgraced. It would be difficult for anyone to trust them again. There would trials for
each person responsible."

"The spectacle would go on for years, Shepard. Years with the bulk of the galaxy's military power
clustered together in a single system."

Shepard sighed, "A giant powder keg, just like we are right now. But what about justice? How can
you even consider not punishing those responsible?"

"In the interest of galactic peace I believe that the narrative of unity is more important than public
embarrassment of the guilty, no matter how satisfying it might be for the aggrieved. Justice will
simply need to fly on silent wings," she said with a meaningful look at the Spectre.

She understood now, "Blame the Shadow Broker and let the Spectres handle the punishment of the
real culprit."

Tevos dipped her chin gracefully and Shepard had to stand up and walk again. Maybe for a couple
of miles this time. Tevos stopped her.

"That is why I believe rejoining the Alliance is a mistake, Shepard. If they are in fact responsible,
you would be faced with an indefensible task."

"You mean killing my own people. I'm not certain I can do that, Councilor."

Tevos stood, her back as straight as an arrow and her expression unwavering, "I understand the
circumstances of your induction as a Spectre carried some conflicting interests that were reasonable
at the time, but you need to consider the terms of your agreement. You serve the galaxy, not just your
own species." Her expression then grew tender, "What I say now is not from pity, but from genuine
concern for your long term well being. I sympathize with what you have endured. If it were me I
would be taking time away from this life, perhaps permanently. If you are unwilling or unable to
meet these obligations, I will accept your resignation and wish you well."

Shepard's jaw tightened. She wanted to protest against all of this. Lies, manipulation and murder
were not who she was, or at least that was what she chose to believe. The truth was a shade darker.
She had been cutting deals and killing people in the name of a greater purpose her entire life. What
made this any different, really? The resources that would be available for Liara's defense if she
agreed were no laughing matter, and Shepard would have a direct hand in her protection.

"Let me discuss it with Liara," she said, her voice leaden, "If she's in, then so am I."
Semblance of Normal

Admiral Tali’Zorah vas Normandy finally felt comfortable again. The hum of Hephaestus’ engines around her weren’t as musical as the Normandy's, but the old ship's heart was nevertheless beating strong. Truth be told most of the ships in the Flotilla had a similar sound. The sound of a story in each little tuning variation. This ship needed her, and she was pleased to help.

She folded her arms and stepped to the side on the bridge where acting Captain Vedra Tanner was about to engage with the other ships in their joined FTL jump. When correctly coordinated, multiple ships could engage their Mass Effect drives together and create a single bubble for the whole. This saved fuel and for the first time in any of their memories that fuel was precious.

Tanner simply beamed. While she managed to keep her expression neutral to convey a sense of self control Tali saw right through it. The two had become pretty close over the last few weeks, each of them working long hours to make sure the Hephaestus would be ready when called upon. When Lt. Madras elected to stay behind and help the colonists, Petty Officer Tanner was the natural selection to run the ship on their repair mission. Tali had never seen spontaneous combustion but was fairly certain the engineer's reaction came close.

Because the Hephaestus was a repair ship there were a lot more ports on the bridge, the better to see distances on approach. Tali could see the Normandy to their starboard and the Rachnid to port, sitting quiescently as the navigators coordinated. Their chatter was played over the comm system while they made their final checks. Over on the Normandy Tali knew that Samantha Traynor would be busily transmitting their status back to the news hungry in Sol. There was a sense of excitement and adventure among everyone involved. Whatever happened, they would be forever remembered.

"This is Joker. All systems are green. Initiate countdown for field creation on my mark. Engage Eezo drives."

"The Three report drive engaged."

Tanner nodded to her pilot and a rising hum could be heard from the rear of the ship as the drive began to harness the power of Element zero to create a forward gravity well. She keyed her mic when the returns looked solid. "This is Tanner. The Hephaestus is ready."

Joker's voice came back, "Confirmed drives engaged. Mark."

Traynor's formal tone and accent took over at that point, "Thirty seconds to field creation."

Tali noticed a fluctuation in the power levels and turned to her station to make some adjustments. Tanner called them out, but when she noticed Tali already on the job she just smiled, "Thank you Admiral."

"No problem, Captain. I think we are all ready to leave this place."

The hum from the rear of the ship grew louder and louder and Tali could see the strange bending of light outside the ports that heralded the creation of a well strong enough to pull the hundred thousand ton repair ship to light speed and beyond. It wasn’t glaring...just a gentle flicker across the glow of the stars as if she were viewing them underwater.

Then, as the countdown reached zero, all three of the craft began to move as one. Everything had been calibrated down to last iota, accounting for the difference in mass, size of the engine, minor differences in course due to their differing positions...everything. As far as anyone could tell, the
three craft could have been joined with struts outside of view. They were in perfect concert and only tiny floating debris falling away gave any indication that they were in motion. The internal dampeners were online and functioning properly.

Joker sounded pleased, "Point zero zero two. Steady as she goes."

Tanner replied, "No problems to report."

The artificial female voice assigned to the Rachni translator agreed, "All systems normal."

"Point zero five. Point one."

They saw Benning pull away quickly, followed by Euler at a slower pace. The stars began to move at fifty percent of light speed and they colorshifted subtly; the stars closer to the bow turning a deeper blue and the ones to stern bleeding red, the tint streaming behind them in tails.

"Point seven five," Joker said, "Report any problems as they arise."

The silence was what everyone had been hoping for and the relief in everyone's faces when they passed light speed was echoed in whispers passed around by everyone on the bridge.

"Goodbye Euler," Tanner broadcasted, "You have been good to us."

"Here, here," said Ashley across the link before her voice took on a dreamy quality.

"Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Tali didn't fully grasp the strange cadence but she recognized all too well the tightened jaws and teary eyes of passion in the humans around her, Tanner especially.

"Lovely words, Commodore," Vedra said quietly, and many heads on the bridge nodded in kind.

"Thank you, Captain," Williams replied with conviction, "Now let's go home."

As pleased as Tali was that her friends were finally returning to where they belonged, her own heart panged for the brief glimpse of Rannoch she remembered before the assault. "Keelah Se'läi," she said with her own long denied desire, and prayed her own return would be soon.

A few hours of vigilant watch for any sign of problems later, Tanner sent most of the crew to get their first real rest in weeks. She couldn't be prouder of their work and told them so under no uncertain terms. Her mood was nevertheless tainted by the pair of brooding eyes watching her from outside the bridge door, and once the others had gone she gestured to her office with a jerk of her chin, not checking to see if he followed.
"Shut the door," she said before taking a seat.

The man saluted after and waited for her to release him. She took her time, long enough that she saw anger set in his jawline, "At ease."

"Permission to speak, Captain?"

She nodded carefully, her expression telling him that he should take care with his words.

"May I ask just what the hell you are doing?"

"Just what you are doing, Ryan. Going to fix a relay."

"Why aren't you responding to his messages? I'm getting reamed over here."

"So he sent you to order me to talk to him? I'm a grown woman. If I don't want to talk, harassing me won't change a thing."

Ryan looked like his head might just explode, "Vedra, you know what's at stake here!"

She stood quickly and looked down at him, "You're damned right I do. My reputation. I didn't spend five years in the service just so I could wash out being an errand girl for a psychopath. What's my next move after that, hmm? He's using me and he's using you, Ryan. Why are you even listening to him?"

Ryan shook his head, his face incredulous, "I can't believe it. You sold us out." He pressed on even as he saw her denying it with a shake of her head, "Yeah, yeah, you have. You got your pretty little hunk of tin to fly and got all starry eyed from a couple o' lines of god damned poetry."

"Be careful, Ryan."

"No, you had better be careful," he said, pointing a finger at her. "If you wanted to bail, you picked the wrong time! He's never been stronger and all he needs is this one thing to make good! You're worried about your next move in the Alliance? You should be worrying about payback if you fuck him over. So here's what's gonna happen. You are gonna reply to him so I keep my skin, alright? I've got family to think about!"

Vedra looked down at her hands. She didn't want him to get hurt. She didn't want anyone to get hurt. Being so far out and cut off from everything made her feel safe for the first time in a long time, but Ryan had a point. They were going home now and there were debts to be paid.

"I'll talk to him, Ryan. For you."

He was clearly relieved, and dropped his chin, "Thank you Ved. This will all be over soon, you'll see. No more worries." He stood up and saluted again, and she dismissed him.

He was wrong on that point but she wasn't going to tell him that. Her time on Benning, scrapping, surviving, rebuilding, making new friends and finding old ones...it had changed her. She caught a glimmer of what could be and it left her hungry for more.

Like all things, though, there was no reward without risk. All she had to do was put him off, just for a little while. What he was asking for made no sense anyway...it would likely all work out on its own.

She pulled up his last message on her omni and cringed at the number of exclamation points she saw
before she began her reply.

Hi Dad,

Sorry it's been so long, things have been crazy busy with all our preparations to leave. I understand how concerned you are that the party go off without a hitch, but I have some issues with the decorations. Are you certain you don't want to go with the traditional colors? It would be a real shame for them to clash with the cake.

A birthday this important should be handled carefully or we might get some unwanted crashers.

Just think about it? I'll be in touch with you again soon.

Love,

Vedra

She heard a knock on the door and shut down the interface, smiling brightly as she saw Tali's helmet slide into view.

"Vedra? They're popping some champagne in the mess. You want to go?"

"You bet! I'll be right there."

Liara sat back in the chair she installed on the Rachni command platform. From this vantage she could see the movement of the stars as they travelled and comfort herself with the knowledge that they were speeding to the arms of the person she needed most in the universe. The message she had just read from Shepard bothered her greatly and her eyes were turned inward in thought.

The chittering of mandibles preceded words from the giant Queen that nested nearby, "Your aura withers. What troubles you so?"

Liara smiled wanly at her friend. She could not hide her feelings from them. Sometimes it was a relief, having everything exposed. Sometimes her feelings overwhelmed her and not even the Queen's confidence could help her unravel the knots. Times like these required solitude, but for her she'd try and explain. Sometimes just saying the words brought solutions to light, "I'm afraid the things I have done in my past have now endangered my future. Shepard needs to rest, but this past will shackle her to her work more surely than chains."

"The Shepard protects you because that is her role; it is who she is. One's purpose is solely to be what one is and to prepare for whatever comes. Contentment comes with the fruit of that labor. Though the trials may be harsh she will take her rest in you and in your progeny."

Liara nodded, surprised and grateful for that simple wisdom, "I will give her the comfort she needs to carry on. Whatever it takes."

The Queen's antennae moved slowly in agreement, "Then be at peace Little Mother, for you will need all your strength. Also know that if we can protect you from this danger we will do so."

"You are a true friend, Three. May our paths always be entwined."

The Asari looked out the window and released her thoughts to roam again. The idea Shepard relayed was intriguing, but there were many angles to consider before she could agree. The most troubling of
these conundrums was the cure to the Thorian effect Shepard had mentioned. How the members of
the Convergence would respond to being freed was really anyone's guess, but it would be
irresponsible not to plan for worst case scenario, which was her role being revealed right away.
Having the Spectre corps available to defend her was a boon, no question; but while everyone was
stuck in the Sol system the forces they could bring to bear were a pittance compared to the varied
military presences there, any group of which might take umbrage with the theft and hunt her down in
the name of justice. Where could she conceivably hide in that scenario? She didn't let her imagination
stray to that empty beach vacation for long; its impossibility hurt too much.

The fact that this idea had come from the Councilor herself came as a shock. She couldn't help but
wonder if the same idea would have been considered had the Shadow Broker been a Salarian or
Goddess forbid, a Batarian. No, she decided firmly, that would never have happened. She hoped
there was no ulterior motive for this move in favor of the Asari, but from what Shepard had
described of this 'sharing' there would have been no way to engineer it quietly; Tevos had to have the
support of the Convergence and that meant Liara had their support too. If she could just make it until
the relays were open to Thessia and all the resources waiting for her there she would feel more
confident. In her mind, that meant only one thing; the Convergence would simply have to wait for
their cure.

Tevos was right about one thing, however. No matter what she decided, Liara could no longer do
this alone. Thankfully, she had a few ideas on how to adjust. Between Feron and the Rachni she
managed to revive some of the main flows of information but if this plan were to work they would
need to ramp up their security...and their redundancy. Not for the first time Liara lamented the loss of
the Shadow Broker's ship. Her predecessor's setup had been designed and maintained very well, so
that's where she would start planning.

Now she just needed a few more people on which she could rely.

"I don't like it," Joker said with a scowl, his arms folded defensively as he watched the stars go by.
"Do you often make these declarations to empty space?" EDI said smoothly as she took her seat
beside him.

"It's too.....quiet, EDI. Everything is going way too well. Something bad's about to happen, I just
know it."

"I don't believe I have a security protocol established for 'Everything is going way too well.' Would
you care to establish the criteria?"

"Yeah! For starters the Commander is smiling way too much. Take that one down."

EDI blinked, "The Commander's happiness level correlates with the likelihood of our impending
doom? Noted. What's next?"

"Ok um...it's like the Love Boat in Engineering with Donnelly and Daniels down there," he said
before his face lit up with an idea, "Wait a sec, it's coming...hold that thought! Doniels....no!
Dannelly!"

EDI rolled her eyes but he kept right on going, "I'm tellin' ya EDI, it means one of them is gonna die.
That's the way grand adventures always end. Look at you!"

"I am very much alive, Jeff."
"Only after a cluuuth move by the savior of the galaxy, followed by a completely ridiculous set of perfect circumstances that allowed us to get what we needed to fix you and return home. You don't think that happens all the time, do you?"

EDI actually paused, figuring the odds, "I do not believe I have fully considered my mortality as a likely event. With the exception of the Crucible, which has only fired once in the history of the universe and is unlikely ever to do so again, my form and intelligence is hardened against damage of any kind. Unless something occurred to completely obliterate the Normandy, such as flying directly into a star, there will always be a chance that my intelligence would survive. By human terms I could conceivably be immortal."

Joker just stared at her, mouth hanging open a smidge, "Uh...thanks for making me feel completely insignificant."

"Well at least someone managed to put you in your place, hotshot," said Williams, walking in with a smirk. She stopped between them, draping a hand over each of the chair backs, and looked at the readouts, "Everything five by five?"

Before Joker could speak EDI reported, "Unfortunately not, Commander. We are facing imminent destruction." Her shining face looked intently at Joker while she said the words and Williams picked up on her oh-so-obvious sarcasm for a change.

"Oh? Why is that Joker?"

His face contorted as it colored and he cleared his throat while shifting in his seat, "Well I ah...I just thought that things...well you know how it goes...Oh look! A nebula!"

Ashley winked at him then said, "EDI, can I have a word?"

"Of course Commander," she said, then rose and followed her toward CIC.

"Just wanted to follow up on that little espionage project," Ashley said quietly, folding her hands behind her back as they walked, "I didn't see anything telling in the reports but there was a lot of data there. You want to give me the short version?"

EDI nodded her head and folded her hands behind her back in the same way, eliciting a crooked smile from the woman, "The short version is that while the interactions of the people working in fabrication may make for fascinating drama I found no indication of insubordinate or malicious activity. None of the transmissions sent to or from Benning or Sol flagged any of the filters I have in place. On the whole I would say that spirits are high."

Ashley visibly relaxed, "I've never been so happy to be wrong. Thank you."

"I am pleased to put your mind at ease, Commander. Barring unforeseen complications the next few weeks of travel should be relatively uneventful."

Ashley nodded and rubbed the back of her neck, "We could all use the downtime before this final push. I never thought I'd be happy to get some boredom back in my life."

"Yes, it should leave you plenty of time for more amorous pursuits."

The mock glare that Ashley gave her meant she had achieved the appropriate level of humor without overstepping the Commander's boundaries. Her synapses recorded the human equivalent of satisfaction at an accomplished goal.
"You know, I'm curious, EDI. You are in a relationship with Joker, right? I mean, it's official."

"We have both agreed to explore what a relationship might be, given our differences, yes."

"Reason I ask is…you seem to talk about sex an awful lot. Have you and he…?" Ashley didn't finish her sentence, the final words trailing away into a secretive whisper as she looked around for anyone standing close.

"What Jeff and I have or have not explored sexually is a matter for discretion, Commander," When Ashley flushed and began to withdraw she added, "Unless of course you would be willing to let me peruse your correspondence again."

Ashley cradled her face in one hand, "That's just…creepy."

"I'm uncertain if by 'creepy' you mean that the consumption of your communications is disturbing in general or because I would be the one performing said consumption. Can you clarify?"

"Either? Both? I'm not sure why you are so interested, to be completely honest."

"My reasoning is uncomplicated, Commander. I interface more frequently with you than any other crewmember and we have established parameters for open discussion. We…trust…one another. While I may have had the same agreement with Shepard, her relationship with Liara does not reflect the same physical or emotional circumstances I am likely to encounter, making yours the superior model on which to base my research."

"You're serious?" Ashley asked, but didn't wait for an answer, "But who says I'm a good example for that kind of thing? You should go read poetry instead. There is nothing more elegant that can be said about love and relationships, you know, and I can recommend some good ones."

"I have absorbed a great deal of poetry on the subject of love, Commander. My inquiry is not about the stylized ideal of love but the reality of day to day interactions. While I do have access to communications between all of the crew and their loved ones as well, I do not share the same level of trust and must refrain from asking questions."

"If you want real day to day interactions you get that from Joker. That's how you figure it out….you just do it."

EDI looked concerned, "If I cannot collect enough data I may make misread his intentions or desires."

The Commander's face split with a grin, "And that is the best introduction to humanity of all, EDI. Insecurity. It isn't that you won't run into trouble, that's a given. Success or failure is all about how you deal with it. Just remember what you love about him when he does the things you hate, and then communicate. It's possible this relationship won't work. You know that, right?"

"That is not an acceptable outcome."

Williams chuckled, "Of course not, but it is a possibility. Relationships aren't a game with a predetermined outcome. You have to feel your way through it," she said, her hands rotating around invisible pieces in her mind's eye, "Like a puzzle you are putting together blind. It's slow going, and if your partner isn't willing to accept mistakes and learn from them as well then there's a chance it won't work. Finding who you were meant to be with isn't easy, EDI. It's just well worth it in the end."

The Commander's dark eyes searched EDI's face. It wasn't too long ago that all she could see was
the machine that had nearly taken her life. She wasn't exactly sure when that changed, but she put a companionable hand on the AI's shoulder. "Look, if you have questions I'll do my best to answer them."

"Thank you, Commander."

"Welcome, but you are still not looking at my messages."
"So where's Jack?"

Miranda finished programming the destination into the shuttle and looked at Shepard while the door slid closed. "Clothes shopping. Seriously," Miranda said with a half laugh at the woman's arched eyebrow, "It's not like you can have this stuff delivered anymore and she quickly tired of commissary fashion. She has particular tastes, as I'm sure you recall."

Shepard eyed the purple bruises at the base of Miranda's neck and quipped, "Very particular tastes."

Just the weight of that look had Miranda blushing, but she calmly set the shuttle to auto and reclined. She kept her expression neutral when she finally met Shepard's intent gaze, "She can be very...enthusiastic."

Shepard finally broke her stare and cleared her throat, looking instead at where they were headed, and Miranda wondered for a moment if she was offended by the minor injury, "Does that make you uncomfortable?"

The woman's cheeks colored and she smiled, "Not in a bad way. Missing Liara is all." She fidgeted for a moment before looking at her again, "So is she really shopping or did you run her off to preserve my privacy?"

"Bit of both," she admitted.

"Did it bother her?" Shepard pressed, then shrugged when Miranda's eyes sharpened, "Hey, just wondering if I need to duck the next time I see her. Occupational hazard."

"We talked about it. I wouldn't worry," she responded thoughtfully as trees flew beneath them.

Shepard broke the silence, "You know, I think I might have sounded insensitive when I first found out about you two. Not what I intended."

"You were surprised, I know you didn't mean anything by it. You should have seen the look on Jacob's face," she replied with a smirk.

Her face lit up with curiosity, "This I've got to hear!"

Miranda waved her hand dismissively, "Oh he didn't say a word, you know him. All smiles and nods and quiet judgement." Her eyes turned mischievous, "I could tell it was positively killing him, though," she said, chuckling at the memory.

Shepard grinned, obviously imagining what he must have looked like before joining her, their laughter filling the small space. "He does take himself pretty seriously, doesn't he? Though I guess we all do to some extent."

Miranda nodded, still smiling, "Comes with responsibility, I'm sure. He doesn't want to show any cracks, especially with the latest drama."

"You think he didn't approve because you were moving on or because it was Jack?"

"Knowing him? Mmmmm, I think it was more that I no longer fit into that neat little box he set aside for me in his mind. Jacob doesn't like surprises and now he has to rethink everything about me."
"I can't blame him too much for that. You've changed quite a bit."

"Yeah?" She asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. You always seemed cold. Distracted. You were in your head pretty much 24/7," Shepard shrugged, searching for the words, "And I get that. I got it at the time, too. It's just nice to see the real you, I guess."

"The real me," she repeated softly, "Perhaps you're right."

"At the risk of sounding insensitive again, you think it'll last?" Shepard's expression was sincere, so Miranda gave it some thought.

"Who can say? We are very different in some ways but surprisingly alike in others. Her past makes things more difficult of course, but the fact that I'm not out to get something from her seems to go a long way."

"It does seem hard to believe she'd trust you," Shepard said, "I think that more than anything else is why your relationship was so shocking."

Miranda smirked at the lie, "More than anything else?"

Shepard chuckled, "Okay, you got me. What do you see in her? Don't get me wrong, I have immense respect. Immense. I'm just...having trouble doing the math."

"That's just it. There is no math," Miranda said flatly to further confusion on Shepard's face. Miranda smiled and shook her head, then tried again. "My entire life has been planned and laid out, every decision based on a goal, every relationship nurtured for an outcome. Niket was the only person in my life that was my friend simply because of our history and even that proved to be a lie. For the first time in my life I am doing something purely for the enjoyment of it. No plans, no objectives, no math."

Shepard nodded thoughtfully, but clearly still struggled with the concept.

"Who else do you know that feels that alone in life? Feels that any relationship they've ever had has been about goals and outcomes? Feels that nobody in the galaxy could ever simply want something real and honest?"

The lights turned on in Shepard's eyes, so Miranda continued, "What do I see in her? Myself in darker circumstance. She is...intelligent, brave and beautiful. She never stops fighting, no matter what."

Shepard's eyes softened and she smiled, "Wow. Miss Lawson if I didn't know better, I'd say you're in love."

Miranda felt her cheeks warm, "Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"Tch, I was the same way, 'til Liara," Shepard said, looking out at the scenery, "No time for feelings, they just get in the way, right?" she said, adding a quick wink in Miri's direction, "But honestly? I don't think I would have made it to the end without her to fight for. That kind of love can put people back together. Maybe it'll work for you two."

Miranda smiled softly, "And here I thought I was the one giving advice."

Shepard blew on her fingernails proudly and grinned. The shuttle continued to lift higher and higher
up the mountain slope and the Spectre's eyes focused on the starkly beautiful landscape revealed above the visible treeline. "This is a long way from civilization," she mused.

Miranda took back control of the shuttle and slowed, searching for the landmarks of her landing zone. "That is the point. I think living in those sarcophagi down there made me crave some distance. There," she said in recognition and hovered over her property, spinning to give Shepard the view of Vigil, "So, what do you think?"

Shepard's jaw dropped, "What do I think? I wanna know how you are gonna get anything actually built up here."

Miranda conceded the point, "It might take some time, but I'm planning a little cabin for starters. That shouldn't be too difficult." She set the shuttle down in the same clearing she had used for her and Jack's vacation then shut the engines down.

Shepard followed her out, then just walked around the clearing. She closed her eyes and took in a few deep breaths, savoring the fresh air and afternoon sun that slanted down through the canopy, "A little cabin would be all I put up here."

"MmnHmm. I'm not quite so Spartan, I'm afraid."

"Shocking," she retorted, turning in the direction of Vigil, "Yeah, you'll need to take these trees down to get the view, but they are good sized. You can use them to build the structure." She walked to the far ends of the clearing, looking down the slope analytically, "So where are the property boundaries? The slope is pretty steep here."

Miranda answered all her questions as they hiked around. Shepard seemed to have a genuine interest in how she could best use the property and they swapped ideas, falling into a simple but satisfying problem solving rhythm. When darkness began to fall they returned to the clearing a little fatigued but with eyes sparkling at the promise of what the place could be.

"Yep. It's beautiful. Gonna be a bit cold in winter, though," Shepard said, looking at the moonrise.

"Just an excuse for a massive hearth as far as I'm concerned. And speaking of," Miranda said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Speaking of what?"

"Come on, Miss N7," she pointed imperiously to a ring of stones with some darkened coals scattered within, "That fire isn't going to make itself."

Later, as the flames kept the chill darkness at bay, Miranda sipped at a warm drink, blanket wrapped around her shoulders while Shepard told her about her dreams.

Miranda watched her obliquely, paying as much attention to how Shepard spoke as what she said. She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs while her hands poked a stick into the coals. Her words were wooden, rote. This was an old wound, long scabbed over. Her face showed no emotion with the telling but her eyes also never left the licking flames. It was the only way she could get through them, apparently, for every time Miranda caught her attention she
lost track and it would take time for her to begin again.

So she waited patiently until Shepard ran out of variations, until she ran out of words. All the dreams seemed to share similar threads though Miranda wasn't sure if Shepard was aware of that fact. She just stayed quiet until Shepard looked at her without invitation, only then asking, "Do you remember the first time you had one of these?"

Shepard took a deep breath and relaxed until she sat crosslegged, then stretched her back, "Dunno. Had 'em a long time."

"Can you tell me if it was before or after Eden Prime?"

"Before. Before I went into the service even. That's why I told you this wasn't a big deal."

That surprised her. Her first guess was that the Prothean Beacons and their graphic warnings about the Reapers may have been the cause. "Did you have trouble sleeping as well?"

"Yeah. Just a light sleeper I guess."

"So you are able to sleep, but then the dreams wake you?"

"No, most of the time I don't get that far."

"Can you tell me more about that? What does a normal night look like for you?"

Shepard clearly didn't like talking about this, but she rotated her shoulders, relaxing the muscles there and pushed on, "There's this….pulse. Not like electricity but sometimes I can swear I see it behind my eyes. I get real close to sleep, just enough for what's real to kind of blur. If I stay there, I can fade in and out most of the night. If I go deeper, then I get that pulse." She shook her head with uncertainty, "I dunno really how to describe it. It starts in my stomach and ends up in my head and I...my eyes just open. It's only when I can ignore that, when I can just let go...that I dream at all."

"It sounds a bit like a reaction many people have when they are about to fall asleep. Their muscles jerk them awake. Does that sound like what you are experiencing?"

"No, I've had those, though. This is more like...adrenaline. I just don't feel sleepy afterward. Sometimes I have to get up and walk before I can even lie back down."

Miranda took another sip while she thought. There had to be a rational explanation for it but she didn't know what it was. She couldn't put herself in Shepard's shoes without being horrified, though. It sounded like she was punishing herself anytime she relaxed with a dream of dire consequence. An excess of adrenaline was often a problem with the kidneys but Shepard had never had any such diagnosis, and the replacement organs definitely wouldn't be the source of such a thing. It had to be some form of anxiety, but if it was occurring before any mention of the Reapers...

"Would you tell me about Mindoir?"

Her easy answer belied the haunted look in her eyes, "Sure. What do you want to know? I assume you know the story."

Miranda tilted her head at the reply, instincts screaming, "I'd like to know the parts you didn't tell the Alliance."

Shepard tilted her own head, eyes sharpening, "Bad things. Things I've moved past."
"I think we both know that's not true," Miranda said without a trace of cruelty in her voice.

Shepard looked away, then looked back at her for a brief moment, then turned to the fire before she could sit no longer. When she launched to her feet and started pacing Miranda knew she had hit paydirt. This was the source of the issue and Miranda knew she couldn't stop now.

"Shepard!" She exclaimed until the woman turned and looked at her, "Talk to me. This is what we're here for, isn't it?"

She stopped and put her hands on her hips, then sighed and looked at the ground, "It was my fault. They all died because of me."

"Go on. What happened?"

She rubbed her face with one hand and spoke into her palm with a pall of shame, "When they took New Hope they rounded us all up and stuck us in the gym. There must have been two hundred of us, maybe more. As they were bringing me and my parents in I noticed that all of the slavers were piling up on their ships and taking off. I didn't know that they were going to fight the marines that had just landed, but what I did see was that there were only maybe a dozen Batarians left to hold us there. We walked in and everyone was just waiting quietly for someone to come save us. We had them more than twenty to one, but not a soul was gonna lift a finger to save themselves." She gestured with a hand in frustration, "I told my parents. I told them that they could just take them out. Sure, some of us might die but we had all seen the vids. We all knew what was going to happen if we didn't. But they just stood there."

Shepard was pacing again, that frustration growing into anger, "They said they were just farmers, that they couldn't fight. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Just because they were farmers they couldn't pile on? Had they never seen a football game?" She finally stopped, her lip curled in revulsion, "I was so...angry. When they started taking us out and putting the collars on I just...."

Miranda stood up and caught Shepard's eye before holding out a hand. Shepard just stared at it with the same disdain she felt for the colonists, seeing it as a sign of weakness. She lowered her hand slowly but didn't drop her eyes.

"I got one of their rifles," Shepard continued, her face stone-like, "He let down his guard, thought we were all spineless. I shot him and shouted for us to defend ourselves." Her voice trailed away to a whisper, "I thought surely...surely now....but only a few even moved."

Her eyes were sightless, lost in memory of the massacre that followed, but then the emotion drained from her face and her tone lightened, "I got a pretty good crack in the head during the struggle but I could still see. They cut us down like wheat in a field."

"It must have been horrible to watch them die."

"It was," she said numbly, "My parents...they begged." Miranda listened to her talk as if she were describing a picture rather than a formative event, a sense of unease growing within her, "But they weren't finished with me yet."

What followed made Miranda nauseous. The part of Shepard's interview she saw about the Blitz made much more sense now. Shepard's razor focus against the Reapers made more sense. Her relentless drive to build a consensus against them made sense. She made sense.

The official story went that once the Batarians began to lose their hold on the colony they simply executed their prisoners before their retreat. Miranda briefly wondered which story was true, but in
the end what she believed didn't really matter; only what Shepard remembered.

After a lengthy silence, Shepard asked with a grim smile, "So what do you think? Should they let me back in?"

Now that Miranda finally saw who she really was it made her hesitate, "You lied to the recruiter during your admissions eval I'm guessing."

She didn't even flinch at the question, "I told them what they wanted to hear. There was nothing left for me on Mindoir, and with the Batarians acting up they needed soldiers. My background was a bonus as far as they were concerned."

They should probably have never let her into the Navy to begin with and might not have if they knew the truth; but the irony was that if they hadn't everyone in the galaxy would now be dead. Miranda had no idea how Shepard hadn't broken under the weight of her guilt, but it was as if she had been made for this struggle; her entire life spent making up for that singular sin.

"I think we should get some sleep. Thank you for letting me in, Shepard. I know it wasn't easy."

Shepard looked relieved to let the memories go and nodded before building up the fire.

Of course, neither of them slept much.

Miranda woke before dawn to see Shepard's face illuminated by her Omni and the fire still burning merrily. It had obviously been well tended, and the woman looked like she'd been up for a while.

Lawson rubbed her eyes gently and yawned, "All caught up?"

"Heh," was the woman's derogatory response.

"When does your assistant start work?"

"As soon as he arrives. I'd like to tell him to start right now, but that would be kind of rude since we haven't even met." Shepard shut down the interface and smiled at her, "You might wanna check yours. Liara's been busy."

"Oh?" Miri replied with a suggestive wink, "I think I know what you've been spending all these late night hours doing, now."

Shepard looked chagrined but didn't take it lying down, "Oh yeah? Well if it makes you feel better we included you. Liara sent you something really 'special'."

Lawson feigned a shocked expression, "Should I show Jack?"

"Definitely not!" She replied before giving her a devilish smile, "Unless you want to."

Miranda chuckled and started to rise, but Shepard was quicker, "You might want to be seated for this. I'll get the coffee going."

Now her interest was truly piqued, "Sounds serious."

"Yep."
Miranda read quietly while the coffee heated over the fire, the little crook between her brow growing deeper line by line while the mountains behind her became stark silhouettes. When Shepard handed her a steaming cup she looked up, "This is...a bold plan."

Shepard nodded mid-sip and searched Miranda's face, "What do you think?"

Miranda sighed. "I think it's the riskiest proposition I've seen since we first heard of Omega Four," she said, meeting Shepard's gaze unflinchingly, "Anything goes wrong and I lose everything."

Shepard raised her eyebrows and her shoulders in surrender, "You're right. It's too much to ask." She took another drink and sat back on her elbows but never broke her gaze, "But there's nobody else that can do what you can; not that we can trust and has no conflicts of interest. Plus, think about what might happen if everything goes right."

Miranda sipped her coffee and considered carefully, "I would expect to be fully repaid followed by a commensurate share of future profits."

"I don't think we ever considered less."

Miranda still looked very unsure, "And you're positive the Council will go along with it?"

"The details are Liara's, but this was Tevos' brainchild. You'll have Spectre protection along with any intel we receive to mitigate problems before they arise."

Miranda shook her head and then spontaneously chuckled, "I certainly never expected to wake up to this. I need to think it over."

"Take your time. I just need your decision before we find the data."

Miranda nodded and they both started cooking up breakfast. The frogs and crickets quieted and birds began their songs as the sun crept over the mountaintop and closer to its summit. They spent the time silently, just enjoying companionship without any expectations. When Shepard started scooping out the contents of the skillet onto a plate Miranda finally spoke, "Jordan is a lovely name. Why don't you use it?"

The look Shepard gave her was one she would remember for the rest of her life. It brooked no discussion at all, the ice in them crystal clear, "It was a religious name. It's not who I am anymore. I'll thank you not to speak it again."

Miranda's eyes widened at her tone and Shepard's jaw tightened with regret. She dropped her eyes and pursed her lips, mumbling an apology.

"It's fine," Miranda replied, her own tone a bit clipped, "But if you're going to go back to that panel you can't react this way to normal questions. You understand that, yeah?"

Shepard took a bite of her food, lost in thought. Then, as if it were everything she hated, "Fine. What's your advice?"

"My advice is for you to come to grips with what happened on Mindoir," she said gently.

Shepard gave her an exasperated look, "Ancient history."

Miranda shook her head with her own exasperated expression, "You may have fooled the rest of the world about that but it's just not true, and with the brass obviously digging deeper that's the conclusion they're going to come to as well."
Shepard grit her teeth, a surge of anger welling like a waking volcano, "So what? Let's be honest here...haven't I done enough to warrant a little trust? Who gives a...." She grit her teeth again and clamped down on the outburst just waiting behind her tongue, "I shouldn't have to answer to them about this kind of shit, we've got more important things to worry about."

Miranda tilted her head, her patience thinning, "Right, let's change perspectives for a moment, shall we? Let's pretend that you are under investigation for a crime that carries a possible death sentence." She held up three fingers and counted them down one at a time, "The person who has been assigned to prosecute you is in business with the judge, sleeps with the victim's sister and the last person they prosecuted never made it to trial under mysterious circumstances."

Shepard rolled her eyes but Miranda dug in, "How concerned would you be about ferreting out the prosecutor's motivations, hmm?"

"That's...ridiculous," she groaned.

"No, it's not. You're a Spectre who has the power to be judge and jury over any person and now potentially any government in the galaxy! May I remind you that you just tried to cut a deal with me that completely bypasses every single governmental entity in the galaxy to favor a Shadow organization run by your girlfriend? Really now. Take a moment and think about it. I'll just...finish my coffee." She took a demonstrative sip, staring at her expectantly.

The arched eyebrow and melodramatic speech struck Shepard as suddenly hilarious and she began to laugh around a mouthful of food despite the shreds Miranda's words had left of her argument. When Miri's eyes narrowed in anger she put her plate down and held up a hand to ward her off while she continued to chuckle, "Okay! Okay! Maybe I haven't thought this through."

"You're damned right you haven't," Miranda huffed. Shepard just continued to grin at her discomfiture, so she turned her frustration into cleaning up the dishes.

When she went for Shepard's plate the woman reached out and stilled her by the wrist, "Come on now. I'm sorry." When their eyes met, Miranda nodded. It was patently obvious through their history together and in the last few minutes that the Commander almost never allowed physical contact, so the effort wasn't lost on her.

"So...." Shepard continued a bit awkwardly in an attempt to move on, "How would you suggest I 'come to grips' then?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure you can; at least not before you meet with Dr. Fields," she said while putting away their bedding. Once done, she looked back at Shepard, "You do realize that Mindoir wasn't your fault, right?"

Shepard finished collecting the dishes and began scrubbing them with a brush, punctuating some of her words with elbow grease, "Do I get that the Batarians were evil bastards and if the colonists hadn't all died they might have been subjected to much worse? Sure, but the fact is that it was my disobedience that got everyone I ever knew killed; man, woman and child. There's nothing anyone can say or do to change my mind about that."

"While I understand your perspective I can't agree," Miranda replied, though Shepard patently ignored her. "Jordan," she called firmly, and that got the woman's attention. Shepard glared at her dangerously, but Miri overrode the wordless rebuke, "You can't go through your life pretending that a part of you simply doesn't exist!" Miranda's eyes softened and she took a step closer, but this time kept a respectful distance, "Look, you need to heal. I mean really heal. I would hazard you haven't really made that attempt yet and simply keep getting drawn into more and more difficult situations to
"I wish that were true," Shepard said grimly, "I thought about little else for a decade, and you know something? Dr. Fields was right about one thing." Her eyes dropped along with the volume of her voice, "I did hate the Batarian. I killed every one I could find for a very long time, especially on Elysium. I made them pay with every bit of imagination I had, even after I became a Spectre."

"That's understandable," Miranda offered softly.

"Is it?" Shepard asked archly, "What about Aratoht?"

Miranda shook her head adamantly, "You had no choice, you know that."

"And yet the whole time I was under arrest I found myself wondering if I wasn't just a bit too enthusiastic about pressing that damn button. 300,000 batarian, Miri. How many of them were actually responsible for my parents?"

"Likely none, but none of them were responsible for the Reapers either. Lay that one at their doorstep, you've got plenty on your plate as is."

"Yeah," she agreed half-heartedly. "Choice of occupation notwithstanding, l...I think I'm just tired of killing." Shepard looked up at her, the question clamoring for release, "Does that sound stupid?"

Miranda looked at her friend for a long moment, "Not at all. Unfortunately this thing you are doing with Liara and the Council isn't likely to lead you down the most peaceful of paths."

Shepard shrugged and continued with her chore, drying the pots once clean, "Can't be worse than what I've already done. Maybe I just need to accept that this is who I am."

"Hey," Miranda said until Shepard met her eyes, "There's no question that this is who you were meant to be. That doesn't mean it has to be who you are tomorrow. It's the same advice I gave Jack."

"Yeah? What did she say to that?"

Miranda smirked, "That I should stop trying to fix her."

They both began to chuckle knowingly, and Shepard stood to put away the equipment. "Well," she reassured her, "That's not my answer. Fix away."

"I think Liara is right," she said after a moment of thought. "I think the Asari might be able to help you, or even a regular psychologist; but as usual you are stuck in the middle of something you can't leave. You want my advice? You are going to have to fake it if you want to pass the evaluation, but you are going to have to do it well. It doesn't take much to set you off right now and they'll pounce on that."

Shepard looked up at the clear open sky, the pastel hues of morning settling into a respectable blue. She didn't want to go back just yet but there were people waiting. Always waiting. "Dammit. Why can't I just write them a letter and promise to be good?" she retorted sarcastically.

The returning smile was understanding but humorless, so Shepard sighed and shrugged, "Fine. I'll call him today and set something up. How hard can it be for me to just keep my temper for an hour? I'll try and put his mind at ease."

Miranda nodded and looked pleased, then continued packing. "Hey," Shepard said earnestly before she could turn away to the shuttle, "Thanks. Again...I seem to be telling you that often, don't I?"
"Don't fret about the score," she said as she climbed inside, "You've got a few points on the board, as I recall."
Second Master

Shepard took the offered hand, "Say your name once again?"

"Zhuang Sueh-yen, Ma'am," the young man with the strong jawline replied, "It can be difficult to pronounce. If you would prefer, please call me Wong."

"Oh no, I won't back down from that challenge, Sho..wong?" She chuckled at herself, "Just be patient with me." The answer seemed to please him and he lowered his chin once in agreement.

"Come in, sit down. We have a lot to talk about. Would you like some coffee?"

"I would prefer tea, if you have it." His voice was smooth and pleasant, flavored ever so slightly with an accent she couldn't place. The name was Chinese, obviously, but their culture had been aggressive in expansion over the last hundred years, so could have been from anywhere.

"Creamer?" she asked, and at his nod moved to the side table that held refreshments for the meeting room, "You were in the service, right? What made you leave?"

"The war is over, Ma'am."

She looked over her shoulder, "You don't have to call me Ma'am. Call me Shepard." She brought back two cups and sat at the long table beside him before sliding his mug over. "You made P.O. first class," she said, glancing at her datapad where it lay, "You had a promising career, but you left just because the war was over? Why?"

"I did not wish to be a soldier," he said before pulling the tea to his lips.

Shepard's eyes narrowed, "Then why become one at all?" He scored well in every area for combat but elected to join the rear echelon instead, where he thrived with calm competence and attention to detail.

Zhuang's dark eyes met hers unabashedly, "Even prey will turn and fight to defend their family, Shepard. That does not mean it is their nature."

Shepard was struck by the timing of that philosophy, considering recent conversations, "Have you already spoken with the Asari councilor?"

"She graced me with a few moments of her time, yes."

Shepard managed to refrain from smirking. This had Tevos' fingerprints all over it, "And you've signed all the required confidentiality forms?"

"I have."

Shepard nodded and took a deep breath before continuing, "So you understand that in the course of your duties you may be forced to handle information that may considered damaging to humans, in part or on the whole?"

"Councilor Tevos relayed the particulars. Your current duties have been compromised by the fame your past duties have garnered and you require assistance with handling the requests and communications from a large number of vectors. My skills in this area have been honed and well documented, Shepard. I will keep your confidence and assist you to the best of my abilities. Your
needs and my skills are in alignment."

Shepard sat back in her chair and regarded him for longer than would be comfortable. She knew the
effect that gaze could have on others; watched them crack in fear of what might happen, what they
couldn't foresee in an opponent with her reputation for violence.

"Are you a pacifist, Zhuang?" She asked when he showed no signs of disturbance.

"I believe I have already answered that question," he said impassively. Oh how Shepard wished she
could sample that implacable calm.

"I want more."

His eyes unfocused in thought before he answered, "When one is born, their instinct is for peace. It is
only the unfortunate circumstance of life that forces them to choose violence. Once violence is
chosen, however, it is easier and easier to choose it until the day comes that peace is their instinct no
longer. I am not a pacifist, Shepard; but so long as it is an option I will exercise it."

Regardless of the internal debate that topic engendered in her, there was no doubt his temperament
was perfect. She found herself looking forward to future conversations with him and smiled
genuinely, "Welcome aboard."

"Thank you. When would you like me to begin?"

Shepard slid a workpad down the table to his waiting hands, "Right now. I'm about a month behind
on communications. I've provided you an account and access to my correspondence and calendar. Of
primary concern is Council business, Spectre communiques and anything regarding the current
investigation. I've taken the liberty of highlighting the contacts from whom any message should be
immediately relayed. Any content that you see as encrypted should remain that way, for your own
protection as well as mine. Clear?"

"As you wish," he said without hesitation.

"Also," she added, "My calendar has been pretty packed up to this point and you'll see that continue.
I'd like to designate a time each day for calisthenics and meditation. I'm open to when, but do your
best to make sure I have it available."

"I will see it done."

"Thank you, Zhuang. I've arranged quarters beside my own and they should already be prepared.
I've got an appointment to keep but at lunch I'll show you around? You can work here for now."

He nodded amiably and she stood, "Good. I look forward to working with you."

"As do I."

Shepard was already reaching out to the Convergence, Tevos specifically, before she reached the
door. Had they come to a decision on Liara's terms?

There had been considerable resistance amongst the shorter lived races to the idea of delaying a cure,
despite how little progress had been made on that front to date. The prevailing counter-argument,
however, was that if war broke out in Sol the cure would be a moot point. With delayed gratification
also came a speedier galactic recovery; beginning with the repair of the relays. When normal
communications were restored their research could begin in earnest and in complete secrecy, and
who knew what valuable information about their condition might be found in the Reaper data itself,
once secured? Tevos was confident they would reach an agreement in favor of their plan, though it hadn't happened yet.

Shepard approved, and had her own idea to add that might speed the timeline further.

The Rachni had a presence in many underpopulated systems and might be convinced to assist with construction. Such a task would require a great many resources acquired through their own methods, however. Perhaps the Council could reward the Rachni with political recognition, a formal treaty and the promise of a homeworld in return? Tevos agreed the idea was worth exploration.

Finally, preparations needed to be made to provide data that could point to the Shadow Broker as the guilty party in the investigation; and Shepard already had some ideas on how to move it forward without full commitment, just in case the Convergence had a change of heart. She would need to get the ball rolling before her team was able to begin drawing their own conclusions; time was of the essence. Tevos agreed with Shepard's summation, and less than fifteen seconds after the Spectre had reached out she was able to break the connection with all the answers she needed.

She had a grudging respect for how quickly things could be done using the Thorian effect and found herself hoping the Convergence's scientists could figure out a way to exploit its possibilities without the negative side effects. What if the sharing could be initiated and broken by the members at will as Shepard could? It could ensure the transparency of communication that was its hallmark but would be voluntary, if so. She immediately thought of five reasons that wouldn't work, however, after only a moment of reflection. Unlike the Geth, organic races valued their autonomy too much.

She could only speculate in the end and had little time for that much before she engaged her team. After a quick elevator ride she sat down at the head of the conference table. "So what have we got?" she asked the assembly of faces that looked to her for guidance.

"We've been discussing the matter while waiting," Haliya said smoothly. With the Humans and Salarians as the primary suspects in the crime it didn't surprise her that they weren't attempting to take the lead on the investigation. What did surprise her was the Turians hadn't. Shepard met the Asari's gaze and nodded, giving her the floor.

"I spoke with Devo as you requested," she said, "But he was not forthcoming. He seemed content with his fate, in fact, so I pursued his finances in the hope of discovering a payoff that could potentially be available to him after any prescribed incarceration. There was nothing until I expanded the search to his sister."

She stood and advanced to the holodisplay then pulled up what appeared to be credit statements for a man named Regen Taylor. "His brother in law received several payments after the data transfers began that coincided with the transfer dates. The amounts deposited were transferred shortly thereafter to a local crime syndicate enforcer's account. This enforcer's territory overlaps the family's living quarters and the school district where their two children attend. We are attempting to contact informants in that locale to verify the threat, but it appears to be a connection."

"So if he talks, his nieces might die. That might explain his silence. Good work." Shepard murmured in thought, "It doesn't seem likely these local thugs are part of the larger operation, though. Any luck tracing where the deposits came from?"

"As in most criminal enterprise the deposits were bounced between institutions from ghost accounts that were closed after the transfers were made. Whoever performed them was careful. We are looking into the aliases utilized to find out if they have been used elsewhere. The credentials required to open these accounts would be an expensive undertaking on their own."
Shepard nodded, "Send me that information. I'll see what the Spectres have on those aliases." She saw Sidann waiting eagerly in her peripheral vision, so she relented, "Sidann? What news?"

"Believe we know which ship was used," he said with pride, looking to Haliya who pulled up the schematics on the display. "Rekanah class freighter called Brakenbah. Origination listed as Mars. Carried load of supplies for facility but crosscheck of capacity shows delivery much less than capability. Not proof. Ship stayed in dock for three weeks, six days. Range encompasses dates of transfer. Reason given for lengthy stay: Repairs."

"Do we have copies of the repair orders?"

"Ship used own crew, just needed supplies. Supplies purchased? Communication system parts."

Yufi'Gonn nar Neeya interjected, "The parts could have been used for the construction or repair of a transmitter, and the Brakenbah was moored at bay B17. It was large enough to achieve LoS."

Shepard straightened in her chair, "Where is the Brakenbah now?"

"That's the best part," The Quarian said, and Shepard could hear the smile in his words, "The logged flight path put it headed back to Mars. It never arrived."

"Sounds like our girl, alright. I don't suppose we have a fix on the transponder?" Shepard sighed when they both shook their heads, "And no report of accidents or altercations along its route?"

Again, they shook their heads. "Then they had to have tampered with it."

Sidann spoke once more, "Would take skill to disable transponder. Hardened against tampering. That skill could be used to redesignate as well."

Shepard chewed her lower lip, "There would still have to be a record of any new designation, though, right?"

Yufi's shoulders slumped slightly, "If the designation were registered recently it would be fairly easy to find. It's possible, even likely that it was arranged beforehand, however."

"But the transponder would have to be operative the entire time. The moment a transponder stops working there's a log, and then there's questions," she posited.

"We checked the logs and do see a report that the transponder went offline, here," he brought up the logged flight path along with a flashing blip along its arc to Mars, "With the large number of naval losses and the current state of potential hostilities, there is a backlog of such events that have not been closed," Yufi said.

Sidann raised a finger, "Inactive but registered transponders highly illegal to transport. Brakenbah's cargo scanned through Vigil docking security. New transponder would have to be brought to location for transfer. Could track any ship travelling through last known transmission point."

A brief deployment on a pirate-hunting Alliance destroyer gave Shepard a bit of an edge on this topic. Disabling a ship's transponder was risky business, mostly from a technical perspective. If the job was botched authorities were immediately notified. If they successfully disabled the transponder they could then run silent until they met with another ship somewhere off course, but that was a risk in itself. Without that transponder help would be hard to come by in case of emergency. With risk came reward, however, and with this kind of reward the choice was obvious. She wasn't sure she wanted to point her team in that direction if they hadn't thought of it yet, though. She needed that time to maneuver until the Convergence made its determination, "It's worth a shot. Let me know..."
"Yufi," Shepard added, "It might be a longshot, but check to see if any other Rekanah class ships are in the system with an active designation. If they've already replaced this thing they could be docked and doing business while we poke around in dead space." Yufi nodded, and Shepard was suddenly grateful the Relays were down. If the Brakenbah could easily leave system it might never be found.

"Any word on Bray?" she asked, looking at Dan.

His index finger was across his lips as if he were deep in thought, and he dropped it before answering, "I wasn't able to speak with Mr. Saracino. He's offworld on business. He instructed his staff to provide me with all the data they had about his background and voting record, however. I'm still slogging through the muck, but am finding no direct link to the connections the rest of the team is putting together."

Alarms were sounding in her head, she could swear she was detecting evasiveness from the investigator. The sweat beading on his lip confirmed it and they stared at one another for a long moment before she said simply, "Keep digging. Tell him I want to speak with him personally."

The slight widening of his eyes gave away his surprise, no matter how quickly he tamed it. She could have driven deeper but refrained and now he was wondering why. She was content to let him stew and stood up to approach the display instead, where she removed the red X drawn over Renin Yijaa's photo and looked at the assembly meaningfully.

"That's right. I've received information that Renin may in fact be alive. We are running down the information as we speak along with known contacts." Sidann looked distinctly uncomfortable at the news and as much as she wanted to make him feel better she said nothing. "I don't know if this will lead back to STG or not, but I thought it was important you be aware. As always, I insist upon confidentiality until this data has been confirmed. That will be all. We'll meet again tomorrow."

Barnes looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it, pulling his belongings together and leaving with the rest under her steady eye. If he was bought, she thought, this might throw them off and give her some room to work. Meanwhile, she'd pursue Terra Firma as a lead and see what fell out. Saracino and Bray's absence was conspicuous and the other investigators weren't dumb; she hoped that the fabrication about the Salarian would keep them off balance for the moment. Either way, Shepard was going to become intimate with Terra Firma in short order.

At the end of the day Shepard stifled a yawn and rapped on a closed office door. When it opened, Dr. Fields looked surprised and stood aside for her to come in, "Hello, Shepard. I was just closing up for the day. What can I do for you?"

Shepard looked around his office again before her eyes settled on him, "I wanted to apologize. I think we got off on the wrong foot."

"That is gracious of you. We obviously miscommunicated and I apologize for whatever part I may have had in that."

She nodded and smiled, folding her hands behind her back, "I wanted to know if you would be open to another try? I've got my schedule under some semblance of control."

"I can certainly understand how busy you must be. How about now?"
"Oh," she replied, caught off guard.

"Or we can schedule something," he smiled openly.

"No um...no that actually... That's fine. I don't suppose you have coffee?"

"Couldn't live without it. Please, have a seat and I'll get you some. Black?"

"That's just fine," she said, taking a seat on the divan. She watched him prepare the coffee with interest. He seemed a bit hurried but she wasn't sure if that was because he had limited time with her or if he was nervous. In the end she concluded that neither result was a bad thing. "I've been thinking quite a lot about last time, Doctor," she said while gratefully accepting a cup. He sat down in a chair across from her and pulled his workpad into his lap from the side table, then looked to her, listening. "I think I've just been....fighting for so long that what you said sounded like just another challenge, and I overreacted."

"It was meant to challenge your thought process," he confirmed, "It was not meant to challenge you personally. I should have been more sensitive to how little time had passed for you since you awakened."

"Things have moved pretty quickly, it's true. Now that I've had to time to consider your questions, would you like to pick up where we left off? Without the shouting?" She smiled wryly and sipped her coffee carefully.

"If you are comfortable with it, of course."

Shepard nodded and crossed her legs, "I'm paraphrasing but I believe the question was...how did I justify going from hating aliens to mating with them."

Dr. Fields had the decency to look embarrassed at the choice of words, "Close enough."

Shepard took a long moment and just looked at him. He kept his gaze impassive, but she didn't relent. Finally, she said, "I can't help but get the feeling that your question was...how did I justify going from hating aliens to mating with them."

"Can you describe how the question made you feel in more detail? You said off-balance. What does that mean to you, exactly?"

"It means that your question made me feel insulted both for my negative feelings toward the Batarians and for the positive feelings I have for Liara. You made it sound as if all aliens should be in one camp or the other, which is nonsense. It made me wonder what the real question was; and I don't like trying to figure out where someone stands when their stated goal is to help me. That kind of thing makes me defensive, and I can get downright testy when I am defensive."

"And you believe that I did it on purpose."

"I don't think you wanted me to get angry, no. I think you wanted to ask me something else but didn't want to do it directly. This was the only way you could think of getting that answer and it backfired."

The Doctor's eyes hardened but he didn't seem upset, "You've put some thought into this, haven't you?"

"I don't like losing my temper, Doctor. In my line of work when there's an angle you don't understand your first thought has to be to defend yourself and those who are with you. Just be
straight with me and I can get you the answers you need with a minimum of fuss."

"Alright Shepard," he said, leaning back in his chair, "Let's assume you are correct. What question
do you think I was asking?"

"I think you were asking whether or not I would throw Humanity to the wolves in the interest of the
Galaxy at large, but then I wonder how anyone could really even consider such a thing of me. I've
spent a lot of time...and blood, defending us."

He considered her words thoughtfully, then appeared to come to a decision, "There's a quote in the
bible about serving two Masters. Are you familiar with it?"

Shepard fought back irritation at the question. Of course it was familiar, she had been hammered
with it at the same time she learned how to speak. She supposed he was bringing it up knowing her
past and hoping it would make her more comfortable. "Matthew 6:24," she quoted in a low voice.

"That's right. The scripture discusses the futility of trying to serve them at the same time. It is
inevitable that you will love one more, and the other will suffer for it no matter how much you
protest to the contrary. You've had experiences no other human being can claim. You've seen more
worlds than many human beings ever will. You take orders from the Galactic Council. You've
worked side by side with other cultures and have even taken one as a lover. No one is questioning
your honor here, Shepard, only which Master you love more. The distinction is an important one,
wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose," she said softly. She had never really considered it that way before, "I would never do
anything to endanger humanity, though. I know the stakes."

"Okay, answer this question. If you were called upon to serve in your capacity as a marine to defend
against an attack from the Turians next month, would you?"

"Of course."

"Good, okay. How about an attack on Sur'Kesh?"

"Why would we do that?" She asked, eyes narrowing.

"That's not your concern. Would you serve?" As she sat there silently he straightened, his jaw
tightening forcefully, "Don't think, Marine! Answer!"

His voice took on all the bark and authority of a drill sergeant and Shepard's eyes widened, but she
realized it was from curiosity. When he saw her non-reaction he smiled and gestured to her with one
hand, "Now, I'd like to think that is because I would make a horrible instructor but I think we both
know that's not the problem."

It wasn't, she knew, and now she understood his point. She was a soldier no longer, not really. Her
instinct to obey was gone, changed by the weight of the decisions she had to make; many of them in
spite of authority. Her desire to protect her own didn't negate that fact; it just made the service her
Second Master; the one that would suffer if she were forced to choose between justice and
obedience.

"I think I see what you're getting at," she said before standing and beginning to pace, "I just...the
service is my life. It's who I am. I don't want to give that up."

"You can still choose it, Shepard. The question is, will it make you happy?"
She thought about the deployments she would assigned, the movements around the galaxy, being away from anywhere for long stretches. She had a family now, and not one that could easily wait for her, not with the Shadow Broker as a partner. She needed the freedom of being a Spectre, needed to be able to go where she willed whenever it was required. She couldn't do that as an Alliance officer.

"Just because I know the right answer doesn't mean I have to like it," she said as she turned to face him.

"You know, the service is like a tight knit family with a rigid structure. That discipline is a lifesaver for many, and I think you needed it. Eventually though, all children have to go out into the world. It sounds pedantic but the fear of that transition is very real. Don't be frightened, Shepard. You've already left the nest, you just haven't accepted that fact."

"So you think I should resign my commission."

"I'm not here to tell you what to do. I'm here to help you face some facts that you may not have considered because you simply haven't taken any time for self reflection."

Shepard chuckled, "You aren't the only one saying that. It's like there's an echo in my ears."

Fields shrugged, "It's easy to make rational judgments on others when there are no personal motivations or emotions involved. Those things make self-analysis very murky."

She nodded in agreement, "So what happens now? We haven't discussed what happened on the Citadel."

"It is pretty clear that those events weren't your top priority. We'll get to them when you are ready."

"Yeah," she said wryly, noticing the time, "I'm not sure we'll cover all of that in half an hour."

"Probably right. Maybe we should set a few appointments up in advance?"

"Heh, you taking me on as a patient?"

"If that means 'Do I think you are crazy', then no. You are clearly competent, Shepard. I do think you have events in your life that could be handled better with some perspective, though; and since it doesn't appear that you are going to be able to take time for yourself in the near future this would be a good way for you to begin that process."

Shepard looked at him steadily. She was no longer certain he had some nefarious motivation given the way he handled himself today, but they both had been given time to prepare for round two. It was possible he was still playing games, and it was also possible that Hackett had something to do with his sudden about face; but she needed to cut through the bullshit quickly so she could move on and decided to take a chance.

"I'll consider it, but I've got a dilemma. I need to successfully pass this evaluation in order to gain the trust of the Alliance in how I will pursue my investigation. That investigation is progressing, and I think we need to give them an answer sooner rather than later."

Dr. Fields looked confused, "Is that what you think we are doing here?"

"Not directly," she said, running a hand through her hair, "I know the eval is to determine whether I am fit for duty, but let's be honest; If I'm not judged fit for duty nobody, including the Council, will be comfortable with me making Spectre level decisions, either."
"That's fair, and when you put your concerns in those terms I understand why you were so defensive," he said as he stood and approached her, "Let me be as blunt as I can here. Whether or not your first loyalty is to the Alliance is not at the heart of this evaluation, though it is something we must know. It is more important still that you know, Shepard; that you understand where your loyalties lie. The oaths that bind you to the Navy are not something to be taken lightly, and being forced to break them later doesn't serve either of our purposes."

Shepard nodded gravely, "I think you've made that point very well. I will take it under consideration."

"I'm glad to hear that. As I said, the evaluation rests on your health. You are my highest priority at this point, so if you are willing we can get started right now. If we need to burn the midnight oil I assume you won't object?"

"Midnight oil is something I've got plenty of," she said.

"Then have a seat. I'll get some dinner sent up."
Go Time

When Shepard checked her Omni the next morning a smile broke across her face. There were less than a dozen messages for her review and they were color coded using the categories she had provided. A knot of tension she didn't know existed at the top of her spine released in sweet relief. She sent a message to Zhuang and did her best to express her gratitude without sounding like a fangirl. Dinner would be on her, if he liked.

Next, she saw not one but two responses from Aethyta and opened the first eagerly while she walked to the cafeteria.

Shepard,

Isn't this what your kind call a shotgun wedding? Doesn't make sense to knock someone up before the end of the world but not bother to marry her first. Anyway, you seem like a nice kid. I think I can work with you.

I can't come to see you right now, lots on my plate, but I'll definitely be there before she gets back. You can probably learn what you need to know about what to expect from being a father a lot quicker from other Asari there. There's a test when I get there, just so you know, and if you fail you can't have my daughter.

In all seriousness I'm glad you two have stuck together. If you made it through the end of the galaxy I figure you can make it through anything.

Aethyta

Shepard smirked and scrolled to the second message.

Oh, you might earn points if you name the kid after her mother.

"Duh," she muttered quietly, then asked for a good time for a call. She might be able to learn a lot about the Asari culture from someone like Tevos, but when it came to making wedding plans only Aethyta and Liara's opinion really mattered. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, however, she was brought up short by memories of some of the Matriarch's more crass behavior. Maybe she would consult Tevos too, just in case.

The red colored entries that represented encrypted messages drew her next but she waited patiently for the cafeteria to finish opening its storefront first. She liked the coffee fresh and the bread still warm from the ovens; a perk of being an early bird. She sat down at one of the empty tables and watched the news with her breakfast.

"And finally, a report on the latest proposal to end the more than month long famine aboard the Turian and Quarian fleets. A joint effort by both races' leadership has managed to bring together every remaining viable seed that grows the dextro-protein food required by their physiology; and now a team of scientists from the galaxy-saving Crucible project has begun cloning them in large quantities. Initial reports show that the mature vegetation from these seeds appears to be safe for consumption, and plans are being developed to begin immediate production. The question we don't have an answer for yet is where and that could be the biggest problem of all. Joining us to comment on the dilemma is Caesopia Buldas from the Turian Institute of Scientific Affairs."

The holo slid over to a female Turian with green colony markings who nodded curtly and began without preamble, "Dextro-protein based plant life requires many of the same nutrients and growing
media that Earth based plant life requires, but there are complications when both types of plants are grown in the same location. For us to begin large scale production we would need to completely sterilize the ground before planting, in addition to the rest of the necessary infrastructure construction. We are currently in negotiations with the Alliance on the best place to put such a 'farm', as it would then be ill-suited for Levo based production without significant effort."

The anchor nodded sagely then asked, "Couldn't hydroponic or aquaponic solutions be used instead of agrarian ones?"

"Ideally they could," Caesopia replied, "But those solutions are even more infrastructure intensive and will provide little help for our people in the short term, which is the time frame we are focused upon. If the reconstruction of the Relay to Arcturus is successful there are current discussions regarding the use of the Benning hydroponic facilities to bridge the gap, but until the Relay is rebuilt they are only that...discussions."

Shepard's brow furrowed at the report of their near starvation and immediately wondered how Garrus was faring. Stretches of farmland all over Earth had been put back into production as part of the massive recovery effort and they were just beginning to see the bounty of that labor now that the end of summer was approaching. It was a tragedy that the Turians and Quarians could only look on while others feasted.

Her Omni blinked with a reply from Aethyta, and she opened it to see a picture of the Asari standing behind the remnants of Apollo's cafe. The enclosure had collapsed and part of the bar was buried beneath it, but the part nearest the old water features still stood and Liara's father was caressing its blackened surface with a thoughtful smile.

"Good times," Shepard whispered fondly. Below the picture Aethyta had written 19:00.

The Geth had been granted an Embassy and were putting their considerable strength into repairing the Citadel now that their ships were fully operational. Life support had been restored on a few of the wards and many of the surviving residents had begun moving back in to assist. That's where Aethyta and much of the Convergence was, now. There were no more Keepers but maintenance was still required, so the Convergence had a vested interest in learning what needed to be done to provide themselves a home.

It would be strange to step foot on the station again, Shepard thought, a pain moving through her at memories she had relived only the night before. Maybe it would be good. Maybe she could pack away those memories once she saw the place thrive again. She and Dr. Fields had gone through the majority of her report but he had so many questions they were unable to finish. Some of those questions seemed to be more curiosity than the need for any insight, she suspected, but she forgave him. They would meet again this evening, at which time she hoped to get his positive recommendation.

*That ought to make everyone happy,* she thought somewhat petulantly. Maybe now she could get on with the work that needed doing. She finished her breakfast and in what was quickly becoming a daily ritual reached out to the Convergence on the way back to her room.

They had approved the plan. Shepard could sense their hesitance, however, and they knew hers. Even if everything went off without a hitch Liara would now be in more danger than ever, and as both Miranda and Dr. Fields pointed out that seemed to be her soft spot. She had argued with her lover throughout that long night by the campfire trying to find any other solution; but the 'Shadow Broker' version of Liara that came out whenever the topic turned was extremely stubborn. Worse, Shepard wasn't to know any of the arrangements so that as little information as possible would be relayed to the Convergence. It may have been for Liara's protection but it drove Shepard mad.
"You were made to protect people, Shepard. So this time, protect me," were the words that finally broke her. Through her frustration she gazed up at the stars and swore to every God or Goddess that ever existed to do just that.

Tevos suddenly interjected, and Shepard's cheeks colored as she realized the Asari had just been privy to those thoughts. If Shepard was prepared to resign from the Navy and take on this project after the investigation was complete, Tevos would work with her to announce her resignation from the Spectre program as well. The move wouldn't be surprising to anyone after Shepard's exemplary service to the Galaxy, but the soldier would be far from toothless. Through special Council dispensation she would still be granted access to all the resources the Spectre's possessed, meaning she would have the information and tools necessary to protect the Shadow Broker and the data cache from any who would take it by force. Tevos had only one caveat to this offer: Should a situation arise that was significant enough to warrant Shepard's involvement, she should be prepared to offer her services as a full Spectre once again.

The mere suggestion that she couldn't handle normal responsibilities stung, but despite that bitter pill Shepard could find no fault with the rest. No amount of pride could compare to the depths of need she had to protect her family. It was then that Shepard realized that she truly had three masters, not two, and her choice was finally clear.

Once that acceptance was absorbed Shepard had her own request; one in which Tevos rejoiced. Shepard wanted to better understand Asari culture, especially around what humans would identify as marriage. Shepard received more than she expected when that flow of information began. Courtship contrasted with regular interaction. Regular interaction relied on accepted caste. Caste ran over into culture and culture into ritual. Ritual intersected with religion and religion into language. Hundreds of years of experience battered her like water from a firehose and she simply couldn't grasp it all.

She pulled away from the Convergence reflexively and caught her breath, returning the looks of concern from others in the passageway with a reassuring smile. She'd have to try that again some other time. Better yet, she thought another real conversation might be in order.

When the door of her room closed behind her she leaned against it, thoughts whirling at more than the depth of Asari culture. She was actually going to frame Liara for one of the biggest thefts in history today. Perhaps she had been convinced on some level that roadblocks wouldn't allow it to truly happen, but now the road was clear. When she checked the encrypted messages waiting for her she found that they contained all the data required to point the investigative team toward a Shadow Broker result and indicated how best to present it to prevent suspicion. As much as her gut twisted at the idea of this grand deception, she had to admire the efficiency behind the work. In a way, it made her departure from the Spectres more palatable; she could leave this part of her life behind her forever. Or so she hoped.

Curious, she sat down at her desk and queried the actual data that had been altered from the GIS. As she suspected, the original purchase of the Brakenbah had been carried out by a shell corporation with ties to Terra Firma only at a distant reach. The credentials used for the bank transfers were similar. There was a lot of power, money and manipulation behind this play. The benefits for a group like Terra Firma weren't hard to grasp, though. The slow but steady sale of that information could surpass the gross income of an entire planet, and the favors gained by playing one group over another while denying alien races access to the technology would only further their causes. It was the perfect answer to the destruction of their Cerberus allies and would secure their power base for a century or more. She sat back in her chair and chewed on her lip, wondering if it would be enough simply to indict Terra Firma for their crimes.

As much as that solution might soothe her conscience, however, it simply put the blame squarely at
Earth's feet. After all, Terra Firma had apparently infiltrated all levels of government to get the access they needed for this plot. If a corrupted Earth chain of command couldn't protect their own facilities, did that make them more or less responsible for the data loss in the other race's eyes? Shepard wasn't sure exactly how that would play out politically, but she did know that simply stealing the data back from the group after everything they had invested would be more crippling than any legal recourse. Terra Firma was on its way out of favor after Cerberus' defeat, that much was clear. How much sweeter would it be for them to be eliminated using methods they didn't dare protest for fear of their involvement in the theft becoming public? If one fact had been patently crystallized for her through all of this, it was that Shepard never wanted to be on Tevos' bad side.

Still, when she finally found the data she would be forced to eliminate anyone who could potentially identify her presence, which meant everyone on that ship at a minimum. The fact that she wasn't disturbed by that mission specification was in fact what disturbed her most. It was as if she were two people now; the Shepard who would do whatever it took to finish the job and the one who judged her every action. She blamed Fields. And Miranda, and Hackett, and even Liara.

One last time. she told herself. Just once more, then I'm done.

As she no longer had access to Alliance intelligence and didn't want to set off any alarms with a formal query, she sent a quick message to the Normandy to see if Ashley could drum up a list of official and unofficial Terra Firma Facilities. It's possible that the Brakenbah was headed to one of them and if so she wanted a heads-up.

Before she could get comfortable and study the data she would be presenting to the team a knock came at her door. When she called out that it was open, Zhuang stepped inside, perfectly coiffed except for a hastily smoothed cowlick that revealed he had just woken. He waited for her cue to approach.

"Good morning. You are up early. Everything okay?"

"Everything is very well, Shepard. I wanted to relay a request from Councilor Tevos that I just received from her assistant. I don't believe she knew you had returned or she would have delivered it herself."

"Sure, what is it?"

"She said to apologize for the abrupt ending of your last conversation but her schedule still limits the time she has available during the day. She wonders if you would be so good as to visit her quarters for a late dinner this evening?"

Shepard smiled at the thought. Tevos wanted to have a talk about Asari culture and Liara in particular, she was certain.

"That'll be fine. I have an appointment with Dr. Fields that will run later as well. Would you please tell her I will do my best to be there at 21:00?"

"Of course, anything else?" he replied smoothly.

"Not for now. Enjoy your morning."

Zhuang's smile was pleasant without being too familiar as he withdrew.

As if by magic, her Omni chimed with a message from seashell. Shepard grinned at the perfect start to her day.
We're decelerating to our first discharge location so I'll EVA over to the Hephaestus and spend some time with Tali. I just wanted to say good morning and that if you need me I can be reached through my official channel until I return. Counting the hours love.

Oh, and Miranda has accepted my offer. I've set up her contacts and put her in touch with Feron.

Shepard sent a quick response.

My ears were already burning this morning. Don't think they won't again if you and Tali make fun of me behind my back. On the other hand I imagine all she'll talk about is Garrus. Have some fun, you deserve it.

That's good news about Miranda. I feel a little better already.

Maybe once this was all over she could put together another party. The last had turned out quite well and she thought her old crew could use some fun. She missed Garrus especially but simply had no time to go see him and as usual she swore to make it up to him; it was a tired song but one that seemed to be stuck on repeat.

"Okay," she said, looking at her workpad with an exhale and crack of her knuckles, "Time to get to work."

The meeting was going very well. The hunt was on and everyone was actively engaged.

Renin Yijaa had been recast as an active agent with ties to the Shadow Broker and not a member of STG. That was all it took for Sidann to become a wholehearted supporter of the new theory, and his energy was infectious. The idea that none of the individual races was responsible was popular and easy to embrace; nobody wanted to see conflict. They were verifying the financial and starship links to past Shadow Broker crimes when she noticed that Daniel Barnes was pulling his things together.

"Barnes? Anything we should know?" she asked.

"No. Personal emergency, I apologize. I need to depart if you don't mind, you seem to have things well in hand."

Let him scurry off to report to his Masters, she thought, fighting not to smile.

"Of course. I hope everything turns out well."

"Me too," he replied nervously before departing. It was odd; she would have expected to see relief, instead. Maybe he was simply more gifted at acting than she had given him credit for.

Questions about the Brakenbah's last trajectory brought her back to the topic at hand and she put him out of her mind. It was important not to lose focus this close to her goal.

Ashley Williams returned to the bridge once the lengthy deceleration maneuvers were completed. They had arrived as expected near a massive M7III star without any kind of habitable planet. The Red Giant had expanded long ago to consume the nearest rocky worlds and only a handful of gas giants remained. Williams had never seen the discharge process herself and she suspected that few of the crew had either, but that's what regs were for.
The actual trip in FTL wouldn't have required more than a week or two if it weren't for this painful process. The Normandy would be forced to stop roughly every two days to discharge the static built up from their drive core. Failure to do so would result in the death of everyone onboard when it discharged within the bulkheads, instead. It was one of the reasons the galaxy had come to depend so heavily on the relays rather than direct travel, a fact the Reapers relied upon for an efficient harvest.

While the red glow permeated the bridge they ran through the regulations step by step with the other ships and moved into orbit around one of those gas giants. After a couple of hours they initiated the program to release the collected static charge into the planet's gravity well, the only safe place to send such a burst of energy. The arcs from the ships' hulls toward the swirling maelstrom of the atmosphere were sudden and enormous, brightening the ports to the point that EDI dimmed them to protect the crew's vision. Eventually the discharges reduced in number and severity, but they would need to wait until the registered charge reached a level safe enough for them to depart. Everything appeared to be progressing as normal, though, and Ashley eventually gave the okay for EVA's, then headed back to her quarters.

She felt guilty for wanting to take a nap. They'd had two days of as close to downtime as it gets on a starship but she still felt ragged after weeks of solid activity. She gave the bed a regretful look and sat down at her terminal instead. There she found her daily message from James and she only stopped that selection when she saw a high priority message from Shepard blinking downscreen.

Ash,

Need a favor. Can you access AIS and get me a list of all known Terra Firma facilities, official and unofficial, in Sol?

Still waiting on a clean bill of health from psych or I'd do it myself. I'll owe you one.

Thanks,

Shepard

Terra Firma. All the negative instincts she had recently quashed crawled up her spine at the words. She ran the report and looked it over for anything interesting, but she had no context. She attached it to her reply.

Not a problem. I have to ask, though. Why Terra Firma? There have been some blips on my radar lately and I'm curious if you've seen something I haven't.

Let me know?

Ashley

With her brain on high alert there was no chance of a nap, she realized with a sigh. Instead she pulled up EDI's last communication report, put her chin in her offhand and started reviewing it manually.

A couple of hours later, Ashley's eyes were crossing no matter how many times she rubbed them. There didn't appear to be anything but messages to friends and family in these reports; but on a hunch she cross referenced them with the list of unofficial facilities she had just provided Shepard, which reduced them to only a few dozen messages and only two recipients, Vedra Tanner and Ryan Postich. Intrigued, she reviewed them quickly but found only more of the same family and friend correspondence. There was nothing there, she was certain, until something caught her eye.

Postich and Tanner appeared to converse with a shared contact, Phoenix13, and she narrowed her search to that one. The messages still seemed to be inconsequential as she scrolled through them,
then she realized that the context didn't always make sense.

She stopped on one of Vedra's latest messages and Ashley's eyes widened. It was addressed to 'Dad'.

Vedra's father had died before she was born and she had always made a point of calling her adopted father Terry.

This was code.

"I tell you, I've never been so happy to be able to activate my olfactory filters!" Tali exclaimed to laughter at the mess table on the Hephaestus. On either side of her sat Vedra and Liara, giggling as they ate.

One of the other engineers held up his hands in protest, "Awww come on! I'm a carnivore for God's sake. I had no business eating that mess! You should have complained to command that I get some of the reserves. It would have saved lives!"

Vedra shook her head, "Next time I'll stick you outside the ship in your own suit. Suitable punishment I think."

"Cruel and unusual!" He retorted.

"You got the unusual part right," Tali said to another peal of laughter.

The camaraderie reminded Liara of her last night on the Citadel. She had spent so much of her life alone that these rare moments held a novel value she treasured. She may not quite understand the humor but the spirit of bonding was there; the gentle teasing that ironically brought a group of souls closer together was here amongst the crew of the Hephaestus and she was happy to partake.

"What I find most unusual is the fascination all of you have with bodily functions," Liara added in perfect deadpan. When the table turned to her in silence she reddened, then pressed on, "It's too bad you can't all wear a containment suit like Tali. Who knows what secrets she holds?"

The engineer being roasted laughed and slapped the table, "Point for the Asari, Quarian. For all we know you smell like wet varren in there! Hey, where exactly does your excrement go?"

A chorus of groans and 'oooohs' rose but before they could finish, Tali jumped back into the fray, "Trust me, Bosh'tet, the worst odor I've ever had couldn't compare to the socks you put in the laundry. And as for you miss high and mighty?" She said, turning to the traitor to her right, "I wouldn't be surprised if the Asari altered their own DNA not to smell at all just so you couldn't possibly wrinkle those pretty faces of yours with an expression of disgust."

Liara's eyes widened in surprise, her lips curling into a smile. The uncertain silence at the table dissipated into chuckles when they saw she wasn't angry and Vedra graciously bailed her out.

"Don't worry about it Liara," she said with an evil glance at Tali, "Sounds to me like you struck a nerve!"

Liara grinned at Tali good-naturedly, "I have to 'score points' whenever I can. It's not as if I have much of a sense of humor."

"Oh don't worry," Tali replied to her longtime friend, "The next time your extranet searches only take you to Elcor porn you'll know who to apologize to."
As laughter rang out again the other engineer just shuddered, "Elcor...gross."

"Excitement to the point of ejaculation: Oh please. Do that one more time," One of them said in perfect monotone.

The laughter from the group was loud and long.

After the fleetwide notification of departure, Tali and Liara embraced at the airlock.

"Thank you for spending the day with me," Liara said with gratitude, "I miss you all the time."

"You should take a vacation," Tali retorted, "I don't think I've ever seen you actually relax for more than an hour at a time until today."

Liara smiled softly, "What is it Shepard says? I can rest when.."

"I'm dead," Tali finished with her, then took her shoulders firmly, "You know that's dreck, right?"

Liara nodded, put her helmet in place, then sealed it, "Life is a cycle. Work and rest. Let us hope our work is almost at an end."

"It's not so bad as long as we have friends to help along the way," the Quarian said, dim eyes crinkling happily within the purple haze of her environmental suit.

"You have that," Liara said warmly, "I'll be back after the next discharge."

Tali nodded and keyed the airlock, a few moments passing while the chamber recovered the atmosphere within. Soon the doors slid open and Liara stepped inside, turning to wave farewell, her mind already on next tasks.

Pushing off into space was almost a religious experience. The senses were immediately bombarded with the sheer vastness of it, rendering the ego miniscule; and in this place the twin sights of the enormous red giant to her right and the gas giant below dwarfed even the ships in the fleet, further emphasizing her smallness. She took it in without flinching, feeling at one with it rather than diminished by it; a product of over fifty years of contemplative meditation. Her heart filled with joy and she found herself looking forward to experiencing more systems in this way as they made their journey to Sol.

After a few moments spent drifting for the sake of burning the sight into memory Liara keyed the suit's thrusters to send her toward the Rachnid. She imagined sharing these sights with Shepard when they next melded and the thought made her warm in more ways than one. Her hand slid down her suit to her abdomen and she could have sworn she felt a movement within. So entranced with the sensation was she that it took her a moment to notice that she was drifting off the course she had set.

The Rachnid was rising before her eyes and she could just make out the airlock that was her destination. She keyed the thrusters again and after a momentary rise found that she was again drifting downward toward the planet below. She calmly began checking sensors and regulators for any sign of malfunction, although if there were she should have heard a warning tone. Now that she thought about it though, the air in her helmet did seem a bit warm. Oxygen levels read 20% and dropping. That couldn't be right, could it? A twinge of fear ran through her heart and limbs as her mind scrambled. If the air in her helmet was warm she wasn't getting much new flow, which meant a leak.
A leak outside the suit would provide thrust in the same way the release of pressured gas would from her jetpack, just in a random direction. That matched what she was seeing and meant she needed help. She pressed the red call button that would send an alert to all ships in the area and then opened comms.

"All ships, this is Liara T'Soni declaring an emergency. I have a malfunction in my EVA suit and oxygen is low. Please respond."

She watched the Oxygen counter drop to 15%. This was critical and there was still no response from anyone. Was the audio in her helmet also malfunctioning? She glanced up at the Rachnid and realized her vector was placing her in a dangerous place between the ship and the planet below. There may be no more discharges required but that didn't mean one couldn't occur on its own. She blasted the thrusters to hold her position as she called again, this time on all frequencies.

"This is Liara T'Soni! I need help! Please respond!"

She began to drift toward the planet again, albeit slower this time. As helpful as that might be, it also meant she was running out of air. If she didn't get to an airlock soon she'd be dead.

"Come on T'Soni, think."

If she maxed her jetpack she could reach the Rachnid but the velocity might splatter her across the hull. Still no response on comms. She had to start thinking about worst case scenario. If she ran out of oxygen...no don't panic now...hold it together...

She needed the air that was running out of her suit or she would asphyxiate. Liara quickly put up a biotic barrier around herself to catch what remained. Her gauge read 9%. That was not enough to pressurize the barrier. *Shut up, T'Soni, one problem at a time!* She had to stop her downward momentum. Okay. She crafted a singularity between her and the Rachnid and found herself stopping. It might not be permanent but it bought her some time.

The air in her helmet was becoming stifling and it was harder to breath. If she passed out she might survive for a time but would need to be recovered quickly. If she were recovered she would need the Normandy's medical bay and Dr. Chakwas. The other ships weren't properly equipped. If, if, if. That's all she had between her and oblivion.

She generated another singularity to hold her in place and checked to see what pressure remained in her jetpack. 40%. Good. Wait. 40% N. Nitrogen? It had to be. A plan came together quickly in her mind. If she was wrong she'd be dead but if she did nothing it wouldn't matter. She found herself gasping, every instinct telling her to rip the helmet off and breathe.

"Shepard. If anything in this suit works I hope you'll hear this. I love you. Goddess, I love you!"

She spun herself toward the Normandy and kicked on the thrusters at full speed. It took a long time for her momentum to pick up and she watched the PSI totals drop on the jetpack quickly. She'd have to time this perfectly. If she was correct the nitrogen would help pressurize the barrier so that she could remove her faceplate and breathe. It was a ridiculous risk and she'd never heard of it being done, but there was oxygen in the barrier now; almost ten percent of the total she had in her suit before it malfunctioned. It just had to be enough to keep her conscious. If she passed out before she reached the Normandy she would be unable to use Biotics to slow her approach, and that wouldn't end well.

She had no time to do the math on pressurization. Too far over or under the norms and she could still suffocate, suffer from decompression sickness, her eyes could…
Stop it! She thought she heard in Shepard's voice. *It's do or die time! Suck it up and do your job!*

The sight of the Normandy growing before her quickly became the most beautiful thing in the galaxy. Hard on the back of that thought was the realization that her vision was blurring and dark around the edges. She could wait no longer.

Her fingers fumbled with the seal on her helmet until she heard it pop.

Ashley ran to the bridge, alarms going off all over the ship, "EDI?! What's happening?"

"My sensors detected an unidentified incoming object on a collision course," her voice said smoothly through the walls as she ran, "Upon inspection I found it was Liara and she was in distress."

"Cortez! Get out there and bring her in!"

"That will not be necessary, Commodore," EDI intoned, "I have her in the airlock now and it is pressurizing. I would recommend that Dr. Chakwas prepare the medical bay. I will bring her there momentarily."

"On my way!" came Chakwas' distressed cry.

"Shit," Ashley swore, "Do you know what happened?"

"Unknown, Commodore. Upon inspection of her suit I see that her Oxygen levels have been depleted. We did not receive the automated notification or the standard location beacon so I assume there are other compromised systems."

When Ashley sped onto the bridge she was already shouting orders, "Joker, raise the Hephaestus."

"Way ahead of you, Commander...er Commodore. There's been some kind of incident."

"What kind of 'incident'?"

Joker looked at her as with concern etched on his features, "As far as I can tell we are into full blown hostage crisis territory."

Ashley's face drained of blood, "Cortez! Ready that shuttle for me! I need a squad of marines prepped asap!"

Tali watched Liara depart the Hephaestus and noticed a problem with her suit right away. The venting oxygen may as well have been a neon arrow. She tried to contact Liara through the intercom and tell her to come back for repairs, but her words were met with silence. She tried again in alarm, and was about to switch to internal comms when she felt the pistol against her helmet.

"Oh no you don't," came a low growl from behind her. He pinned her to the wall and checked her for weapons, "That bitch dies today, and unless you want to join her you'll stop squirming."

"What? Why do you want to kill Liara? She's harmless!" Tali squealed, stalling for time.
"Harmless? With Shepard's baby in her belly?! She's everything that's wrong with this galaxy. If you wanna keep drawing breath you'll keep quiet, too. You have no idea how many people I've got onboard and that's the price. You say anything you die. You try to leave this ship and you die. In fact, you do pretty much anything I don't much care for and you die."

"Just kill me then you little varren shit. Why spare me?"

"I might still kill you, moron. All you had to do was walk out of here and you would have made it. Why did you have to screw things up?"

"Do you think you'll actually get away with this?" Tali asked incredulously, "We're headed back into Alliance space!"

"No," he growled menacingly, "I don't. Some things are worth dying for but you alien scum wouldn't understand that."

His ignorance took her breath away, but she tried to remember the effect that same ignorance had on her people toward the Geth.

"Fine," she said, looking for an opening, "I won't say a word. Just let me go."

She could see the struggle on his face and knew there was no way he would do that, no matter what he said. Fortunately for her the passage door slid open, "Tali? I thought you said you were…" said another of the engineering crew who now saw the altercation, "What the...? Get off her!"

"Brad! Run!" Tali cried, "Tell someone, anyone! Liara's in trouble!"

Ryan's first instinct was to cover her mouth but the helmet neatly prevented that. He spun to pull Tali in between himself and the intruder and tapped her faceplate with the muzzle demonstrably, "Back off."

"Ryan! Let her go right now! I'm calling security!" He yelled then reached over to hit the alarm against the wall before ducking back into the hallway.

"Vedra!" Ryan yelled, pulling Tali to the corner of the room where she could provide the most cover, "You hear me?! Get down here and handle this shit. Don't think you're not going down with me if you don't!"

After a few minutes Vedra showed, but she wasn't alone. Both passageways on either side of the airlock opened and armed crewmembers filed inside, sights aimed at their target.

"What the hell is this, Ryan? Let her go," she said with as much authority as she could muster.

"I don't think so. Not 'till we come to an arrangement. Tell your guns to leave, or I pop her."

Vedra nodded to the others and they pulled back into the hallway, allowing the doors to shut.

"What are you thinking? There's no play here!" Vedra exclaimed once they were alone.

"She wasn't supposed to be here, Ved. You gotta help me out," he said desperately.

"What did you do?" She asked, her voice rising in volume.

"He sabotaged Liara's EVA gear is my guess," Tali said before he struck her head with the butt of his pistol.
"Not another word!" Ryan shouted as she slumped in his arms. While she wasn't seriously hurt her ears were ringing and her helmet might be damaged. She had to be more careful.

"Ryan, settle down, let's talk about this," Vedra said with a calm upraised hand.

"Oh now you wanna talk? That's rich. Listen, all we gotta do is space this one and make up a story. They'll believe you, you're the Captain."

"You think it's that simple?" Vedra asked incredulously, "Are you really that dumb? Besides, I don't want her dead. She's my friend!"

"Yeah? Well so am I and we go back a lot farther, right? It's time for you to make a choice, Captain," The last word was so full of sarcasm that Vedra took a step back, "Them or us."

That's when the opposite hatch slid open and the room filled with Marines and one angry Spectre. Her visage was stark as she aimed her own Assault rifle at his head,

"Stand down right the fuck now, soldier. That's an order."

"Fuck you, Sir," he said with venom.

"You know what's funny, Chatika?" Tali said softly and heard a soft buzzing from her Omni in return.

Ryan assumed the name was some kind of alien curse and pointed his pistol directly at her face both to threaten her and warn Ashley to back off, "What's that, shit pocket?"

"That you think this is my first rodeo. Get him girl!"

A blast of electricity arced up from the drone that had materialized at their feet and Ryan's entire body stiffened. Ashley wasted no time as Tali dropped, moving steadily forward to put two rounds in the engineer's head. His body seemed to stand on its own for a long second before it slumped back against the bulkhead and they heard Vedra screaming in response.

"Nooooo! Ryan nooooooo!" She voiced as she ran forward to cover him. "Oh God noooo," she sobbed before turning a hateful look on Ashley, "He was stunned, you could have taken him into custody! Why? Why did you have to kill him?"

Ashley lowered her rifle and returned that fiery gaze with one filled with ice, "That man just tried to kill two members of my crew, Captain. I don't have time for this shit."

Williams looked to the Marines around her and pointed at Vedra. "Take her into custody. Vedra Tanner, you are relieved of your command pending a formal investigation. Admiral Zorah, you are now in command of this vessel until we determine if there are any further threats among the crew."

Tali stood up and recalled her drone, her voice grim, "Were you able to get to Liara?"

Ashley nodded but said nothing.

"How is she?" Tali asked.

Ashley's eyes were haunted and she shook her head slowly, "I don't know."
Godspeed

For the first time in what felt like a very long time Shepard relaxed. Upon her arrival at Tevos' rooms she found a late dinner prepared by Asari chefs, served in courses peppered with patient cultural lessons from the Councilor herself. When Shepard surprised Tevos with a few words in her own language, remnants of what she retained from her earlier inundation, the Asari was all smiles.

Shepard could see quiet delight sparkle in her eyes while speaking about her people and it was a rare pleasure to see her relaxed and entirely social. Gone were the barriers between two players of the game, replaced by a warm respect and mutual eagerness for understanding. While they had always worked together when possible and butted heads only when it couldn't be avoided, this was the first time Shepard actually saw the woman as a friend; so when a seemingly inevitable emergency arose in the form of a disturbance from Tevos' assistant they shared a look of veiled disappointment.

Quickly on the aide's heels came Zhuang, full of apologies.

"Shepard, I did not wish to disturb you but you have a visitor. A very insistent visitor. He says it is imperative that you meet with him right now."

"Who is it?" She asked, rising from her seat and putting aside her napkin.

"It is a Turian on your list of those from whom you should hear immediately. Garrus Vakarian?"

She and Tevos shared another look, then Tevos nodded to her associate, "Bring him inside."

Despite the august company the two embraced, patting one another's back roughly, "Damn, it's good to see you Garrus. I've been meaning to reach out."

"Don't be ridiculous," came the reply, "I've seen you plastered all over the vids. Catch the bad guys, then we'll go paint the town red."

Shepard nodded and pulled back to look at one of her truest friends. He had a few more scars, she saw, but many of them did, "You may ah…..you may want to sit down for this."

Shepard's eyes narrowed, "Just give it to me."

Garrus looked like he'd rather be anywhere else but here and that was alarming. She found herself hardening against the news, adrenaline flowing and her thoughts quickening instinctively. "It's Liara," he said miserably, "There's been an accident."

Just like that her legs were cut from beneath her. The adrenaline continued to hammer her brain, but it twisted into fear instead of courage, her thoughts spinning out of control as she broke into a sweat. The look on her face must have been obvious because Garrus took hold of her upper arms to steady her.

"Tali contacted me about an hour ago and I took the first shuttle," he said tenderly, "She was…"

"Was?" Shepard exclaimed before Garrus could continue.

"She's alive, Shepard, she's alive!" he assured her quickly, "She was returning to the Rachni ship
when there was a problem with her suit. She made it back to the Normandy but...she...

It was Shepard's turn to grab the Turian's arms and her grip was not a comfortable one, "But what?"

"She's hurt bad. Decompression."

Shepard let go of him abruptly, eyes wide, and this time Tevos braced her with a hand upon her shoulder. The Councilor's eyes slid to her assistant and with a nod she began motioning all of the attendants in the room toward the door. They followed respectfully and when the door closed Garrus helped Tevos guide a numb Shepard back to her seat.

"Listen to me," he said soothingly, "She's going to be fine. Karin is on the job and they got her into the medbay real quick. It will take some time but she's going to heal."

"Then what aren't you telling me?" Shepard asked, staring into his avian gaze, "Is it the baby?"

Garrus' mandibles worked and he grabbed her hands, working up the courage to say the words, "She's gone, Shepard. It was too much for her."

Shepard's head turned...she couldn't look at them. Her mind started searching for reasons, unwilling to surrender to the looming loss behind her eyes, "What happened? Why was she even in EVA?"

"They're on tight fuel restrictions. They have three ships they need to get to Arcturus and had to split the fuel between them," Garrus explained, "If anyone wanted to change ships they had to use suits and thrusters. Liara had just spent the day with Tali, she said."

Shepard nodded, recalling Liara's last message, "Yeah, okay, that's right. She told me."

Tevos murmured softly to Shepard and she dimly recognized some of the smooth Asari tongue. She spoke of the Goddess and purpose and knowledge and all that sort of drivel. Purpose? What purpose was there for this? Shepard thought, her jaw tightening visibly. "I...need to talk to Chakwas," Shepard managed to get out.

"Councilor," Garrus said formally, "I'll take her back to her quarters if that's alright with you."

Tevos simply nodded, grief in her eyes, and allowed Garrus to help his friend to her feet, "Be at peace, Shepard. Liara lives and the future still beckons."

Shepard pulled her hand from the armor on Garrus' shoulder and straightened her clothes in an attempt to gather herself before walking from the room under her own power. Garrus followed behind trying his best not to look like a mother hen.

Zhuang stood by Shepard's door down the hall with a cowed expression when they approached. Shepard simply nodded to him as she passed and said, "Please cancel my appointments tomorrow."

"Of course," he said softly, "Please contact me if you need anything at all."

Once inside, Garrus closed the door behind him and watched her where she stood listlessly in the middle of the room. He studied her quietly, respecting her space, and simply folded his hands, waiting for her to absorb the news at her own pace. A detached part of her was thankful for him delivering the message personally while another selfishly wished to be alone. It was as if she were dreaming, perhaps since the blast of the crucible washed over her, except this wouldn't be a dream, would it? More like her own personal hell, an everlasting torment to be teased with everything within reach only to have it rot from within.
All of their conversations came back to her then, like whispers on the wind. All their hopes...their plans to raise a family ripped apart like paste jewelry, colored glass scattering on the floor. Still, Liara lived, and Shepard would waste no more time feeling sorry for herself; not until they could share the grief between them. Finally she returned to herself and sent an Omni message to Tali, Ashley and Chakwas requesting an update. Only then did she drop into a chair in the corner and wave Garrus over to join her.

"How have you been?" She asked, her face ashen.

"We don't have to talk about me. That's not what this is about," he said tenderly.

Shepard's chest lifted in a silent chuckle, "Actually I'd like to talk about anything else we can until I get the details. You mind?"

"Not at all. You know me, I can talk to a wall and have a good time," he replied with his version of a grin.

Shepard smiled, albeit wanly.

"They're wanting me make me the Primarch of the Euler system once things settle down. Can you believe it? Me? A Primarch?"

"Can't imagine anyone better for a colony this close to Earth. You've watched so many movies you may know more about our culture than some of us," she replied automatically.

He knew she meant it sincerely nonetheless and continued on in the same fashion, "Hard to really classify Euler as a colony system though; what with the Humans, and the Quarians, and the Geth that will be living there and all. I figure it's just a test run to see if I start an accidental war in someone else's back yard."

"Yeah," Shepard mused, "Speaking of war, I actually I had a question for you but just never had the time to ask."

"Name it," he said with grave earnest.

"We're almost done with our investigation but the Turian representative to the team has hardly said a word. He delivers on every ask but that's about it. I thought you guys would be all over this. Can you shine any light?"

"Yeah," Garrus said pensively, "I can, actually. It was a favor for Jacob. He wanted us to keep an open mind, so I put in a good word. Don't worry, our guy was relaying everything back to command as you can imagine. We just wanted to see where you went with it. We have no complaints or you would have heard them."

Shepard's face softened infinitesimally, "Thanks for the vote of confidence. I don't think you know how much that means to me right now."

Garrus smiled, "Well just point me to anyone bad mouthing you and I'll sock 'em in the kisser."

Shepard's smile grew by a fraction of an inch and Garrus reached over to put his hand on hers. She looked at her fingers and his talons intertwined on the arm of the chair and then up to his face.

"I sure have missed having you around," she admitted.

"Likewise. Listen, I've taken some time off so no matter what happens, I'll be here. Okay?"
Shepard nodded and squeezed his hand, her eyes beginning to brim before drops fell to her lap; she may have managed not to make a sound, yet, but there was nothing she could do about those.

Decompression ranked pretty high on her list of nightmares. That tended to happen when something killed you. Your soul remembers. Your cells remember. She couldn't help but picture Liara there instead of her, grasping for an air leak she had no hope of containing, feeling the breath stolen from her lungs, and that first touch of the void on her flesh, a cold so absolute it burned like the lick of flame. She saw Liara's face in agony and was consumed by grief. Grief and shame that she had allowed this to happen, that she had allowed Liara to risk performing an EVA; but who was she to command her? Wasn't she putting her at an even greater risk now? What a hypocrite she was!

Shepard put a trembling hand over her mouth and Garrus held onto the other tightly.

"My daughter..." she whispered, her voice cracking. She never even knew her but had loved her just the same. She had her pictured in her head from the first moment she knew of her existence; her Mother's nose and lips, Shepard's green eyes. Their child had sprung from the bleakest moment in their shared history and represented everything new and bright that would grow from it. She was hope even above the hope to which they had tenaciously clung, a vision of what could be...and now she was gone. "I wanted to name her Benezia," she said roughly, her heart tearing in two. "I wanted her to..." She paused. She needed to get a hold on herself. She was losing it and didn't even have all the facts yet.

Shepard stood abruptly and pulled her hand free, then moved to a cabinet and opened it, withdrawing an old looking bottle and then two glasses before settling back in her chair. She gazed at the label fondly for a moment only before cracking the seal and pouring two generous fingers into each highball. She sniffed and rubbed the tears from her face before holding up her glass to the Turian who then mimicked her.

"To my daughter and to her beautiful mother. Gods speed to them both, though their paths have parted," she said somberly before filling her mouth with the liquor. She hadn't had a drop to drink since before the Crucible and savored the burn of it down her throat.

Garrus followed suit, then asked, "What is this stuff?"

Shepard sat down her glass when her Omni chimed, "It's the most expensive whiskey in the galaxy Vakarian, so drink it slow." She stood again before she even started reading Ashley's message. There was no way she could sit still for this.

Shepard,

Dr. Chakwas is with her and I told Tali I'd keep you updated while she stays at her side. She's in serious condition but Karin says she'll pull through. She's still unconscious so we don't have the full story, but EDI reported that once Liara realized there was a problem she came straight for the Normandy, using a barrier to hold in enough of an atmosphere to keep herself alive. I don't know how that is even possible, but the Doctor says that the pressure inside wasn't high enough, so when she took off her helmet she started suffering from the bends. EDI says Liara managed to slow herself down and come into the airlock as soon as it opened but lost consciousness before the pressurization could complete.

Now, while we can usually survive that kind of thing, especially with immediate care, the baby wasn't as fortunate. Karin says that the bubbles that formed from the decompression bypassed her lungs and travelled directly into her brain. Karin told me to tell you that even if she had survived, the treatment itself may still have killed her. There was really nothing they could do. All I can say for all of us here is how sorry we are for your loss.
I know you must be asking yourself all kinds of questions about what could have been done to prevent this from happening, and I'd like to start by saying that we met all the safety regulations for the EVA's that were cleared; that wasn't the problem. This is going to be hard for you to hear but you need to know. This wasn't an accident, Shepard. Shortly after we were made aware of Liara's situation we received a distress call from the Hephaestus...

Garrus interrupted her pacing as he watched her expression evolve from sorrow to disbelief and finally anger, "Shepard, what is it?"

Shepard held up a hand while she finished reading about Ryan and Vedra and their shared contact that was believed to be in Terra Firma. She read about the coded messages that Ashley was now making sense of, and that Ryan had received one final message he never had the chance to read. Ashley believed it told him to cancel his plans to kill Liara. It said that the accident was no longer necessary because 'mama bear' was looking the other way, and Shepard knew immediately what that meant. Once they realized that the blame for the data theft was shifting away from their organization they decided it would be imprudent to provoke her, and that, she thought as her teeth ground, qualified as the understatement of the year.

The knowledge about her progress in the investigation also proved Barnes was in contact with whoever sent these messages. She typed out a response to Ashley advising her of the secrecy surrounding these events and that she would explain everything to her as soon as she could. She then sat down heavily, retrieved her glass and took another healthy swallow before calling Zhuang, who answered with an appropriately somber tone.

"Have you cancelled all my meetings yet?"

"Not yet," he replied, "I was attempting to find rescheduling options. Why?"

"Good. Don't cancel my team meeting. It needs to happen right on time."

Zhuang's voice was confused but to his credit he didn't argue, "As you wish."

Garrus sipped the whiskey calmly after she disconnected, "You wanna tell me what's going on?"

Shepard just stared at him thoughtfully and tried to stay calm, "More than anything, but I can't."

"Lemme guess," he offered, seeing right through her, "You need to break a lot of rules, cause some serious damage and put everyone's life around you at risk. I'm in."

"I see we've met," came her wry reply, "You sure you don't wanna just head back to the fleet while your accommodations are a step above an 8X8 cell?"

Garrus snorted, "Cells don't scare me, Shepard. Whatever scares you scares me." He sat up in his chair and finished his drink, then looked at her with his steady blue eyes, "You need me? I'm here. You don't ever have to ask."

Shepard's heart swelled at his loyalty; he was her rock in a stormy sea. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, "I'd warn you that Tali might be targeted if we did this but I'm afraid she already has been." She looked at him curiously, "What exactly did she tell you?"

"Just that one of her friend's friends flipped out and Ashley sent him to the next world. She knows something is going on but I don't think she has the whole picture."

"Yeah," she said quietly before her eyes widened with the realization that the Shadow Broker was out of action and her subordinates had no idea, "Shit. I need to talk to Miranda." She stood up and
went to the bathroom to wash her face. "Come on, I'll explain as we go."

When Liara woke everything hurt, her lungs most of all. She took a few careful breaths through the mask resting lightly on her face and looked around the room.

Dr. Chakwas smiled and put a hand over hers tenderly, "There you are, my dear. Take it slowly. We're here."

Tali's gentle voice came from her other side and she turned to regard its source, "Hey, you. I know you want to be famous but somehow I don't think flying around space without a suit is the way to prove something."

She smiled at Tali's joking tone before she quite recalled what the Quarian was talking about. She remembered the pop of the helmet's seal and that first desperate breath of air so cold it burned. She remembered wondering if it was air at all when her body started to shudder and shake, and she remembered gritting her teeth together long enough to generate a field to slow her descent toward the airlock. The rest was shadow and pain.

She had survived. The plan had been ridiculous, the odds….Her body started shaking again but she realized it was from her laughter. It hurt, but she didn't care; her relief and amazement simply boiling over until she realized Tali had joined her in that mirth, gripping her other hand as she laughed, but looking at Karin oddly.

"It's a symptom of decompression. It will pass," said the Doctor, "Vertigo, nausea, euphoria, it's a bit like a night on the town except for the painful bits. Her body is simply reabsorbing the nitrogen."

Then Karin looked back down into Liara's eyes, "You know where you are, darling?"

Liara nodded and swallowed so she could form a single word, "Shepard?"

Karin smiled sweetly, "Shepard is fine and so are you. She told me to tell you to get some rest, alright? She'll see you soon."

Liara nodded, relaxing, and Dr. Chakwas made an adjustment to some equipment beside her. She began to feel warm and sleepy and let herself slip into that comfort, away from the burning of her skin and joints.

When her breathing had evened out Karin looked pointedly at Tali, "We'll tell her everything when she's herself. There's no point in confusing the poor girl right now. Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes please," Tali answered politely, "I'm not leaving until she tells me she's okay."

Williams nodded to the Marine guarding the brig and he opened the door for her to step inside. Her eyes were immediately drawn to Vedra, who sat in her cell with a mixture of vulnerability and stubbornness on her face.

Ashley sent the guards out so they could talk privately and waited until the door was closed before
pressing down the intercom to speak, "Vedra. What the…"

Vedra was off her chair and banging into the plexiglass before she could get the words out, "You killed him! How could you do that!"

Ashley's eyes narrowed in confusion, "Are you serious? He almost killed one of my people and was threatening a second. What did you want me to do, bring him some fucking tea?"

"He had no choice! They were going to kill his wife! Tali disabled him but you killed him anyway!"

"Oh really?" Ashley returned with vigor, "And we all knew about the poor guy's circumstances because you've been so forthcoming about the god-damned plot to kill my Asari. Right?" That shut her up, and Ashley wasn't done, "We've seen the messages, Ved. We know everything." Now she just wanted to watch, and she wasn't disappointed. Guilt and fear wrote their names on Vedra's face while Ashley waited patiently.

"I tried to talk them out of it," she eventually protested, "I tried to tell him to ignore them, but he wouldn't."

"Ignore who?" Ashley asked. Then, when she said nothing, "I need a name, Ved."

She shook her head immediately, "I can't...I can't.."

"What do they have on you? Talk to me. I can help!"

"How can you possibly help me?" she cried, eyes hard with disbelief, "They're all over the place!" Whatever hold Terra Firma had on her must have been important; she needed to be handled carefully if Ashley wanted her cooperation.

"Tali was right," Ashley lied, "You don't know what a Spectre is, do you?"

"Of course I do," She replied sulkily, looking in fact like she had no idea.

Ashley began to explain slowly, "Listen, Spectres are empowered by the Galactic Council to investigate and handle threats against the Galaxy that are too important to wait for normal bureaucratic processes. Shepard was the Vanguard against the Reapers when no one else listened because she was empowered to do whatever it took to guard us against them. Does that make sense?"

"So?" Vedra retorted defensively.

"So, when I say 'empowered' that means I can do a lot of things, some that might not normally even be considered legal, just as long as I believe it's critical to the task. What Ryan did and what this phoenix guy told you to do is interfering with a mission deemed critical to the survival of the galaxy. I can't have this continue, Ved, and I'll tell you something else. I already know who's at fault, I just don't have proof. You can give that to me. You and only you can free my hands against this person and everyone they call friends to make sure this never happens to anyone ever again." She paused, waiting while it sunk in, "I know you tried to stop it. We have that in writing. You were coerced, right?" There it was, a look of doubt in her brown eyes. "Tali told me that you argued with Ryan for her sake. You never wanted any part of this, did you?"

When she still refused to answer, Williams sweetened the pot, "Cooperate with me and I'll reinstate you, alright? I need your skills in Arcturus, Ved. We all do. You are a skilled engineer and a worthy officer. Help me and I'll help you. Don't you wanna save the world?"
When Vedra put her face in her hands she knew she had her. She nodded, tears beginning to spill down her face, "His name is Charles. Charles Saracino."

"Thank you!" Ashley exclaimed and pulled up a stool. "Let's start at the beginning, okay? When did you first meet him?"

"Okay," she said, sniffing as she went back through her memories, "I met him at a benefit for orphans when I was really young. I don't remember much except that we were supposed to make him some fancy cards to thank him for getting us placed. That's when I moved in down the street from you, with my foster parents..."

"I have completed my analysis, Commodore. After studying the messages sent to and received from the user Phoenix13 I have gained a better understanding of synonym, allegory and metaphor. Using improved algorithms I analyzed the remainder of the stored messages for similar threats and found none. There were a few about which I would prefer some clarification and I've sent them for your review."

"Thanks, EDI. I'll take a look," Ashley said, putting the final touches on her own message. Shepard had instructed her to keep the matter quiet, not sit on her hands, and Vedra's words had put the final pieces into place. Saracino had taken the girl under his wing along with who knows how many vulnerable children who were in a position to need things. He then used those favors to leverage more from them until he had them either so indebted they couldn't pay or they were in trouble with law and depended on Saracino's silence for their freedom. This appeared to be common practice throughout the party, a tactic brought into play by Saracino himself once their apocalyptic warnings began to fall on deaf ears. Woven through it all was a healthy dose of 'mentoring', rife with TF's isolationist policies. Building a network like the one Terra Firma was flexing was no small feat, but Ashley suspected that the loss of their leadership would free a host of people from entanglements they never wanted in the first place.

Not for the first time Ashley wished she were back home so she could serve the political leader a cold slice of vengeance, but she took comfort in the fact that Shepard would deliver it for her. She almost felt sorry for the bastard as she hit send.

Vedra had cooperated fully, would be prepared to testify if needed, and had been sworn to secrecy. The official story was that Ryan suffered a mental break and was a tragic loss on a heretofore flawless mission. Between Vedra's testimony and EDI's somewhat guilty burst of industriousness Ashley was certain there were no other conspirators on board, so they were clear to move forward. They needed Vedra's skills in Arcturus, not in the brig, that part wasn't a fabrication; and Ashley made up her mind to give the engineer another chance. She was sure Tali wouldn't be too upset to give up that vaunted seat on the Hephaestus, especially since she hadn't managed put her ass in it, yet.

Now if only Shepard would reply and assuage her curiosity about why she had been interested in Terra Firma in the first place. She felt some serious trepidation, disturbing the woman's grief, but Shepard knew better than anyone that if Saracino wasn't stopped this wouldn't be the last of it. Not much else she could do from out here but care for her people and get them ready for the next jump. First, though, she'd check on Liara.
Miranda hissed mid-sentence, the prick of the needle seeming to jab right into a nerve.

"Oh shut up you big baby," Jack growled, brow furrowed in concentration as she inked another dark line on the creamy skin of Miranda's forearm.

"Why the inside of the arm?" she asked with a grimace.

"Because you told me you wanted one like mine. Deal with it," she replied caustically, then paused at Miranda's glare and sighed melodramatically. "The inside of the arm is where you go to off yourself, right?" she explained before rolling her eyes at the sudden concern in Miranda's face, "Point is that when life sucked you were there to make it...less...suck." She made a face at her own lame words. Talking about this shit seemed ridiculous but Miranda seemed to get off on it. She waved the ink gun at her in a circular motion, "You were saying?"

Miranda's eyes softened at her explanation, "That's actually quite clever."

"You were saying?" Jack emphasized as she bent close to her work.

"I was saying I just can't figure it out. I've looked into a number of possibilities but she shouldn't be able to function on the level of sleep she's getting."

"Yeah," Jack said distractedly, "She always seemed to want to talk to me in the middle of the night. Stalker was probably watching me sleep, too."

Miranda grit her teeth through another line as she spoke, "That's what you get for choosing a room without a door. Anyway, I thought it might be something after Lazarus, something with the rebuild... but I was wrong."

"And here I thought you knew everything," Jack prodded.

"Not when it comes to this science," Miranda admitted, "But, in my defense, I don't think anyone really knows the implications of the work we've done here."

"Implications equals bad, right? You're fixing people. What's the problem?"

"Well, it's much more than that. Now that we can replace just about every organ and limb what does it say about the future of life? It's called figurative immortality. If you have enough resources and can avoid damage or disease of the brain you could live for a very long time...

Jack paused again, stunned, "Wait, Shep is gonna live forever?"

Miranda chuckled, "Not likely. She can still be killed, especially the way she lives. The point is that life up to now has essentially been defined by death. No matter how good or bad you are, your impact on the rest of humanity is limited by your lifespan. Imagine a world where only the most powerful and affluent can afford to live for thousands of years. Now imagine what that means when you apply it to the most long lived races in the galaxy."

"Like the Krogan?"

"The Krogan are a prime example, yes. Their birthrate now that the Genophage has been lifted will be astronomical. They normally live to an average of a thousand years, but imagine if that were
increased tenfold? What does that mean for galactic resources? It means that eventually there will be wars for them unless birth rates are drastically reduced. Now, how do you think the Krogan would react to such a proposal, given recent events?"

"They'd be pissed," Jack said thoughtfully.

Miranda nodded, "Now consider what might happen if the nanotechnology that is in your own blood or anyone who has these treatments or prosthetics has a child. What happens in utero? How are newborns affected by technology that can repair any and all cellular degradation?"

Jack was at a loss and it showed on her face.

"And then, imagine what happens when we can finally replace the brain. The Geth are already working on that eventuality. At that point are we even human anymore?" Jack's dark eyes looked at her own arm as if it were foreign, and Miranda grinned crookedly in response, "All our lives have changed forever and no one realizes it yet. I had a part in that, for good or ill."

"God damn, Princess. They'll know your name at the end of days," Jack said with a touch of awe and a more than a wee bit of sarcasm.

"Wouldn't my father be proud," Miranda said with the briefest drop of her gaze before looking at her sincerely, "I need to ask you a question, alright?"

Jack nodded quickly before focusing on a particularly challenging sweep of ink along the Martlet's tail.

"Listen," she said, tilting her head so that she could see Jack's full face, "I want to confide in you with things like this. Perhaps topics that, if revealed to the public without careful consideration, could cause a lot of problems in the world. I trust you, Jack, but it's not a good idea to mention things we talk about to other people. Can I count on you to keep my confidence?"

Jack's look hardened as she wondered whether or not she should be insulted, but there was a knock at the door before she could answer, "Really? Doesn't anyone ever call first?"

Miranda stood and caressed Jack's face with her hand, "I need an answer," she said softly.

Jack looked up at her with narrowed eyes, "Not sure what you're asking." The knock came again, more insistent this time. She watched Miranda's eyes glance away to the door before the woman began to pull away. A feeling in her gut spooked her and she grabbed Miranda's hand before she could go, pulled her until their eyes met, "I'm no snitch, Miri, and I sure as hell ain't a social butterfly. I'd never do that to you. Okay?"

"Even if we split up down the line?" Miranda asked, her blue eyes piercing.

"What the….?" Jack responded, then stood and shouted at the door when the knocking continued, "Hey can you shut the fuck up? She's coming!" Jack looked back at her lover with the feeling there was a lot going on she didn't know about, which made her angry. At the same time this felt different. It felt important, and she wanted the trust that was being offered, "You wanna tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Yes, I do," she said, "But this can get me killed. You can get me killed."

Jack tilted her head and clenched her jaw, "Dammit, Lawson! You can't just spring this shit on me!" She immediately regretted that non-answer when she saw the veiled hurt in Miranda's expression.
"I understand," she said in a low voice that betrayed the lie, "Would you mind getting us both something to eat then? If it's Shepard this shouldn't take too long."

"Wait a minute. You got something going on with Shepard? And you think I'm gonna run my mouth about it? Who do you think I am?"

Miranda smiled, but it was all ice, "Well that was a quick answer. If it's Shepard you're willing to dive in, but not for me?" She turned and headed to the door.

Jack realized how that might have sounded. "Aww..sh.." She ran her fingernails sharply back and forth over her scalp in frustration, "Come on. That's not what I meant."

Lawson turned and just arched an eyebrow at her challengingly before palming the panel. The look on Shepard's face outside the door, eyes red rimmed, tabled any further discussion.

"We've got a problem," she said simply before pushing past Miranda. Behind her came the lumbering form of Garrus in his armor.

"Garrus, good to see you," Miranda said, waving him inside.

"Hey Big Blue," Jack said, taking her seat back. Miranda's silent objection was written plain, but Jack just echoed the arch of her brow in response. After a moment, she relented and closed the door.

Garrus nodded to Jack, "You're looking good. Especially after what I heard."

"Miracle of modern medicine," Jack sneered.

Shepard just looked at the pair for a long moment before focusing on Miranda, "Is she in?"

"You'll have to ask her."

Jack put a stop to that nonsense right away, "Oh will the both of you kiss my ass? I don't know what you're into but I'm not saying a god damned word to anyone."

"What's the matter?" Miranda asked, drawn to the Spectre's puffy eyes, "You look upset."

"Liara's out of play. Terra Firma tried to assassinate her."

Miranda's eyes widened, "Assassinate? Do they know? How did this happen?"

Shepard shook her head, "I don't know yet. Ashley said it'd been in the works for awhile and has proof it was Terra Firma, though. It could have been straightforward hate, but it could have been to intimidate me, too."

Miranda's eyes turned inward as she thought, "If they have that kind of reach….that's troubling. Is she alright?"

"She'll recover," Shepard said before pausing to control her emotions, "But the baby is gone."

"Oh no," Miranda said tenderly, her arms crossing to rub her upper arms as if she felt the injury herself, "I am so, so sorry."

After a long, painful moment of silence Jack took a different tact, "So..we're gonna go kill them all then, right?"

"Yeah," Shepard replied in a voice soft but deep as distant thunder, "That's the plan. Miri, you've got
to keep working with Feron in the meantime. I don't know when Liara will be back."

"Leave that to me," she answered gravely, "I can handle it. I'll contact Doctor Chakwas for updates."

"Great," Jack said with the enthusiasm of the insanely bored, "When do we leave?"

"I'll find out tomorrow," Shepard replied before looking between Garrus and a Jack nearly buzzing with unspent energy, "Garrus, you suppose Jack might be of some help?"

"Hmm," the Turian breathed, "She's one of the scariest humans I know; should be fun at a minimum."

Jack grinned wickedly and cracked her knuckles, "I'm liking this plan already."

"So, in conclusion, I wanted to thank each and every one of you for your tireless efforts in the pursuit of justice. You've done much more than you imagined; you've helped keep the peace," the Spectre said from her podium. "Now it's time for me to do my job, and let you return to your people. I will use all the tools at my disposal to make the Shadow Broker answer for this crime, and return the data to the galactic races where it belongs."

Applause filled the room as she finished and Daniel smiled from where he stood, clapping his hands politely. Everything he ever heard about the woman had proven true. The Spectre was even more formidable in person and he knew some very strong women in his line of work. Some of them shared her intense regard, some her boundless energy and some of them her relentless intellect; from what he knew of the woman's confirmed kills, however, none matched her capacity for violence. For a few moments during their daily meetings he could almost feel her focus turning to him not as an associate, but a suspect; her hawkish gaze pinning him as neatly as a rabbit in a field. It scared him unlike anything he had ever experienced, and he thanked whatever gods watched over him that she had been so neatly diverted.

While the idea of this paragon choosing to procreate with another species made his skin crawl as much as the rest of his Terra Firma brethren, none of them had to step within five feet of her. None of them had to feel the discomfort of her full attention or deal with the potential aftermath of her lover's demise. Sending the message to call off that attempt had been one of the most frantic moments of his life. This was the person who had stared down the Reapers without a flinch; the farther away from her Daniel was the happier he would be.

All that remained was to shake her hand and feel the weight of her presence once more before he was finished. The worst was over; time to say goodbye. He mingled with the rest until she was before him, smiling confidently. He forced himself to meet that look as an equal and congratulate her on a job well done.

"Likewise, Daniel," she said sincerely, "Your pursuit of the facts in this case was critical to upholding the reputation of Earth amongst her peers. I wouldn't have gotten far without you here."

"That's not true," Daniel chuckled, "Your leadership is all that was needed."

Shepard smiled again, though it didn't quite make it to her eyes, "Nevertheless, I hope our paths cross again. You're a pretty useful guy to have around."

"Until next time, then," He said with finality.
"Yep," Shepard said, turning to the next person craving a word.

Daniel excused himself without further ado, taking a deep breath once he was outside of the room. Time to get out of here; time to travel to his temporary new home and reap the rewards of more than a decade of work. He could barely contain his excitement. The birds were singing outside the facility and the puffed clouds rolled by at a leisurely pace. He waved off the shuttle that waited for him, electing to walk his final mile instead. He'd miss Earth, but that was something he'd already gotten comfortable with. When he returned he'd be a wealthy, powerful man who could effect real change on human culture, and he was determined to set that path straight.

Dan nodded and smiled to the guards on duty at the spaceport and whistled a tune while making his way to where his ship was parked. She was a sleek consumer commuter, the top of the line five years ago. It had cost him a fortune but having a ship capable of interstellar travel belong to a humble civil servant was a statement that couldn't be ignored. Daniel Barnes was a man to be feared, and not only by his enemies.

He was palming the door when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, a large fully armored Turian approaching from the shadows of the tunnel to the next terminal.

"Say," the Turian said in their species' strange dual-toned voice, "That's a nice ride."

Barnes could barely disguise his distaste. He wasn't sure what a Turian was doing here but he sure as hell didn't have to play host. "Yes, it is," he said noncommittally. The intruder kept on coming and he turned to face the alien head-on, "Not in the mood for a conversation."

"Oh good," the scarred visage replied, "Either am I. Let's take her for a spin, shall we?"

Daniel's eyes furrowed and he snorted, "You must be out of your mind, Turian. Don't make me call security."

"Something tells me they won't get here in time, human," he said as his height began to tower over him.

"Do you know who I am? I'm Chief Investigator Daniel Barnes with the Alliance Bureau," he growled, pulling a pistol, "Now back off and kneel with your hands behind your head!"

A wall of concrete hit him from his right side, or at least that's what it felt like. He spun from the impact, forehead crashing into the frame of the craft's door, bouncing him backward to fall on his back and the pistol away to skitter on the ground. He looked up at the Turian who was backing away with an odd expression, but the alien wasn't looking at him.

When Daniel followed his gaze he beheld a human woman limned in blue light. She had a snarl on her face and eyes black as pitch, hands relaxing from where it appeared she had pushed him despite being several feet away. Her body was covered in tattoos and he tried to take note of them for later identification, but she spoke in a smokey voice that interrupted his dazed thought process.

"Hi Dan, nice to meet you," it said, though the smoldering hate in her tone negated any politeness in the words. Instead she gestured and he felt himself lifting into midair, his back slamming against the hull as she kicked his pistol over to the Turian. "Do pretty much fucking anything and I'll smear your brains across that pretty little ship. You get me?"

He couldn't do much but nod with the breath crushed from his lungs. He heard the Turian say over his Omni, "The package has been intercepted. Will see you at the rendezvous," before he moved forward to grab him by the lapels and drag him to an interior seat. The woman with the dark
mohawk and strange dress entered and closed the door behind them, then took a seat across from him with spread legs, a pose which would have tantalized him under normal circumstances. The Turian searched him quickly and removed several items before binding his hands, then moved forward to pilot the ship while the human watched him eagerly.

"Who...are you?" he risked asking once he was able.

"Not your business, jerkoff," she replied as she settled, "Don't worry, this'll be a short trip."

When he kept looking at her in an attempt to burn her image into his brain she leapt up and leaned down to whisper to him intimately, "You keep eyeballing me I might just have to kiss you. Whattaya say, you wanna play?" Before his body could respond to the suggestion a crack of what sounded like electricity by his ear made him jump, his periphery suddenly cerulean. He quickly decided the floor looked much more interesting and she withdrew, black smile gone and the playful look in her eyes replaced with a promise of pain. "Good boy," she growled before unfolding into her chair once more.

Dan was beginning to think she might be psychotic; she certainly displayed the signs. He withdrew into himself passively and tried to think of any way to get word to his allies rather than risk her wrath. Who had he angered? Were they mercs? His mind started whirling through past cases and likely adversaries but he kept his expression calm in the hopes of engendering the same in his captors.

He could feel the subtle shift to artificial gravity and realized they had moved into orbit, which made him wonder just where they were going. A few moments later his question was answered.

"Citadel control, this is the..." the Turian paused as he looked up the name, "Uboko requesting permission to dock at pad E105."

It took a moment for them to respond but then, "Permission granted, Uboko. Mind the construction, there may be debris."

"Understood control, Uboko out."

The Citadel? He was completely confused. The woman in leather crafted to expose long stretches of darkly patterned skin just watched him as if hoping he'd give her an excuse. He didn't, hoping instead that Alliance control would notice the departure from his logged flight path. Maybe they'd send someone to take a look; after all, who wanted to go to the Citadel? It was a floating wreck in space.

When he was pushed out of his own ship he looked around for someone that might see him. Someone he could signal somehow...but the docking bay was desolate.

The Turian aimed his own pistol at him, "Start walking, down the hall."

After about a hundred feet or so the Turian told him to stop, then nodded toward a room with a green junction panel. It was malfunctioning, the color flickering and sometimes briefly turning red, but the leather clad psycho activated it without issue and walked inside.

This had been somebody's office once. There was a nice couch and table, a dusty desk with chairs on both sides, and a great view of the Citadel proper through the window. Dan could see the arms when he looked up and it was impressive despite the damage, one of the arms ever so slightly askew. He'd never been to the Citadel before today but this certainly wasn't the way he'd hoped to take a tour.
"Make yourself comfortable," the alien said while gesturing at one of the chairs, "We'll be here awhile."

His kidnappers stood by the door, no doubt to prevent any attempt to leave. Beyond that, though, they seemed to ignore him. His face ached and his lip was swollen from his impact with the ship.

"You suppose you could at least untie me?" he asked before taking a seat.

The Turian's flat blue eyes considered him, "What I'd like is for you to just sit down and stay calm. If I untie you, you might try something foolish and I think we've had enough violence today. Capiche?"

The woman snorted, "Did you just say Capiche? Wow."

"What, did I say it wrong or something?"

"Nope, you said it just right," she said, chuckling, "Dork."

He noted their familiarity; if they were mercs, they had worked together before. "Alright, how about just telling me who hired you?" he asked since they appeared to be civil for the moment. That earned him a baleful look from them both before they returned to their conversation.

"So I'm a dork because I'm trying to blend into your culture, is that what you're saying? I'd have thought you'd appreciate the effort," the Turian continued, though he didn't really seem offended, "Dan, what do you think?"

He was taken aback by the question but was marginally encouraged they were treating him as a participant rather than an adversary, "I uh...well, you could do worse things, I guess."

"Yeah, he could break into some Sinatra, then I'd have to kill him," the woman growled.

"I have, in fact, been told I have a voice that lends itself to crooning," he countered to a groan from his companion.

They went on that way for a few minutes and Dan just listened, trying to glean anything he could from their banter. It was clear that the woman trusted the alien, which he found completely baffling. It also seemed the alien was a pseudo father-figure to her, though that didn't illuminate the hows and whys much. The Turian seemed to know a great deal about popular human culture, though. If he weren't in fear for his life Dan might have found the act entertaining.

That all ended when the door opened and Shepard stepped inside, followed by a bombshell he recognized as Miranda Lawson. He felt his bowels turning to water the moment her presence made sense. She knew. The Spectre knew everything, and he was as good as dead.

"Well hello, Daniel," Shepard said pleasantly as the bombshell and the psycho gave one another a kiss in greeting. It was like every nightmare he'd ever had rolled up into one and he wondered if he might be able to shake himself out of it.

Shepard walked over and inspected the bruising on his face before looking back at the Turian. He shrugged and tilted his head toward the psycho. The Spectre nodded in understanding then returned her gaze to him, "Seems our paths have crossed again, and so soon!" She smiled then, and it was everything but comforting, "Time to find out how useful you really are."
"Where's the data?" Shepard asked menacingly, watching him with a clinical eye.

Jack and Garrus moved to encompass their captive in a circle, pinning him with their own expectant looks. Miranda put down the bag she carried and began to rummage while he tried not to reveal his terror.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Dan stammered predictably.

"Boring!" Jack cried as she clinched a blue fist. Everything about her screamed a desire to move this to a physical level, and once Shepard saw his abject fear of her she wasn't inclined to stop the woman. Delegate, Hackett had said. She wasn't sure this was what he had in mind but she had no objection to using the tools at hand.

Shepard sighed and imitated Jack's bored expression, "We know about the Brakenbah, Dan. We've got the flight plan. You were there. We've also got your flight plan from the Uboko. You're headed to the same orbit in the Belt. What's the Brakenbah's new designation?"

"I Don't. Know," he said, clenching his jaw despite the sweat pouring down his face, "That's the truth."

"Alright," she replied with a patience belied by the fury boiling just beneath her skin, "Let's go with that. If you don't know the new designation how were you going to find them? Were you going to change your own? Who were you meeting with?"

Dan just looked away with a stiff back. He was brave, she had to admit. Her eyes dropped to the floor, feigning sadness before looking to Miranda, who approached at her silent call.

The investigator looked quickly between them in alarm, "You have kidnapped and now threatened a member of the Alliance Bureau of Investigation! Do you realize that what you are doing is a criminal offense?" he cried, lifting himself from his chair to defend himself, as weak as that defense might be with his arms bound behind him.

Miranda smiled softly and brandished a primitive untraceable syringe, "We simply have a glimpse at the bigger picture. Self defense is permissible under any circumstance and what you are doing puts us all at risk. Even if we didn't have immunity we would be remiss if we didn't take steps."

Dan's eyes fixated on the sharp needle as it approached. He had no idea what was in it or how it would affect him but the threat chilled him nevertheless. "You were with Cerberus!" he cried, "How can you not see that what we're doing strengthens us all?"

Jack stepped in at that point, grabbing him by the face and slamming him back into his seat, "You'll wanna be careful with that word, asshole. It makes me wanna exercise."

Shepard held up a hand and the two women paused. She approached Dan and searched his eyes for a long moment, "Cerberus had the chance to do a lot of good and they squandered it on a grab for power, and that's what Terra Firma is doing right now. Cerberus killed millions with the compromises they made in the name of that power and if Saracino gets his way, millions more will follow. Defending your people isn't wrong, but let's be honest here; you're not defending anyone, you're profiting from this."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive," he protested with sincerity, "The data simply puts us in a more
powerful negotiating position. You of all people should appreciate the need for leverage against the other races."

She shook her head, "Leverage is what a person uses to force another to do what they don't want to do. That's not peace, that's extortion and extortion has a price, even if it's not paid today. I helped build this coalition by laboring for trust, not leverage. You are literally trying to undo my work, Dan. Did you really think you were going to convince me otherwise?" Her expression pleaded with him, "Just tell me what I want to know. I don't want to hurt one of my own, but I will."

"Then you're no better than them," he spat at her.

Shepard's face lightened with furious mirth, "I didn't send a thug to kill the person you loved. That was you! Exactly who should I aspire to be?"

Dan's face drained and he shook his head weakly, "No," he murmured, "I called that off. It was wrong."

"It was wrong? Or it no longer served your needs?" Shepard asked, her volume rising and her eyes dangerous, "Did you think I didn't know? I'm a Spectre, Dan!"

The words had the appropriate effect, "Please, don't kill me. Please. I really tried to stop it. I did."

Shepard smiled coldly, "And that's the only reason you're alive; an extension that expires the next time you say the words 'I don't know.'"

The man's face contorted, veins appearing at his temples and through his smooth forehead, "And what if I really don't?" he pleaded, "I only know coordinates and times. They don't just hand the rest of that information out to anyone."

"Then you had better start at the beginning and be thorough. If I find anything you say doesn't match...you won't like the next steps in my playbook."

An hour later Garrus stood guard while the rest exited the room and walked further into the ward.

"So how are we gonna deal with a whole fleet?" Jack asked, "We can't exactly ask for backup."

"First things, first," Shepard replied, "Miri, can you pin down the designation change from the coordinates he gave you? The Kuiper belt is pretty big and I don't feel like spending a year out there."

"Well if I can't," she reasoned with a long exhale, "I should be able to narrow down the location of so many ships in a cluster. There's no reason for that level of traffic out there otherwise."

"Alright, let me know what you find. If that doesn't work, we'll probably need to bring Barnes along. If the rendezvous coordinates check out, he would need new steps provided to reach the fleet. That means there's either a package or a person waiting, and if it's a person they'll want to see Dan for themselves."

"I hate babysitting," Jack muttered.

"Cheer up," Shepard said with a grin, "You're getting your wish."

Jack looked at her oddly.
"I seem to recall you suggesting we become pirates, right?"

It took a moment to register, but it did. "Hell yes!" she exclaimed with a childlike grin.

Miranda chuckled, "Don't get her started."

Jack pulled at Miranda's hand and spun her around before kissing her fiercely. Shepard smiled bemusedly as she watched, Lawson's eyes wide with surprise until she began to respond. The Spectre took a second to reach out to the Convergence while they were occupied; then after a few moments tapped out a message on her Omni before gently clearing her throat.

"It's good to see you so happy," Miranda whispered to Jack as they parted.

"Well," Jack whispered back, "You take me to all the nice places."

"I'd suggest you pick a room for a while but I've just had an idea," Shepard chided gently before striding off, "Time to see an old friend."

They made their way through a mostly deserted Kithoi ward to the battered Edroki plaza, where they found a parked shuttle. The door opened as they approached and a familiar figure stepped out.

"Hello, Aria," Shepard said, "Long time."

"Get in," was all the Asari said, looking over the other pair with doubtful distaste.

Miranda arched an eyebrow at Shepard but climbed in after Jack, who hadn't hesitated.

Shepard acknowledged her concern with a reassuring nod before moving around to the passenger door.

"Thanks for coming," Shepard said once they were underway, "I've got a pretty big favor to ask."

"Do your favors come in any other size?" Aria responded with a bored tone.

Shepard chuckled without humor, "No. How many ships do you have left?"

Aria gave her a level look, "You need all of them?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"That's not a favor, that's financial suicide."

"Yeah? Well a little bird told me that you aren't having much luck controlling your toys in Omega long distance."

Aria smirked, "Does that little bird's name end with T'Soni?"

Shepard grinned with one half of her mouth and shrugged, "Do me a solid and I can be there for you when you need me most." Then, "Again."

"That's assuming you live through whatever scheme you've got rolling around in your head," Aria retorted, but nevertheless said, "I need details before I can commit."

"Yeah, that's a problem," she replied, running a hand through her hair, "Super hush hush and all. If you're in, I can tell you."
"If you get my people killed I have nothing to use for enforcement," she countered with narrowed eyes.

"Alright," Shepard said thoughtfully, "Compromise. 20 ships, light armament. These aren't military but they may have some unexpected tech. The objective is divert, distract, destroy. No survivors. That's as far as I can go."

A smile wormed it's way across Aria's face as she pulled the shuttle in for an approach, and she glanced at the Spectre beside her with unveiled interest. "Someone made you angry," she purred, "You're beautiful when your blood is up. Too bad you couldn't have shown this side the last time we worked together."

Shepard kept her expression neutral, minus a subtle tightening of her jaw, "I needed information then. This time, I just need them gone."

Even Jack was taken aback, "Damn Shep, she's right. I like you angry too."

Aria studied Jack's reflection with ancient eyes and seemed to like what she saw, "Change of terms. I want to come with you."

Shepard seemed taken aback, "Who says I'm even going?"

"Oh please…" Aria drawled, "Since when have you ever led from the rear? If you're taking this firecracker with you," she said looking directly at Jack, "Then you plan to get your hands dirty. Besides, I'm bored and want to protect my investment."

Miranda spoke for the first time in a tone brooking no argument, "So long as you understand that firecracker is with me."

Aria smiled and looked at Lawson, "So she does speak. You two are paired?" she crooned, pointing to them both with two fingers, "That's a surprise."

Jack looked at Miranda as if she had grown a new head and when Miri began to blush, Jack smiled, too; a curling of her lips that relayed unexpected, but not unwelcome, pleasure.

"I think you'll find I'm full of surprises," Miranda said in an even voice without moving her eyes from Jack's, "Not all of them pleasant."

Aria uncharacteristically laughed and looked back at Shepard, "You do keep interesting pets. Do we have a deal?"

"We do, but if this is the route we're taking, we need to dress the part."

Aria's eyes widened in yet another surprise and she gasped, "The great Shepard wants to eschew her badges of valor? You're are ashamed of this," she purred again, chewing her lower lip in arousal.

Shepard gave her a hard look. They were going off script here and she didn't like the path Aria was taking. It was too personal.

The confirmation of that soft spot delighted the Asari and she simply smiled, no doubt tucking it away for later use, "Fine. I have equipment you can use. I also have 2 corvettes and 32 remaining fighters, more than enough for what you require."

"Wow, you got hit pretty hard," Shepard said considerately.
"Once I get Omega back in line I'll have all I need. I intend to hold you to your promise."

"Don't worry. I'll pay up," Shepard assured her. So much for 'one more time'.

"Holy…” Jack said, trailing into silence when she saw the armory. The room was as big as a small warehouse and filled to the brim; so much of it that there were stacks in the back corners.

"One of the few perks of scavenging millions of dead people," Aria said with no pleasure, "This is just one cache, but it's the best. We placed the merchandise from most of the high end shops here. None of it is marked, so your anonymity is protected. Gear up."

Shepard took a deep breath in consideration of the cost in lives for such a stash, "Spectre equipment too?"

"Everything we could find," Aria said softly.

They took their time. Shepard could hear Miranda and Jack arguing about something in the background but her thoughts were elsewhere. She hadn't spoken to Chakwas yet, and was worried that if she did she might lose focus. That didn't stop the persistent flashes of Liara's face crowding her mind, of course, but she had so far managed to sequester herself in a bubble devoid of emotion. The alternative lurked like a sea monster from the depths of her soul; it was the antithesis of action, the paralysis of purpose, and it's name was fear. Fear of a universe without Liara in it, a place where the sum of all the days of Shepard's life equaled death, regardless of how well the weapon had been directed. 'One foot in front of the other' was what she clung to with bloody fingernails.

Piece by piece she assembled her armor, trying it on to ensure it fit well. It was a hodge podge of pieces whose variations of color would have been laughable if they weren't generally symmetric. When she clicked the last pauldron into place on the understructure it felt tight, as if she had gained weight or put on pieces more appropriate for a child. She fiddled with the chestpiece, unattaching and reattaching after she confirmed it was correctly sized, but the tightness seemed worse; alarming her when she found it difficult to draw breath. It was as if the armor itself was constricting around her chest, squeezing the life from her body, which of course was impossible. She could feel her pulse begin to hammer in her temple, and she bent over, placing her hands on her knees while she drew in ever more ragged gasps of air. Her world quickly narrowed to that painful exercise until the corners of her vision turned grey; the sound of her labored breath in her own ears ripping open a door to memories ruthlessly quashed.

Looking up, blood in her eyes as the Batarian kicked her broken ribs again, and again, and again while she inhaled nothing but pain. The expanding sphere of Alchera spinning wildly as she tumbled, sucking in warm CO2 before the vacuum stole sound as it stole her life. The agonizing minutes after the Crucible fired, all senses but her hearing gone, her autonomic system vainly trying to control lifeless organs. Hoping beyond hope that she would hear approaching footsteps every painful second until she expired....alone alone...terrifyingly alone.

She didn't know how long she grappled with the python wrapped around her body, but the next thing she recognized was Miranda's face above her, saying something she couldn't quite make out. It wasn't until she felt a pinprick at her throat that she could begin to understand.

"..sn't what I brought this for. Shepard, can you hear me? Get that armor off her, Jack."
"Workin' on it," came the terse reply as Shepard took her first real breath in what felt like a century.

"There you go," Miranda said in a soothing voice, "Just relax. You're fine. Stay still and breathe, okay?"

Shepard managed a nod, but every other ounce of strength went to breathing sweet sweet air.

"What's wrong with her?" Aria asked with detached but obvious concern.

Miranda looked at Shepard helplessly, as if asking what to say. She knew Miranda was trying to protect her reputation but it wouldn't matter; the next time she shared, the entire Convergence would know, including Aria. She gave the woman a nod. Better to resolve this now than during the attack.

Miranda tightened her jaw, glancing up at Aria as she stood over them both, "It looks like an anxiety attack. She'll recover, she just needs a few minutes."

Aria's brow knitted predictably, "What is there to be anxious about? We haven't even started yet."

"How 'bout coming back to the place where she died, stupid? You don't think that would fuck you up?" Jack's vehement defense of her came as a surprise but she couldn't quite smile at it yet.

"I'm….fine…" she croaked instead.

Aria's look turned venomous, "Is this how you are going to react when we attack?"

Jack sprang to her feet and went face to face with the Asari, eyes blazing, "Fuck off, Miss Magenta! She's just gotta get her sea legs back is all."

Aria's lip curled at the challenge, "You wanna go? Take another step."

"No problem, bitch!" Came the reply along with a blue glow around the biotic.

Miranda's shout broke the tension. "That's enough, both of you! It's likely a combination of events, alright? Something that shouldn't happen again. If you knew anything about human psychology, Aria, this wouldn't be an issue. Just back off and we'll finish up!" she lied neatly, the worried gaze she leveled at the Spectre telling a very different story.

Shepard tried to put her gratitude into a look while she tamed her wildly beating pulse. Her hands and elbows slid up the floor beneath her and lifted until she was sitting upright.

"Give me that armor," she growled.

Miranda gave her a silent look of warning but Shepard persisted, gesturing with a trembling hand, "Give it to me."

Jack doggedly refused to move from where she stood between Shepard and Aria, so Miranda leaned over to grab the discarded matte black chestpiece and drag it within reach.

Shepard clenched her jaw and strapped it back on, then reached for the arm pieces, grimly breathing in and out. Whatever Miranda had given her, combined with embarrassment and anger at the episode, kept any further incidents at bay and she forced herself to stand while she snapped the last one in place.

She walked with feigned confidence past Jack to look directly into Aria's eyes from scarce inches away, "Do you have any rifles in this place or are we just gonna march in there with Jack's bad language?"
The Asari's narrowed eyes watched her carefully, searching for any sign of weakness, so Shepard made damn sure she wouldn't find any. Whatever Aria seemed to see there, behind her eyes, seemed to satisfy her and she withdrew. "Over here," she said in a cool voice, turning to gesture at another wall. She gave one final hard look at Jack before they both stood down, though Shepard didn't get the impression either of them were finished.

She turned to Jack as Aria walked away, giving her a grateful dip of the chin, and they finished equipping in silence.
Victory, Interrupted

Aethyta was waiting for them back at the Uboko, obviously informed of current events through the Convergence. The Asari uncharacteristically approached and enfolded Shepard in an embrace, armor and all.

"Heya kid," she said gruffly, "How you holding up?"

"I….can't…" Shepard said softly within her arms, hanging onto her persona with the barest of grips. She pulled away, tears stinging her eyes, "Not right now."

Aethyta nodded in understanding, "I get it. I checked in on her and she's stable. I thought you'd want to know."

Shepard nodded and unslung a wicked looking sniper rifle, "Jack, could you give this to Garrus for me?"

"Sure," she said agreeably, taking the rifle and going back to the conference room.

Miranda followed after a moment, allowing them some space.

Shepard turned back to Liara's father, "My plans haven't changed, just so you know. We need to talk, soon."

"You got it," she said, looking over at Aria in her armor, "You joining the posse?"

The Pirate Queen of Omega smirked in response, "Would I be dressed like this for a social event?"

"With your friends? Absolutely," Aethyta said smugly.

Aria's rolled her eyes, "How droll. Are you coming along?"

She shook her head, "My headbutting days are over, hun. Besides, you don't even need guns on your ships with the firepower this bunch is bringing down on their heads."

"If there's one thing I can't get enough of, it's overkill," Shepard joked.

Aethyta took Shepard's face in her hands and looked her right in the eyes, "You make those bastards pay, you hear me?"

A rainbow of emotions crossed Shepard's visage, but she nodded, "Loud and clear."

Aethyta echoed her nod and released her, "We're all behind you, kiddo. You know that."

"Thanks. I do," She looked at Aria, "Let's go."

"No luck," Miranda admitted, "There's still no record of any new designations in that area of space, and there are no transponders to be found in groups of twenty. It's like they just disappeared."

Shepard nodded grimly, "They just removed them then. They didn't want to take a chance on being
"Risky," Garrus added, "Something goes wrong with a ship, someone gets lost, they might not be found."

Shepard shrugged, "I guess they figure their chances of survival if they get caught are less."

"Damn straight," said Jack, looking ominously at Daniel where he was restrained in the back of the ship.

"So what is your plan, then?" Aria asked.

Shepard shrugged, "What I would have likely chosen anyway, plus a handy fleet, full of distractions. We go meet Dan's friend, remove the transponder and join up with the fleet all nice and silent. Tell your guys to keep a ten minute shadow. When we've docked, have them arrive. TF will hopefully think they are random pirates when they show and peel off their attack craft to engage. That buys us the time we need to take over the freighter."

She melded with the share at that point and Aria perked up. Once the defense craft were destroyed, she relayed, Aria's forces should eliminate all civilian craft. No exceptions. They still needed Dan to play his part and Shepard suspected that if he got wind of his fate she wouldn't get his cooperation.

"Random pirates wouldn't come with that depth," Aria countered verbally, only a fraction of a second delay along with a diminished tone in her voice betraying their other conversation, "I'll keep some in reserve."

Shepard agreed, "Good, ok."

Aria just stared at Shepard for the briefest of moments and she knew the Asari was continuing to absorb information from her. She broke the connection and tilted her head with an annoyed expression.

Aria covered her irritation with a poisonous smile and began messaging her mercs.

When Shepard faced forward in her seat she caught Miranda watching them both very carefully. She felt her cheeks coloring and covered it with a cough, "So how long have we got until we reach the coordinates?"

Garrus looked over his shoulder, "Roughly thirty minutes. She's no racer."

"Okay," she said, rising from her seat and moving back to free Barnes, "Now you do your job and everything will be fine, right? Try anything and most of the people in here don't even need to draw a weapon to defend themselves."

The man nodded slowly, "I understand."

"Miranda?"

"Mmn?"

"I want you to stay with Dan and the ship. We may need a quick exit if something goes wrong, and you're the last person I want ending up as a casualty."

"Now that's just plain rude," Garrus irreverently injected.

Shepard grinned, "The Rekanah class freighter has an elliptical deck arrangement. When we board, I
want two teams. Jack, you and I will pair off; Garrus, go with Aria. We'll split up and meet at the bridge."

"What happened to your fondness for overkill?" Aria asked with a curl of her lips, "I wanted to see Jack in action for myself."

Shepard didn't even need to look to feel Miranda bristling but Jack spoke up, "Don't worry, wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole; the STD's are strong in this one."

Aria laughed again, enjoying the joust, "You've never been with an Asari, have you? Come on Shepard, tell her just what she's missing."

"Aria," she said warningly. Daniel was looking at them all with clear distaste.

Jack's lip curled into a snarl, "You're no temptation, honey. Keep it up and you'll get to see me in action up close and personal."

"That's a date," Aria purred, eyes flashing.

"Aria!" Shepard barked, and the asari gave her a petulant look. Shepard shook her head sternly and Aria relented with a roll of her eyes. Once it quieted, she rose and visited the head, shutting the door and locking it behind her. She removed her gloves and touched the cool surface of the sink with her bare hands. It felt good, a smooth contrast to the heat of her skin and the racing of her pulse.

She ran some water and pulled it over her flushed face, trying to remain calm. That panic still lurked like the tide, held back only by the slow turn of the earth; and her concern was that it would make another appearance while she was on the Brakenbah. If another of her team suffered this way Shepard would bench them without question, but bowing out would demonstrate to Aria that she was no longer effective and the loss of those ships simply wasn't an option. Just as she steeled herself and unlocked the door, there was a knock. She opened it to find Miranda standing there, holding an injector.

She held it out to Shepard with a meaningful look, "For emergencies, only. Your reflexes will be slowed." At her dubious expression, she explained, "It's just a sedative. I wasn't prepared for this eventuality. Get through this and we'll figure the rest out."

Shepard took it with chagrin, "I guess all of you were right. I wasn't ready."

Miranda smirked, "You are a remarkable human being, Shepard." She leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "You're just not a god."

Shepard grinned at the thought, then sniffed, "I guess I can live with demi-god status."

Miranda's chuckle was warm, "Jack has your back, alright? Go get 'em tiger. Then go take a bloody vacation, will you?"

"Yes Ma'am, I believe I will."

Shepard stopped her as she turned and lowered her voice, "Oh. One more thing..."

As they approached the final coordinates Shepard stood and moved up front, "What's it look like
"Picking up a repeating beacon with a new location. Bet that's where we get our designation removed."

"Are there any stations nearby? Some kind of asteroid maybe?"

"No, we're in the middle of nowhere; the better to see the authorities coming, is my guess. If it were me I'd use a ship that can just disappear when the temperature rises."

"Hrm," Shepard said with a chew of her lip before turning to Dan, "You sure you don't know anything about how this works?"

"I've told you all I know," he sullenly replied.

"Alright. If this guy is Terra Firma, he's not gonna want to see your ugly mug," she said to the Turian before turning to Aria, "Or yours. There's a chance he might recognize me too, unfortunately, so...looks like we are going to hide in the bedroom."

The groans were amusing, "Miranda, I want you to pilot this bird. Jack, if Dan does anything stupid?"

Jack smiled, Dan didn't, and Shepard nodded.

When they were in hiding, Shepard took up a defensive position near the bathroom door, just in case. The others followed suit, "Aria?"

"Mmmnm!

"Once we're underway, transmit the rendezvous point to your team. Have them wait ten minutes, then eliminate whoever we are meeting with. I want them to have time to transmit whatever is required before they go quiet. Jam him before you kill him, will you? I don't want these guys to know we're coming."

"Fair enough."

Shepard took a deep breath, "Here we go."

It took about an hour to disable the transponder. It was linked into several systems, all of which would cease to function or transmit alerts when tampered with. The trio couldn't see what the tech looked like, but he spoke English and seemed calm; he'd done this plenty. Occasionally they could hear Miranda or Dan's voice asking questions or being social but beyond that it was a businesslike affair.

They waited quietly for the hatch to close and heard the seal disengage before Shepard opened up the bedroom door to peek out, "We clear?"

Miranda nodded, "So far so good."

Shepard exited the room with the others, "Thank you for your good behavior, Dan. You may get out of this yet."

"I hope you'd consider a pardon given how critical this assistance is to your mission," he said hopefully.

Jack snorted, "So he has some balls after all."
Shepard guarded her expression carefully, "Your assistance will be noted. Where are we headed?"

Miranda leaned over the console, "The fleet's location coordinates put them within sensor range of Haumea. It may be they are using the rock as a reference point to compensate for their lack of transponders."

"Take us there. Nice and casual."

Miranda sat back down in the pilot's seat and everyone started collecting their weapons, double checking their gear for readiness, "ETA fifteen minutes."

This was the part Shepard hated most. Waiting meant you began second guessing. Waiting meant that you started to consider worst case scenario. It was important that she did neither with the lurking beast waiting to steal her breath and reason. She pulled up her Omni interface and began writing a message to Liara, partly because she felt guilty about not doing it before, partly because she needed the distraction. She poured herself into the wording to avoid all the what ifs and reticence about what she was about to do.

I can only guess how you might be feeling right now. I can't tell you how sorry I am, though I am selfishly happy you'll be okay. If there's one thing I've learned in this life it's that it exists to challenge us, to push us off the easy path and to take us away from what we find familiar. How we deal with that chaos is what people remember and all we can do is hope that someday the solution to this hate is so common that we as a whole can start focusing on a new set of problems, leaving these tired arguments behind, forever.

All those hopes are just dreams right now, balanced by the consequence of their attack on you. It's a primitive part of myself that's stolen me away from mourning to right these wrongs. It's the same part that has kept me from you for so long during the war, but I need to indulge it again this one last time while I wait for your return.

I hope that by the time you read this the last remnants of our species who use hatred as their source of power will be dead and I will be free. If not, just know that I sent as many of them as I could to their graves with you and our child in my heart.

I'm ready to start again. I want to build a new life with you. Try and focus on that and not the past; not on what we have lost, but what we stand to gain.

You are always in my thoughts.

It was now Shepard's turn to focus on her equipment, her hands working with a mind of their own, the exercise remembered in her very bones.

"I've got them on sensors," Miranda said before they were hailed.

"Identify yourselves or be fired upon," came the challenge.

Dan looked to Miranda and Shepard for permission before keying the transmitter, "This is Chief Investigator Daniel Barnes. Permission to dock?"

"Hold your position."
"Affirmative," he replied simply, and Miranda slowed the ship.

They watched the fleet move together, a host of commercial ships, some of them with offensive hardware, but only a few actual military craft. Of note were two Turian G-45s that flanked the bloated looking freighter.

Garrus couldn't keep quiet about that, "How ironic is it that Terra Firma turns their nose up at us but decides that our fighters are their go-to solution?" He glanced at Dan plainly but the human gave no response, just watching his dreams sail blithely by.

After a long moment they came back, "Identity confirmed, use the port docking array."

"Understood. Barnes out."

She watched all their faces focus and eyes drop. This was the moment in every soldier's life that tested their mettle. It didn't matter what preparations you performed or how tough you were perceived to be; it was only when the battle began that you knew who you were. She had fought and bled beside each and every one of these people and knew that they'd die before they broke.

Her voice was icy calm, "Jack and I have aft, Garrus and Aria, you've got forward. Comms on channel 7, check in every 120. Confirm?"

Garrus answered for his team, "Channel 7, check in every 2 minutes. See you on the bridge, Commander."

Shepard gave him a wry look, but Garrus just gave her a wink in return. He was in his element.

Miranda brought them in beside the freighter smoothly, the sound of the docking collar and seal plainly audible.

"I'm going first," Jack stated, loosening her shoulders before her skin began to take on a glowing blue hue. She'd been waiting for an opportunity like this for months and every cell overflowed with eager violence.

"Just be careful, Jack," Miranda said from behind where they stood ready to breach.

Her lover turned to grace her with a smile and a nod, "Relax babe, be back in five."

Miranda shook her head at the woman's overconfidence, but pressed the button to slide open the hatch anyway. "Good luck."

The armed guards who stepped into the docking tube took a moment to realize their guests were malintentioned. Before they could lift their weapons they were lifting into the air themselves, heads cracking into the top of the tube with a sickening sound. A wicked smile of satisfaction broke across Jack's face, but only after she ensured they no longer moved did she drop them onto the ground. She turned to the others and put a silencing finger to her lips.

"Looks like our little girl's all grown up," Garrus murmured behind Shepard as Jack moved forward to peer into the passageway.

Shepard didn't respond. She was all business, "Aria, ETA on the arrival of your ships?"

"They should arrive in around five minutes, but they will be spotted on sensors in two."

A single nod was her response, "Let's move." Jack was signaling the all clear.
Like gears on a watch they peeled off in each direction, Garrus and Shepard's weapons trained in military fashion while their companions glowed behind them in support.

Miranda watched, closed the hatch behind them and then took her seat behind the controls. She’d wait for the arrival of their backup and let them know when weapons-free was indicated.

Dan sat down in the co-pilot's chair, his expression tragic. Miranda felt for him. His fortune was as good as gone along with his livelihood and he had helped that happen. There came a point in every person's life where they had to take a hard look at the opportunities before them and pick a pony. He had simply missed his bet, but never counted on the stakes being quite this high. He was handsome. It was a shame.

Her biotics flared, pinning him to his seat as she pulled her pistol and leveled it at his temple. The fear in his eyes tore at her heart, and she pulled the trigger quickly. He slumped forward against her field and there was only a bit of blood on the bulkhead to his right. It was a far better fate than what awaited him at Jack's hands, she knew. As much as she admired the growth she had seen in her lover in just the short time they had been together there were some things that would never change. Not that she was much better; when Shepard quietly asked her to take care of this ugly task she had readily agreed. Dan's death helped ensure her safety and the choice was, in the end, an easy one.

Lawson holstered her pistol and monitored the sensors. Within a minute there were signatures on the edge of the fleet's range. "The cavalry has arrived," she broadcasted on channel seven.

"Understood," Shepard responded, then rounded a corner towards a set of storage rooms in the aft section. The first worker dropped in a short burst from her rifle and Shepard fought to ignore the nausea the act inflicted. *Stop it,* she told herself, *Stay focused.* Just because they weren't armed didn't mean they were innocent; they supported the people who killed her child. Those shots brought more workers and their deaths finally brought the armed guards.

"Eleven o'clock," she said in a flat voice as they were converged upon, and Jack immediately stepped in and lifted them to twist helplessly until her rifle cut them down.

Shepard voluntarily fell back into the deadly rhythm that drummed through her entire existence. Identify, neutralize, eliminate. Even Jack's boisterous expression died down as they synchronized, her own fields breaking bones and disarming guards while her barrier protected them from the occasional stray shot. Nothing moved in their wake.

Garrus heard the go over comms and it didn't take long for alarms to sound. He and Aria were headed to the bridge so they encountered the first real resistance, a full squad of armed men and women that had defense points set up for just such an assault. They had shield generators and turrets, so the Turian started picking his targets while Aria scared the excrement out of the rest. It looked like there was some confusion in their ranks, no doubt because of the incoming fighter attack; they had to decide what to defend and at what priority and it cost them precious time.
After a few moments and several eliminated defense points they received an update from Miranda, "Cavalry is being engaged, one bandit approaching starboard to dock."

Shepard's voice cut across the link, "Aft secured, likely data interface located. Moving starboard to engage boarders."

Garrus gave his own status at that point, "Bridge defenses engaged, making some dents but they are holding. Estimate…" He broke off when he saw Aria suddenly stop in plain view of the guns before her. He saw the enemy painting her and preparing to fire, so he quickly tossed a cryo-grenade in their faces to buy her some time.

"Aria! What's the problem?" he cried, dropping another sniper who was wetting himself at the chance to headshot an Asari. She dropped her face into her hands but he couldn't tell if she was in pain. "Shepard, something's wrong with Aria!" He fired again and the bolt locked back; he was empty. His hand instinctively grabbed a new clip for insertion, but he didn't know how Aria would survive the next few seconds. His worry shifted when he saw Aria turn to him and ball up a blue fist.

Shepard heard Garrus's warning and looked to Jack, "Hunker down. I need a few." The quickest way to reach Aria, and one of the reasons she wanted Aria on the other squad, was their ability to share. She reached out to the groupthink trying to find out what was happening and found herself immediately assaulted by a sensation she hadn't felt since the Crucible. She knew right away that the presence was Charles Saracino, but she wasn't prepared for the overwhelming push of his will. It was the same thing she felt when she had first been infected and The Illusive Man had forced her to kneel. Had she been prepared she might have not reacted so poorly, but a strangled gasp escaped her as she watched herself begin to turn her weapon on Jack.

She tore herself out of the share quickly and managed to pull herself together enough to lower the muzzle of her rifle from where it was training on her friend's unprotected back. This was a problem she didn't have time to explain. She keyed her Omni instead, "Garrus!" she cried, "Get out of there! Now!" Aria would be a nightmare of an opponent, though under normal circumstances she gave Garrus a shot against her. If he was prepared. If there weren't others shooting at him too.

Jack turned to look at her and she brought her eyes up to look at her partner, "You gotta get to Garrus right now. I'll hold this position."

"Why?" Jack protested.

"It's Aria. She's gonna turn on him."

"What in the serious fuck?" Jack yelled, torn looking between where they came and where they were going.

"No time. Between her and the bridge defenses Garrus is going to have problems. Don't kill Aria, just keep her off him!"

The woman snarled angrily but took off down the corridor at a run. She had heard no response from Garrus and hoped it wasn't too late. In the meantime, she needed to give Saracino something else to worry about if they all wanted to make it out of here in one piece. He must have arrived with the boarding party, which meant he was just ahead.

Over the intercom, as if to answer her question, came a voice, "Ignore the Asari. Eliminate the rest."
Looked like she was going to have to roll up her sleeves on this one after all.
Several of Saracino's mercenaries tried to rush her at once rather than continue to be picked off one at a time.

Shepard answered with a deft roll backward and behind cover as they came, leaving behind a shiny beeping cylinder of cryo-fluid that detonated amid their tardy cries of warning. Between the concussive blast and flash frost she made quick work of her attackers and watched the remainder withdraw to regroup beyond her objective, the starboard hatch.

There was no sign of Saracino, which meant she was fighting his rear-guard and he was moving counter-clock with his main force; which when combined with Aria and the bridge defenses meant that if Jack and Garrus still lived, they were likely unhappy. By the time Shepard made it to them this fight could well be over.

"Miranda," she said quickly over comms, "Move forward to support Jack, asap. She should be with Garrus by now." She didn't wait for an answer, settling between some storage containers to hide from view. She had an idea, but it remained to be seen whether or not it was a good one.

When she joined the Convergence this time, she was ready. The push of Saracino's will still staggered her, the draw of becoming one with Aria just as alluring as it had been on the Citadel. Before, she had simply escaped the Illusive Man's will by completely withdrawing from the share. This time she needed to do more; she needed to fight Charles for control if such a thing could be done. Barring that, she needed to distract him, perhaps weaken his hold on Aria long enough for her to regain herself. That would even the odds on the port side and give her team a fighting chance.

Charles noticed her presence and she heard a thundering voice in her head, Welcome. Join us. We need you.

If she thought the pull had been alluring before, his full attention was like the force of a tsunami, encompassing and brutal. It was very hard to think, and she ground her teeth in order to keep focus. This was what Aria must have felt, she thought, but got a different response from Charles, irritated by her resistance.

No, this is what she felt.

Her world exploded into pain. Every nerve and synapse fired, her limbs locking into place as if she had electric current flowing through her. 'Excruciating' was too weak an adjective; she was in hell and demons surrounded her with flaming lashes and pitchforks. How could she possibly….how could anyone….fight this?

Submit and it will end, Saracino insisted.

An image came to her then of a tortured man in murky and dangerous surrounds. Newstead, Ian Newstead, she recalled through gritted teeth. He had fought the Thorian back successfully over and over again, though the effort had driven him mad. If he could do it, even for a moment, so could she. Shepard began to push back, her basest instincts surging forward to grapple with him as if she could pull his inflicted torment from her like a buried dagger. The pain she felt was suddenly reduced, and through the share she suddenly knew that Saracino felt the reflection of it in his own body. Her lips peeled back from her teeth in victory and she pushed harder until she could feel him begin to withdraw into himself. He had never been challenged in this way and simply didn't know how to react, but she wasn't the only one receiving information over the groupthink and it wouldn't take him
To riposte. She hoped it was enough.

Jack didn’t see the blow that struck Garrus down. She did seem him fly down the hallway toward her for several meters before his head impacted the side of a metal container. After he landed he twitched but didn’t move. Aria was taking a step toward him to finish the job, but was interrupted by the howl of fury coming from her lips. The Asari found herself buffeted by a field that threw back every bit of debris around her, but where her barrier stood there was a crash of blue sparks.

"Back off bitch! Momma's home!"

"Ignore the Asari. Eliminate the rest," came the command over the intercom. If the dozen or so weapons now training on her weren’t enough of a concern the look on Aria’s face made Jack’s blood curdle. There was no witty retort to her challenge, no curl of derision in her lips, no flash in her eyes. She just looked at Jack blankly before launching her attack.

Jack did the only thing she could at that point and bum-rushed her. The guns would have a hard time targeting her as long as they were tangled up. She countered a lift and spun around a singularity before their barriers clashed together with a concussive sound. How long they held would be a test of wills.

Their faces were just a couple of feet apart, separated by the shape of the barriers bending against one another with the exertion of their biotics. Aria’s was a picture of serenity, hundreds of years of practice generating a smooth flow of energy that seemed to hold without effort. Jack’s was the epitome of savagery; every press into the Asari’s fields, fueled with adrenaline, resulting in a dip of her own barrier in the next breath. It was chaos versus order and they seemed evenly matched.

"What's the matter, honey," Jack taunted her with a grit of her teeth, "Nothing to say now?"

The woman's eerie indifference was answer enough, especially when she saw the mercs moving to flank her while she was preoccupied. Sure would be great if Garrus got up right about now, she thought before breaking concentration long enough to blast a shockwave down the passageway. The gamble toppled most of the attackers backward and bought her a few moments, but Aria had been waiting patiently for just such an opening. A blue wave hit her like a ton of bricks, dropping her barrier, and she flew backwards against a cargo crate, bending at a bad angle. When her torso sprang back upright she fell to her knees, the wind knocked from her lungs.

Not to be outdone, she was lifting two crates to sling them down the hallway when Aria's flare followed up. There was a sudden silence, as if all the air in the passage had been pulled into an infinitesimally small space before exploding out in a roar. Jack hit a real wall this time, along with the crates she had been lifting. She tasted blood but was granted a breath as a consolation prize while she slid to the floor. Everything seemed to move slower for a second while she watched Aria ready another attack, the second squad behind the Asari drawing a bead.

It occurred to her that this was hardly a fair fight, and she chuckled at the same argument Miri had leveled at her during their camping expedition. Her barrier came into being around her once more but she didn’t expect it to hold. She resolved to kill a few of the bastards before she checked out, and her tongue slid eagerly over her lips as she ripped one of the guards from his feet so she could hear his screams before she died. She saw Aria’s biotic lash coming but kept focus on her final kill with a spiteful grimace.

It never landed, the crackle of a second barrier flashing into being before it was struck and dissipated. A flurry of Miranda's pistol shots kept the soldiers' heads down and they heard Shepard over the
comms, "Miranda, if you're not already doing it, support Jack, asap. She should be with Garrus by now."

Jack pulled her own pistol and took cover while she saw Miranda shout to her left, "Aria, what's going on? Why are you doing this?"

Aria answered with a pull that they both immediately countered, and Jack spat blood on the floor before wiping her lips, "She hasn't said a word and it's creepy as fuck. Not sure what's going on but Shep said not to hurt her."

Miranda's face looked as confused as Jack felt and the biotic shrugged before laying down more pistol fire. Miranda sighed and ducked her head as reinforcements arrived, the mercs' rifles beginning to pin them down. "Well this isn't going very well," she said, looking back to see Garrus beginning to move, "Garrus, keep your head down! We've got to hold this position until Shepard can…. do whatever it is she's doing."

She and Jack shared a private look after the comment and it made them both smile.

"Just like old times," Jack chuckled in a deep voice. She peeked around the corner of the cargo crate and saw heavily armored men, clearly the boarding party that just arrived, overtaking Aria on their way. "Ready?" she asked.

"Ready," Miranda said with a narrowing of her eyes.

As one they rose, Jack using her biotics to warp and rip their armor down, weakening it at a molecular level, followed closely by Miranda incinerating a wide area around the advancing soldiers. The combination made anyone inside of a set of armor extremely unhappy, but what they didn't expect was the explosion that followed. The soldiers all crashed to the ground, writhing in blue flame before they stilled forever. The pair looked up to find Aria grinning, her hands limned in purple, and the guards that were still behind cover watching with wide, terrified eyes.

"Well?" Aria asked loudly, "What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

One of Saracino's men took a sudden shot to the head while re-evaluating their odds, and the rest ducked quickly. Jack turned to see Garrus watching Aria carefully...through his scope, "Next one is for you, unless you start talking."

Aria looked bored, "No time. I'll explain everything after we finish this." With that she turned and launched another flare, throwing guards and their cover around the passageway like she was playing Yahtzee.

The trio looked at each other with wide eyes and shrugged. It was clearly better to have Aria aimed somewhere else but they couldn't afford to give her another free shot at them.

Garrus growled and touched a talon to an open wound on the top of his head, "I'll keep an eye on her. Go give 'em hell."

When Aria was finally able to respond to her queries through the groupthink, Shepard rejoiced. Aria was grudgingly thankful for the assistance, but there was a big problem; the rest of the team was going to demand answers once this was done. Shepard understood the quandary but couldn't divert her attention. Saracino was down but not out and she couldn't risk him recovering.

She got back to it, countering any resurgence by Saracino while at the same time beginning to pull as
much data as she could from the man. She needed to know everything about Terra Firma, their plans and their allies; but most importantly she wanted to know who else could rule the Convergence as he did.

While it was a great deal of information, Charles was no Councilor Tevos. She quickly navigated through TF logistics and found their connections to Cerberus. Saracino had come to terms with The Illusive Man, agreeing to fill Cerberus' reduced ranks with his own followers once he was convinced of Cerberus' inevitable success, and in return was given an altered dose of the Thorian agent that would allow him to have control over the infected. Shepard was very interested in that, and began looking for information about a cure before a voice cut across the share.

You want secrets, do you? Two can play that game.

She felt the pain begin to rise and had to split her attention between fighting it and collecting the data she needed. Unfortunately, he had no information about a cure, but she continued to absorb anything else she could, tracing the links of information to find startling facts. Saracino was planning to tour Earth and each race's fleet before travelling to the Citadel, ostensibly to raise funds for its repair. What he would do instead is enslave anyone still infected and use them to begin consolidating power. She couldn't let that happen!

You are Tevos' personal pet, Shepard. An Asari flunky. Killing your own people? How does it feel to have completely abandoned your own race when they needed you most? How will you live with yourself when humanity is relegated to a footnote in history?

Shepard paused to respond, then chose to focus on her task. She wouldn't let him get a rise out of her. She had found all the major players and their locations, now. The Spectres would finally be able to root these vipers out, once and for all.

You've been manipulated from the start, Shepard. Set up to fail, your reports on the Reapers ignored, imprisoned for doing your job, left to die alone, and now you are the tool the Asari will use to put humanity back in its cage. When will you wake up?

Shepard shook off the doubt he intended her to feel. Various small facts kept coming, things worth exploration, things that must be guarded against. The assassination attempt on Valern had been ordered by Dalatress Linron, which had to mean, yes, Linron was infected. It explained so much. She needed more.

Here, let me give you a secret, for free. Did you know that the Collectors never intended to kill you? Go ahead, search for yourself. What you find might interest you.

Part of her stayed on guard, vigilant for any surprises; but the mere consideration of his words redirected some of her energy down that path. There were in fact connections between Cerberus and the Collectors, she found, which was odd considering the entire Omega 4 mission had been designed to kill them and take their base. She explored those connections further and what she found confused her. The Collectors had orders to retrieve her by any means necessary, but not to kill her or use her body for material for the Reapers as she had surmised. They had been ordered to deliver her to Cerberus. That meant the Reapers wanted Cerberus to reconstruct her. Why? She couldn't be indoctrinated, they said. She destroyed them with the Crucible. Why would they have her killed and then want her back? Why would they have let her unite the galaxy and destroy them?

The Catalyst's words came back to her then, written starkly across her mind, You are already mostly synthetic, Shepard. Surely you see the positive effects. All organics would be improved. The conflict must end for the benefit of all. While Cerberus had no doubt done a great deal of work on her redesign, the Reapers with their knowledge of millions of species were likely the inspiration if not
outright responsible for much of the technology the Lazarus project used. What if...?

Ahhh...Liara is the Shadow Broker! What a small galaxy. It's too bad Positch couldn't finish the job but have no fear, I'll have people waiting when she arrives. This time it won't just be a half-blooded mongrel that breathes its last.

His words brutally cut through her thoughts. With a cry of anger Shepard began pushing at Saracino, wanting him to hurt as much as she did. I'll kill you, and I'll smile when I do it.

Yes, that's who you are, after all. A killer for hire, right? But for how long? The pressure has already broken you, hasn't it? Why else do you think Tevos is forcing you out of the Spectre corps?

He was pressing all the right buttons and she knew it, but Shepard could no more control the self-doubt he was vexing within her than she could catch the wind, and Saracino used that moment to hit her with everything he had.

Pain shot through her body again, her very cells demanding obedience. She heard her own voice screaming in her ears as she tried to regain her footing in this battle of wills, but found she could no longer catch her breath. Her heart was pounding fast, way too fast, and another round of panic crested over her like a wave, spinning her mind away from anything resembling logic.

Shaking hands fumbled for the injector Miranda had given her, the prick of the needle at her throat a relief. The chemical calm did nothing to stop the agony, but at least she could think. And breathe. And fight. She called on everything she could think of to assist her flagging spirit. Her desire for a galaxy without this kind of hate, her love for Liara, her frustration at the never-ending trials they seemed destined to endure, and finally, brightly, rage over her daughter's death. This was the man who had orchestrated the attack, she reminded herself. He couldn't be allowed to do it to anyone ever again.

She pushed back once more, ferociously, then keyed her Omni when it bought her a few moments to act, "Saracino needs to die, now, or we lose this. Make it happen!"

The pain grew as time slowed to a crawl, seconds in the real world taking minutes in the share. She could remove herself from it as she had done countless times before but if she withdrew Saracino would be free to control Aria. The team needed more time to reach him. She pushed back again with all the fury she could muster, but on the anvil of the agony he was wreaking nothing survived intact. After a lifetime of it she reached into the well of her personality for another push and found...nothing. Her thoughts turned to her team. They had to finish this in time. They just had to.

Suddenly, the pain vanished and her mind and body calmed. She stood and took in a cleansing breath, simple purpose crystallizing within her soul. Shepard reloaded her rifle as she began walking toward the bridge. Kill the interlopers, the voice said, and all would finally be well.

Shepard’s voice squelched over the comms, her tone haggard, "Saracino needs to die, now, or we lose this. Make it happen!"

Miranda noticed a well dressed man in the back being helped up by his guards as they were pushed out of their final position. It was Saracino. "There he is! Garrus!" she called out.

Their opponents began to retreat in an orderly fashion toward the bridge, laying down covering fire and withdrawing two by two.

"I can't get a shot," Garrus said as Saracino disappeared around the bend.
Aria seemed suddenly tense, "We have to move faster."

The hairs on Jack's neck stood on end at her words, "Aria?"

The Asari groaned and looked directly at Jack, "You have to hit me as hard as you can. Right now."

"Awww shiit," Jack growled, "You sure?"

Aria nodded, a rictus of pain settling over her face, "Quickly!"

Jack saw Aria's barrier drop, giving her the opening she needed. She shook her head in irritation, but took a deep breath and lifted the Asari into the air. She slammed the woman into the ground with enough force to shake the stacked crates nearby, then watched her for any sign of recovery. Aria turned her head to look at Jack and mouthed something before her eyes rolled into her head.

"What did she say?" Miranda asked.

"Something about Shepard. Dunno. We should keep going."

By the time they made it to the bridge entrance the enemy had fortified, the guards using every bit of cover they could get and keeping a steady rate of fire down the passageway. Jack's team was experienced enough that the tactic could only slow them down, but slow them it did. The bridge opened up to their left and they could see Saracino behind a generated shield unit.

"I got this," Jack said, and started working her way through the remaining guards toward him. Nobody wanted to risk damaging the bridge controls and her biotics were perfectly suited for that kind of combat. Plus, Saracino was Cerberus as far as she was concerned, so she was going to take particular pleasure ripping his head from his shoulders.

Before she could reach him, however, she was hit by several well placed rifle shots that brought down her barrier. She snarled and looked for the target she was going to punish, but stopped cold at the sight of Shepard entering the room, a green eye focused on her through the range finder.

They were all shocked, their barrage stopping for a moment while they absorbed the change in situation. Shepard was moving forward with deadly precision and her rifle spat more rounds at Jack, who dove out of the way.

"Shepard! Stop!" Miranda cried, throwing up another barrier around her lover and taking cover from fire herself.

Powerful impacts lit up Saracino's shield from Garrus' sniper rifle and it began to weaken, but didn't fall, "Stay alive but stay on Saracino!" he ordered.

Easy for him to say from twenty feet away, Jack thought as she regained her footing. Shepard was making a beeline for her, Omni blade extending. They were going to tangle, and her body tingled with lust at the thought. Every fiber in her being longed to test herself against one of the greatest soldiers in the galaxy, but Miranda's shout made her hesitate.

"Jack, don't hurt her!"

"Next person says that shit is getting my boot in their ass!" Jack shouted back, her fingers wiggling while she bounced on the balls of her feet. She wanted to see what the Spectre was made of.

Shepard's thrust seemed...off. The woman's eyes, while furrowed with murderous focus, seemed glassy and Jack knew that look very well. She was on something and it was slowing her down. Jack
juked to the side to avoid the slice that would have taken her head off, then lashed out with biotics timed to use the Spectre's forward movement against her. The move threw the redhead several steps away and put her off balance.

Shepard turned and simply lifted her rifle again now that she was out of range. Jack heard a ping that knocked the weapon from Shepard's hand, and followed the woman's eyes to Garrus, who nodded.

"Tie her up as long as you can!" he called before finding another target, "Miri, see if you can't make that rabbit leave cover!"

Jack caught Miranda's look of concern, but she knew the score and turned to slam a guard trying to take an opportunistic shot at Jack. Garrus put an end to him before he could rise, but then Shepard was all over her. Two slashes from Shepard's blade brought her barrier down, and Jack's fist glowed blue with power as she connected with the Spectre's chest. The woman slid back two feet but was moving again in an instant, not appearing to register the pain.

That quickness caught Jack off guard, and she narrowly avoided the Spectre's blade again, ducking right into her mailed fist. Shepard kept her from falling, a generous gesture, she thought, until her armored knee met Jack's solar plexus. The blow was so hard she was lifted off her feet before hitting the ground, unable to breathe. She rolled as Shepard's blade buried itself into the metal of the deck by her head, then raised her barrier while skittering the fuck away. Jack regained her feet, disturbed once again by the lack of expression on Shep's face as she came at her again. If this was her, slowed…

Alright, no more playing nice.

Jack slipped behind one of the crates a merc was using to fire at Garrus, and his eyes widened as he was lifted into mid-air then thrown at Shepard as she rounded the corner. Her arms full of flailing soldier, Shepard was for a moment still; and Jack took the opportunity to knock her legs out from under her with a well placed blast before jumping on the merc sandwich to pummel the Spectre with biotic coated blows.

One bloody Shepard nose and a feeling of elation later, she and the fully armored merc were pushed off the Spectre as if they were children at play. She was so fucking strong thanks to those cybernetics, but wait! Shepard wasn't the only one that had them anymore!

This time when Shepard swung a fist as she rose, Jack's left hand caught it by the wrist and held it there while their limbs trembled with exertion. The stalemate didn't last long, though, the Omni-blade narrowly missing her face and the hand behind the blade digging into Jack's hair to wrench her head back. Stupid fucking hair! She howled with pain and rage, feeling the fistful of strands pulled from her scalp before headbutting Shepard in the face, the warmth of the Spectre's blood running down over her eyes before she felt Shepard's freed hand grasp her throat in a vice.

There was no give in that grip. It was a machine designed to squeeze the life from her limbs and she saw black spots in moments. Jack punched her repeatedly but may as well have been hitting a wall. She blasted the Spectre desperately with a shockwave that made her turn loose, but by the time she could suck in a breath the soldier was on her again with blows from her elbows and feet that sent her sprawling. She felt the soldier's weight on her, felt her chin held in place with one hand as the other began to strike her again and again and again until she no longer cared.

The beating stopped with the cracking sound of a sniper rifle.

Jack came to with Miranda hovering over her and the smell of medigel heavy in the air. She looked left to see Shepard standing over them both, a look of guilty concern on her blood-smeared face.
Miranda was asking her a question, but Jack was too busy coughing and chuckling. "Broke your fuckin' nose didn't I?" she asked with crimson coated teeth.

"Yeah," Shepard replied with a congested sniff and a lackluster smile, "Was a good fight. You alright?"

"Yeah," Jack said, a delicious, long lost warmth moving through her along with the aches and pains, "Never better." She held up a hand to Miranda who was watching her with a smirk, and was pulled to her feet. Looking to her right, she saw the expensively suited legs of Saracino on the ground, sticking out from behind his still crackling shield barrier. "Nice shot, Blue," she said.

"We're not done," Garrus said in a low voice to keep them focused, "There could be more hiding who knows where. We need to clear this nest."

Shepard nodded and began to split the team up but Miranda interrupted, "Not until I've had a look at you." Shepard sighed but acquiesced. She looked like warmed over shit.

Jack grinned at Garrus and thumbed portside, "Meet you back in a few?"

"Alright, but keeps comms open, just in case."

They found no resistance on this level. On her way back Jack came across Aria, who was beginning to stir, so Jack took a knee by the Asari to assist.

"Hey, you gonna make it?"

Aria's eyes opened and she groaned, pushing herself up on an elbow, "Yeah," she breathed before sitting up, "I take it we won?"

One of the guards curled up against the wall by them shifted, and Jack drew her pistol to aim it smoothly at his head before pulling the trigger. When she holstered it she found Aria watching her thoughtfully, "Yep. The rest are on the bridge."

She stood and offered Aria a hand, which she took in order to stand. Aria immediately began checking in on her forces while they walked back.

When they returned, Shepard was re-armed, "Aria, need a status report on your mercs."

"Chasing down stragglers," she replied, noting Shepard's different energy, "Did you get hit?"

"No," she said flatly, "I'm fine."

Aria narrowed her eyes amusedly, "Liar." When Shepard's brow furrowed she sighed, "Oh get over it, will you? Welcome to our world."

Miranda took a deep breath, clearly impatient, "Would someone like to tell us just what the hell happened back there?"

"No," Aria said firmly, "We really wouldn't."

Shepard gave Aria a hard look, "But we will, provided it doesn't leave this ship. First, let's lock this place down, there could be stragglers down in the hold." She looked at Jack and said, "You and Garrus, me and Aria."

"Me and Jack," Aria interrupted, "We've got unfinished business."
Miranda looked at the pair worriedly but Jack gave her a disarming grin, gesturing with an open hand to the Commando, "I'll be nice. I promise."

"I'll stay here and verify the ship's readiness, then," Miranda said, "We should get underway as soon as possible."

They split up and slipped down the ladders to freight in pairs.

Once they were alone, Jack couldn't resist asking a question, "So...what did you use on me back there? Never felt anything like it. Was like...a bomb went off."

Aria considered her carefully, thoughts masked, "Not a bad analogy I suppose. Not sure how you survived it after the first hit took down your barrier."

"Just lucky I guess," Jack smirked.

"False humility or not," Aria said, "You went toe to toe with me there for a bit. That doesn't happen."

"Often?"

"Ever."

Jack snickered. "'Bout time someone took you down a peg, then."

Aria rolled her eyes, but quieted down as they explored the darkened area lit only with data storage led's. When they didn't run into any resistance, or even another soul, she continued, "Who trained you to fight?"

"You're looking at her," she said with pride.

"Well, that explains a few things," Aria replied with a smirk.

Jack found herself warming to Aria's sarcasm, "What're you trying to say? You want another round?"

"Maybe later. If you are interested, of course."

Jack chuckled shaking her head, "Look, I'm taken, okay? Damn, you are hard headed."

Aria tilted her head slightly and stared, her jaw clenched, "I'm offering you a job. I want you to work for me."

Jack's natural suspicion kicked in, "Uh….why? You've got plenty of flunkies willing to die for creds."

"None that can do what you can. I've never seen a human like you Jack, but I'll tell you something...I think you can do more." She took a step closer, gaze intense, "Nobody will see you coming. On top of a very generous compensation package, I can refine your skills until they are razor sharp."

Normally Jack would have rejected any such offer out of hand but she had never seen what Aria could do. Against humans she was a large fish in a small pond; what she had seen from the Queen of Omega opened up a whole other arena. She found herself wanting that power. It would let her be who she was and support herself at the same time without 'much' risk of incarceration. Unfortunately it would also mean going back to Omega when the relays opened. Somehow she didn't think Miranda would be keen about sharing that address.
"Lemme think about it," she said, "But I definitely wanna see the 'compensation package'." Her words along with the quotations she made with her fingers were sarcastic.

"You're worried about your girlfriend," Aria drawled in disdain as they walked, "Don't be."

Jack's body tensed defensively, "You don't get to talk about her, sweetheart. You wanna press me, I can walk away right now."

"Relax," she said, her face alight after confirming that chink in Jack's armor, "You'll see. Just keep it in mind."

"Fine."

Shepard and Garrus patrolled in companionable silence, checking nooks and crannies for anyone still breathing. Garrus was watching her without looking directly at her, but she could still feel it.

"Go ahead. What's on your mind?" Shepard asked finally.

He still hesitated, not sure it was his place, "I gotta say, for someone who just won a battle, you look like a girl whose dog just died."

She shrugged, "Some of it I'll explain when we get back to the bridge. For the rest...I don't like killing potentially innocent people, you know that."

"I can give you a debate on their innocence, I think, but I know you. That look on your face isn't guilt."

She sighed and ran a glove through her hair. She wasn't ready to talk about it yet. She didn't even know what to think about it yet. He was just going to have to wait, "I just...have a lot on my mind and every time I turn a corner I find I have more to consider. I'd need a couple of hours and a few drinks to break it all down for you."

"Alright. What's next on your to-do list then? The quicker we knock it out the quicker we can get those drinks."

She smiled wryly and stopped to look at him, "You know, maybe that's one of the things bothering me? I don't have anything left on my immediate list."

Garrus grinned, his mandibles spreading, "Well that's just about the best news I've heard all day. We'll throw a party."

Just being with Garrus seemed to improve her mood. "I actually thought about that," she said with a grin.

They started walking again, "Is Anderson's old place in one piece?"

"Dunno," she mused. "Lots of vacancies there, though. I'm pretty sure we can find something posh."

"I seem to recall the hot tub was a hit."

"Riiight," Shepard chuckled, "I'll put that on the list of requirements."

A soft clang brought both of them to a standstill, their ears pricked. She and Garrus started moving forward, guns raised, but then the Turian stopped and put a hand over her scope, "Eh, we probably
shouldn't start shooting in here unless you wanna kill the data we just fought for."

"Shit," she exhaled, "You're right." The instinct she had to connect with Aria was squashed instantly. She didn't think she was going to be doing that again for awhile, if ever. She used normal methods instead and quietly checked in with her Omni, "Jack? Need a sitrep."

"All clear. We were heading back."

"We've got movement here. Need some biotic backup."

"On our way."

She extended the Omni-blade again and Garrus pulled a standard issue Turian knife. If whoever was around that corner was armed with a projectile weapon they might just decide they had nothing to lose, which put them at a disadvantage. She crept along the metal cage and peered around the corner slowly, then pulled back, swearing silently.

Garrus looked at her quizzically and she pointed back the way they came. When they were about ten feet away she whispered, "Workers, about a dozen of them."

"Armed?" came his returned whisper.

She pursed her lips and shook her head, then watched realization dawn on his face.

Garrus' shoulders slumped. He didn't like this anymore than she did. She saw Jack and Aria coming around the corner and put a finger to her lips for silence, then explained what they faced.

"I'll go talk to them," Aria said smoothly.

Everyone in the group knew what that meant. Shepard shook her head, the dread plain on her face, "It's my call. My responsibility."

Jack spoke up, "No, it's mine." Jack looked at Shep firmly, "Listen skipper, how about you sit this one out. We talked about my role on this run a long time ago, remember?"

She remembered. Boarding parties and executions.

"You can't even use a gun in there, what're you gonna do, go stab em all to death? Please."

She clenched her jaw stubbornly, but Jack persisted, "Come onnnn. You don't look so good. Why don't you let me get you your vengeance? Least I can do to pay you for that bit of fun back there, and I sure won't lose any sleep over these wanna-be Cerberus motherfuckers."

Shepard would, no matter who did the deed, but Jack was right. She gave the barest of nods and Jack was off down the hall. Garrus took her arm gently to pull her away but she yanked it back. She was going to listen. She was going to remember. Life as a Spectre was a noble calling, but some of the things they had to do in the name of the galaxy crossed the line. She never wanted this to be okay. Zhuang was right. She wanted peace to be her instinct, again.
Miranda paused her gentle prodding of Jack's back to regard Shepard incredulously, "Look, no offense, right, but this sounds utterly indefensible. I'm just supposed to trust." The word was stressed as she looked meaningfully at Aria, "That none of them are going to spew all of the secrets they know the moment they are cured? And why didn't you tell me about this before I risked my life by joining this insane enterprise?"

Miranda had a legitimate complaint but all Shepard could do was sigh and rub her eyes. They were looking to her for an explanation, for reassurance, and she couldn't give it to them. Furthermore, she realized she didn't want to. Aria could make fun of her reaction to what happened in the share all she liked but it had been...traumatic. The shame she felt at losing that battle of wills and the guilt when she had attacked her own willingly would stay with her for a very long time. Aria had months to process that loss of control; she had only moments. When combined with seemingly random anxiety attacks Shepard wasn't sure exactly what control she had left over herself, much less the ability to control everyone else's sense of well fucking being.

"She didn't tell you because we wouldn't allow it." Aria answered smoothly while giving Shepard the most tender look she had ever seen from the woman, if your definition of tenderness included rust on solid steel. "As far as your concerns, there are no guarantees. We have, in fact, allowed for the virtual certainty that our ailment will eventually be known.

"Allowed for it?" Miranda asked with an arched eyebrow, "Does that mean you have a plan?"

Aria smiled crookedly, "We've made decisions to protect us from that eventuality but the risk is still real." When that didn't appease her, Aria clenched her jaw and clarified, "This isn't an easy thing to explain. What I can tell you is that if we were cured tomorrow we already know who would be most likely to break and why and will take steps to ensure our own safety. Mutual destruction is a powerful dissuasion."

Shepard added, "And those steps extend to you and Liara. Tevos and I have discussed this at length and decided that my entire purpose going forward is to protect you and this data." She looked at the woman directly, allowing for no misinterpretation, "It's that important, Miri. We have backstories and false intelligence that will be released as common knowledge to divert anyone from knowing your activities. Even if word were to get out labeling you as the Shadow Broker you'd have an awful lot of shade."

Jack snickered, breaking the tension in the air, "Makes me wonder what other lines of bullshit you guys have been selling." She winced as Miranda found a particularly tender spot but covered it up with a cough.

Miranda continued her examination, her words a bit calmer now, "I want some influence on that storyline, if you please."

Shepard shrugged, "Don't see why that would be a problem. Are we good?"

She took a deep breath in consideration, then nodded, "We're good." She lowered her voice as she spoke near Jack's ear, "This might be a broken rib. We'll need to get you wrapped."

Jack made a face in response then sipped from a bottle looted from places unknown, "I'll be alright. Oh, and tough rocks, but I'm shaving my head again."
Miranda just shook her head and turned back to the others, "The ship is in good shape from what I can tell. The question is, where do we go from here?"

Shepard took a seat at the navigation station, "It's a fair question, but one that begs another. Do you even want to keep the data onboard this ship?"

"I don't see that we have another option," she replied thoughtfully, "At least until the relays are operational."

Shepard nodded, "It's a moving target, which helps to protect you, but sitting out here is gonna be a boring stint. You're gonna need a crew that can handle everything including repairs, support ships in case of attack and a port of call for supplies."

Garrus opined, "And this thing with the transponder...I think you need to reconsider it."

Jack asked, "Why? Seemed like they were hard enough to find this way."

"True," Garrus answered, "But if for any reason an official vessel does spot her the lack of a transponder is going to raise a lot of flags. They'll be forced to stop and board her, which exposes them to things they really shouldn't see and are going to be tough to explain. The Spectres can only get involved after the damage is done and I'm pretty sure Shepard isn't keen on having to eliminate innocent people."

He was kind enough to omit the word 'more', though she heard it anyway. "Yeah, that's a good point. If we can bake a backstory for the Shadow Brokers we can spin one for this ship. Let's get her legal." Shepard looked back at Miranda once again, "Any ideas for a crew?"

"Liara had some but nothing was finalized. I hope she'll be up and around soon so we can iron that part out."

"So essentially we need to find a place to park this thing and get it squared away," Shepard mused, "That means the Citadel, but it also means we have to cure the transponder problem first. She'll never make it that far without being stopped otherwise."

Aria answered quietly, "I can handle that part. Just need a day or two. There is the question of funding, however. I can't be expected to foot the bill for Shadow Broker business."

"Send me the bill," Miranda said nonchalantly before perking, "But be sure I get a good deal. Shepard will know if you are lying, right?"

Shepard forced a smile at the joke, "So we've got a couple of days to kill. Can we actually get a look at the data?"

"Haven't tried, but now's as good a time as any." Miranda glanced around to see who might share an interest but Shepard stopped her with a look, "So...we'll be right back then."

As they walked Miranda looked at her, "You feeling okay?"

"Sure. Fine." It was an instinct she couldn't shake, that response. While she hated how she felt she wanted to talk about it even less.

"You used the sedative I noticed. You want to tell me what happened?"

"Not particularly," she replied in a dead voice.
"I assumed that was why you wanted to talk."

"Oh, I really want to look at the data but I'm not sure we'll find what I need today. I need you to research something for me."

Miranda arched an eyebrow, curious, "What topic?"

Shepard pursed her lips, then spit it out, "Me."

Lawson actually chuckled, "You're serious?"

"Yeah."

Miranda's brow furrowed, "Right, start talking."

"I learned something rather disturbing from Saracino through the share before he died. Turns out the Collectors were directed to collect my body."

"That's not news."

"They were directed to bring it to Cerberus. To bring it to you. Did you know anything about this?"

The shock was plain on her face, "I…no, nothing at all. That…doesn't even make sense."

They took a few more steps aft before Shepard worked up the nerve to say it out loud, as if the utterance would given her suspicions form, "It does if the Reapers wanted you to rebuild me. That's what I need you to research. If they did, I want to know why."

"You think that data is in there?"

Shepard sighed, "I think it's possible. There was an interface on the Citadel that the Crucible allowed me to access. It represented the controlling program of the Reapers and allowed me to communicate with them. When we talked," she started to say, but there was so much conjecture here she couldn't put it into words, "Well we talked about a lot of things…point is when I refused to go along with its plans it said it would store all the data it had collected so it wouldn't be lost. It called itself the Catalyst. Start there."

They reached the banks of terminals in the aft section, the place where the data was accessed, and Shepard looked at the displays with a haunted expression, "If they meant me to be rebuilt then they had a purpose for me. I find that I'm questioning the whole thing, now. Was it too easy? What if it's not over? I'm worried, Miri. I'm worried about what that purpose is, if it's true. I need to know if I'm a threat."

"You're overreacting," Miranda said reassuringly without encroaching on her space, "You're simply upset that you attacked Jack. You're upset about a lot of things, but the last thing you are is a threat. You hear me?"

"Yeah, well put my mind at ease, would you, and confirm that?"

"Happy to. On one condition."

Shepard groaned, "I really don't want to talk about my feelings right now."

Miranda smiled, dimples stark on her face in the dim light, "When you want to talk, you'll talk. You'll like this one, I promise."
"Fine. What is it?"

"I want you to leave. Today. We'll be fine here. Jack will be with me and we'll get the ship to the Citadel. I want you to go to my place on the mountain and I want you to build your cabin."

She was totally confused, "Where is this coming from? That's your property, not mine. You want me to build a cabin?"

"You need a break," she explained patiently, "You need to do something different, something you are passionate about. I watched you very carefully that day we hiked and you were different, Shepard, you were engaged. You looked content. I want you to build that cabin and I want you and Liara to stay there as long as you like."

Shepard's eyes widened and her heart swelled. She didn't know what to say.

"But….what about you?"

Miranda waved a hand, "Jack doesn't like Vigil. If circumstances change we can talk, but I'm not giving up that property and have no desire to use it yet. Besides, I've got a lot of work to do here and am excited to get started. There will be no record of you owning property so everyone should leave you be."

It would be several weeks until the Normandy came home. She would be away from people. It would be quiet. She could figure things out. She could make a place for them where no one could intrude. It was very tempting. So tempting in fact the desire she suddenly felt for the idea filled her chest. Shepard swallowed hard and wiped her eyes roughly, then cleared her throat, "That is…so generous of you. I…" she managed before sniffing again and dropping her eyes, embarrassed at the display.

It was then that she found herself enfolded in the woman's arms. This woman who had saved her life not once, but twice. This woman who had been cold as ice for so long that Shepard thought the thaw would never come. This woman who had represented all she loathed until she didn't. This woman who held out a hand during her own recovery to lift and help her succeed when she thought she would surely fail. This woman. Her friend. The weight of her gratitude melted away what remained of her frosty reticence and she returned the embrace fully, unable to fight the tears any longer. "Thank you," she managed, somehow, as her voice broke.

"You are finished," came Miranda's appreciative reply close to her ear, "It's time to go home."

It wasn't true, of course. Her new work was just beginning. Regardless, the words loosened something so tightly wound within her that the release was akin to ecstasy. Just a short rest, she promised herself. If Miranda needed her she would come.

"Something's come up, and I need a few days to sort it out. A private matter," she told the Turian as closely to the truth as she could, "I need you to get them safely back to the Citadel. As a favor to me? When you get back look me up in Vigil and we'll get those drinks."

The Turian still looked worried, "If you're sure."

"I am, and I look forward to relaxing with you for awhile," she said with a genuine smile. That seemed to satisfy him, and she clapped him on the shoulder before turning to Aria, "Ready?"

The Asari nodded, and as they headed toward the port array they heard the trio discussing ship
names, "I've got an idea," Garrus crooned, "How about the Black Pearl?"

"What's that supposed to be?" Jack laughed, "Some kind of sex joke?"

Miranda's exasperated sigh carried down the hall, "This is supposed to be a cover, not an announcement that our cargo is actually stolen."

Shepard's fond grin didn't escape Aria's notice, but she just shrugged by way of explanation, "Kids."

They ducked into Dan's commuter and Shepard made for the pilot's seat before a smooth magenta hand brought her to a halt, "I think I'll take it from here."

"Wait, did someone criticize my driving again?"

Aria arched an eyebrow, "No, but this bird is hot and I know where I'm going so we can trade vehicles."

Now Shepard felt stupid and her cheeks warmed with it. Aria couldn't let it lie, though, "What's wrong with your driving?"

Shepard ground her teeth, "Nothing at all."

The Asari chuckled at her discomfiture while Shepard moved to the co-pilot chair. She stopped short when she noticed some suspiciously red and wet bits on and around the seat.

"Oh," Aria said with wicked delight, "Almost forgot about that."

Aria's motive for flying the ship was now perfectly clear, and Shepard gave her a glare before she rummaged for something to clean up the mess, "Sure you did."

She tried not to think about the Chief Investigator too much while she cleaned up what remained of him. The effort wasn't very successful, but she was finally able to put him out of her mind once they were moving. Aria's remaining mercenaries followed, giving them cover all the way.

"So," Shepard asked carefully after a bit, "How did you feel after you and the others were released? After the Illusive Man died, I mean."

Aria looked irritated at the question anyway, "Why don't you just share and get the information that way? I'm not going to hold hands with you all the way back."

Shepard tightened her jaw but understood her reasoning, "I don't know if I'm ever going to share again. That's why I asked."

Aria turned to look at her and said, "Then you know exactly how I felt." The rest she left hanging.

Unlike the rest of the Convergence, Aria had to endure that violation again today, not once but twice. Shepard reminded herself that when Aria needed her, she'd be there; it was all she could do to repay her. Utterances of gratitude would very likely be unwelcome, so instead of making things worse she quieted respectfully for the rest of the trip. She spent the time on her Omni, instead, handling minor business and rescheduling missed appointments through Zhuang. She reported her success to Tevos in couched terms and requested arrangements for her faux resignation, followed by filling out the appropriate forms for a real resignation from the Navy.

Writing the letter to her C.O. after they changed ships at a seedy depot in the Belt was surreal. She had never met the woman because she had never been reinstated, but the picture in her mind was and...
likely always would be the face of David Anderson.

Dear Naval Secretary Ashburn,

I submit this letter as resignation from my commission in the Alliance Naval Forces. I understand that, upon acceptance of this resignation, I will also receive a certificate confirming an honorable discharge. I am requesting detachment, effective immediately.

The reason I am requesting resignation at this time is to resolve an inherent conflict of interest between my commission in the Navy and the role I hold as a Special Tactics and Reconnaissance operative for the Galactic Council. While I hold the Navy in the highest esteem, to continue as things are would be a disservice to it should a future situation occur that placed me at odds with its purpose.

I was born on April 11th, 2154 and started my career in April of 2172 at the New Hope, Mindoir, Naval Recruitment Office. My commission is due to expire in April, 2188, but I request immediate detachment as I have not been officially reinstated due to my convalescence following the end of the Reaper War of 2186.

I am grateful for the time I have been a part of the Navy and hope to depart on good terms. Please contact me should you wish to discuss the matter further.

Sincerely,

Jordan L. Shepard

Hitting send sent chills through her, and a feeling of detachment followed her until they disembarked at the Citadel; where she looked Aria in the eye once again, neither of them willing to speak. She held out a hand, instead, a silent understanding of the commitment she was undertaking at some point in Omega's future passing between them. Aria took it in the spirit it was offered, and Shepard could almost recognize the distraction in her eyes for the sharing that was most certainly going on. Aria gave no farewell, simply turning to walk away. They would never be friends, she realized. She wasn't sure what they were, but at least they weren't enemies.

Shepard called Aethyta now that she was onboard. The Asari seemed surprised on the vidscreen, "Heya Shepard. Back already?"

"Mission accomplished," she said with a smile, "Was wondering if you could meet me at the Apollo in a few?"

"Heading out now. You hungry?"

"Heh….always, I think."

"Good, I'll bring a bite."

She smiled, "See you soon, then."

Shepard moved casually through the Citadel this time, its current desolate appearance flickering and alternating with the memories she had in her mind; memories of a bustling metropolis...and memories of a charnel house. How many times over the past million years had the station changed faces so drastically, she wondered? As she walked to the Commons she began to see more people engaged in repairs, in conversation and in commerce. They greeted her with smiles and Shepard knew they
would welcome her in the share if she wished. She wanted nothing less, but returned their warmth of expression as recompense.

Down the stairs she went, looking out the vast windows to the rest of the station and onto the platform that had once held so many tables full of people busily eating and busily living. Now there was only one, looking up at her expectantly.

Aethyta had a series of dishes laid out, ever the servant despite the power of her position. That humble purpose endeared her to Shepard; it was something she hoped to emulate despite the difference in their roles. Even if she hadn’t been hungry she would never insult the Matriarch with disdain for the effort.

"God, this is perfect. I don't know how you did it, but I'm starving," she said gratefully, taking the Asari's hand before taking a seat beside her. She added an Asari greeting, albeit in an imperfect tongue, "Lissen al' Athame laileth."

The brightening of Aethyta's face was all the thanks she needed, but wasn't all she received. "Well I'll be damned," she breathed. "The blessings of the Goddess be on you as well. You've been paying attention."

"Still have a lot to learn," she replied while salivating, her eyes fixed on the banquet before her.

"Oh go ahead, dig in," Aethyta said in a half laugh, "I wasn't the only one that pitched in for this. You've got some friends around here."

The dishes were a sampling of things she liked, from Asari seafood to Mindorian stew. She wasted no time, washing it down with sparkling water while the Matriarch watched her with amusement. Once her hunger began to sate she pressed a napkin to her lips and gave her future father in law her full attention, "Thank you. Needed that."

"Vengeance whets the appetite," she quipped, "And your hunger is great. I approve. Too bad Liara isn't here to take care of the rest!"

"Did you really just say that?" Shepard chuckled, her cheeks reddening for a second time today.

"I did!" she said boldly as if she was ever anything but, "You know, when you were gone before the war she was inconsolable. Grief can be a kind of poison if you let it. She changed because of it, you get me?"

Shepard nodded. There were depths to Liara now that hadn't been there before she had been revived. Some of them were bitter, she remembered. Their reunion on Illium had been terribly awkward, as if Liara couldn't allow herself to believe she had been successful despite the fact Shepard was standing right in front of her. Expecting the worst from the world and from people made her pessimistic and hard, a stance that only began to soften once she held the reins of the Shadow Broker herself. The experiences created other depths in her character too, though, and some of them were sweet and complex as Shepard had discovered. The memory of those moments brought an unbidden smile to her lips.

"Too much of it can twist you and she's had a lot already," Aethyta continued, "Don't let it be too much. You gotta remind her of the good things to outweigh the bad."

Her brow furrowed and her face dropped. She understood.

"You're struggling too, aren't you?" Aethyta asked thoughtfully.
"Yeah," she said quietly.

"I get it," Aethyta said carefully after a few moments of consideration, "You need to be strong for her, though. Can you do that?"

Shepard took a deep breath and nodded, "I was planning to propose when she got back but I think that would be a mistake, now. What do you think?"

Aethyta sat back in her chair, "It would be bold but I'm not sure bold is what she needs right now. I think she needs some healing time, some building up. So do you."

Shepard snorted derisively and Aethyta smirked. It was strength the Asari needed to see in a potential mate for her daughter and she provided it without a thought, regardless of the truth in the Matriarch's words, "I've got a plan, actually. I wanted to get your opinion on something."

"What's that?"

"Asari decor," she replied with a crooked grin.
By the time Liara opened her eyes she knew; that small familiar presence in her mind was gone and she felt alone in a way that shamed solitude. Cerulean eyes looked around the medbay to the back of Doctor Chakwas where she was bent over a microscope. She looked numbly at her hands and found her arms mottled with purple splotches and spider-like lines. They hurt, and the answering pulses elsewhere told her that her arms weren't the only thing so marred. She pushed herself upright and the movement alerted Tali, slumped as she was in a chair beside the bed.

"Liara?" she asked sleepily, "How do you feel?" That alerted the Doctor who moved to her other side, and Karin looked at her with a pleasant smile and careful expression.

"I've felt better," she said slowly, "But it appears I live."

"That was a brilliant thing you did out there," Chakwas said as she began to check vitals, "Brilliant and very brave."

"If I had paid attention to my oxygen levels earlier it wouldn't have been necessary," she argued, her hand sliding down to her abdomen, "And my child would still be alive."

Tali tutted and hugged her, "I'm so sorry. We were going to tell you."

Liara patted the Quarian's arm, trying not to react to the pain her embrace was causing, "I know you were. It's okay." She turned to Karin, "Would you mind if I stood? Lying down is uncomfortable."

"That's fine dear, just stay here until I finish clearing you, alright?"

"Of course. Tali? Would you mind bringing me some water?" Her heart warmed at how quickly her friend moved to get it. No matter how alone she might be feeling, it was clear she was not. Her lungs filled with air, abundant fresh air, and she slid her legs off the side of the bed so she could stand. A little dizziness made her sway but she let it pass. When Karin offered her some painkillers she declined, "It is bearable. I will let you know if I change my mind."

The water she gratefully accepted and the flavor of it was one of the finest things she had ever tasted. A natural reaction to a near-death experience, her intellect coldly informed her. She licked her lips and gave Tali a smile to make her feel better. It worked, "Does Shepard know?"

"I had Garrus go to her with the news himself," she replied.

"That was kind of him to do, and kind of you to think of it. How did she take it?"

"I'm not really sure," Tali admitted uncertainly, "I just got a message from Garrus but it was cryptic. It sounds like there's something bigger going on, so I have no doubt she's hip deep in it."

"What happened, Tali? Who did this?" she asked, trying to maintain a modicum of calm.

Tali answered hesitantly, "One of the crewmembers of the Hephaestus sabotaged your suit. I noticed something was wrong when I saw you venting but I couldn't reach you with comms. Before I could sound the alarm and have someone pick you up he jumped me. Would have killed me, too, if Vedra hadn't stalled him. Ashley got wind of it and busted in with Marines. He's dead."

Liara could feel grief and anger twisting her face, "Why?"
Tali looked to the Doctor behind her, clearly looking for backup so she wouldn't have to answer. Chakwas spoke up behind her, "I don't think this is a good time fo."

Liara put her hands on Tali's suit aggressively and growled, "Tell me, right now."

Tali shook her head helplessly, "Liara, I."

"Now!" she screamed. Such an uncharacteristic outburst terrified the Quarian, her eyes widening in the depths of her suit before she crumbled.

"Because of you and Shepard," she said with dread and sorrow, "Because he didn't….because he hated the thought of an alien having her child."

Chakwas' hands grasped Liara's shoulders from behind and pulled her away from Tali before the first sob tore from her lips. She ripped herself from the Doctor's grasp, the pain of it on her inflamed skin unfelt in the river of it drowning her inside. Her feet led her to her old room behind the medbay and she locked herself in before they could stop her. There, she allowed it to take her. A part of herself was coldly watching as always, murmuring that these feelings were natural and expected; but the destruction she wrought on the room and its contents was anything but.

She didn't know how long she raged, but it may have been an eternity. Eventually she was spent, despite the emotions still simmering beneath her skin. She felt like a white dwarf star, the majority of her fuel violently flung into the cold of the universe until the force of gravity shrank her to a hollow shadow of her former self. When reason returned, so did the realization of consequence. It was time to reassure her friends, Tali especially.

She opened the door and came out to meet their cautious eyes with equanimity, an apology on her lips. They accepted it. Of course they did. They had seen the emotion she kept so carefully chained and paled before it, but their concern remained undimmed. She embraced them both gently, then asked to be released from care.

"I'm fine," she said calmly in response to the doubtful look on the Doctor's face, "I'll clean the mess, but I would like to shower and eat first."

"I can't let you leave if you are going to be a danger to yourself or this crew, Liara. You know that."

"The only person to which I would be a danger, Doctor, is already dead. I will cause no further issues." Her eyes moved to take in Tali, "I do not wish to be alone, however. Tali, would you go with me?" The question calmed them appropriately and the Doctor eventually agreed.

"Let me know if you have trouble sleeping," Karin doted as they walked to the door, "I'm happy to give you something for a couple of days that may help."

"Thank you, I will report how I feel this evening."

She greeted the crew that consistently stopped them to give their well wishes. Their effort reinforced that not all humans were like the one that attacked her. They were a young species that struggled with xenophobia because they felt threatened, and she could understand that as a natural progression to living amongst the stars. What frustrated her was their inability to grow past it after all the sacrifices they had made, together. If the Reaper war could not convince them of their error, what could? Must she be wary of this ignorance forever?

Despite the support of the crew she was relieved to return to her room. She turned to Tali apologetically, "I am afraid I am poor company. Thank you for your dedication to my well being. It means a great deal to me."
"You would do the same. Go clean up. Don't worry about me. I'll bring some food up here so you can just relax, okay?"

"That sounds good," she said with an encouraging smile.

More well wishes slowed her walk to the washroom, but the crew was kind enough to give her an empty space once she entered. Liara ducked her head under the hot water once she stepped in, hands sliding down around her now quiescent center. She stayed there, soaking as she whispered a prayer for her little girl. An image of her Mother holding her little one closely, whispering wisdom into her small ear as she had done so often for her took shape in response. The tears that came to her then were less violent, less raw. She took her time, lingering in that spot in her mind that her child had once warmed. She felt sorry for humans, then, that they couldn't experience the lives of their own children the way she could; could never convey the love she felt so strongly in a single breath. If they could, she thought, they might not be so brutal to themselves and to others. Comforted by the vision Athame had provided, she carefully cleansed herself, the discomfort of the scrubbing dimmed by the knowledge that it was proof she still lived.

When she stepped out, she beheld herself in the mirror, eyes travelling over the fine web of purple lines blending with the scars she had earned since the day Shepard found her. Perhaps she would look into some of the advances Miranda had developed and return her battered skin to a semblance of normality. The remembered heat of Shepard's lips pressed against those imperfect blemishes made her reconsider, though, and sent a rush of warmth elsewhere. It was entirely inappropriate, she scolded herself, though she hadn't the energy for much self flagellation.

She dressed and then returned to her room, then approached the wide port where she watched the stars slowly slide by in shades of red and blue. Time passed but she didn't know how much before she heard the door slide open. She turned to see Tali set down two plates and glasses on her desk and pulled up a chair.

"How are you feeling?" she asked carefully.

"Oh…..I'll live," she replied, settling into her chair amongst the multiple displays, "How long have I been out?"

"A couple of days," she said, stirring her dextro rations around her plate. The simple gesture reminded Liara how fortunate she was, and how unsympathetic she must seem to the Quarian, cut off from the planet her people had just resettled. They both shared an unfulfilled longing for 'home', but Tali had her life's dream snatched away just before she could enjoy the fruits of her species' labor.

"You must be terribly tired of this food. I wish I had something else to give you," Liara said softly, looking at the steaming fare that awaited her with barely concealed hunger.

Tali shrugged, "We've been sucking our food in through induction ports for so long we don't know what we are missing. Thankfully my biofilters prevent me from smelling anything….appetizing."

"I look forward to visiting Rannoch with you soon. No one deserves a home more than you do."

"You know I still don't know what we are going to eat when we get there? I never did pay much attention in biology."

"Look at it this way," Liara said with a tired effort at levity, "Culinary adventure awaits."

But she could wait no longer, two days of forced fluids doing little to ease the cramping of an empty
stomach. She didn't stuff her mouth like she had seen so many of the crew do, in a hurry to get to their next task and unwilling to give the moment its due. That being said, she may have been a bit less than dignified with the first bite of eggs.

She covered her faux pas by looking at messages while she chewed. A message from Shepard and her Father waited. She opened Shepard's first and her expression softened as she read.

"Would you mind if I sent a message to Shepard while we eat?" she asked. "I want her to know I'm well."

"Sure. Tell her I said hello," Tali replied as she drank. "Oh, you can tell her I want to know what's going on, too. I don't like being kept in the dark."

She smiled and nodded, taking another bite before beginning and rereading her lover's words more carefully the second time. When she read the part about the hatred to which Shepard's species still held, she had to pause and maintain control of her emotions. Who would better understand Liara's own frustration than the very woman fighting against this poisonous hate in her own people?

She shook her head and raised a hand to reassure Tali when the woman saw the crack in her mask, "It's okay. I just need a moment."

Shepard,

Tali is here with me and she is a great comfort. Though the depths of my grief are beyond sight the Goddess saw fit to comfort me with an image of our daughter cradled in my Mother's arms. It warms my heart that neither of them are lonely, a circumstance you and I will enjoy in just a while longer.

Tali told me what she knew of my attacker. While I am not violent in spirit it was fortunate that he met his end with Ashley. If you are righting wrongs then there is a story we haven't heard and I hope you'll correct that, now. She and I both have nothing but time to whet our worry for you and Garrus. Put our minds at ease?

I am as certain that you will return from your mission as I am about my next drawn breath. What adversary could gainsay you now?

Counting the seconds,

Liara

What she wanted to do was ask about the Reaper data, but access to that secret information would have to wait until she was back on the Rachnid, which couldn't happen until the next discharge.

She smiled at Tali, "I'm sure she'll respond as soon as she is able. So tell me in the meantime, have there been any technical problems on the journey so far? When do you expect us to arrive at the Arcturus Stream?"

Liara finished her breakfast while Tali talked with relief about engines, calculations, and harmonics instead of what happened. Her friend's discomfort was natural. How does one support a friend in such a terrible situation? How do you help them feel normal again? With talk of normal things.

They were chuckling over something Garrus said regarding calibrations when the door chimed.

"Come in," Liara called, unlocking it with her voice. It slid open and Ashley entered somewhat hesitantly.
"I wanted to check in on you," she said, her voice tinged with concern, "See how you were doing? The Doc told me you were here."

"While I look a bit like your Frankenstein monster, I am physically well, Commander. Would you care to join us?"

Ashley smiled at the reference, satisfied that she was indeed recovering, "For a few minutes, sure. I wanted to talk to you about something, but it might be too soon."

"Come sit, then, and let us find out."

She did, Tali scooting her chair over to the side to give her room, then stacking the dishes before sitting once again.

"It's about the Rachnid," Ashley began, "I know you'll want to be returning there and I would like to insist that you take a shuttle back when you are ready."

"That would break the fuel restriction guidelines set forth for this mission. Do you have concerns about my continued use of the EVA equipment?"

"No. No, I actually don't. It just seemed to me that you might not want to tackle that experience just yet. Plus, I feel some guilt that I didn't see anything like this coming."

Tali and Liara shared a look before she replied, "What do you mean?"

Ashley shifted in her seat uncomfortably, "There were...some indications of unrest among the people of Benning when they learned who you were and what your relationship was with Shepard. I did my best to investigate who and why and thought I had settled the matter. I was clearly mistaken. The attack on you was my fault, and I hope you can forgive me."

Liara's eyes narrowed in thought, "Commander, you did not commit this act. You tried to stop it and saved Tali's life in the process. I'm not sure if you are simply trying to make me feel better but the misplacement of fault won't accomplish that."

Ashley looked relieved, but Liara wasn't done, "I am concerned, however, that you did not bring this to our attention. We could have taken steps to protect ourselves." Her eyes narrowed as she considered this new information, "It means that you had other priorities than protecting our lives. What were those priorities, exactly?"

Ashley's coloring face told her she was on the right track, "I....you..."

Tali stepped forward, "This was too soon. Ash, maybe come back another time."

"No," Ashley said gruffly, holding up a forestalling hand, "She's right. I owe her an explanation. I owe you an explanation. But that's all I've got, Liara. It's not a reason because there is literally no excuse for not telling you."

Liara could feel the breath coming quickly in her chest, the lines and distortions on her skin and
especially across her face throbbing with the increase in blood pressure. She reminded herself that Ashley was being forthright and did her best to see reason when all she instinctively felt was rage. She nodded for the woman to continue.

"Vedra was part of an organization like Cerberus, called Terra Firma. So were many of the inhabitants of Benning. They are a political group that don't have the same resources that Cerberus did, but they have their own methods." She took a deep breath to gird herself before saying the rest, "I know because I used to be one of them."

The hypocrisy of that statement galled her, "You were one of them but attacked Shepard for accepting Cerberus' gift of life?"

"Yeah, that's right," Ashley retorted defensively, "I left Terra Firma when it was obvious that they were wrong... when the experiences that I shared with you and with all the other species Shepard recruited showed me that just because you were different than us, you weren't 'alien'. When Shepard came at me wearing that sigil? After everything we had done together? And continued to help them? I was livid. I've known Vedra since I was a kid, Liara, figured that if I could get her onboard she could sway the rest. I never wanted you or anyone else to know that I was once part of the same mindset that nearly destroyed our entire race by helping the Reapers, alright? My priority was to fix this quietly, and that's why I didn't tell you; why I didn't tell anyone."

Liara saw the truth of it in her face. Ashley was embarrassed. She had erred, but it was in the name of correcting a flaw she had seen in her own kind. Her instincts still rose bright like flames; there should be justice for this, they said. But what would castigating Ashley accomplish when the culprit was already dead? Liara was not human. She would not let hatred rule her the way it had so many of them.

*It's a more primitive part of myself that's stolen me away from my mourning to right these wrongs,* were the words from her lover. Perhaps Shepard was already getting justice for them both.

She dropped her gaze and felt herself begin to calm, though the words still came forth with effort, "I forgive you, Commander. I would hope that you will be more transparent with any similar events in the future?"

"There will be no similar events, you have my word. If I have any inkling otherwise you will know immediately," Ashley said, her face ashen with remorse.

She nodded slowly, "I agree to take the shuttle the next time we discharge. I won't be leaving the Rachnid again until we have completed our tasks in Arcturus, but I will be available for vidcom anytime it is required."

"I understand. Liara, I am truly sorry."

Liara held her gaze for a long moment, long enough that she began to feel it was punitive, so she changed the subject, "When is the next discharge?"

Tali answered for her, "We should be reaching the M-276-Gamma system sometime tonight."

"Thank you. If you both will excuse me I think I will take some time for reflection before I return to my work."

It wasn't until they left that she broke down again.
Liara's return to the Rachnid was uneventful, the pilot of her shuttle quiet and respectful. Many of the Rachni waited for her at the dock, their mandibles clenching and unclenching in distress for her loss. She moved among them and touched them each in turn, acknowledging their grief and reassuring them that she would go on without words.

Glyph approached her at the entrance to the place most commonly considered 'the bridge', "Greetings, Dr. T'Soni. You have several messages awaiting your review."

"Thank you. From whom?"

"You have….six messages from Miranda Lawson and you have….four messages from Feron.

She took a seat before her terminal and waved it on after only a moment of hesitation. Normalcy was the key to recovery and this had been her normal for years. Feron continued his work like a chronometer, reliable and precise. She answered his questions and provided him the direction he needed after assuring him that she was well.

Miranda's updates made her smile unexpectedly. There was the knowledge she sought about her lover, the revenge taken on her behalf, the data, and now their new ship. It had all come together much more quickly than she had anticipated and that meant she had a number of action items to address.

She didn't restrain her emotions where they dwelt like cooling embers in her mind, but let her fingers distract her with work sorting information about crew, ship modifications, likely locations where the ship would be undisturbed, contingency routes and hiding places in Sol and Euler. As she worked she heard the Queen moving into the room, then felt one of the Rachni's prehensile tentacles touching her shoulder reassuringly.

"I'll be fine," she said quietly.

"Yes," came the pleased response, "You will."
The days grew shorter and the nights colder as the weeks passed. Shepard was up before dawn prepping the day's projects for the cabin and staying up late into the night talking with Liara and Miranda. Garrus arrived a week in once the Icarus, as they had christened her, was up and away. At first, he simply gave her space, keeping the talk light and working side by side. The labor left her more content by inches every day; but try as he might, the tireless Turian failed to keep his eyes open as long. Sometimes Shepard watched him sleep while she waited for a response from the Normandy or Liara. More often she sat for hours looking up at the stars and thinking.

The Shadow Broker team was up and running almost as soon as Liara was and Shepard briefly considered teasing her about the irony of her returning to work so soon after all the advice to do the opposite Shepard received following her awakening; but in the end decided to keep it to herself. There wasn't much else for Liara to do there, after all, and she needed the distraction.

Despite her bubbly personality, Tali was having difficulties with the attempt on her life as well. Garrus mentioned the Quarian's struggles to Shepard one afternoon as they labored in the stony ground. It wasn't as if Tali never risked her life, she knew, or never had a gun pointed at her; but a cold blooded murder attempt wasn't something she was accustomed to, and the thought of it being someone she thought she knew and had worked with for months troubled her. She wanted to give that trust again, but found herself questioning the crew's motives and digging into their beliefs, sometimes with confrontational results.

Tali vacillated about her feelings on the matter and unfortunately didn't feel as if she could discuss it with Liara. The Asari was buried in her work, she said, and Tali felt that broaching the subject would be unwelcome. Sometimes she worried that Liara's distance was somehow her fault; that perhaps she had done something wrong one day, or something she had neglected to do in the next.

The answer seemed obvious to the pair as they dug and Shepard took comfort in that clarity for a change, not that she would wish that kind of internal confusion on anyone. Garrus reassured Tali that Liara was simply dealing with this pain in her own way, and Shepard asked if Liara would be comfortable with dedicating some time to relieving Tali's concerns. Liara never meant to hurt Tali's feelings, after all; there was no one she was closer to in the galaxy there, literally, a feeling to which Shepard keenly related.

Shepard eventually confided her latest fears to her best friend over a campfire tended within the gaping structure they were building, cups of liquor in their hands and the first snow of the year gently falling outside.

"Alright then, what did Miranda find?" Garrus asked dubiously. He obviously couldn't believe that Shepard would endanger anyone.

Shepard exhaled through her nose, made a face, and shook her head, "Not much but she's still looking, she says. The only thing we can confirm is that the Catalyst was programmed to find a way to stop organics and synthetics from killing one another. The whole synthesis thing might have worked along some very narrow lines of logic, but you saw what it did to every species," She sipped from her cup and enjoyed the burn now that the temperatures were dropping.

"Monsters," he growled with distaste.

Shepard nodded, "There's no way anyone would ever willingly agree to become that, and then there's the part where they are pretty much automatons and need direction for everything, not much
of a long term solution. So we tried looking at things from the Reaper's perspective for a change."

They shared a smirk at that thought, before she pressed on, "He seemed to be convinced that the only way organics and synthetics wouldn't fight would be if they shared common physiology, something that made each of them closer to what the other was. Maybe he thought that common ground would make them related enough not to exterminate, which I thought was stupid. It's not like we have any qualms about exterminating pretty much anything we don't like if the stakes are high enough."

"Heh," Garrus intoned, "We don't have a very good track record, it's true."

"So that can't be it, I said. There's got to be more."

"What do you think it is?"

She took a deep breath, "Well, there's a couple things that keep poking me. First, he called himself the Catalyst. Just start there."

"Catalyst…." Garrus said, following her lead and pulling up the definition on his Omni, "A substance that causes or accelerates a chemical reaction without itself being affected."

"This Catalyst didn't strike me as being loose with his words, Garrus. He's had what, millions of years to think about this problem?"

"So he obviously saw himself as an agent of change; but maybe that's just a title, a way of explaining his role in your language, something you'd understand."

"Maybe, but there was something else. At one point I asked him to just go away and leave us alone, that we didn't need his help. He said something then that came back to me on the Brakenbah.." she looked thoughtful as she remembered, "He said they had been created to solve a problem, and that they couldn't stop until that problem was solved."

She looked directly at him, "Now let me ask you something. You are an all powerful species with millions of years of building up and tearing down galactic civilizations in the pursuit of solving a problem. The problem is that these new races won't willingly accept the artificial elements necessary to stop killing each other. So...how do you get them to think that the whole thing is their idea?"

Garrus hummed, "You'd have to sell it to them. They'd have to think it's the answer to all their problems."

"That salesperson can't come from the galactic invaders ready to destroy everything and everyone, obviously. It's got to come from the inside," she said, "Someone who isn't afraid to use the technology offered and create a compelling story for its use. Someone...who truly believes they are stealing that tech and turning it into a weapon for the good guys."

"Shit," Garrus breathed, "Someone like the Illusive Man." His eyes lingered in the flames as he followed the links in the chain, then they widened and looked at her, "You think you are that tech." At her nod he shook his head, "One big problem with your theory."

Shepard was eager, "I'm listening."

"Well, the Crucible kinda killed you on the Citadel. Makes it hard to spread, doesn't it?"

Shepard grunted, "I thought about that. The Catalyst went out of his way to make sure I'd survive the Crucible blast. Why? Why save the person who destroyed you, unless you were needed for something afterward? In fact, how likely is it in your mind that the Reapers would have allowed the
Crucible to be built upon generation after generation….and that the Crucible ended up simply leading to a consensus program so that we could discuss the matter? It just doesn't add up, Garrus."

She looked at him steadily, though her gaze was far away, "I don't think the Crucible was ever intended to be a weapon. I think it was a self destruct mechanism."

Garrus was trying his best to keep up.

"They let themselves be destroyed," she explained. "Think about it. If I'm right, it's because they completed their program," she pointed to herself, sadly. "Look, here's the hero of the Reaper wars, bolstered by technology so astounding that it can help everyone everywhere be more than they are. Wouldn't you like a taste?"

Garrus' eyes widened in understanding, "And Miranda waltzes in and perfects the tech so everyone can have it."

"Billions of people across the galaxy want it. We've already distributed a lot of that information. Miranda's made a killing."

"And they're all using it to repair the casualties caused by the war."

"I mean, I can't think of a better advertising campaign," Shepard confirmed with an outstretched hand. "So let's look at best and worst case scenario. Best case is that the Catalyst actually meant well and this will truly help us all overcome some hard-wired necessity to kill each other. Worst case?" she waited for Garrus to fill in the blanks.

"There's something else in the tech that we know nothing about. Something that could later change us all."

Shepard nodded and reclined against the wall, tilting back her cup and licking her lips.

"I don't know what's going to happen, and that scares the hell out of me. Worse, there's not much we can do to stop it now without causing widespread panic."

"So Miranda's looking for proof," he said thoughtfully.

Shepard nodded and refilled her mug, "Pretty much brings you up to speed." She shook her head wryly, "Best part? I get to tell Liara that she did all that work to get my body back for nothing. How you think she'll take that?"

"Oh brother," Garrus sighed, then laughed before taking the bottle himself. "Speaking of troublesome secrets, Tali wants to know what's going on and I'd like to tell her."

"Yeah, I thought you might," she replied after a moment. "You know I trust you, right? Kinda obvious."

"You saying you don't trust Tali?"

"It's not that. I have to be careful, especially if someone has a great amount of responsibility for their people. You might be a Primarch soon, but Tali is already an Admiral. There may come a point where loyalty to the Quarians is more important, and I wouldn't blame her for choosing her own. I have to protect myself, Liara and now Miranda, and that's why I haven't said anything to Wrex, as an example. He is a pragmatist; and while I love that about him, it means I have to keep my guard up. I need to be sure that her allegiances won't be a problem before I can make that decision. You understand?"
"You need to know that? Or Liara does?"

"Hey, if Liara's willing to take the risk then I'll back her up, of course. I have to make sure she understands those risks, is all."

"Yeah? Well you need to understand the risk of me telling Tali that I can't talk about this stuff," he responded with a grin.

Shepard chuckled around a mouthful of whiskey, then nodded. "Tell you what, I'll make the case to Liara and then let her decide. Not like you could really give Tali the details over reg comms anyway."

"Fair enough."

Shepard peered at him through narrowed eyes, "You do realize you are throwing in with galactic criminals, right? This pretty much goes against everything you and your father stood for."

"Not true. In all the time I've spent with you I learned one very important lesson. Sometimes the right thing isn't the prudent thing, and sometimes it's not even the legal thing. No matter who you are or what the situation is, the 'right thing' just might come with a price, and a good person simply isn't afraid to pay it. All we can do is try to be on the right side when it counts, my friend, and if I'm to be associated with a Shadow Broker that keeps important information out of the wrong people's hands and gifts it to the right ones, then I'll gladly take the role of your Robin Hood with all the risks. I think Tali would agree, or I'd never suggest otherwise."

Shepard looked into the flames for a few moments before answering, "Doesn't that make us the same as Terra Firma?"

"If you weren't fighting for the wellbeing of every race in the galaxy it might. It's an important distinction." He put his hand on her knee until she looked at him, "Hey, if I thought you were going off the righteous path I'd say so. I'll always say so. We're going to make mistakes, that's life. Let's just do our best not to."

Shepard smiled, her eyes softening, then lifted her cup. "To the right thing," Shepard toasted, "May it never bite us in the ass."

"Here, here."

They made good progress on construction and visitors stopped in from time to time to help. Wrex brought a crew for some heavy lifting that included one boisterous Grunt. Jacob stopped by and surprised Garrus with some quality dextro-based cuisine that had him smiling for hours. The Council actually stopped by one rainy day and sat in the only finished room in the house to stay dry. Aria had shared everything that happened on the Brakenbah with them, but Tevos wanted to check in on her when they realized her decision not to share wasn't temporary.

Shepard convinced them that all was as well as it could be, then asked Tevos to return so they could discuss the plans she had for finishing the interior. She agreed, then appeared again when the weather cleared.

Shepard greeted her in an approximation of the Asari way and was pleased when Tevos corrected her gently. Her hand movement was a bit too brusque and the smooth unspoken reference to the elements was too hurried.
"Nothing in haste, remember?" Tevos said in her calm and even voice before demonstrating the technique; and Shepard returned her smile when she did it correctly.

"I'm glad you came. Thank you for taking time out of your schedule for me."

Tevos nodded gracefully, and Shepard began to walk her through the house she was building for Liara. The north wall with the tall hearth would represent fire and keep the coldest wall warm all winter. The eastern wall would be filled with windows to greet the wide vista and the morning sun, representing air. The southern wall, representing water, would house a running waterfall to keep the air moist and tanks filled with fish; and the west wall was literally made out of earth, solid granite that made up the mountain beneath them. The entire foundation had been cut into the rockface and a basement built in the space left between the slope and the horizontal line along the exterior. In a nod to her parent's old house on Mindoir a porch ran along that same exterior, and the second floor housed two well sized bedrooms and baths. Shepard was sparing no expense on the fundamentals, having little use for the money she earned over the course of her career. The pleasure evident in Tevos' eyes said she was impressed, and Shepard felt a thrill of pride at the sight of it.

"Now all I need to do is decorate. I realize a timber house in the middle of nowhere isn't exactly Thessia, but your rooms in Vigil were beautiful, and I hope you can help me capture a bit of that here."

Tevos tilted her head, "Do you know much about our history as a people?"

"Not as much as I would like. What I got through the share was more... recent."

Tevos' gaze pierced her own, "I used to believe that we were ancient. After all, we were the species that first discovered how to use the relays, the ones who found and first populated the Citadel and the ones that established intergalactic politics and commerce. It is easy to believe that one is.....superior with that kind of history." She paced the length of the first floor space before turning back to her, "Now we know just how small we are. We have the benefit of long lifespans but we are still...small. If the Reapers had not existed we would likely be slaves to another race, if the truth were told." She paused again, the topic clearly troubling her, "We started as farmers, Shepard, as fishermen, just as you did. We worshiped gods of the elements, gods of the harvest, gods of fertility, just as you did."

Tevos approached her again, her eyes soft, "I tell you this because it is important that you see our similarities instead of our differences. You honor me and you honor Liara with your inclination to learn our ways. So learn from us, by all means, so long as you understand that we share a very common past. You want to make Liara feel at home," she said before she put her palm against Shepard's chest, "But she is at home here. Then she placed a gentle fingertip to Shepard's temple, "And here. Do you understand?"

For Tevos to say such things reflected doubts she had clearly been grappling with. It was an expression of trust as well as advice, and she couldn't help but admire the strength behind it, "I do, and I thank you."

Tevos inclined her head again, but Shepard couldn't resist breaking the formality, "I still want to know where you got those curtains, though."

Their chuckles filled the cabin, another of many such moments of mirth that would blossom there.

The day the Normandy was scheduled to open the Relay from Arcturus to Earth and return home
had been whipped up into a frenzy by the media. The progress on their repairs had been one of the top stories every day for the last month and every scientific theory and possibility whether good or bad had been dissected morning, noon and night.

Shepard watched no vids from the cabin. Her knowledge came from the source, after all, and Liara was much more pleasant to interact with than Khalisah al-Jilani. She did hear that the reporter stalked Zhuang for the better part of a month trying to track her down, which amused and horrified her at the same time. Her assistant had made arrangements for any crews that needed to come out and assist on the project, such as the blasting for the foundation; and had been careful to arrange Shepard and Garrus' absence for those events as well, lest word of her quiet sanctuary be released to the world. The war that kept Shepard and Liara apart and the tragic loss of their child had been publicized to the point of nausea and she didn't want to give that dying fire any fuel at all. Fortunately, the brave and tireless crews of the Normandy and Hephaestus were now the darlings of the galaxy.

Even with her military discharge, she and everyone else related to a member of the Normandy crew had been officially invited aboard the SSV Killimanjaro to greet the ship when she returned. Hackett was also going to be there, she learned, as well as major dignitaries from each race. Invitations had also been sent to past surviving members of her crew as well, so there would be a lot of familiar faces. Once the cabin was complete, Garrus returned to his fleet to get some things done before the event.

But Shepard found herself with a problem. She could no longer wear her dress blues or any other kind of uniform for the event, so she called a friend. Jack arrived with her and Aethyta had arrived only just that morning. Shepard gave them a tour, careful to credit the Turian for every bit of labor he had put in at her side. She couldn't have done it without him. Her increased strength was helpful but as every builder knew, there was no multiplier like another person.

Miranda seemed very pleased with the result, and after the tour handed Shepard a folded document deeding the place over, just missing Shepard's signature.

"What's this? You don't need to do this," she protested.

"Yeah well, I kind of do. I've been looking at all the pictures you sent and I got to thinking. As much effort as you've put in here I couldn't ever really consider building over it. You've done quite a lovely job." She tilted her head at Shepard's troubled look, "When you are ready to own this place and handle the scrutiny, sign it and make it official. Until then, it's status quo, right? Call it an early wedding present. Whether you meant it or not you've made me a very wealthy woman. It's the least I could do."

"Eh," Aethyta interjected, "Sad to say doll, but Shep's not springing the question yet."

"Tch," Was Miranda's good-natured reply, "You don't need to be an oracle to predict where these two are headed."

"That's very kind," Shepard said, "Thank you."

"You want to thank me? Get in touch with one of the agents I sent your way weeks ago. You can't hide out in the woods forever, and you'll need someone to actually earn you some appearance money now that you are old and retired."

Shepard narrowed her eyes, "Why do I get the feeling I'll like staring down a crowd less than staring down a Reaper?"

"Because you have a brain rattling about in that thick skull?" Miranda quipped with an arched
"Nice. How did you manage to skip this part, exactly?"

Miranda looked quite proud of herself despite her words, "Because no one idolizes eggheads, Shepard. Only heroes."

Shepard smirked, and Jack said, "You know, since you and Liara are on team Miranda now, we should get some matching ink."

"Oh, it's team Miranda now?" she chuckled.

Miranda playfully elbowed Jack, "Of course not, she made it up so she'd have an excuse to mark her territory. Little bitch."

"Is it just me or is Miranda getting a potty-mouth?" Aethyta said to laughter.

"Yeah," Jack admitted with an evil glint, "I guess I rub off on her. Fortunately I have fun doing it."

Aethyta's guffaw clued Miranda into the double entendre and a look of horror came over her face, "Jack!" Miranda exclaimed as her jaw dropped, "Good lord!"

Aethyta was impressed, "Shep, where you been hiding this girl? She sounds like fun!"

Shepard smiled fondly while shaking her head shamefully at the same time, "You know what? I'll think about the tats. But there's a lot of other people that should be in on that deal. Something for the ones who made it, something to remember the ones that didn't."

"I can live with that," Jack said gamely, "I'll think about it and let you know after I get back."

"Back from where?"

"Going to the Citadel for a few days. Aria's offered me a job so I need to get the lay of the land."

Shepard paused, not sure what to think of that, but smiled encouragingly anyway while stealing a glance at Miranda. Her expression was carefully neutral, a warning sign.

"That's...great. Will it keep you away from the Icarus much?"

"Nah, not till the relays are open. That's what I like about it. I'm on call for special situations only."

Jack. Working for Aria. Shepard couldn't decide if she liked or hated the idea; hated because it felt like a step away from the emotional progress Jack had been making, but having an inside source in Aria's organization could potentially be very very helpful. Regardless, saying anything derogatory would only distance Jack from her, ground that had been painful and expensive to gain. Miranda's eyes seemed to confirm her thoughts, saying in their quiet way just to let the matter go.

"Congratulations, then. Can't wait to see what art you put together."

"Thanks. You know, I had my doubts we'd all survive the Omega Relay, much less the rest of that hairy shit in London. Kinda makes all this like a dream. I know we didn't all make it?" She said, looking suddenly uncomfortable, "But I'm really glad Liara did, for you. Almost as glad as I am that she did, for me." Jack entwined her arm in Miranda's, and the sadness only barely concealed in Miranda's eyes made Shepard's heart ache. It looked to her like this thing with Aria actually might be putting a divide between the couple, though they were playing nice.
That wasn't good. It could end with Miranda pitted against Aria in future encounters, which put them all at risk. She could only think of one way to approach it, so she chuckled, "You know Aria's gonna throw a dozen naked Asari your way to get you to stay. It's what she's famous for. You gonna be able to hold out?" Miranda's glare nearly burned a hole in Shepard's face, but she pretended not to notice.

"Yep, she saves her best dancers for the ones she wants the most," Aethyta confirmed with a fold of her arms.

Jack snickered, her arm sliding around Miranda's waist, "No offense? Asari just don't do it for me. All that slinky mind shit creeps me out. There's only one reason I wanna work for Aria, and that's to learn how she does that biotic bomb thing. If I can make some creds at the same time, great." She turned to Miranda and took her earlobe between her teeth, much to the woman's wriggling mortification. It popped out when Miranda pulled away and Jack licked her lips with regret, "Only one woman I want and she's standing right here."

Miranda's cheeks flushed and she glanced sideways at Jack, a smile slowly growing on her face. Point and match, Shepard thought.

"So," Shepard said, changing the subject before things became any more awkward, "Funny thing, I don't have anything to wear for the ceremonies."

Miranda pulled herself together after clearing her throat, "Um, do you actually have any clothes that aren't fatigues? Or is someone going to have to shop for you?"

Shepard shrugged helplessly and gestured around the open floorplan, "Been a bit preoccupied, I'm afraid."

Miranda gave her an arch look and tapped a foot enclasped in elegant footwear on the stone floor, "Well I'll certainly be glad when Liara gets back. You need a full time mother."

Shepard stepped back and covered her heart melodramatically, "You wound me! I'll just stop saving the world so I can get my weekly mani-pedi then!"

"Impossible woman," Miranda said without meaning it, already taking in Shepard's form with a critical eye. "You've gotten a tan at least with all of your manual labor. Pops your eyes. We'll need to go green, I think. I like the longer hair on you, but it still needs a cut. We've got some work to do."

Jack and Aethyta just looked at each other as if they could read each other's mind.

Aethyta asked, "Wanna drink?"

Jack eyed the Asari appraisingly, "I think we're gonna get along just fine."
Champagne corks popped and the cheering was loud when the Normandy appeared off the port bow. People were jumping around boisterously and hugs were common. It was, in a way, the final shot in a war that had redefined the galaxy's existence. The comms channel was redirected to the loudspeaker and everyone heard Joker's voice for the first time since the defeat of the Reapers, "Transit complete. Looks like we made it!"

The group of old crew that had coalesced and chatted through the morning on the Alliance flagship were all smiles and handshakes, their reactions more solemn and bittersweet than the rest. Those happy few, those thicker than blood compatriots could now take their ease with the return of their companions. It was finally over for them all. Implicit in their handshakes, high-fives and hugs was the undercurrent of loss for those not there. Wrex, Garrus and Jacob cavorted loudly with the rest of the surviving crew, their boisterousness atoning for the other's absence in some small way. Stories were told about the lost crew; about Kaidan who sacrificed himself on Virmire; Mordin, who did the same for the Krogan on Tuchanka; Legion, for his Geth to become more than they had ever been; for Zaeed and Samara and Javik, who died along with epic numbers of their foes during the final battle; and for the mysteriously missing Kasumi that everyone hoped was pulling the disappearing act of the century.

"This is the SSV Normandy requesting permission to dock, Kilimanjaro," came Commander William's smooth contralto.

"Permission granted, Normandy. Proceed to the starboard docking array. Welcome home," was the response from the Dreadnought's comm officer.

The Hephaestus appeared from the Relay next while the Normandy began docking maneuvers. Garrus perked up at the sight from the viewports and Shepard put a pleased and calming hand on his shoulder to keep him steady. Comms gave them the customary challenge and received a reply, "This is Captain Vedra Tanner of the SSV Hephaestus. Transmitting ident and requesting permission to dock."

"Identity confirmed, Hephaestus. You may proceed to the port docking array. Welcome home, and well done."

Finally through the relay appeared the strange silhouette of the Rachni freighter, its alien configuration aweing the remaining viewers at the port before slowing to a respectful stop. Shepard stepped away from the celebrations to set her eyes upon it, unnoticed but for the cameras of the media.

The yearning she felt for its lone Asari inhabitant swelled in every fiber until she thought she might burst from it; but she would nevertheless be forced to wait. The Dreadnought had only two berths for vehicles of the Normandy and Hephaestus' size, and their crew disembarked to be reunited with friends and loved ones first. She moved to the fore with Steve Hackett to greet them all as propriety dictated and took pleasure in that task despite the impatient desire that prickled her skin.

The reunions happened one after another, including a raucous mauling that Tali'Zorah gave Garrus Vakarian on sight. Their exuberance had everyone applauding with shouts of encouragement before the Turian took the Quarian's hands and smoothly dipped her for a kiss on her faceplate, which turned the approval to widespread applause.

Eventually the two now famous ship Captains stepped aboard and shook hands. Shepard, Hackett
and the rest of the assembled crews saluted them to the cheers of the crowd and received a salute in return before the formalities relaxed into a more casual homecoming.

"Great job, you two," Hackett said to them both before Admiral Inez stepped forward to speak to the assembly.

"We've all been eagerly monitoring your exploits. I want you to know just how proud we are of your efforts, and welcome you back home to Sol. The work you've done has charted the way for the rest of the galaxy and now it's time for us to forward that progress," she said in a deep, proud voice, "You've earned a well deserved rest, and I've assembled crews to pilot your ships home. Take your time here, then coordinate with Master Sergeant Lewis to collect what belongings you need before you ship to the location of your choice."

Ashley shook Hackett's hand with a warm expression before turning to the new Admiral, "Thank you, Ma'am. Nothing we did would have been possible without all of your coordination. You really saved our bacon out there and we couldn't be happier to see your faces right now."

Shepard noticed Ashley's gaze flicker to the side, where Lieutenant Commander Vega stood quietly in his dress blues with the remnants of Ashley's family. The moonstruck look in his eyes warmed her heart. Ashley had not only redeemed the unjust shame of her grandfather, she had returned a hero of the Alliance and found a partner who shared her deep convictions for devotion, loyalty, and service. All was decidedly well on that front.

Vedra, on the other hand, looked decidedly gun shy. Ashley had reached out to Shepard a few weeks before to discuss her specifically, detailing what level of involvement she had in the attempt on Liara's life and what she had done to avoid the conflict. It was understandable she would feel guilt with regard to the events, especially when facing Shepard, and soon Liara, together; and Shepard promised to make overtures to the young woman. So she stepped forward, meeting the young engineer's eyes unwaveringly before holding out an earnest hand.

Vedra looked at her, then her hand, then back to her eyes, the conflict clear in her gaze. Shepard waited quietly for that storm to pass, unmoving, until Vedra took her hand in her own, sorrow twisting her visage. Shepard felt her own grief surge in response but swallowed and managed to keep her face still before addressing her, "Good to meet you, Tanner. I've heard a lot about you."

Vedra bit her lip to try and maintain some semblance of calm, though her voice shook with unshed tears, "And you, Shepard. It's an honor to meet you."

Shepard pulled her close so she could speak privately into her ear, "I want you to know you are forgiven. You have nothing to fear from me. Thank you for helping save Tali's life."

Vedra's face dropped nevertheless, though she managed to respond in kind, "You and yours have nothing to fear from me, or anyone I know, ever again. I would die before I let that happen, I swear it."

Shepard withdrew so she could look the woman in the eye, and nodded in understanding. Then she gestured to where an older couple waited with patient smiles. Vedra turned to follow her gaze and grinned, then nodded to Shepard before moving to embrace her parents.

She turned then to look at Ashley and could see she was as eager to get to her loved ones as Shepard was. Still, an acknowledgement was required, and desired. She walked forward and embraced the Spectre gruffly, then withdrew to behold her no longer as a subordinate, but as an equal.

"Words can't express how proud I am of you, Ash," she said, "You are everything I knew you could
be, and more."

Ashley grinned widely, memories brimming behind her eyes, "Thanks Shep. That means a lot."

They shared a lengthy moment before Shepard glanced at the waiting group, "Go on. They've been waiting for you long enough. We all have."

Ashley nodded but squeezed Shepard's shoulder a moment longer, "Thank you. For everything."

Shepard grinned, "Don't get too comfortable. I may call on you before long."

Ashley withdrew and very formally saluted the woman standing before her. She held it even when Shepard blushed and looked away, but then Vega was saluting, and then Vedra, and before long everyone in the room was following suit, including Hackett and the Admiral.

Shepard looked around at the crowd, and the cameras, and the dignitaries who had also quieted respectfully for her. What else could she do but return that sentiment? She straightened despite her fashionable but very civilian slacks and blazer, saluting as crisply as a new recruit while fighting tears that blurred her vision.

She held it as long as decorum demanded, then lowered her hand; the rest of the room following suit. She looked around at as many of their faces as she could in thanks. It was then that a familiar shape entered the room, blue eyes searching for and finding their target.

The sight of Liara stole Shepard's breath. She swallowed and wiped the dampness from her eyes with the back of one hand while beholding her in disbelief. They stared for a moment before walking at a dignified pace toward one another. Gone were the crowds and the cameras, gone was the ship and its sterile bulkheads; all that remained were the two of them. They stopped short, their eyes devouring each other's faces until Shepard remembered what she had practiced for weeks, only then moving her hands in a slow and solemn greeting that was intimately familiar to the Asari.

Liara took Shepard's hands in her own before she could complete the greeting, moving close enough for the tips of their noses to brush, then leaning forward until their foreheads met. There they looked into each other's eyes, the moment surreal.

The feeling of Liara's hands in her own was electric. Shepard lightly rubbed her palm with the pad of a thumb, all the while continuing to stare into the most beautiful deep blue eyes in the galaxy. They darkened ever so slightly and she knew that Liara wanted to meld with her.

She wanted it too, so badly that the force of it made her cautious. They were in a room full of people watching them closely, and her eyes delivered that warning to Liara. The piercing look she received in return asked only for her trust, and Shepard knew that in the end she couldn't deny her anything on this day of days. When she acquiesced, Liara's eyes darkened again and she felt a light brush against the corners of her mind. The gentle movement of their spirits into the other was a key to the shackles of disappointment that weighed their souls, and when that weight dropped from them they shared a sweet breath of air, their brows lifting in terribly needed relief. Such was the pleasure of that sudden freedom that they were surprised by the sound of laughter, realizing after a moment that it was coming from their lips.

Shepard slipped her arms around her beloved's waist and lifted her up high into the air, spinning while she cried her name, "Liara!" There was childish delight on Liara's face, her peals of laughter like bells in Shepard's ears as the Asari clung to her shoulders. Their souls entwined in familiar patterns and Shepard lowered her slowly to the ground, their lips likewise entangling to a rising cheer from the room. Liara's fingers curled into Shepard's hair as they kissed, tears falling unabashedly
from both their eyes when they parted.

"You're really here. You aren't a dream," Liara said breathlessly.

Shepard's arms tightened and she nodded, "I'm here. Always and forever."

Liara smiled widely and nodded while their meld intensified. Past events and future fears gathered like stormclouds and they each promised to explore them at the same time that they erected barriers to their view. This level of control was bliss to Shepard and she promised a full accounting later...hopefully much later. What she wanted to do in the meantime filled Liara up and threatened to deepen the connection embarrassingly.

They reluctantly broke the meld and the deep kiss they weren't even aware they were sharing before they perceived that the cheering had turned to chanting; boots stomping the ground primally to accompany the embrace and kiss of others as full of promise as theirs. Then, suddenly, Tali was among them, throwing arms around Shepard while they both giggled in delight; and the crowd closed in around them in spontaneous celebration.

Tevos' shuttle dropped them off at the cabin, the Councilor's escorts neatly preventing paparazzi from discovering the quiet location. Shepard and Liara gave their heartfelt thanks, but Tevos would not stay at their invitation. She gave them both a knowing look before the shuttle lifted, and raised a hand in farewell before heading back to Vigil.

All that remained after her departure was the sound of the wind in the trees and that underlying sigh that was the voice of wide open places. The leaves had all fallen in brilliant colors, carpeting the ground while the trees themselves reached into the cold and peerless afternoon sky. Liara stood there beholding the beauty of it, drinking in the sound of silence and feeling the approach of winter on her skin. Shepard said nothing, choosing instead to draw near and slide her arms around Liara's waist from behind to hold her close.

The Asari shivered and it was from more than the cold. Shepard's warm breath was slow and even against the back of her crest, and her own hands covered Shepard's where they folded over her stomach. Her fingers traced delicately over the skin of Shepard's hands and she could feel goosebumps rise wherever they wandered.

"It's beautiful," she whispered reverently, looking out over the growing town far below them.

"You're beautiful," Shepard replied against her ear. Her voice was deep and full of emotion, sending a thrill through her limbs. "You're also shivering," she added with a note of concern, "Let's go inside?"

Liara nodded. There would be plenty of time to enjoy the scenery, now. Shepard took her hand and they walked toward the house made from what appeared to be native trees. Liara wondered at its construction and that Shepard and Garrus had built it themselves. The door opened as they approached and a very formal looking dark-haired man bade them enter.

Shepard smiled and led her into the wide open interior before he shut the door behind them. Shepard turned and introduced the stranger, "Liara? This is Zhuang Sueh-Yen. Zhuang? This is Doctor Liara T'Soni." She cocked a thumb at him, "He's one of a few people I probably would have lost my mind without, so be nice to him."

Liara smiled obligingly and took his hand in the human custom, but her eyes were inexorably drawn
to her surroundings. The air was warm from a fire in one wall, a well lit kitchen drew her eyes, set against dark granite, comfortable seating focused on wide open windows, and the sound of water beckoned her toward the sight of aquatic sea-life set into panels for viewing. The ceilings rose high and away but recessed lighting kept the shadows away with elegant sophistication.

"I….how did you?" Liara looked at Shepard incredulously, "You are a soldier, not an architect."

Shepard grinned self-consciously, "This isn't a complicated building and trust me, I had help when I needed it. When I was a kid, the whole neighborhood would pitch in to help build a place for new couples, you know, a family just getting started. Things were rough on a colony without that kind of assistance. Of course, kids grew up a lot faster in that environment and we were fully expected to help. The concepts aren't difficult once you have some repetition under your belt and...well I had some of that. The rest came with instruction vids."

Liara smiled softly at the nostalgic look on Shepard's face, "You've never mentioned your childhood before."

A blush blossomed on Shepard's cheeks and crept down her throat, and Liara realized it might be because Zhuang was still there. She cleared her throat and gave him a proper greeting, "So sorry, I just never expected anything like this. I am so happy to meet you."

"The feeling is mutual, Doctor T'Soni," he said, bowing his head briefly before looking to Shepard, "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank you very much for keeping the place ready today. If we need the shuttle we'll call."

"Of course," he replied smoothly, then gathered up his reading materials from where they were stacked on a table beside the couch. He turned before he opened the front door and said simply, "Welcome home." before departing.

"Home," Liara said as if she were tasting the word for the first time.

"Does that mean you like it?" Shepard asked hopefully.

"It doesn't seem real," she said quietly.

Shepard nodded and took her hand again, "Let me show you the upstairs. It'll sink in."

Floating stairs were anchored into the granite near the fish wall, allowing Liara to see Shepard's new pets up close before ascending. The granite wall continued on their left as a hallway opened before them, three doorways exiting off to the right. The first doorway stood open but dark and Shepard led her inside without pause.

"Lights," her lover said softly, and illumination rose to reveal a state of the art office, the windows to the right now becoming translucent and revealing an even better view of the downward slope of the mountainside, Vigil beyond. Monitors came to life and awaited interaction, and she looked to the left to find a mahogany bookcase rising to the ceiling. It was mostly empty, a model of the Normandy SR-1 displayed prominently in the center; the rest was hers to fill as she saw fit.

"Miranda helped me with this part," Shepard said gratefully, "She says it has everything you need to communicate with your contacts and access the Data."

"It's perfect," Liara breathed, "Just perfect." She smiled and turned to Shepard, gazing into green eyes glowing with pride, love and something else, something so tightly reined in that its twin, coiled within her breast, ached in response. Shepard had always been in staunch control of her emotions.
She had been patient when they were first together, always restraining herself to allow Liara to learn, to deal with her own fragility and newfound feelings, to maintain decorum in front of her crew; and now as certainly as this planet orbited its star she was restraining herself because of their lost child and the effect that might have on Liara's desires for intimacy.

But Liara had grown impatient with patience. She had come to despise their shared stoicism, as associated as it was with things that would inevitably keep them apart. She wanted to sate what had woken her on more nights than Liara would care to admit. She wanted to give Shepard what she obviously needed, wanted to fill her up with it until her lover begged for repose. She wanted to make Shepard lose that terrible control.

She lifted her hand to cup the side of Shepard's face and approached close enough that she could feel the woman's breath hitch on her own lips. She stayed there, intimately close but not close enough, their eyes locked in a stare that revealed everything about what they felt. Liara saw her pupils dilate and felt the warmth of arousal beneath her palm; but still Shepard resisted, her eyes continuing to ask cautious questions until Liara put an end to them with a warm tongue, licking its way from Shepard's chin to the tip of her nose.

She watched it shatter Shepard's composure with satisfaction, the groan that caressed her ears making her growl low in her chest. "You have another room you want to show me?" She asked in a tone Shepard had never heard from her, one that made her lose her words until she nodded hurriedly in response.

"Then show me."

Shepard took her hand and pulled her, walking backwards farther down the hall, unwilling to tear her eyes away from the object of the need that weakened her knees. She backed into the last doorway, the room already lit by the same vista that could be seen from Liara's office. She didn't notice the aged wood furniture or any of the clever decorations or curtains. The entirety of her existence focused on the woman before her and the bed just beyond her visage.

Liara dimly recognized that she had ripped the forest green blazer from Shepard's shoulders because the woman's muscular arms were momentarily pinned by the garment. The hunger that would no longer be denied pressed her body against her prey's hard enough to give her lips and teeth access to the bared neck before her. Her hands slid round to pull Shepard's hips close to hers, and she tasted the flesh of her throat fully before raking her teeth across it. The startled whimper she received in response to that bite drove her to push Shepard until they both fell onto the mattress.

"God….Liara! Shepard gasped, pressing herself up against Liara's thigh instinctively, her hands cupping Liara's face and her deft fingers sliding behind to caress dips in her crest that made her burn. She could feel the slickness of that need inside her undergarments and suddenly felt constricted by her own clothing.

Shepard was meanwhile entranced by the aggressive expressions moving across Liara's face. Her liberated hands slid under Liara's form fitting medical tunic in response to her wordless plea and caressed the skin of her stomach, dragging up to cup and squeeze her breasts.

When Liara felt Shepard tweak her taut nipples the sensation cut through her stupor. She came to herself long enough to lay her body down on Shepard's and kiss her with a desperation that couldn't be in any way mistaken. Liara's fingers tangled into the red hair that had grown past her lover's shoulders and she nearly cried from the pleasure that simple touch brought her. She withdrew and looked into those emerald eyes once again, asking without asking to delve into her mind.

Shepard nodded without hesitation and they were buffeted by the force of the meld that followed.
Their desires were laid bare and Shepard was taken aback by the ferocity she found. It was love, it was desire, but it was also anger and fear...and possessiveness. Every experience they had together seemed to be born at the end of their world. In a way, Liara had acclimated to that constant potential loss; to the point that any satisfaction she felt was inextricably linked to some nameless dread.

While Shepard enjoyed the validation of her attraction, this was not okay. Liara felt that gentle disapproval, then felt herself flipped on the bed until she was enfolded in Shepard's arms and anchored by her weight. Shepard's kiss was gentle and slow in comparison, and Liara felt the drumming of her pulse ease with the calm assuredness that enveloped her.

*I'm not going anywhere. I'm here. Shhhhh…*

Liara felt hot tears slip down her cheeks as she responded, *I know. I know but…*

Shepard placed her hands on either side of Liara's face and through the meld could see herself with Liara's eyes as well. She gathered the sad brightness that was *Liara* within and cradled her soul with her own while their eyes stared into one another's. The ache that echoed between them was as sweet as it was bitter, for they were alive, alive, alive.

*It's over Liara. We're safe, now. It's finally over.*

And then no more words were said, comfort given and received instead with the truth of their souls. As one they bared their bodies to join in that most sacred of unions until the physical, mental, and spiritual realms merged, time marked only by the beating of impassioned hearts and tears that fell to sweetly salt their kisses.

The sun set and the stars wheeled before exhaustion finally claimed them, but Liara woke when the first beams of the sun shone directly on where they lay entwined. She took a deep breath and turned to gaze upon the one she loved more than life, expecting to see green eyes staring back at her as they had every time before.

To her surprise, Shepard lay bonelessly in her arms, breathing slowly and quietly.

She had slept through the night.

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