New Beginnings

by AnnaMouse

Summary

Shepard thought that controlling the reapers at the end of Mass Effect 3 offered the greatest chance at bringing a lasting and happy peace to the galaxy, even if it cost her her own being. But it would seem that her story didn't end with firing the Crucible. This story is based on my other work 'Transitions', but is in a separate continuity.

Notes

Author's Note on Story Continuity:
(This note contains spoilers for Transitions):

First off, I should say that while this is a derivative-work based on my other story entitled Transitions, it should stand on its own; it is not a retcon, it is in a separate continuity. If you'd like a better grounding in my take on the characters I'd suggest reading the stories in that continuity first. I'd recommend the following order: Transitions, Recollections, Longing, Guilt, Transitions: Last Thoughts, and Reassignments (thought that last story is a bit of an
off-shoot and doesn't really matter when you read it so long as it's after Transitions).

So, to sum up:

Previous Works – ME1/ME2 Paragon Spacer/War-Hero Shepard, ignores events of ME3

This work – ME1/ME2/ME3 Paragon Spacer/War-Hero, same person but ignores some of the events of my previous works (specifically, anything that happens after the conclusion of ME2)

Author's Note on Story Timing:

This story takes place right towards the beginning of SG-1 Season 5. So, definitely before Daniel Jackson dies, but also before Anubis begins to show up as well.

Gratitude to Mass Effect and Stargate for such fun universes to play in.
Victoria Shepard felt rather than heard the words resonate within her. It didn't seem real, nothing seemed real. The words were in her own, albeit distorted, voice, but she didn't speak them. I will protect and sustain… I will act as guardian for the many… But she had done that! When could she just rest, live her own life in peace with her beloved? But perhaps that could never be. Maybe this was always her fate, endless self-sacrifice. Shepard felt detached, like she wasn't really there. I will never forget... I will remember the ones who sacrificed themselves so that the many could survive… Suddenly, Shepard realized the words were not just within her, but directed at her as well.

To give the many hope for a future… To ensure that all have a voice in their future… The words repeated upon themselves. But how? Shepard felt a presence. It was enormous, suddenly distinct from herself, yet it enveloped her. It was ominous, but she did not feel fear. Shepard was beyond fear. She had united a galaxy. She had faced down the Reapers. Whatever this was would be no different.

Shepard felt the presence withdraw. She became aware of her N7 combat armor, complete with her hardsuit helmet, not the burnt and mangled mess that she had worn while discussing the fate of the Milky Way with 'the catalyst'. She felt a subtle movement. Her eyes came into focus. Shepard looked into a shimmering blue pool. Victoria was confused, but unafraid. The blue was not the rich Cherenkov-like glow of a mass effect field, it was lighter. The pool rippled as if a multitude of small rain drops fell upon it.

You will have a voice in your future…

Shepard thought it was beautiful, the same shade as her beloved Liara's skin. It enveloped her. My god, it's full of stars, she quoted the famous old Earth film. What a cliche.

"Incoming offworld traveler," said Chief Master Sergeant Harriman.

Brigadier General George S. Hammond appeared at his side. "Who do we have due back, Walter?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

Walter responded, "SG-1, sir. They are," he checked the chronometer above the main console, "two minutes early, sir."

The stargate engaged with the familiar whoosh of air displaced by the formation vortex, it was easily audible through the ballistic glass. "Wormhole established," Walter paused and interrogated the IFF gear. A few moments later the computer acknowledged receipt of SG-1’s IDC code, judged it to be valid, and pronounced the all clear. "SG-1 IDC received, sir."

"Very well," responded the General. He looked through the ballistic glass to see the members of SG-1 exit the stargate and walk down the ramp. Hammond opened his mouth to order the pro-forma defense team to stand down when he heard a loud series of pops. The stench of ozone immediately filled the control room. "Walter, what's going on?"

Chief Harriman's fingers danced across his keyboard. "Don't know, sir; running diagnostics now." A loud snapping sound came from the gate room. Electric arcs flashed about the stargate, some made contact with the walls, while others danced along metal electrical conduits. The Security Forces team
in the gate room ducked behind their barricades, SG-1 scrambled for cover. Hammond caught the look on Major Carter's face; she was already working out what was happening in her mind. In a moment she would be next to Walter, solving the problem as she always did. Just as soon as she thought she could make it out of the gate room without being struck by lightning. Fortunately, Staff Sergeant Syler wasn't down there; he seemed to be a magnet for the stuff.

A disturbance appeared on the event horizon, a shimmering ripple. *Just like before an object comes through the event horizon*, thought Hammond, "Walter! Close the iris!"

"Yes sir!" Chief Harriman reached out and slapped a palm down on the red emergency button. Nothing happened. Walter tried again, still nothing. "Sir, iris not responding."

General Hammond reached forward to the intercom, "Defense teams to the gate room!"

Then she came through the gate.

No sooner had they exited the stargate had the fireworks started. SG-1 dropped to the floor amid the electric arcs and crawled behind the defensive barriers. Major Carter immediately started collecting data. This was her bailiwick, she would need to help sort out what was happening. Curling his nose at the stench of ozone, Colonel O'Neill looked at his team. They were all under cover, hopefully it would be enough. He was about to order Sam to the control room when he heard General Hammond order the defense teams to the gate room. Then a lone figure tumbled through the stargate.

It looked human. It looked female. It looked like something from the future. The figure, clad in what Colonel O'Neill could only imagine was some sort of advanced body armor, skidded to a stop at the bottom of the ramp. She shook her head, and stood. The electric discharges abated substantially.

SF troops poured into the gate room through a blast door and leveled their assault rifles. Then the shouting began, variations on *drop your weapon* and *hands up!* Jack hadn't even noticed the pistol, it seemed to unfold out of nowhere and materialize in the stranger's hands. But that wasn't even the most astonishing thing. *As if anything we do isn't astonishing*, O'Neill thought. The figure was wreathed in an ethereal blue glow. Deeper and brighter than the stargate's signature 'glowing puddle', the figure continued glowing even after the stargate shut down abruptly. The SF team's shouting increased in volume and urgency. Jack decided he needed to do something before this ended in a bloodbath. Subconsciously, Jack wondered whose blood it would be.

To say Commander Shepard was disoriented was a profound understatement. It had been a long day; space combat with the largest armada ever assembled in the history of the Milky Way, an all-out space-to-ground assault on the city of London, brutal street fighting against seemingly unending waves of enemy troops, a foot scramble towards the London Beam with the 2 kilometer tall *Harbinger* standing behind it blasting away at them with all manner of deadly weapons, the Illusive Man's suicide, Anderson's death, and an absurd conversation with 'the catalyst' where she learned that, despite all of her work and effort and sacrifice, she really didn't have any good options for ending the Reaper War. The snap decision that attempting to control the Reapers was the *least bad* option offered despite the personal risk, the strange disembodied voice that sounded eerily like her own, and now *this*.

*I can't win, can I?*

Despite the disorientation, her trained soldier's senses began collecting data. It looked like she was in some sort of concrete bunker. She was dressed in full N7 combat armor rigged for hard vacuum. Her armor was complete and undamaged, and she wasn't wounded like she had been when she entered...
the London Beam. She stared down barrel of her M77 Paladin pistol and into the muzzles of a squad's worth of ancient looking gunpowder assault weapons. The camouflaged men holding the weapons were shouting at her. Another group of camouflaged individuals lay sprawled on the floor.

_Something isn't right_, she thought; a stupendous understatement. Victoria summoned her biotic energy; she was enveloped in a powerful mass effect field as she prepared to lay down a singularity right in the middle of the troops shouting at her. Her muscles tensed, she tightened her grip on her pistol.

"Stand down!" a man in desert camouflage shouted. "Stand down!" He interposed himself between Shepard and the increasingly agitated soldiers with the toy-like weapons. The man held his arms out until the soldiers relented, then he turned to look at her.

Shepard was taken aback. She looked into the man's eyes. He was obviously agitated and worried, but there was something else. There was something _familiar_. A realization, _there's pain in those eyes_, Shepard thought. This man had _been there_. Shepard slowly lowered her pistol, the mass effect field dissipated with a faint _pfft_.

Despite the decreasing tension, Shepard's heart rate continued to accelerate. The world greyed, her lips and fingertips tingled. Suddenly she noticed the 'air supply critical' warning light flashing in her helmet's head's up display. _I knew something wasn't right_, Victoria Shepard thought as she slumped to the ground. A faint, distant voice shouted, "Medic!" as she slipped from consciousness.

_It's been a long day._
The Arrival

"What do you have for us Doctor?" asked General Hammond. They crowded around a lab table in the SGC's medical wing.

"A bit of a mystery, sir," responded Doctor Fraiser.

"That's an understatement," quipped Colonel O'Neill.

Doctor Fraiser ignored the Colonel's interruption and continued. "We've confirmed that she's human, though the quick DNA check we've run on her shows signs of modification."

"What kind of modification?" asked the General.

"Hard to say, sir," the Doctor replied, "But the preliminary work suggests that one is on the allele that is known to affect blood clotting, plus half a dozen others that we don't fully understand yet." She paused, "Honestly, I won't know until I talk to the Human Genome Project people, and even then…" she trailed off.

The group traded glances, "Please continue, Doctor," commanded the General in a curious tone.

"Yes, sir. Well, she's definitely human, and she's definitely not a goa'uld." She paused and reached towards a computer terminal on a rolling cart. "That said, well, she's got some serious issues." She pointed to a fully body CT scan image, "Her skeleton shows signs of extensive damage and repair. Notice the metallic plates throughout. A number of her internal organs seem to be unnatural; organic for sure, but not human. Prosthetic, probably. I'm afraid I won't know exactly what they are without a biopsy, and I'm reluctant to do that until I know more about her physiology. She's also covered in scars. Whatever happened to this woman, it was severe."

"What are these? Tumors?" asked Doctor Daniel Jackson pointing to the image on the computer. "That looks like a serious case of cancer."

"That…" Major Carter said haltingly, "we don't know what that is." The group looked at each other. "It seems to be emitting a dark energy field, my instruments can confirm that much; but not much else. It's definitely not naquadah, though, that's for sure. It looks like they're all formed around primary nerves. Additionally," Carter zoomed the computer image in on the skull, "there appears to be a device implanted at the base of the skull that's connected to them. I have no idea what that does, but they're obviously related."

"And then," Carter reached for a small metallic object, it looked like a deck of cards, "there's this". Her excitement level increased. Jack chuckled to himself, kid in a candy store. "I think this is a computer of some sort. It's emitting the same dark energy field. And watch this," she tapped the object. A bright orange holograph formed around Carter's left hand. The group, startled, leaned back, and then leaned forward in curiosity. "I think it's a holographic user interface. Unfortunately, I don't have the required implanted accelerometers in my fingertips to use it," she paused, "we also detected those on the CT scan."

"Then how do you know what it is?"

Carter smiled at the General, she was obviously excited. "It told me, in English. American spelling, if anyone's interested." The group seemed a bit confused. "This, apparently, is a Savant Mk. 10 omni-tool, manufactured by the Serrice Council." She shook it in her hand excitedly. "It is registered to one Commander Victoria Regina Shepard of the Earth Systems Alliance Navy." The group's
collective jaws dropped.

"It just told you this?" asked Daniel Jackson.

"Yes. Apparently it's detected that Commander Shepard over there is having some sort of medical emergency and offered me some identification and medical information; presumably to aid in her treatment." She powered off the device and picked up a lab notebook. "Commander Shepard has O-positive blood, an allergy to penicillin, and a Savant Mk. 10 bio-amp implant, also manufactured by the Serrice Council; I can only assume that's the device in the base of her skull…" She trailed off as she consulted the rest of her notes, "She was born on, get this, April 11th," she paused, "2154, on some place called Arcturus Station." Now that got everyone's attention. No one spoke, Major Carter continued, "She holds something called an 'N7 special forces designation' and a commission at the grade of Commander in the Alliance Navy, service number 8923-AC-2826. She's a Citadel Council Spectre, whatever that is, and she's the commanding officer of the Systems Alliance Space Vehicle Normandy." Everyone was dumb founded. Could this be for real?

Shepard's thoughts swam. She could hear voices through a haze of drugs. "It seems to have her service history here, apparently she's some sort of war hero."

"Major, do you believe that this is for real? Not some sort of goa'uld trick?"

The voices faded somewhat. Where am I? What kind of Reaper trick is this? It had to be a trick. She must have been duped. I can't believe I fell for it, just like the Illusive Man, I'm so stupid! I just wanted to have a chance to be with Liara again, even if I were part of the Reapers. The Reapers were controlling her! Oh god, I betrayed the galaxy! Is this what indoctrination is like?

Victoria decided that if it was, all was already lost. But if it wasn't, she needed to come up with a plan to escape. Shepard tried to calm herself; her placid face never betrayed that she was conscious. She needed whoever they were to think she was still asleep.

"General Hammond, a thought occurs," a voice said. The voices were becoming louder, the sedatives were wearing off. "In general, secret programs don't go advertising their presence to others, but I know that the Stargate Program isn't the only classified government project out there. You'd think we'd have heard about this Earth Systems Alliance by now?" It was the same voice that had called off the troops when she first arrived. Stargate Program?

"Major Carter, do you honestly believe that this woman could be from the future?"

"I think we'll have to ask her to find out. When she wakes up."

"She'll be out for a little while still. We had to sedate her. After we got that armor off of her she woke up and broke an SF's nose trying to escape. She tore through the restraints like they weren't there, some strange blue glow. I had to put her under. But, I've had to use more with each dose; her body seems to be developing immunity quickly." A pause, "Still, she might be out for another couple of hours."

"I do not believe that to be the case Doctor Fraiser," a deeper voice, polite and very precise. "I believe this Commander Shepard has been awake for some time, and is now listening to us."

That was Shepard's cue. If she was going to make a break for it, or at least try, now was the time. Something stayed her hand, though. Something deep down told her this wasn't some trick. She remembered the ominous voice, it didn't sound malicious. Shepard had the deep sense that it was giving her a second chance. She just knew it. Of course, there was also the purely tactical
consideration of affecting an escape. During her first escape attempt, before she had broken that man's nose, she heard someone saying that they might seal the mountain. If this bunker she was in was under a mountain, escape on foot was most likely impossible. She'd have to bide her time and come up with something else. Shepard decided to take a chance.

"Very observant," Victoria said evenly. She slowly rose from the hospital bed. She was unrestrained; apparently they'd decided that it wasn't worth ruining another set of straps on her if she tried to rabbit again. The group took a startled step back. A very angry airman with a swollen crooked nose approached her with an archaic looking pistol at the ready. "Peace," Shepard heard herself say. She raised her hands slowly, "I won't resist, and I won't try to escape again." She paused; some diplomacy was in order, "I'm sorry about your nose. I was, confused."

Shepard looked at the rest of the individuals in the room. They were all human, though one of them had an odd looking ornament glued to his forehead. That's almost like the ornaments Samara wears. They seemed to be military, but their uniforms looked like something out of a history book. "My name is Commander Victoria Shepard, Alliance Navy. Who are you?" She paused, "And what is today's date?"
Shepard sat in what looked like an antique conference room. No holography, no haptic interfaces. They had some old style office chairs, a long table, and an overhead projector that looked like it belonged in a museum. The most interesting artifact was the 50 star United States flag in the corner. Provided someone wasn't messing with her, and that wasn't something that Victoria was willing to rule out yet, that placed her in the United States, not the United North American States, sometime between 1959 and 2096. So, pre-Prothean Discovery, she thought. Shepard smirked to herself and recalled something Javik had said when she first met him, I am surrounded by primitives.

They hadn't given her the date yet, of course, or any other information for that matter. They were probably still trying to figure out what to do with her. She imagined the only reason they hadn't tried to knock her out again was her relinquishing her bio-amp. Hopefully they were keeping it in a sterile container and not messing with it like she had asked. They better not; it was a gift from Liara. The Savant series was way better than her Alliance issued equipment. Still, they were obviously afraid of her, even after she told them she couldn't use her super powers without the device. This was a lie, of course. Victoria was an amazingly talented biotic, she retained a limited biotic capability even without the amp. Certainly enough to get my hands on a real weapon, she thought to herself.

She was somewhat surprised that they were being this laid back about the whole situation. She knew she was confused beyond belief, and would certainly have them locked up if their roles were reversed. That General Hammond, though, he seemed to see something in her; he was giving her a chance. He reminded her of Hackett in a way; rapier wit, forceful, but compassionate when he needed to be.

General Hammond and the members of SG-1, she had at least learned that much, entered the briefing room. Shepard came to her feet and stood at attention. Hammond was surprised for a moment, and then he motioned her to sit. The assembled took their seats. There was a pregnant silence. All eyes were on her, but it wasn't her show, not yet. "Miss Shepard?" asked General Hammond, "would you mind telling us who you are, and where you came from?"

Victoria held her tongue. She took a deep breath, "Commander, sir," she said as politely as she could.

To his credit Hammond merely nodded, "Pardon me, Commander."

Victoria nodded her thanks. "As I said before, my name is Commander Victoria Shepard." She paused, they didn't react. Usually people responded with awe or applause or something similarly annoying. "I assure you that I'm as confused about this as you are, and I want answers as much as you do. However, since it looks like I'm your guest, rather than the other way round, let me start by answering your questions."

She was met with silence. They just scrutinized her. They weren't going to get anywhere like this. If she had traveled back in time, however insane that sounded, she needed to get these people mobilized. She might have bought at least a century to prepare for the Reapers. These people needed a kick in the ass. Even as they spoke Sovereign was out there, plotting. And maybe I'll see Liara again, she thought. Shepard tried to put from her mind the fact that, depending on what year it actually was, Liara probably hadn't even been born yet. "May I have my omni-tool please?" she asked. Everyone looked at each other. Hammond nodded. Major Carter reached into one of the baggy pockets on her fatigues and produced the device.

Shepard took the omni-tool in her hand, powered it on, and slipped it into the pocket of the hospital
scrubs they had her wearing. She could hear the SF guards tense slightly; they were obviously pondering what horrors might befall them if they tried to get the omni-tool out of her pocket against her will. *What to show them*, Shepard thought, *perhaps a history lesson?* Of course, without an uplink to the extranet, or an extranet for that matter, she would be relying on whatever data she had cached in the omni-tool's memory. Fortunately, she fancied herself something of an amateur historian.

"In 2148 human explorers on Mars discovered an abandoned research facility left by an extinct alien species which we call the Protheans," she projected images of the facility she had downloaded prior to her mission to the Archives. The 3D images were met with *oohs* and *ahhhs*. "It was the single most important event in human history." She let that hang there for a moment. "Based on the data we recovered there we were able to develop mass effect technology enabling faster than light travel. We also discovered that Pluto's moon, Charon was in fact a Mass Relay linking Sol to Arcturus. Arcturus is roughly 36 light years from Sol." Realizing that they definitely didn't know what a Mass Relay was, she continued, "The Mass Relay network allows near-instantaneous travel across thousands of light years throughout the galaxy."

Shepard paused, she waited for questions. There weren't any, not even from Major Carter, and Shepard had *her* pegged as the brains of the outfit. *Alright, prepare to be dazzled!* "Over the next 19 years humanity, represented by the Earth Systems Alliance, began exploring our corner of the galaxy. In 2157 we encountered and fought a brief war with the Turian Hierarchy. Thankfully, the First Contact War was very short and relatively bloodless, and we were welcomed into the galactic community." Shepard paused and tapped out a few commands on her omni-tool. A schematic of the Citadel blossomed to fill the air above the conference table. She actually heard the man called O'Neill say *wow*. He held a hand out and swiped tentatively at the image, Major Carter elbowed him and he stopped.

"Up until very recently," Shepard continued, "galactic society was centered on the Citadel. It's an enormous space station, roughly 45 kilometers long with a population of about 13 million. We thought it, like the Mass Relays, was built by the Protheans. On it, the Citadel Council directs law and politics for all of Citadel space." She tapped out a few more commands and projected an image of the day she was inducted as a Spectre. It was a minor point of vanity, but she had downloaded a news image and saved it to her personal files.

"What the hell is that?" asked O'Neill. He seemed to be looking at the councilors.

"The one on the left is Sparatus the Turian councilor. In the middle is Tevos, she's the Asari councilor. The frog-looking guy on the right is Valern, he's the Salarian councilor. In 2183, a few months after this picture was taken," Shepard said with some amount of personal pride, "humanity was given a seat as the fourth Council species in recognition of our heroics at the Battle of the Citadel."

"Is that you in the middle?" asked Doctor Jackson.

"Yes. This image was taken when I was inducted as the first human Council Spectre." She saw the confused faces. "Spectres are a supra-legal paramilitary organization which is employed by the Council itself to maintain galactic stability. I was made a Spectre when I was hunting a renegade Turian by the name of Saren."

"That sounds like trouble," she heard O'Neill mutter. Frankly, Shepard agreed with that assessment. Though, she couldn't be quite sure if he was commenting on Saren, or the supra-legal part.

"Saren?" General Hammond looked confused, and rightly so.
"I can brief you fully at your convenience, but here are the highlights." Shepard paused, she looked at O'Neill. In the few hours she'd known the man he'd come off as a simpleton. She knew this was an act. The man had a brutal intellect, and was a born leader. That much was obvious based on how well his team worked together. O'Neill simply looked at her, collecting information. She got the impression he knew that she was about to lay some very unfortunate truth on them.

"It's all a lie." That caught the team's attention. "The Citadel, the relays, none of it was built by the Protheans. They, like us, merely discovered them. The whole thing was built eons ago by a machine-race known as the Reapers. It's complicated, but they basically come around every 50,000 years to harvest, read as kill, all advanced organic life." Shepard stepped through tactical data on the Reapers. A three dimensional view of *Harbinger* hovered over the table. Jaws dropped, they could read the scale.

"Um," Doctor Jackson spoke up wagging a finger at the image, "We haven't spotted any evidence of these harvests in our travels through the stargate."

"The Reapers are very thorough at covering their tracks."

"Yes, but you would think that there would be something."

"The Reapers might not even exist here," responded Major Carter. "We may be dealing with alternate realities rather than simple time travel. This wouldn't be the first time we've seen this."

General Hammond spoke up, "Major, we don't need to get into classified mission reports right now. Please let Commander Shepard continue."

Simple *time travel*? Shepard shook her head internally and continued, "Over the last several months, at least so far as I'm concerned, the Reapers have been systematically wiping out all space faring organic life in our galaxy." She displayed tactical data recorded during Sword's engagement in Earth orbit, and the London assault with Hammer. As the images played, Shepard looked at SG-1. They seemed horrified, but none more so than Doctor Jackson. It was almost as if he'd seen Earth destroyed before. He wore a haunted expression on his face.

"However, before I came here, I defeated them. It's also complicated, but the War is over." Shepard realized that she'd never uttered those words aloud before. *The War is over!* It felt good. Regardless of what else might have happened, or may be happening now, it felt *good*!

"How?" asked General Hammond.

"It's a long story," was all Shepard could muster. Shepard herself was still trying to figure out what *exactly* had happened.

O'Neill leaned in close and whispered with the General. Daniel Jackson and Major Carter still studied the projected images intently. The large man named Teal'c steepled his fingers and regarded her stoically. *He certainly is an odd fellow.*

"Commander," said Hammond. "You've obviously got a lot you need to tell us, and we're not going to get through it all today. We'll schedule more debriefings. In the meantime, you'll be assigned to guest quarters. Don't consider yourself a prisoner, but we can't let you leave. Do you understand?"

"Yes, General."

"Very good…" Hammond was cut off.

"Wow, who's she?" asked O'Neill with a smile.
Shepard looked up to see a picture of herself snuggling with Liara. Her omni-tool must have launched a slide-show application of her personal photos. Shepard smiled. They both wore casual clothing, Liara's was actually rather revealing, for her at least, and they sat on the couch in her stateroom on Normandy. The scene was so tender. I must have had EDI snap that picture. Shepard's heart ached. Beloved, are you truly lost to me? Victoria decided to hold out hope, what else could she do? She didn't have enough information yet to know if this was a one-way trip or not. She certainly hoped that wasn't the case. I love you so much!

"That's Liara T'soni," she smiled, "she's my wife."

SG-1's collective jaws dropped.
"Could this person possibly be telling the truth?" asked General Hammond. SG-1 sat around the conference table pondering Victoria Shepard.

Major Carter leaned towards the table, "Well, the multi-world interpretation of quantum physics postulates…"

"Ahhh hah!" interrupted Colonel O'Neill, "Enough of that multi-world stuff." Doctor Jackson and Major Carter shot him a look. Teal'c arched an eyebrow. "If suddenly people can come through the stargate from other realities then we're going to be knee-deep in goatees faster than you can say lame cliché." He paused, "I didn't intend for that to rhyme." O'Neill looked down at the table; he pretended to straighten his note pad. Major Carter grimaced.

"Major, are you saying that she might actually be who she says she is?"

"Yes sir, I am. Remember our experiences with the quantum mirror device." Major Carter tried to contain her enthusiasm. She was all but drooling over Shepard's omni-tool. And the other equipment! It was almost too good to be true. Shepard had promised to help her interface the omni-tool with their systems. She seemed hell bent on getting as much data on the Reapers into the hands of the SGC as possible as quickly as possible.

Before the SF troops had escorted her to the VIP quarters Commander Shepard had returned the device to her. She said it was a gesture of good faith. One final, longing, look at the image of her wife, and Shepard had powered down the small computer and slid it across the table.

"Well, if she's for real, then we have a very serious problem."

"I couldn't have said it better myself, sir," O'Neill cut in. "If these Reapers are out there, then this whole thing with the goa'uld is almost laughably quaint."

"She certainly seems willing to help us," Doctor Jackson chimed in. He was almost as excited as Major Carter at the prospect of interacting with Commander Shepard. In all of their travels through the gate the SGC had only made contact with a few sentient races; the majority of them were surprisingly human-like. This Citadel Council put it all to shame.

"I believe this Commander Shepard is a formidable woman," Teal'c observed, "She is most likely willing to do anything if it achieves her goal of defeating the Reapers. She will only assist us as long as it furthers those goals."

"Yeah, did anyone else notice the look on her face when she was describing the Reaper War?" O'Neill looked at the group. "I've seen that look before. The woman is a killer, no doubt about it. I for one think we should stay on her good side."

"Sirs, we may have to face the possibility that the Reapers don't even exist in this reality. If the mass relay network is as expansive as she described, we'd have surely stumbled across the council races by now. Also, we may not be able to send her back to wherever she came from. What will happen when Shepard realizes this?"

"We get her to help us with the goa'uld, however quaint she might think they are," O'Neill said matter-of-factly.

"What if she doesn't want to," Doctor Jackson leaned over the table and interlocked his fingers, "Did
you see the look on her face when that picture of her wife came up?"

SG-1 shared a worried expression.

"I'll be just outside if you need anything ma'am," said the airman with perfunctory politeness.

"Thank you airman," Shepard was already assimilating the lingo, "I'm sorta climbing the walls in here, do you think you could give me a magazine or something to read?"

The security forces trooper pondered that for a moment. "I'll see if I can scrounge something up, ma'am," she said.

"Thank you, airman. I'll let you know if I need anything," she paused, "oh, maybe some clothes that aren't hospital scrubs?" She plucked the green garment away from her chest and shook it slightly in a show of disgust. The SF nodded. "I'd be up for grabbing some chow whenever it's convenient for you." The airman met her gaze and nodded again. There was still confusion and wariness in her expression, but less open hostility than when Shepard had first arrived. Truly, Shepard was trying to wheedle information out of the young woman, and a certain measure of politeness could go a long way.

Victoria would settle for anything that had a date on it; a periodical, a novel, anything that could give her a rough idea as to what the year was. Of course, if the powers-that-be here had any foresight at all they'd make sure that there was nothing to scrounge, or worse, faked materials. So long as they could keep Shepard in the dark, they could exercise a modicum of control over her.

She had an opportunity to get a jump on the Reapers. Victoria needed to know just how much time she had to play with. She composed a mental list of things that would need to happen; on the top of it was Mars. They needed to get to the archives. It would jump their technology ahead nearly 200 years, hell, maybe 300 if what I've seen is the best they have to offer. It would also tell them if the Reapers, and by extension Liara, even existed in this reality. Then they could move on to the Charon relay; from there, on to the Citadel. Those asshole councilors would have to believe her and all of the war data she carried! Wouldn't they?

The Reapers were priority one, but what about Liara? Oh Liara, how I miss you, Shepard thought to herself. Victoria closed her eyes. She wanted to weep, she wanted to cry out, but she couldn't; they were watching. She looked up at the security camera; she projected an even facial expression despite the inner emotional turmoil. Liara might be lost to her! Her beloved could be gone, and not because she was lost in battle, but because she never existed in the first place. Somehow that was worse. Shepard was a soldier, and so was Liara. Soldiers die. But to never exist in the first place? That wasn't something Shepard could deal with as easily.

Shepard put the thoughts from her mind. She was here and now, wherever and whenever that was. She was going to find a way to destroy the Reapers before the war even started. She was going to protect this Earth from the Reaper menace, just like she had done for her Earth. Then she was going to find a way back to her love.

Or she would die trying.
"Yes, sir, I understand. Thank you very much, sir." General Hammond returned the red phone to its cradle. Colonel O'Neill arched an eyebrow. "The President says she can stay." O'Neill pumped his fist once in celebration. "Apparently it took some wrangling. The President said he had to use up a bit more political capital than he would have liked to get this past the Appropriations Committee."

"That doesn't surprise me, sir," O'Neill responded. "What bone did we have to throw to the Honorable Senator?"

"All of the intel and any technology we develop through Commander Shepard, and anything we find on Mars. Provided we find anything at all, that is."

"Sounds like we got off light."

"Like I said, he had to use up a lot of capital. Most of it was to keep the Commander's gear with us as well. The President was able to convince the Senator that the SGC would be best able to replicate the technology, if that's even possible at all. Of course, we'll pass everything we learn on to the NID."

"Of course."

"She's been given a Navy commission at the grade of Commander and placed under my command. He's banking on her sense of duty and honor to keep her under our control, since I doubt anything short of lethal force will rein her in if she decides we're no longer serving her interests. I'll keep her in a separate TOE under you for now. I don't know that I want her in command of any of our personnel yet."

"I wasn't expecting that."

"The Senator insisted, actually. I think he was planning on getting the Commander on a 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' charge, cashiering her, and shipping her off to Area 51 for indefinite interrogation." He paused, "She's an avowed lesbian after all," Hammond pointed at the pile of debriefing summaries on his desk.

"That's a load!" O'Neill bristled.

Hammond raised his hands, "I agree, and so does the President." Hammond shifted in his seat; he obviously felt the same way about that particular regulation as Colonel O'Neill did. "He told the Senator that Doctor T'soni wasn't technically a woman, and that he would grant the Commander a presidential pardon on that particular matter if he pushed it. The Senator backed off."

"I bet that didn't win the President any points."

"No." Hammond leaned back in his high-backed leather chair. He looked at the pile of documents, the executive summaries of nearly a solid month's worth of debriefings, "Besides, that isn't even the most troubling bit of information we learned. Not by a long shot."

O'Neill leaned forward and picked up a few of the folders. "Like what, sir? Personally killing 300,000 civilians? Her penchant for unleashing rapidly breeding killer species on the galaxy? Assassinating the head of Earth's surviving government? Or perhaps the whole being dead for two years thing?" Hammond merely scowled at him. "Probably worst is how she got here. Joining her mind to the big bad evil machine race, taking control of them for the sake of the galaxy instead of
destroying them, ignoring the risk that she wouldn't be able to control them, and then somehow re-substantiating herself here?" Jack paused for breath. "That's science fiction stuff," he paused again, "and that's from a guy who travels to other planets every day for a living." At least that was the working theory; Shepard doesn't really know what happened to bring her here, thought O'Neill.

"You're not saying anything that I haven't already thought of myself," replied the General. "The truth of the matter, though, is that if what half of what she's said," he pointed to the documents again, "is true, we're in a whole world of trouble." He paused, "We need her."
Acceptance

Knock knock knock...

"Enter," Shepard heard the deep, slightly muffled, voice through the closed door.

"Teal'c?" Victoria asked as she slowly opened the door. The interior was warmly lit by a dozen candles. She could feel the heat. The flames had raised the air temperature in the small enclosed space by nearly ten degrees. Teal'c sat on a mat on the floor cross-legged, hands folded in his lap. It looked like he was meditating. "If I'm disturbing you, I can come back later."

"That is quite alright, Commander Shepard. I have just completed my kelno'reem. Please come in." Teal'c stood and offered her a seat at a small table. Victoria entered the room, assessing her new surroundings. The décor was Spartan, but the candles, which Teal'c moved about extinguishing, gave it a homely feel.

"Kelno'reem?" asked Shepard.

"It is a deep meditation. It allows my symbiote to regenerate my body. It is analogous to your sleep.

"I had heard that you weren't human," she paused, looked him up and down, and continued, "You're the most human-like alien I've ever met." Teal'c merely closed his eyes, smiled pleasantly, and bowed his head slightly in response. "I'm going batty locked up in this mountain," Victoria said, "sitting here, waiting to find out what they'll do with me; all the while the Reapers are out there."

She motioned aggressively towards the ceiling. Control Shepard, she thought to herself, this man is a stranger to you, maintain control. Teal'c said nothing, observing her stoically. "How did you assimilate into this outfit?" Shepard was somewhat surprised with herself. She hardly ever opened up to anyone like this; certainly not since coming here.

Teal'c pondered that question for a moment, and then replied, "With a great deal of help and understanding from the members of SG-1."

"They just accepted you? Didn't you command the military of one of their enemies? This is a pot calling the kettle black," Teal'c arched an eyebrow, "but aren't you a war criminal?"

"Indeed. I was First Prime in the service of Apophis."

"And they just welcomed you into the fold?"

"Some were less accepting than others. But the Tau'ri are a welcoming people," he paused, "and good judges of character."

"Incredible," Shepard blurted. Teal'c arched his eyebrow again. Victoria tried to wrap her head around what Teal'c had just said. Could they really be that trusting? She also wondered if that last comment was a polite dig against her. Even if it were, she was convinced that he was being truthful. "Do you think they'll accept me?" Was she afraid?

"Do you believe they should not accept you, Commander Shepard?"

Do you always answer a question with a question? Shepard couldn't help but think. Still, Teal'c had hit the nail on the head. She was concerned that she would not only be rejected as a member of the SGC, but be prevented from taking any active role in preparing Earth for the Reapers. That would invalidate all of her sacrifice, and the sacrifices of everyone who died fighting the Reapers in her
reality or time or whatever. It was almost as much a personal insult as it would be a global
catastrophe for the human race.

There was more to it than that, however. On a deep personal level, Victoria Shepard didn't know if
she was worthy of these people's company. These people were defending the Earth from powerful
enemies with almost archaic technology. Is this what it was like immediately after the Prothean
Discovery; a slipshod boot-strapped approach to space exploration and global defense? Am I
worthy to serve with such pioneers?

"I've," Shepard paused, almost unable to go on, "I've done monstrous things, Teal'c. You're not the
only war criminal in this room."

Shepard balled a fist under the table, she hoped Teal'c didn't notice. Control yourself, Shepard! But
she couldn't, this was all too much for her. Shepard had lived a life of near constant fear and brutal
violence. The last few years had been especially taxing. She doubted she would have borne up as
well as she had if not for her friends, her family. But they were gone. Anderson was dead. Liara? I
love you so much! Will I ever see you again? Shepard closed her eyes. She could see her beloved
clearly in her own mind. But it wasn't enough. She needed friends here, she needed family.
Somehow she could relate to this Teal'c fellow, but did he even care?

"Do you refer to the Bahak system, Commander Shepard?" Shepard opened her eyes. Teal'c looked
at her with an even facial expression. There was no judgment in his eyes. He knew. He'd been there.

"Yes," responded Victoria, "and Elysium." Teal'c arched an eyebrow. Clearly Teal'c had read some
of her debriefing files, but not all of them. Or, at least, not the details of her Elysium experience.
"When I was 22, I was on shore leave on a world called Elysium." She shifted her weight and sat on
one of her legs. Teal'c could obviously tell that she was uncomfortable, but he let her continue
without comment. "Slavers, Batarians mostly, attacked the colony. They killed most of the colony's
defense forces in the opening salvo. Within the first few minutes I was the highest ranking officer on
the entire planet." She paused, looked off into space for a moment, and continued, "I was drunk and
naked, in some woman's bed. I picked her up in a bar, a hell of a dancer. I can't even remember her
name." Teal'c said nothing, he observed her stoically.

"Suddenly it was all on me; thousands of slavers trying to sack a colony of defenseless civilians. It
was up to me to stop them, to keep them from grabbing slaves and killing the locals."

"Did you succeed, Commander Shepard?"

"Yes. We held until the Alliance showed up. But I couldn't save all of them. I watched people
herded into pens and shipped offworld. I killed scores of civilians that I knew I couldn't reach in time
rather than let that happen to them. I personally killed dozens of Batarians. Stabbed or blew them up
in their sleep. Set fire to their wounded. I remember watching them burn and laughing. Laughing! It
felt so good to do it. I enjoyed it!" She stopped and looked at Teal'c. There was no emotion on his
face; no empathy, but nor was there any judgment.

"You know what happened to me?" She smirked, "They gave me a medal. The Star of Terra, I'm a
hero of the Alliance. It's the highest honor they've got. They gave it to me for murdering people, and
enjoying it."

Teal'c said nothing. He merely regarded her. After a few moments, he spoke. "Do you feel these past
events should prevent you from joining the Tau'ri in the defense of this world?"

"Shouldn't they?" Teal'c did not respond. Perhaps she was being unreasonable. Maybe it was just the
lack of activity which was prompting her to dwell on the past. Maybe things would be better once
she was in action again; doing something, doing anything. "You know, I haven't ever told that story to anyone except my mother." Teal'c arched an eyebrow. "Though I think Liara has seen glimpses of it in the bond; what few times we've had the opportunity to be intimate."

There was a knock at the door. Teal'c rose to open it and Doctor Jackson entered. She stood. "Thanks for the chat Teal'c. I appreciate it." Teal'c nodded in response.

"Yeah, you need to be careful with this guy," Daniel Jackson said, "You get him started, he's liable to talk your ear off."

"Indeed," replied Shepard.

Teal'c's eyebrow rose a good three centimeters.
Doctor Daniel Jackson regarded the Spectre. In a word she was terrifying. Large, powerful, an admitted killer of men and aliens, she was a near force of nature. But, at the moment, she seemed vulnerable. Slightly flushed, a glisten in the eye, was she crying? Jackson was secretly relieved that she had reached out to Teal'c. Out of all of the SGC, Teal'c could probably best relate to her. Teal'c was an excellent sounding board, and, while he rarely spoke, when he did it was usually profound. Daniel truly hoped that he could help Shepard find a modicum of peace in her new situation.

"Oh, Commander Shepard," Daniel said, "something came for you in the mail." Who the hell knows you're here? Jackson was confused, and he wasn't the only one. This morning a package had arrived at The Mountain's administrative center. Addressed to 'CDR V. Shepard (USN)', the duty clerk had no idea what to do with it until he happened to mention it to Chief Master Sergeant Harriman. After the Security Forces troopers had a chance to scan it for booby-traps Walter had carried it down to the SGC and handed it to Jackson.

Daniel handed Shepard the box. He looked at it as she tore it open with a smile on her face. She actually smiles? Then he caught a glimpse of the return address, Kinkos of Colorado Springs? "Call me Victoria," Shepard said as she unwrapped the item. Her smile widened.

"What is it," he paused, "Victoria?" asked Jackson.

Shepard turned the framed photo to show a portrait of Liara T'soni. She beamed at him from behind the glass in the simple wooden frame. Wow, she has such a beautiful smile. "I uploaded a photo of Liara to one of the local printing places. I had them frame it and send it back to me." She looked at the photo longingly.

"I'm surprised that security let you upload a picture like that. Seems like a pretty huge security breach."

"I didn't tell them. They let me on to your internet," she said that last word with a bit of a scowl, "so I could look up some Martian imagery on your JPL's website. I took the opportunity to have this photo printed up." She paused, "For when I don't have access to my omni-tool." She sighed.

"I don't mean to rain on your parade," responded Daniel, "but sending a photo of an extra-terrestrial outside of this base is a pretty big no-no. We strive to maintain a low profile..." he let that last sentence hang there. This is not the sort of behavior I would expect from a squared away professional like this woman, Daniel thought.

"Don't sweat it Doctor Jackson," she looked at him with a smirk, "I told them that it was some artwork for a video game that's in development."

"Daniel, please. They bought it?"

"Yeah, in the confirmation email I got they asked when the game would be released." She paused, "I told them the game studio had just been bought out by a larger firm, the game was in development limbo, and things weren't looking good. They seemed a bit saddened by that."

Daniel couldn't help but chuckle at that. He could only imagine what General Hammond would say about the security breach when he found out, but he hoped that he would understand. Daniel certainly knew he understood what Shepard must be feeling. Not a day went by when he didn't mourn the loss of his beloved Sha're. Sometimes the fond memories of his departed wife were all that
kept him going.

Daniel motioned towards his lab and they walked down the corridor. "Tell me about her, Victoria?" he asked as they entered the lab. He motioned to an empty stool, and Victoria took a seat. Shepard placed the framed photo on the lab table and looked at it. She was obviously madly in love with Liara, that much was clear to Daniel. Moreover, to Shepard, Liara was a link to her own world. Shattered and destroyed by war or not, it was home. She pined for it.

"She was," Shepard paused, obviously trying to collect her thoughts, "smart, and caring, and so kind. There's nothing she wouldn't do for a friend." She paused again. Her gaze seemed to wander towards infinity. "She seemed so innocent when I met her, naive." She laughed, "You know, it sounds funny when I say that out loud. She's almost 80 years older than me. But, she seemed so young in those early days. 106 is barely an adult by Asari standards." Shepard sounded almost wistful.

"She was awkward, at first." Shepard chuckled. "She liked her dig sites, preferred to be alone. She didn't really know how to interact with people; it was all rather comical at first. She'd get so flustered trying to talk to me, everything she said came out sounding weird." She smiled.

"After I died she grew up," her facial expression changed as she continued. Now she looked saddened. "She became cold, and aggressive. She was a much harder woman when I met up with her again after my resurrection." She sighed, "But I still loved her, even more than before." She looked at Daniel, "Being dead sorta made me appreciate life a bit more. Ya know?"

Daniel nodded in agreement. "How did you meet?" he asked. He already knew the answer, of course. He had listened to the debriefing recordings. Somehow, though, he thought he'd get a slightly different answer than a nameless intelligence officer in an interrogation room.

"You mean you didn't hear the story on the recordings?" Shepard asked with more than a hint of sarcasm. Daniel could tell that Shepard knew why he was asking, though. He wasn't looking for intel. He just wanted to get to know her. So, is she going to open up or not? Apparently yes, he thought as Shepard continued to speak.

"Well," she leaned back and rested an elbow on the tabletop, "we had determined that the Matriarch Benezia, Liara's mother, was helping Saren in doing whatever it was that he was doing. At the time, of course, we didn't know what that really was. Though, Reapers," she made a substantial set of 'air quotes' with her hands, "certainly sounds ominous, no?" Daniel nodded, yes, that certainly does sound scary. "We really didn't have much in the way of leads, so I decided to take Normandy to find her."

Daniel reached out and motioned to the photograph. Shepard handed it to him. Daniel looked at Doctor T'soni. She was very pretty, there was no denying it. Light blue skin, faint freckles, she smiled warmly at the camera. The swooping scalp folds reminded him of long hair blowing in the wind. "Go on?"

"We had to fight through a lot of Geth to even get to her. She was stuck in a Prothean security barrier deep underground." She smiled, "She was so confused when we showed up. She didn't know who we were. I asked her about her mother and she became incredulous. I knew at that moment that she wasn't an enemy."

"When did you realize you loved her?" Daniel asked.

Shepard laughed. "Would you believe the moment I laid eyes on her?"
Daniel merely smiled, "I know exactly what that's like." He did. He knew he loved Sha're the moment he met her. She was so fearless, so indignant at being offered to him as a gift. He knew it was hard to describe, so when Shepard didn't elaborate further he didn't press. Daniel paused for a moment, "When did you know she loved you back?"

Shepard was silent for a few moments, pondering. "I think it was when she implied that she wanted to dissect my brain." There was an awkward silence. They both burst out laughing. Shepard smiled as she reached out and picked up a similarly framed photo of Jackson's late wife. Her smile faded. Her eyes seemed to lose their luster. "She's gone, isn't she?"

Daniel stopped smiling himself, "Yes. She was taken by a goa'uld. She's dead now."

Shepard closed her eyes and placed the photo on the table. "They're all gone. They probably never even existed." Victoria was obviously not talking about his wife. She was silent for some time.

Daniel heard a rustling at the door, "Commander?" asked Major Carter.

Shepard snapped out of the trance. Daniel was startled, the transition was so sudden. "Yes Major? What can I do for you?"

"I've checked some of your equipment out of the armory. Do you have some time to give me an overview?"

Daniel watched as Shepard stood, picked up the photo of Liara, and moved to leave the room. She paused suddenly and turned, "Thank you Daniel," she said in a surprisingly soft voice. "Can we pick this up again sometime soon?"

Jackson was too floored to say anything beyond, "Sure."
Shepard field stripped the N7 Valiant sniper rifle in a practiced blur. Major Carter looked on intently. "All modern weapons basically consist of an ammunition block, a mass effect field generator, a thermal management system, a barrel, and the frame/stock/trigger group. A small projectile is shaved off of the ammunition block," she held up an innocuous piece of metal, "its mass is reduced to near zero by the mass effect generator," she pointed to an innocent looking self-contained unit, "it is accelerated to high velocity, and exits the barrel," she pointed to the barrel. Aside from the trigger group, it was the only piece of technology that Major Carter could recognize. "This, necessarily, generates heat, which is dumped to the heat sink here," she held up a spare thermal clip. "For this type of weapon, you can get three shots off before the thermal clip is saturated and needs replacement. You cannot fire again until a fresh one is inserted." She handed the thermal clip to the Major, "You'll need to figure out a way of manufacturing more of those, or I only have what ammunition I came through with. I believe that is within your manufacturing capability." Major Carter scowled slightly at that last comment. It was an obvious dig against the SGC's technical capability, and the Earth's at large.

Shepard was happy to be out of her 'guest quarters'. Over the past month she had developed a rapport with the members of SG-1 in between the seemingly unending series of debriefings. While they were mostly a blur, she did remember some of the questioning. The majority of it was bothersome. She would have rather been preparing for the Reapers.

Still, some of the topics were, obviously, of paramount importance:

Describe Reaper military forces; numbers, armaments, tactics, strengths and weaknesses, and disposition of fleets and ground units throughout the galaxy, particularly Earth. Describe indoctrination. Describe the Reaper invasion of Earth, sequence of events, and areas of possible improvements. Similarly, describe the re-conquest of Earth by allied forces. Describe the military organization of the Systems Alliance; including the member nations of the Alliance on Earth itself, the military forces of the other Council Races, military forces of non-Council Races, the Geth, the Rachni, and of terminus systems organizations. Describe military tactics, intelligence gathering techniques and technologies, espionage organizations, vehicles, ships, and weapons systems employed by the Systems Alliance and other races.

Other topics were more asinine:

Describe the Unified Banking Act, the system of fiscal governance of the Citadel Council, and how it relates to currency markets on Earth. What is the Alliance Military's policy on inter-species relationships, legal recognition of same, and the dispositioning of property and children (where possible) across species boundaries? What mechanisms are employed to prevent copyright infringement and protect intellectual property across the extra-net?

Some were quaintly bigoted:

Describe the moral justification for permitting inter-species relationships involving Alliance military personnel. Describe same for homosexual relationships or those outside of the 'traditional definition of marriage' amongst humans.

And some topics were down-right personal:

Describe your relationship with Doctor Liara T'soni, and any other aliens you may have engaged in sexual relations with. Describe Asari physiology, particularly related to the 'bonding' process and
procreation with other species. Have you ever divulged, intentionally or unintentionally, Alliance military secrets while engaged in sexual activity with an Asari?

The most frank, however:

_Do you love Doctor Liara T'soni? Did you forgo destroying the Reapers outright and risk failing to control the Reaper forces in an attempt to reunite with her? Did you re-substantiate yourself here in an attempt to reunite with her? Will you disobey orders of those appointed above you in an attempt to reunite with her if the opportunity arises?_

She still wasn't sure how she got here, but the answer to that last question was, of course, yes. But she wouldn't tell them that.

And, finally:

_Will you help defend Earth from offworld threats, be they the Reapers or other extra-terrestrial forces?_

The answer to that question, too, was yes!

Shepard returned to the present and continued, "Unless we can track down some more eezo, we'll never be able to replicate the working bits." Shepard began reassembling the rifle. "Same goes for my pistol, omni-tool, bio-amp, and the kinetic barriers in my armor." The rifle came together with similar rapidity. Victoria placed it on the work bench and pressed a button near the trigger group. The rifle folded into its stowed configuration with a beep. Carter smiled.

"Do you know how to synthesize element zero?" Carter asked.

"No, Major. As I recall it's a byproduct of supernovae. Most is mined near neutron stars and pulsars. I'd suggest looking there."

"We've scouted a few such places, but we've never detected anything like it."

"I wish I could help you more on that, Major," Shepard said truthfully. "If we're going to get ready for the Reapers we're going to need a lot of it. Tali was the engineer, I just shoot stuff." Shepard smiled at the Major, "You remind me of her." Carter grinned. "Same cute smile." Carter blushed a bit and leaned back. "Relax Major, I'm spoken for," she winked.

Major Carter bit her lip in thought. She was all but _geeking out_ over the equipment Commander Shepard was sharing with her, but another problem was gnawing at her intellect. What if eezo just couldn't exist in their _reality_, or whatever one would call it. No, that didn't quite track, she thought to herself. Eezo could obviously _exist_ in her reality; Commander Shepard was full of the stuff. Maybe it just couldn't be _created_ here.

"Well, multi-verse theory posits that there are an infinite number of infinitely variable universes." Shepard nodded, she was following so far. Despite not having a formal education in engineering, Shepard was frighteningly smart. Even in Carter's time the Navy was a highly technical service branch, all officers necessarily had at least _some_ scientific aptitude. "We've encountered other _realities_ that were very similar to our own, though with certain events that turned out differently."

"You're not going to start talking about classified mission reports?" Shepard politely reminded Carter of what General Hammond had said when she'd first arrived.

"No," Carter frowned, "I can't yet, though we can still speak in theoreticals." Shepard leaned back on the work bench and crossed her arms over her breasts. She smiled and waited for the Major to
continue. "Perhaps one of the differentiating factors between where you came from and where you are now, is in the formation of eezo?"

Shepard smiled. "One plus one equals three." Carter's jaw literally dropped. She stood there for a moment pondering. A broad smile crossed her face. Shepard smiled in response, "No, I was wrong. Your smile is cuter."

"You think the underlying math of our universes might be different?" Carter said ignoring Shepard's latest comment. "That's why we've never seen element zero before?"

"It's certainly possible Major Carter. I just recalled something EDI told me once."

"Your AI?"

"Well, not my AI, she's fully sentient and considered by most of us to be an independent person. But yeah." Victoria closed her eyes trying to remember EDI's exact words. "Our laws of physics may only occur in a finite area, a bubble if you will. If you went far enough out, or created enough energy, you could reach a place where one plus one equaled three. All energy, all matter, all math would be different." She opened her eyes, "Well, that's paraphrased, I'm afraid I don't have an eidetic memory."

Carter nodded, "That's actually still pretty profound. What brought that up?"

Shepard sighed, "Liara asked."

Carter frowned, "You really miss her, don't you?"

"That's an understatement, Major." Shepard looked at the floor. Then she looked at the photograph she had placed on the work bench. She closed her eyes.

Carter caught a glimpse as to how much Shepard was actually suffering. She had been expending a non-trivial amount of effort to mask just how much she missed Liara. Somehow, though, it seemed Shepard was relating to her. She was letting her in, bit by bit. It pained Samantha to see someone so out of place and hurting. The situation reminded her of the time she met her doppelganger from another reality. She too had just lost everything. Major Carter decided then and there that she'd do whatever she could to get Commander Shepard home. Hopefully circumstance, and orders, would permit that to happen.

"Commander, we'll figure out a way to get you home. Somehow. I promise."

"But in the meantime," O'Neill appeared in the doorway, "I have a consolation prize for you." He held out a piece of paper to Commander Shepard. "Welcome to the United States Navy, Commander Shepard." He looked at the framed photograph. Apparently the United Parcel Service thought she was in the Navy too.

Shepard took the page tentatively and looked it over. "I've been placed under your command," she looked up at Colonel O'Neill. "So you'll be looking to order me around? Fight the goa'uld, whoever they are? You realize that the Reapers are the real threat, right?" Shepard sounded incredulous, the goa'uld were beneath her.

O'Neill wasn't expecting this to go smoothly. Still, it needed to be this way, and Shepard needed to understand that. "Commander," he continued reasonably, "the condition for you remaining free is that you join our command structure. If you can't deal with that, they'll shove you in a box in Area 51. You'll never get an opportunity to help us prepare for the Reapers, and you'll certainly never get a chance to try to find a way back to where you came from. You'll never see Liara again."
A faint mass effect field flickered into view about her body. Carter and O'Neill jumped back. Shepard regained control almost immediately and the field dissipated. "I don't respond well to threats, Colonel." She looked into O'Neill's eyes, to her surprise he didn't flinch. "I'm going to do what I need to do to keep Earth safe. Reapers, goa'uld, doesn't much matter; I'm not going to back away from a threat." She paused, "But I won't tolerate you using Liara as a lever."

O'Neill nodded. Despite the borderline insubordination, he appreciated and agreed with that sentiment. Deep down, he knew he'd enjoy working with Shepard. They just needed to get used to each other before things would go smoothly. "Well, now that that's sorted out, you've got a choice." He held up two gold pins. "The President has authorized you for our equivalents for all of your decorations. Unfortunately, there aren't any women in Navy Special Warfare or Submarine Warfare, so I can't give you a Navy SEAL or submariner badge. You'd draw too much attention. So, do you want to be a naval aviator?" he held up his left hand. "Or would you rather be a surface warfare officer?" he held up his right hand. Before Shepard could respond, O'Neill continued, "Also we can't give you a ribbon for the Medal of Honor, which is what we think your Star of Terra is equivalent to, that'd attract way too much attention." He paused and shrugged, "Sorry."

Shepard scowled, irrelevancies, "So, when are we going to Mars?"
Shepard climbed into her armor for the first time in nearly two months. Aside from her omni-tool they had kept most of her equipment away from her except for during a few supervised demonstrations. Those were nearly as bothersome as the endless debriefing sessions she’d been subjected to, and twice as counterproductive. Shepard still had no idea if Major Carter, Doctor Lee, and the SGC’s team of engineers could manufacture more thermal clips; the idea of burning through a few to give some political flunkies from Washington a show irked Victoria immensely.

Still, it certainly felt good to shoot something, Victoria thought to herself. That surprised her. She wanted nothing more than to leave all of that in her past. She wanted to retire with Liara and start making little blue babies; lots of them! Shepard sighed to herself. Maybe that's no longer a possibility, she thought sadly. She pushed the fear from her mind. That would come to a resolution soon, one way or the other. In the meantime, she’d just have to settle for blowing shit up.

Consequently, the biotics show ’n tell in particular stood out in her memory. Not so much that it was an opportunity to wreak some serious havoc, but because she decided not to. And not just because I could have brought the mountain down on my head, either, she thought. Victoria had barely given them half of what she was capable of; some throws and pulls, and not much else. They were also still unaware that she could do some serious damage without her bio-amp which was kept under lock and key when not in supervised use. She still didn’t trust these people. Keeping something in reserve seemed like a good idea. Save it for a rainy day.

But today was different. She was a woman of action, and today was the day they took their first steps against the Reapers. Shepard moved with purpose. She actually turned a few heads in the locker room when she stripped naked without a second thought and started dressing. Prudes. It felt like a second skin, literally. She was home.

Major Carter had kept her word. Her N7 combat armor was un-damaged, despite the best efforts of Doctor Lee and the rest of the SGC science corps to pick it apart. Shepard slipped her omni-tool into a protected pouch on her belt and powered up the device. A quick diagnostic test verified that the armor and bio-amp were in good condition. She placed her helmet upon her head, prepped for vacuum but left the face plate open, and looked at her heads up display. All systems green; game time.

"So where's the Spectre?" Colonel O'Neill asked while he checked over his P90 sub-machinegun. Everything was in order. He nodded to the armorer who withdrew after handing another to Major Carter.

Carter chambered a round on her own P90, engaged the safety, and looked at the Colonel. "Last I saw her she was connecting her armor's plumbing," she grimaced.

"Ouch," interjected Doctor Jackson as he pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Is that really necessary? We’re only going to be EVA for a few hours, and not for the better part of a week."

"Procedure, going into potential combat," Carter paused, "Apparently she's trained to spend several weeks in the armor without removing it. The power cell is good for at least a month." She shrugged, "Besides, she said she could always take it off and relax on the ship."

"A whole month?" Jack shivered at the thought of being plumbed into anything for that long. And relief tubes for males are a relatively simple affair, he thought.
"Well, she certainly applied enough baby powder," Carter's voice trailed off as Commander Shepard strode into the gate room.

"Colonel," she snapped off a textbook perfect salute despite the body armor. Then she turned to retrieve her weapons from an armorer who looked not a little uncomfortable holding the *space weapons*, as they had come to be called.

"Commander," Jack replied, tipping his olive drab baseball cap.

O'Neil recalled the first debriefing with Shepard. Then she was defiant, powerful, determined; even in hospital scrubs. *Now* she was downright terrifying. Barefoot Shepard stood nearly 6'-2" with a muscled tri-athlete's build, dressed in armor she was enormous. She had *presence*. Jack quietly longed for the day she faced off against a squad of Jaffa; he could picture them running in terror.

With practiced hands Shepard's pistol smoothly clicked into place at her waist and folded into brick no larger than a paperback novel. Victoria elected to keep the sniper rifle deployed and at the ready. She worked the charging lever, examined the weapon, and thanked the armorer who seemed relieved for the chance to back away from the scary lady in the *robot armor*.

Commander Shepard walked over to SG-1. She nodded her head respectfully to Teal'c. He returned the gesture. They had developed a substantial rapport, much to O'Neill and Carter's surprise. "Ready when you are," she said.

O'Neill looked her up and down one more time, *shit she's scary looking*, and raised his voice, "Dial us up, Walter!" The stargate began its dialing sequence.

"Ever been to Mars before, Colonel?" Shepard asked. She smiled evenly beneath her helmet's open face-shield. O'Neill was somewhat taken aback. He had never seen her smile except on the surveillance camera in her quarters, usually when looking at still images or videos of Liara on her omni-tool. It was sufficiently rare to be noteworthy.

"No, this will be my first time," O'Neill replied. "First time for anyone, actually." Of course the stargate couldn't take them directly to Mars. They'd be gating to a small un-inhabited world roughly three-dozen light-years from Earth. After a few biotic demonstrations that Shepard and Carter thought would be too dangerous to undertake inside the mountain, they'd rendezvous with Jacob Carter and a Tok'ra transport ship. Another few days or so spaceflight and they'd be back in the Sol system. It was a roundabout way of doing things, but the SGC still didn't yet have a *reliable* FTL capability of its own. *Hopefully that'll change after this little trip*, Jack thought to himself.

"Interesting place, Mars," Shepard said evenly. "Do you want to know the names of the first astronauts to step foot on the red planet in my time?" She arched an eyebrow. O'Neill was beginning to worry; this was not the brooding severe Shepard he had come to know over the past couple of months. She seemed almost cheerful. *Pre-combat jitters?* Jack wondered to himself.

"Big Mars colony? Maybe a football team?" O'Neill asked as the third chevron locked into place.

"Backwater, Colonel," Shepard replied. The fourth chevron locked, "After we discovered the relays we found plenty of Earth-like worlds," the fifth chevron locked into place, "wasting time on Mars didn't seem worth it." *Wasting time?* O'Neill thought. He found the idea that someone would consider colonizing Mars a *waste* of time *alien*. **What kind of person is this Shepard?** The sixth chevron locked, "It's been declared a preserve. Mostly off limits to people who aren't authorized to research the Archives."

"Chevron seven, locked!" Walter's voice boomed through the loudspeakers. The stargate opened
with a flash of blue light and the *woosh* of the formation vortex. Despite the tough exterior, and the space-aged body armor, Shepard jumped back in surprise. O'Neill chuckled to himself, *everyone is shocked the first time.*

The ancient looking rover that the locals called a MALP trundled through the event horizon. Shepard recalled the briefing material, *they were finally letting her in on operational details,* the MALP would check to make sure the other side of the gate was clear, and then they would follow it through. Arrayed behind them was a pair of cargo rovers with SG-1’s EVA gear.

Shepard walked slowly up the ramp towards the event horizon. It was beautiful. Somewhere, deep in her memory, it looked *familiar.* She still couldn't remember all of the details of what had happened, of what she *was,* before she had arrived in the SGC. Though, it was *definitely* familiar. Shepard heard the clank of boots on the grated ramp as Major Carter approached her. "Pretty spectacular, huh?"

Shepard held her hand out. She let her fingertips play along the event horizon's surface. The shimmering 'pool of water' seemed to react slightly to their passing. "It's the same color as Liara's skin," Shepard said. Carter was conspicuously quiet. Shepard remembered the feel of Liara's flesh; warm, smooth, inviting, *comforting.* She remembered the night before they assaulted the Illusive Man's base. Despite the nightmare, she wished she never had to leave that bed. Shepard closed her eyes, *I'll see you again someday, beloved.* But she didn't feel anything here, despite the high-sensitivity gauntlet fingertips. There was nothing. *Please don't be lost to me.*

"SG-1," General Hammond's voice boomed through the speaker system, "you have a go." The MALP must have reported all clear on the other side.

"The first time is always a bit strange," said Major Carter and Shepard lowered and locked her helmet's visor. "The trick is to exhale a little bit just before…" Without warning Shepard leapt through the event horizon. "Or you can do that."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Victoria Shepard's second experience in stargate travel was certainly less traumatizing than her first. *If you could even call whatever that was travel,* she thought. Transiting a stargate was definitely different than jumping through a mass relay too. She actually perceived a finite passage of time, and the *light show* was rather amazing. Exiting on the far side was a bit disorienting, *Carter wasn't kidding about exhaling before entry.* She nearly stumbled, but for her ballerina-like grace.

A fraction of a second after arrival, Shepard switched into combat mode. She raised her N7 Valiant rifle to her shoulder and scanned the immediate surroundings. The stargate lay in a small clearing in a wooded area. The MALP sat passively where it had stopped a few meters beyond the stargate's stone pedestal. To her right was the Dial-Home Device, *cute name.* It all seemed so peaceful. *Nice to visit an alien planet and not immediately have something try to kill me.*

The members of SG-1 came through the gate. They, like Shepard, raised their weapons and searched the immediate area for threats. Finding none they waited for the cargo rovers, and got down to business.

Carter, ever the engineer, had put together a *test plan.* They dialed another gate the SGC knew to be on an uninhabited world. They sent the MALP through, *no one home.*

Shepard enveloped one of the cargo rovers, sans EVA gear, in a mass effect field and pushed it through the stargate. *Success,* the MALP showed it arriving safely on a small video monitor Carter had stashed in her backpack. Samantha scrutinized the small LCD display, it appeared that the Cherenkov-blue of the mass effect field didn't persist on the far side of the gate. Carter inferred that the mass effect field didn't carry through, and the objects regained their original mass on the far side.

Shepard tried to *pull* the rover back through the gate. *Failure,* it seemed that biotics couldn't reach *backwards* through an active wormhole.

Doctor Jackson and Teal'c traversed the gate and dialed back. Shepard tried to pull the same rover *forwards* through an active wormhole. *Failure,* Doctor Jackson, Teal'c, and the rover returned.

For the last test Carter did not want to risk a rover. She handed Shepard a bag of spare MRE's and then took cover behind one of the rovers with the rest of SG-1. Major Carter closely monitored her link to the MALP as Shepard enveloped the bag in a mass effect field, and threw it through the stargate; *the wrong way.*

"Holy shit!" Carter cried after the bag had transited, *it actually transited,* the wormhole. The stargate flickered and disconnected abruptly. Shepard turned to look at SG-1. "I think we're going to need another MALP," she said pointing to a spike of data on the display. Colonel O'Neill looked at it dubiously; obviously not understanding what the data were telling him. "I'm glad we didn't use the SGC gate as a target. Look at that gamma pulse!" Shepard matched gazes with O'Neill, he simply shrugged.

"What happened Major?" asked Shepard.

"Well," she started excitedly, "normally the stargate is strictly one way. Matter cannot come back to the dialing gate from the destination gate. Photons can, since they have no mass. That's what allows
us to transmit video and voice between the SGC and the MALP or whoever. This last test was to see if your mass effect field could reduce the mass of an object enough that it could travel backwards through the stargate." Shepard wasn't an engineer, but that seemed fairly straight forward.

"I presume it didn't work?"

"Not exactly," Carter was obviously geeking out a bit. The thought that she had just destroyed a few million dollars' worth of MALP no longer registered. "The bag…"

"Which contained half of our food, by the way," O'Neill interrupted with a raised finger. "Not that I'm a fan of the 'four fingers of death' myself," he mumbled to Doctor Jackson.

"The bag," Carter continued, "did leave this gate and traveled to the originating gate. But it didn't re-materialize." She smiled.

Shepard couldn't help but smile herself. Carter was actually rather cute when she was excited like this, "So what did it do?"

"It exploded!" she said with a grin. "The MALP recorded a very energetic spike of gamma radiation and then the wormhole disconnected. I bet when we have the SGC send another MALP to that gate we'll find the entire surrounding area irradiated and charred."

There was a moment of silence, "Good to know," quipped O'Neill.

"Yeah, note to self," continued Jackson, "Let's not have Shepard do that again."

Victoria was about to respond when they heard a deafening roar from above. "Ahh, looks like Jacob's here," said O'Neill.

Jack looked up at the hovering tel'tak transport. Say what you want about Selmak, he (it?) was an excellent pilot. Not that Jacob was anything to sneeze at when he was in the Air Force. He turned his attention to Shepard. She had dropped to a knee and was scanning the tree line for threats interspersed with glances up to the transport. Her facial expressions were impossible to determine through that slit-faceplate, nice that she doesn't have any of those blasted 'shoot-me lights' illuminating her face, but from her posture she definitely looked agitated, alert. High-gain mode, Jack thought.

"Shepard," he called.

Commander Shepard turned to look at him, rifle still at the ready. "Colonel?" she replied.

He motioned to her and she rose from her crouch and bounded towards him as he approached one of the cargo rovers. "You and I will board first."

She looked around, "I don't think this clearing is wide enough for that shuttle to land," she said confused.

Jack smiled, "About that…" with a whooshing noise accompanied by a loud buzz a set of rings descended from the belly of the tel'tak and settled around them. Another whoosh and a flash of light and Shepard, much to her surprise, found herself standing in the cargo bay of the shuttle. The internal rings disappeared into the floor with a similar noise.

Obviously startled, Shepard's rifle came back up to her shoulder as she looked around. "What was that?" she asked.
"Transport rings," he replied, "Let's clear the pad so the rest of the team can come up." Still a bit confused Shepard followed as the cargo rover motored towards a bulkhead. "The go'uld use them to move from ship to ship. You have anything like that in your place?"

"No, actually," she replied as the balance of SG-1 came aboard with the remaining cargo rover. The transport rings had no sooner stowed themselves as Shepard could sense a slight shift in the floor. The transport shuttle was underway. Victoria observed the members of SG-1 unsling their weapons and place them in a neat pile on one of the cargo rovers. They continued to remove their packs and jackets, ending up looking quite casual in their fatigue. Tea'c looked rather dashing in his tightly fitted black t-shirt, if you were into that sort of thing, she thought. She briefly imagined Liara wearing one of her form-fitting N7 tank tops, she smiled broadly.

Taking a cue from the rest of the team, Shepard began to relax. She returned her rifle to her back-mount and removed her helmet placing it atop one of the rovers. She looked around. The interior of the shuttle was, in a word, wrong. This was neither a starship, nor was it an Egyptian tomb; regardless of the designers attempts to make it both. Shepard remembered visiting the Temple of Dendur at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. She didn't recall seeing gold leaf everywhere. It was ancient, surely worn by the passage of time, but she could never imagine it being so gaudy. She was about to ask who decorated this place when she heard a voice. Deep and warbling in timbre, it cut to her core. We are Harbinger!

"We're under way, ETA 81 hours." Her right hand flashed to her hip, her M77 Paladin already deploying. This attack tears you apart, the taunts came roaring through her memory. Shepard's body moved on full automatic. She pivoted and took cover behind the cargo rover. Biotics flashing she leveled her pistol on Selmak. Preserve Shepard's body if possible.

He merely regarded her, 'Is this the Commander Shepard you've been talking about?"

Stunned silence. No one dared move; they feared Shepard might pull the trigger. You could hear a pin drop.

"Commander," O'Neill said softly, "this is Selmak. He's a friend. We don't point guns at friends."

Shepard shook herself back into reality. It was just so startling. The SGC had told her what a tok'ra was, what a symbiote did to its host; in this case with the host's permission. She just wasn't expecting the voice. She rose from behind the rover and lowered her pistol. "Sir."

"Are you alright, Commander?" asked Selmak.

Shepard returned her pistol to her belt and spoke, "Just don't go saying assuming direct control, and I think we'll all be fine." Her Harbinger impression wasn't quite as good as Selmak’s.

Selmak closed his eyes and bowed his head silently for a moment. Jacob Carter raised his head and opened his eyes. He looked at Colonel O'Neill, "Is this lady for real?"

Chapter End Notes

Alternative names for this chapter I considered were: 'Aperture Science' and 'Now You're Thinking With Portals'. I figured they weren't quite appropriate, though. Alas.
Jack leaned back against his pack and observed. For her part, Shepard was being a good sport about all of this. *A damn sight better than she was during the Air Force and NID debriefings,* he added to himself. Selmak asked no questions about Shepard bringing pirated mp3's back from the future. The tok'ra cared not for the banking infrastructure or fiscal policy of the Citadel races. They sure as hell didn't care about who the Commander took to her bed, what color her skin was, or her apparent gender; the tok'ra were approximately genderless after all. *Too bad,* Jack thought. He rather liked it when Shepard asked the man from NID if he wanted to know how many freckles Liara had around her navel, or if they knew what part of the Asari body the azure was.

Shepard leaned against a support strut as Selmak asked her real questions. *The nature of eezo, so far as she understood it. The nature of biotics, their uses, and limitations. How mass effect technology has impacted tactical doctrine, engineering design, and infrastructure.* The tok'ra wanted tactical and strategic data on the Reapers; a threat assessment was already underway.

Victoria answered his questions as best she could; though some subjects were just out of her range of experience. Jack didn't detect half of the resentment she had shown to the NID interrogators. She obviously found Selmak's voice off-putting, but she wasn't the only one. Selmak also benefited from two months' worth of engineering work between Carter and Shepard interfacing the latter's omni-tool with human and tok'ra technology. A wave of a hand, a flash of orange holography, and the tok'ra knew everything about the other place as Stargate Command.

Selmak closed his eyes and bowed his head. Jacob opened his eyes and looked at Shepard, "How are you doing, kid?"

Shepard, startled, looked Jacob in the face. "Not well, sir."

"I can't imagine what this is like for you," Jacob said, "Neither can Selmak."

Shepard pondered that for a moment. "Sir, what's it like? Having that thing in your head?" She almost looked disgusted. At least Jacob didn't seem to take offense. *Shepard certainly had an excuse.*

"It's a bit strange," he replied, "but Selmak is a really interesting character once you get to know it." He paused, "I don't think it's like this indoctrination you've been describing, if that's what you mean. It's more of a conversation, not subversion."

Shepard pondered, "I think I know what you mean."

She could tell that her response confused him. "What you're describing sounds a lot like the bond; that mental connection that an Asari can form with her partner." Shepard suddenly felt wistful. She missed Liara so much, and feared that she may never see her beloved again, but she also mourned the loss of the bond itself. To feel so close to someone, anyone, was a joyous experience; doubly so with the one she loved. *Please don't be lost to me.*

SG-1's ears perked up, Shepard didn't often talk about her personal experiences. "In the joining, two individuals become one. Thoughts, feelings, desires, sensations; they all intertwine. As Liara put it, an Asari and her mate cease to be separate individuals, but combine into one rapturous whole." She couldn't remember her exact words, but that was pretty close to what she told her in her little alcove behind the med-bay; it seemed like so long ago.
"Do you describe a spiritual experience, Commander Shepard?" Teal'c asked. His query surprised the other members of SG-1 somewhat. Shepard wasn't quite sure if it was because he was a man of few words, or some other underlying reason she wasn't familiar with. Though, he does strike me as the spiritual sort, she thought.

Shepard chuckled and smirked, "You know, that's exactly what I said to her when she first described it to me." She paused and looked off into infinity, "That seems like ages ago, she was so young then. Innocent. We had no idea what was coming." She frowned and looked at the floor.

A pregnant silence.

"Well," Jack piped up, "I can't wait to meet the Asari." He smiled and looked at the others, a mischievous look on his face.

"You would," quipped Daniel.

Shepard smirked, "Well, Colonel, I imagine the opportunity to join with a member of the 'new species on the block' will be very appealing to a lot of Asari." She let that sink in for a moment. If they even exist here, a dark corner of her psyche whispered. She clenched her jaw, don't think like that. You will find her.

O'Neill looked off into the distance, grin on his face, twinkle in his eye; he was obviously pondering what it might be like to be the object of numerous Asari's attention. Unable to resist, she continued, "You may even catch the eye of a few Matriarchs." Looking O'Neill in the eyes she reached up and cupped her breasts, hefted them in her hands, winked, and let out a long whistle.

"I'm willing to do my part for first contact," Daniel said with a sudden change of tone.

SG-1 and Selmak chuckled. Carter closed her eyes and laughed despite herself.
Shepard looked out upon the Martian surface. It was desolate, red, lonely. The scenery mirrored how she felt. Mars of her time was only slightly more populated than the Mars of now when you got down to it. She checked the pressure seal on her combat armor once again and turned to look at O'Neill and Carter. They were each closing the faceplates on their EVA suits. Those things belong in a museum, Shepard thought to herself. Carter pronounced them good to go and pressed a button that looked like a gold scarab or something equally out of place on a starship. Whoever these goa'uld are, she thought to herself, they have a very strange sense of style.

And if we don't find what we're looking for out there, they're going to become my problem. She tried to put the thought from her mind.

"Blowing down the airlock now," Jacob Carter's voice came through her aural implants loud and clear. She could only imagine how much it crackled in those antique space suit helmets. Fucking dark ages. The air pressure in the airlock dropped rapidly, Shepard could feel her armor expand slightly into shape.

Shepard stepped to the hatch as it slid open. Then she stopped. She turned to look at O'Neill and Carter, "Remember what I was saying about the first astronauts on Mars?" She could see them nod clearly enough with the damn shoot-me lights in their helmets. Some idiot engineer somewhere had decided it would be a Good Idea to include small LED lights inside their faceplates. Shit I hope they do something more than just illuminate the wearer's face, she thought. Maybe they were part of a heads-up display? Either way, Shepard decided she'd have to talk to the engineers about that one. "Well..." she stepped to the side and motioned towards the surface of the Promethei Planum, "How about you put your names in the history books instead?"

Major Carter grinned from ear to ear and stepped forward. O'Neill was a bit too surprised to do anything beyond smirk and get out of the way. "One small step for a woman," she said as she jumped over the threshold of the airlock. Shepard tried to say something, but Carter was too quick for her, "One giant..." Carter's otherwise historic speech was cut short as she toppled over with a yelp and face-planted into the Martian soil. One for the ages, Shepard thought to herself. She wondered if they could secretly show a video of this to Neil Armstrong; he'd probably get a chuckle out of it.

Shepard gracefully leapt from the transport ship and landed next to Carter. She leaned over gingerly and helped her to her feet. "Martian gravity is just shy of 0.4g," Shepard said as she dusted the Major off, "The artificial gravity from the ship leaves off abruptly when you clear the air lock. Sorry, I wanted to warn you. But, you were a bit too quick for me." She smiled, not that Carter could see it. The interior of her helmet didn't have any visible lights to give her position away to potential enemies.

Shepard stood back and watched O'Neill exit the transport ship. He stumbled too, but managed to keep from toppling over. Sure that they were upright, Shepard turned and bounded away. She brought her omni-tool online and began scanning.

Jack was starting to get the low-g 'bunny hop' down. Armstrong made it look so damn easy. Carter was doing slightly better. Shepard moved with a cat-like grace that put them both to shame. Despite her carriage, O'Neill could see that things were not going to Shepard's liking. Victoria's omni-tool glowed bright orange as she scanned for the Prothean artifacts that were increasingly obviously not to be found. Still, she wasn't giving up. Part of him admired the attitude, the unwillingness to admit...
defeat, but Jack knew what thoughts must really be racing through her mind.

Carter bounded to his side, "Anything?" he asked over a private channel; Shepard didn't need to hear their demoralizing conversation.

"No, sir," Carter looked at an instrument of her own. Bulky, heavy even in the reduced gravity, it didn't have nearly the sleek sexy lines of Shepard's futuristic equipment, but it was just as sensitive. There was nothing here. No underground bunker. No treasure-trove of Prothean technology. Earth's tech-base would stay in the 21st century; there would be no 'greatest discovery in human history' today. "I hate to say it, sir, but I think this trip has been a bust." Carter's shoulders slumped.

"Yeah, it's looking that way from here too," chimed in Doctor Jackson over the comm. He, Teal'c, and Selmak had been rather quiet through the entire exercise. The tek'tak's sensor suite wasn't quite designed for this work, but even it was sensitive enough to tell there was nothing here. Though, they didn't want to upset Shepard any more than she was already becoming.

"Roger that," O'Neill responded. Despite the unfolding tragedy, Jack couldn't help but chuckle, "Carter."

"Yes, sir?"

"Carter, look around, we're on Mars," he turned and smiled. She beamed back at him with realization. It was funny, they'd already visited nearly a hundred different worlds, but this was the first time men and women had set foot upon the red planet. There was something epic about standing there, something more visceral than stepping through a stargate. This was literally a childhood dream come true for both of them.

"It's beautiful, sir," she paused, "I can't believe we've never visited before. It's in the neighborhood, after all."

Jack chuckled, then his jaw dropped; Shepard fell to her knees.

Nothing! There's nothing here! Shepard looked at her omni-tool for the hundredth time. Despite the absence of the Martian Positioning System satellites from her time, the data in her omni-tool's memory should have been sufficient find the Archives. Still, there was nothing. No dark energy emissions, no Prothean beacons, not a single sign of Prothean tech. No! It must be here somewhere.

Shepard breathed deeply. She paced wildly. Her vision began to grey. She looked up at the top of her helmet and noticed the 'hyper-vent' light appear in the 'master caution' section of her heads up display. She was losing it. No! Please no!

Shepard's world was falling apart. She was alone; Liara didn't exist, and she never would. It's over, it's all over. Shepard fell to her knees. She bowed her head. She wept.

Victoria thought back to the moments before the final push in London. It all struck her as very poignant. She said her goodbyes to everyone she had interacted with during her fight against the Reapers stretching back to the mission against Saren. There were so many, they were all together in the fight. Liara, however, stood out in her mind, and rightfully so. Shepard smiled at the memory. Liara had shared her mind with her one last time. Liara showed her all of the feelings and memories about her she'd accumulated over the years. For a glorious moment they were a single mind, even more so than when they made love. Shepard could feel how much Liara loved her. She could feel how much she wanted to end the Reaper War and settle down with her. For a brief, amazing moment she could see the large family they would have. All those little blue children, and they would raise
them together in peace. Liara used the phrase *bond-mate*, and it sounded perfect. That was why, despite no official documentation to justify it, she had told SG-1 that Liara was her *wife*. Shepard's shoulders bucked with a sob, tears streamed down her face, *my beloved wife*.

Shepard didn't know the nuts-and-bolts of Asari reproduction, but part of her hoped that Liara had taken that opportunity to conceive a child by her. She must have known it might be the very last chance they would get. Still, she wanted to be there to raise their daughters with Liara. *She's still alive out there, somewhere*, Shepard thought to herself. She was sure of it. Liara had gotten away with the *Normandy* when she called for the evac. Victoria hated the thought, but she was actually relieved when Liara had been wounded during the scramble to The Beam. Joker had come and taken her and Garrus away. They were safe! Somewhere, in some other *reality*, they were safe. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly over the tears. *I love you so much!*

A hand appeared on her shoulder. She looked up through bleary eyes at Colonel O'Neill. Thankfully he couldn't see her crying through the small slit of her view port. The look on his face was familiar. There it was again, the *pain* behind his eyes. Just like she had seen that first day she had *arrived* here. He understood. Shepard wasn't sure how, but he *understood*.

"It'll be ok, Victoria," he said. "Let's go home."

*Home*, Shepard thought, trying not to let despair overcome her again. "Yes. Home."
"That sounds like a great idea Samantha," said Doctor Fraiser's muffled voice, "we've got plenty of food, and I think Cassie might like to meet someone else with, um, a special background."

Major Carter shifted the telephone's receiver to her other ear and fiddled with the wire, the connection was awful. "Yeah. I think she could use some family right now too."

There was a pause, the line crackled a bit. Carter imagined Janet was mulling that over in her mind, "Yes. I would think so. Well, you can head over any time. Cassandra is hooking up some sort of karaoke game on her PlayStation, so…” she trailed off.

Carter chuckled, "Well, I can't really sing, but that's sorta the point, right?" She thought for a moment, "I think Shepard is actually rather keen on contemporary music, it might be right up her alley." She checked her watch, "I only have my bike on-base right now, so I'll have to grab a car from the motor pool. Call it an hour, hour and a half?"

"Sounds great, see you soon."

Major Carter returned the receiver to its cradle. She made a mental note to have the explosion-proof phone replaced. Airtight seal or no, if there was an internal short it could be an extreme hazard; there were plenty of volatiles in her lab space and she couldn't afford an errant spark. Safety first. She looked around her lab to make sure there were no active or dangerous experiments that needed putting away, and then walked down the corridor towards the guest quarters.

Carter increasingly worried about Shepard. She hadn't been the same since Mars. Shepard, a brutally smart individual, must have known what they would find, or rather not find, on the red planet. All the signs pointed to finding nothing. The SGC had never found any eezo in all of its offworld missions. They had never encountered any of the citadel races on any of the planets they'd visited. Nor had the Tok'ra. Nor, presumably, had the Goa'uld. Carter imagined the Asgard would have given them the same story if they could get ahold of them. Thor is surprisingly incognito considering the novelty of the current situation, thought Carter. Likewise, Shepard had never heard of naquadah, the Goa'uld, Tok'ra, nor the Asgard wherever she came from. Though, she had visited the 'Asgard System' on a few occasions. It was painfully obvious to everyone, even Shepard, that Victoria had transitioned into a completely separate reality and timeline well before they had ever made it to Mars.

But Shepard was a stubborn individual. She held out hope until the very end. Carter could tell that Victoria was relieved, on an intellectual level, at the discovery that the Reapers just didn't exist here. Shepard was dedicated to the protection of Earth before all else, and not having to deal with the Reapers simplified things immensely. But she was also emotionally destroyed. Suddenly, with certainty, she knew; she would never see any of her friends, especially her beloved Liara, ever again.

Carter had proposed that perhaps the Asari still existed, but without eezo they might not yet have a faster than light capability. Thessia might not have a stargate. Maybe this explained why they had never met any of the Citadel Races before. Perhaps someday Liara would still be born, and they could be reunited; for whatever that was worth. Shepard would be roughly 100 years old by time Liara was born, if she was ever born. Their meeting on Therum a century after that would never happen.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Shepard had sadly observed that eezo was so prevalent on Thessia that life had evolved around it. No eezo, she said, no Asari. Nor would there be any Protheans to uplift them. It was madness to even hope in the first place, and Shepard had known it.
It pained Carter. Despite the occasional discomfort she felt when Shepard flirted with her, something she was willing to believe was now done only in jest, she had come to quite like the Spectre. Carter saw much of herself in Shepard. Victoria was another powerful intelligent woman on the front lines, putting her life on the line so others did not have to, doing what an unfortunately large percentage of males thought impossible for her gender. She'd given her life for humanity, at least once, and she was still willing to give her all to defend her species. The fact that her enemies were now goa'uld rather than Reapers was just a detail.

Carter would not let Shepard lose herself to despair, and not just because she needed her for the fight against the goa'uld. Shepard deserved at least some happiness in her life. She had fought her war, and she had won it! Undoubtedly the people of her reality were currently enjoying that victory; she should find some enjoyment in this one.

Samantha reached Victoria's quarters.

Knock, knock, knock…

Commander Victoria Shepard reflected upon her life.

She'd lived a rich childhood, raised by parents who adored her and provided whatever she needed despite the rigors of military life in space. She had followed in her parents' footsteps, joined the Alliance Navy, earned the coveted N7 Special Forces designation, and served with distinction. She had saved the colony of Elysium from slavers, received the Start of Terra, and was regarded as a 'Hero of the Alliance'.

She was inducted as the first human Spectre and sent after the traitor Saren. She'd defeated Saren, his Geth armada, and the Reaper Sovereign in their attempt to seize the Citadel and launch the Reaper invasion of the Milky Way.

She had wooed and won the beautiful Asari Doctor Liara T'soni, finding her soul mate in a shy archeologist nearly four times her own age.

She had risen from the dead. She had risen from the dead! She had recruited an amazing team of disparate individuals from throughout the galaxy and stopped the Collectors before they could kidnap more colonies. She had successfully traversed the Omega 4 relay, faced down a proto-Reaper, and personally destroyed it.

When the hammer blow finally fell, she had rallied the peoples of the galaxy into the largest alliance in the history of the Milky Way. She had cured the genophage and brokered an alliance between the Turians and Krogan despite a millennium of hatred. She had helped the Quarians reclaim their homeworld; but through peace, not conquest. The newly sentient synthetics and their organic creators would live together in harmony; united, by her, against a common enemy.

She had delivered the materials and experts to build an ancient super weapon of stupendous magnitude. She had assembled a fleet the likes of which had never been seen to deliver their last hope to Earth, her world, fulfilling her promise to bring help for the fight. I shall return, Shepard remembered the quote from that old Earth general. She had dropped in the first wave of an invasion many orders of magnitude more complex and pivotal than even her ship Normandy's namesake.

She had fought her way through the rubble of one of the most celebrated cities in human history. Personally facing down the 2 kilometer tall Harbinger, she still made it to the London Beam despite catastrophic injuries. She had confronted the Illusive Man, traitor to humanity, and convinced him to end his own life and stop preventing her from saving everyone else's.
She had sacrificed her own self to take control of the Reapers. She would use them as a tool for good, despite the corrupt intent behind their original design. *The most noble fate a man can endure is to place his own mortal body between his loved home and the war's desolation.* She remembered the line from her favorite book; still the only science fiction novel on the Alliance Military Academy required reading list.

But there was more to it than that, wasn't there?

As a child she would go months without seeing one or both of her parents. Alliance officers were a mobile lot, and a warship did not accommodate children. Her own service in the Navy had been one long study in adversity. N7 training was brutal; she still wondered how she ever survived 'The Villa'. Not a single day went by during training that she hadn't seriously contemplated dropping out.

Her heroic defense of Elysium had been a traumatizing exercise in horror and brutality. She had personally murdered several dozen Batarians, and her orders had ended the lives of many scores of civilians. She remembered the ceremony where she was awarded her *Star of Terra*, all of the smiling faces and congratulations. *Lies!* They were lauding a killer, a butcher. She had returned to her quarters to vomit and then cry herself to sleep. She could only confide in her own mother after her night terrors had awoken her. The screaming was loud enough to conduct through the metal bulkheads of Arcturus Station to her adjacent suite. Viking Victoria, Viking Vikki, god how she still hated the nickname they pinned on her along with that medal; it reminded her of what she did.

Her battle against Sovereign was equally horrifying. She had murdered her beloved's mother before her very eyes. She had left Kaiden Alenko to die on Virmire. She needed someone to ensure that bomb went off, and he was in the right place at the wrong time. She had hurled the Alliance 5th Fleet at the Geth and Sovereign to save the Council and the *Destiny Ascension*. She remembered each of the hate letters she'd received from grieving families. Not everyone thought humans dying for aliens was the right thing to do.

She had died. *She had died!* She watched her command crumble about her as she was blown into space. She had hardly noticed the hiss of air escaping her suit at first, her thoughts screamed in her head so loudly. She kept looking for the escape pods, even as the lack of oxygen robbed her of consciousness. Liara and her crew needed to be ok, nothing else mattered.

She had awoken a different woman, nearly more machine than human, to an exploding space station crawling with homicidal security mechs. Necessity allied her with Cerberus, the abhorrent terrorists who assassinated Alliance admirals and unleashed Racni on civilians. She would just as soon have destroyed Cerberus but for the Council's inaction. *She had to do something!* What was worse than her own changes were the changes of those she had loved. Her beloved Liara seemed like a completely different person; colder, harder, angry.

She had to murder more Batarians; 300,000 of them! *It was the only way.* Then she had to face the music. She was on Earth in time to watch the world end. She saw a boy die. She was haunted by his memory. She watched her friends die. Mordin went out like a boss. Legion gave its life so the Geth could have individuality. *Good* deaths or not, they were still dead.

She watched her beloved's homeworld, Thessia, burn. It was almost more horrifying than watching Earth crumble. The Asari were so beautiful, so ageless, they weren't built for stand-up fights; their venerable commandos no match for skyscraper sized starships. She was too weak, too slow, to save it. She had wept with Liara.

Then she saw her own world burning.

She saw a city in rubble; mounded bodies, screaming civilians, terrified soldiers. *So much blood.*
Her mentor, the closest thing she had to a father since her childhood, died by her own hand. She still couldn't fathom how or why she'd shot Anderson. But he was dead.

Then the worst thing of all; the choice.

Three equally awful options that made the last three years of her life seem utterly irrelevant. *All of that work, all of that sacrifice, for what? Goddamn it! Who could be so cruel as to let it end like this? Who came up with this bullshit?* She chose what she thought was the least offensive option. It seemed so unreal. Part of her wondered if she was indoctrinated. *Maybe when I blacked out in front of Object Rho? Maybe everything since then has been some poorly written delusion. An effort to take me out of the fight.* Another part of her hoped she was indoctrinated. It would almost make her feel better having been under outside control when she had to make that choice. *If that even happened at all.*

But there was more to it than that. She took a huge risk. She *should* have destroyed the reapers. It *apparently* carried awful consequences, the death of EDI and the Geth, but it was the safest course of action. She would have undoubtedly been killed herself. Trying to re-enter a planetary atmosphere using her face as a heat shield and expecting to survive a second time seemed like tempting fate too much. Not to mention the 7 billion tonnes of flaming space station coming down behind her. *That'd just be crazy.*

She had been selfish. That was all there was to say about that. *Controlling* the Reapers seemed to offer her a way out; a way to save the citadel, a way to ensure the mass relays could be repaired, *a way to be with Liara.* Of course, she wouldn't be human anymore, but an individual's species didn't matter much to Asari. More importantly, all an Asari required to bond with her mate was physical contact, specifically the ability to link her own body's electrical field with another's. Reaper or no, Shepard would have an electrical field that Liara could tap into.

Victoria squeezed her eyes tightly shut, *how could I ever expect that to work?* It was insane. It was unrealistic. It was, presumptuous. Granted, from her experiences with Liara in the bond, she was almost certain she would have gone for it if she could; but, to do it without asking first? *There was no time!* Shepard made one crazy, selfish, choice and hoped for the best. *What if it was a trick? You would have betrayed the entire galaxy for one woman!*

Shepard came to the sudden, startling, realization that she was *ok* with that.

Shepard put her head in her hands and wept. *What am I?*

*Knock, knock, knock...*
"Come in," Major Carter heard the muffled voice through the heavy steel door. *All doors in this place are steel doors, aren't they?* thought Carter. Samantha opened the door onto the dimly lit guest quarters. Shepard had Spartan decorating tastes. While she hadn't touched the USAF "Aerospace Power" posters, *who doesn't like pictures of cool airplanes, even if they are primitive by her standards*, she hadn't really brought in anything new either. Despite nearly two months of living in this space, Shepard had only added the small framed picture of her mate.

"Busy?" she asked.

"Just thinking," Shepard responded, "Why?"

Shepard looked disturbed. Her arms were crossed tightly over her breasts. She sat in one of the chairs at the small table, but her boot-clad feet were up on the end of her bed. She wore fatigues, the Marine Corps style with the digital camouflage pattern, with the sleeves expertly rolled up to her well-muscled biceps. Shepard, even when *off duty*, dressed like she was ready for an inspection, despite the general casualness the rest of the SG teams tended to display. It was almost as if these trivial details helped keep her grounded. *Anything that reminded her of her own place*, thought Carter.

"A few of us are getting together to celebrate the anniversary of a friend's," she paused, "adoption. Would you like to come?"

"I don't know Major. If this is something amongst your friends, I probably shouldn't be there."

Carter could see from the expression on Shepard's face that she was desperate to get out of the mountain. Hammond had just authorized her to leave, albeit under strict supervision. So far, she'd only been to the surface and walked around on-base. She hadn't even left the security cordon yet. Deciding the bold approach was appropriate, Carter sat down at the small table next to Shepard and said, "Cassandra isn't from here either." Samantha was sure that Shepard would keep the secret, "Janet adopted her from a planet we call P8X-987. The goa'uld Nirrti poisoned her world, she's the only survivor. SG-1 and I rescued her, she's been living here ever since."

That got Shepard's attention. Her jaw flexed. "I think I can relate."

"Yeah." She looked at Shepard. She had a hard time fathoming what it must be like for her, but if the expression on her face were an indication, it was unpleasant. "Come on, you need to get outside. It's a beautiful day out there."

That, too, got Shepard's attention. The last time she really got a good look at Earth it had been a burning ruin. The chance to get outside, to interact with other people, and to not have it all be crashing down upon her was appealing to say the least. "That sounds nice, Major."

"Please, when we're off duty like this, call me Sam, Commander."

"Victoria," She smiled. "I like Sam. That's a nice nickname."

"I take it that we wouldn't both fit on your motorcycle?" Victoria asked as they strode up to a navy blue Crown-Vic from the motor pool.
"Probably not," Carter said as she opened the driver's-side door, "And we'd have probably turned a few heads if we tried."

Carter was dressed casually; the jeans and her riding jacket she would have worn on her bike. Shepard, however, was wearing a sun dress that seemed to be about a size and a half too small for her. The skirt barely made it to her knees, and her muscled upper body was nearly spilling out of the top. Shepard said she traded for it, thought Carter. Of course, she wasn't sure who she could have traded with, and for what. Shepard didn't exactly have the biggest breasts in the world, but she filled the dress out rather well. Fortunately, though, she had that covered with a field jacket, which, in addition to the combat boots she wore, made the entire outfit slightly incongruous. She'd probably make some hipster kids in Colorado Springs' day, Carter thought.

"Yeah," said Shepard, "I've been meaning to apologize for that. I realize that you're not interested, and that I might actually cause trouble for you if I don't lay off the flirting. What with this not being the age of enlightenment yet." Carter stopped short. Shepard was right, though she hadn't figured out a way of telling her so. "I really didn't mean to bother you. It's not really an excuse, but it was from the heart." Carter opened her mouth to respond and Shepard continued, "Plus, if Liara ever found out, I think she might hurt me." She smiled.

Well, at least she's smiling, Carter thought. Shepard's apology was heartfelt. Yes, she found the flirting slightly off-putting, but it was innocent enough that she'd let it slide so far. To know it was about to stop obviated any confrontation, and she was just fine with that. "Well, we wouldn't want that," Carter said with a smirk. "Thanks, I appreciate you laying off," she paused, "I wouldn't want to have to smack you around over it." Shepard favored her with a lopsided grin.

"We're here," Carter said.

Shepard looked out the window to see a modest suburban house. She smiled to herself. Earth looked so beautiful when it wasn't a smoking ruin. Victoria had grown up in space, she hadn't spent much time on Earth, but she always cherished the times she did return to the homeworld.

Shepard and Carter exited the car and walked up a neat concrete path towards the house's front porch. She inhaled the scent of marigolds from a pair of flower pots on either side of a freshly painted door. Carter knocked. A moment later a blond haired teenager opened the door. She beamed a smile at Samantha and pulled her into a hug, "Sam! You came!"

Samantha smiled back warmly, "Of course I did." She turned and motioned to Shepard, "Cassandra, this is Victoria. We work together." Carter didn't elaborate further on that point, but she didn't need to. Cassandra nodded and smiled.

"Victoria," she said with an outstretched hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, Cassandra," Shepard replied with a smile. "Happy…” Shepard trailed off not knowing exactly what to call the anniversary of an adoption."

"We call it Arrival Day," Cassandra filled in the blank.

Shepard visibly twitched at the word arrival. Despite her best efforts her eyes developed a thin sheen of tears as she remembered the Bahak System. Shepard hoped that didn't notice.

"Victoria? They did notice. "Are you ok?" asked Cassandra.

Shepard immediately recomposed. "Of course," she smiled, "I was just remembering something I did at work last year." Carter and Cassandra looked at her with confused expressions. Then Carter
remembered one of Shepard's debriefings and her eyebrows jumped.

Cassandra noticed Shepard's discomfort, "Come in!" she said with a smile. "Jack's got the grill warming up already."

"Thanks Cassie," Carter said leading Shepard into the house.

Shepard looked about the home. Furniture and wall paper were all of warm colors. The walls were covered with bright paintings and photographs. Through them Shepard could see Cassandra age from a little girl to a rapidly maturing young adult. In all of the photographs she wore a warm smile. SG-1 appeared in a few of the photos; General Hammond was even in one.

Shepard followed Cassandra and Carter out onto a large wooden deck. The backyard was beautiful; Doctor Fraiser's house bordered on a large green-space. Tall leafy trees swayed gently in the early spring breeze. Green! This place is green! Shepard smiled widely. The last time she had seen Earth it was a burning horror. Any trees that still existed in London during the battle were leafless and charred a sickly black. Not here. Earth was alive and well!

Doctor Fraiser pulled up alongside of her, "Beautiful huh? There's a small footpath that runs through the park. Maybe you and Cassie can take a walk after dinner." She looked at the grill, "With all of this food I think we're going to need a little activity when we're done."

Shepard basked in the warm sunlight. She removed her field jacket and placed it on the back of a folding chair. She immediately caught everyone staring at her chest. She looked down, christ, I really am spilling out of this dress, aren't I? "It's impolite to stare," she said to no one in particular.

"Umm," Cassandra couldn't seem to resist. "Sorry, that's just a lot of scars."

"Cassie!" admonished Doctor Fraiser.

Shepard looked down at her bare chest. A pair of thin scars ran from the top of her sternum down between her breasts and disappeared below the top of her low-cut sun dress. Another faint set of scars ran parallel to her left clavicle. Those are obvious, aren't they? Shepard didn't even see them in the mirror any more. Her scars had become as much a part of her as her spirit, or her love for Liara. Shepard's heart warmed momentarily at the thought, then it sank. You're gone to me, aren't you my love.

"That's fine Doctor." Victoria looked at the teenager, "I was in a pretty bad plane crash a few years back, Cassandra," she said. A lie, of course, but not too far from the truth.

"Was that when you were in the Army?" she asked looking at the field jacket.

Shepard couldn't resist, "Oh, I've got soul but I'm not a soldier!" she sang out in her high soprano startling everyone. God I love that song, she thought with melancholy. "Sorry, one of my favorite songs." You'll hear it on the radio in a few years. "I'm in the Navy, not the Army."

"Ahh," Cassandra said, and her eyes fell back to Shepard's scars.

"Cassie," Doctor Fraiser elbowed her daughter.

"Oh, that's ok Doctor," Shepard assured her, "Just so long as it's my scars she's looking at. I think she's a bit too young to be staring at my tits," Carter nearly gagged on her beer.

"Uhh," Cassandra was a bit flustered at that, "I don't think my boyfriend would appreciate that."
"Oh, you'd be surprised," Daniel said. Teal'c arched an eyebrow.

"Boyfriend ehh?" asked Carter. "We going to see this mystery man? Make sure he's cool enough?"
Samantha cast a concerned look to Janet.

"No," chimed in Doctor Fraiser, "This is a family celebration."

Shepard's heart warmed at the sight. Fraiser obviously adored Cassandra; Carter too. She pined quietly for the family she would never have with Liara. Oh beloved, Shepard thought, we would have had such beautiful children. Then she heard a sizzling and looked at the grill. Jack was flipping a large, rare, steak. O'Neill turned to Victoria, "Hey Shepard, glad you could make it, want a beer?" he smiled. Victoria noticed blood dripping from the pink meat, juices falling onto the glowing coals, small flashes of flame as the fat burned. Her stomach lurched, suddenly she was in Elysium again; slaughtered civilians, burning Batarians. She looked away. Somewhat confused, Jack pointed to the cooler, "Beer's over there."

Chapter End Notes

Song lyric credit to 'The Killers'. If you're curious as to just how much Shepard loves that song, I recommend you read Chapter 6 of my other Fic "Recollections".
Jack was profoundly tone deaf; almost painfully so. While Shepard loved music, singing in particular, this PlayStation did not impress her. The user interface was barely adequate, and the musical selection anemic. She resolved to fix that. A discreet wave of her hand and her omni-tool analyzed the game system's hardware, a small twitch of her fingers and her personal music library opened, a few more commands and a specially built program compiled; she was ready.

Sure not to disturb a duet between Carter and Cassandra, Shepard leaned over to Doctor Fraiser, "Do you have a computer with a," she paused, searching for the correct term, "CD burner?"

Janet flashed her a quizzical look and nodded, "Follow me." They both got off of the couch and walked into a small home office. "Here you go," Janet said placing a blank CD-R into the drive. Shepard turned the holographic interface back on and waved her hand over the PC. Interfacing with the computer's operating system was a snap. A few commands and the CD burner spun up. Fraiser looked on, surprised how easily Shepard could take control of contemporary computer hardware. "What are you doing?"

"Adding some songs to Cassandra's PlayStation," she smiled at the Doctor. "20th and 21st Century music is actually a hobby of mine; she might get a kick out of this. They haven't invented Lady Ga-Ga yet, right?"

Fraiser was confused, "Lady what-what?"

Shepard smiled, "Never mind, you'll find out soon enough. This is one of my favorites. It won't be released for another year or so, though, so don't let her take this disk out of the house." She removed the disk from the burner and returned to the den.

Shepard came upon Daniel Jackson holding his head in his hands in feigned disgust with Major Carter's performance. Cassandra was laughing. "Cassie?" Victoria asked in a tone that said, can I call you by your nickname, Cassandra nodded, "I've got a few extra songs for your game that you might enjoy." She smiled.

Victoria loaded the disk into the PlayStation and it booted up flawlessly, glad my omni-tool could sort out that primitive operating system. She selected a song, and in her high beautiful soprano began to sing."

I walk a lonely road, the only one that I have ever known…

Cater watched, dumbstruck, as Shepard belted out a melancholy song from an album from their future. Victoria's expression rapidly changed. The other members of SG-1 could see it, even Doctor Fraiser and Cassandra. There was so much pain in Shepard.

...I walk this empty street, on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams…

Carter suddenly realized that they had underestimated Shepard's mental state. Everyone at the SGC knew that she was out of place, isolated from friends, family, and familiar environs; but no one had appreciated just how lonely she was.
Shepard's facial expression changed further, her eyes shimmered, she was on the verge of tears.

O'Neill listened to Shepard sing. She had a beautiful voice; a damn sight better than his, that's for sure. He was only half listening to the lyrics, though. He observed Shepard. He watched some of the barriers come down.

Jack could appreciate some of the pain that Shepard was feeling. Obviously he'd never experienced what Victoria had just gone through; it was almost too sci-fi for him, and *that* was saying something. But, Jack knew a thing or two about loss. He nearly killed himself when his son died. *It was my fault!* He thought that the stargate program was a spectacular vehicle for his suicide; maybe get some use out of his death as a penance for his son's.

He went through the gate that first time not intending on coming back. Perhaps nuclear fire would cleanse his soul of the guilt from killing his son. *I left that gun where he could get it, just as good as shooting him myself.* But that all changed. Suddenly, with the goa'uld threatening the people of Abydos, he found purpose. The defense of Earth gave him a mission, his team gave him stability. Without them he could be lost again, and that's what had just happened to Shepard.

*...of the border line, of the edge and where I walk alone...*

*What can we do for her?* Jack wracked his brain looking for a solution.

As the song progressed, Daniel Jackson couldn't help but think about his departed wife Sha're. Aside from the whole 'saving the galaxy' thing, Daniel figured he was best suited to sympathize with Shepard; a distinction he'd just as soon not be able to claim. Daniel would give anything if it meant he could have his wife back. *Shepard's wife doesn't even exist here, she never will!* He couldn't even begin to fathom how you'd deal with that.

Daniel looked at Teal'c. He was obviously concerned as well, it was plain on his face; and *that* was a substantial occurrence in and of itself. Daniel's heart ached for Shepard. He didn't know what he could do for her. Still, he wanted to do something, anything. He just didn't know how to help.

*...My shadow's the only one that walks beside me...*

*What can I do to help her?* Carter asked herself.

*...My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating...*

*How do I help her?* Jack thought.

*...Sometimes I wish someone up there will find me...*

Shepard looked to the sky.

*...'til then I walk alone...*

No more lyrics appeared on the screen as the music continued. Shepard, with what SG-1 would swear was a tear in her eye, quietly placed the PlayStation microphone on the coffee table and exited the room as the song finished playing.

They all looked at each other, dumbfounded.
Then Cassandra stood, and followed Victoria outside.

Cassandra came upon Shepard as she was rummaging through the cooler for a beer. She retrieved one and, in a frightening show of strength, popped the cap off without aid of a bottle opener. She took a sip and walked over to the steps leading to the backyard and sat down. Shepard's shoulders heaved with a sigh.

Cassandra took a breath, made a decision, and sat beside her. "So, you going to talk about it?" Cassandra asked, "Because that whole walking out in an emo huff doesn't quite seem your style."

Shepard chuckled despite herself.

"Well, so long as you can laugh about it."

"It's complicated Cassandra."

"You know, you can tell me. I'm from Canada too," she said deploying 'air quotes', "I'll probably understand."

"Hey, don't knock Canada. One of my best friends was from Vancouver."

"Was?"

"I killed him," Shepard said flatly.

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. Twenty kilotons, right in the face," Shepard said.

"Is that all?"

Shepard looked at the teen. Her tone was mocking, but somehow she couldn't be angry at her. She knew her background; Victoria knew she had it as bad as or worse than she did. "Touché, Cassandra."

"So, what's bugging you?"

"I miss my wife," Shepard replied without hesitation.

"Where is she?" Cassandra didn't even bat an eye at the word wife.

"Gone, Cassandra, she's gone. I'm all alone now."

"I disagree," Cassandra said with an unexpected conviction. "My mom, and Sam, and everyone else back there," she motioned to the house, "are here for you." She paused, "Just like they were there for me."

Shepard nodded knowingly. "You're pretty smart for a kid."

Cassandra chuckled, "Yeah, and you're a bit dense if you didn't notice that before."

It was Shepard's turn to laugh. She looked around conspiratorially, checking to see if any neighbors were looking. "You want to see a picture of her?"

"Sure."
Shepard activated her omni-tool on a low-light setting, Cassandra's eyes nearly leapt out of their sockets. *Knocks the socks off of you PlayStation, doesn't it?* Victoria brought up a portrait of Liara T'soni. "Her name is Liara. She's from *Canada* too." Shepard smiled.

"No wonder you're bummed, she's beautiful."

"Yeah," Shepard said wistfully as she powered down her omni-tool. "Hey, Cassandra, I appreciate what you said, and you're right. I think I need a moment, though. I'm going to take a walk, clear my head," she stood and began walking towards the tree line. "I'll be back in a little bit. Carter's my ride back to base, don't let her leave without me," she said with a smile.

"Sure Victoria. Hey, thanks for the new music," she said heading back into the house.

Shepard made her way towards the footpath leading through the small wooded area behind Fraiser's house. Once she left the area lit by the house's lights navigation became difficult. Her military-grade gene mods gave her exceptional low-light vision, but it was a moonless overcast sky, she could just barely make out the trees and the path.

*Kid's right,* she thought to herself, *Liara wouldn't want you to feel this way. There are people here who care about you, you'll be ok.* She smiled, *from the mouths of babes.* Shepard decided that she would follow, or at least try to follow, the Asari philosophy and *embrace the time they had together.* Victoria would never have her beloved back, but part of her did live on within her. So long as she remembered, Liara would still exist.

Shepard heard a rustle from some bushes. Her N7 reflexes came online, but too late. A sudden pin-prick in her neck and Victoria pulled what looked like a dart from her skin. The world spun and she blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Song credit to Green Day's *'Boulevard of Broken Dreams'.* This chapter constitutes a 'transformative work' and is, thus, fair use.
First, Do No Harm

Chapter Notes

Reader Discretion Advised: This chapter contains graphic depictions of gore and violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Subject is a Caucasian female; age unknown, approximately 35 years, height 190 centimeters, weight 80 kilograms."

The voice paused. A heart rate monitor beeped softly at a leisurely, regular, 45 beats per minute.

"Subject is currently unconscious via a 1.5 milligram fentanyl drip. Subject shows a high degree of tolerance to anesthetic. Dosage increases will correspond to increases in heart rate and respiration."

The first figure, clad in white surgical garb, leaned forward and lifted Shepard's eyelids with a gloved hand. He played a small flashlight across her pupils. "Pupils blown and unresponsive."

The second figure, similarly dressed, wheeled a surgical tray to Shepard's supine nude form and nodded. "Very well, detailed exterior exam continues:

"Subject appears to be extremely fit, well developed musculature and low body fat percentage. Fat fold measurements have been compiled and included in report Appendix A. Subject shows extensive callusing on the hands and feet. Additional callusing is evident on the hips and shoulders, most likely from chronic backpack use or other load bearing equipment, and on the inner thighs, most likely from extensive walking. All hair below the neckline has been removed. Method of removal is unknown, but lack of skin irritation suggests the process was carried out some time ago. Skin has scattered freckles throughout, though predominantly on the face, no cancerous lesions are evident. Finger and toe nails are painted. There are no tattoos in evidence.

"Subject's exterior shows signs of substantial trauma and surgical intervention including multiple bone, joint, and organ prostheses. There is notable scarring along the spine, left hip, left knee, and left ankle suggesting prosthetic implants. A summary of these implanted devices and non-invasive imagery appear as Appendix A of this report. A scar on the pubis indicates a possible caesarian section or hysterectomy. Appendix A of this report contains ultra-sound imagery indicating this is a hysterectomy scar. There is no evidence to indicate the reason for this procedure, nor if the subject has ever been pregnant or delivered.

"There is a conspicuous lack of scars above the neckline despite the presence of substantial prosthetic implants in the skull, neck, and mouth suggesting some sort of active scar removal. There is no evidence to suggest the method of scar removal, but it appears to be completely effective. Subject's cranial, neck, and dental implants are summarized in Appendix A.

The first figure took Shepard's mandible in his hands and gently opened her mouth. Holding her tongue down with a wooden tongue depressor stick he shined a light and examined her teeth.

"Subject's teeth show signs of substantial grinding. Three molars have gold crowns, presumably to repair cracked enamel or root canaled teeth. Subject has no wisdom teeth; x-rays indicate they have
been surgically removed. Dental x-rays appear in Appendix A of this report.

The first figure took Shepard's head in his hand and gently rolled it to the side and pulled her hair back to expose an empty bio-amp implant port.

"Subject has a small mechanical port implanted at the base of the skull. A small flesh-colored cover is affixed with what appears to be an interference fit. Removing the cover shows the port is empty. The cover will be left in place to avoid contamination. Appendix B of this report indicates that this is known as the 'bio-amp port'. The bio-amp is not present suggesting that it is in storage at the SGC. Appendix B also suggests that the subject has limited to no biotic capability without the implant."

The heart rate monitor changed tone. Shepard's heart rate was increasing. "Subject appears to be resisting anesthetic, increasing dosage; 25 micrograms fentanyl." He noted the time. The heart rate monitor changed tone again as Shepard's heart slowed.

"The phenomena associated with the phrase 'biotics' are outlined in Appendix C of this report. As indicated in the Appendix, a core component of biotics is the presence of element zero within the body. Element zero appears in the subject in the form of nodules affixed to the central nervous system. As noted in Appendix B, the bio-amp implant allows the user to coordinate nerve impulses to these nodules to form usable mass effect fields. Thus, the absence of the bio-amp renders the user's biotic capabilities inert.

"We will begin with the nodule designated 1A in Appendix D on the ulnar nerve of the right arm."

The first figure lifted Shepard's right arm as the second figure wrapped an ACE bandage tightly from her hand to her bicep. He then applied a tourniquet and removed the bandage. Shepard's already pale skin was now ashen white from lack of blood. The heart rate monitor's tone increased in pitch, the second figure watched the readout climb.

"Heart rate is climbing, increasing anesthetic dosage; 25 micrograms fentanyl." He noted the time. The heart rate monitor changed tone as Shepard's heart slowed, but it did not settle at the original rate. The two figures looked at each other, they didn't have much time.

"Beginning incision," said the second figure as he expertly dragged a scalpel down Shepard's forearm near the elbow. The first figure blotted what little blood emerged with a gauze pad. The heart rate monitor changed tone. "Heart rate is climbing, increasing anesthetic dosage; 25 micrograms fentanyl." He noted the time. The intervals between dosage increases were shortening. Shepard's heart rate slowed, but not as much as with the previous dose.

The first figure clipped back the cut skin with forceps as the second figure went to work with a muscle retractor. The heart rate monitor's tone increased rapidly in pitch.

Shepard's thoughts swam. *Where's Cassie? Where am I?* She heard a muffled voice, "Heart rate is climbing! The anesthetic is wearing off. Increasing anesthetic dosage; 50 micrograms fentanyl." Shepard's world became fuzzy again.

*Focus Shepard!*

Victoria heard a voice. It sounded like Liara. *Liara?*

*Shepard, wake up!*

Shepard concentrated, *beloved, where are you?* Her right arm hurt. She heard two voices.

"The anesthetic is wearing off again!"
"If I give her any more we might kill her."

"That's acceptable. You may euthanize her," a new voice. It sounded distorted, tinny, as if it were coming through a speaker.

"Very well, administering 20 milligrams fentanyl."

_That's not Liara! This is not a dream!

Shepard's eyes snapped open.

The second figure looked into Shepard's now open eyes. "Oh shit! She's awake."

Victoria Shepard moved more quickly than either of them knew a person _could_ move. She reached out with her left arm and grabbed the first figure's hand before he could depress the plunger on enough anesthetic to kill her twice over. A quick jerk and his wrist broke with a loud crunch. He screamed, and dropped the syringe.

The second figure shouted, "Get some help in here! Now!"

Shepard detected movement from the far end of the room. A pair of men brandishing pistols burst through a door. Victoria moved with purpose. She sprung from the operating table in a biotic blur and snatched the scalpel from the man she designated _Target-A_. He was too stunned to react when she looped behind him, wrapped her hand around his forehead and placed the scalpel against his neck.

Shepard took stock. She had one man, _Target-A_, dressed in surgical garb, dead to rights. Another man, similarly dressed, _Target-B_, nursed a broken wrist. Two men, _Target-C_ and _Target-D_, pistols drawn, continued their approach. From her left arm hung an IV, a full syringe dangled from the injection port. Her right arm bore a tourniquet above the elbow. Below her elbow was a large incision, forceps and a muscle retractor held the wound open.

All N7 Marines are trained in basic field surgery; she assessed her wound as non-life threatening in the short-term. The tourniquet concerned her, however. She had no idea how long ago it had been applied, and it was making her hand stiff and unresponsive. The pain didn't even register in her conscious mind.

The two men with the pistols moved closer. _Time to act!_ Shepard cut _Target-A_'s throat. She did it the right way, not like you saw in the vids. In a single, smooth, _well-practiced_ motion she plunged the scalpel through the side of the man's neck, the cutting edge of the blade facing forward. The blade slid into the muscle without effort, just forward of the spine. Shepard then pushed out with the scalpel while she pulled the man's head back with her left hand. The blade cut through the right jugular vein, carotid artery, and the man's trachea. The scalpel blade was _just_ too short to get both sides.

_Target-A_ was dead before he even realized he'd been cut. Blood geysered from the severed artery as he _tried_ to scream, the severed wind pipe prevented even gurgling. He would have died silently except that Shepard launched the dying man towards _Targets C and D_ with a biotic throw. They crashed to the floor under the blow of the rag dolling doctor.

She expertly threw the scalpel at _Target-B_. The blade buried itself to the hilt in the man's left leg just above the knee. Confident that _Target-B_ was going nowhere, she directed her attention towards _C_ and _D_ who were still sprawled underneath the rapidly exsanguinating _Target-A_. She noticed the pistol knocked from _Target C's_ hand lying on the concrete floor.
Victoria expertly removed the forceps and retractor from her arm; she left the tourniquet in place for the time being. A twitch of biotics and the loose pistol slid across the floor to meet her as she strode, stark naked, towards the two guards. Her feet made a soft slapping sound on the smooth concrete. She pulled the IV from her arm and scooped the pistol up off the floor with her left hand. Without even slowing down Shephard fired a single bullet into each of the guards' heads and she stepped over them and through the door they had entered through. She was panting. Generating a biotic field without the help of a bio-amp was exhausting, she was very nearly spent.

Somewhere in this building is a man on the other end of the intercom, she thought, the man who ordered me killed. He'll have answers. She paused, and my stuff!

"Shepard! Are you ok?" asked Colonel O'Neill. The room looked like a slaughterhouse. There were three bodies in a pile on the floor and at least one of them looked butchered. Shepard stood, wearing nothing but a bloody lab coat, next to two seated and bound figures. One looked dead. Ashen-white waxy skin and a ragged stab wound at his knee, O'Neill thought he might have bled to death. The other man was obviously alive, and whimpering. Strangely, they both had their pants and underwear down around their ankles.

Security Forces troopers fanned out to secure the rest of the building. Shepard looked terrifying. She was covered in blood. Her arm was wrapped in a soaked-through bandage. She was naked beneath the blood soaked lab coat which she didn't bother cinching shut. No modesty at all appeared on her face, her nudity was beneath her notice. Modesty is a human emotion, thought O'Neill, Shepard is not human. Her expression was set. She was angry. Jack looked into the face of death. "We need to talk," she said coldly.

Jack could only nod as Carter came along side. She seemed equally horrified. "Let's get you back to base. Doctor Fraiser needs to take a look at you." The Security Forces troops grabbed the whimpering seated man to hustle him out to the waiting vehicles. They jostled the other man and he moaned.

"Oh shit, he's alive," said Doctor Jackson. "We need a doctor in here!" he called out.

One of the SF troopers nodded, he reached for his radio as Shepard strode up to the dying man. She reached out with both her powerful hands and grasped his head.

"Shepard, no!" shouted Jack.

Shepard paused. Her already flexed arm muscles relaxed as she looked at him. O'Neill was taken aback. There was no longer any emotion on Shepard's face. No anger at whatever these people had done to her. No surprise at Jack barking a command to her. Nothing. Shepard was a machine, emotionless, pitiless, merciless. Jack had no doubt in his mind that Shepard would have wrenched that man's head clean off if he hadn't stopped her.

Victoria nodded. "Let's go."

Jack tried to suppress the gooseflesh as he looked into her eyes.
Interesting Fun-Fact: The phrase 'first do no harm' doesn't actually appear in the Hippocratic Oath; that is, somewhat of a simplification of one of the lines.
Detection

Lord Ba'al, Goa'uld System Lord, sat upon his throne. The gilded throne, like the rest of the throne room, was enormous. Everything about it, including the open flame torches and the flickering orange light they provided, conveyed the sense of power Ba'al wished to project to all who came before him. He was master of his domain, a living god to his Jaffa and human slaves. The goa'uld interlaced his fingers in thought. He was always thinking, always plotting; it was his way.

The goa'uld underling waddled into the throne room. Ba'al was internally disgusted at the sight. Like all goa'uld, Ba'al himself was a hedonist, but his tastes ran more refined than this sloven idiot's. Still, he was technically brilliant, almost as much as him, so he tolerated his gluttony. The fact that he craved not personal power, but rather was content with satisfying his own urges, certainly helped his case as well.

"You summoned me, m'lord?" Nerus asked with less than the awe Ba'al normally required from his vassals. He picked a piece of meat from between his front teeth; examining it, he placed it on his tongue and smiled as he swallowed.

"Report on your analysis," Ba'al commanded.

Nerus wiped his hands clean on his stained robes. From the look on his face Ba'al could tell Nerus was thinking only of his next meal. "The chappa'ai does not know what happened." Ba'al began to rise from his throne, Nerus quickly continued in an attempt to avoid his wrath. "The diagnostic program I've hacked into…"

"I've hacked into," Ba'al corrected him with growing anger.

"That that great Lord Ba'al has hacked into," Nerus continued with a bow and flourish trying to defuse the situation, "simply lists it as unknown event." His hands fidgeted nervously, "The system provides technical data for the occurrence, but no useful conclusions. System fail safes distributed the energy across the entire gate network."

"What, specifically, does it report?"

"The record shows a very abrupt very powerful energy spike originating at a single gate and dissipating across the network. Upon further scrutiny, the records also show several lower energy discharges at that chappa'ai, the tauri gate, and a third gate."

"Is that all?"

"No m'lord," Nerus responded. "The gate that experienced the high energy spike was not known to us. We know that the gate network is more expansive than the worlds we've visited, but until now your hacking software has been unable to reveal any new chappa'ai. This is probably due to an anti-hacking security measure built into the system. This event seems to have changed that."

Ba'al interlocked his fingers and placed his chin upon them in deep thought. That was an interesting development, learning the locations of new chappa'ai would provide him a significant strategic advantage over the other System Lords; secret bases could be established, resources gathered in safety from attack. He leaned back in his throne, "Describe the unknown events in order, do not abridge the log," he commanded. He stroked his close-shaven goatee as he listened.

Nerus consulted a data device, "The first event took place at the tau'ri gate two months ago. Strangely enough, the diagnostic system does not list an originating gate. The next event occurred
between the tau'ri gate and the third gate I mentioned six days ago…"

"Why do we only learn of these events now?" demanded Ba'al in his deep bass voice, interrupting his minion.

"The hacking program only periodically contacts us with updates, and just now unearthed these data logs. The high energy event drew the program's attention and prompted it to scan for similar events, allowing us to detect the lower energy anomalies. Now that we know what to look for, however, we should be able to detect either of them in real time."


"Yes, m'lord," Nerus bowed his head and continued his report. "There was then a series of low energy unknown events between that gate and the gate that experienced the powerful anomaly. Finally there was the single high-energy unknown event and no further activity of a similar nature anywhere in the network since."

Ba'al pondered Nerus' report. It couldn't be coincidence that these events originated on Earth. The third planet involved was probably an intermediate location the tau'ri had visited. Could they be testing a new device? A weapon perhaps? Ba'al immediately decided he wished to control such a weapon. Given the goa'uld proclivity for conquest, any edge he could eke out over the other System Lords was too tempting a prize to give up. It was curious, though, that there seemed to be two different types of occurrences; one highly energetic, the other seemingly benign. Lord Ba'al made his decision.

"Kree, Jaffa!" he called to his First Prime, standing just outside of the throne room.

The aged Jaffa swiftly entered and dropped to a knee. Head bowed, he said, "Kree hol mel, Ba'al. Command me, my Lord."

Ba'al keyed a device built into his throne. A holographic representation of the galaxy swirled into view. The stargates of interest, including the newly discovered one, were clearly marked. The positions Ba'al's forces were also annotated.

"Rise, Jaffa," Ba'al commanded. Ba'al's First Prime came to his feet and observed the display. "Prepare a squadron of stealth tel'tak. Provision them for long term reconnaissance, and give them each a long range communication device. Dispatch one to each of the two planets Nerus will indicate, and keep the rest ready for immediate dispatch. We will monitor these worlds, and any other which show this strange activity."

The Jaffa's eyes swept back and forth upon the display, "My lord, one of your mother ships is very near that planet where you have detected the mysterious energy at the unknown gate. We could divert it and begin surveillance immediately; it would be there in but a day."

Ba'al was pleased. He had noticed that option immediately, a very fortuitous coincidence. Had his First Prime missed it he would have been put to death for incompetence. "Obey your god, divert the ship. Sortie one of the stealth tel'tak to the other world immediately; keep the rest on standby."

Ba'al looked at the display assessing the nature of the forces embarked on the ha'atok. He was pleased with what he saw; heavy ground units and support vessels, well suited to securing the planet. "I will receive the ha'atok's reconnaissance report the moment they arrive. Leave us." The Jaffa bowed deeply and withdrew from the room with a swish of his cape.

"You," Ba'al looked at Nerus. "Modify the program monitoring the chappa'ai's systems. I want to be
notified immediately if more of these events occur, so we may dispatch our forces to investigate. Go now." Nerus licked his lips, obviously pondering his next meal once he left his lord's presence. "Do it before you eat," Ba'al concluded. Nerus dropped his gaze in dejection.
The members of SG-1, Doctor Fraiser, and General Hammond sat around the conference table in the SGC. In their fight against the Goa'uld, they had seen horrors of varying magnitude. But, this made them all pale in the face. This was horrible. This was monstrous. This did not even seem to register on Shepard's face. What is this woman? they all thought in unison.

The 2-D holographic movie played from Shepard's omni-tool. It looked like any home video recording, save for it was suspended in mid-air above the conference table. Shepard's omni-tool had hacked it from the NID safe house's surveillance system. SG-1 watched, horrified, the attempted vivisection and euthanasia, murder, of Commander Victoria Shepard.

The images made Carter squirm. She sat there and watched an unconscious and naked Victoria lying on a table like so much meat. Normally vibrant and powerful, Shepard appeared utterly vulnerable. And the scars! Carter had no idea how mutilated she truly was. She wasn't one to go sneaking free peeks, even when Shepard was unconscious in the SGC medical bay; nor did she stare at the barbeque. Carter found the cold and clinical description of Shepard's hysterectomy particularly off-putting. Two doctors hovered over her and studied her like she was some sort of lab animal. They spoke about her as if she were just some machine they were tinkering with. A scientific curiosity, it was so dehumanizing. The hairs on the back of Carter's neck stood on end.

Next to her, Doctor Fraiser was absolutely seething. She was witnessing the dark side of medicine. This was the sort of thing that they covered in medical ethics books as case studies in 'we don't do this sort of thing; we have a sacred duty to do no harm'. That anyone who called themselves a doctor could perpetrate this on another human being was beyond her. They were doing Doctor Mengele proud. She was doubly appalled at their poor surgical technique. But that was just a bit of vanity, she took great pride in her skills as a surgeon. From the look of the incision they had no intention of ever putting her right, they didn't even sterilize the area. This procedure was obviously the first of several, and Doctor Fraiser had no doubt in her mind that they wouldn't have stopped until they had extracted every gram of eezo in Shepard's body and parted out all of her prostheses for study.

She was also alarmed with how casually Shepard had regarded the wound as she sutured it in the SGC's medical wing. No anesthetic, no flinching, she had just sat there observing. Then there was the somewhat unnerving, you do good work, she had favored her with. It would seem that Shepard is no stranger to getting sewn up by doctors, and she had certainly done a good job field dressing it before we got to her; one handed. Also, apparently, the penicillin allergy listed in her medical records was there for liability purposes only; as she learned while prescribing a course of antibiotics to stave off infection from the less than sanitary surgery. Shepard's military-grade gene-mods fixed that particular defect; the lawyers just wanted it to stay on her file. I guess some things just don't change.

SG-1 watched events unfold rapidly. Shepard fought off the anesthetic more quickly than any of them, especially Doctor Fraiser, thought humanly possible. One moment she was out cold, the next
moment she was awake and had broken a man's wrist. Then, with a blue flash, she was behind the other doctor with a blade to his throat. She's so damn fast, was the common sentiment. General Hammond quietly wondered to himself if they could possibly hope to control Shepard if she got it in her head she didn't want to cooperate with the SGC. And all that without her bio-amp! It was a non-trivial tactical problem; he would consult with O'Neill after the debriefing.

Next, SG-1's jaws simultaneously dropped as they watched Shepard slaughter one man, maim another, and methodically execute two more; all in the space of ten seconds. Not a shred of emotion crossed Shepard's face, neither in the video, nor in person. She was, for all intents and purposes, a machine. O'Neill suddenly wondered how often she had nightmares; he had declined to watch the surveillance footage of Shepard sleeping in the guest quarters so he didn't know for sure. She's not a psychopath, this must affect her somehow.

The camera angle shifted to several new sources as they watched Shepard, still stark naked with a gaping hole in her arm and a tourniquet about her bicep, stride out of the surgical bay and stalk about the building for the man who had authorized her murder through an intercom. Shepard eventually found him in a control room attempting to wipe several banks of hard drives. The image cut out after Shepard subdued him, shattering one of his elbows in the process, and recovered her omni-tool.

The image disappeared. Shepard spoke up, "At this point I escorted my prisoner back to the surgical bay. The other doctor had tied a tourniquet around his leg and was trying to escape." She paused. "He didn't get far," she almost chuckled. This is funny? thought O'Neill. "I secured my prisoners to two folding chairs and then dressed my own wound. I confirmed that my omni-tool had already called for help, as I had programmed it before I was ever authorized to leave the SGC, and that you were on your way. Then I proceeded with the interrogation." Without a pause she tapped a few commands on her omni-tool and the video started again. This time the image quality was substantially better, and it was full 3-D.

O'Neill pondered that tidbit as he leaned back to view the image. She pre-programmed her omni-tool to call for help if she was ever taken? Jack couldn't decide if that was exceptional foresight or profound paranoia. What else might she have programmed it to do? Either way, it might have saved her life. It certainly saved one of her prisoners'.

The image resolved to show two men tied to folding chairs. What's your name?" Shepard's voice asked from off-camera. It seemed Shepard had placed the omni-tool on a table; the vantage point was roughly waist-height. She got no response from either of the bound men. "Who ordered you to do this to me?" No response. "What outfit are you with?" Still nothing.

Shepard's shadow moved about, she was doing something off-camera. They could hear the soft clanking of metal on metal. The two men looked at each other nervously. "Ok fellas, this is going to go a whole lot more smoothly if you just tell me what I want to know," Shepard's tone sounded downright reasonable. Still, no response from either of the bound men. The man from the control room looked indignant. "Alright, if you insist."

Shepard moved into view. She was still naked. In one hand were a few surgical implements; clamps, scalpels, forceps. She casually walked up to the doctor and grasped the scalpel lodged in his leg with her free hand. He howled as she worked it back and forth a few times. "Still nothing?" Target-B bit his lip bloody in an effort to overcome the pain. He was afraid, but he still wouldn't talk. She wrenched the scalpel from his knee. He screamed again, his face turning white. She looked at them expectantly, they declined to speak. She shrugged.

Shepard dropped to her knees and removed the tourniquet from his leg; blood immediately welled up, soaking through his pant leg, and ran onto the floor. It pooled around her feet and knees. Shepard
had obviously nicked something vital; the color was draining from his skin. She quickly removed the 
doctor's pants and undergarments. He started whimpering. He was losing a lot of blood. "This is 
your last chance," she said. Shepard was met with whimpering. She looked at the man from the 
control room. "You're next, take a good look." He stared at her, less indignant than before. Shepard 
took up a surgical clamp in her right hand and reached for the doctor's scrotum with her left.

"I don't know anything!" screamed the doctor. "They just hired me to examine you! It was all 
handled on their side. They just told me when and where to show up!"

Shepard looked at the man from the control room, "Do you want to elaborate on that?" He stared 
back at her. There was fear in his eyes, but he still said nothing. She shrugged and turned back 
towards the doctor. He howled. Then he passed out.

"Well that was disappointing," she said picking up a scalpel and coming to her feet. Her knees 
popped loudly. "I wanted to at least drive the point home with you as to how deft I am with a blade," 
she twirled the razor sharp implement in her hand. Her left hand, still twirling the scalpel, 
disappeared behind her back. Then the scalpel appeared from behind her shoulder, arced up and over 
her head, and was caught mid-flight with the same hand that had thrown it. She resumed twirling the 
blade. The man's eyebrows jumped. "So, shall we begin?"

Shepard took a step away from the bleeding doctor. She smiled when she realized she was leaving a 
trail of bloody footprints. "Tell me, are you un-circumcised like that other guy? Or can we skip 'step 
one'?" The man from the control room's face turned white. He wet his pants. She walked over to the 
man, kneeled in front of him, and un-did his pants. Doctor Jackson grimaced, that whole motion had 
a bizarrely sexual feel which nauseated him. I wonder if she was making a show of it on purpose? 
Daniel thought. She looked down. "Lucky you," Victoria said.

He was obvious utterly terrified. The fact that she was completely naked, covered in blood, and 
totally emotionless just added to the horror. "So, here's where you tell me what you know; who 
you're working for, why they want me, and what you were going to do with the stuff you took from 
me. Otherwise," she paused, "well, I think you know the otherwise at this point." She flipped the 
scalpel in the air, it tumbled, and she caught it leveling the blade less than a centimeter from his 
genitals. The man gasped.

A cell phone rang off camera. The man from the control room snapped his attention to the sound. 
Shepard smiled when she realized she was leaving a trail of bloody footprints. "Tell me, are you un-circumcised like that other guy? Or can we skip 'step one'?" The man from the control room's face turned white. He wet his pants. She walked over to the 
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trail of bloody footprints. "Tell me, are you un-circumcised like that other guy? Or can we skip 'step 
one'?" The man from the control room nodded emphatically. "You are going to tell him everything is going fine." He nodded. "You're going to tell him that you're ready to proceed with the next phase of your operation." He nodded.

"You'll ask him if he has any additional instructions." He nodded. "You will not let on what's 
happened here. That's to say, you will not use any code phrases indicating you're under duress." He 
looked at her with a jaw-dropped expression. "I'll know if you do, and it will not end well for you." 
She applied a few ounces of pressure with the scalpel to accentuate her point. It broke the skin; blood 
trickled out around the edges of the blade. "Do you understand?" He nodded. "Good," she said and 
she gave the doctor a savage kick to the side of the head with a biotic blur. Out cold, he stopped 
whimpering.

Shepard set her omni-tool to record and trace the call. Then she opened the cell phone and held it to 
the man's ear. The voice that came through the cell phone, loud and crystal clear via Shepard's omni-
tool recording, was so surprising that Jack jumped to his feet. "Thomison, report," commanded none other than Senator Kinsey himself.

Shepard looked at the man intently. "Sir. Procedure is underway now."

"Excellent. Any trouble with the medication? Our information says she might be immune." O'Neill's eyebrow arched. They're obviously reading our medical reports.

"Yes, sir. The doctor is aware of that. He's keeping ahead of it at the moment. We're almost ready for phase two."

There was a pause. Kinsey hummed through the phone, "Getting the eezo and tech out of her body is your top priority. If it comes down to killing her to keep her asleep," he didn't even pause, "kill her." General Hammond turned beet red. "I want her put down and disposed of once we have what we want anyway." O'Neill balled his hands up into fists, released them in an attempt to remain calm, and balled them again. Despite the horror of what they were hearing, surprisingly, SG-1 remained silent; transfixed by the sights and sounds of the recording. "Is that understood?"

"Understood, sir," the man replied. The phone disconnected. He looked at Shepard.

Shepard smiled wolfishly, "You know what I've learned about interrogating people?" she asked. "It's not so much about hurting them, than it is showing them how much you can hurt them." The sound of vehicles skidding to a halt outside caught their attention. SG-1 and the rescue team had arrived. "You got off lucky." The Shepard in the image sighed; she would not have an opportunity to beat this man any further. She backhanded him across the face and walked out of the camera's field of view.

The recording ended.
"That son of a bitch!" O'Neill was livid. The motherfucker! This went beyond the constant jockeying for political power that they had come to expect from the good Senator, this was cold blooded murder.

For his part, General Hammond was keeping a lid on his emotions; verbally, at least. His bald scalp flushed with anger, "At ease, Colonel."

O'Neill tried to calm himself, he honestly tried. Shepard was strange. She was foreign to him. She was arrogant at times, and had an infuriating ability to trivialize the trials and tribulations of the SGC and their fight against the goa'uld. But, Shepard was one of his people. She had joined their struggle in the defense of Earth. She was a member of his command. An attack on her was an attack on him. Someone tried to dissect and murder one of my people!

"So, we're just going to do nothing?" asked O'Neill incredulously.

"The President has decided our interests will not be best served by exposing the Senator at this time."

"He's playing politics with Shepard's life?"

Hammond scowled. He obviously didn't like it either. "He's given us our orders as our Commander in Chief, and we will carry them out."

O'Neill took a deep breath, "What about the guy Shepard didn't kill? The moment he talks to a lawyer or something the good Senator is going to know we're on to him. I'm sure he'll start maneuvering to limit the damage the President can do to him." Jack hated it, but the word had come down, this is the way it was going to be. If we're going to do this, we need to make sure we do this right, he thought. "We'll need to stash him somewhere. Or can we leave him in a room with Shepard for a few minutes and see what happens?"

Hammond set his jaw rather than respond to that last comment. He enjoyed working with Colonel O'Neill. He was a consummate professional, fearless, and utterly dedicated to those under his command, so he allowed his informal attitude when they were alone. The General felt the same way about the intrigue, but as a professional he too wanted to make sure they could carry out their directive. "He's already on his way to Gitmo."

O'Neill arched his eyebrow, "Not bad," he chuckled. "Who's taking him there? If word breaks out around the SGC it might get back to Kinsey."

"SEAL Team 7. The Admiral was kind enough to help us out. He didn't take kindly to someone assaulting one of his SEALs; even if she's only an adopted one." He paused. "So far as the Senator or anyone in NID knows, Shepard killed every last person in that building making her escape. Our reports on the matter will reflect that story."

O'Neill pondered that for a moment. Then he sighed, "I'm glad you could get that thing with the trident sorted out. It really pained me to tell her to keep a low profile, even if she didn't seem to care."

"I met the Admiral when I served in Vietnam. He's a good man. Once I explained what was going on, he got right on board." Hammond paused, "I'm just glad he was in on the Stargate Program, otherwise I could never have mentioned it."

"Well, sir, I can't say I'm pleased with the Kinsey situation, but I'm sure we'll make it work out in the
end." He paused, "I'm a bit more concerned with Shepard, though. There's way more to that woman than any of us realized, and I'm not just talking the coldblooded murdering part."

To a certain extent, of course, the members of the SGC were aware that Shepard was capable of such acts of carnage; her descriptions of the Reaper War and the Skyllian Blitz were downright horrific. But watching it un-edited and hovering over your conference table was somewhat different than anecdotal evidence from Shepard's autobiography; after all, seeing was believing. Both men silently wondered what she might have left out of the sea stories she'd told her debriefing officers.

"I agree. I don't like being suckered."

"We can't send her to Gitmo too," O'Neill observed. "Like it or not, she's valuable. I think she just needs to start being a team player…" O'Neill was interrupted by the buzzing intercom.

"General, Commander Shepard is here for you, sir," said Walter through the small speaker.

Hammond grimaced. This conversation is going to be awkward. "Send her in, Walter."

"General," Shepard said as she opened the door, "you sent for me, sir?"

"Yes," Shepard stood before his desk, back ramrod straight, at attention. She wore the green Marine Corps-style digital-camo fatigues she seemed most comfortable in. The sleeves were rolled up, her right forearm and elbow bandaged. On her breast she wore the Navy 'SEAL Trident' at the request of the Admiral in charge of the Naval Special Warfare Command.

It had come to his attention that the Commander, despite being an N7 and, thus, authorized by the President to wear the SEAL badge, had been asked to leave it off of her uniform to maintain a low profile. The Admiral would have none of that, and he had made that clear to his old friend George Hammond. She was an officer in the United States Navy, a hero to humanity, a SEAL so far as he was concerned. If anyone had any problem with a woman wearing the SEAL badge, they could talk to him. Alas, he had agreed, however, that wearing the Medal of Honor ribbon would attract too much attention; even if Shepard decided to wear it only while on duty in the SGC as she had the SEAL badge. She couldn't palm that off with the same excuse they'd generated for the trident; there were no 'pilot programs' when it came to the Medal of Honor. Shepard would just have to forego that.

For now, at least.

Hammond looked at the Commander. She was an intimidating presence, despite the neutral facial expression. The General knew he was looking into the eyes of a killer; the video she'd shown left no doubt in his mind about that. "Do you know why I called you in here?"

"You're going to tell me that we're not going after Senator Kinsey. That the President has decided that having something to hold over him is much more useful than locking him up; or me killing him," she replied matter-of-factly. "You're also going to tell me that I should feel lucky that they're not going to lock me up for killing those men, or attempting to torture my prisoners; despite the fact that they all had it coming."Shepard paused, "I've dealt with politicians before, sir."

Hammond nearly lost his cool. Nearly. "This isn't the Citadel, Commander. You are not a Spectre here. You just brutally killed three people, and you allowed a fourth to die of his injuries when you probably could have saved him. Even justifying those first three is a stretch considering how easily you disarmed them. That man that bled to death is wholly unacceptable. By rights, you should be tried by a court martial, and then, most likely, shot."

Hammond didn't turn to look at a non-descript piece of paper on his desk. It contained a request to
the local JAG officer that one Commander Victoria Shepard be investigated for the crime of murder. Hammond's professionalism made his skin crawl at what he saw her do on that video. They'd been overtaken by events, however, and that piece of paper would soon be shredded. Besides, it was really only one of those angry letters that you write in the heat of the moment with no intention of actually sending; just to help get your thoughts organized and begin the process of calming down.

"But since the President now has some dirt on the Senator," Shepard observed smugly, "none of that will happen." Shepard paused, "And I'm sure that there's more than enough dirt to keep the Senator from messing with this unit's funding anymore." Shepard couldn't help but rub it in, "Human politicians are a bit more predictable than their alien counterparts, sir."

Now Hammond did lose his cool, but only for a moment. "I don't know how it is where you come from, Commander, but here we respect our superiors," he paused, "and the law." He stood, came around his desk, and walked up to the Commander. "You removed that man's tourniquet and he bled to death. He was your prisoner, and helpless. And don't tell me for a second that you wouldn't have snapped his neck if Colonel O'Neill hadn't shouted for you to stop."

"He was going to die before we could get him to a hospital anyway, he lost too much blood; probably even before I took the tourniquet off. It was the merciful thing to do," Shepard responded coolly. "Also, I am a Spectre."

"That's not the point Commander," Hammond knew she was right, of course, "and I've already said that Spectre business won't fly with me either. Worse still, you lied to us," he motioned to O'Neill who stood silently to the side. "You led us to believe you couldn't use your biotics without your amp, and it seems you've downplayed your omni-tool's capabilities as well." Hammond regained his composure, "May I assume the biotics demonstration you gave us offworld was similarly censored?"

"You may, sir," said Shepard.

Hammond took a breath. He was stuck. He couldn't get rid of Shepard; the SGC was probably the only place on the planet where Shepard would be safe. The NID couldn't touch her again, so long as she remained in the mountain. But could he trust her? Could he risk the lives of his command by keeping Shepard among them? Her lying about her capabilities was worse than the lives she took. While he couldn't ever tell her so, Hammond did agree that they had it coming. He also felt that leaving only one prisoner alive to interrogate simplified the cover-up immensely, another thought he'd never share with her. He felt dirty at the thought. He was better than that, they were better than that.

But he wasn't sure that he could use her anymore. Plus, he was also now convinced that they'd be hard pressed to kill Shepard, and that's what it would take, if she decided to be uncooperative. O'Neill agreed. They'd probably have to gas her in her sleep. They could see about getting a small canister of Sarin from the proving grounds at Dugway. Otherwise she might bring the entire mountain down on their heads.

As if sensing the thoughts passing through his mind, Shepard spoke, "Sir, if you're wondering if I'll continue to serve the SGC or if you'll have to kill me, you can rest easy. I would never do anything to jeopardize the security or effectiveness of your command. Despite the absence of a Reaper threat, this planet still has its enemies, and I'll defend Earth; as I always have." She was silent for a moment, then she turned to O'Neill, "I know you've been discussing killing me with the General. You're right, that would be your only recourse if I ever decided to not play along. I'd like to avoid that mistrust instead of trying to keep one eye open while I sleep for the rest of my life." She turned to look at the General, "I am sorry I lied to you, sir, and I pledge never to do so again. Please know, though, that I didn't intend you nor Colonel O'Neill any disrespect. I just did not know enough about the situation..."
to entrust myself fully to you. Hindsight being 20-20, I think I made the right choice. I believe your Kurt Cobain said; just because you're paranoid, don't mean they're not after you."

General Hammond processed that last comment. Deep down, he believed her; it wasn't personal. And it had saved her life. His anger with and distrust of the Commander began to ebb. In time it might even wane completely.

So, this is it? Shepard looked into the eyes of the man who would either take her at her word, or order her death. He had no other choice, and, like him or not, she wouldn't go down without a fight. How did it come to this? Shepard wondered. She still didn't know what had truly happened to bring her here, but she couldn't believe that the Reaper-Shepard or whatever it was that she became would send her, re-substantiate her, here only to leave her to rot at the hands of primitives. Oh Liara, she thought, what I wouldn't give to see you, just one more time.

Hammond opened his mouth as if to speak when the alarm activated, "Unscheduled offworld activation!" Hammond looked at O'Neill, and then they both hustled past her and out the door towards the control room. Despite not being dismissed, she decided to follow them. Upon entering the control room, Shepard heard Walter say, "It's SG-5, sir. They're broadcasting the danger-close IDC."

Hammond leaned over to the microphone, keying the button, "Defense teams to the gate room. Incoming hostiles," SF troopers began pouring into the gate room and manning their weapons. Suddenly lightning bolts erupted from the stargate. The stench of ozone assailed Shepard's nostrils, she grimaced. Hammond looked her, "This is just like what happened when you came through."

Holy shit! Shepard's thoughts raced. A small flame of hope lit within her. Could it be? Shepard wasn't a religious person, but she said a silent prayer.

Staff weapon blasts flashed from the event horizon adding to the already substantial light show. The defense team ducked behind their blast shields as SG-5 leapt, rolled, and fell down the ramp. "Walter, hit the iris!"

Walter's hand flashed to the iris control, but nothing happened. "Sir, iris not responding," he said while slapping the button repeatedly. The blast shield lowered into place automatically. They could hear the dull ring of a staff weapon blast impacting the heavy steel plate.

Shepard disappeared in a biotic blur, startling Colonel O'Neill and General Hammond. She was gone faster than either of them could even form the thought to question her motives. Shepard raced down the stairs from the control room into the corridor. She sprinted away from the gate room passing another squad of SF troopers. She could hear the gunpowder weapons firing along with the staff weapons and the lightning. There must be Jaffa in the gate room. I need to hurry! Shepard thundered past a confused Doctor Fraiser while she ran to the storage locker and ripped the door off with a flash of biotics. Captured goa'uld devices and prescription pain killers clattered out of the secure storage as she reached for the small metal container containing her amp.

"Shepard, what are you doing?" she heard Doctor Fraiser say as she pulled her amp port cover off and gently slotted the device home. Victoria felt a delicious tingling through all of her nerves as the amp activated. She replaced the port cover, turned, winked at the doctor, and disappeared in a biotic storm.
O'Neill was beginning to worry; the situation in the gate room was deteriorating rapidly. A dozen or so Jaffa had already come through the gate. The defense team was pouring the fire on them, but without a working iris they might be in it for the long haul. Two airmen and a Marine were already down. And those 50-cal's chew through ammunition like no one's business. The only saving grace was that the lighting storm, or whatever it was, seemed to be striking the Jaffa more than the airmen. Probably because they're all standing on the ramp instead of hiding behind something heavy, or maybe that chainmail crap they're always wearing, thought the Colonel.

A Jaffa came through the gate with a large sphere on his shoulder. A bomb! It was one of those almost comical-looking explosive devices the goa'uld were fond of. If it only had a fizzling black powder fuse it would be straight out of a cartoon. Some days you just can't get rid of a bomb, the old Adam West line jumped into Jack's head. Alas, this was no joke, those things were immensely powerful. If that bomb went off, it would gut the entire Cheyenne Mountain Complex. Jack took a closer look, peering around the iron sights of his P90, and it's already armed!

Suddenly a glowing blue blur streaked past him and impacted the Jaffa furthest down the ramp. With a flash, a thunderclap, and blur of billowing fire-red hair Shepard appeared where the Jaffa had been standing. The Jaffa rocketed back up the ramp tripping up three others. The one carrying the bomb dropped it, and it began rolling down the ramp. Jack O'Neill had just witnessed his first display of true biotic power.

It would not be the last.

Victoria Shepard, with murder on her face, wound up into an under-hand pitch and threw what looked like a blue ball of light at the remaining Jaffa on the ramp. With a thump and an odd ringing sound the Jaffa, enveloped in a Cherenkov-like blue glow, floated off of the metal grating thrashing wildly. Shepard followed up with a side-arm throw of another blue glowing ball. The floating Jaffa detonated upon impact. The sound was deafening, one of the SF troopers screamed and clutched a bleeding ear. A Jaffa literally came apart and bloody pieces of him showered down on the defense team.

Without warning a new figure tumbled through the stargate. Oh shit! Another one! Jack thought as another space-armor clad woman rolled down the ramp. She rolled to a stop and sat up against a dead Jaffa. She was immediately hit in the shoulder by a staff blast through the event horizon. Shepard howled. The cry, drowning out the roaring machinegun fire, made Jack's blood curdle. It was if all that was good had gone from the world. Shepard was agony.

Lara! No! Shepard screamed. She had dared to hope that the universe was showing mercy on its humble servant; reuniting its hero with her true beloved. The moment Hammond said that the light show looked like when she came through she knew. She just knew. But no! Not like this!

Shepard sprinted up the ramp. Her thoughts screamed within her head. I need to make sure Liara is ok! But first thing's first. Without breaking stride she took up the odd looking bomb, enveloped it in a mass effect field, and threw it towards the event horizon. Bomb mid-flight, another Jaffa came through the stargate. Shepard deployed her omni-blade and, with her best war cry, she gave the Jaffa an uppercut. The blade entered mid-abdomen, and exited dead-center between the shoulder blades; steam escaping from the freshly micro-manufactured surface. Shepard screamed in the dying Jaffa's face, spittle flying from her lips onto his cheeks and into his eyes. Victoria watched the life drain from his eyes, and she dropped him to the ramp.
The bomb transited the event horizon and the stargate abruptly disengaged. Shepard could only imagine what the opposite side looked like now. *Boy, am I glad we did those experiments when we left for Mars,* she thought to herself. Victoria swept her eyes over the carnage. At least a dozen and a half Jaffa, clad in their absurd looking chainmail, littered the ramp. Two SF troopers and a Marine were down, they looked fairly charred. One of them wasn't moving at all, some of the others moaned. One of the Jaffa was moaning as well. Shepard crushed his skull with a biotic-assisted stomp. She twisted her boot-heel grinding the grey matter into paste.

*Liara!* "Liara! Baby, are you ok!" Shepard screamed and she jumped down the ramp and crashed to a stop beside her. Of course she couldn't be sure it was Liara at this point, all she could tell was he/she was wearing female-form civilian body armor rigged for hard-vacuum. *But who else would it be?* Whoever it was, she wasn't moving.

"Please be ok!" The armor's kinetic barriers hadn't done shit to stop the staff weapon blast. Though, that shouldn't be surprising, they were optimized against kinetic energy weapons. The armor itself had taken the brunt of the blast. Her whole shoulder was charred black; Shepard couldn't tell if it was charred armor of flesh. *Please be ok!*

Shepard reached up and quickly, but gently, removed the helmet.

*B eloved! It's you, it's really you!*

Shepard could have burst into tears at that very moment, she was so happy. But, she was also terrified. *No! Please be ok! Please don't be hurt!* Liara's face was slack, her eyes closed, she was unconscious. *No! No no no no!* Shepard tried to shove the panic back down to where it couldn't hurt her, but she was barely holding on by a thread.

*Think Shepard! Don't panic, think!* Her thoughts shouted at her. *Remember your training! She'll be ok, check for injuries, treat as required.* She remembered what she'd learned at the N7 'villa'. Shepard activated her omni-tool and scanned her mate. *2nd degree burns to the shoulder. No broken bones. No internal bleeding. No obvious nerve damage.* Shepard fumbled at Liara's belt. *Come on! All body armor has slots for medi-gel!* She found it and quickly, but expertly, applied it to the burn. *She'll be ok! She has to be ok!*

"Liara," Shepard said into Liara's *ear*, trying to keep the panic from her voice, "honey, are you ok?"

Liara's eyes fluttered. They opened. A moment later they came into focus. She smiled.

"I love you, Shepard."

"I love you, Liara."

They kissed.
"How long have they been at it?"

"I don't know, maybe a couple of hours? Since Shepard got her out of her armor."

"Is anyone else creeped out by that? It's like the damn X-Files in there."

After the firefight in the gate room, Shepard had carried Liara back to the medical wing and gingerly removed her armor. She had made sure to stay out of Doctor Fraiser's way as she and her team tended to the wounded airmen and marines. No one paid them any attention as Shepard tenderly redressed her mate in some hospital scrubs. That seemed to suit Liara fine, she was a bit shyer about her nudity than Shepard was about hers.

Unexpectedly, she and Liara had handed Doctor Fraiser the remaining medi-gel from Liara's armor's belt pouch and told her how to apply it. Liara's burns would heal themselves, they didn't need any more of it, and she wanted to help. They had quite probably saved Corporal Jones' life. _Lord I wish we had more of that stuff_, Doctor Fraiser thought to herself. Fortunately there weren't any NID a**holes** here to confiscate it before she could use it. _Medicine is meant to save lives, not sit in a lab_, she thought angrily.

General Hammond joined SG-1 and Doctor Fraiser as they observed the Commander. Shepard sat, as she had since she carried Liara in, at her bedside. The Asari laid on her side as not to put pressure on her burnt shoulder, already nearly healed. Shepard held her hand with both of hers; she held it to her cheek, and smiled warmly with her eyes closed. Shepard's face was bliss, happier than anyone in the SGC had ever seen it before. Liara's facial expression was even, but her eyes were a frighteningly dark oily black.

Hammond and O'Neill had wanted to debrief Shepard and Liara almost immediately. It was obvious to them who had just arrived, but they wanted to discuss the implications. One look from Shepard dissuaded him. She hadn't given him her death stare; she hadn't even tried to intimidate him. She didn't have to; the look of joy on her face was enough. Hammond couldn't stand in the way of that, even for a few minutes. The animosity he had felt towards her not twenty minutes ago had all but bled away seeing the smile of a woman reunited with her love. There would be time for debriefings later.

"Is this the _joining_ Shepard spoke about in her debriefings?" General Hammond asked.

"I can only assume so, sir," responded Doctor Fraiser.

"Should we give them some privacy?" asked O'Neill, "I mean, are they _doin' it_?"

Carter grimaced at the joke, but he had a point, _what were they doing? _"Maybe they're just catching up, sirs?"

Hammond pondered that for a moment. He was intrigued by Liara T'soni, he'd obviously never seen an Asari before. From what Shepard had said she must be a remarkable woman. _And the photos do not do her justice_. With a start he worried that he might not be the only one to find Liara alluring. Shepard had spoken at length as to how most species from her reality were enamored with the Asari. The SGC's experiences with the goa'uld Hathor still left a bitter taste in his mouth. He resolved to consult with Doctor Fraiser on if there could be some sort of pheromones at work.

Still, General Hammond certainly couldn't begrudge them taking some time to catch up. If one thing
from Shepard's debriefings stood out, it was her utter and complete love for this Asari. In the meantime, he concerned himself with the safety of his command and his subordinates. "Your report Doctor Fraiser?" he asked.

"Three serious injuries, all staff weapon blasts. A number of minor wounds and some ruptured ear drums from whatever explosion Shepard set off in there, but I'm not concerned about them."

"And Corporal Jones?"

"Lucky to be alive, sir," Janet responded matter-of-factly. "He should be dead, he was very badly burned. Liara's medi-gel saved him." She looked at the heavily bandaged Marine; he _should_ have been in a body bag. In fact, he and the other two serious injuries would most likely make full recoveries. "I'd kill to get my hands on more of that stuff, sir," she said with a surprising amount of emotion.

"Colonel, the Jaffa?"

"Bagged and tagged, sir," O'Neill responded, "all symbiotes accounted for and destroyed." _Good, the last thing they needed was some stray god'uld taking an SGC member as a host._ O'Neill looked at the happy couple, he sighed, "Ok, someone at NID is going to say this, so I might as well just broach it now." He had the group's attention. "The SGC was breached, several men were wounded, some of whom _should_ be dead. We would have probably been able to avoid that if we got the iris closed after SG-5 came through, but that light-show jammed up the works." The group looked at him, they knew where he was going, but they let him continue, "I really don't want to be that guy," he made a set of 'air quotes' with his fingers, "but Liara T'soni nearly cost us the entire complex." He was, obviously, referring to the bomb the Jaffa had managed to bring into the gate room.

"And wasn't that supposed to be a _safe_ world?" asked Jackson. "Those gate coordinates weren't on the Abydos cartouche. How did SG-5 even get bushwhacked in the first place?"

General Hammond agreed. They had nearly lost everything. He was sure that it wasn't intentional, and it appeared that everything would work out ok, _but_... But, the Colonel was right; someone higher up the chain was going to give them grief about this. Then he chuckled to himself, _it seems holding something over the good Senator will be useful sooner than he had thought._ The General found the idea of blackmail distasteful, the very notion of back room politics did not sit well with the career military officer, but it appeared there was no escaping the reality of the situation. _Also, Jackson made a very good point, undoubtedly someone at NID would try lumping that on Shepard and Liara as well, _he thought.

"Colonel, Doctor Jackson," Hammond said evenly, "we'll cross those bridges when we come to them. In the meantime, we'll be happy that things turned out as well as they did," he paused, "and grateful that Corporal Jones will make a recovery." He looked at Corporal Jones and his commander Major Harper who had come to check up on his wounded SG-5 team member.

The assembled nodded.

"General Hammond?" a new voice asked. They turned to the bed where Liara laid. Her eyes were no longer black, they had returned to their rich blue-within-blue. Shepard also looked at them. Her eyes shone with what must have been tears of joy. They had never seen her smile so broadly. Shepard's world was perfect, complete once more. _She smiles?_ the group thought in unison.

Softly, politely, precisely, Liara spoke, "I am very sorry that my arrival caused you and your command harm. It was never our intention to put you at risk, and I am glad your man will recover. Victoria has just explained to me where I am, and I will be more than happy to answer any questions
you might have, but," she paused and looked at Shepard with a smile. "But," she continued as Shepard started chuckling, "I need some alone time with the missus."

"Indeed," Teal'c said matter-of-factly.

**Beloved! It's you!** Shepard's thoughts resonated through the bond. Shepard felt joy, more than she knew possible. She was whole again. She'd cheated death, *again*. Shepard could feel the feelings reciprocated. Liara broadcasted her own love and the emotions self-reinforced into a single rapturous joy. *This is even better than when we make love,* Shepard thought.

**There will be time for that later,** Liara responded. Shepard's entire being filled with beautiful warmth.

**You're here! How are you here?** Shepard was curious, but she didn't really care. All that mattered was that she was here. They were together, that's enough. The war was over, they were safe, and they were together!

**As your people say, it is a long story,** Liara responded through the bond.

Shepard saw rather than heard Liara's elaboration:

The Reapers disengaging from combat throughout the galaxy. The allied forces shifting from combat operations to humanitarian relief missions. The Reapers helping. *The Reapers helping!* Reaper capital ships, including *Harbinger*, working to reassemble the broken relay network. Reaper destroyers sifting through rubble, rebuilding infrastructure, and towing damaged starships to safety and repair. Husks and Marauders delivering humanitarian supplies and liberating indoctrination centers. Banshees, Rachni, and Brutes making themselves scarce as to not terrify the populace. The allied races regarded the Reapers warily, but they were so grateful for help it didn't matter.

**They are helping us rebuild, my beloved,** Liara said joyously.

But Shepard could feel another emotion. There was trepidation. The Reapers were helping, but people were afraid. There was no compassion. They kept the peace, but with a brutal efficiency. A minor Krogan clan had risen up against Urdnots Wrex and Bakara and their vision of a peaceful Krogan renaissance. The Reapers had annihilated them before Wrex could even organize his forces to quell the insurrection. There would be no repeat of the Krogan Rebellions, or the Rachni War for that matter, but there was fear. *What else might trigger the Reapers' wrath?*

There was peace, but at what price?

**Oh god, did I make a mistake?** Shepard was filled with a sudden dread. Had she traded the threat of immediate destruction at the hands, *well tentacles really*, of the Reapers for a protracted terror? Was their reprieve a temporary respite until they ran afoul of the un-knowable machine intelligence's ideal of galactic stability? Would Shepard's own values or hang-ups, somehow assimilated or co-opted by the Reapers, lead to the genocide of an entire race? *I've done horrible things; I'm a monster, what have I unleashed upon the galaxy?*

The bond flooded with a feeling of comfort and love. *Peace, beloved,* Liara soothed her, *you made the right decision. You gave the Reapers a moral compass, and they could not have asked for a greater paragon of an example.*

Shepard calmed substantially.
I was afraid I had made a mistake. I took a huge risk. I just wanted to be with you again!

Victoria flashed her rationale for controlling the Reapers to Liara, her hope that they could still join after the transformation. I was selfish. I was presumptuous. Shepard wept; so much as she could in the bond at least.

Yes, you were. There was a very brief flash of coldness, but then Liara resumed the projection of happiness. I know why you did what you did. There were risks, yes, but it worked. We are together again, and the galaxy is safe. Shepard could feel Liara smile. The galaxy wanted you to be happy, and now we have that chance.

Shepard was met with a flood of images. Urdnots Bakara and Wrex surrounded by scores of young Krogan, the horizon littered with construction cranes. Jacob Taylor and his infant son. The Justicar Samara and her daughter lounging in a garden. Tali’Zora, un-masked and silken black hair billowing in the wind, in Garrus Vakarian’s tender embrace. The Citadel, intact and whole, glittering with life, suspended gracefully above mother Earth; Earth no longer burned. Liara and an Asari child.

Wait! Was that our…

Yes, beloved, Liara thought with mixed joy and fear, our daughter, Victoria.

Shepard was confused. When you showed me your memories? Before the final push?

Yes, Liara paused for a moment. You hoped I would, did you not? She smiled in the bond.

Shepard's confusion mounted. Wait. How much time has passed? A sudden spike of fear, You wouldn't leave our baby, what happened?

Shepard could feel Liara's anxiety. She broadcasted assurances to her mate. Calmed substantially, Liara continued, It has been almost three years. It took that long for the Reapers to understand what had happened to you.

They came to me on Thessia, Harbinger itself. It explained that the Reaper intelligence was now a Reaper-Shepard gestalt. It bore witness to your sacrifice, explained your gift. They had already communicated to us their intentions, but never had they given us details on what had happened to you. Harbinger said that they had tried to re-substantiate you using the mass relays; they were the only things with enough power to convert energy into that much matter. Something unexpected had happened. You did not appear where they thought you would.

Shepard chuckled through the bond, That's an understatement.

Liara continued, They believed they had finally understood what went wrong. They were willing to try again, but I would have to go to you, you could not come to me.

A flash of fear, Is our baby ok?

Comforting, Of course my love. Liara T’soni and her daughter Victoria live, happily and healthily, in the home that once belonged to the Lady Benezia in Armali.

Confusion, Then who are you? You’re not Liara?

I am as much Liara T’soni as you are Victoria Shepard. A pause. We are both shadows of the women we used to be. The Reaper-Shepard gestalt wanted to honor your sacrifice; you saved
them from their amoral corruption, delivered the galaxy from their destruction, and entrusted its care to them. They owed you! They knew the one thing you wanted most, what prompted you to take a chance on them, so they tried to give it to you.

And when they realized they couldn't return me to you, they asked if you wanted to come to me? Or at least a copy of you.

Precisely my love. Liara T'soni joined her consciousness to the Reapers. Then they sent me here.

Shepard pondered that. She wasn't Victoria Shepard, and Liara wasn't really Liara T'soni. The Asari she had met on Therum still lived, with my daughter, in the other place. Then again, she had never really been to Therum, had she?

Liara was conspicuously silent through the bond; she was letting her think it through on her own. So Victoria Shepard had died on the Citadel when she joined her consciousness to the Reapers, yet here she was. Liara T'soni had delivered a daughter and was raising her on her own on Thessia, yet she was also here. The other Liara gave the gift of herself to this place, knowing she'd never see it. She wasn't a philosopher, she was a marine; this was all almost too much.

Do you love me? Shepard asked her mate through the bond.

Of course, beloved; forever and always, the response.

Then that's good enough for me, she concluded.

The bond strengthened, a nearly euphoric joy encompassed them both. They were one once more. Death couldn't keep them apart, nor could different dimensions or realities or whatever this was. She'd let Major Carter ponder on the physics. All she knew, or cared, was that she was with her beloved.

Shall we live happily ever after? Liara asked.

Yes my love, Shepard paused, I hope you don't mind. I told all these people that we're married.

Liara's warm smile enveloped her through the bond, That is something we can rectify easily.

As the bond faded, Victoria urged caution, Don't tell them too much until I can explain things in more detail. They know who you are, including your Shadow Broker persona, but they don't know what you're capable of. Let's keep it that way for now. She sent the briefest of flashes of what she had just experienced at the hands of those who would exploit them. Liara shivered in the bond.

With that, the joining ended. Liara blinked and looked to see a group of several people looking at them with intent curiosity. Through the bond, even though they hadn't really discussed it, Liara knew who these people were. Shepard held them in high regard, and so would she. She also knew that Shepard had sworn to help these people defend Earth. Part of her wept that the struggle continued, but she was also proud of Victoria for never turning down someone in need. We'll find a way of retiring soon enough, she comforted herself.

She missed her daughter, but she knew she was alive and well, and that her other self was there for her. It was a strange feeling to say the least. There will be time to have our own family here, she consoled herself.
In the meantime, she owed these people some answers. But, first things first, it's been three years! She looked at the older man with the bald head and spoke, "General Hammond…"
"Please be seated," General Hammond said as he entered the conference room. Major Harper, commander of SG-5, and the members of SG-1 eased themselves back into their plush conference chairs.

"Major Carter," Hammond said nodding to her, "do you have the tech report from the ordinance folks?"

"Yes, sir. They just finished going through the telemetry."

"Very well, Major. We'll get to that in a moment," Hammond said. He shifted his gaze to Major Harper, "Major Harper, please give us your report on your mission."

"Sir, will Commander Shepard be joining us?"

"No Major, she's," he paused, "indisposed, at the moment." Harper's eyebrows jumped.

"Very well, sir," Harper said mechanically, "At 0830 this morning we deployed a MALP to the test area indicated by SG-1 on P3Y-88499." He nodded to Colonel O'Neill. "MALP telemetry showed no hostile presence, and no abnormal radiological or chemical hazards. At 0845 SG-5 transited the stargate and began its assessment." He looked down at his notes. Of course his report had already been filed electronically, but Major Harper preferred the tactile sensation of reading his own handwriting from his grimy spiral notepad. "We noted the following anomalies:

"The stargate itself bore a thin layer of soot, the stargate pad appeared charred but otherwise undamaged, there was no appreciable cratering. The soil surrounding the stargate pad appeared vitrified. We collected samples for study. The small shrubbery and grass surrounding the gate reported by SG-1's MALP was no longer present. Some burnt root systems survived, however. Approximately 150 meters from the stargate was a stand of trees. All leaves were either blown down or burned in place. Smaller trees were knocked flat up to at least 250 meters from the stargate. All trees showed heavy scorching on the sides facing the stargate. In a few cases we saw a shadowing effect where one tree shielded another from line of sight to the stargate. These trees did not show the same scorching as the others. We were unable to locate SG-1's MALP or any MALP-related wreckage."

He flipped to a new page, "Neither the MALP-mounted nor handheld radiation detectors indicated elevated levels. We collected soil samples for chromatographic analysis. We were unable to locate any local fauna to bring back for radiation exposure analysis. After completing our sweep, I ordered my team to dial home roughly one hour early and return to the SGC." He paused, "At approximately 1215 I ordered Corporal Jones to dial Earth. We immediately came under staff-weapon fire from the tree line. Additional Jaffa infantry appeared from behind the stargate and opened fire. This is supposition, but my guess is that these Jaffa were waiting for us to dial home; most likely in two or more cloaked transport shuttles. We must have just not stumbled into them during our sweep," he looked disappointed in himself.

"Just prior to completing the dialing sequence, a pair of death gliders appeared overhead and began strafing us. Additionally, I heard engine noise from a cloaked transport shuttle entering a hover over the stargate pad. Once the stargate connected, I sent the danger-close IDC signal and ordered my team through. Last thing I saw on the far side was the cloaked shuttle's transit rings deploying a squad of Jaffa a dozen or so meters from the stargate pad."
He closed his notepad in a surprisingly melodramatic gesture, "And the rest of the engagement happened here in the gate room."

General Hammond nodded thoughtfully. He wasn't one for dramatic speeches, and Harper wasn't the type who sought out praise, but it was a damn fine piece of soldiering extracting his team, "Well done getting everyone home Major."

"Yes, sir," he replied stiffly. "I just wish we could have avoided that mess in the gate room, sir."

Jack's eyebrows shot up. He knew Major Harper was not type of man to hold a grudge. He also knew Harper appreciated the risks involved with the SGC's mission and accepted them with the professionalism and pride he'd expect from any officer in the United States Marine Corps. But, that simple sentence carried anger with it; more emotion than he normally saw from the Marine. At the moment, Jack couldn't tell if it was directed at Commander Shepard or Liara, or if it was merely a visceral reaction to a very closely run thing. The SGC had nearly been lost, and that didn't give anyone in the entire mountain a warm fuzzy feeling. He resolved to keep an eye on the Major, perhaps head off any animosity that might be building against their latest guest.

"We'll discuss the engagement in the gate room in a moment," said the General, changing topics, "Major Carter, please deliver your report on the biotics field-experiment."

"Yes, sir," Carter responded. "I'm afraid I cannot give you the physics behind what happened, I'm still working on that with the rest of the engineering unit, but we have evaluated the results of using biotics on objects transiting stargates." She consulted her lab notebook, not quite as weathered as Major Harper's notepad but still well worn. "Commander Shepard has demonstrated that her biotic abilities cannot reach through to objects on the far end of a wormhole. It appears that the effect dissipates on the far side of an active wormhole, but mass effect field influenced objects can transit through a wormhole.

"In its simplest form, she can reduce the mass of an object and send it from the originating gate to its destination. Possible applications would be moving heavy objects without the benefit of cargo rovers or large groups of people on the originating side. We've already got some of this planned.

"The more interesting application is sending objects the wrong way through the stargate. Based on telemetry from our MALP during the experiment we conducted on our way to Mars, the objects cannot properly re-materialize on the originating end. The flash of gamma radiation detected before the MALP went offline indicates that some form of matter-energy conversion is taking place. But the survey conducted by SG-5 suggests it's not that simple."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Jack smiled. Carter was entering a full-on geek-out. The great Doctor Major Samantha Carter, PhD had latched onto a challenging intellectual mystery, and wouldn't let it go until it was solved.

"How is that Major?" asked Hammond.

"Well, sir, based on the observations reported by SG-5, and the MALP telemetry available, the ordinance unit estimates an event on the order of 10 gigajoules." The assembled group obviously had no visceral grasp as to how much energy that was. From the look on Jack's face, he might not even know what a Joule was. "Their guess is that it comes out to be about 10 to 20 tons of TNT. Roughly equivalent to the M-28 Davy Crockett nuclear bazooka developed in the 1950's."

Jack let out a long whistle.

"Talk about 'four fingers of death'," quipped Daniel Jackson, alluding to the contents of the MRE's
Shepard annihilated.

The room grew very quiet. The SGC had, more than once, deployed nuclear weapons, but this was the first time an individual had unleashed that much destruction with a simple flick of her wrist.

Cater broke the silence, "I had ordinance double check their assessment. They consulted data from the 'Little Feller' nuclear tests in 1962, and they're quite confident in their report on the blast damage." Carter paused for a moment, "The implications are, troubling."

"You kidding? This could be very useful," opined O'Neill.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Carter responded, "I meant the math carries troubling implications." Jack looked at her anticipating a physics lecture soon to come sailing over his head.

She'd obviously piqued the General's curiosity, however, "Please continue Major."

"Yes, sir. Well, general relativity tells us that there is a mass-energy equivalence which can be described..." she trailed off realizing Jack's eyes were beginning to glaze over. "E = mc^2, sir." That seemed to register with him. "The math doesn't work out. Suppose the 10 kilograms of MRE's Shepard sent through the stargate were converted to energy upon arrival. Einstein says that equates to roughly 9*10^17 Joules. That works out to an energy release in the ballpark of 900 megatons! That's seven zeros missing."

"That's a lot of zeros," quipped Jack.

Carter scowled. "What's more, ordinance made the observation that the majority of the blast effect generated by a nuclear weapon is the result of rapid soft-x-ray heating of the atmosphere. MALP telemetry suggested an emission in the gamma ray band which is less efficient at heating air, so the estimated energy release might be an order of magnitude low. Still, that's a whole lot of energy missing."

Carter paused for breath, she was getting excited, "We know that matter and energy can neither be created nor destroyed, it can only change form. So that energy must have gone somewhere. I think the ambush of SG-5 gives us an indication of where it might have gone."

"How so, Major?" Harper spoke up unexpectedly. Jack observed his facial expression and posture; he obviously wanted to know how this near-disaster had befallen his men, he wanted payback.

Carter nodded to Harper, then she looked to General Hammond, "Sir, on a hunch I asked Daniel to take a look at the markings on the Jaffa we killed in the gate room."

"According to the database we've put together along with intel from the tok'ra," Daniel spoke up, leaned towards the table, and pushed his glasses up his nose, "these were Jaffa in the service of the goa'uld Ba'al. He's one of the more tech-savvy goa'uld System Lords."

"My theory, sir," Carter spoke again, "is that the left over energy from the MRE's was distributed across the gate network, dissipating across all of the stargates in our galaxy. Perhaps it was by chance, perhaps from some sort of gate network safety protocol. Either way, Ba'al probably detected this energy spike, and came to investigate." She paused, "Think of it as plucking a string on a spider's web. Once he arrived at P3Y-88499 he must have found something of enough interest to set a trap and wait. SG-5 couldn't find our MALP, he might have grabbed it." The group shared worried glances.

"This would also explain how Ba'al, or any goa'uld for that matter, would even know to go to P3Y-88499. You'll recall that that world's gate address does not appear on the Abydos cartouche. The fact
that this was a *safe* world in addition to being uninhabited was what prompted us to use it as a test site. It would seem that the explosion released enough energy to reveal the presence of this gate in the network itself."

"So now Ba'al is aware of a new world that was previously unknown to him, *and* he knows that we were somehow responsible for that explosion?" Hammond asked.

"It would seem so," responded Carter.

"He certainly paid enough to confirm it was us who did it," noted Jack.

"A goa'uld would not give a second thought to sacrificing Jaffa if it achieved its goals," observed Teal'c grimly.

"Major Carter," Hammond said after a few moments of thought, "until or unless we can develop a way of preventing their detection, we will suspend all biotics experiments that might result in a similar explosion. Or do you believe that all mass effect interactions with the stargate are detectable?"

"Sir, we detected no anomalous gate activity with the lower energy experiments," she responded. "I believe if we avoid the wrong-way explosion-type event we should be safe." Hammond nodded in agreement.

Colonel O'Neill sighed. "Looks like we might have just caught the attention of another goa'uld who has a special reason to come after us," Jack commented. "He's going to want to get his hands on this technology."

The assembled group looked at each other in silence. They'd proven that the Reapers didn't exist, but they'd also just made a new enemy. *Shepard certainly knew how to make an impact on those around her.*

"You failed your god," a deep resonating voice. "Before you die, describe your defeat. Perhaps we will forgive you, and you will not die shol'va." Lord Ba'al, goa'uld System Lord, looked down from his throne upon the dying Jaffa. Sickly waxen skin, sunken cheeks, bloodshot eyes, barely contained explosive diarrhea and bloody vomiting, the Jaffa's radiation poisoning was obviously fatal. The cellular damage was apparently severe enough that his symbiote could not save him; even if it hadn't suffered the same amount of damage itself.

"My Lord," the Jaffa said haltingly, "we lay in wait on the planet as you commanded. When the tau'r'i arrived we maintained our concealment until they opened the chappa'ai to return home. Seconds before the portal opened, I ordered the attack. As the tau'r'i retreated through the gate I deployed your Jaffa from my transport shuttle and they pursued our prey through the gate."

"And this is when you failed me?" Lord Ba'al stated it more as fact that query.

"No my Lord, the chappa'ai remained open for some time, longer than expected. I managed to get more than a dozen Jaffa and a heavy explosive device through the gate. Even more were going through when the disaster befell us." Ba'al leaned forward in his throne and cast a withering look. The dying Jaffa bowed his head even further. "There was a blinding flash of light. My shuttle's shields overloaded, our systems failed. The pilot managed to keep from crashing but we only barely made it back to the ha'tak in orbit. The pilot succumbed to radiation sickness before he could return to your court." *How fortunate for him,* Ba'al thought.

"Did you set the timer on the explosive?"
"Yes my Lord, I set it myself."

"Did the flash of light correspond to when the device should have detonated?"

"No my Lord, it was nearly a half minute too soon."

Ba'al looked at the Jaffa for a moment. Then he cast a gaze to his First Prime, standing stoically to the side of the dying Jaffa. "Take him away. Let him die in shame." A flick of the wrist and his First Prime ordered another pair of Jaffa to drag him from the throne room; he was too weak to walk. "Summon Nerus, and leave us." The Jaffa commander bowed deeply and exited as well. Ba'al could hear retching from the corridor.

A moment later Ba'al's fat underling waddled into the throne room and bowed, but not as deeply as he would prefer, before him. "Report Nerus," Ba'al commanded.

"There is no doubt, my lord," he said, "this was the unknown event the chappa'ai system has been reporting."

"Then the tau'ri have developed a way to turn the gate itself into a weapon of destruction?" the goa'uld said more than asked.

"It would appear so, my Lord." Nerus seemed to be on the verge of saying more.

"Speak!" Lord Ba'al commanded. He was in no mood to brook his underling's nonsense.

"As my Lord Ba'al commands," Nerus said with a bow and a flourish. Ba'al scowled at him. "I was only wondering at the nature of this possible device. The flash of photons which destroyed your Jaffa and damaged their transport was of a similar intensity to the nuclear weapons we know the tau'ri to possess, but their character was incorrect. This event was more skewed towards the gamma-ray band rather than x-ray." He paused for breath. "Additionally, the method of delivery must be truly novel. They apparently struck at your forces through an inbound wormhole."

*That would be truly novel indeed,* Ba'al thought. While he would never admit it to anyone he was deeply troubled by the events reported by his dying Jaffa. The lives and equipment lost were inconsequential; those could be replaced, one more easily than the other. What truly frightened him, however, was that the tau'ri had managed something he thought impossible. They had sent a device, or something equally destructive, *upstream* through an incoming wormhole. The implications were distressing. Dared he use the stargates any more if such a disaster might be waiting for him to dial into? What if one of the other System Lords developed such technology? It would upset the entire strategic balance. *He must have it for himself."

"Is that all?" Ba'al asked, still lost in thought.

"No, my Lord," Nerus responded. "Seconds before the disaster, a low energy unknown event was detected at that tau'ri gate. I do not know what that could be. Since there was no corresponding event at the dialing gate, this might be similar to the first event detected months ago. That occurred at the tau'ri gate without an originating gate as well."

Ba'al pondered that. "Very well, we will conduct surveillance anywhere we detect this activity. We will undoubtedly learn what the tau'ri have devised, and then relieve them of it," he said with much more confidence than he felt.

*What other choice did he have?*
The New Asari in Town

Liara stretched as a broad smile crossed her face. She splayed her toes with a satisfying series of pops as her joints cavitated. Her toe nails were un-painted for the moment, but Shepard would take care of that soon enough. She loved doing her nails. Such a tender ritual; surprisingly feminine for Shepard, if you ascribed to traditional gender stereotypes.

Her shoulder ached slightly, but the medi-gel had done its work. Both she and Shepard felt awful that her arrival had nearly gotten so many hurt. The gestalt had no way of knowing what conditions would exist on the other side, hence the hardsuit. If it had, it wouldn't have put her into the middle of a fire fight. She was glad that they were able to help Corporal Jones. Shepard hoped that would diffuse any animosity towards her beloved.

Still, her shoulder wasn't the only part of her body that was sore. She smiled at the thought. Shepard had almost not even wanted to make love; she was content to join with her in the bond. It was emotional intimacy she craved. So much pain and loneliness, she needed her mate's love. But that just wouldn't do. Liara needed the physical contact. She needed to feel Shepard's skin on hers; she needed to feel Shepard's face between her thighs as she ran her fingers through her fire-red hair. She tingled at the thought.

For her it had been years since that last glorious night before the assault on Cerberus. Despite her prudish exterior, Liara reveled in her race's sensuality; and Shepard never disappointed her. Liara bit her lower lip as she observed Shepard's prone nude form hungrily, no, she needs to sleep. Besides, they both needed the distraction from the memories Liara had shared with her in the infirmary. Many things from the other place disturbed Victoria. She feared that her selfishness had doomed the galaxy to a terrifying peace under the Reapers. She felt guilty. Guilty that she had risked so much, to come to a place she didn't belong, to live with a copy, to be a copy herself. Guilty that there was another Liara out there, raising a daughter that she would never know. That had hurt Liara, but only for a moment. It was a strange situation, obviously, but they were together. That's what mattered. What was done was done. She had no regrets, and neither did the other Liara, wherever she was. So, she sought to cement their bond. She smiled knowing she had succeeded. She'll come around.

Part of her worried that she might be manipulating Shepard to some extent. Her Shadow Broker persona would approve of using physical and emotional intimacy to make someone pliable to her will; to make it easier for her to accept the current state of things, however insane they might be to an outside observer. She shook her head. She didn't want to sully this. If she had acted to bind Shepard to her, then it worked both ways. She was Shepard's as much as Shepard was hers. Two individuals, yet one mind and one flesh in the bond. I have you back Victoria, she smiled to herself. I will embrace the time we have together. Goddess willing, that will be a long time yet indeed.

She quietly sat up in their bed. Shepard, prone and out-cold, didn't move a muscle as she stood and quietly padded towards a simple wooden dresser. She dressed in some military clothing that Shepard laid out for her and walked towards the door. Placing her hand on the door knob she took a look back at Victoria. She lay sprawled on the bed, her pale bare back rising gently with her breath, her flame red hair an unruly mop half buried under a pillow. She smiled and opened the door.

Doctor Liara T'soni glided into the SGC mess hall. The Asari moved with a fluid grace despite the baggy fatigues she wore. All eyes in the dining room watched as she retrieved a tray and added some fruit slices to her plate. The Security Forces escort took up position at the door and tried to remain
unobtrusive. General Hammond did not regard Liara as a prisoner, or a particularly serious security threat, despite what Shepard had said about her profession in the other place, but he wanted someone to keep an eye on her until she could be fully debriefed.

Jack looked at his watch, "Jeeze, 18 hours?" he looked down at his plate and shook his head as he pushed some ketchup around with the chewed nub of a French fry.

"Seriously," replied Daniel, "that endurance is inhuman."

"As you are no doubt aware Daniel Jackson," chimed in Teal'c as he plucked another grape from the vine on his plate, "Doctor Liara T'soni is not human." He placed the grape in his mouth and chewed as he regarded SG-1 with an even expression.

"Oh," Daniel said making a wide-eyed expression, "I've noticed."

Carter grimaced.

"Even for a Jaffa, Teal'c? 18 hours!"

Teal'c merely arched an eyebrow in response, not even his signature indeed. Jack and Daniel's faces went slack in surprise. They shared a look.

Samantha placed her palm to her face. She seemed to be one of the few people on base to have met Liara and not taken more than an intellectual interest in her. Surely she was a curiosity, an alien who actually looks alien, and undeniably pretty, but she would have to reserve judgment until she had an opportunity to get to know the Asari. She didn't really know much about her beyond what Shepard had said, and there's an obvious potential for bias in her opinion.

"I'm sure you're mostly interested in comparing notes with another archaeologist. Isn't that right Daniel?" she said with a lopsided grin. Still, Sam wasn't above a little teasing.

"Oh yes, my interest is purely academic."

"That's probably a good thing," quipped Jack, "Shepard strikes me as the jealous type."

Jack closed his mouth as Liara approached their table, "May I sit with you Colonel O'Neill?" she asked pleasantly as she looked at the other members of SG-1. "Major Carter, Doctor Jackson, Teal'c, a pleasure to see you."

"By all means," O'Neill motioned for her to sit. Liara gently placed her tray on the table and took her seat.

Liara's plate consisted of fruit, a bowl of string beans, and a cup of apple juice. Carter had to satisfy her curiosity. "Doctor T'soni," she asked tentatively, "what do Asari eat?"

Liara smiled pleasantly, "We are levo-amino like humans, so our dietary requirements are similar. I can digest almost all human foods without incident. Spicy foods upset my stomach, though. Please, call me Liara." Liara noticed Carter's blue Jell-O. She narrowed her brow; it was the same shade as her skin.

"Do you eat meat?" asked Daniel, "You don't seem to have taken any."

"Well, it is meatloaf day, Daniel," quipped O'Neill.

"We are omnivorous, as you are." She precisely spread her napkin on her lap and began dissecting a
slice of cantaloupe. "Many Asari choose to be vegetarian. I seldom eat meat, especially red-meat. Though, I am partial to your smoked salmon." She smiled and took a bite of fruit.

"Why no red meat?" asked Carter.

Liara placed her fork and knife on the table and finished chewing. She swallowed. "Shepard finds it upsetting, as do I." She paused in reflection, "The last several years have been particularly," she thought for a moment looking for the right word, "graphic, Major Carter."

"I noticed that," O'Neill said. He looked at Liara, "Shepard seemed to avoid looking at the barbeque at Doc Fraiser's place." He noticed Liara subconsciously reach to her right elbow with her left hand. She stroked the area where Shepard had been cut by those doctors.

"Barbeque? I am not familiar with that word."

"It's a type of outdoor grill that's ubiquitous in our culture, predominantly used for cooking meat products at social gatherings" Daniel piped up, providing more detail than anyone expected. "Your English is very good, Liara, where did you learn it?"

"From Shepard," she said. "My translator implants are excellent, but Shepard and the Normandy crew used a lot of slang. I learned as quickly as I could. Though I never really understood all of the colloquialisms that they used, Joker especially."

"Yeah, there are some things that just don't translate into Asari," Commander Shepard seemingly appeared from nowhere with a mischievous smile on her face. "Do you agree, beloved?" she favored her with a peck on the cheek as she sat down next to her.

Beloved? The phrase surprised Carter somewhat. Unlike a few people on the base who didn't approve of the Commander's relationship with the Asari, and despite the flirting early on that made her uncomfortable, Carter never really thought Shepard's love for Liara was anything other than heartfelt and natural. In fact, she rather thought that particular regulation was a throwback to a less enlightened time. Still, the tender phrase, beloved, coming from such a hardened woman as Shepard, seemed out of place. Also, Carter wasn't one for public displays of affection, but that was just her.

Carter noticed Jackson shudder for a moment. Then it struck her; the goa'uld Hathor had called Jackson "our beloved". That must be bringing up a whole slew of memories he'd rather forget, she thought. Samantha shook her head.

Shepard didn't notice Daniel's discomfort. She interlocked fingers with her wife and smiled. Across the room an airman, whose name Carter couldn't recall, stood and stomped away with a disgusted look on his face. That upset Sam. Whatever his personal hang-ups were, she didn't appreciate the lack of respect he was showing for a superior officer.

Liara had taken note and looked at Major Carter, "What was that about?"

Carter opened her mouth to speak when Shepard beat her to it, "In this time period, it's still acceptable to cast judgment on others based on the gender of the people they choose to bond with." Shepard squeezed Liara's hand. She looked at Carter, "Give it a few years and this whole thing will take a turn for the better. And the Air Force will be better for it." Jack raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"You realize," Liara said studiously, "I do not really have a gender. It is a meaningless concept for my people." She winked. Shepard smiled warmly.

Carter looked pensive. She cast her gaze between Daniel and Jack, they both looked at Liara with similar smiles. Teal'c's expression was even, as it always was, but he seemed a bit more serene than
usual. Sam looked at Liara and she returned her gaze evenly. "I am still not very good with human facial expressions, Major Carter, but I think you want to ask me something."

"You seem to have everyone overly fascinated with you. Is it pheromones? Hypnosis?" Shepard started chuckling, "What?" asked the Major.

"Everyone loves the Asari," Shepard said with a grin, "everyone."

"I think it's a legitimate question," Carter said defensively, "We had a problem with a Goa'uld drugging all of the men in the SGC. We nearly lost the base."

Jack and Daniel squirmed a little bit. "Can we not talk about that?" asked Daniel. "I'm really trying my best to forget all that ever happened."

"Hear hear," echoed Jack.

Liara looked somewhat self-conscious, "I am not doing it on purpose. I may be producing some pheromones which humans are sensitive to, but I am not attempting to take over your base." Shepard laughed harder, Liara blushed.

Jack couldn't help but smile. Of course, Liara might actually be deceiving them. From Shepard's descriptions, the Shadow Broker was a terrifying force to be reckoned with. Perhaps this Asari was a master manipulator, giving them an utterly convincing show of flustered innocence. Or maybe she was just truly too clueless to be playing them. He sincerely hoped it was the latter; his experience with Hathor had been singularly unpleasant.

"Colonel O'Neill?" Jack looked up to see a Security Forces officer standing at the end of their table.

"What is it Lieutenant?" he asked evenly.

"Sir, I've been instructed to escort Doctor T'soni to the conference room. General Hammond would like a word before her debriefings start. Major Davis is ready to begin with the initial interviews."

Jack looked at Liara. She seemed resolved to the process. Then he looked at Shepard. She wore a cool expression; she was obviously going to escort her escort. Jack sighed internally. He hoped that whoever would be doing the debriefings had the sense enough to not give Shepard any excuse to turn him inside out. He had no doubt in his mind, none whatsoever, that Shepard would react with an uncontrollable level of violence if any one made an attempt on her wife's safety.

If there was any good thing he could say about Shepard's abduction, it was that General Hammond had decided to circle his wagons. He would not allow the NID to run amok on the base, and having something to hold over the good Senator gave the General some clout in that regard. Not that anyone was willing to play that hand, yet.

Shepard squeezed Liara's hand and winked. Liara smiled in response. "Oh, word to the wise," said O'Neill, "Don't make fun of Davis' mustache; he's very proud of it." Carter snickered, Liara looked confused.

"It's good to see you feeling better, Doctor T'soni," General Hammond said as the Asari, and Shepard, entered the conference room. He came around the conference table to take her hand in both of his and shake it warmly; an open display of Texan charm. Despite himself, General Hammond found Liara alluring, just as most of the rest of the SGC personnel did. Then he shuddered internally at his memories of Hathor and what she'd nearly accomplished. Any latent attraction aside, he was
genuinely glad to see her up on her feet and not wincing from a burned shoulder. Her recovery was nearly as rapid as Corporal Jones’. Though, while obviously not nearly as severe as Jones’ injuries, a staff weapon blast like that should have had the Asari in a burn ward for at least several days. We really need to get our hands on more of that medi-gel, he thought to himself, echoing no less than three separate communiques from NID on the same subject.

Regardless, Liara wasn't the only person looking better. Shepard was absolutely glowing. No wonder too, 18 hours? Hammond smirked to himself, remembering his own youth. Despite wanting to debrief Liara immediately, Hammond just couldn't bring himself to keep Shepard from her long lost love for a minute longer. He'd even had the Security Forces shut off the surveillance cameras in the guest quarters for the day. NID hadn't really liked that. They wanted to observe human-Asari joining. But, fortunately for Shepard and Liara, Hammond didn't consider himself a pornographer. He was just happy that the concrete walls and heavy steel door kept most of the sound down. From what the sentry in the corridor did hear through the door, though, it sounded like they were getting reacquainted rather vigorously.

"Thank you, General Hammond," she replied. "Your Doctor Fraiser is very talented," she said graciously. "And, again, I am very glad we could help Corporal Jones. I hope he will make a full recovery."

"Doctor Fraiser assures me that he will. Would you please sit? We'd like to start debriefing you, but I wanted an opportunity to speak with you in a more casual setting." She smiled, then turned to look at Shepard. "Commander Shepard can join us if she wishes, but I believe that she is expected in the gate room in a few minutes, and then has a briefing scheduled with some of our officers."

"Of course," Liara nodded, turned to Shepard with a smile and squeezed her hand. After holding it for a moment she released her grip and took a seat at the conference table.

Somewhat to Hammond's surprise, Shepard braced to attention, "By you leave, sir." She spun on her heels and exited the conference room. Sometimes I just don't understand that woman, the General thought.

Liara squeezed Shepard's hand and formed a shallow bond; just enough to share thoughts, her eyes didn't even turn black.

**Hammond is a good man, Shepard said.**

**I get that sense,** Liara replied.

**I trust him and SG-1, but I do not trust their superiors and this NID outfit.** Shepard accidentally flashed an image of her would-be dissection. Liara's stomach lurched with rage that someone had tried to harm her beloved. **Sorry my love, I tried to suppress memory for you.**

**I know,** she replied with a feeling of forgiveness. **I will exercise caution.**

**Thank you. I won't let anything happen to you, not ever.** Shepard sent that message along with a warm glowing feeling of love; pure, absolute, and heartfelt.

Liara basked in Shepard's joy. **I shall devise an insurance policy. We will discuss this further, later,** Liara replied. She broke the bond, her Shadow Broker persona already weighing options. She took her seat, less than three seconds had passed. Shepard made a flawless military exit, and she was alone with the General.
Liara regarded the officer. Hammond was intelligent, principled, proud, and he enjoyed the respect of those under his command. Liara could tell all of this from just his carriage and how his subordinates acted around him; seeing Shepard's thoughts had merely been a confirmation. The Asari, as a race, were not empathic, at least not outside of the joining; but, she could sense a friction behind his eyes. Hammond's duty-bound loyalty to his superiors gnashed against his loyalty to those under his command; which, if Liara wasn't mistaken, included Shepard and, now, her. Barring any action she or her beloved took themselves, their continued safety rested with this man. *Time to make allies*, the Shadow Broker thought.

"I imagine you want to ask me number of questions, General?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes, Doctor. We've set up quite a few interviews over the next couple of weeks to record your experiences, knowledge, and insights on a variety of topics." He smiled evenly, "You're the first Asari anyone has ever encountered, and there are a lot of curious people who'd like to meet you."

"I can appreciate that, General," Liara replied. "Though, I get the sense you wanted to say something else before the debriefings started?" Liara had conducted her fair share of interrogations in her tenure as Shadow Broker; she tended not to precede them with idle chit-chat.

General Hammond shifted in his chair. "Doctor, has Commander Shepard mentioned to you what happened to her a few days ago?"

"Yes, General," Liara replied. "Everything Shepard knows I know if she chooses to share it with me in the bond." That was a half-truth. While profoundly strong-willed, Shepard did not yet have the training to shield her thoughts in the joining. A skilled Asari could take them, even if uninvited. This had never been an issue for her and her mate, though, Shepard had never made an attempt to deceive her or hide something from her. In the bond, she was an open book to Liara; Victoria offered herself to her love in her totality. Luckily for her and the Alliance, Liara was absolutely trustworthy.

"I see," Hammond said, obviously mulling that over.

"You are pondering the security implications of that fact, yes General?" she asked in a friendly tone.

"Indeed Doctor T'soni, it's food for thought."

"You should know General that I would never betray the trust you place in Shepard. Or the trust Shepard places in me. Victoria is dedicated to the defense of Earth, as am I. I am probably the only Asari in this universe," she said sadly, "Earth is now my home as much as it is Shepard's. We would never do anything to jeopardize it."

"There will be some who will not take you at your word, Doctor," Hammond said with a sigh. Liara could see the dissatisfaction Hammond had with at least some of those appointed above him. The Shadow Broker filed that away.

"I believe the human expression is, 'we will cross that bridge when we come to it'?"

Hammond smiled, "Yes, Doctor T'soni. I suppose we should get started. However, I don't think anyone has said this yet, but," he paused, "welcome to Earth."

Liara smiled in return.

Commander Shepard strode into the gate room to find it nearly back to normal. The scorch marks on the walls left by staff weapons had all been painted over and the Jaffa blood, grey matter, and entrails had been cleaned away. The Security Forces personnel nodded politely from their positions behind
their recently cleaned, serviced, and reloaded M2 machine guns. It was business as usual. Things look a damn sight better than yesterday, Shepard thought.

The area ahead of the embarkation ramp was stacked with large metal-reinforced plastic boxes, each serial numbered and bar coded. Shepard would be using her biotic lifting capability to push them through the gate to some offworld base; it sounded like they were going to have her doing this for a few separate bases over the next few days too. It was all very hush-hush; she imagined she'd get details on it later if she needed them. A little manual labor was the least she could do for them, Shepard thought, they'd certainly been very understanding about the circumstances surrounding Liara's arrival.

Master Sergeant Siler appeared from around one of the crates wearing a blue hard hat. He held a barcode scanner in his hand and was finishing his check that all of the cargo was ready to go. He walked up to Victoria, "Mornin' ma'am," he said.

Shepard looked at her watch, "It's the middle of the afternoon."

"Sorry ma'am, I must have lost track. Time flies when you're having fun," he said with a smirk. Shepard could have sworn she heard one of the SF troopers snicker from behind his machine gun mount.

Victoria arched an eyebrow. She knew when she was being messed with; senior non-coms especially liked to rib officers whenever they thought they could do so politely. Fortunately, they could usually take as good as they gave. "Missed you the other day Siler," Shepard said amicably. "Huge lightning show from the gate, like something from a techno dance club, I hear you're a big fan." She paused for a moment, "Of lightning, I mean; not the techno." She winked.

Siler smiled, touché Commander. "We're all ready for you, ma'am."

Shepard cracked her knuckles and formed small biotic spheres in the palms of her hands. It felt good to flex her biotics; especially since they'd decided to let her keep her amp. The glowing orbs disappeared and she nodded, "Dial her up Master Sergeant."

"My Lord, the mysterious energy has been detected. Once again it appears at a chappa'ai that was unknown to us," Ba'al's First Prime reported.

Lord Ba'al looked at the holographic display of this corner of the galaxy. The tau'ri were at it again it seemed, and they had given him the location of another new world. "Jaffa, kree!" he commanded, "Dispatch one of the alert shuttles. Have them report once they have begun their surveillance."

He leaned back in his throne and waited.
Shepard looked at the technical manual and scowled; *amateurs.*

The progress these people had made in so few years was astounding, that wasn't lost on her. In fact, it was possibly even faster than when *her* people had discovered the Martian Archives. Plus the level of *innovation* was phenomenal. The peoples of her *place* were merely *using* mass effect technology as they had discovered it; just as the Reapers had planned.

But, the way they were going about it seemed a bit haphazard and *handicapped.*

When humanity found the Martian Archives and formed the Alliance they had thrown themselves bodily into developing a deep-space defense capability. Fleets were constructed, Arcturus Station built. They didn't even know what was out there, save that *someone* had built the relays. *They* armed themselves.

After the surprise capture of Shanxi and Admiral Drescher's crushing counter attack, it was the size of the Alliance Fleet and its preparedness that had caught the attention of the Citadel Council. They couldn't have defeated the Turians, no one could, but the Turian conquest of Earth could have been a pyrrhic victory. The Council wanted to avoid that, and so humanity was peacefully welcomed into the galactic community.

The people of this *place* had done no such thing, despite learning of the goa'uld threat at nearly the same time as discovering the true purpose of the stargates. Only a few governments toiled in secret to defend the Earth. Members of the United States government even actively tried to hinder the SGC's mission. Shepard was incensed. They needed to be on a war footing, not eking along in secret.

The one, when it worked properly, *Prometheus* Class and the half dozen planned *Daedalus* Class warships did not a fleet make. Despite the impressive specs provided by the Asgard, which might actually exceed Alliance technology in a few areas, these ships couldn't hope to contend with the known goa'uld military strength; and who knew what *else* might be lurking out there. Having not developed effective tactics yet was icing on the cake. So this is where Shepard found herself; teaching a bunch of Air Force officers the intricacies of deep-space combat when she should have been knocking their politicians' skulls together to get Earth's industry up and running on building more ships.

*And who puts an Air Force in charge of a starship?* Victoria shook her head at that one. The Alliance had one military branch, the Navy. Of course infantry like her were called, by tradition, Marines, but it was a unified command structure with no inter-service budget fights. Addressing those future ship-masters as *Captain* when they all held the rank of Colonel confused them to no end. She'd have to work on that a bit more, she thought.

The door to her guest quarters opened and Liara appeared in the threshold. Silhouetted by the harsh florescent lighting in the corridor she looked downright angelic. *What did I ever do to deserve her?* Shepard wondered to herself. Victoria's heart fluttered, she immediately beamed a smile to her mate and closed the briefing documents.
Liara closed the door and returned her smile. "Tough day at the office?" she asked playfully. "That is the correct expression, yes?"

Shepard smirked as she pushed away from the desk on her rolling chair. She held out her arms and Liara glided to her beloved to sit gently on her lap. "I was going to ask the same of you. I remember those debriefings being very frustrating. You've been at it all day. You sure you don't want to crack some heads together? Remember what your dad said, if you get the urge to head-butt someone, it's probably genetic."

Liara favored Shepard with a kiss on her forehead, Shepard's smile widened. "It was not that bad. Major Davis is very nice, and I complimented him on his mustache." Liara paused, "I think he knows what you might do to him if he gives me a hard time, and is taking it easy on me."

"I might have used the scary voice," Shepard smiled impishly.

Liara stood abruptly, pivoted, and straddled Shepard's lap. "Play nice, beloved," she said, "If anyone is going to give me a hard time, it better be you." She ground herself into Shepard for a few moments.

Shepard literally purred with delight and she tightened her embrace. She placed her face between Liara's breasts held her. She just held her, basking in the comfort of her touch. This is real, she thought, this is really real. She could hear Liara's heartbeat, she could smell her scent, she could feel the rise and fall of her chest with each breath. We're actually here, together. Things worked out, how can I be so lucky? She wanted to cry with joy. We'll have our happily ever after. For a few moments Victoria could forget that they were both shadows, copies, of the women they once were.

Liara sensed a change in Shepard's demeanor. "What is it love?"

Part of Shepard didn't want Liara to see her cry. Objectively, she knew that Liara would know her feelings the moment they joined, but somehow maintaining a strong façade was important to her. Change of subject. "I was just wondering."

"Yes?"

"Have your breasts gotten larger since I last saw you? I think they're certainly bigger than when we met on Therum." She looked up at Liara with a wolfish grin and then drove her face back into her soft cleavage.

Liara let out a surprisingly girlish giggle. "I was wondering how long it would take you to notice," she said. "I have started my metamorphosis into the Matron stage."

Taking another deep breath she inhaled Liara's scent. Conversations about cross-species pheromones aside, Liara smelled distinctly of woman, her woman, and she wanted her; badly. Before Liara could respond, Shepard tightened her grip about her waist and carried her to their bed. Victoria placed her mate gently upon the covers and Liara looped her legs around her pulling her down along with her. Wrapping her arms around Liara, Shepard embraced her tightly and kissed her. Liara responded aggressively, she reached up grabbed the back of Shepard's head and pressed her lips tightly to hers. A tongue darted into her mouth. Liara bit her lip. Liara sucked gently on her tongue. Shepard's nethers quivered.

Running out of air. Victoria broke away and pulled in a ragged breath, "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Yes, my love," Liara beamed a smile at her and ran her fingers through Shepard's hair. "The change
is not strictly necessary, but I want a family, I am ready for a family. I want *our* family. I want all of those little blue children you promised me; as many as possible." Liara rolled atop Victoria, grasped her by her collar, and pulled Shepard to her lips.

Shepard tingled. Liara's aggressiveness was an immense turn on, but that paled in comparison to the emotional intimacy she enjoyed. *I love you! I want you!* Shepard was joy. Then, suddenly, there was something else. *Be happy Shepard,* she thought, frustrated, *just be happy with this!* But she couldn't, there was something wrong.

Liara could see it too, even without the bond. "What is wrong?"

"Join with me and I'll show you," she bobbed her eyebrows and glanced dramatically towards the ceiling mounted security camera.

Liara placed her hands on Shepard's face gently caressing her cheek, kissed her tenderly on the lips, and said, "Embrace eternity." Her eyes flashed to an inky black.

Liara felt Shepard enter her. Shepard's love filled her with a glorious warmth. But she could also feel fear, and *pain.*

**What is wrong Shepard?**

**I want children,** Shepard responded.

**Then what is the problem? So do I.**

**I don't think it's safe, I don't trust these people.**

I... Liara paused as she tried to give voice to her thoughts, **I agree. There are those here who would use our children to exploit us. You saw what they were willing to do to get the eezo and tech out of your body. I would be even more important a prize.** Shepard spared Liara another image of her near-vivisection. **Then there is the goa'uld.**

**The goa'uld are pussies.** Liara sensed a flash of contempt from Shepard. These enemies were nearly beneath her, considering what she just went through.

**You have such a way with words.**

**They are a threat, surely, but I worry more about the people of this world. I think some consider you more of a threat than the goa'uld.**

**Why do you say that Shepard?**

Shepard showed her as much as told her. Liara saw an image of their children, their grandchildren, their great grandchildren; scores of them, taking humans, Jaffa, even *tok'ra* and *goa'uld* as mates. Liara could see them influencing those around them. Surely they would be a voice of stability and peace as they were in the other *place,* but many would not see it as such. They would see an *invasion,* a subversion of human dominance.

**You will be the Athame of this world, mother of your own immortality; a goddess by no small stretch of the imagination. A new Asari race will spring forth from your womb and there are those who would fear that, or try to exploit it.**
We need an insurance policy, the Shadow Broker side of Liara said. I have been giving that some thought.

Ideas?

I will release a modified version of Glyph into their internet. I have its software on my omni-tool, though not the drone hardware. I can rebuild my information network, gather resources, money, blackmail material. I will make it such that no one would dare hurt us or our children. Failing that, we will have enough money to disappear, or possibly buy our way offworld.

I knew you'd come up with something, beloved. Convenient, though, that you came through with a copy of Glyph on your omni-tool.

Indeed, convenient.

Shepard flooded her perception with love and pride. Liara basked in it. Then she detected something else.

That is not the only reason you are upset, is it love?

Tell me about our daughter.

Liara could feel anguish. Shepard obviously didn't like the idea of having a child she would never know. However many children they might have here, there would always be that hole in her heart.

I cannot.

Please don't hide this from me Liara, I want to know.

It is not a matter of hiding anything; you know I would never withhold something like this from you. It is just that I have so few memories from after the war in the other place. Liara could sense Shepard's confusion. My old self and the gestalt decided to remove some of my memories before I came here. They wanted me to be able to make my own life here, unburdened by what happened after your sacrifice.

I don't understand, did something bad happen?

No, love. Liara radiated comfort through the bond, everything is fine. Our daughter is happy and healthy. My old self misses you, but is accepting of her life there. Little Victoria has a safe home, a warm bed, good food, and many friends despite the ongoing war recovery. Her Aunt Tali and Uncle Garrus visit regularly, as do her grandfathers.

Grandfathers? You mean Mother and Aethyta survived the war?

Yes, beloved. Hannah Shepard is retired, and the Matriarchs have welcomed Aethyta back to Thessia to help guide the reconstruction of our world. They visit us regularly, even if Hannah and Aethyta do not always get along.

Shepard chuckled within the bond, I can see that. They're both very opinionated, and my mom is just straight laced enough to be at odds with your dad.

Samantha Traynor visits regularly as well.
Why is she there?

Oh, she is dating my father.

Shepard burst into laughter, at least as much as you could in the bond. **Ahh, way to go Samantha! I think she traded up from when she tried to seduce me in my shower.** Liara was surprised at that last comment, but got a laugh when Shepard shared the memory with her.

**Do not sell yourself short, beloved. At least you let her down easy, losing to her at chess.** There was a pause. **I know this situation is troubling for you, as it is for me. They left me with just enough memories to ensure us that everything there is ok. They want us to make a life for ourselves here.** I can tell you that the Geth and Quarians are resettling Rannoch; Tali does not even need her suit on the homeworld. Ash and Vega are still with the Alliance on Earth, helping Hackett rebuild. The Krogan have begun to experience their renaissance. There is still much to do, but there is hope. I am afraid I cannot tell you much beyond that.

**Will you give me some time to process this? Are you ok holding off on starting a family?**

**Of course my love. Take as much time as you need. In the meantime,** she reached out with her hand in the physical world and looped it around Shepard’s belt buckle. **It has been three years since that night before we assaulted the Cerberus Base. I have a lot of lost time to make up for.**

She could feel Shepard's arousal through the bond. Then she felt Shepard knock the security camera out of position with a small twitch of her biotics. **Now that we've got privacy, I think I owe you several years' worth of catching up.**

The Security Forces sentry in the hall tried to ignore the sounds coming through the door.

"I don't know what to make of it, Svetlana," Carter said, "It's been months, and it still has us completely stumped." Samantha looked at her Russian counterpart's face on the secure video conferencing unit. Sharing the stargate program with the Russians had caused no small amount of friction amongst most of the SGC personnel, and it caused near constant conniptions for the political leadership, but Carter had never experienced any such problems. Doctor Svetlana Markov was just as brilliant, and amicable, as Carter, and they both enjoyed a warm working friendship.

"I'm afraid I don't have better news in that regard, Samantha," Markov replied, "We've been reviewing the data you provided us, and we haven't generated any new insights either." She smiled, "And you know our physicists have always been better than yours," she winked. Carter scowled and Svetlana chuckled. It was a friendly barb, but a barb nonetheless. Russia, and Eastern Europe in general, had historically generated brilliant physicists and mathematicians. A stereotype to be sure, Carter thought, but a flattering one. Doctor Markov wasn't shy about rubbing it in; she knew how much pride Carter took in her own intellect. Of course she would never tell her to her face, but Doctor Markov regarded Samantha Carter as one of the most gifted physicists in the world; better even than her own countrymen. That's what made it so funny.

Markov's tone changed, "I've been instructed to ask; is there any chance we might get a sample of the element? Perhaps a physical examination would yield..."

Carter cut her off, "I'm afraid that's impossible." She smiled and shrugged in apology for the interruption; Markov accepted it with a cocked eyebrow. "Doctor Lee just figured out how to replicate the 'thermal clips' for her weapons, so we've been instructed to keep them intact for"
continued use." Carter's face screwed up into a scowl in introspection. "As to getting eezo samples for Shepard or Liara's bodies..." she tailed off trying to choose her words carefully. "All of the eezo nodules are attached to nerves. It'd just be too invasive to remove some for study; even if they consented. That's not something we're willing to force on them."

All of the SGC personnel who knew about Shepard's abduction had been forbidden to discuss it with their allied counterparts by order of the President himself. While technically a treaty violation, the President and General Hammond did not want to risk word getting back to Senator Kinsey as to the resolution of that episode. So far as he knew, Shepard had managed to escape, but only after the NID operatives had successfully destroyed any evidence linking the operation to him. All Kinsey had learned about Shepard from the abduction was from the coroner's reports on the men she'd killed. Rumor had it he was a bit frightened by how brutally she'd affected her escape.

Doctor Markov nodded. "Of course, Samantha, we will make do with what we have available." Carter was certain that there were those within the Russian's stargate organization who would not hesitate to attempt what Kinsey had done, thankfully Svetlana was as honorable as Carter. "In the meantime, I have a list of non-invasive medical exams we'd like Doctor T'soni to submit to. Could you ask her..."

"I'm sorry we're late Major, we..." Commander Shepard said as she and Liara entered Carter's lab. Victoria stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Markov's face on the video screen, her arm fell away from Liar's waist.

Liara's jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. "Mother? Oh Goddess, what is this?"

Carter and Markov exchanged looks, at least as well as two people could in a video conference. "What's going on?" Carter asked, confused.

Liara couldn't respond. She was looking into the face of a dead woman. She glanced at Shepard; she was having a similarly difficult time of it. "Uh..." Liara couldn't get the words past her lips. She knew who this woman was. She was Doctor Svetlana Markov, a scientist associated with Russia's stargate program. Carter spoke very highly of her. She and Shepard were late for an interview right now after the private time they had just shared in their quarters.

Shepard managed to recompose herself more quickly than Liara. Perhaps it was her N7 training, or maybe it was because she had only met Benezia once instead of living with her for nearly a century, but she managed to croak out, "A pleasure Doctor. I'm sorry, but you bear a striking resemblance to Liara's late mother."

Liara still couldn't speak. She watched Shepard activate her omni-tool and project an image of the Matriarch Benezia for the two doctors. They looked at each other. "I'm sorry, I don't really see the likeness," the Russian woman said. Carter shook her head as well.

Liara swallowed hard, "I am sorry. It is just, startling." Svetlana smiled. I had not seen Mother smile like that since I was a child. She felt a squeeze of her hand. Shepard looked at her, she smiled gently. Liara thought about forming the bond, even if just for a moment, to ask Victoria for her support. But, she didn't need to; it was plain on her face.

Shepard looked at her beloved. She needs me, Victoria thought. She didn't care what Carter and this Russian woman said. That was the Matriarch Benezia's face, and it was upsetting Liara terribly. And me! Killing the Matriarch on Noveria had been a personal low point for her. She knew that Benezia wasn't herself. She knew that indoctrination was at work. She knew Benezia was fighting it; she
succeeded just long enough to make her goodbyes with her daughter, and give them the intel they needed to pursue Saren.

Shepard loved Liara, even back then; love at first sight wasn't a cliché for them. The idea of hurting her was horrific. I killed my beloved's mother! Shepard lamented to herself. She knew, through the bond, that it still haunted Liara. She was getting over it, for sure, but it was still an emotional hole in her heart. This, though, this! Liara didn't need this! Shepard wanted to rage at this woman for no other reason than she had a familiar face. What's wrong with me?

Victoria shook her head. No, she would not be angry at this Russian woman. It's not her fault she looks like Benezia. She would not lose herself to despair. She definitely wasn't going to let Liara fall back into the grief-fueled depression that followed her mother's death. I didn't just get you back for you to be sad, Shepard thought to herself.

Much to Svetlana's surprise, Shepard squeezed Liara's hand and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. "It's ok, beloved."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day
"I'm sorry, Shepard. I just don't see the resemblance," Jack shook his head. Then he shoved another French fry into his mouth.

"Seriously?" Shepard powered down her omni-tool, "How can you not see it? The voice is even similar."

Daniel Jackson just shook his head.


"Whether or not we see a resemblance is immaterial, Colonel O'Neill," Teal'c observed to his teammates, "Svetlana Markov's appearance has awakened painful memories in Commander Shepard and Doctor T'soni." He paused and looked at Shepard, "Is there not something we can do to assuage Doctor T'soni's grief, Commander Shepard? Or your own?"

Shepard had come to really enjoy Teal'c's company. He didn't pull any punches, but nor did he act without compassion. Shepard treasured the little chats he and she shared, even if she did do most of the talking. "I'll talk with her after the interview is over." Shepard smiled, "She's way tougher than me, I don't know if I'd be able to sit down and chat with Doctor Markov after a startling introduction like that. And she's already on day two!"

"You know I don't mean this to be insulting," said Daniel. Shepard's senses immediately perked up. In her experience, phrases like 'I don't mean this to be insulting' usually were. "But, how do you two deal with the fact that you were the one who killed her mother?" Daniel raised his eyebrows, trying to intimate that he really did not mean to insult Shepard. "That's kinda a big deal."

Victoria sighed, "It's..." she trailed off trying to collect her thoughts. "It's complicated Daniel."

"What isn't?" observed Jack.

"We can share our feelings and thoughts in the bond. She knows it was necessary. She knows I didn't want to do it." She sighed, "She knows how often I lose sleep over it. She's seen the nightmares. She accepts my pain, and I accept hers. We are each other."

"Wow, that must really take the guess-work out of relationships," observed Daniel.

Shepard sat quietly with a pensive look on her face for a few moments, "Speaking of which, are there any good jewelry shops in Colorado Springs?"

"Nothing quite says, sorry I killed your mom, like a new necklace," quipped Jack. He immediately regretted the joke.

Shepard cast a withering glance, full-on the killer; and then softened her expression substantially. Jack meant well, of that Shepard was sure, he just had a wry sense of humor, and poor timing. "No, Colonel. I need to buy some rings."

Daniel's eyebrows jumped, "Now that ought to take her mind off of it for a while."

Shepard doubted very much that simple trinkets could ever assuage the guilt they felt over the death of the Lady Benezia, but life goes on. "I never had an opportunity to give her any tangible item to express my love for her. I know she'd say none were necessary. As you observed, the bond really
takes the guess work out of a relationship. But," she paused, "I don't know, I need there to be something physical. Does that make any sense?"

Jack nodded knowingly, "Yeah, I understand." He thought for a few moments, "I'm sure there are a few places in town. We can head over there if you like. I bet Liara will be tied up with Markov and the rest of the ruskies on the video-phone for several more hours."

Shepard made a decision immediately, "Change into civilian clothes and meet you in the armory in 20 minutes?"

"Woah! You're not going to rob the jewelry store, are you?" asked Daniel with no small amount of concern on his face.

"No, of course not, Daniel," Shepard replied with a wolfish grin. "But if you think I'm going out there again unarmed, you're crazy."

"You've got your amp and your omni-tool, Hammond said you can both keep them on you." he countered, "You could take out a small army with those."

"And then some," she replied with pride.

"I believe Commander Shepard wishes to be less conspicuous," Teal'c observed.

"Indeed, Tea'c," Shepard responded, "Plus, you've got that 2nd Amendment I want to take for a test drive." She winked at Daniel.

"Alright, see you in 20 minutes."

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Jack O'Neill watched Shepard expertly slot a full magazine home and rack the slide on her FN Five-Seven pistol. Jack had always liked the FN57s, accurate as all hell and it certainly simplified logistics having to only carry one type of ammunition through the gate. Shepard had proven herself absolutely deadly with them on the range too. *Even managed to win $50 off of the base armorer, and he was an alternate for the US Olympic Pistol Team*, he thought with a smile.

"You're really not going to hold up the place, right? I mean, how do you have any money?"

"The Navy is paying me at the grade of Commander," Shepard replied slipping the pistol into a discreet holster under her blouse at the small of her back. She pulled her field jacket down completing the concealment.

For this adventure outside of the mountain, Shepard had opted for a past-the-knee skirt, knee-high leather boots, and a conservative blouse. Gone was the ill-fitting sundress, which Liara had inherited. Jack still thought the field jacket was a bit of an odd touch, but he couldn't deny that Shepard cleaned up well. In fact, had she not been a subordinate, and had he not known her proclivity for female aliens, he could totally see himself trying to pick her up at a coffee shop. He shook his head.

"And you're going to buy jewelry with it? Is Navy pay way better than the Air Force or something?"

Jack pondered for a moment, "Liara strikes me as a high-class sorta woman. She deserves the best."

"The very best," Shepard smiled in agreement. "I've been day trading."

"I see." *Sure you have,* he thought. "And that's how you afford your clothes?"
"Indeed. Your amazon dot com is very convenient."

They finished signing out their weapons and made their way to the surface. Jack led Shepard to his pickup truck and they motored off base and towards town. He looked over to the Spectre as they drove; she watched the trees pass by with a smile on her face. "I didn't know you were such a nature buff," he paused as Shepard looked at him with a mildly confused expression on her face, "the way you look at those trees you'd think you were an arborist or something."

"It's just nice to see it so green, Colonel," she replied sadly. She sighed, "It almost doesn't even seem real to me." Jack could tell Shepard needed to vent. Is she going to open up?

"What part of it?"

"All of it." Come on Victoria, I know you're hurting.

Jack scowled. A firm believer of minding your own business, Jack didn't want to pry; but Shepard was obviously hurting, and he wanted his command at peak condition. "Would it help to talk about it?"

"Probably." Here we go.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." Apparently not.

"Shepard," Jack said with no small amount of frustration.

Victoria snorted, "You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"Nope," Jack replied pulling up to a stop light.

"What do you want me to say, Colonel?" Shepard said shifting her weight on the leather seat. "That I'm still not used to the fact that I'm on Earth, in the past, in an alternate dimension? Or maybe that there are no screaming civilians covered in blood and dirt and their own filth?"

Shepard looked at him with anger in her eyes, "Perhaps I could talk about how I've been reunited with my love, but I can't quite be happy because this one is a copy and the original is out there somewhere with a kid I'll never know? Or that I'm a shadow of what I was? Or that whatever I became holds the other place in a state of peaceful terror? Or that I want to start a family now, but I don't know if I'll have to worry about people trying to kidnap my babies and dissect them? Or my wife? Or both?"

Jack raised his eyebrow. A car behind them tapped it's horn and he looked up to see the light had changed. "Anything else?" he asked nonchalantly as he accelerated through the intersection.

"It's beautiful out," Shepard's tone changed suddenly from anger to sadness. "Last time I was on Earth it was all smoldering ash. I don't think I saw a single patch of green in the entire time I was in London." She paused and sighed, "I don't think they'll ever let Liara out of the mountain, she can't even see it."

The transition in topics was jarring, Shepard's brain certainly switches gears quickly. Then Jack nodded spotting their objective. He pulled his pickup into a parking spot across the street from a small jeweler's shop and shut off the engine. "I see," he wasn't sure he did, she just dropped a lot of serious shit on him, "there might be something we can do about that," he said with a wink. "But, first thing's first. We're here."
Shepard climbed out of the truck, thankful that O'Neill's prying had been blunted by their arrival. She took in her surroundings. A small quiet street, clean storefronts, smiling pedestrians, it all looked so normal. No thudding explosions in the distance. No screeching Sirens or that awful fog-horn sound the Reapers made. No casualty reports. No messages requesting volunteers to decoy Reaper forces away from civilians. No death. No destruction. Just peace. Her heart ached at the magnitude of it all, peace, we finally have peace. She just hoped that she and Liara would be allowed to enjoy it. She couldn't help but shake her head, certainly an improvement over back home. She caught herself, this is home now Vikki, get used to it.

Returning to the present, she walked up to the small jewelry shop's door and placed her hand upon the brass handle. This is home, and you're going to make a life here with your love, and you'll kill anyone who gets in your way, she smiled to herself and opened the door.

The door opened with a soft jingling of a bell and the proprietor greeted the two officers from behind a display cabinet, "Good morning," said the portly woman with a smile.

"Good morning," Shepard replied with more cheer than she actually felt. She chastised herself, this is a cheerful occasion, lighten up!

"Morning," Jack said, flatly. Shepard glanced back at the Colonel, he seemed subdued. Victoria recalled O'Neill divorced shortly after his son died. The circumstances of Jack's son's death weren't a secret, but he had never mentioned it to her. Shepard was disinclined to ask about it. Jack's no stranger to pain, that's for sure, she thought to herself.

"What can I do for you?" asked the proprietor.

"I'm looking for a couple of wedding bands," replied Shepard with a smile that was rapidly becoming more genuine.

"Of course," the shopkeeper responded motioning to a display case, "Are you two engaged? Or are you looking for new rings?" she asked, her gaze alternating between them.

"Oh, not us," replied Shepard. He noticed O'Neill's eyebrow arch, "He's my bother-in-law. He's helping me pick something out; it's a bit of a surprise.

Shepard bristled at the idea that she had to keep her relationship with Liara a secret, and not just because she was an alien. Victoria wanted to shout her love from the rooftops she so adored her mate, but that just wouldn't do. Not here, and certainly not now. Of course, Shepard had no idea if this particular shopkeeper was a bigot or not. She might actually be a completely rational, understanding, accepting person; maybe she even favored the fairer sex herself. She just had no way of being sure, so she would play it safe. Fucking dark ages, she thought. Can't risk getting pissed at some racist and immolating half of the city, play it cool, she cautioned herself.

"Do you have a style in mind?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Subdued," Shepard replied, "Plain metal, no pattern, maybe a simple ridge on the edges or a bevel?"

"Classy," O'Neill observed. "I'm sure he'll love it."

The proprietor extracted a small tray from the display case and gingerly placed it on the glass surface. "Here are a few patterns you may like," she said pleasantly.

Shepard looked at the selection and made a choice immediately. She went the traditional route. No
pattern, plain smooth metal, slightly rounded exterior, Victoria smiled warmly picturing what it would look like on Liara's finger. "I like this pattern."

"Excellent choice," the shopkeeper said smiling, Shepard was her easiest customer today by far. "Gold?"


"Isn't that what they make the nibs on fountain pens out of?" she asked, "I've never heard of an iridium ring."

Shepard remembered herself. "Oh, well. I guess I'll settle for platinum." Both Jack's and the shopkeeper's eyebrows jumped at that. Settle? their expressions said.

"I see," said the shopkeeper, a bit surprised, "I can fit you for one right now, but unless your husband comes in for a fitting there's a risk the ring will need to be resized."

Shepard reached into her field jacked and produced a small sheet of paper, "Here's the size of," she paused, "his current ring. This ought to work." Shepard's tone left no doubt, her 'husband' would not be coming in for a fitting.

"You know," the shopkeeper said as she wrote up a purchase order, "we usually see the men coming in here purchasing rings as a surprise gift."

"We're not a traditional family," Shepard responded a bit too shortly.

"I see," she replied, "Let me go ring this up for you."

As the shopkeeper walked towards the register Colonel O'Neill leaned over to Commander Shepard. "Ok, seriously, you're not going to rob this place, right? Settling for platinum?"

Shepard smiled and placed a Platinum Card on the class countertop. "Day trading, remember?"
"Do svidaniya, Akademik Markova, do sleduyushchego raza," Liara managed in broken, yet intelligible, Russian.

"Vydayushchimy, doktor T'Soni!" Svetlana Markov replied, "That's excellent, you're a very quick study." She smiled at the Asari through the video conferencing unit.

"Thank you Doctor," Liara smiled, "but I think my translator implants should get most of the credit." Loading the Russian language onto them had proven trivial. *Glyph* had already infiltrated Earth's primitive internet to a substantial degree, pirating translation software from some outfit called *Rosetta Stone* happened on a whim.

It wasn't quite the 'Shadow Broker Network', but Liara had already secretly gained access to the computer systems of all of the 'Fortune 500' companies, all levels of the US government and military, the majority of the European Union and NATO networks, and an increasing fraction of the People's Republic of China's computer systems. Cracking into Russia's communications channels was trivial, as was penetrating Japanese corporate security. *Glyph* hacked new networks daily; soon she would effectively be the Shadow Broker once more. She smiled at the thought.

With a few discreet commands on her omni-tool Liara could bring entire militaries to their knees, financial ruin to corporations, or utter chaos to governments. She had at her fingertips enough blackmail material to make any political/military/corporate official think long and hard if they really wanted to mess with her or her family, *which will hopefully grow very soon*, or anyone whom she decided she wanted to help or protect. She had acquired enough wealth to buy a small country on which to found an Asari colony if she chose; or at least for her, her beloved, and their descendants to live in financial security wherever they wished. She even set Shepard up with something the locals called a 'day trading' account to make some *legitimate* money with her Navy pay. *And if the people at the FTC ever get it in their mind to investigate Shepard for insider trading she had enough dirt on them to ruin a lot of lives, or at least marriages.*

"I've monopolized enough of your time, Liara," Markov said, "Please give my regards to Commander Shepard. I hope we can chat again sometime in the near future."

"Of course, Doctor," Liara replied pleasantly. Samantha leaned in from off-camera and deactivated the video unit. Liara looked at the human woman and smiled, "Doctor Markov seems like a nice woman. Very smart, no wonder she likes you."

Carter's eyebrows jumped a bit at that comment. "Our stargate program and theirs do have a bit of a rivalry. Though, I'm glad that we've been able to maintain a cordial working relationship." Samantha continued, seemingly ignoring Liara's observation, "I'm glad that you could warm up to her as well. Still, that must have been awkward for you."

Liara sighed, "That, as Shepard would say, is a monumental understatement."

"Tell me about her?"

Liara sighed again. Adapt as she did to Markov's resemblance to her mother, Lady Benezia's death still weighed heavily upon her heart. Despite their estranged relationship towards the end of her life, Liara truly did love her mother. She was proud of her for having the strength of will to overcome Sovereign's indoctrination at the end, *we wouldn't have stopped Saren without her help.*
Liara remembered that night on the Normandy after they left Noveria. She cried into Shepard's shoulder for what seemed like hours. Shepard cried too, she felt her pain, she accepted it unto herself. As if she needed any more confirmation, she knew she loved Shepard; consummating their relationship en route to Ilos merely cemented their bond. She wished Benezia had lived. She wanted her to know Shepard, to see the amazing woman who had won her heart, who would be the father of her grandchildren. She wished Benezia could have met little Victoria, even if she didn't really remember much about her daughter from the other place.

"She was strong willed, and powerful. We did not get along when I was an adult, but I could always tell she loved me; in her own way. She was swept up in Sovereign's indoctrination while she tried to turn Saren away from the path of destruction."

Liara frowned, "Shepard met her once. She actually overcame indoctrination for a moment to give us the intelligence we needed to get to Ilos, she had that strength of character." She paused, "Then we had to kill her," she said flatly. She closed her eyes. Liara was filled with a sudden need to hold Shepard in her arms. She needed the comfort of her presence.

Samantha saw the pain in Liara's face. Debriefing with Doctor Markov had been an ordeal for her; that much was obvious. But she stuck with it. As she pointed out, knowledge was power, and Earth needed whatever advantages it could get against the goa'uld; even if it was mostly discussing Asari biology. Still, while she didn't quite see the resemblance herself, Samantha didn't know if she would have been able to spend a few days talking with a doppelganger of her dead mother. The Lady Benezia apparently wasn't the only T'soni with a strong will, she thought to herself.

Liara closed her eyes. Carter was certain Liara was reliving the death of her mother in her mind, right before her eyes. Sam's heart ached for her. A combat veteran herself, she often relived unpleasant experiences. But this was worse. To have your own mother brainwashed by the enemy? To have no choice but to kill her? To have your future wife, the woman you love, be the one who does it? She didn't know if she could have dealt with that level of pain, or stayed in love with Shepard. Carter racked her brain for ideas on how she could help her.

Daniel Jackson entered her lab and interrupted her introspection. One glance at Liara's face and he had a fairly good idea what was happening. He smiled, "I'm not interrupting, am I?"

To Samantha's surprise Liara recomposed instantly. Strength definitely runs in the T'soni family. "Of course not Doctor Jackson," Liara actually smiled, "We were just finishing a meeting with Doctor Markov.

Carter smiled herself. Liara was obviously very fond of Daniel. A fellow archeologist turned soldier, he was a kindred spirit. From what Carter had heard form Shepard, and gleaned from Shepard and Liara's debriefing materials, Liara was once a shy bookish, well, nerd. Just like Daniel. Meek and socially awkward, Liara preferred to spend her time alone at her dig sites. Just like Daniel. She held beliefs about an ancient culture that were widely derided by the academic community. Just like Daniel. Then, her life took a turn. Suddenly, her theories were vindicated and she found herself as part of the vanguard defending the galaxy from destruction. Also, just like Daniel.

"Oh good," he said with a smile. He clasped his hands together and looked at the two women, "I just got the go ahead from Hammond. How would you like to take a little trip to a dig site we've got set up offworld?"

Carter had never seen Liara smile so broadly.
Goddess! That light show was amazing! Liara stumbled as she exited the stargate and looked around; hot, sandy, and desolate except for the ruins Doctor Jackson described. This place reminds me of Therum. She smiled. Not only was she reminded of meeting Shepard on Therum, despite the ensuing violence one of her happiest memories, but the ruins themselves spoke to the archeologist within her. Years as an information broker, and a brief stint as an honest-to-goddess war hero, had prevented her from pursuing her original passion; but the desire had never truly gone away. And now I may have an opportunity to revisit old interests with the scientific members of the SGC, she thought happily.

Daniel Jackson bounded through the stargate behind her and wormhole disengaged. "Pretty cool, huh?" he asked. Liara smiled in response. "Let me show you around." They walked down the stone steps from the stargate's pad and towards a series of weathered stone walls and tan colored tents. "The ruins are scattered about the stargate," Daniel motioned with his hand, "out to about 20 kilometers in every direction. We don't know for sure who they were, but their technology level was pre-industrial. There is an oasis fed by an underground spring about 15 kilometers north of here, and we're seeing remains of a stone aqueduct. They were also fairly adept road builders. We figure it was roughly analogous to ancient Rome on Earth." Daniel paused, "Are you familiar with old Earth history at all?"

Liara nodded, "Very little, but I am familiar with the Romans. Many of the scientific words in your language are based on something called Latin?" Daniel nodded. "When I was researching the etymology of some terms I came across history books about the Roman Empire. It made for an interesting night's reading." Daniel winced. Liara could tell he was a bit bothered by how cavalierly she had dismissed one of Earth's greatest civilizations.

"Anyway, we've had a fairly constant presence here for the past few months; between 6 and 10 scientists, with a SG-team's worth of security. We could commute back and forth each day through the gate, but we rather just set up a few tents and keep the gate free for other exploration or tactical missions. We rotate personnel and refresh supplies about every week."

Liara smiled, "This really does remind me of some of my dig sites when I was a doctoral candidate." Daniel smiled back. "May I join this expedition in some way? I am afraid I would be coming to this survey a bit cold. Is that the right expression?"

Daniel smiled, "Yes, that's the right expression. Don't worry about that. You know the basics, and we're pretty much coming at this whole thing cold ourselves. We need trained archeologists who are cleared on the stargate program, and you're an archeologist. One of the best, so I hear," he smiled.

"Someone likes to brag" Liara responded with a smile. Jackson watched Liara's demeanor change as she powered up her omni-tool. The Asari was all business now, and Jackson liked what he saw. The omni-tool's scanner produced a three-dimensional representation of the dig site in the air above her hand. A few tapped out commands and a grid overlay appeared, it coincided with the wood stake and twine grid the SGC personnel had laid out. Liara scrutinized the display.

Jackson's smile widened as Liara's nose scrunched up in thought. It was, in a word, adorable. He sighed, and remembered how Sha're had that look about her sometimes, usually when he had become so absorbed in his work that he'd forgotten to eat. He wasn't above being jealous of Shepard and Liara's relationship. They had defied death at least twice to remain together. By all rights they could look forward to a long life together, something he would never get with Sha're. Still, he was above letting it sour his relationship with them. He was content to be happy for what Shepard and Liara had rather than be sad for what he had lost. Thankfully, Shepard realizes just how lucky she is, he thought.

"Is something wrong, Daniel?" Liara asked. She had powered off her omni-tool and was looking at
him.

"Oh, just remembering something." How long has she been looking at me? The alarm on his wrist watch beeped, saved by the bell. "Looks like we've had enough for one day. We're due back at the SGC."

"Oh? I have only just started," Liara cocked her head to the side and placed a fist on her hip.

"Sorry, this was just a show and tell. Hammond couldn't get clearance for you to remain offworld for extended missions. Plus we've got a whole lot of background information you should probably take a look at before you get too deep into the minutiae." He shrugged, "Sorry."

Liara smirked. "It is ok, Doctor Jackson. I need some time to go over the readings I have taken with my omni-tool." Jackson's eyebrows arched. "Oh, the scans I have taken are probably more sensitive than what your instruments are capable of. Did you know there is a large crypt 10 meters directly beneath us?"

Daniel's jaw dropped, "No, I was not aware of that," he said flatly.

Liara smiled, "Then I think we both have some data to review back at Stargate Command."

Lord Ba'al, Goa'uld System Lord, leaned forward in his throne, what is that? He had commanded Nerus and his Jaffa to bring a large display for the long-range communications device into his throne room; it sounded its unknown event warning moments ago. The stealthed transport ship in low orbit above the target chappa'ai was relaying real-time video surveillance. Since the shuttle's arrival after the original alert many days ago, they had monitored nothing more than mundane tau'ri activity on the arid world; until now. The creature in the center of the frame speaking with the Tau'ri known as Daniel Jackson was something Ba'al had never seen before.

"It would appear that the Tau'ri have made a new friend," Ba'al observed.

"And she is quite the beauty," Nerus responded unbidden.

Ba'al shot him a look and he looked at the floor. In the strictest sense, as a goa'ul, Ba'al was asexual. He tended to take male human hosts, however, and millennia of that habit had instilled in him a certain affinity for the female form. Also, like any goa'uld he was a hedonist and occasionally took human slaves to his bed to experience the pleasure his host body could provide him. But, this… This blue creature on the display piqued his curiosity in more than just a sexual way; and he had to admit, he found the shapely blue figure more alluring than he normally found females.

The blue woman on the display represented something new. A new ally for the Tau'ri, perhaps? Ba'al didn't believe in coincidences; the emergence of the new Tau'ri weapon, if it even was a weapon, the new unknown events recorded by the chappa'ai computers, and now a new species of alien, that was too much happening all at once. They must be connected. But how?

"My Lord," his First Prime asked respectfully from one knee, "Shall we capture this creature for interrogation?"

Ba'al looked at his Jaffa. He admired his aggressiveness, but now was not the time to act. Not yet. "No, Jaffa. The time is not yet right." He pondered for a moment, "Do the Tau'ri have any devices which could detect my ship's presence?"

"We have detected no such sensors, my Lord," the Jaffa responded.
Ba'al was about to say something when he observed the blue creature's right hand light up with a faint orange glow.

"Now that's new," observed Nerus.

Ba'al didn't respond. He was too engrossed in the image. The video, recorded from low orbit, carried no sound but he could see them conversing. What manner of technology has their new blue friend provided them with? The orange glow dissipated, they spoke some more. Then the Tau'ri Jackson dialed the chappa'ai and, presumably, opened a wormhole back to his home. They stepped through the gate and disappeared. The stealth shuttle wouldn't have been able to deorbit and capture her quickly enough anyway.

A small instrument strapped to Nerus' ample waist beeped loudly. He consulted it. "Low-energy event detected, m'lord." He looked at the display, "At that gate."

There are no such things as coincidences. Ba'al made a decision. "Order the stealth ship to maintain its vigil, and prepare a ha'tak for immediate sortie to that world. Have it lay in wait behind the planet's moon and stand by for orders."

"At once my Lord."
Shepard bounded out of the Stargate and looked around. She felt naked wearing her flak jacket and holding onto her antique-looking P90, and this Kevlar helmet is total shit! Victoria wore no N7 armor, she carried no advanced weapons. Doctor Lee and company were running tests on them again, hopefully not damaging them, and this world was considered thoroughly under SGC control. She shouldn't need them. Still, it was policy to travel through the gate armed; at least she didn't need to argue that point with the locals. Though you wouldn't know to look at Colonel O'Neill, she thought, I don't think I've ever seen him wear any armor; just that dumb baseball cap.

O'Neill leaped through the gate behind Shepard and the wormhole disengaged. He made a casual sweep of the horizon and lowered his P90. "Looks good, let's get rolling," he said. Shepard fell in behind the Colonel. She wasn't quite so casual about lowering her weapon; she swept it from left to right as they walked down a well-worn path through knee-high grass.

Noticing fresh knobby-tire tracks on the path, Shepard spoke up, "You've been moving some heavy equipment through here?"

"Observant, Commander," Jack said sardonically. "You'll recall using your super powers to push a few very heavy crates through the Stargate a few days ago? That was very helpful, by the way. You saved us a bunch of time. Thanks." He smiled.

"I do recall," Victoria said, still sweeping her submachine gun left and right looking for potential targets. Normally Shepard wouldn't chat while on patrol, but it seemed that Jack's lack of concern for their environment was rubbing off on her; at least a little bit, at any rate. "What was in them?"

"You'll see," he said cryptically. Shepard rolled her eyes.

After about ten minutes of walking the two officers came upon a wide shallow valley abutting upon a sheer face of sandstone. Nestled near the rock wall were a series of corrugated metal structures and field tents. A wide strip of cut grass ran down the center of the valley. "Is this an airbase?"

"Among other things."

Shepard didn't much appreciate being kept in the dark. Like anyone, she enjoyed a surprise from time to time, but not in the field like this. What if they fell under attack by the goa'uld and she didn't have crucial information? Would they all die because Colonel O'Neill wanted 'show her something cool'? All she could get out of Jack before they departed was that they were traveling to a safe world, that they were using it as a training and research area, and that he wanted her to see it. At least Liara's field trip was more up her alley, she thought to herself. Then she smiled. She remembered how excited Liara was to be back in the saddle, at least in terms of archeology.

They walked on. As they approached the installation Shepard began to notice things. Small well-hidden sensors dotted the perimeter. Shepard imagined that they were rigged to detect movement and footsteps. Undoubtedly the personnel at this base were already aware of their presence. Good. There were a number of slit-trenches and sandbag pillboxes scattered about. Victoria approved, she was glad to see that whoever was in charge of this installation was not taking their alleged safety from goa'uld attack for granted. As Shepard and O'Neill attained the airstrip she noticed a lot of pebbles and other potential FOD. She also noticed a distinct lack of landing gear marks. Her curiosity was piqued, they obviously didn't base or intend to base conventional aircraft out of this field. The FOD alone would be a disaster for any western-built jet aircraft.
Jack looked at Commander Shepard. *She doesn't switch off,* he thought. This world's Stargate address, was not on the Abydos cartouche, and, therefore, unknown to the goa'uld; so they were safe. *Safe as anyone can be in this galaxy,* Jack added to himself. The fact that Major Harper's team had been ambushed on a similarly unknown world was very troubling. Hopefully that was a fluke related to the explosive biotics experiment, or at least that was the conventional wisdom.

The assumed anonymity of this world was what prompted the SGC to establish an offsite supply depot here. While not as thorough as the 'alpha site', this place still had its charms. They were also using it to field test some micro-satellites and other equipment based on captured goa'uld technology. That's what brought them here today. General Hammond wanted Shepard involved in some of that development; she knew a thing or two about space-based surveillance systems.

It also got Shepard out of the mountain, and out of people's hair. Jack thought it was utter bullshit, but some of the SGC personnel still didn't take too kindly to Shepard's *lifestyle.* *All with the tacit approval of a certain douchebag Senator,* O'Neill groused. For his money Hammond thought it was bullshit too, but he was getting pressure from higher up the chain to keep a lid on things. The President felt that quelling some zealots' contempt for something as *simple* as Shepard and Liara's civil rights wasn't worth playing their hand against Senator Kinsey. Jack bristled at the thought. He didn't want to serve with the likes of them, and he just *couldn't* wait until the Senator got his.

Jack had considered taking Shepard on as part of SG-1. He still was to a certain extent. But, somehow, he just didn't think she'd fit in. Or want to fit in, definitely now that Liara was here. Reunited with her love, no Reapers to fight, Jack thought it was only a matter of time before she requested to be discharged and settled somewhere offworld where they could live together openly. *Colorado Springs certainly isn't going to be a safe place for Liara, and it probably won't be safe from Shepard if anyone got in her face about her and her wife.*

He wished that *was* an option, too. Perhaps they could call the Tollan? Maybe they would take a pair of high-tech refugees? The goa'uld certainly seemed content to leave them alone. Jack shrugged to himself; he'd take that up with Hammond when they returned to the SGC.

They seemed to be so in love, it was heartwarming. It reminded him of when he was still married, before his son died. Jack shook his head and tried to clear his mind of unpleasant memories. Then he recalled how Shepard seemed to want to talk about it when they went ring shopping, and how he almost let her. Jack was saved from himself when he spotted Major Harper.

"Colonel O'Neill," Major Harper snapped a salute as he emerged from one of the corrugated steel structures. Jack returned the salute casually as he noticed Harper lurch a little bit when he realized his companion was Commander Shepard. It would seem that her *conventional* attire had confused him initially. "Commander Shepard," he saluted her as well, though with less enthusiasm. That puzzled Jack. Harper had never been less that completely polite to Shepard *and* Liara, despite what happened to his SG-5 team, but he acted so oddly towards her; obviously cold, but there was something else about his behavior that still baffled him. *Though, he's not one of the bigots that have been giving Shepard grief either,* he thought. *Strange.*

"Ready for the show 'n tell?" Jack asked.

"Yes, sir," Harper replied, "Right this way."

*These guys are learning quickly,* Shepard thought as she hiked back to the Stargate with Colonel O'Neill. Major Harper had given them a good tour, even if he behaved a bit woodenly. Victoria resolved to ask Jack about that when they had a moment back in The Mountain. They had an effective if sparse laboratory setup that would make even Mordin proud. Their stockpile of supplies,
spares, and ammunition would give any Krogan a hard-on. Apparently the biotics display she'd favored them with a few days ago delivered several dozen shoulder-fired surface to air missiles, and three pallets of anti-tank rockets. Plus some items that she hadn't been briefed on. *Crates landed right on their cargo rovers, I guess I am as good as I think I am,* she thought.

The armaments had surprised her, actually. Even without the planned squadron of fighter aircraft or the flotilla of spy-sats, they had enough ordinance to take on a squadron of death gliders and a solid company of Jaffa. Considering the goa'uld weren't supposed to even know this planet existed, it was certainly a good start.

This visit was primarily a meet-and-greet. Shepard would be coming back on a regular basis, for a few days at a time, to help SG-5 and the local science team get the rest of their satellites unpacked and a deployment plan put together. In a few weeks' time the SGC would begin emplacing fighters that could start lofting the recon drones into orbit. *If they can get that Prometheus thing working properly.* Until then they were relying on something called an MQ-1 Predator UAV to keep an eye on things, but that had no deep space capability. *Or any space capability,* she thought.

Shepard was so busy running down a mental list of items she needed to square away at this installation, she even had a few ideas on how to jump the spy-sat deployment ahead, that she didn't hear the noise at first. The Stargate came into view and distracted her further, another few steps and seconds lost. Then she noticed it; coiled, rattling, and hissing ready to strike. If she had been paying more attention she would have stopped, taken a step back, and walked around the snake leaving it in peace. It didn't mean her any harm, it was just doing its snake thing and she had stumbled upon it; all of the rattling and hissing was its last-ditch effort to make her go away. But she was just too surprised, so she reacted on instinct.

"Holy shit!" Jack shouted has he dove to the ground. The blue flash of the singularity field had caught him by as much surprise as the snake had Shepard. The rattlesnake, or whatever passed for a rattlesnake on this world, floated off the ground writhing madly. Shepard followed up with a warp field and the snake *disappeared* with a loud thunderclap and blue Cherenkov-like flash.

Shepard didn't actually realize what she had just done until the echo faded. She looked around, P90 sweeping the horizon on its own accord. Little bits of snakeskin fluttered to the ground. For a brief instant she was in London, ash falling from the sky, explosions echoing off of the gutted city buildings. She shook her head and centered herself. "Clear," she said.

"What the hell was that?" Jack said brushing himself off.

"I think it was a rattlesnake," Victoria responded. "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention. It surprised me."

"Well shit, Shepard," Jack replied, "Remind me never to sneak up on you." He looked around. "I think we've done enough to the local wildlife for one day, let's dial home."

"Replay that last part," commanded Lord Ba'al.

Nerus pressed a few buttons on his control unit and the image rolled back. The tall soldier walking next to the accursed Colonel O'Neill launched a blue glowing orb towards a small reptile in their path. A moment later another orb impacted the now floating snake and it exploded.

"Now that's certainly interesting," Ba'al observed to himself.

The image continued to play and showed the figures dial the gate and leave the planet. The video looped back. "The low-energy event corresponded with the tall soldier transiting the event horizon,"
Nerus observed. He didn't need to mention again that until an event was recorded several days ago, they had no idea there even was a chappa'ai on this world. Nor did he need to mention that the tau'ri installation on the planet was also a surprise to them. The tau'ri have certainly been busy.

"Have we recorded any more activity at the settlement?"

"No m'lord," Nerus replied. "Less than two dozen of the tau'ri, rudimentary defenses, only local patrols. The tel'tak could destroy the facility, if they do not have any hidden heavy weapons."

"No," Ba'al responded. There was no questioning his tone. "I will not settle for a few dozen of these SGC tau'ri. I want the person who did that," he pointed at the image. He scrutinized it further. "Enhance the image of the taller one's face. Is that a woman?"

Nerus adjusted the image. A pale freckled face came into focus; fire red hair peeked out from beneath the helmet. Nerus arched an eyebrow, "It appears to be."

Ba'al steepled his fingers and placed them against his lips in thought. He turned to his First Prime, "Dispatch a ha'tak. I want that woman brought to me."

Liara T'soni stood in the gate room and watched the formation vortex rush towards her. The tempest of blue energy dissipated and settled into the familiar 'shimmering puddle'. A few moments passed, undoubtedly Walter was interrogating the IFF gear in the control room. "Defense teams, stand down," he called through the intercom. The half-dozen SF troopers lowered their weapons and two figures came through the gate. The first through was O'Neill. He took his baseball cap off and waved hello. Immediately behind him was Shepard, she carried herself much less casually. Then she saw Liara and smiled.

"Honey, I'm home," she said cheerfully. She can certainly turn Viking Vikki on and off like a switch, she thought. Shepard safed her weapon and lowered it on its sling. She then favored Liara with a peck on the cheek, much to the surprise of the Security Forces personnel still milling about the gate room until the wormhole disengaged. A blush turned Liara's cheeks purple despite what was on her mind.

The Stargate shut down and Liara spoke, "Welcome back Shepard. We have something we must discuss."

"Uhoh," opined Jack, "Last time I heard a girl tell me that she said she wanted to start seeing other people."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. Undoubtedly she had already read Liara's facial expression and body posture and noticed something was on her mind, but she would never fear that she wanted to end their relationship. They were bonded; for the rest of Shepard's life, much to Victoria's constant awe and delight. "What's wrong?" Shepard asked seriously.

Liara paused, "It is Thessia," she said, "Change out of your gear and meet us in Daniel's lab."

"You're certain, Liara? Completely certain?" Shepard was in a state of shock.

"Yes, Victoria; I recognize these constellations," she pointed to a series of photographs of a night sky. "That is the Goddess Athame's shield," she traced out a roughly square shaped series of stars. "This one," she pointed to a surprisingly straight line of six stars, "is Her sword. The last one, the red giant at the tip, is roughly analogous to your North Star, Polaris."
Shepard had a jaw-dropped expression about her; not so much about what Liara had just told her, but because of Liara's lack of emotion about it. "So, this is Thessia," Shepard said flatly.

"We call it P3X-888," said Major Carter. She paused, "It's the homeworld of a reptilian humanoid race called the Unas," she paused, "and the goa'uld," she said sadly.

"Motherfucker," Victoria said softly to no one in particular. I never thought I'd see Thessia again, Shepard thought, certainly not like this. Shepard's mission to Thessia in the other place still weighed heavily upon her; such senseless destruction, graceful flowing architecture reduced to flaming chaos. It hurt more than Earth sometimes. Despite her feigned protestations to the contrary, she did have a thing for 'blue'. Seeing such beauty devastated still gave her nightmares. Now it was happening all over again. I wanted to raise our children in Armali, Shepard thought, where Liara grew up.

"It would seem that the children of Thessia hold great influence over the galaxy in this place as well back home," Liara observed coolly.

Shepard could barely speak, "How are you so calm, beloved?" The term of endearment only did so much to salve the grief she felt.

"I knew my people did not exist here," she said. "Without eezo, evolution on Thessia would, necessarily, be very different. Not only for us, but for the Protheans as well," she paused, "and without their partial uplift, we certainly would not be the people we were where we came from."

"But," Shepard said with a waiver in her voice, "the goa'uld? Nothing like them existed on Thessia back home."

"We have a theory on that, actually." Major Carter spoke up. Obviously subdued by the revelation, she was still keenly interested in the scientific implications of the discovery. The group looked at her expectantly. "Our best guess is that the presence of eezo on your Thessia somehow prevented the development of goa'uld biology."

"And the absence of it resulted in the development of the Unas rather than the progenitor of the Asari?" asked Jack in a somewhat surprising bit of deductive reasoning. "Or, perhaps, the Unas are the progenitors of the Asari?"

Carter's face scrunched up in thought, "This is more likely a case of divergent evolution from a very ancient common ancestor. Sexual dimorphism is a big deal," Jack's eyebrow shot up a few inches. Carter cleared her throat, "From an evolutionary standpoint, sir. Our biologists still aren't 100% sure how or why it actually happened. Perhaps eezo impacted its development on Thessia, I couldn't say. Either way Liara," she looked at her sadly, "we've compared your genetic material to that of what we've seen in the Unas. There are," she paused, "similarities."

"Interesting," Liara observed. She was looking at photographs of the Unas that the SGC had encountered. "Other than the humanoid form, I see almost no similarities between these people and mine. And you say they are sexually dimorphic?"

"How are you so cool about this?" Shepard asked.

Liara placed photograph of the lizard-people who inhabited 'Thessia' on the table and looked at her. She smiled warmly, "Let me show you." She held both hands out to her across the table. The members of SG-1 leaned back to observe, they were obviously very curious as to what would happen next. Shepard reached out and took her beloved's hands; the warmth of her touch was comforting. "Embrace eternity," she said with a smile, and her eyes flashed black.
Liara could feel Shepard enter her consciousness. She could feel her confusion, her sadness. She felt that Shepard considered Thessia's fate in this reality her fault, somehow. That was preposterous, and Shepard needed to understand that. Liara accepted Shepard's sadness unto herself, she showered her with love. She felt her mate calm substantially.

**This is not your doing, beloved.** Liara broadcast through the bond.

**Are you sure? Who's to say that the gestalt didn't cause this when it sent us here?**

That is unlikely, and you know it. What is it that is really bothering you? Liara felt hesitation, she felt guilt. **You need not hide anything from me, my love. What is it?** She sent her love to Shepard, it had the desired effect.

I'm concerned about you. I'm concerned that you don't seem to feel anything about this. You know how badly the loss of Thessia weighs on my mind, and I only visited once. It must be awful for you. Or it should be.

Liara smiled through the bond, **My people take the long-view, beloved. There is nothing I can do about the Thessia of this place, so sadness and anxiety serve no purpose. Also, I anticipated my people did not exist here anyway, this is not a surprise to me.**

**But the Asari are gone! These goa'uld monsters have taken their place!** Liara could feel Shepard's anguish through the bond, she comforted her.

You are mistaken, my love. We will deal with the goa'uld, just as surely as we dealt with the Reapers. As to the Asari, do not despair. So long as I live, and my daughters, and **their** daughters, there will be Asari in this universe. She felt Shepard's realization.

You knew you could be the mother of a new Asari race, and that's why you were not upset?

Of course I am upset, Liara chided, but my grief is tempered. You will recall that you mentioned to me when I first arrived that there would be some who consider me a threat because I can spawn a new Asari race. Or were you too troubled to remember? Liara could feel that Shepard had indeed forgotten, she was so upset by the revelation. **Will you be the father of my people?**

**Like you have to ask?**

Liara smiled as she broke the bond.

Samantha was definitely weirded out by the black eyes. She'd only ever seen it twice now, she refused to watch the surveillance footage recorded in their bedroom, and it was certainly a sight to be seen. She couldn't imagine what this might be doing to them. Shepard was obviously broken up, but she still had difficulty reading Liara. "What do you think she's saying?" Carter asked.

"Don't worry, be happy?" offered O'Neill.

"It might be that simple," observed Daniel. "Have you noticed how Liara can completely disarm Shepard?"

An awkward silence passed. "Then I certainly hope nothing ever happens to Liara, for all of our sakes," Jack said. He immediately thought better of it.
"How can you say that?" asked Carter. *Sir, that's cold.*

"Jesus, Jack!" Daniel chimed in, "That's like tempting fate too, and you know it."

"Yeah," he looked at the floor, "I shouldn't have said that."

Carter scowled, then she looked at the couple. They were still *elsewhere.* "At least they didn't hear you say it, sir," she said.

Silently observing until now, Tea'c spoke up, "Colonel O'Neill does raise an important point, Daniel Jackson. Would it not be wise to consider the relationship between Commander Shepard and Doctor T'soni, and the implications losing one of them might carry." He paused in reflection, "I believe it was with a sense of loss for Doctor T'soni that Commander Shepard sang the karaoke. She is undoubtedly a very emotional woman."

Somehow when Teal'c said it in his detached polite way it sounded less crass. Still, relevant or not, the whole line of thought did not sit well with Samantha. *And they had certainly all noticed how badly Shepard was hurting at Fraiser's house.* "We might have to cross that bridge when we come to it, sir," she said as Shepard blinked hard and shook her head. Liara's eyes returned to their normal blue-within-blue.

Shepard smiled.

*She's smiling?* Thought Carter. *I wonder what she said.*
Shepard dozed lazily in her bed under Cheyenne Mountain.

Despite being on the front lines in the war against the goa'uld, the SGC followed a surprisingly civilian-like schedule for its non-combat operations. As such, Shepard was relaxing on an uneventful Friday night, looking forward to having nothing to do except lesson planning for the rest of the weekend. She already had most of her 'how to captain a starship' class for next week planned out, so she didn't anticipate it taking much of her time.

Shepard felt almost guilty not having anything to do. Her career in the Alliance Navy had rarely afforded her opportunities to relax, and when it did they sometimes misfired; her one-and-only shore leave on Elysium was a graphic example. Once she was inducted as a Spectre almost all of her time was consumed preparing for, then fighting, total-war on a galactic scale. Well, except for that party we threw back on the Citadel before we attacked the Illusive Man's base, she reminded herself with a smile.

Victoria wondered idly if the other Liara still had the keys to Anderson's old apartment. Did she still go there? Did her friends? Did they gather to celebrate their victory and mourn their dead? Would Liara even want to attend such a gathering? Did it even still exist? She shook her head. You could drive yourself to frustration entertaining such thoughts.

What should we do tonight? Shepard wondered. She recalled that Daniel and Teal'c were involved in some sort of movie marathon in the rec room, but their selections for this evening seemed like something Liara might not enjoy. Perhaps some biotic sparring in the gym? She wondered. Shepard smiled, that usually ended up with them back in their quarters, all wound up and sweaty. She smiled more at the thought. Perhaps she could convince General Hammond to let her take Liara up to the surface and wander the base grounds. She was sure that she could find some sort of clothing that was concealing enough that no one would notice her until they got into the woods and away from prying eyes. Then again, some Chinese satellite might catch a glimpse of her; I doubt the Chinese military would just assume a member of Blue Man Group was visiting Cheyenne Mountain and ignore it.

Shepard turned her head on her pillow to look at her mate. She was hunched over her laptop computer, one of the high end ones the SGC had bought her with the stylized head on the lid with the light-up eyes. She was so intent on the screen, clicking rapidly, and typing wildly. I wonder what she's doing?

"Goddess!" Liara exclaimed.

Shepard arched an eyebrow as Liara's nose scrunched up in concentration. She started typing again madly. Shepard smiled; she was so adorable when she did that. "Liara? Love? What'cha doin'?"

Her shoulders slumped in what looked like dejection as she read something on the screen. Without turning her head she replied, "Bill suggested I play what he called an online video game," she said with a sneer, "as a way of socializing without having to leave the mountain. Since they will not let me leave the mountain." She sighed, "I was enjoying myself until this mah-gee started bothering me. He helped me with some quests, but now he will not leave me alone." She scowled at the screen,
"No, I will not buff your staff!" she said typing angrily, "What does that even mean Shepard?"

Victoria was out of her bed and at Liara's side in an instant. "Wait, what did he say? Who is this?"

Liara pointed to some cartoonish man with a cloak and a staff with a jewel at its top. "This mah-gee."

"Mage," Shepard said looking at the chat log.

"What?"

"It's pronounced mage. It's old French, I think."

"But do you not speak English?"

"Yeah, English sorta steals all of its vocabulary from unsuspecting foreign languages."

"Fascinating."

"Anyway," Shepard said, trying to get back on topic, "what's this guy been doing?"

"I met him yesterday. He helped me slay a big spider." Shepard arched an eyebrow, "I bet Tali would be proud. I thanked him, but now whenever I log in he finds me and will not leave me alone."

Shepard looked at Liara's screen, "You named yourself Lidanya? Wasn't she the Captain of the Destiny Ascension."

"Yes, a formidable warrior, and very taken by a certain human Spectre."

"Wait. What? I never heard that."

"No, I made sure you did not." Liara said arching an eyebrow. "I have no intention of sharing with a Matriarch. No matter how formidable she may be."

Shepard made a harrumphing sound and Liara sported a lopsided grin. Victoria leaned in to look at the screen. "Well, you don't exactly have pointy ears or long flowing hair, but she does have the same shade of skin as you."

"It was the closest thing I could find to a Justicar. Also, not the point."

"Yes love," Shepard replied placing a kiss on Liara's scalp folds. She giggled despite her being agitated, she was mildly ticklish. Well, more than mildly in some places, Shepard thought with a smile. The offending mage sent another message; Shepard's eyes went wide in rage that someone would say something so rude to her beloved. Then she looked at the character's name; Spectacularleesexy. Shepard's eyes narrowed, wait a minute. "Liara, who did you say turned you on to this game?"

"Bill Lee, one of the civilian scientists who works with Samantha."

Shepard's eyes rolled. Liara was one of the smartest people she knew. As the Shadow Broker she was cold, calculating, and ruthless. She was one of the most talented biotics Shepard had ever met, and on the battle field she was nearly as deadly as her. But she could also be profoundly oblivious, especially in subjects outside her usual envelope of experience; like English turns of a phrase or plays on words. Victoria loved Liara, utterly and without reservation, even when her quirks sometimes got her into trouble. Not that this would be trouble for much longer, she thought. "I guess just try to ignore him? If he doesn't start leaving you alone soon, I'd suggest complaining to the game's
administrators."

Shepard didn't know Bill Lee very well, despite his near constant efforts to destroy her equipment in engineering tests, but she was familiar with him and his habits. Some nights when the nightmares woke her from her sleep, but didn't also wake Liara, Shepard would wander the corridors of the SGC. More than once she had observed Doctor Lee in his lab playing on his laptop in the wee hours of the morning. Victoria formulated a plan. She could check to see if he was there now on the way, not that she had any doubt. "Love, I have to take care of something real quick, I'll be back in a little bit. Would you like me to grab you some popcorn from the commissary?"

Liara's eyes lit up. Since being introduced to popcorn on the SR-1 she couldn't get enough of the stuff. She slapped her hands together and rubbed her palms hungrily, "I would love some." She pulled Victoria down by her shirt into a kiss. "In the meantime, I will try to conduct my quest while ignoring this annoying mage."

"Have fun storming the castle," she said with a wink while exiting their quarters. Liara didn't notice she was wearing her game face.

"I do not understand Daniel Jackson. Would not the sound from their motion sensors give the Marines' positions away? Why would they include such a feature in their design?" Teal'c quietly asked looking at the movie screen.

"For dramatic effect, Teal'c. It's all adding to the atmosphere of suspense."

"I question the logic of such a design requirement."

"It's a movie, Teal'c," chimed in O'Neill, "It requires a certain suspension of disbelief."

Teal'c, a space alien himself, pondered that for a moment. Arching an eyebrow, he nodded his head in silent agreement. He returned his attention to the screen.

A chair rustled in the dark, "Game over man! Game over!" Shepard exclaimed quietly. The members of SG-1 directed their attention to the new moviegoer; fortunately no one else in the rec room seemed to notice. "Great flick." They nodded greetings and turned back to the screen. The chair rustled again, "Guys, I really don't want to disturb your movie, but I need your help. It's sorta an emergency." That got their attention. Teal'c, Daniel, Jack, and Shepard quietly rose from their chairs and exited to the hallways lest they disturb anyone else.

Once Jack had closed the rec room door he turned to the Spectre and asked, "What's up Shepard?" Shepard could tell that Jack was curious but mildly bothered to come out of the movie to not find the corridor on fire or swarming with replicators or something similarly cataclysmic; he didn't much care for someone using the word 'emergency' lightly.

She didn't know how else to say it, so Victoria just laid it on the line. "Bill Lee is flirting with my wife in an online video game right now. She's getting pissed off that he won't leave her alone. I want your help to get him to stop," she paused, "forever." She flashed him a wolfish grin, "And record it on video, might make for good 'movie night' material."

Jack pondered that for a moment and nodded his head from side to side. "Sounds like an emergency to me, how can we help?"

Shepard smiled; she really enjoyed working with Jack sometimes. She turned to Teal'c. "Teal'c, do you have a wooden staff and some robes I can borrow?"
Doctor Bill Lee was so engrossed in his computer game that he did not hear the door to his lab open. Even if he weren't so fixated on the blue-ish elf he was hitting on, his back was facing the door so he certainly did not see SG-1 steal into the lab and crouch behind a lab bench where Daniel Jackson set up a video camera. It was late on a Friday night in The Mountain, and people rarely bothered him in his lab anyway, so what happened next came as a complete surprise to him.

The first indication that something was wrong was when the entire lab went dark. This, in and of itself, wasn't necessarily an evil portent; the lights had a motion sensor and sometimes he didn't move enough at his desk to keep them active. The sudden re-illumination of his laboratory with a rich Cherenkov-like glow certainly was out of the ordinary, however.

"Spectacularleesexy!" a voice boomed from behind.

Bill Lee went rigid with fear. He slowly turned around. He beheld a terrifying visage; a tall robed figure, face concealed beneath a large hood, stood at the door. In one hand the figure held a wooden staff with a brilliant blue glowing orb affixed at the end. "Yes?" Bill choked out a reply.

The figure pointed a long finger at him. "I am here at the bidding of the High Council of Kirin Tor! You are accused of behavior unbecoming of a Mage of the Realm!" As if to accentuate the point a blue glow enveloped the pointed finger.

"What, what, what do you mean?" Bill tried to stammer.

"Do not feign ignorance Spectacularleesexy! We know all. We see all. We know of your disrespectful behavior towards our elven allies of the Justicar Clan. Do you not think We would let that go un-punished?"

A blue glow enveloped his laptop and it hurtled across the room into the waiting hand of the self-identified emissary from Kirin Tor. Justicar Clan? Doctor Lee had never heard of that particular faction.

Suddenly the blue light disappeared and the lab was plunged into darkness. Bill Lee's heart pounded in his ears. Then he felt a presence. "Listen very carefully, Spectacularleesexy," Shepard's voice whispered in his ear, "If you are ever less than completely polite to my wife ever again," a dramatic pause, "you'll not have much of a staff left to buff."

The weight of his laptop computer dropped into Doctor Lee's lap. A few heart beats later the lights came back on to find the lab empty save for Doctor Lee and the snickering members of SG-1 and their video camera.

"Honey, I'm home," Shepard sing-songed as she re-entered her guest quarters. She was greeted by a wide smile and outstretched hands which veered towards the popcorn bowl rather than the embrace she was hoping for. Asari love popcorn, Shepard thought. "Sorry it took so long. They had to make a fresh batch. Did that mage leave you alone?"

"Yes," Liara said around a mouthful of popcorn. She finished chewing and swallowed. "He abruptly disconnected a few minutes ago," she said before shoving another fistful into her mouth. She beamed a smile to Shepard as she chewed.

"I'm glad to hear that," Shepard said with a large grin. "Oh, I think you'll want to come to next week's movie night. Daniel is going to show some home movies before the feature. I think you'll get a kick out of it." She winked.
I thought we needed a lighthearted break.
Shepard knocked on Major Carter's lab's door. She received no response. The door was open, of course, but Shepard preferred to be polite when entering other people's spaces. Victoria poked her head into the lab and saw Carter's back hunched over a work bench. Actinic flashes silhouetted her and an occasional spark flew past her shoulder arcing away as it faded into invisibility.

Shepard let her eyes wander over her backside for a moment and then she caught herself. Liara had, of course, seen Victoria's attraction to Samantha in the bond. She chided her gently about it. Victoria had seen she harbored similar feelings in turn, after all. But they had decided to leave those feelings as a silent, subtle compliment on Carter's beauty, both physically and in personality, and nothing more. Besides, since their meeting on Therum they had both been monogamous, even during her brief stint as a corpse she had learned, and never harbored any serious inclinations to break their unspoken vows to each other. Still, Sam certainly is pretty, she shook her head and smiled as she found a set of protective goggles and put them on.

Victoria knew better than to disturb Carter, or anyone for that matter, while they were doing something delicate and or dangerous. She waited quietly for Samantha to finish her current project. She didn't have to wait long before she placed the welding unit, or whatever that device was since Shepard didn't quite recognize it, in its cradle and removed her mask. She turned and regarded Victoria with a start, "Oh! I didn't hear you come in, been standing there long?"

Shepard removed her goggles and placed them back on the work bench, "No, a few minutes."

Carter smirked, "Don't take this the wrong way Shepard, but you're pretty big." Shepard arched an eyebrow. "How do you move around so quietly? And in those combat boots too?" She motioned to her impeccably maintained boots.

Victoria chuckled to herself, "Long hours of practice." She paused. "Liara tells me I move like a predatory cat. I can only assume that's a compliment." Of course, through the bond, she knew it was. In more ways than one, she thought with a sly internal grin. "I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you."

It was Carter's turn to arch an eyebrow. She and Shepard had become fast friends since her arrival, and she had certainly become more up-beat and outgoing since Liara had joined her, but she had never come to her like this. She looked at her, she seemed a bit pensive. I wonder what that could be? "Of course, Victoria, what do you need?"

Victoria looked over her shoulder and closed the laboratory door with a gentle flick of her biotics. She motioned for Carter to join her at a clean lab bench and produced a laptop computer. Placing it on the counter she poised her hand over the cover and looked at her, "If this in any way makes you uncomfortable, just say so and I'll ask someone else. I thought about asking Janet but I don't know if she'd worry about Cassandra intercepting it, so figured I'd come to you first."

Carter arched an eyebrow in concern. "Okay?" she said haltingly. Shepard opened the cover of the laptop and her eyes went wide. Then she sighed in relief. "Doing some shopping then?"

"Yes, I was wondering if I could have it shipped to your house; it'll already be wrapped, you just need to take it out of the shipping box. I'd really rather not have Walter see this come in through the
base post, and I don't know if Jack would be able to resist bugging me about it." She looked up at the security camera to make sure the screen was shielded from view, "I also want this to be a surprise. Can you help me out?"

Carter chuckled, "Sure Victoria." She looked at the screen, "You have good taste."

Shepard actually blushed.

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Liara came upon the door to Major Carter's lab to the sound of grunting. She poked her head in to see the Major struggling with a large piece of equipment, trying to push it back into position against the wall with little to show for her efforts. The Asari gently placed her laptop computer on one of Carter's work benches and came to her aid. "Major Carter?"

Samantha looked up and smiled, "Hello Liara, how are you?"

"I am fine. Please, let me assist you." Liara approached the heavy object and with a graceful sweep of her arm she enveloped it in a mass effect field. She then helped Carter gently guide it into place before she allowed it to settle to the ground.

Carter dusted off her hands. "Thanks. I had to fix a short on the back of that unit. Getting it back in was harder than pulling it away from the wall."

Liara smiled, "I am glad that I could help. May I ask you something?"

"Sure, what do you need?"

Liara closed the door to the lab and used her biotics to drape a rag over the security camera. Uhoh, Samantha thought, what now?

Liara opened her laptop computer. Carter knew that Liara preferred to use her omni-tool, but she did make the effort to also learn the SGC's technology. "I was hoping that you could..." she trailed off trying to navigate to her web browser. Her nose scrunched up in concentration, a look that she knew Shepard found adorable. Sam chuckled, she had to admit, it was cute. "Ah, goddess, I do not know how you can stand to use such a crude interface as this."

Carter arched an eyebrow. She knew that Liara was speaking truthfully, not a drop of sarcasm in her voice. "We make do," she said, "What is it that you need?"

"Ah!" Liara succeeded in bringing up a now familiar website. Carter sighed, she hoped Liara didn't notice. "I would like to purchase a few items for Shepard," she paused, "and myself," she added demurely, "for us to enjoy in our private time together."

"And you'd like to ship them to my house instead of the base?" Carter asked, instantly afraid that she had given away Shepard's surprise.

"Yes," she didn't seem to notice, "I think Shepard would rather this sort of thing kept private. You are a dear and trusted friend to us."

"That," Carter responded in surprise, "means a lot to me." It did, it truly did. Carter had come to be quite fond of both Shepard and Doctor T'soni. She was glad that they had found each other across the expanse of the multiverse, and that she could be there for Shepard in her time of sadness before they did. Even the awkward flirting early on was forgotten.

"Excellent," Liara turned to the computer and made a few clicks, "Do you think that Shepard would..."
like this one?"

Carter rolled her eyes despite herself, _and there's the awkward again._

Shepard could sense Liara approaching the door to their room. Well, not _sense_ with any sort of telepathy, despite their ability to meld with others the Asari were not telepathic; but Shepard's keen sense of hearing could detect the very subtle squeak Liara's shoes made on the concrete in the corridor. She had surprised her a few times, opening the door for her just before she reached for the door knob. When confronted Shepard claimed she could feel the approach of her beloved, a _disturbance in the force_; a reference Liara only recently got after a movie marathon with the members of SG-1. Shepard smirked, _Teal'c was certainly batty over the original trilogy_. Through the bond, Liara knew that her explanation was full of shit. Still, she never called her on it. Shepard thought that maybe she was just too flattered to spoil her fun.

Shepard didn't rise to open the door for Liara this time. She had a _better_ surprise for her. Victoria calmly placed her bookmark, a laminated $2 bill, in her novel, closed the book, and tossed it across the room towards her desk. A minute twitch of her biotics guided it in for a landing next to her laptop. Like Liara, she was attempting to become more tech-savvy with the local equipment. She pulled her legs into a cross-legged position, sitting up in their bed. A hand reached under her pillow to make sure that the package was still there, then she folded her hands in her lap and waited.

The door opened and a vision of beauty stepped into their quarters. Liara wore a rough approximation of an Asari-style casual robe she had a seamstress on the internet make for her and a smile. One of her hands was held suspiciously behind her back. Shepard arched an eyebrow in curiosity, but then centered herself. She beamed a smile to her mate and held out her arms beckoning her to an embrace. Liara smiled in response, closed and locked the door, and glided across the room to her. "You look beautiful, Liara," Shepard said as Liara sat on the side of the bed, discreetly dropped something on the floor, and wrapped her arms around her.

A tender kiss; starting chaste but increasing in duration and intensity as neither of them wanted to let go. Shepard reached up and gently rubbed a thumb across Liara's cheek. "Love," she said, "I have a surprise for you." Shepard smiled.

"I have a surprise for you as well," Liara responded.

"Would you like to go first?" Shepard asked.

Liara merely smiled in reply and reached off of the side of the bed to return with a small wrapped package. Shepard cocked an eyebrow, _that wrapping paper looks familiar_, she thought. "I bought it online, from a shop with what I thought was a very clever name considering who I was purchasing it for." _Uhoh_, Victoria thought.

"I'm sure I'll love it regardless of where it came from," she said opening the box. Shepard's eyes went wide, but not as wide as Liara's. _Oh shit!_

"That is not what I bought you," Liara said confused and slightly upset.

Victoria held up a pair of panties; blood red, lacy, _cheeky_. They, along with the matching top still in the box, would contrast beautifully against her beloved's pale blue skin. At least that's what _Shepard_ thought when _she_ bought them for _Liara_. She quickly rooted through the rest of the box; all of her other purchases were there too, thankfully.

That would suggest that the box currently under the pillow was the present that Liara bought for her.
Which meant that Liara not only bought her something from the same store, hence the same wrapping paper, but she also had it shipped to Carter. All of the pieces fell into place, that sneak! She'd have to compliment Carter for keeping a straight face when she handed her her package, knowing that she was about to hand Liara a similar parcel.

Shepard concluded her introspection and noticed that Liara was frowning. That won't do. Shepard smiled, reached up to caress Liara's cheek and kissed her. "No, but it's what I bought for you." She reached under the pillow and produced the other box. "I think Carter might have mixed up our gifts." Shit, I hope that's what happened, Shepard thought, it'll be extremely awkward if I open this box to find something Sam bought for herself.

Realization appeared on Liara's face. She smirked. "I believe the correct expression is, great minds think alike?" She was already holding her new garments up to herself, she approved.

"Yes Liara," responded Shepard, "though I think you've got me beat in the brains department by a few IQ points." Liara pouted and motioned for Shepard to open her box. God she's hot when she pouts like that, Victoria thought as she sliced open the wrapping with her finger nail. She opened the box and her eyes went wide, "Wow."

"Should I ask you to try those on for me?"

Shepard looked up to her mate's gaze, then she looked down at the contents of the box, then she looked at Liara, then the box. A stretch of elastic and a biotically assisted undergarment knocked the surveillance camera out of position. "Maybe tomorrow," she said as she pulled her beloved towards her and kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Another lighthearted chapter. Now back to our regularly scheduled programming.
Mother of Eternity

Shepard had butterflies in her stomach. She smirked. It was funny; she rarely got the jitters before going into combat. Even in the shuttle ride down to London with Hammer she experienced an unearthly calm. But now, she was trembling. She shook her head, there's nothing to be nervous about. In their hearts they were bonded long ago, this was just a symbol. She tried to suppress the gooseflesh as she looked down at the small device in her hand. She was profoundly grateful to General Hammond for this, she'd have to buy him a beer or something next time she got a chance.

Shepard took a deep breath and she opened the door to the guest quarters she shared with her beloved. Liara was sitting at the desk poring over some documents from Jackson's lab, preparing herself for the dig she would return to in a few days. She didn't notice her enter the room and take up position behind her. Liara let out a surprised squeak when Shepard wrapped her arms around her mate's shoulder and gently bit down on the tip of one of her 'hair' folds. Shepard knew how sensitive the tips were, it always drove Liara crazy when she toyed with them. She played her tongue across the tip in her mouth, Liara's whole body shuddered.

"You surprised me!" Liara managed to get past quivering lips. She turned and looked up at her, "You have a rather large smile," she noted coyly, "What have you been up to?"

In the few days since their chat about Thessia, Shepard had settled substantially. The revelation had given what she was about to do new importance, and it refreshed and strengthened her commitment to her mate. "I have a surprise," Shepard said, "Here; stand up over here by the mirror." Shepard smiled warmly and took her wife by the hand. She led Liara to a full length mirror next to one of the simple bureaus they had bought from some place called Ikea. Liara looked at herself in the mirror as Shepard stepped up behind her. She reached one hand around her waist and pulled her in closely. She kissed her cheek and whispered into one of her 'ears', "Watch this."

With her other hand Shepard reached up and affixed a small device to Liara's blouse just above her right breast. She pressed a button and with a soft beep the image of Liara T'soni in the mirror was replaced by that of Staff Sergeant Tracy Westerholm.

"Goddess, what is this?" Liara asked running her hands down what now appeared to be Staff Sergeant Westerholm's face and neck.

"It's called a mimetic imaging device," Shepard replied, "A while back a bunch of aliens almost took over the base by posing as SGC personnel. General Hammond let me check one out of the armory for you. Tracy Westerholm was one of the base personnel they impersonated; she said we could use her likeness for the evening."

"Why?" Liara seemed to be a bit too surprised to have figured out what Shepard had planned.

"We're going on a date."

The doorbell rang. Cassandra opened the door and smiled, "General, hi!"

"Hello Cassandra, how are you?" he replied with a smile.

"I'm fine, come in."

General Hammond entered Janet Fraiser's house and looked around. He could hear Teal'c and Doctor Fraiser talking in an adjacent room and walked towards the sound. He found them sitting
around the dinner table.

"Afternoon, sir," Hammond responded, waving her off. While he was on good speaking terms with all of his subordinates, General Hammond, as a rule, did not interact with them much off-duty. Command could be lonely, he lamented, but it wasn't appropriate for him to carry on casual relationships with his people. That said, Cassandra and her adoptive mother Janet were an exception. When her homeworld was poisoned by Nirrti, the SGC welcomed her into its family. Janet made the adoption official and welcomed Cassandra into her home. Hammond regarded Cassandra as something akin to an adopted niece, and he was glad when the opportunity presented itself to visit. Even if he didn't consider the Fraisers and extension of his family, though, he certainly wasn't going to let one of his subordinates come to attention in her own house.

"I take it they haven't arrived?" he asked.

"No, sir. Daniel returned to base to pick them up. Apparently," she said, shaking her head and cocking it to one side, "Shepard didn't pass her driver's test." She glanced at Cassandra with a knowing look; she was just learning to drive herself. "The motor pool would not issue her a car." She smirked, "Shepard said it might have something to do with a mako shark or something. I wasn't quite clear on that."

Hammond arched an eyebrow; he didn't know what to make of that either. He heard another knock at the door and Cassandra opened it to see Colonel O'Neill and Major Carter standing on the porch.

Carter made eye contact with him and nodded, "Evening, sir." She hugged Cassandra, a huge smile on her face. Hammond's heart warmed. Major Carter loved the young teenager very much. That had become obvious when they first met when she was willing, almost eager, to die with her at the bottom of a nuclear bunker when the Goa'uld Nirrti planted a bomb within her body. He remembered wanting to rage against Carter for disobeying orders, for nearly throwing her life away so flippantly, but he couldn't do it. He was a father and grandfather himself; he knew what it was to love a child. He would have done the same, he thought.

Jack merely snapped off a casual salute to the brim of his baseball cap. Hammond nodded to the Colonel. He watched as Jack hanged up his coat on a hook, it was still early spring and relatively cool, and extract a couple of small boxes and an invoice from the pocket.

"Are those them?" he asked motioning to the box.

"Yes, sir." Jack opened one of the boxes and showed a simple, yet beautiful, platinum wedding band.

Hammond had ground his teeth when Shepard had come to his office and told him she wanted to apologize for lying to him again. He had let the Kinkos thing slide, but he was still very sore about Shepard lying about her biotic capabilities; despite how well that hard worked out for her when the NID had attempted to carve her open. Not to mention he still thought of the circumstances of her escape bordered on murder; though, those feelings had tempered somewhat when she saved the gate room from the Jaffa assault on SG-5. When Shepard explained that she had never technically married Liara, despite calling her her wife, his jaw had unclenched. With the Reaper War there was never enough time, they just didn't get around to it.

She still considered Liara her spouse, though, and wanted the General to be there when she presented her with a token of that commitment. George lamented to himself that they would never be able to officially marry here on Earth. Chief Master Sergeant Harriman, who was apparently an
ordained internet minister, had offered to perform a wedding ceremony, but Colorado State law just
didn't support a union between a woman and an alien.

"Those are very nice," the General said looking at the rings.

"They should be," Jack responded rather flippantly, "sure cost enough." He handed him the invoice.
Hammond's eyes went wide. "I'm thinking of asking her to give me stock advice. She claims she's
been supplementing her salary by day trading." He accentuated that last point with a substantial set
of 'air quotes'.

"She has," Hammond responded. NID was crawling all over Shepard's online activities. For the life
of them, however, they couldn't find anything untoward in her financial dealings; or her lingerie
purchases for that matter. Everything she did was above board and fully disclosed. Try as NID did,
they just couldn't prove any insider trading; and none of the data they'd extracted from her omni-tool
would suggest she knew the future of the stock market. They'd probably be playing the market
themselves if it did, Hammond thought wryly. Apparently she was just very astute in making her
investments. She and Liara did not want for material comforts, such as they were underneath a
mountain. They lived within their means, but those means were not trivial. Thankfully, Amazon and
Ikea would ship to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex.

Daniel Jackson worked through the gears on his Subaru. The turbocharger whined and they picked
up speed. Shepard had squeezed into the rear seat so that Liara would have a clearer view. She
smiled widely; glad to finally be out of The Mountain. She watched the trees whip by, children
playing in parks, birds flying overhead.

"So much green!" she said, the joy plain in her voice.

Shepard squeezed her shoulder. "That's exactly what I said first time I was out of The Mountain."

Liara felt free for the first time since arriving here. The trip offworld with Doctor Jackson was
refreshing, but it wasn't as lush, verdant, or alive as Earth. She tried to put the memories of the
London of the other place out of her mind, or the fate of Thessia in this reality, and to a large extent
she was successful. The beautiful early spring afternoon drowned out what few memories she still
had of the reconstruction as well.

Shepard squeezed her shoulder, "I love seeing you smile," she said.

"But you cannot see my face with this device," Liara said, smiling coyly, "Perhaps it is Tracy
Westerholm's smile you find pleasing?"

"You're the one I find pleasing," Shepard winked.

"You know, I'm sitting right here," Daniel said as he shifted loudly into 4th gear.

"I have seen your thoughts Commander Shepard," Liara responded with a mocking scowl, "I am not
the only one who's appearance you find to your liking." She held up her hand and counted off
fingers, "There was the Consort Sha'ira, and Sheala on Feros; she reciprocated, by the way. You
were also always enamored with Councilor Tevos' spots as well."

"Hey!" Shepard responded is faux-indignation, "When I nailed the Consort I hadn't even met you
yet."

Daniel cleared his throat loudly.
Liara continued, "You liked Jack's hair when she grew it out, and I know how Samantha Traynor threw herself at you."

"You also know I turned her away, gently," Shepard responded.

"There were those private dances Kelly Chambers would give you in your stateroom," she smiled. "You were quite fond of Aria's corset," Liara winked, "and her, what did you call them, 'fuck-me boots'?"

"Hey," Shepard said, "you would look amazing in that corset. Also, I didn't kiss her back, even when she shoved her tongue down my throat that one time."

Daniel coughed and cleared his throat again.

Liara continued, "On more than one occasion the Justicar Samara caught you staring at her cleavage," Shepard tried to protest, "And do not get me started on what you thought about my parents."

"Well, Aethyta does have a certain raw animal magnetism about her. She was also right about your mother having tits that just don't quit," Shepard paused, "You certainly inherited both those traits."

Daniel downshifted to 3rd, the engine raced loudly.

"Or, more recently," Liara pressed on, "what about Major Carter? I know you were flirting with her rather shamelessly."

"La la la," Daniel said loudly, "I can't hear you."

"Hey, I…" Victoria stammered.

"Your thoughts always return to me, my beloved" Liara said warmly. "I have seen into your heart of hearts, I am the only one for you." She smiled, "Besides, I am rather fond of Major Carter myself; especially how her lips curve up when she is concentrating on something."

"And… We're here!" Daniel said jerking the handbrake up. Liara giggled. He obviously didn't like the subject of their conversation; especially when it turned towards his comrade Samantha.

Shepard climbed out of the back seat and opened the passenger door for her. Liara smiled internally, she always does these cute little things for me. She looked into her beloved's eyes and smiled. Shepard was up to something. She made no effort to hide that. She did, however, say it was a surprise, and asked her not to search for it in the bond. Liara would never dream of taking something without permission, but she agreed. Shepard said it was a good surprise after all, she thought.

"There's someone I want you to meet," Shepard said as she knocked on the door to a lovely looking house.

A teenage girl opened it, "Victoria!" she smiled. "I'm so glad that you're alright." They hugged. Liara realized that this must be Cassandra Fraiser, and that she had not seen Shepard since the night she was taken by the NID. Liara watched Shepard's face light up as she interacted with the teen. Something stirred within her; Shepard will be such an amazing parent.

Liara knew she wanted children. She knew she wanted to raise them with Victoria. She knew they would be the best parents any child could hope for. She also knew she wanted to start right away; she had begun her metamorphosis into the Matron stage early for that very reason. She wasn't even 115 yet, most Asari did not enter the Matron stage until they were 400 or so, she was that sure. She
knew she had only a limited window of opportunity with Shepard and she wanted to squeeze as many children as possible into it. Being the genesis of a new Asari race hadn't even factored into it initially, but there was that consideration too.

Liara returned to herself to hear Shepard speak. "I want you to meet someone," Shepard said stepping aside and motioning to her. "This is Liara."

Cassandra looked confused. "You're not nearly as blue as I thought you'd be."

Liara smiled, "No, I suppose I am not."

"Let's step inside," Shepard said, "and maybe we can change that."

Shepard, Daniel, and Liara entered Doctor Fraiser's home. Janet greeted them in the foyer and asked Cassandra to draw the curtains. When Doctor Fraiser had mentioned to Shepard that Cassandra suffered from migraines, and that she had installed blackout curtains for when she became photosensitive, a plan came together. General Hammond was surprisingly amenable, he didn't even seem that angry about her fibbing about being married to Liara when she technically wasn't. He merely asked if he could be there for it. She wouldn't want it any other way.

Shepard took Liara's coat and hung it on a peg near the door. She removed her own field jacket and did the same. Janet noticed the bulge of the FN pistol at the small of her back. "I normally don't like guns in the house," she said softly. Shepard began to apologize, but Fraiser beat her to it, "Though, considering what happened last time you were here, I think I'll give you a break."

"I'll try not to let Cassandra see it," she said pulling her blouse down a bit, "Unless you want me to teach her to shoot. Certainly keep that boyfriend of hers in line, if he's ever less than a perfect gentleman."

Janet smirked, then he face saddened somewhat, "Don't let Jack hear you joking about stuff like that."

Shepard nodded. She still hadn't gotten the full story on that from O'Neill, and she was still disinclined to ask about it. "Of course, Doc." Victoria turned to look at Cassandra closing the last of the curtains. She remembered the last time she saw the teen. The pep talk she gave her before her abduction by those NID assholes still stood out in her memory. She walked over to Liara and placed her hand on her shoulder.

"You really like that girl, yes?" Liara asked.

"Yes," replied Victoria, "She really helped me out last time I was here. I was in a terrible funk, and she knew just what to say to get me out of it."

"That is why you brought me here?" she asked. "To meet her?"

"That's one of the reasons," Shepard replied with a wink. "I also have a surprise."

"And what might that be?" Liara asked.

Shepard smiled, "First thing's first," she said. "Cassandra, I'd like to reintroduce to you to, Doctor Liara T'soni." With that she deactivated the mimetic imaging device, and Liara returned to her normal appearance with a shimmer.

Cassandra's jaw dropped, Shepard actually giggled. "Wow, your photo doesn't do you justice,"
Cassandra said.

"Victoria was sharing photos of me now?" Liara asked with a wry expression. "So much for secrecy."

Shepard shrugged, "What can I say? You are my kryptonite." Cassandra chuckled, Liara didn't get the reference.

Doctor Fraiser approached, "Not that I need to remind you, Cassandra," she said, "but you can never, ever, tell anyone about this."

"Like I can't tell them I'm not really from Canada?"

"Touché," Janet smiled.

Shepard favored Liara with a peck on the cheek, and said, "I need to ask Jack something. Be right back." She left Liara and Cassandra to chat. They seemed to have hit it off rather well. Liara had never actually had the opportunity to interact with juvenile humans, and Cassandra had definitely never had the opportunity to interact with an Asari.

She made her way into the kitchen where O'Neill was chatting with General Hammond. "Did you get them?" she asked.

He handed her the two ring boxes and the invoice. She didn't even look at the invoice as she shoved it into one of her pockets. That got a bob of the eyebrows from Jack. Popping one of the boxes open her face lit up with an enormous smile. "Excellent, though I still would have preferred iridium," she said. Much to Jack's surprise she wrapped an arm around him in a hug. "I really appreciate your help with this."

"Of course, Shepard," Jack didn't know what else to say. "So, you're just going to up and pop the question?"

Shepard smiled. She hadn't really thought about it that hard. Calling it a question wasn't really accurate, there was no doubt in her mind that Liara would say yes. Actually, Shepard caught herself, she might say no because she already considered this a settled issue. But that's different. "Something like that," she decided to say. She turned to General Hammond, "Thanks for being here, sir. Also, thanks for understanding. I felt a bit deceptive, what with the semantics."

"That's fine, Commander," Hammond said evenly. "I'm glad I could be here for you."

Shepard smiled, "Then let's do this." Victoria centered herself and walked out of the kitchen and towards Liara and Cassandra. She cast a knowing look to Fraiser and Carter and they fell silent and smiled. Liara felt everyone's demeanor change and observed Shepard. She smiled, knowingly. Of course she would figure it out, Shepard thought, she's way smarter than I'll ever be.

She needed to say something; something epic, something uplifting, something they could tell all those little blue children about some day. Try as she did, though, nothing came to mind. Shepard's feelings towards Liara were just those, feelings; hard to verbalize. Then she realized that she didn't need to, not for Liara. The moment they joined she would know. She always knew.

Saying it aloud, though, somehow made it more real, and it certainly was the only way the others would know what was happening. But what to say? She remembered her N7 training, improvise, adapt, overcome! She smiled, she would wing it, banzai!

"Liara T'soni," Shepard said hiking up her skirt and lowering herself to one knee. Her knee popped
loudly and she winced, *damn* Cerberus *cartilage*. "I think you know what I'm about to say, but I feel it strongly enough to say it aloud." Liara smiled. *Here goes!*

"For the past several years, our lives have been one horrifying experience after another. I've never experienced as much fear and uncertainty in all my life, including Elysium, than I did fighting the Reapers. But, through it all, there has been one constant that gave me strength enough to not only survive but to prevail.

"You gave me that strength, Liara. You gave me a reason to keep fighting. You gave me hope when I felt only hopelessness. You gave me joy from joylessness. You gave me a second chance at life, literally," a tear appeared at the corner of her eye. "I've known I wanted this since the day I met you on Therum. And I'm pretty sure you feel the same way," she winked and Liara smirked.

"Liara T'soni," she said reaching into a pocket on her skirt, "be my wife. Embrace eternity with me," she said with a wink. She removed the wedding band from the small felt box and slipped it onto Liara's finger. It fit perfectly; Shepard's omni-tool had made a good measurement after all.

In retrospect, if Shepard had it all to do over again, she would have kept the speech more positive, but Liara didn't seem to care. She simply smiled and said, "Of course, Shepard. Was there ever any doubt?" Shepard handed Liara the other ring and she placed it on the woman's finger. They kissed and, to their surprise, everyone burst into applause. *I'd almost forgotten they were here,* Shepard thought to herself.

Shepard was bliss.

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"I was not delirious!" Liara said with mock indignation. "I was merely confused." Liara was absolutely glowing with joy, she hadn't been this happy since she opened her eyes in the gate room those several months ago to see her Victoria and know that the gestalt had kept its promise; delivered on its vow. Now she found herself sitting with the members of SG-1, General Hammond, Doctor Fraiser, Cassandra Fraiser, and her wife sharing a delicious dinner and telling stories of times past. *Goddess! My wife!* thought Liara with joyful realization. Of course there had been no ceremony, no laying of hands, no singing with friends, no commitment bracelets; but they were wed, regardless. Despite the rings, there hadn't been a human ceremony either; but Liara was okay with that. It was the thought that counted, and they had friends, *new friends*, to share the moment with. She smiled and looked at Shepard.

"Whatever you say, Liara," Shepard chided. "Just like you *intended* to lock yourself in that security bubble?"

"How else would I be saved by you?" Liara said with a wink.

"Nice one, Doctor Münchausen," Jack quipped.

*That's an odd human word,* Liara thought. She turned to ask Shepard what it meant and she beat her to it, "Ask me later," she said shooting Jack a look.

"So, that's how you met?" Cassandra asked. "That sounds dramatic."

"And not at all romantic," Doctor Fraiser chimed in.

"You had to be there," Shepard quipped. Liara merely smiled. *It was dramatic, but it was also romantic in a way. Shepard coming to the rescue, as she always does.*
Liara watched Shepard return her attention to her meal; something called Portobello steak. In general Shepard tried avoid meat in her meals, especially 'steak'. It conjured too many vivid horrific memories. Liara wondered why this was different. Either way, it was delicious.

Liara looked at Major Carter, "You cannot tell me that SG-1 has not had its fair share of dramatic rescues."

Major Carter took a deep breath and puffed out her cheeks, "Oh, I think you could say we've had more than our fair share. That's for sure." Teal'c merely arched an eyebrow.

"How about you, Victoria?" she asked innocently.

_Uh-oh_, Liara thought as she observed the most transient of twitches from her mate. Her eyes flashed to Colonel O'Neill. He saw it too. Neither Liara nor Shepard believed in sugar coating or denying their past experiences, despite the sometimes painful memories. At the same time, though, they didn't usually just bring them up in conversation. Liara knew how much pain Shepard carried from her war experiences. She knew how hard she tried not to show her sadness to others. She always made sure to knock the surveillance camera in their room out of position before quietly whimpering herself to sleep. Sometimes not so quietly, face pressed between her breasts as she sobbed. But she also knew that Cassandra was just a child, and she didn't need to know such things. Right?

Victoria finished chewing, swallowed, placed her utensils on the table, and folded her hands in her lap. She looked at Cassandra with a smile which betrayed none of her inner-anguish and said, "Vermire was a tough scrape. Though, I already told you about how that one ended," her tone flattened ever so slightly at the end of that sentence. She paused, and then continued, "Though, I think Joker pulling me out of the Bahak system before I blew it up would probably take the cake for epic rescues."

The room was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Everyone, with the exception of Cassandra, knew about the Alpha Relay Incident and what Shepard forced herself to do at Bahak. They all knew, though not as intimately as Liara did, how much pain that decision caused her. So they were all surprised when Victoria smiled warmly at the teenager and continued, "It's my sincere hope, Cassandra, that you live a long and peaceful life where you need never worry about things like that. Your mom, the men and women of the SGC, Liara, and I all work very hard, every day, to make sure that's the case. We all love you that much." She winked, "So next time Janet grounds you for something, cut her some slack. She's only doing it because she cares."

_Goddess, Shepard_, Liara thought, _you never cease to amaze me_. Watching Shepard interact with Cassandra, she could feel that _something_ stirring within her soul. She wasn't yet sure what that feeling was, but she was experiencing it more and more lately.

"Thank you for saying that," Doctor Fraiser said. She looked at Cassandra, "See? I only ground you because I care. I must care for you a whole lot," she said poking her daughter playfully in the ribs.

Shepard smiled. Liara glanced down at her mate's left hand that she held beneath the table. She clutched a bunch of her skirt in her fist, her knuckles white with the pressure of her grip. Liara's eyes went wide.

The rest of the dinner went smoothly. The group shared stories of happier times past, drank wine, and laughed; Liara even played a melancholy song on the piano much to everyone except Shepard's surprise. After the meal was done Janet served coffee and dessert. Liara's eyes went wide when she was presented with a piece of blueberry pie a la mode. _Goddess! What is this made of?_
"Trust me, Liara," Shepard said, "you'll love it."

"Yeah, it's Shepard's favorite, she's insatiable," opined Jack with a wicked grin on his face.

General Hammond gagged and coffee dribbled from his nose before he could wipe it away and conceal his smile. Shepard turned bright crimson, and Jackson and Carter chuckled despite themselves. Teal'c regarded his own piece of pie for a moment, looked at Liara, and arched an eyebrow.

_Not even Joker was this bad_, Liara thought to herself.

All laughing aside, the time finally came for them to part ways for the evening. They made their farewells and Liara, Shepard, and Daniel made their way towards the door. Doctor Jackson had agreed to be their chauffeur this evening, on the condition that Shepard earn her driver's license at the earliest possible moment.

Liara hugged Cassandra goodbye and whispered in her ear, "Thank you for being there for Shepard before she was taken. It helped her immeasurably. I am very grateful."

Cassandra smiled, "No problem. I'm happy I finally got to meet you. Will we see you again?"

"Oh, I imagine so," said Doctor Fraiser. She turned to watch Cassandra walk back towards the kitchen, "Oh, Shepard."

Victoria lookup from offering Liara her coat, "Yes, Doctor?"

"Thanks for what you said to Cassie," she paused, "and what you didn't."

Shepard nodded. "Sure Doc, no problem." Victoria placed her hands in her pocket and her eyes went wide, "Oh! I almost forgot." She discreetly pressed two small reddish stones into Janet's hands. She leaned in close and whispered into her ear, "For you and Cassie. I pocketed them on Mars."

Struck speechless, Doctor Fraiser could only watch as Shepard kissed her wife and reactivated the camouflage device. "After you my love," she smiled and motioned to the door.

Liara smiled, and blushed beneath Tracy Westerholm's face.

They rode the elevator down to the SGC in silence, Shepard's arm wrapped lovingly around Liara's shoulder. They decided to spare Tracy any scandal, and deactivated the mimetic imaging device the moment they entered the elevator to the SGC. Liara looked down at her delicate blue hand. The platinum wedding band contrasted beautifully with her skin.

She had always considered herself Shepard's bondmate, _wife_, ever since the night before they dropped on Ilos. It was her first time with Shepard, her first time _period_, but she was sure. Shepard liked to joke that the bond took all of the guesswork out of dating, but she was right. Not only was she sure that first night, but she knew Shepard was just as certain. Alas, they had been overtaken by events.

War, war crimes, two years of death, resurrection, suicide missions, atrocities, incarceration, more war, more atrocities; the universe, it seemed, did not want to give Liara time with her beloved. It took a nearly incomprehensible fit of _space magic_ to bring her here and back together with her mate; after a fashion, but she tried not to think about the whole doppelgänger thing. She would never complain, she had what she wanted, but it certainly gave her an _appreciation_ for what she had.
Shepard leaned over and kissed one of her blue scalp folds. Liara smiled, she was mildly ticklish on her scalp. Shepard was so tender, so loving. Liara leaned her head into the crook of Shepard's collar and sighed with joy. She looked at the ring again, she was so in love. Shepard had made the evening perfect. An escape from the mountain, a lovely evening with friends, the romantic gesture of the rings, *I'm glad I didn't peek at the secret last time we joined;* it was all so perfect, and peaceful. Even with the goa'uld threat, this place was whole and undamaged compared to where she had come from. Then there was Cassandra. Liara recalled Victoria's interactions with teenager, her heart warmed. *Victoria was good with kids, no doubt about it.* That something stirred within her once more.

Shepard squeezed her and broke her introspection. She looked down with a smile, Liara's heart fluttered. The elevator door opened and they began walking towards their quarters. Liara dredged her memory from the other place. She could only remember fragments, but she knew she loved her baby. She knew she wanted more, lots more. She wanted what Victoria offered her, to be the new Athame of this world; mother of a new Asari race. She wanted those children badly, she wanted them with Victoria, and she wanted them now.

Shepard opened the door to their quarters and held it open for her. No sooner had the door clicked shut did Liara pivot quickly and, with a flash of biotics, propel Shepard to their bed. Victoria landed with a loud grunt. She looked back at her with surprise upon her face. Pausing only long enough to click the lock on the door, Liara closed the distance to her beloved in a biotic storm and straddled her aggressively.

Victoria was too stunned to react while Liara gathered her collar in a bunch in her fist and pulled her lips to meet hers. Liara kissed Shepard deeply, she pinched her waist between her thighs, she inhaled her scent. Liara stopped and looked into the eyes of a completely astonished Commander Shepard, "Babies, now!" There was no doubt in her voice, nor was there any in her heart. She wanted children. She wanted them by Victoria. She wanted them now! "I thought we were going to wait," Shepard stammered. Liara was so intent on her objective she didn't notice how surprised and flustered Victoria actually was.

"I do not want to wait," she replied earnestly. "I am not afraid of the NID, or the SGC, or the Air Force, or anyone on this world. If they try to hurt our family I will destroy them. I am not afraid of the goa'ul'd, nor any of the other enemies the SGC has made. We bested the Reapers; we can beat anything this universe throws at us. I am not willing to let fear of something that might happen to us or our children prevent me having them when I know we will love them.

"You're certain?" Shepard asked as her face hardened in resolve.

"More certain that I have ever been before. I want to be the Athame of this world. I want to be the mother of a new Asari race. Do you love me?"

"Utterly and completely. I love you more than life itself. I am yours." Liara smiled, their current situation was certainly testament to that.

Liara smiled. She kissed Shepard again, more gently this time. A rich biotic glow enveloped them both, flickering wisps of static electricity arced from the metal bed frame to the floor and walls. "Embrace eternity."

Liara dove deeper into Shepard than she ever had since that moment in London. She traveled down the paths of Victoria's genetic memory, mapping out her beloved's DNA the way countless generations of her people had done before her. She could feel her strength, stretching back untold millennia to when the first primitive hominids had left their caves to claim the Earth for their
descendants. She sensed the independent streak and the thirst for adventure that ran in Shepard's blood; she was not the first Shepard to be drawn to space. It felt wonderful.

She could sense Shepard's essence, that unique spark that made Victoria the woman she loved and the hero of the galaxy. She basked in that sensation, treasuring what she had won for herself in a mate. *This is it! This is what I'll use*, Liara thought to herself. She took Shepard's core, Shepard's soul, unto herself. She explored each and every nuance, unfolding it in all of its glory, as she began the task of randomizing half of her genetic material.

Nervous systems fully attuned, the basis for her daughter identified, the process itself didn't take that long; perhaps a few seconds. But, once complete, the effects were profound. Providing the newly formed embryo implanted in her womb properly, and there were no unforeseen complications, she would be a mother again in just over ten months. *Then we can get started on all of your little sisters.*

Soon there would be a new Asari race in this galaxy; Liara would be its matriarch and Shepard its *patriarch* after a fashion. Liara opened her eyes and looked into Shepard's. Tears streamed down her pale freckled face, green eyes shimmered with the welling tears. Shepard was joy; pure, unspoiled, joy.

"I love you Victoria Shepard," Liara said with a smile, gently undressing her wife. Family matters concluded for now, Liara still wanted intimacy with her wife.

"And I you, Liara T'soni. Forever and always."

She let her wife undress her, and then she undressed Liara. They made love and joined for several hours.

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The surveillance camera, which they forgot to knock out of position as they usually did, observed the proceedings. The red LED light blinked silently as it recorded.
"Chevron three encoded," Chief Master Sergeant Harriman's voice boomed over the gate-room loudspeaker.

Commander Shepard looked up at the bespectacled man through the control room window, and then to her wife; her *wife*! She beamed her blue smile back at her, she was so excited. "Big day; ready?"

"Shepard," she said with a haughty cock of her head, "this is not the first archeological dig I have ever been on. I have been doing this since before you were born."

"And look where that got you," Shepard replied with a wink.

"You mean transported to another universe with the woman I love? I could do worse."

"Yes, I suppose we could," Shepard smiled. "You have all of your stuff?" She pointed to a rolling bin stacked high with gear and supplies. Liara would use her biotics to push it through the Stargate and to the SGC science encampment on the other side.

"I think there might be some room left for a sink," she smiled, "that is the correct expression?"

Shepard chuckled. "I meant the FN," she said, suddenly serious. Liara cocked her head and pouted. "It's just about as accurate as your Carnifex, but it doesn't have nearly the stopping power; aim for the head."

"You certainly have a way of talking to a woman," Liara said with no small annoyance. Then she placed her hand on the holster at her hip. She nodded.

"I just want you two to be safe," Shepard said. Shepard reached for Liara's abdomen but stopped herself.

"Not in public."

"I will not know if the pregnancy is stable for another week or so. But, we will be careful."

"I know you will."

"Chevron seven, locked!" Walter's voice boomed. *I completely tuned that out*, thought Shepard.

The Stargate opened with all of its usual brilliance and Shepard kissed Liara on her cheek. "Have a good day at the office. See you in a week."

"SG-8," Walter's voice called out, "You have a go."

The personnel of SG-8, which included Daniel Jackson for this mission, until now waiting quietly at a polite distance, started shuffling towards the event horizon. Liara enveloped the rolling bin in a mass effect field and pushed it effortlessly through the gate.

She walked up the ramp, turned back to Shepard, smiled, and said, "See you in a week, Mrs. T'soni." She smirked and, before Shepard could get a word in edgewise, stepped through the gate.

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Shepard shook her head with a smile as the Stargate disengaged. Then she turned to look up at the control room and nodded to Walter. "Ready when you are," she said. He wiped a smirk off of his face and began the dialing sequence. Victoria ran the mission details over in her mind; it was all fairly straightforward, *even that little side project for Carter*. She looked over at the cargo rover she
would be taking through the gate; it was loaded with all sorts of technology for Sam's science project.

Honestly, *that* was the only aspect of this mission that actually required her presence offworld, the rest of this trip could have easily been done from here at the SGC; or at the dig site by Liara's side, Shepard added for herself. She suspected, though, there were more than *technical* reasons for getting her out of the mountain. Hammond hadn't said anything directly, but someone was sowing discontent amongst the personnel of the SGC, and Shepard suspected who.

It had started innocently enough; odd looks, whispers, stomping out of the mess hall in a childish huff. Shepard couldn't blame them, or, at the very least, she could explain it away as normal reactions to seeing a human/Asari pair-bond for the first time. *Who doesn't react oddly when confronted with something new, after all?* The innocent morphed into the surprisingly childish; shaving cream in her locker, her bootlaces undone when she came back from the shower after a workout, the DVDs she'd purchased for the rec-room online scratched beyond use.

Then things had taken a turn for the slightly more sinister. Shepard had opened her equipment locker one day to find her combat knife's blade filed completely flat and utterly useless. Victoria especially abhorred tampering with other people's equipment. Granted, she didn't really need the knife. She could quite literally flense a person with a flick of her wrist using her omni-blade; but that wasn't the point. In the field you lived or died by your gear; something driven home for every Alliance Marine in the horrific explosive decompression drill they all affectionately called the 'eye popper'.

Up until then no one had directly assaulted her or her beloved, so Shepard was only mildly bothered. This behavior was potentially dangerous if left unchecked, but it was relatively harmless in and of itself. Then Liara had a shelf near the back of one of the SGC's plethora of storage rooms topple over onto her while she was researching for her upcoming dig. Her biotics made quick work of it, she even managed to prevent damage to any of the fragile artifacts, but that was the last straw. Victoria went absolutely ape-shit over the 'accident', and all but demanded the perpetrator's head on a pike; *she wanted him/her intact so she could put their head on it personally.* Unfortunately, somehow, there was no video record of that storage room or the adjacent corridor for the 18 hours leading up to the incident. Some 'technical glitch' had befallen the base's surveillance system.

Nothing had led back to the good Senator, of course. Nothing ever would, of that Shepard was sure. But she could feel it in her heavily-augmented bones that he was behind it. If he couldn't have her dead and dissected on a slab, it would seem that he would try to make her and her wife's life as miserable as possible. *And if one of them died in an accident, then they would have no choice but to dissect them; for science.* Victoria entertained herself for a moment with the image of what she might do to him if she ever caught him in a dark alley alone at night. *Fucking bigot, I will destroy you! Or so Jack - Jacqueline Nought, that is - would have said.* Colonel O'Neill had commented on how glad he was that the SGC's atomic arsenal was under such tight lock and key and robust permissive-action-links. He feared that Shepard might, quite literally, 'go nuclear' over this. That was, fortunately, hyperbole; *but only slightly.*

There had been one unexpected and charming exception to that trend, however. The base's Catholic chaplain, a bespectacled Jesuit who seemed to be even more upset about the mistreatment that was befalling them than *she* was, had befriended Liara and her, and they had enjoyed many a dinner conversation in their quarters in the SGC. Apparently he was fascinated by the parallels between the Holy Trinity, the Asari's life-stages, and the three aspects of the goddess Athame. He also shared similar tastes in literature as her, so they had something to talk about too, *plus he used his priest-credentials to bring wine to their dinners.* Victoria was seriously considering an offer to join the base choir at his invitation, too.
The engagement of the Stargate ended Shepard's introspection. *Time to work,* she was already counting the days until she would see Liara again. Victoria enveloped the cargo rover in a biotic field and pushed it through the event horizon ahead of her. She turned to look at Walter, "See you later, Walter. Leave the porch light on for us." He nodded and she stepped through the gate.

*That senile old fool!* Ba'al seethed.

He looked at the image transmitting from one of his ha'tak; the alluring blue woman had just exited the gate and was pushing a large cash of supplies about using some sort of ethereal blue glow.

"Low-energy event, m'lord," the disgusting Nerus said consulting a small instrument in his chubby hands. "I would posit that the tall human woman has exited the other target gate."

His quarry was in position; all he need do was spring the trap. But he couldn't, *not yet.*

Two ha'tak and their attendant al'kesh and embarked death gliders would have been *more* than enough to subdue a hundred, let alone a dozen of the tau'ri; but no! Lord Yu had chosen that very moment to launch an attack on his domain, pulling one of his mother ships out of position. The stealth tel'tak was no longer available either. Relieved by the ha'tak, low on consumables, it had begun its journey back to its home base. It would never be able to turn around in time to even offer surveillance until the mothership's return. Ba'al silently raged at himself for allowing the ship to be relieved, *those Jaffa should have stayed there until they were out of air!* If he couldn't launch simultaneous attacks on both locations, he would bide his time until he could. He didn't want to risk warning getting out.

*Damn that ancient has-been!*

Ba'al steepled his fingers and rested his chin upon them. He refused to allow his underling to see him upset. The distraction with Lord Yu's ships was over. Thankfully, it had only been what the tau'ri would have called a 'hit-and-run attack'. His ha'tak would be back into position soon enough, and he was a patient goa'uld. It was just that he would have *preferred* instant gratification. He would have also *preferred* to keep an eye on what the tall human was up to. *Not that it will matter,* he told himself. *Nothing that tall woman can do will save her from her fate.*

Victoria Shepard stepped out of the Stargate and looked around. The scenery was just as quiet and idyllic as when she last visited. *At least before I blew up that snake,* she added for herself with a sigh. She didn't see the welcoming committee she was promised, though. Instinct took over and she dropped to a knee behind the rover and brought her P90 up to her shoulder. Once again she was using *vintage* equipment; her biotics and omni-tool were the only items she had from the other place for this mission. *I swear, if Doctor Lee breaks my stuff, I'll kill him.*

Shepard noticed no signs of battle, no bodies, no craters, no splintered trees, no burnt grass; nothing to explain why Major Harper wasn't here to greet her like he was supposed to. Then she noticed a shrub that wasn't there last time she visited and smiled. "Nicely done Major," she said loudly enough to be heard, but got no response. Her smile widened further. Harper was playing it by the book. "Bull dog!" she shouted the challenge.

"Chesty!" she heard the reply, but from a different shrub than she expected. The Marine appeared from a concealed firing position with a modest grin on his face. "Howdy, ma'am."

"Major," Shepard nodded, "looks like you've been busy."
He walked up to her as he slung his M4 carbine, complete with under-barrel M203 grenade launcher, over his shoulder, "Started digging shortly after you left last time, Commander. Didn't much care for you sneaking up on us like you did."

"Wait, I thought you had this area salted with sensors." She looked around. Here and there she could see the odd, very well hidden, plastic module sticking up out of the ground.

"They were concentrated further in towards the base, and don't always work, Commander," he replied. "Now I've got eyes on the gate and a buried hardline for communications back to the main camp. We've even got claymores set up on command line. We can blow them from camp."

"Very busy." Victoria smiled. She always enjoyed working with professionals.

"Like I said, I didn't like being surprised." Major Harper smiled. Shepard arched an eyebrow, she had never seen this much emotion out of the Marine before; definitely not this much positive emotion at any rate. Granted, Corporal Jones' prognosis had just been improved noticeably, and he had been released from the burn ward, so that must have been a relief for his former commander, but Victoria wondered if there was something else at play as well.

"Well," Victoria said slinging her P90, "I come bearing gifts." She pointed to the cargo rover. "Compliments of Major Carter and the engineering unit, plus a couple of surprises," she smiled. Not that she expected any shenanigans offworld, but Shepard had packed a few goodies for this site's personnel as a way of saying hello. "Shall we?"

"Follow me, Commander," Major Harper said. Shepard enveloped the rover in a mass effect field and effortlessly pushed it towards the camp.

After a quick pit-stop at the mess-tent dropping off mail and the evening's dinner, Chinese take-out from City Wok in Colorado Springs, the cargo rover rolled to a halt in one of the corrugated metal hanger structures at the offworld airbase. Shepard looked over at one of the 'Predator' drone aircraft as the biotic field enveloping the rover dissipated with a faint pfft. Shit, it's the fucking dark ages here, she thought.

Harper helped Shepard pull the plastic tarp off of a large plastic case absolutely covered with SGC stencils; variations on fragile and do not drop. The Major eyed it inquisitively. "Smaller than I would have thought."

"Yes. Doctor Lee managed to build it employing some of the same diamond compound as in the thermal clips in my weapons; quite a bit more thermal protection for a given volume. Plus it's pretty robust, so the box needed less padding. The unit itself is a bit bigger than you would think to look at the case." Major Harper nodded approvingly.

To use a local colloquialism, Shepard's spidy-senses were tingling. Major Harper wasn't quite acting warmly towards her, but that cold detachment she'd sensed from him every time she'd met him previously seemed to have been noticeably dialed back. She was wondering if she should just come out and ask him what changed, or wait until she rotated home and ask Liara to look into it when she caught a whiff of Chinese food.

"What's in the box?" a new voice from behind Shepard.

Victoria glanced at Major Harper who rolled his eyes, then she turned to see a member of the science staff with wire-rimmed glasses, slicked-back hair tied in a ponytail, and an annoyed expression on his face. He held one of the takeout containers and a pair of disposable chopsticks in his hands. This
must be the guy Sam warned me about, Victoria thought. "Doctor Kavanagh, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Commander Shepard." Shepard plastered her most charming smile on her face and held out her hand.

To his credit Peter Kavanagh's body language became slightly less cocky and he accepted her hand. "Commander," he said. "What's in the box?" he asked in a moderately less annoyed tone.

Harper's eyes narrowed. "That better not be all of the beef and broccoli, Doctor," Kavanagh recoiled visibly.

Victoria instantly evaluated this scientist as not worth the effort that it would require to crush his spine. Carter, and to a lesser extent Doctor Lee, had both told her that Pete Kavanagh was the type of colleague that you only tolerated because he was competent enough to do his job and had the required security clearance to do it in the first place. Both of which in combination were pretty rare commodities when you got down to it. The man had almost zero in the way of 'people skills', so no one complained when he had been assigned for extended offworld research positions. If someone could figure out a way to ship him to another galaxy they'd jump at it.

"This," Shepard patted the case gently, "is one of your surveillance satellites, Doctor Kavanagh," Shepard said amicably, you should know this already, "we'll be putting it into orbit tomorrow morning."

Kavanagh huffed, just like Carter said he would, "That's impossible. We don't have the 302's we need to deploy satellites."

"I know," Shepard said with a smile. "That's why I'm here."

"I don't see how that's going to help," he said as he pushed his glasses up on his nose.

God, this guy is such a douche bag I've only known him for 45 seconds and I can just tell he belongs in the DB-file, was all that Shepard could think. "The briefing materials are in the crate, Doctor," Victoria said with a mild edge to her voice. She pointed to another similarly marked crate, "You'll recall another delivery came through a few days ago. One of those crates contains the booster motor off of an old ASM-135 anti-satellite missile. You're a PhD, you can make the necessary deductive leap." Victoria turned to look at Harper, "You know, it's amazing what was just lying around on the shelves after that Cold War of yours ended. It's plain crazy."

Harper shrugged, then he stepped forward and looked Kavanagh in the eyes, "The guidance/propulsion unit needs to be integrated with the satellite, heat shield, and aerodynamic shroud before launch, Doctor," he reached out and grabbed the food carton. Obviously agitated to see that it was empty, the Major continued, "Instructions are in the case, lots of pictures, think Ikea; might even use an Allen-key or two. Our launch window opens at dawn, get it done."

The two officers walked out of the hangar as Kavanagh grumbled to himself. "Is that guy half the asshole I think he is?" asked Shepard.

"Don't even get me started." Major Harper smirked.

"I brought three quarts of beef and broccoli, by the way."

"Oh, that's a relief."

Their next stop was the command hut. Aside from the corrugated metal walls, the interior actually looked quite similar to the SGC, if a little bit smaller. "We've been reinforced. Now I've got a Marine
squad with the heavy weapons you shipped in in addition to SG-5 on-planet, plus some specialty headquarters-type personnel; those folks will work out of here. We've got all of our remote sensors tied into this building, as well as flight ops when we finally get our fighters emplaced," Harper said. "We've also got the fail safe system installed over here," he pointed to a computer console with a key-secured terminal.

"What are you wired to?" Victoria asked looking at the setup, it reminded her of the self-destruct terminal they had in the SGC back on Earth.

"1.1 kiloton device under the floor," he replied, "used to be an atomic artillery shell. Another item we had lying on a shelf after the Cold War ended, to borrow a phrase. It's under enough earth that it can't be dug out before the timer would go off, but it's still enough to crater this whole installation. Probably start a serious forest fire unless it's raining heavily too."

Shepard nodded, "Arming sequence?"

"Two-man rule," Harper responded, "I have a key, as well as the next two highest ranking permanently assigned officers on-post. You don't get a key, ma'am, since you're only here temporarily. Once it's armed it's on a 6 hour dead-man failsafe, if we don't set the timer for something shorter. Advancing the timer can be done by the base commander alone or the next two officers in concert. One of us has to input our code every six hours or the bomb goes off. That's about how long it would take to dig the damn thing out, best we can figure. It can't be fully disarmed unless we get a disarm code from the SGC."

"Not to argue with you, Major," Shepard replied, "but that's fail-deadly, not failsafe." Harper arched an eyebrow in response. "Sorry, that phrase has always been a pet peeve of mine." She looked at the Major and shrugged. "Still, I like it. It would certainly be a nasty surprise for any Jaffa who want to steal your airbase. Or, at least, toss it thoroughly for intel after wiping you guys out."

"Yes, ma'am. I can show you to the bunks if you like ma'am, sun will be down soon."

"Lead on, Major."

They walked across camp towards a row of large tents. They weren't quite the pre-fab units of her time but Victoria was impressed by the level of sophistication that even this austere post enjoyed. Shit, is that air-conditioning? Victoria was also still somewhat taken aback by Major Harper's behavior. This wasn't the cold, aloof officer she had met several times around the SGC; he seemed animated and almost warm. What is this guy's deal? She had to know, was it the whole Jones thing? "I'm glad Jones is feeling better." Harper stiffened momentarily. Shepard's eyebrow jumped. "I'm sorry for…"

"Forget about it," Harper said curtly. "I'll show you to your bunk. Like I said, it's almost sundown, and we're on the equator; it gets dark here very quickly." Victoria followed where she was led, mulling over what she had just learned. Harper was obviously very sore about what had happened to SG-5, especially so when it came to Corporal Jones. "I've put you in the female tent. You happen to be the only military woman on-planet at the moment, the rest of your bunkmates are scientists." Harper pointed to one of the tents. "That's the latrine," he pointed to another, "and the shower," another still. "You've already seen the mess tent and the hangar. There is a shelter between the command post and the mess tent; glorified pillbox, really. Fighting positions are littered about the perimeter. First briefing is at 0400, see you then."

With that he turned to walk back towards the mess tent, presumably to try to get some take-out before it was all gone. He stopped short, "Oh. So you know. I'm glad Doctor T'soni is ok." He paused, then continued, "And you don't need to worry. There won't be any of those pranks here."
He smirked and turned away.

*What is his deal?*

Shepard opened the door, *this tent had an actual door*, and entered her bunk. The lighting was low, and one of the science staff was lounging in her bed reading a paperback novel. She waved hello. Shepard didn't know her, but she waved back nonetheless. Victoria recognized her bunk immediately; someone had draped a makeshift flag over it depicting a rattlesnake exploding under a blue lightning bolt. She chuckled and kicked her boots off. Laying down on her bunk she pulled a photograph of Liara out of her pocket and looked at it. She sighed and smiled, *one week, see you soon.*

Nearly two thousand light years away Liara T'soni kicked her boots and socks off and crawled into her tent; it wasn't nearly as advanced as Shepard's, but she didn't mind. Considering some of the planets she had visited, having a tent to sleep in at all was saying something. Not needing to worry about varren was a bonus. She was almost too excited to sleep, they would be opening up the main chamber in the morning, but she knew better. Fatigue could make you miss things on a dig, and that was unacceptable. Liara's excitement was tempered somewhat, though. She missed Shepard already. *See you in a week, beloved,* she thought as she curled up into her sleeping bag. Then she ran her hands gently over her abdomen, *good night little one.*

*She paints her toe nails?* Ba'al found himself increasingly fascinated by the blue creature he saw through the long range communications device. The blue woman disappeared into her tent and Ba'al deactivated the video. This went beyond his desire to edge out the other System Lords, to find a strategic advantage over them through her. She was so *alluring.* He had to have her. He steepled his fingers and rested his chin upon them in thought. Preparations here were nearly complete; just one last detail which he would attend to presently. Then all that was left was to capture them.

He turned to his First Prime. "How long before my ha'tak is in position above the tall woman?"

"Less than a day my Lord."

"Excellent."

Ba'al leaned back in his throne and pondered the situation. For millennia the struggle amongst the goa'uld System Lords was a trying, if predictable, grind. His Jaffa would take territory from his rivals, some of his territories would be taken back, alliances would form and be broken, the resolve of the Asgard and their 'Protected Planets Treaty' would be tested, it was all very routine; but now things were different. The tall human woman and the blue beauty had changed the equation. He was certain that they were responsible for the *unknown events* that the chappai'ai were reporting, and the disastrous new weapon the tau'ri were deploying. The whole strategic balance was shifting. He had to do *something* to maintain his dominance amongst the System Lords!

He was. His forces were moving into position. Soon he'd have ha'tak in place to capture the human and the blue creature, *just as soon as I can take them both at once,* he thought to himself. But there was also one other gambit he wished to play. Something that might be more useful in the long run than just a new destructive weapon to use against his goa'uld rivals. *It was time.*

"Summon Nirrti," Ba'al commanded.

"Yes m'lord," his First Prime responded.
A few moments later the renegade goa'uld Nirrti was led into the throne room. Head held high in haughty defiance she met his gaze. "Ba'al, what is the meaning of this insult? Release me at once."

Ba'al, despite himself, smiled. Nirrti was roughly persona non grata amongst the goa'uld, yet she still behaved every inch the System Lord. Despite his distaste for her methods and her penchant for treachery, Ba'al could see enjoying this working relationship. After all, she was easily his match in intellect, even if her proficiencies leaned more towards the biological sciences rather than the technical. Still, that wasn't going to stop him from rubbing it in a little. "Watch your tongue Nrrti," else I inform the rest of the System Lords where you've been hiding?" She moved to retort but he cut her off with his deep warbling voice, "Silence! I have use for you, despite your treachery. Perhaps when your work is done you shall go free," he paused, "Without the others learning of where you're headed next." He let that hang there. Nirrti was smart. However irksome she found defacto imprisonment by Ba'al, she preferred it to what some other goa'uld might want for her.

"And what does the great Lord Ba'al wish in return for his most generous hospitality?" she choked out the words. I will make this cretin pay for this, someday, her thoughts plain on her face.

Ba'al stood with a grin and strode out of his throne room with a swish of his robes. He motioned Nirrti to follow him with an infuriatingly casual flick of his wrist. Determined not to show weakness, Nirrti didn't move for a few seconds; when she did stride from the room she held her head high and allowed her gown to trail regally behind her. Ba'al's First Prime took up the rear, providing exactly the level of menace his lord demanded from him while maintaining the requisite level of respect any Jaffa should show one of their gods.

The two goa'uld entered a large chamber at the end of a long corridor. Nirrti immediately recognized it as a biology lab. She also immediately recognized the device taking up the center of the room, but she kept her face as passive as possible. Thousands of years as a System Lord had given her enough practice to maintain her royal aloofness despite the surprise.

"I know you recognize this piece of technology," said Ba'al with an infuriating smile on his face. "You, no doubt, are familiar with its operation?"

Nirrti knew when she was bested, "It is a DNA re-sequencing device. I am aware of their existence," she said trying not to give too much information away. Ba'al's tone implied that he knew she had a similar device in a secret lab hidden way on a distant world. But she didn't need to confirm his suspicions. She looked about the room. The lab setup was impressive. Bio-containment units, energy barriers for containing specimens, a cryogenics unit, the re-sequencing device; with this equipment Nirrti could perform quite a bit of research. Ba'al looked at her expectantly, he's up to something. "What is it that you want me to do with this lab?"

"Continue your hok'tar research, of course," he responded with a grin. He held up a hand at her feigned surprise, "Do not act like we don't know what you've been trying to do all of these centuries. I wish to help. So that we may," he paused for dramatic effect, "both reap the benefits of your labors."

Nirrti longed for the day where she could kill this pig. But it did get her thinking. "You have something beyond just this laboratory setup, don't you?"

Ba'al smiled again and stepped towards a computer console. He input a few commands and a hologram appeared in the air above them. "This image was taken by one of my scout ships. We'll be able to capture her soon."

Despite all of the self-control developed over untold centuries, Nirrt's jaw dropped. The image
showed a beautiful blue woman with a sweeping scalp dressed in the clothing favored by the tau'ri. She appeared to be waving her arm about as it glowed an eerie orange. The tau'ri Daniel Jackson stood at her side. "What is this?" she barely managed to get past her lips.

"That, my dear Nirrti," Ba'al said with a smug smile on his face, "may be our new hok'tar." He paused, "If you think you're up to it."

They both looked at the hologram and smiled.
Shepard bolted awake. Her heart pounded, her lungs clawed for air. She looked around, assessed her surroundings. She was in her bunk in the female tent. She was safe. It was ok. She wiped the cold sweat from her brow. Her breathing slowed, as did her heart rate. It had been Elysium; the last night of the Blitz. She had just set fire to the Batarian field-hospital and she was gunning those fuckers down. \textit{Well, kneecapping them; she nearly gotten off on listening to them howl as they burned to death.} It was funny; she had enjoyed that engagement to no end when it had happened. Now, however, she still struggled with what she had become during the battle. The nightmares had become less frequent, thankfully; well, the nightmares of the \textit{Blitz} at least. Last night's dreams, however, were particularly vivid. \textit{It must be because Liara isn't here.} she thought. Shepard pondered for a moment if it was merely a subconscious effect on her part, or if her wife was actually actively stabilizing her during her sleep. Perhaps she was joining her in her dreams through the bond? \textit{No, she would tell me if she was. Right?}

Victoria looked at her watch. There was no sense in trying to get back to sleep. She had just enough time to run a few lengths up and down the airfield, shower, and eat before the morning briefing. Then they got to play \textit{missile command}, as Colonel O'Neill had put it. Shepard dressed in her PT gear, a Navy SEAL t-shirt, shorts, and one of those hilarious reflective belts, and laced up her boots. She went through her stretching routine in silence outside of her tent listening to the base around her. She could hear a few diesel generators, but otherwise there was an unearthly calm about the installation. \textit{Well, we're not on Earth, are we?}

Victoria ran the length of the grass strip runway looking at the dark sky. The constellations were different; this world was quite a ways away from the Local Cluster. Still, without any light pollution the stars were brilliant, and she couldn't help but smile at the view. She wished for a moment that she could take Liara here and stargaze with her, perhaps make up their own names for these new constellations. More likely just make love for hours under the twinkling lights. She smiled widely and ran just a little bit faster.

As she was running across the width of the runway she heard a buzzing noise and dove for the ground as one of the Predator drone aircraft came in for a landing nearly striking her. \textit{No pranks my ass.} The drone flared, touched down, ran out, taxied to the hangar, and powered down. Shepard stood, dusted herself off, resumed her run towards the drone, and watched as the hangar door opened up and a few airmen came out to push the aircraft inside. Out of her peripheral field of view a sliver of light formed at the door to the command center and a figure came out and started running to the hanger. Victoria picked up her pace.

Shepard was almost in ass-chewing range when she heard Harper's voice, "What the fuck are you idiots thinking? You almost ran her over!"

"I thought it was one of those squirrel things that lives in the hills," another voice. Shepard slowed her run.

"Wearing a Navy SEAL shirt and reflective belt? Are you fucking retarded? And even if it was a
"squirrel you could have broken the drone. Who the hell put you up to this?"

"It was an accident, sir."

"I don't think so, you stupid shit! I have repeaters of all of your landing displays in the command center, or did you idiots forget. I saw you aim right for her. Or are you going to tell me you accidentally shut off the autopilot and botched your landing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir." Shepard pulled up to a stop just outside of the hangar.

"Listen to me," Harper said in a frighteningly soft voice, "clear as a fucking bell. I don't care what sort of bullshit people have been pulling against the Commander and her wife back at The Mountain. There will be none of it here. Do you understand me?"

There was a pause.

"What do you see in that dyke anyway?"

Silence.

Shepard moved with purpose.

Suddenly she was between Major Harper and the unruly airman who had apparently tried to run her down with the Predator. He looked like that man who stormed out of the mess hall in a huff when Liara first arrived. Victoria immediately evaluated him as a non-threat without the help of his UAV, but that didn't mean he couldn't ruin Harper's career if his face tried to occupy the same space and time as his fist. Which was exactly where this conversation looked like it was going; Harper was a coiled viper poised to strike, his fist balled and ready. Victoria still couldn't quite figure Harper out, but he seemed pretty keen on kicking these men's asses over her. Too bad she wasn't going to let him.

"Morning fellas," Victoria said amicably. "Great weather for fly'n, huh?"

With nearly two meters and 80 kilos worth of Shepard between Harper and the drone operators things defused rapidly. Deep down Victoria doubted that they had learned their lesson, but she didn't think they'd cause her any more trouble while she was here. Bullies, after all, were cowards, striking at weakened targets when success was assured by weight of numbers or surprise. If their prey was expecting it, or worse, had super powers that could turn a man inside out, they tended to back off. Victoria was somewhat surprised, though. She had figured part of her offworld assignment was to get her away from the pranksters, not drive her into their path. She might need to have a talk with Hammond about how far spread this problem actually was, and if he was aware of it. Hopefully Liara wasn't stranded offworld with a similar batch of malcontents.

Major Harper ordered the airmen to complete their processing of the drone and to prepare the other for sortie as planned and left the hangar with Commander Shepard. He would undoubtedly file this incident in a report, as would Shepard, but she would be very surprised if it actually amounted to anything. These assholes had a very powerful patron, not that he would admit it.

Sunrise was still an hour off, and the moons weren't up, but Shepard didn't need her enhanced night vision to see how pissed off he was. "Don't sweat it, Major."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am," he snapped. He took a breath, held it, then let it out. "Sorry. Begging your pardon ma'am, but I can't not sweat it. Those men nearly killed you. On purpose."
"Better men, and drones, have tried and failed." Harper chuckled. "At least you can laugh about it. There's still hope for you."

"Sorry, ma'am. But it's not acceptable how they've been treating you and the Doctor."

"No Major, but this wasn't your fault. This goes higher than you," she left it at that.

"I don't like that sound of that."

"Nope." Shepard paused. "Major, I don't blame you for that. And I'm sorry for doing whatever it is that I did to upset you in the first place." Victoria watched Harper stiffen slightly, but continued, "I do appreciate you going to bat for me back there, but I'm not going to let you ruin your career over it; no matter how much those assholes deserve to have their teeth kicked in. I'm not going to let any of this get in the way of us doing our job. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Outstanding. I'm going to grab a shower and some chow. I'll see you at the briefing at 0400."

After the stuff Shepard had already dealt with this morning, the 0400 briefing was a bit of an anticlimax. Major Harper ran down the day's events for the rest of his command staff and the relevant parties in the science unit.

Shortly after dawn a modified reconnaissance satellite would be launched using the booster rocket from a Cold War-era anti-satellite missile. Normally the missile would be carried aloft by an F-15 fighter jet, and wouldn't itself be capable of orbital velocities, but that's where Shepard came in. Major Carter, Doctor Lee, and Commander Shepard had crunched some numbers back at the SGC and they theorized that Victoria could envelop the booster/satellite assembly in a mass effect field that would reduce its mass sufficiently, by approximately a factor of five at launch and for most of the main propellant burn, for the rocket to propel it into orbit about the planet. If this process worked, they could try it on other worlds using some of the other remaining boosters from the ASAT program, or purpose-built new ones. They would no longer be tethered to worlds visited by their own spacecraft for orbital resources.

All of the military personnel were impressed if a bit skeptical, as were most of the science staff. One member of the science team in particular, however, was rather vociferous in his objections. "This isn't going to work," said Peter Kavanagh.

"What makes you say that?" Shepard asked, not really caring what he said in response. They were going to do it, regardless of his objections; and it was probably going to work.

"This thing is going to be accelerating to a healthy fraction of orbital velocity before it can clear the atmosphere; do you have any idea how much heating that will cause?"

"A lot," Shepard responded. "Which is why you installed that new heat shield, or did you forget?"

"Which is made of what? Adamantium?"

"A diamond composite derived from my thermal clips. It's designed for exactly this."

Kavanagh didn't seem deterred. "Well, if it doesn't melt or incandesce, then the gee-forces will tear it apart."

"Why's that, Kavanagh?" Harper chimed in, "Lacking faith in your handiwork?"
"No. It's just that it's a lot of delta-vee for a very short burn-time on the booster. The gee-forces the rocket puts on the satellite are going to be insane."

"The mass effect field will reduce the satellite's mass to zero. Zero mass means zero force; you know, F=ma. It'll hold together until after burnout." This guy didn't need to know the details of how much mass reduction they were really talking about, now did he?

Kavanagh seemed about to say something else when Harper stepped in. "Doctor, the SGC believes this plan has a high probability of success. If it doesn't work, then we'll just have to wait until the 302's get here. So," he turned to look at Victoria, "I believe the historical phrase is, let's light this candle."

They walked outside to be greeted by the rising sun and a comically phallic-looking missile rig. "Seriously?" was all Shepard could muster.

"What?' asked Kavanagh. "You brought it."

"Yeah, but it was in a box," Shepard shook her head wondering what it was with the military and things that resembled penises, "Whatever, let's do this." She approached the missile and activated her omni-tool. It interfaced with the missile guidance system and the control unit in the command hut.

"This isn't going to work you know," Kavanagh said with a haughty tone of self-assured superiority, "this is crazy, even for Sam Carter."

"It does have a certain air of space magic to it," Shepard replied, "but I find that it's usually best to just shut up and roll with it in times like these. Besides, you wouldn't believe half the shit I pulled off during the war," she shrugged to no one in particular. Victoria was becoming increasingly annoyed with the scientist. She sincerely doubted Kavanagh's concern was over a potential waste of taxpayer money if they blew up a satellite in a failed launch attempt. No wonder they assigned this asshole to this base.

Shepard spoke into her comm-unit, "Harper, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Commander," Harper responded, "Telemetry reports a good link. We're ready when you are."

"Very well, Major. Here we go." Shepard looked at Kavanagh, "You don't want to be in the shelter for this?"

The doctor crossed his arms over his chest, "Actually, I'd really like to see if this works or not."

"Suit yourself, it's not like the booster is 25 years old or anything." Kavanagh's jaw dropped momentarily in realization. He started backing away, but not quickly enough. Victoria smirked to herself, your funeral. Then she remembered the other half of that historical line Harper had quoted, don't f*ck up Shepard.

Victoria summoned her biotic energy and enveloped the missile in a mass effect field. This task required more control than usual; an extended duration of effect at extreme distance was necessary, and she was trying to reduce the mass of something that was starting out at over 1,500 kilos. She needed the field to hold together long enough for the missile to achieve orbital velocity, and stay uniform enough so that differential forces didn't develop within the missile components and tear it apart. She had no doubt that Liara could have done it, my girl is so talented, but she was no slouch either. Satisfied that the field had formed and was stable, Shepard slapped the ignition button on her omni-tool. The Cold War-era ASM-135 booster ignited and the assembly disappeared from its launcher with a deafening sonic boom emanating from its hypersonic exhaust plume. Shepard and
Kavanagh were thrown flat on their asses and coughed as the wind was knocked from the lungs. Victoria looked skyward to see an exhaust trail arcing away with a point of light glowing brightly at its tip. *Holy shit, the damn thing works.*

"Go baby go!" she managed to wheeze past her lips.

Two thousand light years away, the night had passed uneventfully. By a welcomed quirk of staffing, none of the SGC malcontents had been assigned to run security on Daniel and Liara's dig site and, on the whole, the SGC Science Corps had proven itself slightly more laid back on the topic, so there were no problems like Victoria's near-miss with the glorified RC airplane.

Liara, Daniel, and the team had shared a delicious breakfast of fresh fruit that Liara had brought through the gate with her. *Shepard's idea,* Liara smiled to herself. She had to admit, these blueberries were quite tasty, *once you got past their off-putting color.* But breakfast was over now, and it was time to get to work. Liara was excited. She hadn't had the opportunity to do some real archeology in what the humans would consider to be quite some time. Though, for an Asari, it was really only the blink of an eye.

"You ready?" Daniel asked.

Liara smiled and consulted her omni-tool, "Yes, Daniel." She powered down the device and summoned her biotics. Gently she lifted and pried the cover stone away from the tunnel. Air hissed around its edges as atmospheric pressures equalized. It was over nearly as quickly as it began and Liara gently eased the stone aside and released it. She brought her omni-tool back up and activated the flashlight function. The light played along walls that had not been viewed by human eyes for thousands of years. She turned and smiled to Daniel, "This is fantastic. Thank you for sharing this find with me."

They entered the chamber.

"My Lord, your ha'tak has re-entered the target system and will soon be in orbit above the tall woman with the mysterious energy. There is no indication that they have anything that can detect the presence of your ships above them." Ba'al's First Prime kneeled before his god.

"Excellent," Ba'al responded, "Bring me the displays for the long range communication devices; I shall watch the operation from here. You may order the ships' captains to launch their attacks when ready."

Shepard didn't quite understand the disgusted looks she was getting. It was her professional opinion, based on data collected on dozens of worlds, that Chinese food was just as good, if not better, cold as it was hot. Using her biotics burned up a lot of calories, fortunately a whole quart of shrimp lo mein was left over from last night's dinner. *Uncultured primitives, or so Javik would say,* Shepard thought with an internal smile as she greedily slurped down the noodles. Victoria quietly shoveled the food into her mouth as she watched the science staff work on the telemetry gear in the command hut.

It so happened that the world they were on was rather large, and it would take some time for the satellite to come around again from the dark-side to complete its first orbit. Until it did, they would have no idea if it had successfully achieved the desired orbit or broken up during launch. The clock ticked down, it should happen any moment now.

"We've got a signal!" said a scientist. Kavanagh grumbled and discretely handed one of his
companions on the science team a $20 bill. Numbers scrolled across the screen. "Orbit looks good. I think we nailed it."

"Nicely done, Commander," said Major Harper. It wasn't the optimal orbit like they could have gotten it if dropped from a 302, but as a proof-of-concept it was pretty damned good!

As if on cue, an ominous red light began to blink. "What's that, Major?" asked Victoria pointing with her chopsticks.

"Proximity alert, we're detecting something big entering orbit."

Harper walked over to the main display and looked over the operator's shoulder. "Is it close enough for a visual?"

"Not quite, sir, this bird's a bit light on optics," the operator said, fingers dancing across the keys, "but LIDAR is painting it as a..." he trailed off has his skin blanched.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Shepard asked.

"The computer says it's a ha'tak and a couple of al'kesh." The room went quiet.

Shepard looked at Harper. *This world is lost*, there was no doubt in Shepard's mind. Somehow, *somehow*, the goa'uld had discovered this installation and they were coming down to take it from them. They didn't have the means to fight them off. Harper took a deep breath and sighed. He realized it too. It might have taken him a fraction of a second longer than Shepard, but she cut him a little slack. She had fought *way* more hopeless battles than he had; she had more experience at recognizing these sorts of odds. *That's a hell of a dubious distinction*, she thought.

"Can you calculate an ETA?"

"Just a moment, sir."

"Very well," Major Harper fished around within his shirt for his dog tag chain, "Lieutenant Renquest, produce your auto-destruct key, please."

A bespectacled Marine 1st Lieutenant, Harper's second in command at this post, swallowed hard but did not hesitate to step forward and pull a keychain from his shirt pocket. Shepard tried her best not to laugh at his 'birth control glasses'; this situation was just too dire, it would be inappropriate. As Harper approached the inappropriately named *failsafe* panel he turned to his communications officer, "Get the OP at the gate on the line, tell them to dial the SGC and let them know we've got a goa'uld mother ship and two al'kesh on the way in. We're initiating Evac Plan Alpha, and we'll need reinforcements to hold the gate until all of our people can get there."

"Yes, sir!"

"Sir, ETA 5 minutes, target ships have not altered course; I don't think they've spotted the satellite or detected its launch," the satellite operator projected an unearthly calm which seemed to soothe the other technicians. Shepard quietly thanked that person, fear was infections. "Correction," the satellite operator spoke again, "the ha'tak is staying up top, settling into orbit above us. The ak'kesh are still on the way down. Showing death gliders separating from the ha'tak now, sir. Still no sign they've spotted the satellite."

"Very well," Harper inserted his key and looked at Lieutenant Renquest, "Turn on three, two one, *turn*," they both twisted their keys and an emergency klaxon sounded throughout the base. A countdown clock appeared on the console marking six hours. They both removed their keys.
"Lieutenant, sound battle stations. Get the science staff to the shelter and man the fighting positions. Make sure each of them have all the Stinger and Javelin reloads that'll fit. Shepard sent us a shipment a while back so there should be more than enough. Skip the mortars, we'll be leaving this base faster than we'll be able to set them up and make them useful. Tell the gunners personally; Stingers for the death gliders, Javelins for the a'kesh. The gliders are just too damn fast for the AT missiles."

"Yes, sir!" Lieutenant Renquest sprang into action.

"Major Harper," the communications officer said excitedly, a hint of panic in his voice, "Gate OP reports incoming wormhole." He pressed his hand to his earpiece and stared into space for a moment, "Jaffa coming through the gate now, sir. OP requesting instructions."

Harper grimaced. Shepard wanted to spring into action but this was his show. So far he was making all of the right calls, *god I love working with professionals*, so she didn't have to. "Tell them to sit tight and *donot* engage. Lay low and report via hardline only, radio silence." He turned to the drone operations station, "Re-task the Predator, I want eyes on the gate." He stared down one of the men who had tried to kill Shepard this morning; when he wasn't landing or taking off the drones from the hanger his place was here in the operations hut. They were all in this together now, and that bigot knew it, *that* was plain on his face to Shepard.

Finally, as the 'general quarters' klaxons began to wail throughout the camp, Harper turned to Shepard. He nodded to her and said, "How about you Commander, you up for putting on a light-show for our guests?"

Victoria merely smiled in response and glowed a bright Cherenkov-blue.

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Liara T'soni was in heaven. She hadn't had an opportunity to lose herself in an archeological dig in ages, damn galactic wars and conspiracies kept getting in the way, and this one was proving to be particularly fascinating. She had completely lost track of time and only realized it was getting late when her stomach began growling loudly. She turned to Daniel and giggled. He chuckled and nodded, he had lost track of time as well. "I think our stomachs are trying to tell us something," he said.

"Indeed," Liara replied, "shall we take a break?"

They headed up the stone staircase towards the surface together. Liara was so absorbed going through data on her omni-tool that Daniel was the first to notice it; the telltale whine of a death-glider engine. His face blanched a split-second before he heard someone shout, "Incoming!" The whole dig site erupted.

They came upon a scene of carnage. Several death gliders wheeled above the encampment like so many birds of prey, periodically swooping down on the SGC personnel. An a'kesh hovered in the distance disgorging Jaffa, and Jaffa also seemed to be coming in through the gate. SGC soldiers were firing back at the Jaffa but they seemed to be fairly well pinned down. Liara and Daniel dove for cover and drew their pistols.

"Prepare to open fire."

Shepard looked down the barrel of her P90 as the a'kesh bomber flanked by a pair of death gliders approached the airbase. Victoria had lost count as to how many times she had wished she had her N7 Valiant. She could have drilled that a'kesh pilot through his windshield already if Doctor Lee wasn't probably breaking it this very moment in the SGC. *This P90 is about as useful as tits on a Hanar.*
Oh shit, I'm sounding like my father-in-law.

So far the SGC personnel had made no indication that they were aware of the goa'uld presence on the planet. The Jaffa at the gate in particular seemed to be blissfully unaware that they were under surveillance. All of that was about to change. No fewer than five separate FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missiles were trained on the al'kesh and each death glider had a pair of FIM-92 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles slated for them.

Shepard turned to look at the other occupants of the shelter; the balance of Harper's command staff and most of the science contingent. Victoria had a very bad feeling of how things were going to turn out for these people. Fighting off the two al'kesh was going to be a herculean task, but also evacuating these people all the way to the gate would be even more difficult. If the mothership actually came down from orbit or began bombarding them, well, she tried not to think about that.

The goa'uld ships drew closer. Victoria thought about Liara, she hoped she was alright. She hoped that she would see her again soon. She hoped that, if the worst came to pass, then she would not be too crushed having to live on and raise a daughter alone again. She wept internally at the thought. No, not today! No way you goa'uld motherfuckers! Liara gets her happily ever after, and my baby girl gets her father! Fuck you very much!

"Weapons free!"

Nine guided missiles leapt into the sky.

Shepard could only imagine what it was like for the goa'uld pilots. One moment they were on approach for the seemingly unaware SGC airbase; fat, dumb, and happy. The next moment the sky was full of missiles. The Marines were firing from well camouflaged fighting positions, and the Stingers and Javelins didn't leave much of a smoke trail after the motors ignited; it was certainly possible that they had no idea where the fire was even coming from. One moment there was an al'kesh and a pair of escorting death gliders; the next moment the death gliders were two expanding clouds of debris and the al'kesh was skidding sideways under the blows of repeated anti-tank weapon hits.

The Javelin was originally designed as a fire-and-forget weapon intended to defeat heavy tank armor, but the SGC had early on realized that it might be useful against the relatively slow moving al'kesh medium bombers used by the goa'uld. This was the first field trial, and it was going swimmingly. The fourth missile to impact the bomber scored a hit on the engine and, after a surprisingly anticlimactic puff of the impact, the entire left side of the space craft exploded and the al'kesh rolled over to its side. Careening out of control it impacted the hangar where the Predator drones were kept and exploded.

Shepard smiled a toothy grin, not so much at the destruction of the drone that nearly killed her, machines were only worth getting angry at if they were sentient, but that the first al'kesh was out of action so early in the engagement. Her smile was short lived, however, as she saw a new death glider roll out of a bank and start strafing one of the firing pits. A Stinger leaped out of the pit on its ejection motor but the solid-rocket sustainer motor failed to ignite and the projectile fell harmlessly to the ground 10 meters in front of what must have been a very upset Marine judging from the cursing that Shepard could hear even over all of the carnage. A dud, fuck! Unchallenged the death glider completed its strafing pass and bits of sandbag and what Victoria hoped were not body parts flew in all directions as at least several staff weapon-type blasts connected with their targets. The goa'uld fighter wheeled away, obviously preparing to come around and finish its prey. No fucking way, not on my watch, was all Shepard could think.

The N7 Slogan that all candidates learned on their first day at 'the villa' was; improvise, adapt,
overcome! Shepard was an ardent proponent of putting what she learned into practice, and she was about to. "Cover me!" she shouted to anyone who would listen, and she vaulted over the concrete lip of her dugout. In the distance she could see a Marine dragging a badly wounded comrade out of the firing position that was just strafed. Further afield the death glider was leveling out for another pass. Body glowing a rich Cherenkov-blue she summoned her biotic energy and charged the distance to the retreating Marines. She couldn't quite pull off the same level of badass that Tela Vasir had when deploying the same move on Illium, but it was certainly effective in closing the distance.

Shepard exited her charge with a thunderclap and her Kevlar helmet went flying; apparently the fabric strap just wasn't up to the task. Never liked the damn thing anyway, was all she could think while she looked at the incoming death glider. Glowing a brilliant blue, red hair billowing in the wind, she raised her P90 and emptied its entire 50-round magazine into it. Inexplicably, the fighter didn't fire but peeled away. Works for me. She wound up and pitched a warp field at the receding death glider and it shuddered and began smoking.

Not wanting to spend any more time in the open than necessary she ran over to the Marine carrying his comrade over his shoulder and shouted at him, "Is there anyone else in that foxhole?"

"No ma'am! They're all gone!" he shouted back, grief clear on his face.

Shepard wanted to look to make sure for herself, but there was no time, another death glider had spotted them and was wheeling in their direction. "Here, give me this!" Shepard dropped her P90 to hang on its sling and grabbed at the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon the Marine had slung over his shoulder. "You get him over to the shelter near the command hut. The corpsman is there with Major Harper. I'll cover you. Move it Marine! Oorah!" Spurred on by her pep talk, he hefted his wounded comrade over his shoulders and ran for all he was worth towards the command hut and the adjacent dugout. Shepard began jogging next to them and readied the SAW.

When it became obvious they wouldn't make it to the shelter before the death glider would be upon them, Shepard threw another warp field. The blue orb impacted the fighter and it took on a blue glow, a rapidly shifting mass effect field began its terrible work; shredding and kneading the very molecular structure of the death glider and its occupant. Victoria smiled, dropped to a knee, and drew a bead on the aircraft. Leading it expertly she opened fire. 5.56mm bullets ripped out towards the death glider at over 900 meters per second, and the mixed-in tracers allowed her to literally walk her fire onto the target. Taking enhanced damage due to the warp field the death glider disintegrated in midair, causing whoops of joy from the marines and scientists taking shelter near the command hut. Finally Victoria threw herself bodily into the dugout and took a deep breath. She looked at the Marine she had escorted and gave him a thumbs-up; the corpsman was already working on his companion.

"Where's Harper?" she shouted to no one in particular. Her ears were ringing badly.

"He's in command, ma'am," someone replied.

"Roger," she started moving along the length of the shelter, in reality a large concrete pill box/slittrench with a small covered path leading into the command hut, passing several members of the science team with awe-struck faces. A death glider rocketed overhead and they all ducked as one. We need to get out of here soon, Victoria thought. If that other al'kesh swings by we're toast. Victoria imagined that it must be staking out the Stargate. She stopped and handed the SAW back to the Marines she had taken it from, "Thanks, Marine," she winked. He took the automatic weapon and just stared at her with a slack-jawed expression. Shepard was getting that a lot.

Victoria came into command as another death glider few overhead. Surprisingly enough, they hadn't leveled the building, not that she was complaining. She found Major Harper leaning over the
shoulder of the drone operator. They were viewing the take off the surviving Predator; he did not like what he saw. The other al'kesh was, in fact, orbiting the area around the Stargate escorted by a brace of death gliders. A squad of Jaffa occupied the Stargate pad, and the inbound wormhole showed no sign of disconnecting; a Jaffa appeared to be holding it open with the end of his staff weapon. By some miracle, however, none of the foxholes associated with the forward observation post had been discovered yet.

"Major," Shepard said, making her presence known, "we can't stay here."

"Agreed," he pointed at the screen, "but leaving will be difficult."

"No doubt," Victoria observed. She wouldn't undermine Harper's command. He knew the score, and he had proven himself a pro so he knew what needed to be done. It was just a matter of him giving the order to move out, no small amount of luck, and a healthy dose of miracle to get to and through the gate.

"Sir," another voice of calm from the satellite tech, "LIDAR is showing the mothership deorbiting. She's heading this way, sir."

Shepard looked at the technician. Then she looked at the video feed from the Predator. The Jaffa at the gate had begun erecting some sort of tripod-mounted staff-weapon-like turret. "They mean to drive us into the open."

"Agreed," the Major saw it too. "They probably thought they could have done the job with just the al'kesh. They know we'll make a break for the gate the moment we see the ha'tak, and they've already got the gate secured. They can grab us on either end, or pick us off at any point in between."

He grunted, "Well played."

"We don't have much time then, do we?" Shepard asked rhetorically.

"No, we don't. How long before that mother ship gets here?" Harper asked the technician.

"Fifteen minutes tops, sir," he responded, "looks like they're taking their time, but it's not a long trip."

"Very well," Harper said as he stepped to the failsafe control unit. He manipulated the controls and the timer advanced. It now read 45 minutes to detonation. Shepard brought her omni-tool up and set a timer. "We're leaving." He looked at the drone operator, "Transfer drone control to the mobile unit and destroy the fixed-base unit."

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A chorus of "Yes, sirs!"

Harper nodded to Commander Shepard. She cracked her knuckles loudly.

To the uninitiated, the scene in the 'shelter' might have seemed chaotic; which was to say for the science staff it was. Doctor Peter Kavanagh was having kittens, and he was quite allergic to cats so he didn't much care for the metaphor. He had been okay with losing the $20 bet. After all, you could argue that it was partially due to his own technical prowess that the missile had survived to make orbit, so it was money well spent after a fashion. What he wasn't okay with was the miniature spy
satellite immediately spotting impending doom at the hands of an invading goa'uld strike force. The personnel back at the SGC just couldn't handle his talent, that's why he'd been labeled as 'doesn't play well with others' and relegated to a series of offworld assignments. Now it was going to cost him his life. Another death glider whooshed overhead; he tried to become one with the concrete.

A presence. "You!" it was that Shepard woman, "Yeah, you, Beef and Broccoli! You know how to fire a gun?" She towered over him. She was enormous. Her flame-red hair, unencumbered by a helmet and billowing in the breeze, made her look downright demonic.

"Uh, no?"

"Here, it's easy." She knelt down and handed him some sort of belt-fed monstrosity that he thought the Marines called the 'buzz-saw' or 'chain-saw' or 'saw-bones' or something equally menacing.

"Uh, I don't know about this."

"Shut up," she said. "It's easy. It's point and click. Line up these three posts," she pointed to the sights, "then squeeze the trigger. It's got one tracer for every three bullets so you can pretty much walk the fire onto the bad guys; just hose 'em down. Hold the trigger down just long enough to say die motherfucker, die in your head; then let go. Bucks a bit, so lean into it. When you're out of ammo, yell. I've got more." She pointed to a very large rucksack on her back. She also had a spare Stinger and a spare Javelin slung over her shoulders. All of this in addition to her P90 submachine gun.

"How are you carrying so much?"

"You kidding?" she smirked, "All these cybernetics and enhancements I've got in me, I'm easily half again stronger than Teal'c. I just try not to show off. Don't want to hurt his feelings. Big guy's a softie at heart." She winked, "Don't worry Beef and Broccoli, keep your head and keep up with the group, and you'll be ok. Just try to only shoot at stuff wearing chainmail."

Pete Kavanagh gulped hard as the frightening woman strode, purposefully away. He desperately suppressed the urge to vomit.

The breakout itself went well. But, then again, the goa'uld commander probably wanted it so. They waited until one of the death gliders completed one of its harassment passes. Shepard doubted it was more than that, really, they didn't seem to be trying very hard to hit anything. Something, deep down in her hind-brain, was wondering about that. Why were they so intent on capturing them? In the past, the goa'uld seemed content just to slaughter the SGC personnel they encountered and stem the tide of their advance throughout the galaxy. What about this place was different? More so, what prompted the sudden change? They seemed hell-bent on killing all of us, then suddenly they backed off. Unfortunately, she was just too busy trying to stay alive, and keeping those around her alive, to really ponder that at the moment.

A Stinger missile leapt from its launch tube and the sustainer motor ignited as designed. The infrared seeker head found its target and the death glider erupted in a fireball. "Move!" shouted Major Harper. SG-5 vaulted from cover and started moving towards the gate; quickly behind them were the civilian science team and wounded. Peter Kavanagh's cheeks puffed mightily as he hefted the M249 SAW along for the run. He was obviously out of his element, but a heavy dose of fear-induced adrenaline and an N7 pep talk had him giving a fairly good Rambo impression. Victoria stayed just long enough to help the anti-aircraft gunner reload his Stinger launcher and left the shelter with him. She would take up the rear with Major Harper and the balance of his Marine security element. Even carrying the Javelin reload, Shepard had to consciously slow down her run lest she pull ahead of the group.
What was normally a leisurely ten minute walk between the gate and the airfield was now a harrowing three minute sprint. Shepard would have preferred they move in bounding over-watch, from cover to cover, under heavy suppressive fire, with a healthy dose of some sort of obfuscant; a tactical cloak was her personal favorite. But they didn't really have any of those things. As it was, though, Harper's men were doing a stupendous job of keeping the science team and themselves alive. Every time a death glider swooped down upon them a fusillade of machine gun fire or a Stinger missile would drive them away. For good measure Shepard would also pitch a warp field at it, and she managed to help the Marines bring down two more of the goa'uld fighters before they reached their rally point just short of the Stargate.

Presently the group formed up just short of their objective. A cluster of boulders, most likely dropped there by some ancient glacial movement eons ago, on a gentle rise overlooking the Stargate afforded them a decent place to take cover and collect themselves. It also allowed them an opportunity to lay eyes on the Stargate without the goa'uld realizing they were being observed. Or, at least, Shepard thought, they hoped.

"I was wondering where that thing had gotten off to," Harper said looking through his field glasses. He handed them to Shepard. While her military-grade gene-mods had afforded her phenomenal visual acuity, she didn't pass up the opportunity to get a closer look. The other al'kesh had taken up position defending the Stargate as expected. What surprised Shepard was how literally the goa'uld pilot seemed to be taking his orders.

"That damn thing is hovering right over the gate now," Victoria observed out loud. It was no longer orbiting the area. She quickly scanned the rest of the area. "I don't see any bodies. I don't think they've spotted your OP yet."

"Or the mines," Harper replied, "But they don't seem to be trying very hard." He was right, Victoria reflected. The Jaffa seemed to be standing around or manning that heavy tripod-mounted gun, not really doing more than making sure no one made a break for the gate and that the incoming wormhole stayed active. A deep basso rumble caught all of their attention. In the distance, in the direction of the airfield, the ha'tak mothership came into view; another squadron of death gliders swarmed around it like so many angry bees. "I don't think we have much time."

"Agreed..." Shepard was cut off by the sound of staff weapon fire from the direction of the Stargate. It was quickly met by rapid staccato of 5.56 millimeter assault weapon fire. One of the observation post foxholes had just been discovered. Shepard grimaced. Harper's men were well disciplined; none of the other OP foxholes came to their brethren's aid. The battle was savage, but it was brief; half a dozen Jaffa lay dead before the survivors began pulling the dead Marines out of the concealed fighting position. I'm going to enjoy killing these fuckers, every last one of them, was all Shepard could think. She felt a feeling she hadn't experienced since Elysium surge within her. A firm hand slapping down on her shoulder broke the trance.

"Shepard," Harper said, "on me." Victoria crept her way back down the line of SGC personnel with Major Harper towards the drone operator. Along the way they collected Lieutenant Renquest and Harper's lead NCO.

As they passed Peter Kavanagh she could hear him whispering, "Die motherfucker, die," over and over again, clutching the SAW tightly to his chest. She smirked. He didn't have to say it aloud. But so long as it gave him focus, she wasn't complaining.

Once assembled, Harper looked at the portable drone readout and outlined his plan, "Based on the take from the Predator, we've still got four Marines in two foxholes and all of the claymores intact down at the gate. There's an al'kesh, a pair of death gliders down there, and dozen or so Jaffa on the
ground with a heavy weapon, plus who knows how many more aboard the al'kesh. Here's what we're going to do, and we're going to do it quickly enough that the ha'tak back at the airfield and all of its death gliders won't be a factor.

"Three teams; anti-aircraft element, anti-armor element, and the balance of the force. The Stinger crews will target the death gliders. The Javelin crews will target the al'kesh. The rest of us will escort the science team and wounded and lay fire on the Jaffa infantry that are already on the ground or any that might disembark the al'kesh or come through the gate. On that note, the gate needs to come down as fast as possible. Shepard," he looked at Victoria, "you're going to escort our Javelin team into firing position and, the moment after you've helped them reload with that rocket you've got on your back, you're going to sprint down there, take out that heavy gun, and close that gate. Then you're going to dial Earth and send the 'danger close' IDC. We'll cover you." Victoria cracked her knuckles.

Harper looked at the drone operator, "I'm going to have you pilot the Predator into that al'kesh's cockpit, since they're being so nice and holding it still for us. We'll launch our missiles the moment it impacts."

"Banzai!" Shepard couldn't help herself. Harper's NCO, a Gunnery Sergeant who happened to be of Japanese descent, rolled his eyes in mock disgust.

"The moment those ships are down, I order the OP to blow the claymores and open fire on any Jaffa by the gate still standing. Then we assault, hard and fast, through their position and through the gate to the SGC. Understood?"

All present nodded. God I love working with professionals, Shepard thought, semper fi motherfuckers!

The death glider pilots were apparently not aware of the Earthly axiom, attack out of the sun, for they did not see the diminutive UAV until it was far too late to intercept it. Shepard didn't really expect it to do much in the way of damage, though. In fact, she was surprised it had even survived this long, guess the goa'uld weren't so big on RADAR, but it did provide the distraction they were hoping for. No sooner had the Predator smeared itself across the al'kesh's windscreen did three Stinger missiles and two Javelins streak out towards their targets. Shepard didn't have time to watch their handiwork; she was too busy helping her gunner reload the Javelin launcher. The moment the new launch tube was attached to the Command Launch Unit she gave him the traditional, if a bit anachronistic since he knew by looking through the CLU's scope when the missile was ready, tap on the back of the helmet, and took off in a sprint towards the Stargate.

Shepard moved like nothing anyone, SGC or Jaffa, had ever seen before. Despite being a profoundly talented biotic, even she doubted she could have covered that distance in a biotic charge and have any useful amount of biotic ability left over to accomplish her mission once at the gate; so she was doing it the old fashioned way. That said, however, she was still not only the product of the best genetic modifications and nutrition that the Systems Alliance could buy, but also the recipient of nearly four billion credits worth of Cerberus cybernetic enhancements; so she was undoubtedly the fastest human in existence in this 'universe'.

Victoria thundered downhill at nearly nine meters per second; beyond anything an Earth Olympian could accomplish. In her right hand she held her P90 SMG, a glowing blue biotic orb she held sinister. Her eyes were fixed on the Stargate, almost nothing else mattered. Almost. In combat, a lack of situational awareness could kill you, and she had just enough to register that the Stingers had found their marks, and that the al'kesh was smoking badly and veering out of position. She tossed a warp field at it for good measure and noticed two separate streams of tracer fire reach up to follow
the spacecraft into the ground.

Closing on the Stargate, her ears were assailed by a stupendous thunderclap. The claymore mines detonated and thousands of ball bearings shredded through the startled Jaffa. The onset of violence had been so sudden, so complete, that they did not know which way to look; it had afforded the SGC personnel all the opportunity they needed. What few Jaffa weren't killed outright by the maelstrom of shrapnel were felled by the Marines breaking cover and gunning them down from their foxholes; all in all, a well-executed ambush.

The Jaffa standing behind the heavy mounted gun wavered momentarily, trying to decide who to target first; the two foxholes that had suddenly erupted before him, or the glowing blue streak thundering his way. His indecision was fatal. A Marine Lance Corporal drilled him between the eyes with his M4 carbine, and he slumped over the gun. The muzzle skewed and pointed crazily at the sky. Shepard immediately deprioritized destroying the heavy weapon and concentrated on the remaining threats.

A single Jaffa stood before Victoria. He had been holding the gate open using the end of his staff weapon. He turned to level it at her; he never even managed to deactivate the weapon's safety. Without warning he was enveloped in a singularity field and floating off of the ground. Just as suddenly, Shepard used a biotic throw to push him the wrong way through the wormhole. The Stargate disengaged with a flicker, and Shepard stepped towards the DHD to begin dialing home. The rest of the party was sprinting towards her, and the Marines from the foxholes were gathering up the bodies of their fallen brothers. In the distance the death gliders escorting the ha'tak broke formation and began heading their way.

Liara T'soni fired her FN Five-Seven pistol. The 5.7 x 28 millimeter round rocketed out of the muzzle at nearly 650 meters per second. An instant later it entered a Jaffa's forehead. Victoria was not joking about its accuracy, Liara thought. She enveloped the dead Jaffa's body in a mass effect field before it had even begun succumbing to the force of gravity and pitched it towards the incoming wormhole. The Stargate disconnected with a flicker. The briefest of smiles crossed her purple lips. She could only imagine what the far side looked like now; how many Jaffa she had just irradiated into incandescence?

Liara summoned her biotic strength and erected a repulsive bubble, taking a page from Shepard's experiences on the Collectors' Space Station in the Galactic Core. Incoming Staff Weapon blasts seemed to change trajectory ever so slightly upon contact; the gravitational shear of the Mass Effect field just enough to deflect their passage, like light diffracting through water. The attacking Jaffa couldn't quite hit them while under its protection. Though, that certainly didn't deter them; they continued their assault.

It was terrifically difficult to maintain. Every staff weapon blast impacting the bubble stressed her abilities further. A sweat broke out upon her forehead immediately; it ran down into her eyes stinging badly. Her heart pounded within her chest. We do not have much time. She could contain the surviving SGC personnel and the DHD, but that was about it. Liara ground her teeth at the strain. "Now, Daniel!"

Captain Andrews, SG-8's Commanding Officer, and Daniel Jackson sprinted towards the DHD. Andrews covered Daniel as best as he could as he dialed Earth. He quickly realized, however, just like everyone else, that Liara would have to lower her protective bubble before they would be able to escape through the gate.

"What do you mean it's busy!" Harper shouted at Shepard.
"You heard me!" Shepard ducked as a staff weapon blast zipped past Harper's head, "The wormhole won't engage. I think it's busy."

"Are you sure you dialed it right?"

"Yes, I'm sure I dialed it right!" Shepard stepped back from the DHD and pitched a warp field at an approaching death glider. It dodged and broke off. "Here, you give it a try. I'll shoot at these assholes for a while!"

*No plan survives first contact with the enemy,* thought Shepard. The assault on the Stargate had been near-textbook. They had brought the science team and the bulk of the Marine and SG-5 contingent from the doomed airbase to the gate with minimal casualties. But then things had gone *sideways.* First, the Stargate wouldn't engage. Then, it turned out that the al'kesh's crash hadn't been nearly as fatal to the crew as had been initially assumed; a surprising number of Jaffa infantry had swarmed out of the downed spacecraft. Finally, the death gliders that had been escorting the mothership had decided to join the party. As it was, they were being pounded by a half dozen death gliders, and an unknown number of Jaffa were shooting at them from three different directions. *Plus, it's only a matter of time before more Jaffa from the ha'tak show up and overwhelm us. We can't be here when that happens!* Shepard grimaced, wasn't she supposed to be on a beach somewhere with Garrus living off of vid royalties?

About the only break they had caught unexpectedly during the assault on the gate was that the Jaffa heavy weapon had been captured intact. True to the traditional source of his rank's name, Harper's Gunnery Sergeant was using it to give the death gliders some serious shit. A death glider exploded into a fireball to accentuate that point, Shepard thought.

Victoria's P90 clicked on an empty chamber. She was now completely out of ammunition for it. She looked up; another death glider was beginning a strafing run. They still seemed oddly unwilling to make direct passes against her, but she wasn't willing to take that for granted. Thinking quickly, Shepard reached down and grabbed a fist-sized rock. She enveloped it in a Mass Effect field and pitched it with frightening speed towards the approaching fighter. It impacted the canopy, shattered the glass, and showered the pilot with shards. The death glider spiraled wildly and crashed into the ground. *That works,* Victoria thought in shocked disbelief as she heard the Stargate finally engage behind her.

She turned to look. Harper was inputting a code into the IDC unit strapped to his wrist; that's when it happened. A Jaffa staff weapon blast caught him in the leg. "Shit! Harper!"

"Get through the gate!" Harper shouted, eyes wide with the surprise of being shot. From the look of his face, it obviously didn't hurt; yet. That would come later. "We've got the 'all clear'! Get through the gate!" Harper's Marines began shepherding the scientists through the Stargate. The Gunnery Sergeant behind the heavy weapon began firing wildly for all he was worth; Jaffa infantry dove for cover and death gliders seemed stymied in their approaches. Victoria sprinted towards the Major. She spotted the Jaffa who had shot him at about the same time he spotted her. He shot first, it missed low and wide kicking up debris that stung her arm and face. Victoria drew her Five Seven and, in a quick and fluid movement, shot the Jaffa twice through the chest and once through the forehead. She quickly holstered the pistol and scooped up Major Harper into a fireman's carry.

"Let's go Marines, we're leaving!" she shouted as she jogged up to the gate, staff weapon blasts whizzing past her to either side.

"You're the last one through, ma'am!" said the Gunnery Sergeant as he quickly abandoned his post and jogged through the gate with her.
"Let's go, Gunny!" Shepard shouted, staff weapon and, now, zat-gun blasts zipping past their heads.

They stepped through the event horizon together.

The SGC-side of the gate was no less chaotic than where they had just come from. In fact, the Jaffa staff weapon fire was still coming through the event horizon. Victoria rushed down the embarkation ramp and vaguely registered the Gunnery Sergeant patting her on the shoulder and rushing off to tend to other wounded Marines. She threw Major Harper down on the concrete and looked into his pained face. She was filled with that same rage she had felt on Elysium all those years ago. *Motherfuckers gonna pay!* "Keep that iris open!" she shouted loudly enough that Walter and General Hammond could hear her in the control room through their microphone pick-ups.

She summoned her biotic strength. She dug deep. She groaned at the exertion. The last section of the embarkation ramp began to glow a rich Cherenkov-blue. It groaned in sympathy with her. It creaked. It shuddered and moved. Bolts and locking pins sheared and popped. Suddenly it was free from the rest of the ramp and floating before the Stargate. The staff weapon blasts, increasing in intensity, began impacting off of it with a dull ringing noise. Puffs of smoke rose from the impacts with the acrid stench of ozone. "Eat shit and die!" she shouted and pushed it through the gate *the wrong way*. The wormhole disengaged with a brilliant flash and loud pop.

There was silence in the gate room.

It was short lived.

"She lives. I have never seen someone survive so many blasts from a zat'nik'tel."

"You should hope so! Our Lord commands that this one be taken to him unharmed! I loath to think what fate would befall us if she had perished."

"None of the remaining tau'ri survive."

"All but a handful were able to escape."

"Nor have I, but it is none of our concern now; neither are the tau'ri who *did* escape, our Master cares not for them. Activate the chappa'ai. The transport to our Lord's court awaits."
"I Should Go"

Shepard panted at the exertion. Her heart rate began to slow. She bared her teeth in a toothy, prideful sneer, *eat shit and die you goa'uld fucks!* Shepard looked around at stunned and jaw-dropped faces as the biotic glow enveloping her began to subside. The gate room was suddenly silent. No one had suspected that Shepard was *capable* of such a feat. The iris finally closed. *Better late than never,* Victoria thought.

Then the screaming started.

"Medic!" shouted a member of SG-5. Security Forces troopers from the gate room defense team sprang into action with their first aid kits. Several of the surviving members of SG-5, the enhanced offworld security detail, and the science team suffered from varying degrees of injuries, but none more so than their commanding officer.

Shepard raced down what was left of the embarkation ramp and fell to her knees next to Major Harper. The ragged staff weapon wound on his thigh suddenly began spurting blood; rich, bright crimson, an arterial wound. Despite her best efforts, she caught a face-full of it. A familiar salty taste, suddenly she was on Elysium; the panicked screams of civilians, the thudding of artillery, the stench of smoke and human filth, so much death, so much destruction. It was where *Viking Vikki* was born. She shook her head and centered herself. *Femoral artery! He doesn't have much time,* Shepard realized. Victoria acted quickly and instinctively. "Medic!" she shouted as she pulled the belt from her trousers and wrapped it around Harper's thigh just above the wound. *Well that's one benefit to these old-style uniforms; belts,* she thought as she yanked it through the clasp and pulled with all her strength. Harper howled in pain and passed out, but the spurting blood slowed.

Shepard looked up for the medical team. "Where the *f*uck are the medics!?" shouted Victoria, suddenly concerned; wiping her face with her sleeve. *They should be here by now. Hell, they should have been here before they even came through the gate;* that was standard procedure for *danger close* arrivals. Victoria didn't have time to wonder why help didn't seem to be rushing into the gate room. She certainly didn't have time to link that fact with the *busy signal* they had gotten when they first tried to dial home. All Shepard could think of at the moment was that she needed to get Major Harper to the infirmary before he bled to death.

Victoria enveloped Harper in a biotic field and raced out of the gate room and down the corridor pushing him ahead of her, screaming at the top of her lungs for people to clear a path. SGC personnel sprinted, scurried, and tumbled out of her way as she rounded a corner and entered an infirmary already swarming with people and bustling with activity. Shepard wondered what the hell was going on as she shouted, "Medic!"

Victoria was motioned to an empty examining bed upon which she gently placed Major Harper. The biotic field dissipated with a faint *pfft.* Doctor Fraiser hustled up to her; her white lab coat was already splattered with blood. "What happened," she asked clinically as she started examining the Major.

Shepard responded mechanically, "Staff weapon blast to the left thigh, arterial bleeding. I applied a tourniquet about a minute ago; stopped the spurting, but he's still bleeding badly."

Janet nodded, looked the Major over once more, and looked to an orderly, "Priority. Prep for surgery." She turned to face Commander Shepard and looked her up and down. "You'll keep. I need you to clear out. Gate room says I've got more wounded coming in. I need the room."
Shepard was too focused on getting Harper aid to understand what Janet meant, to notice that there were way more injured people in the infirmary than had come through the gate with her, or that they were here already when she arrived. She managed a, "Yes, ma'am," and stepped back to allow two nurses to wheel Major Harper back towards the surgical suite. Harper shakily raised his arm and gave her the 'thumbs-up' sign as he disappeared from view. Victoria hadn't even realized he'd regained consciousness.

"Shepard!" she heard someone call. Victoria turned and peeked behind a curtain. Her jaw dropped when she realized who it was.

Oh no! What's going on here?

Daniel Jackson sat on the floor with a bloody bandage wrapped around his upper arm and an icepack pressed to his swollen face. Daniel was apparently waiting his turn on the triage line.

"Shepard! You're here! What happened?" asked Doctor Daniel Jackson.

"What do you mean I'm here? Why are you here?" Shepard's world came to a screeching halt with realization, this wasn't an isolated incident. "Daniel, where is Liara! Is she ok?"

"Where is she!? Daniel said she was surrounded by Jaffa when she threw him through the gate." Shepard said as she entered Hammond's office in a near-manic rush.

Walter hadn't even tried to get in her way; he wasn't suicidal, but appeared behind the Commander. "Uh, Commander Shepard to see you, sir. Also, I have that update for you," he said haltingly.

Hammond looked at the disheveled Commander for a moment, her BDU blouse was coated in blood and her trousers were riding low around her shapely hips without a belt. Then he glanced to Colonel O'Neill standing next to the desk. He returned his attention to the red phone. "Very well, I'll await his call." He returned the phone to its cradle and addressed Walter directly. "How long?"

"About ninety minutes, sir."

Shepard was mightily confused, "Ninety minutes until we can mount a rescue? That's way too long!"

"No, Commander," Hammond replied. "Dismissed, Walter," Chief Master Sergeant Harriman closed the office door behind him as he left. Shepard didn't notice the look of relief on his face to not be trapped in a confined space with Shepard. She was quite obviously in a killing fury, and he wanted to achieve minimum safe distance.

Victoria sighed in momentary relief. She had faith in the General. She knew he wouldn't rest until Liara, and anyone else who might have been captured, was found. Then she looked into Hammond's eyes, wait, something isn't right.

"We won't be able to mount a rescue nearly that fast, Commander. We're not certain who attacked the dig site, and we certainly don't know where they might have taken Liara."

Shepard's jaw dropped. "Daniel said it was Ba'al's guys. It was certainly Ba'al's Jaffa who attacked my forces. I memorized the forehead insignia after Liara arrived." Victoria swallowed hard; she tried to rein her emotions in. "Sir, we can't just leave her in the hands of those monsters. We have to go get her," Shepard's voice cracked.

"We will, Commander," Hammond replied. "But we don't know where they've gone. I'm going to send a recon MALP back to the dig site to see what's going on, but I won't stage it from here. We'll use a third site."

"Sir, that'll take time to set up," Victoria almost whined. Control yourself.
"It certainly will," Hammond replied. "But, considering what we've learned about the interaction between biotics and incoming wormholes, I can't risk the SGC. Liara might have been," he paused, "compromised."

Shepard rocked back on her heels as if she'd been struck. "What do you mean, compromised?" Of course, she understood. She knew what the goa'uld did, what they were. The adrenaline and shock of the battle was wearing off, her brutal intellect was returning to the fore. "Oh shit, you don't think? No, oh no. Liara, no." Shepard clutched her stomach; she feared she was going to be sick.

"We'll get her back," Jack piped up.

"We don't leave people behind," Hammond affirmed.

"Request permission to join the recon team," Shepard said robotically.

"Denied," Hammond responded.

"But, sir."

"I said denied, Commander Shepard," Hammond repeated firmly. "I don't know how, but Ba'al has somehow attacked every world you, Liara, or your biotics have visited. Including two which there was no way he should have been able to know even existed. It's possible that he's tracking you and or Liara's movements somehow. Probable, actually, since he managed to launch simultaneous attacks on worlds you and Liara were both visiting."

"But, how?" Shepard felt herself slipping away; she was losing herself to despair. *Maintain control Shepard, she needs you.* She was so shocked by the entire situation that she hadn't even fully realized that this was probably a calculated move, planned in advance, to capture both her and her beloved at the same time. They were being hunted. *Damn it, how could you have not realized this sooner?* Shepard raged at herself, *you let this happen! This is all your fault!*

"We don't know yet," responded Hammond, "and that's why we cannot risk you compromising this recon mission. SG-4 will handle it." The office was quiet for a moment. "Commander," Hammond said, "there is," he paused, "another matter which I'm going to need your help on."

Shepard straightened up somewhat. The idea that she could still be of use gave her strength. "Anything, sir."

"In ninety minutes," Hammond paused to look at his wristwatch, "Senator Kinsey will be visiting the SGC." Shepard ground her teeth loudly, her fists clenched, a faint biotic field flashed into view and flickered away just as quickly. Hammond saw the reaction and continued, "This is a planned visit, and one of the reasons why I scheduled you and Liara to be offworld when I did. I didn't want to run the risk of either of you *killing* him." Hammond stopped and let his words sink in. He was playing with fire; Shepard was acting like a wounded animal protecting her mate. She wasn't completely there, and he knew it. "Since you're here, he's going to want to speak with you. I need your assurances that you will *not* harm him. Am I clear, Commander?"

"We're going to do nothing to rescue Liara while I play nice with the *fucker* who tried to have me *dissected*? And who was undoubtedly sowing the discontent around the SGC? Oh, and offworld too." Shepard hissed through her clenched teeth. "Don't we have enough dirt on him to *end* him, sir?"

Hammond stood and walked around his desk. He faced Shepard. "No, Commander," he said with no tone of hostility despite Shepard's outburst. "First off, we are not going to sit here doing nothing.
SG-4 is going to run recon on the dig site and try to determine where Ba'al might have taken your wife. If they don't turn up anything then we'll pump all of our allies for intel. Then we're going to get her back.

"Second, the President still doesn't want us to play our hand against the Senator. I'm waiting for him to return my call," he pointed to the red phone. "He's in England right now on a state visit. He's actually speaking with Her Majesty the Queen at this very moment; else I'd be talking to him right now. I'm going to try to talk him into deflecting Senator Kinsey, but we might not have enough time. Failing that, I'm going to get us free rein to mount a rescue when we know where to send it. I need you to play along and not let on what we know. And I need you not to harm him." He looked into her eyes, "I will not be able to protect you or Liara if you do."

He placed a hand on her shoulder in a somewhat fatherly gesture. "We're going to get Liara back, and you're going to be in the vanguard of that rescue when the time comes, but only if you're not in the brig because you killed a Senator."

Shepard took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and released it slowly. "Yes, sir," she managed.

"Good," Hammond said, obviously relieved to have disarmed a potentially lethal reaction. "I need you to get showered and changed into your service blues. I'm going to circle our wagons best we can to keep Kinsey from getting in our way. I'm waiting for the President to call me back for just that reason," he pointed at the red phone. "I promise you, Victoria, we'll get her back." He squeezed her shoulder. Shepard winced. Startled, Hammond looked down to see blood running down her arm and pattering from her hand onto the floor. He removed his hand from her shoulder and it came away bloody, "You're wounded."

"I hadn't noticed," Shepard replied robotically.

Hammond took a step back. "Colonel, escort the Commander to the infirmary. See that she's…"

Hammond was interrupted by Shepard's omni-tool beeping. "What was that Commander?"

"Oh," she shook her head slightly, hardly able to recompose her sunken facial expression, "PINNACLE NUDET, sir," Shepard said without emotion. "The airbase is gone, along with that ha'tak if it was still landed there." She completed her report plainly, as if she were delivering the day's weather.

Hammond nodded, not a little off-put by Shepard's lack of emotion at describing the detonation of a nuclear device. He would need to kick that up the chain immediately. He resumed his last train of thought, "Colonel, see that the Commander's checked out. Then get yourself changed too. I'm sure the good Senator will want to speak with you as well. Dismissed."

"Aye aye, sir."

Shepard entered her guest quarters. A brief exam in the infirmary revealed Shepard's shoulder wound to be superficial. It appeared as if a staff blast had super-heated a rock into exploding. Red-hot fragments had peppered her shoulder and upper arm. The enhanced clotting factor afforded her by her military-grade gene mods had closed up the wound until General Hammond had inadvertently re-opened it. The removal of the fragments, a thorough disinfecting, and a couple of sutures later, Shepard was ready for her shower. She would apply antibacterial-cream and a fresh bandage after she dried herself.

Shepard looked at her bed, perfectly made and un-slept-in for several days. Victoria had to fight the urge to vomit, Liara, my love, please don't be lost to me again. Shepard could barely take it, she had
crossed to another universe or reality or whatever and somehow been reunited with her beloved. Now she'd been taken from her, *this can't be happening!* She clenched her teeth, *focus Shepard, she needs you to rescue her. You cannot rescue her if you lose it!* She couldn't employ her normal coping mechanism for this trauma. She couldn't ignore the events of the past few hours. She couldn't harden herself to the loss. Liara was her entire world. Through the bond; one plus one was greater than two. She couldn't fathom what life would be without her one and only love. She ground her teeth; there was little else she could do.

Victoria averted her gaze and didn't look at the photograph of Liara on the end table next to their bed. She stripped naked and entered her private shower. The hot water pelted her body as she replayed the conversation with Daniel in her mind:

**We fought our way from the dig towards the gate. Jaffa were ringing down from stealth transports all over the place. Death gliders were buzzing us but not firing and the Jaffa were mostly using zat-guns. They obviously wanted us alive.**

**What happened to Liara?** Shepard had asked him.

**The Jaffa dialed in so we couldn't escape. Liara enveloped one of their dead in a biotic field and threw it through the event horizon. The gate disengaged and I dialed home. More and more Jaffa ringed down around us, I barely had time to send the IDC signal. Liara was protecting us with a biotic dome.**

Shepard had nearly screamed in his face, **where is she?**

**Liara had to drop the dome to send us through. She enveloped all of us in a biotic field and launched us through the event horizon. I got this, he pointed to his swollen face, when I landed on the embarkation ramp. Last I saw her she was taking concentrated zat-gun fire. She went down, stunned I think. That's the last I saw of her. Hammond closed the iris and the gate shut down. We had just gotten to the infirmary when you came through from your mission.**

Victoria squeezed her eyes tightly shut and forced her face under the stinging stream of hot water. **Beloved, why did you have to be a hero,** Shepard lamented to herself. Victoria didn't blame Daniel, nor any of the other scientists or airmen she sacrificed herself to save. It was Liara's way, just as much as it was Shepard's. She would have to apologize to Daniel for shouting at him, she was sure that he'd understand. Shepard suddenly sobbed uncontrollably. She fell to the tiled floor of the shower, tears mixing with the hot water. **No! This can't be happening, no! Not now, not now that we're expecting a baby!** She cried for several minutes.

Then she stopped.

**Viking Vikki** took over.

She was going to get Liara back, nothing else mattered. Nothing would stop her. If anyone, especially that *douche-biscuit* Senator, got in her way, she would destroy them. Once she had Liara back, a smile crossed her lips with the thought, she was going to make all of those goa'uld *motherfuckers* pay. She was going to rescue her beloved, and then she was going to make them extinct.

Shepard rose from the shower floor and shut off the water. She dried herself and dressed her wound. She strode, stark naked and with purpose, to her bureau and reached in for a bra and panties; the black, lacy ones that Liara had bought for her from that ironically named shop. No one would know she was wearing them under her uniform, but it felt good to be close to something associated with
Liara. She opened her closet and extracted her 'service blues' uniform. She dressed quickly and examined herself in the full length mirror; her uniform was immaculate. The US Navy SEAL trident badge shone brightly in the overhead lighting. Shepard nodded to her reflection and left her quarters.

She met a similarly well turned out Colonel O'Neill outside of the briefing room. "You ready?" he asked.

"Let's do this," she replied as she set her jaw. She pushed open the door and regarded her opponent; Senator Kinsey. Maintain control, Shepard, she thought to herself, Liara is depending on you, so keep your shit together. She entered the room.

"You sent for us, sir," Jack started the exchange. O'Neill and Shepard entered the room and braced to attention.

General Hammond, who was conspicuously not seated at the head of the briefing table, motioned them forward, "At ease." The two officers placed their left feet to the side, shoulders' width apart, and folded their arms behind their backs; a parade ground-perfect motion. For his part, General Hammond was not going to give the Senator the satisfaction of seeing him flustered. It was bad enough that the murderous politician was throwing his weight around in his own briefing room; he wasn't going to let it show on his face.

Shepard quickly assessed her surroundings. Kinsey sitting in Hammond's usual chair was an obvious slight against him. Ditto the slab of meat wearing the black suit in place of the normal security forces guard standing near the stairwell to the control room. Even before her military-grade gene-mods, Shepard had exceptional eyesight; there was no way she could miss the small radio bud stuck in his ear or the secret service pin in his lapel. She certainly didn't fail to notice the slight bulge on the left side of his chest. He undoubtedly had some weapon under his jacket; probably a large one for it to show under what was obviously a custom-tailored suit. Excessive if that's only a slight against the General. More likely an intimidation tactic against me too, she decided. He has no idea what he's dealing with, she suppressed an internal chuckle. Secret Service works for the Executive Branch, Treasury Department, she filed that away.

"Senator Kinsey," Hammond continued, "may I introduce you to Commander…"

"Shepard, I know," Kinsey rudely cut him off. The Senator closed one of several manila folders spread out in front of him on the briefing table and stood. He buttoned his suit jacket as he approached the Commander with a saunter and a smile that only a career politician could muster; obviously the result of decades' worth of practice. "I've read so much about you," he extended his hand, "it's a pleasure to meet you, Victoria," his feigned familiarity was also an obvious slight against her.

For a fleeting moment Shepard thought about not accepting his offered hand, but that seemed childish. I saved the galaxy, she thought, I can deal with one piss-ant politician; and I can do it without shooting him. There was also the purely practical consideration of needing to avoid lockup if she had any hope of rescuing Liara. Victoria took the Senator's hand in a firm grip, suppressing an equally fleeting desire to crush it like a Christmas ornament, and shook it. "A pleasure, sir." She smiled amicably; running through a multitude of ways she could kill the man. Victoria could think of no fewer than half a dozen different methods that would have him dead before he hit the floor and that didn't require biotics. Another time, perhaps.

"Oh," Kinsey responded, "you don't know the half of it," a predatory smile crossed his lips. For a brief moment Kinsey's eyes flashed down to her chest, did he just look at my tits? Then he locked stares with her for several seconds. Shepard knew that look. Donnel Udina had a similar facial
expression moments before she shot him. She tried to place that thought from her mind. The Senator released her hand and turned to return to his seat. Shepard took a quick glance down at herself, an epiphany, he was looking at my trident. I suppose he's never met a mere woman wearing one of those before. Still, she found his expression troubling.

"I was afraid that I wouldn't have the opportunity to interview you in person," Kinsey said as he sat down, "It seemed as if you and the Asari would be offworld and conveniently unavailable for my visit." He glanced at the General. Then he looked down and opened one of the folders. "It looks like circumstances have brought us together after all."

Shepard felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. This behavior was going beyond the cocky self-righteous politician she was led to expect from Kinsey. Something else was going on here. Shepard balled a fist behind her back. Control Shepard, maintain control. "I am at the Senator's disposal," Shepard replied neutrally.

"Indeed you are, but not under auspicious circumstances. And the Asari is nowhere to be seen." He looked about the room theatrically.

Shepard ground her teeth. She tried not to rise to the bait, and she knew she was being baited. That has to be what this is, right? She glanced about the room; General Hammond's facial expression alternated between resentment for Kinsey throwing his weight around in his briefing room and all but begging her to maintain control. If Victoria could have seen it without turning her head, she imagined O'Neill's face looked the same. If she hadn't just come out of combat and learned of the capture and possible compromising of her one and only beloved, she probably could have kept a level head. But, enough adrenaline still saturated her cells to kill and un-augmented human and, as the Senator had pointed out, circumstances were less than auspicious. "Begging the Senator's pardon, but I'm sorry that the destruction of billions of dollars of SGC property, the deaths of SGC personnel, and the capture of my wife by the goa'uld have inconvenienced you in any way. Sir," she added as an afterthought.

Senator Kinsey smiled, then he turned to look at the General. Shit! Shepard thought. Something else is going on here. "Let's talk about the Asari's capture then, shall we?"

Shepard dug her finger nails into the palms of her hands. In for a penny, "The Asari has a name, Mister Senator," in for a pound, "it's Liara T'soni."

"Indeed," replied the Senator. He looked down at the file in his hands. "And how long, General Hammond, would you say that Miss T'soni has harbored delusions of godhood?"

"Pardon?" Shepard and Hammond squawked out in unison; Shepard before she could fully process the comment, Hammond because of the sudden shift in the object of address of Senator Kinsey's interrogation. The slight Kinsey made against Liara by not acknowledging her doctorate flew right past both of them. Godhood? What the hell is he talking about?

The shift in Kinsey's body language was as sudden as it was insulting; Commander Shepard no longer existed. Kinsey was alone in the room with Hammond for all intents and purposes; all others were merely spectators for his grand performance.

"I realize you don't have all of that fancy genetic tinkering the Commander has. Man messing where he has no business," Kinsey responded with a superior smile on his face, "but I know you've got pretty good hearing for your age. Or are you just playing dumb now?" He paused, observing him. He noticed how he was only now recovering; he obviously liked the feeling of control it gave him. "I asked you, how long has Liara T'soni harbored delusions of godhood?"
"Senator Kinsey, I…"

"So, I should take your flustered lack of a response as admission of ignorance? Commander Shepard hasn't reported any potentially treasonous behavior from the Asari, then? Perhaps she's reluctant to because of a guilty conscience. Or maybe she doesn't like repeating things said in the bedroom; especially when she's doing something as unnatural as sleeping with an alien," he paused and shuddered theatrically, "woman."

Shepard bristled. Despite her general loathing of bigotry, Shepard had done a fairly good job at not assaulting the less-tolerant base personnel; even the ones who try to drive remotely piloted aircraft into her. She was sure that the Senator was trying to goad her on purpose; at least with that last barb. Victoria had heard that he was a bit of a loony in that regard, but hearing it and seeing it were two different things. What the hell is he playing at? Is he suicidal? He knows I can crush him like an ant, right? The fact that he was ignoring her presence was adding to the insult.

Kinsey made a display of putting on a pair of reading glasses, "Let's see if I can jog your memory, General. I'm sure that you've reviewed all of the surveillance footage recorded in Commander Shepard's quarters, and have simply forgotten the instances of which I speak. I wouldn't want to imply that you've been completely shirking your duties by ignoring them in their entirety." No, Shepard thought, Hammond was not shirking his duties. Every evening when she and Liara returned to their quarters they found the surveillance cameras returned to their nominal positions, no matter how askew they had knocked them the previous evening. Hammond undoubtedly found the spying distasteful, but orders were orders; he took his duties seriously.

He cleared his throat, "I want to be the Athame of this world. I want to be the mother of a new Asari race." He lowered the glasses on his nose and looked at him. "I'm given to understand that some Asari believe that Athame is their goddess?" That last statement was rhetorical. "Looks like the Jaffa might not be the only people to be taken in by false gods." Looking down at the file, he muttered something to himself that Shepard just barely made out as, "There's only one true God, when will these idiots take the hint."

Shepard's eye twitched at that last comment. Shepard wasn't a religious person. Neither was Liara, really. She was knowledgeable in the Athame doctrine as a matter of historical literacy; though also, in retrospect, probably because the Lady Beneda had educated her with the hope that she would one day have access to the Prothean Beacon in the Temple of Athame. So, ironically, Kinsey might not be too far off the mark on this one. She almost smiled wondering what Kinsey might think of that, almost.

She never quite understood organized religion, but she appreciated that it was very important to many. She recalled surprising Ashley Williams by not scoffing at her beliefs out of hand. What Shepard certainly didn't understand, and only tolerated so far as the law required, were people who tried to foist their views on others. It was becoming more and more obvious to Shepard that Kinsey was a total whack-job. Is that what this is about? O'Neill must really hate this guy, that's so cliché.

Shepard's jaw figuratively dropped at the absurdity of it all. She wasn't so much surprised that the Senator was monitoring the recordings made in her and Liara's quarters, than with how far out of context he was willing to take what she said. Shepard experienced that sinking sensation again. From what the members of SG-1 had told her, Shepard knew Kinsey was a power hungry asshole. She didn't appreciate, however, how brazenly he was willing to bend the truth to get what he wanted. Rolling it all into his skewed world-view was just icing on the cake. Victoria wondered, idly, if those beliefs were really near and dear to his heart, or just political expedients. Is he goading me? Is he gloating in front of the General before he makes one of his power plays to seize command of the SGC? The President wouldn't allow that. Right? It's got to be gloating. Kinsey isn't a stupid man,
"General Hammond," Kinsey said, the smug expression once again appearing on his face, "it would have been bad enough that you failed to detect and stamp out goa'uld-like ideation amongst your personnel, but the Asari didn't stop there. No, she made specific threats; and you did nothing." He looked down at the folder again, "I am not afraid of the NID, or the SGC, or the Air Force, or anyone on this world. I will destroy them." He placed the folder back down on the conference room table, "Ring any bells, General?" Hammond ground his teeth, trying to maintain an even expression.

Shepard nearly leaped out of her skin. While Victoria didn't have an eidetic memory, she did remember enough to know that the Senator was omitting a sentence. How could she forget the conception of her first daughter? Well, second, technically. Liara wasn't making a threat against the organizations of Earth out of hand. She was vowing to fight anyone who threatened her family, regardless of who they were.

Shepard squeezed her fist even more tightly behind her back. She didn't understand. She tried running through it again in her head. Did Kinsey really believe what he was spouting? Was he just trying to goad her into an outburst? Something beyond just the suggestive bedroom talk he had recorded and taken out of context? Was he looking for some legitimate reason to lock her up, as part of his jockeying for control of the SGC? That's not going to happen if I lose it and murder him. Or does he think that the mook in the suit could save him? Shepard found herself locked in a loop, too flabbergasted at what she was seeing to really understand it.

What the hell is this asshole up to?

Colonel O'Neill didn't like Senator Kinsey. He never did, and that was no secret. For all of the things there was to hate about him, there was something Jack appreciated in the Senator; consistency. Kinsey could be relied upon to do whatever he needed to do to gain more power for himself. Be it manipulating subordinates, blackmailing generals, subverting the Stargate Program, or even kidnapping and dissecting naval officers; it all was part of a well laid out strategy to move one Senator Kinsey up the ladder. But Jack just could not figure out what he was trying to pull here.

Jack O'Neill was watching a train wreck in the making. Senator Kinsey seemed to be going out of his way to insult Shepard's spouse, their relationship, and her beliefs. He seemed to be working his way towards linking some bedroom talk and the recent attacks on Shepard and Liara's offworld teams together into some massive goa'uld conspiracy with Liara at its center. But to what end? Was Kinsey lining up some sort of massive I told you so to lay at Hammond's feet to preface his takeover of the SGC?

Additionally, Kinsey seemed hell bent on goading Commander Victoria Shepard into splattering him across the wall. The showy assumption that she would appear before him, only to be completely ignored while he spoke at the General; Kinsey was being even more of a douchebag than usual. Either that or he was so confident, or terminally stupid, to believe that Shepard wouldn't or couldn't lash out at him, that he wanted to rub her nose in it. He certainly was pulling out all of the stops to do it too; religious zealotry, sexism, bigotry, homophobia, all of the Kinsey oldies-but-goldies, with a leavening of insulting her commanding officer for color. But to what end? Did he know his case was that flimsy that he needed Shepard to do something stupid to 'close the deal'? Did he really want to be a martyr that badly?

Part of him wanted to see Shepard go to town on him, but his more logical side understood what a disaster it would be for Shepard, Liara, and the SGC as a whole. Sweet Jesus, this guy is crazier than even I thought he was.
Jack eyed the Commander. He looked at her hands, held behind her back in textbook perfect position. Her knuckles were white with her grip. Her finger nails dug into her palms, and blood pooled around her fingertips. He could swear that he heard the tendons in her hands and forearms straining. Oh shit, he thought, she is going to lose it.

Finally General Hammond spoke. Decades of military service kept his tone even and respectful despite the loathing everyone in the room knew he felt towards the Senator. "Mister Senator, I have nothing but the highest regard for Commander Shepard and her wife Doctor T'soni, and I do not question their loyalty and dedication to this command and the planet Earth. I have not, nor have any of my officers, witnessed any behavior that would indicate otherwise. What is it that you're getting at, sir?"

"Don't play dumb with me, General. I know the Commander and her wife," he said that last word with a sneer, "have been in contact with the goa'uld. The bastards show up at every world they've visited like clockwork." He closed a folder and tossed across the table to rest in front of the General as he rose from his seat. He approached the Commander. No! Jack's thoughts screamed in his head, stay the fuck away from her! She'll rip your goddamned head off! "Liara wasn't captured, now was she?" Despite his increasing proximity to Shepard, he was still talking to General Hammond. "She's been working with them all along. She's going to use them to get what she wants, isn't she? The adoration of worshipers, legions of soldiers and servants at her command; she's going to be a goddess, just like she's always dreamed. Just like she has you, the Commander, and a goodly number of your people, wrapped around her finger. My beloved," he said mockingly, "General Hammond, you yourself know where else we've heard that phrase."

Kinsey continued, walking a slow circle around Shepard and O'Neill. He obviously didn't notice her trembling fist, or the blood pooling about her finger nails, "The way they prattle on about their undying love for each other. How they're incomplete without each other. How they're inseparable, always holding hands. It's so sickeningly co-dependent; I hope you haven't irrevocably set a bad example for Doctor Frasier's adopted daughter." He paused to look at the General, speaking past Commander Shepard as if she wasn't there, "Oh, I know how you allowed the Asari to leave this base without authorization from your superiors." Kinsey stepped around front of Shepard, addressing her for the first time since greeting her, "I wonder where your parents went so wrong raising you that you had such an obvious emotional need that this Asari could exploit it."

Senator Kinsey was now standing less than a foot from the Commander. So far as Jack was concerned, the fucker deserved what he got. He just prayed that Shepard wouldn't give in to temptation. Please Shepard, Jack thought, just don't do it. We'll get Liara back, I promise, just don't kill him first. Shepard's right arm began to move, oh shit! There was a blinding flash of light, god damn it Shepard, don't do it! Suddenly Shepard was gone. Kinsey looked around, surprised. He looked at Jack; they shared a what-the-fuck expression. Then he looked at the secret service agent who had produced an MP-7 out of nowhere and was scanning the room. "What the hell was that?"

Shepard suddenly found herself looking out of a large glass window and down upon the Earth below. I didn't mean to punch him that hard, she thought. Victoria looked around. She was definitely on a spaceship and not in the SGC anymore. The construction didn't match anything she'd seen the goa'uld, SGC, nor anyone from the other place ever deploy. "What exciting new dimension have you found yourself in now, Shepard?" she said out loud to herself.

Ahem, someone cleared their throat behind her.

Shepard turned to regard a short grey figure. Oh what the hell is this? A puppet?

"You're human," it said.
"You're not," she replied.

"I am Thor, Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet."

"I'm Commander Shepard, US Navy, Council Spectre," for whatever that's worth, she didn't add. She looked at Thor, he seemed familiar. Ah! That's it. "Should have taken that left turn at Albuquerque ehh?" The small grey alien scowled; at least so far as Shepard could tell it was a scowl. "You're friends with Colonel O'Neill?" Thor nodded. "Do you think you could get him on the phone?"
Taken

Lord Ba'al, goa'uld System Lord, seethed as he watched the replay of the battle against the tau'ri soldiers. *How could they have known?!* His Jaffa had had the element of surprise, or they *should* have. There was no indication that the SGC cretins had anything in orbit or on the ground that could have possibly detected the approach of his ha'tak, or the presence of his tel'tak surveillance ships. *They certainly didn't have anything in the way of launch facilities to indicate such a capability.* Yet, when the assault began they were ready for them. The Jaffa he sent through the gate to secure the chappa'ai had walked into a well laid ambush as well.

_Curse you Lord Yu!_ Once again Ba'al raged against that aged has-been Yu for distracting his forces. That *gap* in coverage must have afforded the tau'ri time to get at least *some* of those forces into position without being observed.

But Lord Ba'al did not let any of his anger show on his face. Unlike some of his more *capricious* System Lord associates, he was not prone to temper tantrums or fits of rage. The proper heads would roll, of course, but only at the appropriate times. As it was, they still had work to do, *and a great deal of my vengeance has already been carried out for me._

Lord Ba'al manipulated the controls on the display and zoomed the image. The tall woman with the fire-red hair filled the frame; so intimidating, so defiant, Ba'al had _wanted_ her as a prize. The death glider pilot had had the perfect firing solution, targeting reticle centered on the billowing hair and angry face; the strafing run had been aborted just barely in time. In retrospect, he might have been better off letting the pilot take his shot. Though, considering what he saw her do as the battle unfolded, he wondered if *mere* death glider weapons could have brought the demon down. Conventional tau'ri weapons had already shot down half of his attacking force, including one of his al'kesh, but *she* had wreaked an entire brand of carnage all her own. Radio chatter from his forces during the battle labeled her the 'flame-haired banshee' when translated to the tau'ri tongue. Ba'al made a note to himself to execute any Jaffa he caught using that phrase.

The ha'tak remained in orbit initially, observing and directing the battle, combining its bird's eye view with the individual cameras of the death gliders and al'kesh; the long range communications device aboard the ha'tak relayed the imagery back to his court. Of course, the mothership could have reduced the entire continent to superheated glass, but that was not the purpose of this mission. Ba'al's rage at the failure peaked again; he almost wished he had given that order rather than his prize escape. No, he caught himself, the original plan was sound; it was devised by his First Prime and one of his best ship captains, after all. The ha'tak would remain in orbit as one al'kesh assaulted the tau'ri base and seized it. The other would seize the chappa'ai. If the tall woman was not captured outright, she would be driven towards the chappa'ai. If either of the al'kesh were destroyed, the ha'tak would be used to drive their quarry. *A sound strategy._

Playing the recording forward Ba'al watched his forces annihilated by a vastly outnumbered tau'ri force. In the thick of it all the flame-headed woman would glow a brilliant blue and manifest some sort of glowing orb from her hand. She pitched them toward his death gliders and they would glow, or explode, or all but stop in midair and tumble lazily to be easy pickings for the tau'ri's gunpowder weapons. What was supposed to be harried prey driven towards capture looked like a well-organized retreating force prepared to fight its way through the Jaffa arrayed before it defending the chappa'ai.

At this point in the battle the ha'tak *did* leave its orbit, so his overhead view disappeared. The rest of the battle was pieced together into a single file by his disgusting underling Nerus from video recordings from the surviving al'kesh before its crash and audio transmissions received afterwards.
The video, along with the report of the ha'tak's captain, was transmitted through the long range communication device after the battle was complete, *but before the final disaster.*

The image jumped to that looking out of the cockpit of the al'kesh guarding the chappa'ai. Suddenly there was a dark blur and a small airplane-shaped object struck the glass windscreen. Immediately afterwards alarms began blaring within the cockpit reporting incoming missiles and the bomber lurched wildly to the side. The pilots spotted the tau'ri and throttled up to engage in battle. More missile warnings were received. The bomber lurched again.

The image cut to an exterior view. Ba'al leaned forward in his throne to look. It was *her.* Wreathed in a blue glow, moving at an *impossible* speed, she sprinted towards the chappa'ai. Throwing a blue orb at the al'kesh as an afterthought she sped past it. The heavily damaged al'kesh went down in a hail of machinegun fire.

At this point, his picture of events at that world's chappa'ai devolved into garbled and panicked radio transmissions about the 'banshee' picked up and relayed to him by the ha'tak. The tau'ri deactivated the gate, inflicting a cataclysm upon his forces which were keeping it open from another world. They managed to escape to their home, and visited the same destruction upon this place, if on an *even larger* scale. Only the ha'tak survived since it had landed at the tau'ri base far from the gate.

Of course, a different disaster would befall his mothership a half hour later; theatrically enough, at the very moment the ship's captain was giving his report on his failure. Ba'al doubted he could have resisted the urge to tear the prim'ta from his First Prime's body, despite how badly he was still needed until a replacement could be identified, if not for the fact that he had watched his eldest son obliterated with his hat'ak by a tau'ri atomic booby-trap at his side; live, and in 3-D. That was punishment enough, *for now.*

Lord Ba'al closed one video display and opened another. The battle to seize the blue beauty, fortunately, had gone much better; though, a number of his Jaffa would soon meet his executioner for putting his prize at such risk.

He watched the fight unfold at an accelerated speed. His forces deployed in well-drilled precision, just as he had planned. There were no meddlesome guided missiles or ambushes to save the tau'ri on *this* world. His *quarry,* however, was something entirely different. She moved with such fluid grace; like *water.* Ba'al almost chuckled aloud, *she was certainly the right* color. Even wearing dusty and baggy tau'ri-style clothing she was obviously beautiful, elegant in her movements despite being locked in mortal combat; and the *glow!* Ba'al was convinced, now, that he needed to possess her. He could get over not having the redhead, but not *her.*

With the blue beauty's help the tau'ri fought his Jaffa to a halt and managed to push their way to the chappa'ai. His pilots all had explicit instructions to not even fire in the general direction of the blue woman, so the rest of the tau'ri benefitted of the lack of a concerted air attack. Ba'al slowed the playback and leaned forward in his throne. He re-watched the next segment of the battle several times, subconsciously stroking his goatee. There it was; a crack-pistol shot, an ethereal glow, a floating Jaffa going through the chappa'ai *the wrong way!* The gate disconnected. He checked the time-stamp on the recording and referenced it to when his supporting tel'tak on the world from which his forces had dialed in to prevent escape went offline. There was no mistaking it. That was it!

Finally, Ba'al knew what was causing the highly energetic 'unknown events'. It was this blue effect manifested by the redhead and the blue creature. He had lost nearly a hundred Jaffa and two tel'taks who hadn't even seen combat this day to their witchcraft! But soon he would have that power for himself.

The next bit where the beauty erected a protective bubble to deflect staff weapon and zat fire was
impressive too, but he'd already seen what he'd wanted. Lord Ba'al, goa'uld System Lord, powered
down his displays and awaited delivery of his prize.

It would not be a long wait.

"Once again it has become patently obvious to me that the SGC is being grossly mismanaged," Senator Kinsey had resumed his rant almost immediately after Shepard had disappeared from the briefing room. His near-brush wish a violent, biotic-assisted death was either lost upon him or ignored. "I don't see how you're going to be able to weasel your way out of this one; the President is going to have to see reason this time."

Jack was maintaining his cool better than Shepard had, but he was used to the man. *I'm going to have to have a word with Shepard about that temper*, Jack thought. It was obvious to everyone, including the Senator, what had just happened. Thor had finally decided to make an appearance, *it's not like we've been trying to contact him for the past several months*, and he up and body-snatched Shepard right out of the briefing room. Jack imagined that a hologram of either Shepard or the little grey dude himself would appear any moment now cluing them all in to what was going on. He was sure that General Hammond had come to the same conclusions. Kinsey, douchebag as he was, was very smart and fully briefed on the program, so he had also probably come to the same conclusion; he just decided to pass the time differently. *To each his own*, Jack supposed.

"Letting wannabe-goa'uld aliens run amok around base, violating decorum, compromising offworld installations, losing SGC personnel, detonating nuclear weapons, it's beyond me how you're not all in prison, let alone still running this command," the Senator kept talking. Jack tried to tune him out.

He looked at Hammond. The General obviously felt the same way, *when is the President going to call us back?* It was all they could both think about.

As if on cue, the red phone in Hammond's office rang.

Kinsey actually made a movement towards Hammond's office but stopped short with a glare from the General. *Perhaps he isn't as dumb as he looks*, Jack thought. When Kinsey tried to hover over the General and listen in on the conversation he had the door slammed in his face. Jack's professional, stoic face actually cracked into a grin at that, he just couldn't help it. The Senator fumed and paced outside of the General's office. He wouldn't even look in Jack's direction.

The conversation itself couldn't have taken more than three minutes, and Jack couldn't tell what was being said since the door was sound-proof. For the life of him, O'Neill couldn't tell if he should be concerned or elated it was so quick. Hammond emerged from the office and looked at Kinsey, "Senator, the President would like to speak with you, sir." Hammond held the door open and motioned for the Senator to enter.

Kinsey straightened his tie and smiled. As he passed the General he said, "Pack your bags. Oh, and I'm keeping your chair." He closed the door loudly behind him.

No sooner had Kinsey closed the door did a shimmering visage of Shepard appear where she had stood a few minutes ago. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

Jack's eyebrow perked up, "I was wondering how long it would take you to phone home."

"Sorry, I was having a quick chat with Thor." Shepard paused for a moment and looked over her shoulder, "Is it just me, or does he look like a muppet to you?" She shrugged at someone off-camera, Jack could only imagine Thor was giving her one of his looks.
The change in tone and carriage was remarkable. In the briefing room a few minutes ago, Shepard was morose and uncaring bordering on combative and psychopathic. Now she was not quite cheerful, but animated. Jack couldn't be sure what Thor had told her, but he could guess. Shepard had purpose now, she had a plan. She wasn't adrift anymore, and that gave her emotional strength.

"Oh, good, you're all here," Jack looked over his shoulder to see the balance of SG-1 enter the briefing room. "Sorry General," the hologram of Shepard said, "I had Thor hack into the base's intercom system to summon the rest of the team so they could all hear what was going on at the same time."

"That's fine, Commander," the General said, giving his blessing for this unconventional briefing, "please continue."

"Thor says he's been monitoring all of the eezo and mass effect field interactions with the gate network, just like Ba'al has. That's how he's been able to track Liara and my movements, or when we used our biotics to push stuff through the gate. He would have come sooner, but he had his own shit to deal with," she looked off-camera and shrugged, "What? That's what you said." She turned to look back towards SG-1, "Anyway, he believes he knows where they've taken Liara and he's willing to help us mount a rescue, but we need to move quickly."

"Sir," Shepard straightened up as she spoke, "I'm requesting permission to embark on a rescue mission. I'll need help, and some supplies. I've prepared a short list." With a burst of light a piece of paper appeared at an ashen-faced Carter's feet. She looked pale, ever since Shepard said that Ba'al had been able to monitor all of Shepard and Liara's interactions with the gate; not just the 'high energy' events like she had thought. She was obviously blaming herself for this. Sam reached down and picked it up.

"Well, Major?" asked the General.

"Yes, sir," Carter said, shaking her head trying to center herself. "Let's see. Shepard needs all of her gear, SG-1, whatever personal gear we think we need to assault a goa'uld space station," she paused and looked around at the group with surprise, "a week's worth of rations, water, and portable latrine kits for six people, heavy-trauma first aid gear including quite a bit of anesthetic, a whole bunch of demolition, and a, woah..." she trailed off and looked at the hologram. Shepard nodded, an utterly terrifying grin appeared on her face, "and a W80 thermonuclear warhead set for maximum yield and rigged for remote detonation on a rolling dolly or hand-truck."

O'Neill let out a long low whistle. Then he looked into Shepard's hologram's eyes and his blood momentarily turned to ice. He knew that look, it spelled trouble.

There was silence in the briefing room. Then Colonel O'Neill turned to General Hammond, "General, SG-1 requests permission to join Commander Shepard on the rescue mission."

Hammond, to his credit and Shepard's eternal gratitude, did not hesitate a single second, "Granted. Get your team and gear ready to go." Shepard resolved to name her first daughter after the General, maybe Liara would go for Georgia T'soni? He looked at Daniel Jackson. He sported an obviously broken nose, but seemed prepared as well, he nodded. "I'll need a more detailed briefing before you depart, but let's not waste time." He turned to the hologram, "Commander, I'll also need to make a few phone calls regarding the last item on this list." He let that hang there for a few moments.

"Please do, sir," Shepard said in a level and respectful tone. "Thor tells me it is a," she paused, "large space station."

Hammond nodded. He was about to speak when he was interrupted from behind.
"Now what the hell is this!" Kinsey stormed around the conference room table towards the shimmering hologram. "You bringing the Asgard in on you and your little girlfriend's plot?"

Shepard's eyes narrowed. Jack said a silent prayer of thanks that Shepard was somewhere very very far away right now where she couldn't possibly wring the Senator's neck, and it was only a hologram that he had just insulted.

"I should go," she said with an odd flourish, and disconnected.

Somehow Jack wondered if Shepard had a lot of practice saying that. Anyway, what does this asshat want now?

"Is there something I can help you with Senator?" General Hammond asked in an even tone. O'Neill looked closely at his commanding officer. He could swear that he detected the slightest hint of a smile. Oh, this should be good.

"I don't know what sort of games you're playing, General," said the Senator, straightening his tie, "But it's not going to work. Somehow you've convinced the President to let you see this fiasco through to its conclusion. He's asked me to compile my report while you're doing that. You're going to make some of your base personnel available to me to that end. When you all get back here, provided you don't end up as that blue woman's thralls, things are going to change." He looked them each in the eye. "I don't think I'll waste my breath explaining what I mean by that." Good, because we don't care. He turned and left the briefing room; the Secret Service agent that everyone had forgotten about left with him.

SG-1 turned in unison to General Hammond for an explanation. "I'll explain when you return. All you need to know is that you have my full confidence and that of the President of the United States of America as well. SG-1's collective chests seemed to puff up with pride at that last comment. "Now get yourselves kitted out and ready to go. Reconvene here with your equipment in 20 minutes. Dismissed."

Ba'al looked upon his prize.

What a prize she was! Ba'al had not felt this excited in a very long time. The blue creature on the examining table, stripped naked and unconscious before him, was definitely something new. And new was always exciting to a goa'uld.

"Intriguing, isn't it?" asked Nirrti absentmindedly as she interrogated her instruments.

That's not the word I would use, thought Ba'al. His Jaffa had delivered the blue creature to him immediately after capture. They had used the chappal'ai on the target world to do it, gating to a nearby planet and flying on a quick transport waiting there for that purpose to his space station. She was still unconscious from the zat'nik'tel blasts it took to bring her down, they had brought her here that quickly. It had taken multiple shots to stun her too, that was unheard of.

The idiot Jaffa who had risked destroying the blue beauty with their over-zealous trigger fingers, along with someone who had used the phrase 'flame-haired banshee' in his presence, were already on their way to his executioner. He put that thought from his mind and redirected his attention.

"What have you learned, Nirrti?"

Nirrti manipulated the controls of her scanning equipment bringing up a holographic depiction of the interior of their prisoner. "Its internal structure is very similar to humans and Jaffa. Skeletal structure is nearly identical. The cranial fringes appear to be cartilaginous. Organ structures look similar;
similar sizes and shapes, a few do not match, but I can hypothesize their function from their composition and connective tissues.

"Nervous systems looks familiar but much denser. The amount of nerve endings is astounding. They must serve some special purpose to be this well developed. There also appears to be," she fiddled with the controls, "some sort of material affixed to the nerve tissue throughout the body that my instruments cannot recognize. Very pervasive. It is emitting a strange energy. There appears to be some level of cybernetic implants associated with these nodules as well; all wired to a device at the base of the skull."

Ba'al looked at the display. That material must be the unknown that the chappa'ai was reporting, what gave this creature her special abilities. He would have Nerus get started on that immediately.

"Outwardly, she would appear to be female; mammary tissue appears analogous to its human and Jaffa cognates. Exterior sex organs appear similar as well. Interior arrangement is obviously different, but generally recognizable. She..." Nirrti paused. Cocking her head she manipulated the controls further and zoomed in on the lower abdomen.

"What is it?" asked Ba'al. He was concerned. Nothing must be wrong with his prize!

"She is with child!" Nirrti said with no small amount of surprise. A smile crossed her face. A casual observer might have mistaken it for some sort of maternal joy, but that would have been a gross misconception. Nirrti was a scientist. Not only that, a goa'uld scientist. For her the word ethics was a quaint concept that the tau'ri threw around, at least until their civilization was annihilated and they were enslaved. She would have been more at home with the likes of Mengele, had one been pressed to find an Earthly counterpart. For Nirrti, the small clump of cells growing in this creature's version of a womb represented not a joyful new life to be celebrated and nurtured, but an opportunity to further her hok'tar project by leaps and bounds.

Ba'al stepped towards the examining table. "Not for long, I imagine," he said turning to smile at Nirrti. The goa'uld biologist smiled deviously in response and began working her controls. Ba'al turned his attention back towards the blue beauty on the table. He reached his hand out and ran his fingertips along her shoulder. The blue dappled skin, nearly iridescent in places, was smooth and warm to the touch. He traced his fingers down over her breast and nipple, which hardened as he brushed past it, and further over her taunt abdomen. Ba'al noticed that his prize was utterly hairless except for the eyelashes; though she did have tattooed eyebrows. Fascinating.

"Imagining how your old adversary Qetesh might have looked in this body?" Nirrti ribbed Ba'al with a smile. "I know that, despite your rivalry, you were quite fond of her. Or maybe because of your rivalry?"

"Mind your tongue!" Though, that raises a point, thought Ba'al. "Will this body accept a symbiote?"

Nirrti consulted her display. "I believe so. The nervous system is more than sufficiently developed, and the morphology is appropriate." She cocked her head again, "Curious, the genetic structure shares some odd similarities with that of the 'first ones'." She shrugged, filing the thought away for another time, and went back to work preparing surgical instruments.

Ba'al smiled. "Excellent."
In Her Mother's Footsteps

Commander Shepard stood, still dressed in her naval 'service blues' uniform and at parade rest, in a large cargo area of Thor's flagship. Hands held behind her back, neck ramrod straight, she waited. She could have tapped her foot she was that impatient, but she understood the gravity of what she had proposed, of what she had asked of not only General Hammond and SG-1, but of the Commander in Chief as well. She had just asked him to hand over one of the most potent instruments of destruction ever wrought by the hands of man to a woman of, and she would be the first to agree, questionable emotional stability. It was only the profound trust the President had in one George Hammond and his subordinate Jack O'Neill that he was even willing to entertain the request. That, and the fact that she had put together a reasonably well thought-out plan. She reviewed the virtual briefing in her mind:

"Thor's instruments have tracked Liara through the Stargate to a world which he knows to be several hundred light years within Ba''al's territory." For the sake of Shepard's sanity, and because his interruptions kept dragging out the briefing, Kinsey had been forced out of the briefing room. The holographic visage of Commanders Shepard and Thor delivered the briefing from Thor's ship. Much to everyone's relief, Thor's hologram appeared seated in his command chair.

"The world they have taken her to is unremarkable," Thor picked up from Victoria. "But it is only a few hours flight by shuttle from a very large space station that Ba'al uses as a staging area for motherships operating in that portion of his domain."

"Apparently Ba'al and some other guy named Lord Yu have an on-again off-again rivalry going over several systems in that corner of space. This is his nexus of operations. Thor feels that it's likely that she's been taken there, and that Ba'al is actually present at that station as well."

"The Asgard and the Tok'ra have some shared intelligence on the matter," Thor added.

"Wish we had some of that," Jack quipped.

"Anyway," Shepard said, trying to get things back on track, "Thor feels that we can probably alert Lord Yu to the location of this space station, perhaps giving him a hint as to its importance to Ba'al's operations in that area, and then use the distraction of his inevitable attack to mount a rescue."

General Hammond spoke up, "What will your intervention do to Earth's status as a 'protected planet'?"

Thor was, of course, anticipating that question. "He will know nothing of my involvement. I can deliver SG-1 to his space station without detection. Retrieving them clandestinely would be problematic only without a distraction." O'Neill shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The diminutive grey alien looked at him and narrowed his black featureless eyes. "You wonder why I offer so much help against a goa'uld now, Colonel O'Neill, when I have been reluctant in the past?"

"Well," Jack tried to demure, "we definitely appreciate all that you've done for us over the years, Thor. And it's said that you shouldn't look a gift horse…" he trailed off at what Shepard was beginning to regard as a scowl from the alien, "a gift Asgard in the mouth, but this is sure out of character." He cleared his throat. "Why now?"

"The Mass Effect, Colonel O'Neill," Thor said simply. "If the goa'uld were to gain control of this technology it would upset the strategic balance of the entire Milky Way."
Shepard leaned forward, "However horrific that is, Colonel, that's probably not the primary threat. Between Liara and myself there is only so much eezo in existence in this universe, and Thor is dubious as to if more can be created." She turned to Major Carter, "Thor believes that Nirrti might be involved; at least peripherally." Samantha all but snarled. It was an uncharacteristically visceral reaction that Shepard found at once alarming and endearing.

Hammond, also visibly upset, spoke, "What makes you say that, Commander Thor?"

"We have indications that a certain piece of Ancient technology may have recently been discovered by Ba'al's Jaffa and moved into that area. It is a device used for examining and manipulating genetic material. The Tok'ra also have an unconfirmed report that Nirrti has been taking refuge in Ba'al's court. If Ba'al himself and a device that Nirrti is uniquely suited to operate are both at that space station, it is probable that Nirrti is as well."

"And with the one and only Asari in the universe to study?" Daniel spoke, "It certainly sounds plausible. But would she cooperate with Ba'al?" He looked to Teal'c.

"It is not unheard of for a defeated goa'uld to enter the service of a more powerful System Lord," he observed. "Lord Ba'al may be using her expertise in the biological sciences to serve his own ends."

"Liara getting worked over by that monster is pretty horrific, Shepard," opined Jack.

Shepard shifted in place, "That's not exactly what I was getting at." She ground her teeth. Shepard knew how uncomfortable the Asari were discussing this subject, but the SGC needed to know what the stakes were. She sighed, and ploughed on, "There is a condition amongst the Asari, possible in all of them but more common in purebloods like Liara, called Ardat Yakshi. In its most severe form it makes the afflicted Asari incapable of forming the bond properly; she overpowers the nervous system of her mate and burns it out, killing them." SG-1's collective eyebrows jumped up.

"Worse still is that it usually produces a narcotic-like euphoric response. So Ardat Yakshi end up getting hooked, becoming serial killers leaving mountains of bodies in their wakes. I've tangled with one. Trust me, they're bad news. The name actually means 'demon of the night winds' in an extinct dialect, it stretches so far back in their culture. Undoubtedly this is where some of the prejudice against purebloods comes from.

"If the gene defect for this trait is buried somewhere within Liara's genome, then it's likely that this Nirrti will find it with the Ancient gizmo Ba'al has. Based on your experiences it sounds like they're all keen on coming up with some sort of superior host for their symbiotes? Can you think of a better vessel for one of these things than an Ardat Yakshi Asari? Unleashing something like that on the galaxy would be a disaster."

She let that sink in. She needed to motivate these people, and nothing quite motivated an audience like 'end of the world'. Honestly, all she really cared about was rescuing Liara. Obviously she'd love to prevent the galaxy at large from going up in flames in the process, but Liara was 'Priority One' so far as she was concerned. Fortunately for the Milky Way, those two objectives were one in the same this time around.

SG-1 and General Hammond shared glances. They had not anticipated this turn of events. They were obviously dredging their memories for the term 'Ardat Yakshi'. Shepard was sure she had mentioned it during her debriefings, at least in passing. If she hadn't, then Liara must have. The stories they told about the Justicar Samara must have led to the subject at some point. Doesn't matter now, she thought. All that mattered was that they authorized the mission. She didn't want to have to assault a goa'uld space station alone. It sounded like Thor was willing to give it a go, but she estimated her chances of success at zero without SG-1's help.
General Hammond nodded thoughtfully, "Very well, Commander Shepard, you have a go." Bless you, General, Shepard thought. "I'll recommend to the President that he release the warhead to you and SG-1 and that he grant you detonation authority." He stood, SG-1 stood as well, "SG-1, complete your preparations, I'll make the call, dismissed."

That was all less than a half hour ago. The transport beam activated with an odd gong sound and a blinding flash of light, Hammond certainly moves fast.

SG-1 appeared, as well as a veritable mountain of gear. They were accompanied by two other individuals whom she didn't expect. Victoria tensed. One of them was a known quantity, a friend, and definitely a non-threat. The other, however, was unknown to her, armed, and angry looking. Is this Kinsey's idea of a joke? She narrowed her eyes. "Who's your friend Master Sergeant?"

"At ease, Commander," Jack said, obviously trying to defuse the situation. "He's here to escort the bomb until we can get a new arming code input into it. It's protocol." He shrugged. The tech man didn't flinch, his face remained stern but he made no threatening move. He held his SAW pointed at the floor, his trigger finger rested on the outside of the trigger guard. Even though the likelihood of Thor, SG-1, and her stealing the weapon to become nuclear terrorists was nil, he had a job to do and he was going to do it. Couldn't have them go all 'Never Say Never Again' on everyone, now could they?

Master Sergeant Siler, obviously fascinated to be on Thor's flagship, nonetheless stepped forward to execute his duty. For the life of her, Shepard could barely suppress the chuckle at the blue hardhat he was wearing. Then she saw it; less than a meter long, barely a third of a meter wide, roughly cylindrical in shape, the W80. The bomb sat on a small hand truck, held fast by ratcheting straps like you would find in any moving van; polished metal, rounded edges, the whole thing looked almost comically like a beer keg awaiting delivery to some frat party. A 150 kiloton frat party, she thought. She had to suppress another chuckle, the damn thing is so harmless looking.

At the wider of the two ends sat strapped a small electronics package to which Siler connected a control unit. "Ma'am, the way this works is that we'll enter a six digit code to this unit here," he shook the control unit in his hand, "it'll get programmed onto the hardened circuitry in the bomb. Then, when you're ready to arm it, you punch that number in again on the small number pad on the warhead itself." He pointed at the electronics package on the wide end of the warhead. "That'll enable an onboard timer, and/or the remote detonator. The remote's got a line of sight range of about a thousand kilometers in vacuum. I believe Commander Thor could probably boost that if you were hard pressed." He cleared his throat and continued, "Once we set a code here, the bomb can be disabled by inputting any other six digit number three times in a row. That will also scramble the circuits and require a factory reset, so don't do that unless you really mean it; like if the weapon were at risk of capture. Once armed, the weapon can be disarmed using the same code." He held up a small manual. "It also comes with a manual, ma'am."

At this point Shepard couldn't suppress her chuckle, "Anything else Master Sergeant?"

"One, two, three, four, five, six, is probably not a good code, ma'am," he responded, deadpan.

"Noted," Shepard responded equally deadpan. She thought for a moment and then spoke loudly and clearly so Siler could enter the code, "Three, six, two, four, three, six. Please read that back, Master Sergeant."

"Thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six," he said. Then he smirked.

Daniel leaned over to Jack, "Wait, isn't that The Ramones?"
"Violent Femmes," a whispered response.


"She'd be flattered you remembered," Shepard observed. Three sets of eyebrows arched higher. Carter's blush deepened.

Siler punched the numbers into the electronics unit. Then he ran the bomb through a series of self-checks. Once the weapon pronounced itself healthy, he unplugged his equipment and packed up his gear. "All set ma'am." Then his tone changed. In a soft voice he said, "Commander," he paused, not sure if he should go on, "from all of us in The Mountain, good luck. Please bring the Doctor home safe."

"Thanks Siler. I will." Shepard nodded to the bomb escort. His job complete he nodded back respectfully. Another blinding flash of light and he and Siler disappeared. A subtle shift beneath their feet and they were underway.

Next stop, Ba'al's space station.

Liara T'soni regained consciousness with a start. The sounds of battle, seemingly, still echoed in her ears, but her current environs were very quiet. Where am I? Liara tried to look around but she found her head unwilling to move. A conscious effort got her eyes moving, though, even that effort was a strain. Every muscle in her body screamed as if she had been shocked or burned, or both. She tried to call out, but not even her mouth would move.

Her vision blurry, she didn't recognize her surroundings. She was indoors at least, no longer outside near the Stargate where she had been fighting when she had been knocked out. I was knocked out, right? She wasn't at the dig site, but the room had a definite archeological feel to it; fuzzy hieroglyphs adorned the gilded walls. She wasn't at the SGC, that was for sure. With a groan she managed to look down at herself; she lay on a slightly inclined table, she was naked, and restrained.

Oh goddess, where am I!?

"Excellent," said a voice, "you're awake." A cultured, unfamiliar, smug accent.

A blurry silhouette came into view. Liara didn't respond, and not because she didn't think she could speak either. Oh goddess, I've been captured by the goa'uld! Liara's heart began pounding within her chest. She tried to suppress the incipient panic that threatened to claim her, to maintain control and apply decades' worth of experience at coldly analyzing problems. She had to think her way out of this, and she had to do it quickly if she ever wanted to see her beloved again. Her heart rate slowed somewhat.

Think, Liara, think! She tentatively tried flexing her hands, they failed to respond; likewise her toes. For a brief moment she feared she might be paralyzed, but she doubted it considering how much pain she was feeling from those body parts. More likely the concentrated zat-gun fire had overloaded her motor-nerves. Goddess willing it was only a temporary effect. Liara made a similarly tentative test of her biotic abilities, nothing! Shit.

"I imagine you are trying to free yourself," the silhouette observed smugly. "Or at the very least you are testing your special abilities so you can employ them when it would be more fortuitous to do so?" The figure slowly approached. Liara lamented that she couldn't flay this goa'uld with her biotics for his taunting. "My associate's instruments have determined that the circumstances of your capture
have left your nervous system somewhat," he paused as if theatrically searching for the appropriate word, "out of sorts. She assures me that there is no permanent damage, to you or your implants, and that it should dissipate with time."

*Well, that explains that*, Liara thought. The figure came upon her and Liara blinked him into focus. He wore flowing robes that, while showy, were actually rather more subdued than she would have expected from a goa'uld. Judging from his goatee she imagined that this particular goa'uld thought of itself as some sort of sophisticate. *Or he's just a douchebag; oh how Shepard would hate this guy.*

"Why else would I risk getting this close to you?" he smiled just as smugly as his tone would have suggested.

She felt so helpless. She feared she'd never see Victoria again. She feared she'd never have an opportunity to raise their new daughter together. *Our daughter!* She had forgotten, my brain must be out of sorts indeed. It was too soon in her pregnancy to even hope to feel the presence of the fetus' tiny mind probing at her consciousness, but she worried that something was different. What might the goa'uld monsters do to her daughter? What might they have already done?

Liara was filled with a rage she hadn't known since the war ended. Liara wanted to rip this thing's throat out. She wanted to paint the walls and ceiling with his insides using her biotics. She wanted to turn his own ships against his Jaffa forces and turn his worlds to glass. She knew these feelings; Shepard still harbored them in her dreams against the Batarians to a certain extent. Now she wanted to inflict them on the goa'uld, but she couldn't. She was helpless.

A tear of frustrated rage ran down her cheek.

"Oh, don't cry my dear," the goa'uld said in a condescending voice. "You need not be sad that we can't speak yet. You'll have all the time in the world after you've had a chance to meet my new associate." He motioned to a human slave holding an ornate gilded vase-like container. Flanked by an acolyte he stepped forward. "You know, it's a bit ironic. This little fellow was within one of the Jaffa who got a bit too trigger-happy while stunning you. I had him executed for putting you at risk. Yet, here he is again." He chuckled.

He rolled up a sleeve and the slave's acolyte bowed his head and removed the vase's lid. The goa'uld reached in and extracted, much to Liara's increasing horror, a fully mature and madly writhing goa'uld symbiote. The acolyte replaced the lid and the pair backed away from their master.

"Normally we enter the body through the neck," the smug goa'uld said, "but, considering how lovely your neck is," he eyed her lasciviously, "I think we'll have this fellow go in through your mouth. What do you say?" He smiled. Liara's stomach turned to ice.

The smug goa'uld nodded and a strong set of hands wrapped themselves around her face. She hadn't even heard the Jaffa approach. Before she could think he had her nose pinched shut and a large hand clasped over her mouth. They obviously intended to either force her to open her mouth to breathe, or just wait until she blacked out and implant her. Somehow she got the sense that this vain asshole was unwilling to risk his Jaffa breaking her teeth by prying and had just ordered him to choke her into unconsciousness.

*Think Liara! You do not have much time, think!* Her heart raced, her lungs burned. She tried to use her biotics again. Again, they didn't budge. CO2 levels in her blood were already beginning to rise despite her being in phenomenal physical condition. With proper preparation, she could hold her breath for nearly 7 minutes of strenuous activity. But they had surprised her, and she was panicking, she had no idea how much time she actually had. The world was already beginning to grey.

*What do I do! Shepard, what do I do? Goddess, what do I do!*
"Do not despair, Little Wing," a familiar, distant, voice.

Mother?

The last thing Liara T'soni saw was the smug goa'uld smiling and the writhing symbiote. Then the world went dark.

Liara's vision cleared. She looked around. She stood in a small park. Trees swayed gently in the breeze. Colorful birds darted overhead and chirped happily. She was no longer bound or naked; rather she stood wearing a light sundress, skin warming in the sun, bare feet standing on soft grass. She wriggled her toes in it savoring the sensation. This place looked familiar.

"Hello Little Wing," a familiar voice.

Liara turned to regard the speaker with a start. Mother!

The Lady Benezia, dressed in a light-colored yellow dress, smiled warmly. This was not the severe Matriarch from her later years. This was the loving mother of her youth. She wore no traditional headdress; her arms were bare, as were her shoulders save for the thin straps of her dress. She wore sandals. "Not quite, my daughter. But I am here to help."

Those zat-gun blasts must have really disrupted my thought process, Liara thought, I must be having a conversation with my subconscious' projection of my mother. She looked around. Suddenly she recognized where she stood, this is the park near where we used to live in Armali on Thessia.

"I always knew you were bright," Benezia said with a warm smile. Definitely something from my childhood, Liara thought.

"So, why are you here, Mother?" Liara asked, deciding that playing along with her subconscious was better than nothing.

"You do not have much time," she replied. As if on cue, the sky on the horizon began to darken. The trees' swaying increased in vigor. An ill wind was blowing. "The goa'uld will soon invade your mind. You must prepare."

"How, Mother?" Liara said, almost pleading.

"You are a Matriarch's daughter, Liara," she replied with a hint of smug pride in her voice, "The strength is within you." The Lady Benezia took a step towards her daughter. "As I sectioned a portion of my mind off from Sovereign's indoctrination, so too can you from the goa'uld's control."

"What if I cannot?" Liara said with sudden self-doubt. It struck Liara that, despite all that had happened since her Mother's death, she hadn't ever doubted her own abilities. Granted, she understood the odds she and her comrades faced, but she never imagined that she herself would fail; it would always be some uncontrollable cataclysm that claimed her. But now... her thoughts trailed off in trepidation, now it was all on her and her Mother of all people was driving the point home. "You can," Benezia replied matter-of-factly. There was a slight edge to her voice, but it exuded the love and confidence that Benezia had shown towards her when she was still a child, before she had expressed her desire to break from tradition and study archeology at least. It calmed her somewhat. "You can and you will." She smiled and took another step towards her daughter. The sky on the horizon continued to darken. "As your beloved has pointed out, compared to the Reapers, the goa'uld are pussies." She smiled as the skies darkened further.
"You will hide a part of yourself away, deep down where the goa'uld does not even know it exists. You will watch. You will listen. You will wait. If you can, you will influence. You will sabotage. You will prepare for when your beloved brings the soldiers of the SGC and anyone else she can recruit with her to rescue you."

"You think she will come?"

Benezia stepped closer to Liara and smiled warmly. She reached out with a delicate blue hand and cupped her daughter's face. Liara reveled in the touch, she had grown so estranged from her mother, she missed it greatly. "Do you really need your subconscious' manifestation of your mother to tell you what you already know in your heart, Little Wing?"

No, she didn't. Liara's faith in Shepard, like her love, was not misplaced. She had witnessed what lengths Victoria would go through to defeat the Reapers, and it was no small flattery to her to know that her safety and happiness ranked as high or higher on her priorities list. She would do as her mother had done, but she would do it better since she had a better idea of what she was dealing with from the start. Plus, as the Shadow Broker, she was no stranger to duplicity; her mind raced at what sort of havoc she might cause behind the controls of an actual goa'uld.

"Do not get ahead of yourself, Little Wing," said Benezia with a smirk. Liara squinted, the sky was nearly pitch-black and her mother was beginning to fade from view. "We do not have much time, daughter," she said, "Focus your mind, like I taught you to meditate when you were a child living in Armali."

"Yes Mother," Liara responded, "I will not let you down."

Then the world went dark.
When The Walls Came Tumbling Down

Chapter Notes

The chapter contains graphic depictions of violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The trip would take almost two days. Not so much for the distance traveled, no, Thor's ship was capable of fantastical speeds, but for their stealthy approach and allowing certain other players to get into position. Once under way, Thor signaled his contacts within the Tok'ra. They let it slip to certain elements within Lord Yu's command structure that Ba'al had a substantial space station directing operations in this sector of space, and that destroying it would give him advantage in the entire region. Given the already tense state of affairs between the two System Lords, a substantial attack was organized and launched almost immediately; just as Thor and Shepard had anticipated and planned on. Victoria observed that it was rather convenient that the diminutive alien had decided to make an appearance and offer a viable way of rescuing her beloved just when she needed one most, but she was not going to, as Colonel O'Neill put it, look a gift Asgard in the mouth.

Victoria opened the 'instruction manual' for the W80 and weighted the pages with an MRE pouch and a canteen. She intently read as she unbuttoned her uniform jacket, oblivious to all around her. She continued to read as she disrobed and neatly folded her jacket and tie in a pile. She turned a page, kicked off her shoes, and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"That ain't right," commented Jack a few yards away and trying not to stare as Shepard took off her blouse revealing a surprisingly feminine-looking bra. Jack was already familiar with the constellation of scars running down her spine that he now had a clear view of as well.

"What's that?" Daniel wheezed painfully through his broken nose, "The irony that Victoria Shepard secretly wears clothing from Victoria Secret, or that the instruction manual for the NAV-system in my WRX is thicker than one for a hydrogen bomb!"

"It's not polite to stare," Carter observed, consciously averting her eyes as Shepard stripped naked before re-dressing in her MARPAT fatigues, all the while unaware or uncaring of their observation. SG-1 couldn't decide which would have unnerved them more.

"We were just concerned, Carter," Jack said.

"I'm sure your intentions were pure, sir," she replied as Daniel washed down a modest dose of Vicodin and decongestants with water from his canteen. Doctor Fraiser had medically cleared him for the mission provided he felt up to it, and let the pain meds wear off before entering action, and he was doing his level-best to overcome the pain. Janet just hoped he didn't have a deviated septum requiring surgical repair later. He stopped mid-sip and looked at her with an arched eyebrow. A quick glance to Colonel O'Neill and Major Carter realized Jack was indeed rather pensively watching Commander Shepard go about her business. A split second later she realized why, and nearly kicked herself for forgetting, it's been a busy day.

"Sorry, sir."

"Forget about it, Sam," Jack said flatly.
Teal'c, until now quietly observing, stepped forward, "In the past, Commander Shepard has sought support from her teammates when she has needed it, Colonel O'Neill. Will you not wait for her to reach out to us?"

Jack met Teal'c's gaze and thought for a moment. Then he looked back towards Shepard who was now balancing gracefully on one foot while she tied the boot laces on the other, never taking her eyes off of the instruction manual. "If we had more time, Teal'c," he said with a sigh, "and she wasn't sitting on a dozen Hiroshimas? Yes. But we're out of time, and," a pregnant pause, "I've seen that look before."

SG-1 shared a silent moment, and looked worriedly at Commander Shepard.

Shepard rifled through one of the bags that SG-1 had brought with them from the SGC and greedily extracted two more MRE's. Officially 'Meals Ready to Eat', they were also known as 'Meals Rejected by the Enemy' or less politically correct variations on the theme. The MRE's were derided for being less than palatable, but they contained 1200 calories; and Shepard needed all of the nutrients she could get. Using biotics expended enormous amounts of energy, and she had not eaten anything since that quart of shrimp lo mein just after the missile launch. An impressive display of her biotic prowess, not to mention a pitched conventional battle against an airborne company of Jaffa, had burned up all of Victoria's reserves. She was crashing.

She had finished memorizing the W80's instruction manual, though she would read it again at least once before they arrived at Ba'al's space station. Now she was preparing a distraction using the nearly 50 kilograms of C4 explosives she had asked SG-1 to bring with them. They'd completely emptied the SGC armory of explosives and detonators, but she had the making of one hell of a fireworks show. 'Explosives, Demolition, and Pyrotechnic Signals' had always been one of her favorite courses back at Interplanetary Combatives Training.

Victoria looked at the contents of one of the MRE's, she grimaced. She tended to avoid meat under most circumstances. She'd seen enough carnage through her career to turn the stomach of any veteran slaughter house kill-floor worker. But, at this moment, she was famished enough to make a concession to expediency; so she hungrily ripped the top of a dark green plastic pouch off and started chewing. Thankfully it was an inoffensive dark brown color rather than red-meat. She was so busy chewing that she almost didn't hear Jack walk up behind her.

Almost.

"What do you need Jack?" she managed around half a mouth full of 'meat' product. She didn't turn to look at the Colonel so she failed to see the expression of concern on his face. Shepard continued chewing as she pulled the plasticized wrapper off of a package of C4 demolition blocks.

"Got a minute to chat?"

Without looking she tossed a half-kilogram block of C4 over her shoulder to the Colonel. "If you can chat you can wire fuses," she said, already knowing what was coming. "Thor's working up a care package for me, but I want to have some of these blocks wired before he's done."

Jack caught the C4 deftly and flopped down on a crate next to Shepard. Victoria smirked internally that O'Neill didn't fumble or otherwise freak out at being tossed more than a pound of high explosive. He was a pro, she knew such rough handling wouldn't set it off. I so enjoy working with professionals, she thought, though she loathed what he was likely about to discuss.

Victoria had resisted, for the longest time, prying into Jack's background. His past was his business,
so far as she was concerned. If he wanted to talk about it, he would have that day they went ring shopping. *It seemed right on the tip of his tongue too,* she thought. Still, her beloved *Shadow Broker* needed to understand her allies and their motivations as thoroughly as possible, and *she* had hacked into Jack's service record. From Liara, Victoria knew all about the Colonel's young son's death. She knew about how he blamed himself. She knew about the ruined marriage. Most relevant to today's situation, however, she knew that Colonel Jack O'Neill went through the Stargate for the first time with a thermonuclear weapon, and *no* intention of coming back.

"So…" Jack started speaking, seemingly unsure of himself.

Shepard roller her eyes.

Victoria wasn't beyond being objective, however. She could understand how this looked. The *goa'uld* had taken her other half from her; quite literally her reason for existing, *I doubt I'd have ended up in this place if not for her, that's for sure.* It was probably clear to SG-1 that she didn't want to ponder a life without Liara. *Viking Vikki* was in control, and she *did* have a nuclear weapon.

When it came down to it, of course, she was willing to die to rescue Liara. But that did not necessarily equate to this being a suicide mission. She didn't want to ponder what her own death might do to her beloved if it had been a direct result of her rescue. Asari tended to take the long view, but, somehow, their bond felt different.

Fortunately, Victoria was granted a temporary reprieve in the form of blinding flash of light and the appearance of a pair of iridescent plastic barrels. Shepard smiled. "Here are the compounds you requested, Commander," Thor's voice said over a hidden loudspeaker. "If you require more, I do have time to synthesize an additional lot before our arrival."

"Thanks, Thor," she responded cheerfully, "This should be plenty."

"Uh," Jack looked at the barrels tentatively, "what's this?"

"A proprietary blend of a thermobaric nature, plus a sprinkling of thermite for color, courtesy of Alliance ICT," she said with a smirk, *she always loved the Interplanetary Combatives 'blowing shit up' courses!* Shepard made sure to ground herself thoroughly, and then gently opened one of the barrels. She started clearing a cavity in the fine powder into which to place the C4 blocks once wired.

Jack whistled. "You like starting fires when you were a kid or something?"

Shepard arched an eyebrow in her best Teal'c impression. "I intend to have Thor beam these explosive/incendiary devices into the biggest death glider bay we can find. You know, 'scratch one flattop'?"

Jack arched an eyebrow, "Midway?"

"Coral Sea," she responded. "Hopefully the resulting inferno will serve as enough of a distraction that we can complete our mission and deploy the nuke without anyone noticing." She smiled a terrifying grin. Once again, Jack saw the face of death. This *was the Slayer of the Reapers after all.*

"Yeah…" Jack trailed off in thought. His facial expression became serious again. "About that, I wanted to talk to you…"

F**ck this noise.** Shepard cut him off, "Jack, if this is where you try to talk me out of committing nuclear suicide, speaking from sagely 'I've been there, trust me' hindsight, save it." O'Neill recoiled slightly at the rebuke. "I didn't mean to pry, and I didn't go digging on my own, but I'm truly sorry
about your son. I'm also grateful that you didn't go through with it, and that you've stayed with the SGC in the defense of Earth. I don't doubt the goa'uld would have enslaved the Tau'ri by now if not for your efforts."

Shepard tried to remain calm. Even if he wasn't *technically* a superior officer Jack was a warrior and commander deserving of her respect. He didn't need a forceful 'because I'm better than you' dismissal of his own obviously deep-seated concerns and inner demons, but she needed to put this issue to rest. She took a breath and continued, "But I am not you. I am not going to kill myself. I've been dead for before, *at least once*, and it's not something I'm keen on repeating.

"Hell, I've been living on borrowed time since *Elysium*, and I don't mean that to say I value my life any less. There is someone who holds a lien on that loan, and I'm going to be goddamned if I don't rescue her!" Shepard snarled. "I owe her a herd of little blue babies and I'm going to be there to help raise them." Shepard took a breath and centered herself. She gently placed the lid back on the container of incendiaries and turned to face O'Neill squarely, "So get in line, or get out of my way. If you still have a problem, run a few laps around the cargo bay with Teal'c. Otherwise, help me wire fuses." She took a breath and, as an afterthought, added, "Sir."

Major Doctor Samantha Carter, USAF, PhD was brilliant. Intellect of her caliber came along once in a generation, perhaps even only once in a century. Not only was Samantha a genius, however, she also had that most intangible of qualities; she was in the right place at the right time. Over her years at the SGC, Major Carter had made countless contributions to the field of physics, engineering, chemistry, and mathematics. She had turned her talents into tangibles for the defense of Earth. She unlocked the secrets of operating the Stargate. She gave the SGC naquadah technology. No matter the technological or scientific problem, she always conquered it and came through for her teammates. Except now.

Carter looked at the equations, translated from the Asgard script into symbols she recognized, once again. She was still trying to understand. She had been trying to understand for nearly two days. She knew what it was, of course; Thor had made it obvious he thought the term 'Grand Unified Theory' was rather quaint. She understood the implications as well; Thor had helpfully caused the coefficient in question, the two offending digits in particular, to blink. It was the consequences that were troubling her.

"As you can see from the unified equation Major Carter," Thor said evenly, "the coexistence of naquadah and element zero was a physical impossibility that was never considered during the design of the Stargates. The gate network's computing system registered all element zero and mass effect field interactions as 'unknowns'. The goa'uld merely needed to access the log."

"And the distribution of the high energy discharge across the network was just a safety backup, put there for some presumably independent reason? And if the goa'uld were looking at the logs anyway, then it's just another data point to them." Samantha was trying to shake off the sensation of failure. *She was so sure the goa'uld were only aware of the 'high energy' events.*

Thor merely nodded. *Well, at least I got that part right,* Samantha thought. "My simulations indicate that the value of the coefficient I have highlighted is the dominant term in determining the properties of exotic matter such as element zero. Our Universe's value gave rise to naquadah…"

"…Whereas my Universe gets eezo and the mass effect. It's funny how transposing two digits in a single coefficient can totally screw up the Universe," Shepard interrupted Thor, seemingly appearing from nowhere. Carter smirked despite herself, *Victoria can certainly creep about, especially for someone so large.*
"We get the Stargates and the goa'uld, and you get the Reapers, mass relays, and the Asari." Carter almost bit her tongue. She didn't want to do anything that might upset Shepard further. She was well aware of the little chat that Jack had had with Shepard yesterday, and mentioning the Reapers or especially the Asari seemed like a sure-fire way to agitate her.

"Don't sweat it Sam," Victoria said in an even tone. She wasn't smiling, Carter noticed, but neither was she scowling or weeping.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Commander." Shepard's eyebrows hopped up. Despite technically being Carter's superior by a single grade, Victoria had never seen her act so formally. "They have her because of me." Carter tried to grind her teeth and remain composed. She faltered, not realizing until now how personally she had taken the failure. She cleared her throat to, she hoped, cover up her sudden feeling of distress. Seeing Victoria as anything less than completely vibrant was indictment enough of her failure. Shepard absolutely glowed in the presence of her Asari wife, and she had taken that from her.

Much to her surprise, considering the reaction Jack said he got out of her; Shepard reached forward and embraced Major Carter. She drew her into a hug an cradled the back of her head, bringing the Major's face to rest in the crook of her neck. Samantha felt a warm strength in Shepard's arms, and not even the slightest twinge of discomfort like that had accompanied her earlier flirting. What the hell! Is this some N7 team building strategy?

Objectively, Major Carter knew this was no way for two officers, of any gender combination, to carry on while on duty and that an external observer might find the whole action a bit condescendingly maternal on Shepard's part. But on a personal level, Samantha immediately understood that Shepard held her blameless for the events they currently faced. Victoria cared for her, even if it was perhaps more than she would prefer, and she didn't want to see her beating herself up over this. There was also the purely practical consideration of her needing all of SG-1 completely operational with their heads in the game to complete the mission successfully, but somehow she felt that Shepard cared more about her personally than the mission just now. Maybe she just likes to hug things out?

"It's not your fault, Sam," Shepard said calmly. "I know it's not your fault they have her, and I don't blame you. I also know that she wouldn't blame you either. I just know, okay?" Carter didn't doubt it. Sharing a consciousness must certainly simplify a relationship. She caught herself wondering if she had found herself in the other place, and if she had met a similarly intelligent and personable Asari… Her thoughts trailed off as she shook her head internally, no, no time for that. "Listen Samantha," Shepard said soothingly, "If you help me get Liara out of there, I'll name one our kids after you." They both laughed, giggled even. "I've had good experiences with Asari named Sam."

They both chuckled as Victoria released Major Carter. Part of her actually missed the physical contact, the radiated warmth, surprising her greatly. Women had never really done anything for Samantha Carter in the past; this might bear more thought, she pondered. Shepard stepped around Carter, looked at the display, and placed her arm familiarly on her shoulder. "You know," Shepard said in a joking tone, "cosmic dyslexia aside, it's too bad that you've spent all this time staring at that thing. I know you've got the GUT memorized, but you'll never be able to publish without experimental data to back it up."

Sam broke out of her introspection in shock. Son of a bitch!

Victoria arched an eyebrow, "Come on, it's time for our final briefing."

"So you have no idea if that's her or not?"
"No, Commander Shepard," Thor responded, "I can only confirm the presence of element zero, not if it is within Doctor T'soni. There is something in the construction of the goa'uld space station that is preventing my instruments from establishing a firm lock on the signal. This is not the only source, but it is the strongest. I am also unable to use my transport beam to retrieve the source of the signal, or deliver you directly to that location."

They viewed a large holographic depiction of Lord Ba'al's space station. The structure was immense, roughly radially symmetric, and had several ha'tak docked to it. The interior arrangement was indicated in ghosted lines, and Liara's possible location glowed a familiar robin's egg blue.

"Then how did you snatch Shepard?" asked Jack.

The diminutive alien turned to scowl at Colonel O'Neill. "The construction of your mountain base is significantly more simplistic than that of this space station. Beyond that, it was supposition on my part that the anomalous signal coming from your briefing room, next to which you stood, was of more interest than those in your armory."

"Lucky for the Senator," Jack mumbled under his breath, and Thor continued.

"Fortunately, I believe your plan is still viable Commander Shepard."

"How so?" asked Victoria, "Sounds like you won't be able to beam me over to the station. They've got the walls lined with lead or tin foil or something. I don't like the idea of SG-1 going without me, and then not being able to bring Liara back once they get her." The members of SG-1 all shared long glances; they didn't relish that idea either.

It was Victoria's turn to be scowled at. "The screening effect is substantially weaker toward the station's periphery. I believe this storage compartment near the exterior wall of the station will be a suitable infiltration and exfiltration point." He indicated an empty compartment along the station's outer wall near the 'blue' source of energy. Not only was it close, it was on the opposite side of Liara's possible location from the main death glider bay. Thor, seemingly reading the Commander's thoughts, continued, "I foresee no issue in deploying your incendiary devices to their hangar as a diversion. Nor do I anticipate a problem delivering your nuclear ordinance when you're ready for extraction."

Shepard activated her omni-tool and interfaced her onboard tactical systems with Thor's maps. He had already been kind enough to set up an interface between her technology and his. Apparently, he was actually rather keen to learn everything he could from the other place. Download complete, Victoria began mapping out likely routes of advance for the operation.

A soft tone sounded throughout Thor's command center.

"What was that?" asked Daniel.

"My instruments have detected a sizeable force of Lord Yu's ships entering the area. They will not be in detection range of Lord Ba'al's forces for some time yet, but you should prepare to start the operation."

Shepard balled her fists and released them. She put on her best game face. Viking Vikki said, "Let's suit up."

Shepard was in action the moment the transport beam disengaged. The N7 Valiant rifle came to her shoulder with practiced ease; it was an old friend greeting her, Viking Vikki was home. A well-oiled team, SG-1 fell in behind the Spectre as she flattened herself against the absurdly gilded wall.
Victoria brought her omni-tool up and consulted the interior map they had received from Thor. Tied into Thor's ship's scanners, her holographic display still showed a general schematic of the space station overlaid on the dark energy source. Unfortunately, increased proximity was not affording her omni-tool's own scanning suite any better a picture. Something in the construction of the space station, even at this range, was preventing her from picking out the details of the room, or if Liara was ok.

She was fairly close, but for the umpteenth time Shepard cursed that Thor couldn't drop them any closer. Who the fuck builds a space station out of this gilded foam plastic bullshit with scarabs on the wall? Or is that a crane? Oh for fuck's sake. Victoria tried to center herself. She had work to do. At least this compartment was empty. "Colonel," Shepard whispered.

"Yo," the response.

"I can't get any better readings from here. That section looks like it could be a prison cell? But, honestly, I can't really tell. All I know is that there's eezo in there."

"Teal'c, does that look like a brig to you?"

"The image is obscured Command Shepard," Teal'c responded after a moment's examination of the display, "I cannot tell the nature of that room."

"Fuck," observed Shepard.

"Agreed, but do we have a choice?"

"Thor, do you copy?"

"Yes, Commander, I hear you."

"ETA on the cavalry?"

"I estimate Lord Yu's forces will be entering detection range of Ba'al's ships within the next fifteen minutes."

"Thanks little buddy," she could almost hear him scowl through the radio circuit. Jack chuckled to himself. "I'm going to detonate our diversion now, please have our 'parting gift' ready for transport on my signal."

"Of course, Commander."

Shepard turned to look at SG-1. "Just like we discussed, the hangar bay we dropped the diversion into is clear on the other side of our objective. It ought to pull any Jaffa out of position. I press the button and then we head out of this closet towards Liara." They all nodded. Victoria pressed a few commands on her omni-tool and activated the demolition charges they had Thor transport into one of the death glider launch bays.

The results were not immediately recognizable. The station was massive enough that they did not feel any shockwaves, nor did they hear any explosions; which was saying something, they had used a lot of explosives, and both Jack and Shepard had seen firsthand what thermobaric weapons were capable of. The first indication that something was wrong was that the overhead lighting flickered briefly. Then alarms sounded. Finally they felt the deck shudder beneath their feet with secondary and tertiary explosions. Scratch one flattop indeed, Shepard thought. They had really used a lot of explosives. Shepard looked at her display again, the dark energy source hadn't moved.
"Okay, let's do this!"

The first Jaffa to meet Shepard's wrath died silently. A projectile the size of a grain of sand exited the barrel of her N7 Valiant rifle at hypersonic speed and entered his forehead with cataclysmic results. His two companions, however, did not go nearly as quietly. One of the Jaffa spun wildly after being struck in the heart, knocking over some sort of gaudy candelabra. The third caught a round in the throat and went down gurgling. He gasped and thrashed, blood forming sickening foamy bubbles around the gaps between his fingers as he fruitlessly pressed them against his wound. Shepard nonchalantly stepped up to him and crushed his head with a biotically assisted stomp.

Note to self, Jack thought, never, ever, piss Shepard off.

Jack O'Neill watched the Spectre work. Personally, he wouldn't have ever attempted to use a weapon labeled 'sniper rifle' in close quarters like this, but Shepard didn't seem to follow any sort of rules of war he'd ever heard of. And she got results. She had such a profound sense of kinesthesis; it was as if she didn't even need to look down the rifle's scope at all. After the third shot Jack knew she was out of 'ammunition'. Instead of replacing the spent thermal clip, she docked the rifle on her back and drew her pistol. She had the menacing handgun out and ready before the retractable stock on her rifle had even finished folding up.

Resistance increased, but it wasn't nearly as thick as Jack had expected it to be. I guess our distraction is really, well, distracting, he thought. Three more Jaffa rounded a corner. Shepard glowed a brilliant Cherenkov-blue and tossed what SG-1 had come to learn was called a 'singularity field' at them. A ring and a thrum and the three Jaffa lifted off of the deck and floated harmlessly in the air; they tried to fire their staff weapons at them but they couldn't bring them to bear. Shepard used her biotics to gently pull the Jaffa towards them and she stepped out of the way. With a flourish she said, "¡Olé!"

Just like a fucking bullfighter, was all Jack could think as he ordered SG-1, "Open fire!"

Concentrated P90 and staff weapon fire made quick work of the Jaffa and they fell to the floor in a wet heap. Shepard looked at them and smiled through her open faceplate. Jack gulped loudly. He looked into the face of death. Definitely never piss her off.

SG-1 soon found themselves outside of the room indicated on Shepard's omni-tool. Resistance had been lighter than they could have possibly hoped. Jack wondered if damage control had turned into an all-hands evolution; the alarms hadn't stopped once since the demo went off. So far as Jack was concerned, if they didn't need to use that nuke, all the better. Though, from the look on Shepard's face, he doubted very much if she would take no for an answer in that regard.

Jack slotted a fresh 50-round magazine of 5.7x28mm ammunition into his P90 as they stacked-up outside of the door to the chamber that could be a prison cell, and he tapped Shepard on the shoulder. Her helmeted head nodded and she all but knocked the door off of its frame with her biotics. Flaring a rich, almost painful to look at blue, she darted into the room ahead of them. O'Neill would have shouted at her to slow down and stay in room-clearing formation, but he knew it would have fallen on deaf ears. It also probably didn't matter, unless something horrific happened she could handle whatever was in there. Until now Jack's fears that Shepard would be just too plain unstable to effectively complete this mission had proven baseless. So far she had executed her part of the plan with a frightening zeal and deadly precision; she wouldn't accept anything short of 100% victory. Coming upon her standing stock-still and totally bereft of biotic glow when he did catch up with her should have been his first indication that something was wrong: very wrong.

Then he saw her.
A floor-length blue dress, a full shade darker than her skin, cut low showing her amble bosom, and then swooping up into a choker collar and long sleeves. Head held high, hands folded regally below her breasts. It was Liara, but not like Jack had ever seen her before. Her carriage was so, wrong; almost regal.

Her eyes flashed a golden glow.

Shepard fell to her knees and wailed.

This is it! She's just on the other side of this door, thought Shepard. She sensed SG-1 form up behind her. They were in the classic room clearing stack. She'd lead them in; it was safer for them that way. Even if her kinetic barriers wouldn't stop the staff weapon blasts worth shit, her armor still ablated way better than that Kevlar nonsense they wore. She felt Jack tap her on her shoulder, they were ready. I'm coming Liara! Banzai!

Shepard summoned her biotic energy, she felt it flow throughout her body, it was glorious. She formed a gauntleted fist and unleashed the mass effect field and the hieroglyph-encrusted door rocketed off of its moorings. Suddenly, too late, Shepard feared that she might actually hit Liara with it. She'll be ok, Victoria convinced herself as she all but charged into the target room.

Her keen soldier's senses assessed the space. This wasn't a prison cell. It was too wide open; there were no bars, no restraints, no guards. It almost looked like a gallery or a court. There was a single figure standing in the middle of the space, slightly obscured by dust generated by her breaching the door. Beloved! It's you, you're ok! But she wasn't restrained. She wasn't injured. She stood free, alone in a room. Wearing a dress. A blue dress. A familiar blue dress. Wait, this isn't right.

It took her conscious mind a few heart beats to catch up and process what she was seeing. "Liara?"

Liara turned to face her.

Shepard's heart skipped a beat. 'Liara' smirked; not the normal warm smile she was used to. Shepard's heart skipped another beat; alarms in Shepard's helmet began to report erratic medical readings from her suit. "Hello beloved," said Liara's voice. But it wasn't Liara's voice. It was an octave low, and warbling in timbre. Suddenly Victoria understood. She dropped to her knees. Her arms went limp, her M77 Paladin dropped from her hand nerveless onto the floor. No. That's all she could muster, no.

Doctor Karin Chakwas had once called Victoria Shepard SSV Normandy's 'immovable center'. As the Reapers had learned, she was more than just the Normandy's talisman of stability and strength. Commander Shepard had proved to be the 'immovable center' for the entire Milky Way galaxy and all its organic life; and the Geth's for that matter. But she hadn't done it alone. Outwardly Victoria drew her incredible strength of will from some internal reservoir, unending and potent, and always willing to share and inspire. But there was one other in the universe from whom she drew her strength.

Her quest against Saren, though, some might say destiny, brought them together on Therum. Shepard found her soul mate, her other half without ever knowing she was incomplete, and her own 'immovable center'. Fortunately, for the sake of the Milky Way's organics, the Reapers had never learned of her true importance. For if they had known that Liara T'soni was more than just an able soldier, talented biotic adept, and Prothean expert turned information broker they would have come down on her with sufficient force that not even the stalwart crew of the Normandy would have survived. The Reapers would have targeted and eliminated Liara T'soni, and thus would have effectively destroyed Commander Victoria Regina Shepard.
In one fell swoop, purely by chance, the goa'uld had accomplished what a galaxy-wide Reaper invasion force had failed to do. They had laid Viking Vikki low. And they hadn't fired a shot.

"Yes, kneel before your Goddess Athame," said the goa'uld who had taken Liara's body, and Shepard's soul.

The balance of SG-1 stormed into the room and the goa'uld Athame's eyes flashed a golden yellow.

Shepard howled in despair.

SG-1 was wracked with indecision. Shepard was immobilized; nonresponsive. Liara was a goa'uld. The mission had just gone decidedly sideways. Jack tried to think. They had weapons on Liara, but they were decidedly lethal weapons. Not that he was sure that they would even work against her. Shepard's biotics could give an armored platoon a run for their money, and, according to her, Liara made her look like an amateur. They were all carrying zat-guns, but Daniel had indicated that Ba'al's Jaffa had been wailing away at Liara with their own zats with fuck-all to show for it last he saw her, so who the hell knew what would happen. There was no right thing to do.

So Jack took a chance on the wrong thing. He tried to draw his zat-gun. Athame pinned SG-1 to the wall with her biotics for his trouble. "Insolents!"

"I would have expected more from the vaunted SG-1," said a new voice. A well-groomed man in a fancy set of robes with a substantial entourage and a brace of Jaffa entered the room. Jack's first inclination was douchebag, followed shortly by this must be Ba'al. He looked at his latest prizes and then at Athame. "I see you've met my new associate. She said you'd come for her." He stroked his goatee, "That you'd walk right in here to rescue her; regardless of how obviously trap-like it was."

Daniel strained his neck against the biotic field, "He has us there, Jack. This one was really obvious."

"Shush, Daniel," Jack responded, "20-20 hindsight." Jack looked at douchebag, "I take it from the cliché goatee that you're Ba'al?"

"That's Lord Ba'al, you cur!" one of the Jaffa leveled his staff weapon Jack's head.

"Cur? Who the hell says that?"

"Indeed," Teal'c arched an eyebrow at the use of his customary phrase, "and you are the famed Jack O'Neill. I've heard so much about you. All of you, actually; I've been so looking forward to meeting you all." Ba'al smiled a smug grin. He looked to his Jaffa, "Relieve them of their weapons." They were quickly disarmed. A human slave appeared from the periphery to offer Athame a headdress, manufactured to match the rest of her gown. She placed it upon her head and smiled down upon Shepard.

With a swish of his robes Ba'al stood at Athame's side. "And who is it that we have here?" asked Ba'al. He reached down and unfastened Shepard's helmet, she offered no resistance. Indeed, Victoria was nearly catatonic; she couldn't take her eyes off of what was once her mate, now wearing Benezia's old headdress.

Ba'al gently lifted the N7 helmet from Victoria's head, the thin fabric skull-cap liner came with it and her flame-red tresses spilled out over her armored shoulders. "Ah! It's you!" Ba'al smiled. "I was so
hoping to meet you too."

Athame smiled sinisterly. Shepard blankly turned her eyes to regard Ba'al.

"You've caused me a lot of trouble, I hope you know," Ba'al continued smugly. "My Jaffa have even come up with a rather honorific nickname for you for when they think that I'm not listening. Perhaps I'll share it with you," he paused, ominously, "after you've joined us."

Athame's smile deepened.

"Know this, though," he stroked Athame's arm possessively, "whatever it was that you shared with this magnificent blue creature before is over. She is my consort now. You would be lucky if she even looked at you as a plaything ever again." This seemed to crush Shepard's spirits even more, if such a thing were possible.

Athame reached out her hands and cradled Shepard's chin. She angled her face to look her in the eyes. "Perhaps my Lord Ba'al is being too harsh," she said in her deep warbling voice. She turned to look at Ba'al. "I might need a concubine of my own." She turned to eye Major Carter lasciviously, "Or two."

Major Carter gulped loudly. O'Neill, Daniel, and Teal'c's eyes darted from Athame to Sam and back to Athame again.

Ba'al arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps," he said contemplatively. Then he looked down at Commander Shepard. Her facial expression had changed from one of total hopelessness to hardened resolve. Ba'al's eyebrows narrowed. That was unexpected. "Jaffa, kree! Take these prisoners into confinement under the guidance of your new goddess Athame. Follow her commands as if they were my own. Relieve the redheaded woman of her armor and weapon," Athame was already strapping the M77 Paladin to her shapely hip, "and bring them to Nirrti's laboratory. You will find me there. Go now!"

With a flippant wave of his hand, Ba'al disappeared with a swish of his robes; Shepard's helmet tucked under one arm. Athame released SG-1 from her biotic grip, and a dozen Jaffa manhandled them along with a still largely unresponsive but increasingly determined looking Shepard from the room.

"You would be lucky if she even looked at you as a plaything ever again."

Ba'al's words hit Shepard like a sledgehammer blow. Her entire world was coming apart. Before the Reaper War, Shepard had always wondered what she would do if Liara had died before her. She'd fallen so madly head-over-heels in love with the young Maiden that a life without her seemed unthinkable. On an intellectual level she knew it was selfish of her, but she was grateful for the Asari's immense longevity. She would never need to watch her beloved grow old and frail, and eventually see her pass on. Even after The War started there was always some irrational part of her that knew, didn't hope, knew, that Liara would be ok, regardless of what happened to her.

Now, however, Shepard confronted the reality that Liara wasn't just gone. No, the goa'uld had done something far crueler. Liara was gone, but Athame might live for thousands of years yet to terrorize the Milky Way, and that was a fate far worse than any death the Reapers might have dealt her in the other place.

The romantic, or perhaps just the obstinate coward, in her thought that she might just off herself if she were confronted with the possibility of a life without her beloved, despite what she had said to
Jack on Thor's ship. But now, confronted by the sheer magnitude of the loss, Shepard couldn't move. She just couldn't move. Viking Vikki, 'hero of the Blitz', 'savior of the Citadel', one of the Milky Way's most deadly warriors had been reduced to a catatonic lump. If she weren't so stunned, she would have laughed.

Movement caught Victoria's attention. Athame was moving towards her with a snide smirk of triumph playing across her lips. Her blue hands reached out. Victoria ached for Liara's touch, but she knew it wouldn't be her.

Contact.

Victoria's field of view shrank suddenly to a pin-point as if she were pulling high gee's. The suddenness of it made Shepard want to ball up in reflex as if she were falling, but her muscles would not obey. A flash of light and she was standing in a pleasant park. Birds chirped. Leaves rustled. What the fuck? The melancholy self-pity of a moment ago all but forgotten in the surprise.

"Beloved!"

Victoria turned, seems like my muscles are working now, she thought. She beheld Liara. Liara not Athame! She wore a simple yet lovely yellow sundress and sandals. Her arms were folded casually before her. She didn't move to embrace her, though it was obvious on Liara's face that she wanted nothing more than to do so. Shepard suddenly realized that she couldn't move either.

"What is this place?"

"We do not have much time," Liara said hurriedly.

"We are speaking through the bond?"

"Yes, Shepard," Liara responded. "I do not think that the goa'uld is aware of this, but we must be brief." She looked over her shoulder. On the edge of the park a darkness had fallen. Unearthly, they definitely didn't have much time.

"Are you ok?"

"What kind of question is that to ask?" Liara tried not to snap at her.

"Right, sorry." Shepard's soldier's mind rebooted from the trauma of seeing Athame and rapidly tried to figure out how to rescue her wife, now that she knew she was still in there. "Listen, I've got a ride out of here, and a good distraction planned for our escape, but how do we get you away from all of Ba'al's Jaffa? And how do we keep Athame, 'air quotes', from meddling?"

"And you feared that I would not approve of this one, Little Wing? Quick thinking, dedicated, adaptable, fiercely loyal and in love; she is an excellent match for you." A sudden new presence momentarily derailed the conversation. The Lady Benezia appeared at Shepard's side, but not like she had ever seen her before. She wore a warmly colored sun dress similar to Liara's and open-toed sandals. Her crest was unadorned by her traditional headdress. She smiled!

"Uh, hello?" Shepard stammered out. Then, quietly out of the side of her mouth, so as not to offend the new arrival, "Liara, why is your mother here?" She watched, slightly alarmed, as the Lady Benezia gently brushed her face. The Asari were a very tactile race, but this was just too strange for her.

"She is my subconscious' manifestation of my mother's personality; or at least how I think of her. She's been helping me martial my defenses against the goa'uld's penetration of my mind. Just ignore
'Benezia' scowled at the slight. Shepard caught herself; she almost admonished Liara not to be so rude to her 'mother'. Fortunately, the Benezia doppelgänger hadn't just made an appearance to push their conversation firmly into the realm of the surreal, for she spoke. "Daughter, the goa'uld is gathering itself," she motioned to the darkness on the edge of the park, "you must hurry. Devise a way to escape with your bondmate when the distraction she has arranged arrives. I will try to buy you some time." She turned to look at Shepard, "I wish I had had the chance to know you, and meet my grandchildren. Though, however lovely it is for humans, Georgia, is not a proper Asari name."

"Georgia?" asked Liara with a quizzical arch of her eyebrow.

"I'll tell you later," Shepard quickly mumbled.

Victoria looked back at the Matriarch and said, "Sorry I killed you," and immediately wished she'd thought of something better. It wasn't every day that the universe gave you a chance, albeit a very strange and probably imaginary one, to apologize to your mother-in-law for murdering her.

"We all have a path we must walk, Victoria," Benezia smiled warmly at her would-be daughter-in-law. "Goddess be with you and my daughter, good luck," and she was gone.

Shepard looked back to Liara, "Well, that was weird. Any thoughts on getting out of here?"

Liara pondered for a moment, but only a moment. The Shadow Broker already had a plan, Shepard was sure of it. It filled her with pride, a feeling she tried to flood across the bond to her mate. A small smile appeared on Liara's lips, apparently she had succeeded. "I have a few ideas. I originally intended to try to subtly sabotage the goa'uld, plant suggestions, make it make mistakes that you could track and position myself for an eventual rescue. But things have changed."

"How?"

"I think the goa'uld is sick," Liara said. "I do not know what is wrong with it, but I find myself able to exert more influence than I would have expected. I do not think it is just because of my people's inborn ability to meld consciousnesses either. But that is a theory I can neither prove nor disprove with the data currently available."

"A topic for further academic research, surely, but not now."

"No, of course not!" Liara replied, not slightly annoyed at the implication that she was getting too far off topic, "But I believe that I can more actively affect an escape. All we need to do is..."

Liara trailed off at a sudden low rumbling in the distance. The edge of the park darkened noticeably. Black menacing clouds appeared and circled picking up leaves and causing the trees to sway. The rumble increased pitch into a deep resonating fog-horn like tone.

They both knew that sound. It was enough to turn their blood to ice. Just like during The War. For an instant they each imagined that they were no longer in the park manifested in Liara's dream state. For an instant they were on Earth or Thessia. The Reapers had come. Blaring their fog-horns menacingly, heralding the organics' finally-arrived doom. They tried to shake the feeling off.

"I think the goa'uld is becoming aware of your presence," Liara said hurriedly. She too, was suddenly beginning to darken. Her warm yellow dress started shifting towards a deep blue, the shape morphed; the neckline plunged, the sleeves lengthened, and a choker collar began to form. Fear appeared on Liara's face and she spoke, "Listen beloved," she said in a faltering voice, "maintain the charade that you are broken. When you are alone with Athame and only a few Jaffa, I will take
control. Wait for me." Tears ran down her face. "Believe in me my love."

The world continued to darken. The wind picked up. Liara's appearance shifted even more rapidly. Shepard was sure she would soon look like \textit{Athame}. She also somehow knew that if she was still here when that happened then their escape plot might be in jeopardy. But there was one more thing she had to know. "Liara!" she shouted into the gale force winds and roaring fog-horn, "What about the baby?"

The world went black.

"I might need a concubine of my own. Or two."

Shepard found herself back on the go'uld space station. \textit{Athame} still cradled her face in a mocking show of possession. Ba'al said something that she didn't quite catch and looked down at her. Shepard looked into Ba'al's eyes, \textit{I'm going to enjoy killing you}, she thought, \textit{very soon.}

Ba'al looked into her eyes. He didn't seem to like what he saw.

Chapter End Notes

Title credit to Def Leopard.
Lord Ba'al, goa'uld System Lord, had a smug look on his face; and well deservedly, he thought. Capturing the 'Flame-Haired Banshee' was a boon, and picking up SG-1 in the process was, as the tau'ri would say, *icing on the cake*. His robes swished as he walked down the corridor and examined the human *amazon's* futuristic helmet. His leather soled slippers padded softly on the polished corridor flooring, making soft squeaking noises that he just now realized he could hear again that the alarms had stopped.

He smiled, *perhaps his Jaffa had finally gained the upper hand over the fire in his Death Glider bay?* It was a nasty trick the tau'ri had pulled, and a masterful distraction. He would have to find out which of his prisoners' idea it was. Somehow, though, he already *knew* it must be the newcomer. It certainly fit her personality, *at least from what he could glean from Athame*. He put that from his mind and returned to the amazing piece of armor in his hands.

As a technophile he marveled at its complexity, well beyond anything the goa'uld or the tau'ri had yet deployed. He wondered what manner of technology was packed into it, what breakthroughs it and the rest of the *Banshee's* armor might provide. And therein lied the problem; he *wondered*. He should *know*! Not because he was a *god* like those *idiot*-Jaffa were raised to believe, but because his newest *associate*, Athame, should have been able to tell him. *Athame*, as the goa'uld he had implanted into the blue beauty had come to call herself, had been up and about for nearly two days now, and she had *still* yet to provide him with much useful information.

Sure, she had provided *some* intel, and all of it *interesting*; just hardly any of it *actionable*! It didn't help him to know she was from another dimension, or that she had come here with her flame-haired mate. It was only marginally useful to know that her mate was a war hero and a soldier of exceptional power, skill, and cunning, *he had seen that already!* and that she would *surely* come to rescue her. Athame indicated that the *abilities* her host had displayed at the dig site were a phenomenon from her dimension called *biotics*. When pressed for a demonstration, however, she couldn't muster much more than a brilliant blue glow and some shaking flatware. Athame *claimed* that her nervous system was still recovering from the trauma of the concentrated *zat'nik'tel* fire. She *claimed* the same excuse when Nirrti asked her detailed questions on Asari biology; she was having difficulty remembering *for now*, but things were 'coming back'.

Once again Ba'al quietly questioned himself if implanting the *Asari*, as she was apparently called, was a *good* idea. Goa'uld were ambitious and treacherous by nature. If she really was as powerful as he thought she was, he had quite literally handed a loaded weapon to a potential rival. Perhaps Athame's nervous system *was* still recovering from her host's capture. Then again, she might just be playing him, biding her time until she could kill him and take over his empire for herself. *Was the display she put on during the capture of SG-1 indication her powers had returned?* Fortunately this goa'uld was *young* and *impressionable*, and more than a little hedonistic; he would keep a close eye on Athame. *For more reasons than one*, he thought with a libidinous grin.

Ba'al rounded a corner and entered his lab. Separate from Nirrti's biology laboratory, here is where
Ba'al and his disgusting minion Nerus were pouring over the technology they had netted along with the exquisite Asari. As Nerus was hunched over the device which they had come to know was called an omni-tool, Ba'al decided to more closely inspect the helmet. He turned it over in his manicured hands, it looked weathered and battle worn. A battled-hardened warrior indeed. We don't allow many of those amongst the Jaffa women, perhaps that's an untapped talent pool, Ba'al mused to himself. An odd 'N7' symbol was emblazoned on the side. On a whim he placed it upon his head. It hardly fit, and it smelled oddly of strawberries. He cocked an eyebrow, the blue creature smelled like that before Athame had summoned a group of scantily-clad human slave-girls to bathe her and sew her that odd, yet elegant, dress.

He removed the helmet from his head, "What have you learned!" he shouted at his vile underling, enjoying the sudden jump of surprise.

"M'lord Ba'al, you startled me," he said, as he tried to conceal something in his robes. Ba'al narrowed his eyes. He knew Nerus wouldn't dare steal from him. Seeing he was caught, Nerus sheepishly produced some sort of pastry.

Ba'al rolled his eyes, "You better not be getting crumbs in the equipment again," his deep voice warbled. He privately longed for the day he would dispose of this foul cretin. Alas, he was just too useful to do away with. Yet.

"Of course not, m'lord."

"What have you found?" Ba'al demanded a report as he gently placed the amazon's helmet on the work bench next to the small omni-tool device.

"It is as Athame says, m'lord," he began wringing his hands, "the device seems to have suffered some ill effects from the manner in which the blue beauty was captured. From what menus I have been able to access and translate, it is currently in a diagnostic mode and attempting to effect repairs."

"Does it estimate how long it will take?" asked Ba'al, becoming increasingly frustrated with the entire situation. He could feel the technology just outside of his grasp, and he wanted it badly. He was also growing increasingly convinced that Athame was playing him, at least a little. The Asari had undoubtedly already installed translation software for the goa'uld language. Those SGC cretins would have made sure of it if it was possible. He was also somewhat surprised they had even allowed her to take such an advanced piece of technology offworld in the first place. But their stupidity was his gain, if he could just unlock its secrets!

"No m'lord," Nerus recoiled at Ba'al's facial expression, "It does not."

Ba'al scowled at Nerus who recoiled visibly, hoping to avoid his master's wrath long enough to finish the pastry he had shoved into his pocket. He was granted a moment's reprieve when Lord Ba'als First Prime entered the laboratory trailed by one of his engineers and dropped to a knee before his god with a swish of his cape, "I report, my Lord."

Ba'al looked at his underling. He still hadn't had an opportunity to find a replacement for his First Prime, so he couldn't yet execute him for his failure to capture the Amazon woman; the forms must be followed after all, regardless of how competent this aged Jaffa usually was. He was pleased that the knowledge of his impending doom was not hampering the quality of his First Prime's performance, though. He made a mental note to see that his survivors were not destroyed as was the usual custom for disgraced Jaffa commanders. Ba'al prided himself for being more refined than his other System Lord associates. If his vast memory served, his First Prime was a widower, who now only had one child, a teenage daughter. Perhaps Athame could use a serving girl, he pondered. Then he smiled, maybe that wasn't quite looking after her after all.
"Rise, Jaffa," Ba'al said regally, "What is it that you report to your god?"

"My Lord," said the First Prime with his head bowed, the engineer hadn't risen from his knee, "this station will be of no military use for some time, and may need to be evacuated," he said plainly.

Ba'al's eyes narrowed. *I'm definitely throwing his daughter to Athame*, he resolved. "Explain," he commanded.

"My Lord," the First Prime said, motioning to the kneeling Jaffa engineer, "your chief engineer and leader of the damage control party has come to deliver a detailed summary of the damage."

With a curt nod of Ba'al's head, the engineer rose and addressed his god. Generally Jaffa weren't allowed to learn the intricacies of goa'uld *magics*, but the goa'uld were too limited in numbers and too snobbish in temperament to boast many technicians; necessarily they trained some of their more astute and loyal, "M'lord, the tau'ri weapon destroyed 80% of the death gliders and al'kesh in the affected hangar outright." The engineer spoke matter-of-factly, but he did not raise his eyes to look at anything but the floor before him. "The secondary explosions amongst fuel and improperly stored ammunition destroyed the rest."

"Improperly stored?" Ba'al demanded.

"Yes, m'lord. The commander of your air group was running drills on rapidly loading the gliders in preparation for a surprise attack by any of your foes. He is dead, m'lord." He swallowed hard, resigning himself that the old adage, *don't kill the messenger* probably didn't apply to this situation, and continued. "The armored doors to the main magazine were closed; else the station would have most likely been destroyed. Loading hatches to the two adjacent death glider bays, however, were not. The fire spread to the adjacent hangers, as well the associated workshops and maintenance areas. Fuel storage was compromised, and firefighting activities are ongoing, but so far proving difficult.

"The heat and fumes are almost instantly lethal to the human slaves in the damage control parties, and even our symbiotes barely protect us from the toxic gases released by the combustion. The fires have mostly abated for lack of fuel, but we cannot enter the area to assess what damage might have been done to the magazine armor, or the power plant."

"Then vent the affected compartments to space. That will put the fires out, dispose of the toxic gases, and allow at least some of the heat to radiate away into space," Ba'al responded flatly. It was a basic engineering problem with a basic solution, why had this underling not already done what was obviously the next step?

"But, m'lord, that will kill all of the slaves and Jaffa working in those compartments."

Ba'al moved in a blur. He reached out his gilded hand weapon and held it out over the insolent engineer's forehead. His knees buckled in pain and he shrieked. "I care not for the lives of slaves or your work crews if it means keeping this station operational. Do not presume to know my will when prioritizing the expenditure of assets, as that is *all* that you are."

Ba'al released the Jaffa, he crumpled to the ground. "You will lead the damage control party personally, *after* you designate a successor for when you succumb to the heat and fumes. You will regard that as punishment enough for presuming to know the mind of your god, and you will not die shol'va!" His eyes flashed menacingly, "Go now!"

*Well, sometimes he was more refined than his colleagues.*

Major Carter had a bad feeling about their chances. Things were not going their way. SG-1 had been
captured and disarmed, then brought to a holding area under the watchful eyes of a squad of Jaffa and the goa'uld Athame. Commander Shepard was a catatonic lump on the floor where the Jaffa had left her. The alarms that had started after the detonation of their distraction in the death glider bay had just ceased. She couldn't tell if that meant they had the fires under control, or if they had just gotten tired of the incessant hooting and shut them off; but she had to assume the worst. It had been well over fifteen minutes and there was still no sign of Yu's forces' detection and Ba'al's troops' reaction to it; though, honestly, Samantha couldn't decide if that was a plus or a minus given their current situation. Worst of all, the object of their rescue mission was not just a hostage, but a host to a goa'uld symbiote; and Athame seemed to be eying her rather troublingly.

One of the Jaffa guards finally realized that the folded rectangle on Shepard's back was some sort of weapon and puzzled over it for a few moments before snatching it away from her. Odd, Carter thought, Athame should have pointed that out to him. He looked it over dubiously and presented it to his goddess with a bowed head, "Some sort of weapon, Mistress."

Athame snatched it from the Jaffa with an annoyed facial expression and deployed it to its unfolded position. She ejected the spent thermal clip and snatched a fresh one from Shepard's belt with a twitch of her biotics. With smooth, well-practiced movements she slotted the new thermal clip home, cycled the charging handle, and deactivated the safety. In a single, fluid motion she brought the weapon up to her shoulder, pointed it at the Jaffa guard's face, and squeezed the trigger. The Jaffa's head disappeared in a cloud of red mist. Flecks of skull and grey matter speckled Daniel Jackson's glasses. The rifle's report echoed throughout the holding room. Then, stunned silence.

"A goddess expects her Jaffa to be more observant when searching prisoners for weapons. He paid for his carelessness." She paused and looked around the room at the remaining Jaffa. To their credit, their faces did not show the surprise they were feeling. "How vigilant will you be in the future?"

Athame absentmindedly tossed the Valiant rifle to one of her Jaffa and turned to look at Carter. Samantha swallowed, hard. She knew that this wasn't Liara. Liara would never do something so cold and calculated. Or would she?

"You look upset Samantha," Athame said with smile. Carter realized her mouth was agape. She closed it. "There's no reason to be," she continued as she approached. Carter wanted to retreat, but the staff weapon pressing into the small of her back said otherwise. "You and I will have a long and," she paused, smiled, "enjoyable life together."

Athame reached out with her hand. She gently trailed her fingers along her jawline. Samantha tried to recoil, but, again, the staff weapon said no. "I may even let you continue your career in science, perhaps you can be my 'Lucen'?"

Athame then ran her fingers through Carter's hair, seemingly reveling in the sensation as she let the strands slide between them. "Of course," Athame made a fist and pulled Carter's hair savagely. Carter yelped. "You'll have to grow your hair out like Shepard's," she said smiling. "I do love the feeling of long hair between my thighs." Carter gulped. Shepard sobbed loudly. Athame bobbed her tattooed eyebrows and smiled a wolfish grin.

Oshu, First Prime in the service of the goa'uld System Lord Yu-huang Shang Ti, looked out of the view port on the pel'tak of his command ha'tak and beheld Lord Ba'al's space station and its security picket, still blissfully unaware of his approach after the rapid destruction of its pitiful recon screen. It was exactly where the mysterious intelligence reports said it would be. It was exactly as massive as the mysterious intelligence reports said it would be. And so, all of Oshu's training and combat intuition told him that this was a setup. This made him cautious. After all, in his long service to the great Lord Yu, he himself had laid many a trap such as this; all warfare is based on deception. But, despite the implied and more direct adage, 'do not swallow the enemy's bait', his course was set. His
lord had given him his orders, and the destruction of this station was certainly a prize worth risk. The fact that his ship's sensors revealed that the station had already sustained massive damage only added to his wariness; but he was not one to look a gift-horse in the mouth, as the tau'ri would say.

Oshu had long suspected a large installation or, if it was his to design, an integrated network of smaller ones, in this sector of space. How else could the cursed Ba'al project such power in this corner of his master's domain? But he was taken aback by its sheer size. If he could destroy, or even just cripple the station, his master would have enough strategic breathing room to direct his attentions elsewhere in his realm.

He only hoped that his Lord Yu realized that somewhere forces were playing him, and that a time of reckoning with them would soon be at hand. It must be. He was growing increasingly doubtful, though. Despite all of Oshu's skill and dedication to his master, like those who had come before him, Lord Yu's increasing age and failing health made conducting operations more and more difficult. Oshu held no false impressions that Yu was a god like many Jaffa did, but he was loyal nonetheless; for many reasons.

He opened the fleet-wide communications device, his words broadcasted to nearly two dozen ha'tak and twice as many more al'kesh supporting vessels. This message, and the soon to follow explosions, would be the first indication for Lord Ba'al's forces that something was amiss. Oshu, First Prime in the service of Lord Yu closed his eyes and took a breath to center himself. He thought of his duty to his master, his loyalty to him, and the gratitude he felt for the honor of being entrusted with this task and of the kindnesses his lord had shown him and his family. He would never fail them.

"In the name of The Jade Emperor, the exalted Lord Yu-huang Shang Ti; open fire!"

Nirrti, temporarily-renegade goa'uld System Lord, marveled at the ancient device's display. She was not one to be easily impressed; but this thing, was remarkable. The tiny organism, just barely entering what the tau'ri would call the gastrula stage of development, was a treasure trove of genetic information; and it was hers! She smiled to herself knowing that for all of his technical prowess, that idiot Ba'al would never know how to fully exploit all of the secrets the blue creature's progeny offered. Gadgets and toys could dazzle, but true power lied in the ability to manipulate life itself! Her mind raced as to how she could advance her hok'tar research by leaps and bounds by just the data she'd collected in the few days she'd had to study Athame's cells and that of her embryonic spawn.

She smiled, however, with the knowledge that the hok'tar which she had sought for so long was no longer the end-all-be-all she had striven for. No, she thought, hok'tar is just the beginning. This, Asari, is the future of the goa'uld! she thought. Even if she couldn't duplicate the biotics, which that manipulative bitch Athame obviously refused to demonstrate properly for them, the longevity alone would make a superior host than the tau'ri. Nirrti pondered the benefits of a thousand-year lifespan without need of a sarcophagus and its debilitating long-term effects on the mental faculties. And with judicious sarcophagus use? She arched an eyebrow, this definitely bears more study.

A lesser goa'uld might have thrown a tantrum that so many centuries of effort had been rendered obsolete, but not Nirrti. She was objective enough to accept this odd turn of events, and use them to her advantage. Begrudgingly, she appreciated this trait in her host Ba'al as well, and was happy that few others shared it. If more of the System Lords were as rational, she thought, then the constant battle for supremacy would be much more complicated and vicious. It's already bad enough as it is.

She discreetly looked over her shoulder to see one of Ba'al's Jaffa observing her. True to his word, Ba'al had been a perfect host; providing all of the equipment she needed, and the guards, servants, and trappings due any System Lord. The guards, of course, were his; undoubtedly waiting for the command to kill her at the slightest hint of treachery. At least his minions know their place and
maintain the appropriate distance, she thought as she checked a small data device she had set to hack into Ba'al's computer network. No luck yet; network security no doubt the work of the vile cretin Nerus.

Nirrti had no intention of sharing her findings with Ba'al, no matter how suave he tried to pretend to be. He was using her, plain and simple; and she him as no one thought to look for her here. Hopefully her hacking tool would soon penetrate Ba'al's computer network and give her access to a means off of his station, as well as a means of purging all of her research data from his storage devices. As of yet, no luck, so she left it to continue it work. Instead she directed her attention back to her display. There were fascinating hints of a defect in the genetic code for the nervous system with delicious implications if she could fully understand them. Nirrti was so engrossed in her study she almost didn't notice the floor thud beneath her.

She didn't fail to notice the 'battle stations' alarm sound.

The floor thudded dully beneath their feet, the 'battle stations' alarm blared loudly. Lord Yu's forces had apparently breached Ba'al's defensive picket and were engaging the space station proper. Better late than never, thought Samantha. Athame's Jaffa cast furtive glances up at the ceiling and the exterior walls, obviously just waiting for that one lucky shot to hole the compartment and vent them to space.

Major Carter glanced to her side and met gazes with Colonel O'Neill; he was worrying about their prospects as well. Thus, her attention was on her commanding officer when it happened, so she almost missed it in her periphery. Athame had once again taken Shepard's face possessively in her hands, looking down upon her with a combination of superior smugness, lewd affection, and barely contained lust. It happened quickly; Carter almost lost it in a blink. Athame's eyes flashed to black, then glowing orange, and then back again to their blue-within-blue. Then, just as quickly, Athame's eyes rolled up into her skull and she collapsed.

The Jaffa guards looked at each other worriedly and sprang into action. A pair kept their staff weapons trained on SG-1 while the rest attended to their goddess. They all seemed to ignore Shepard who was slowly pulling herself up onto her knees. "Mistress!" one of them shouted. He knelt beside the fallen Asari, laying his staff weapon beside her. "Mistress, are you well?" he asked leaning over her, gently shaking her shoulders. Carter looked into Liara's face. That must be Liara, she thought. Her eye closest to the floor opened. At just the wrong angle to see it, the assisting Jaffa didn't react. Liara locked gazes with Samantha, smiled warmly, winked, and then glowed like the surface of a blue star.

Once you see the flash, Carter thought in a sardonic historical reference, it's already too late.

The retina-searing glow emanating from Liara was so quickly joined by a similar light radiating from Commander Shepard that Major Carter instantly understood that this was a coordinated attack. That's what that flash of the black-oil-eyes must have been, she thought. Shepard was off like a shot, flashing the distance between herself and the nearest Jaffa in an instant. Breaking the speed of sound with a thunderclap she left a glowing ghostly after-image behind herself. Shepard pushed the Jaffa into the nearest bulkhead and his body impacted with a loud thud. A fraction of a second later his bald head whipped around on his shoulders and impacted the wall with a sickening wet slap. The back half of the Jaffa's skull crushed flat against the gilded metal bulkhead, his eyes bulged, dilated, and bled.

The Jaffa guard was already dead, but Shepard didn't stop there. She balled a fist, wreathed it in a biotic glow and punched the Jaffa through the abdomen. She came away with his symbiote in her glowing fist, and crushed it with a snarl. In a smooth, ballerina-like movement Shepard released the
dead man, pirouetted, snatched the staff weapon from his now lifeless hand, and twirled it to bear on
the Jaffa standing behind Colonel O'Neill. She fired the weapon a fraction of a second before Liara
made her move. The staff weapon bolt streaked past Jack's ear, singing the hair over his right temple,
and impacted the Jaffa on the bridge of his nose. The top of his head disappeared in a steaming,
charred lump of grey matter and skull.

But Carter did not see any of this. Her attention, rather, was focused on Liara. Mesmerized by the
elegance of movement and brutality of violence that was about to unfold before her; also, to no small
extent, and much to her surprise, by the Asari's beauty of form and grace.

Liara placed her right hand, palm down, on the gilded floor. She took a breath, her freckled breasts
bulging slightly over the top of her dark blue dress, and closed her eyes. A biotic bubble formed
above her. The surface shimmered and crackled. The hair on Carter's head and arms stood on end
even from several meters away in the static electric field. What dust there was in the room gathered at
the surface of the bubble and danced on its perimeter. Suddenly Liara balled her off-hand into a fist
and the bubble rapidly expanded. The surface of the biotic field accelerated hypersonic almost
instantly and Carter witnessed a distinct shockwave form ahead of it. A near discontinuous change in
air pressure, the shockwave looked like a crack in glass and it moved through the room; the air just
couldn't get out of the way. It left a faint Wilson Cloud in its wake.

Carter, a holder of an advanced degree in Aeronautical Engineering, couldn't help but wonder at
what she was seeing. The expanding condensation cloud reminded her of the Crossroads Baker shot
in Bikini back in 1946. The sudden drop in pressure behind the atom bomb's shockwave had created
a condensation cloud that wasn't often seen on subsequent tests because the fireball heated the water
droplets and evaporated the cloud. Which was exactly what was happening now, she realized. Liara
too was radiating an intense heat; the Wilson Cloud disappeared nearly as quickly as it formed. Some
corner in the back of Samantha's brain wondered if Liara was radiating in the ultra violet band, it felt
as if she might be getting as sun burn her skin was so hot. Doctor Samantha Carter PhD marveled,
this is incredible!

The biotic bubble / shockwave impacted the Jaffa trying to assist his goddess. It hefted him upwards
as if it were a physical wall. With a grunt the air was forced from his lungs as his torso rose towards
the ceiling. His silver-colored boots flew off with centripetal force and one impacted Daniel Jackson
in the groin; he doubled over with a yelp. The helpless Jaffa was going for a ride; his legs, however,
had just enough inertia to not keep up with the rest of him. Muscles stretched, tendons groaned. The
stocky Jaffa's legs separated from his body with a blood-curdling ripping sound, and hurtled across
the room, barely missing another Jaffa's head. Carter imagined that he might have screamed if not for
his head whiplashing around and slapping hard against the virtual wall of air and biotic energy
hurting him.

Blood geysered from the Jaffa's open hip sockets as he continued to rocket towards the ceiling,
propelled by Liara's expanding biotic bubble. A fraction of a section after it had begun for the now
legless Jaffa, it ended; or at least started to. The holding room had a fairly high, uniformly flat ceiling
with recessed lighting. The ballistic Jaffa impacted the ceiling with a sickening crunch, obviously
already dead. The still-expanding biotic bubble and preceding shockwave was right behind him. It
impacted against the Jaffa and the ceiling and spread out like an expanding hemisphere of glowing
blue energy, squeezing the Jaffa's corpse as if he were in an inverted mortar under a pestle.

Muscle and bone flattened, flesh split open, the ceiling was literally coated with the Jaffa; and all the
while Liara's face was a vision of calm beauty which Major Carter couldn't take her eyes off of. She
was astonished. Not just in the sheer power Liara could yield, but that she would be more focused on
how elegant she was. Once again she found herself wondering what she might do if given the
opportunity to meet more Asari.
Samantha's self-reflection was interrupted by a blur of blue flesh and fabric; Liara was moving. A rapid, yet graceful sweep of her left arm morphed the biotic bubble into more of a biotic wall which vectored towards the remaining Jaffa guards in case their surprise wore off enough for them to try something; all the while she angled it such that the Jaffa paste on the ceiling didn't fall on her and foul her dress. A fast-pitch under-hand movement of her right hand and a blue singularity orb sailed in-between them, still too stunned to have even decided who to aim their staff weapons at. With a bong and a ring the singularity field formed and the two men lifted off the deck. Commander Shepard dropped the staff weapon she had just fired and side-armed a warp field at the two helpless Jaffa.

A blinding, actinic flash of light had Carter blinking hard. The thunderclap deafened her. Through the ringing in her ears she could swear she heard Teal'c howl and clutch a ruptured ear drum. Bits and pieces of Jaffa and their ridiculous chainmail uniforms fluttered about the room, yet still Liara's elegant dark dress went unscathed. A few heartbeats thudded within her head, and then Carter realized there was silence. All Jaffa were dead, some spectacularly so. The space station's alarms were offline too for some reason. Teal'c, still clutching his ear, was stoically, if a bit woozily, coping with the pain. Daniel, too, quietly clenched his testicles; gently verifying that they were intact. Colonel O'Neill tugged at his ear to confirm its presence and looked at Carter with an expression of surprise. Neither of the combat veterans had ever seen violence on that particular level. It was sobering. But things weren't quite settled.

Shepard turned to regard her mate. Her face was a hardened mask, devoid of any emotion save for a methodical willingness and capability to deliver mayhem. A flash of biotics and a staff weapon lifted off the floor and came to her; her fingers tightly wrapped around the weapon's grips. Her weathered N7 Combat Armor was speckled with Jaffa entrails. Jaffa blood pooled at her feet. She locked eyes on Liara, her eyebrows narrowed, her grip on the staff weapon tightened further. Her right leg moved back slightly, and she entered a firing stance.

Liara stared back at Shepard. Her tattooed eyebrows narrowed. Her fists balled. There was such a profound silence that Carter imagined she could hear a pin drop. Then, suddenly, Liara flashed a painfully bright blue, her eyes bulged, and she pitched forward and retched onto the floor. Her whole body shuddered. It seemed as if her ample breasts would spill out the top of her dress she heaved with such might. Her headress skewed to the side. Her eyes flashed a brilliant orange. Shepard covered her with the staff weapon, the harpoon-like tip deployed and sparked menacingly. Jaffa blood ran down Shepard's armored gauntlets, onto and down the weapon's shaft, and dripped off of the sparking tip. The cold look of murder never left her face.

With an agonizing moan the goa'uld symbiote Athame slithered forth from Liara's mouth and flopped onto the floor. Liara squeezed her eyes closed in pain, clutched her neck, and rolled away from the madly-writhing snake-like alien. Shepard blurred into action. SG-1 had never seen a living person move so quickly. A glowing boot stomped down upon Athame with such force that she left a boot-shaped indentation in the metallic floor. With a snarl she ground the goa'uld into a pulp.

Silence.

Panting, Liara rose to her knees and looked at Shepard. Shepard looked her in the eye and loosened her grip on the staff weapon. Liara came to her feet, straightened her dress and headress, and smiled if a bit unsteadily. They shared a silent moment. Then Shepard said something in a language that Carter had never heard before. It was soft, almost lyrical; a melodic sing-song tonal pattern that reminded Samantha of Mandarin Chinese but with an accent more akin to Spanish. She could only imagine that Victoria was speaking with her wife in her native tongue.

Liara responded in kind and Shepard's face softened. The staff weapon deactivated and lowered to
point at the floor. The lovers regarded each other for another moment. Shepard dropped the weapon, rushed to Liara and embraced her. Tears running down their cheeks they kissed.

Shepard was whole once more.
**Murphy Was A Goa'uld**

War has been called many things by many people: 'politics by other means' by philosophers, 'hours of boredom punctuated by seconds of absolute terror' by those who have lived through it, or 'barely controlled chaos' by those who have tried to plan it. It is the last of those descriptions, and other manifestations of a similar sentiment, that have spawned the phrase 'what can go wrong, will go wrong' and its more familiar personification 'Murphy's Law'.

As a career soldier Victoria Shepard was well familiar with Murphy's Law, but she recognized it as simply a vehicle for giving voice to the real truth of warfare; that it was a complex chain of events where breaking or changing any link, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, could vastly change the outcome. Chaos theory in the truest, most literal, sense of the word. That was exactly how the engagement within and around Lord Ba'al's space station unfolded, and what gave SG-1 the opportunity for escape after the joyous reunion of Commander Shepard and her beloved.

It started, trivially enough, with a Jaffa pilot who didn't get enough sleep; or kelno'reem as the case may be. The night before SG-1 and Lord Yu's assault on Ba'al's space station, in his squadron's common area, a rather rowdy celebration of another young Jaffa's entry into fatherhood continuously interrupted his attempts to meditate. So, when one of the pilots for Lord Ba'al's space station's reconnaissance picket pre-flight checked his stealthed al'kesh, he failed to notice a minor leak in one of the auxiliary power units' emission shields.

This first link in the chain could have been broken then and there by the al'kesh's crew chief, but that Jaffa was preoccupied by the series of battle drills his air-group commander had set for that day. His Jaffa engineers, his human slave assistants, and he would be practicing the rapid movement of armaments, fuel, and ships from one of the adjacent flight bays, and the loading of a death glider in his stand which normally served al'kesh. All of it, he was told, to simulate maintaining flight operations in case one of the glider bays was put out of action. Thus, the crew chief was so busy marshaling human slaves that he didn't notice coolant dripping out of the al'kesh's APU until he stepped in a puddle of it twenty minutes after the medium bomber had sortied. Radio-silence with the stealth recon ships meant he couldn't warn them, even if he thought it were that serious, so he made a note of it to fix it upon their return.

As a result, the scouts leading Lord Yu's forces detected the stealthed al'kesh in their path. Oshu, First Prime in the service of the goa'uld System Lord Yu, immediately recognized the purpose of the small vessel, to give advance warning to Ba'al's space station of his approach, and ordered its destruction. Unfortunately for Lord Ba'al, the al'kesh's pilot was so fatigued from the previous night's frivolities that he was too slow in reacting to the onrushing death gliders and just barely failed to get the warning out to his lord's space station. Thus, Oshu and his task force completed their approach undetected.

Ironically, it was this delay in the detection of Lord Yu's forces, and the subsequent battle alert, that gave Liara T'soni enough time to overcome the influence of the goa'uld Athame on her mind, and help her mate free SG-1 from their Jaffa guards; completing that link to the chain.

The drills themselves, of course, were the next link as they littered the space station's largest death glider bay with munitions and fuel and left loading hatches to the next glider bay open. When Thor transported Commander Shepard's distraction into the glider bay it was a tinderbox aching for a spark; much like the Japanese aircraft carrier Shōhō at the Battle of the Coral Sea, the sinking of which Victoria would re-quote to Jack O'Neill, 'scratch one flattop'.

Arguably the most obtuse contributor to the day's events was as much a random quirk of nature as a
seemingly unrelated action or event. The Reaper-Shepard Gestalt, it seemed, had sent Victoria and Liara to a universe that had never known element zero, just its doppelgänger naquadah. Consequently, the life of the planet Shepard and Liara called Thessia never developed a resistance to it. More specifically the goa'uld, whose biochemistry was fundamentally incompatible with eezo, were able to develop and supplant the Asari as the dominant life in the galaxy. This incompatibility with the eezo that permeated Liara's Asari body rendered *Athame* ill and incapable of suppressing Liara's efforts to overcome its domination of her mind.

All of these unrelated events left Lord Ba'al's already heavily damaged and burning space station open to attack by Lord Yu's forces, and provided Liara T'soni the opportunity to break free of the goa'uld *Athame's* influence and free her beloved from captivity.

But there were two last things that provided Shepard, Liara, and SG-1 the opportunity to actually escape. It was two quintessentially goa'uld-type behaviors; their predilections towards stealing technology and towards betrayal, that provided the final links to the chain that bound Ba'al and Nirrti to their fates, ending Ba'al's plans of mastering the Mass Effect and Nirrti's dreams of unlocking the Asari genome as the true future host for the goa'uld…
Ninety seconds ago.

Victoria Shepard was desolation. She was broken.

The one person in the entire universe, two universes, who mattered to her worth a damn, had been taken from her. No, not just taken from her, perverted in a way that she wondered if even the Reapers could have managed back in the other place. Every battle she fought, every hopeless slaughter she survived, every atrocity she committed was all so that someday she would be able to retire to a life of peace and love with Liara and raise a family with her. Or not, she realized; they could do whatever they wanted, they would have time and peace in which to do it.

But no, not anymore. Now there was a goa'uld, a thing, wearing her face, walking about as if it were a goddess. Athame, even its chosen name insulted her. Liara was a goddess, her goddess. Liara's body was a temple, but now this goa'uld was defiling her; strutting around the room, wearing her mother's old gown which exuded power and wielded her sexuality like a cudgel. Liara was warm and often acted shyly. It horrified Shepard to see Athame showing off her exquisite breasts and pale blue dappled skin, behaving coldly and sadistically when that was furthest from Liara's true nature.

Victoria was immobilized. She knelt on the floor, having hardly moved from the spot where Athame's Jaffa had left her when they were brought to this room. The world had figuratively and literally come to a halt for her. She stared at the floor.

"Oh, beloved," Victoria knew that voice, "don't look so sad." Footsteps approached her, leather soles clicking softly on the hard floor, the rustling of fabric. Shepard summoned the strength to look up and see Athame leering down at her. "You and I will have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves." She trailed a hand sensuously down her side and reached out. With a barely contained look of lust she moved to cradle Victoria's face in her hands, "You're mine, for eternity."

Contact.

Suddenly, for Shepard, the room disappeared.

With a violent lurch to her stomach Victoria once again found herself in the Armali park. Liara, not Athame, was there; her heart swelled. But there was definitely something wrong. The wind howled. The sky was nearly black. Leaves skittered about rapidly and trees swayed back and forth violently with great creaks and groans from their trunks.

Victoria looked at Liara. She wasn't wearing her sun dress this time. Liara was dressed in the same modified Alliance body armor she wore during the Battle of London in the other place, complete with scuffs and caked mud. Shepard looked down at herself; she was dressed in her own N7 combat armor. Liara's face was set, battle was about to be joined.

"It's time, isn't it?" Victoria asked.

Liara nodded, "Yes."

For the life of her, Shepard had no idea what to expect. On some detached, intellectual level she imagined she was in some strange mental plane within Liara's mind, that everything she was seeing was a construct much like what Legion had shown her of the Geth Consensus. The battle that was about to take place between Liara and the goa'uld inhabiting her body wouldn't be through weight of
arms or strength of muscles but, rather, by force of will. The armor that she and Liara wore was more symbolic than real, manifestations of their own desires to survive and prevail.

Victoria didn't know what to do or what to expect, but she trusted her wife with every fiber of her being. She poured her love and confidence across the bond to her and saw Liara twitch a smile in response. In the distance something started to move amongst the darkness. The two lovers turned to face it. Shepard reached out her hand and took Liara's in her grip. They interlaced their fingers. **I love you,** she said through the bond. Liara squeezed her hand in response.

The movement began to take shape. The Reaper-siren blared. It had begun.

The darkness swirled and **Athame** appeared, but it was not what either Shepard or Liara expected. Apparently **Athame** had plumbed the depths of Liara's psyche and, through the bond, Shepard's as well. The goa'uld chose a form it knew would have maximum psychological impact. Athame didn't appear as a Reaper, it didn't appear as anyone they knew, it didn't even appear as a giant marshmallow man like some humor-loving corner of Shepard's hind-brain half expected. Suddenly Shepard and Liara were faced with a small Asari child wearing a grey hooded jacket and baggy cargo pants.

**That son of a bitch!** Shepard thought. Liara could feel the disturbance through the bond and hazarded a glance to her wife. A moment later she realized why Victoria was so upset by the image. It wasn't just that they both longed for a child, the Asari daughter before them looked to be about 10 years of age, **this** one was dressed like the Catalyst. Shepard still held strong feelings against the corrupt AI that governed the Reapers before she had assumed command of them in the Gestalt. **Athame has chosen well,** Liara thought.

"You can't win, you know," the child said in her disturbingly innocent voice. "I am a god, and you are here as but playthings for my amusement."

"Greater gods than you have fallen before us," Liara responded coldly.

"Mere pretenders," it responded, "Just like the supposed System Lords who presume to control this space station. After I'm finished with you and your beloved I'll be taking care of them, and then the galaxy will have a new goddess to worship. A true goddess. And you will be silent witness to the carnage!" The child raised her chin in preemptive triumph.

Liara didn't rise to the bait, she just regarded the goa'uld avatar stoically, "Before I kill you, tell me; where is my daughter?" Shepard shuddered momentarily at the sheer coldness of Liara's question, and again at the realization, **they have our daughter.**

The **child** smiled a wolfish grin in response but said nothing.

Liara regarded the child icily for a moment, closed her eyes serenely, inhaled deeply, and opened her eyes again.

The opponents regarded each other. The swirling winds seemed to die down for a brief moment, but then rapidly picked up again. The hair at the nape of Shepard's neck stood on end. **Something** had just happened, though she didn't know precisely what. The Reaper siren sounded again, but from a different direction; she couldn't quite localize it. In her confusion, Victoria did not notice that Liara had gone quiet though the bond in deep concentration. Her thought process was interrupted when **Athame** spoke.

"Submit," **Athame** said in her high-pitched, juvenile voice, "and I will make your friends' deaths painless. I will spare them becoming hosts, and that Jaffa the pain of having his prim'ta removed."
Shepard arched an eyebrow and Liara twitched a smile almost simultaneously for they both realized it in unison. The dynamic of the confrontation had obviously changed and Athame knew it.

It was bargaining.

Whatever Liara was doing within her psyche, whatever it was that Shepard couldn't even detect, they were winning. Victoria poured even more love and confidence through the bond to Liara; she saw the Asari's chest swell with renewed confidence.

The sky darkened to a near pitch-black, the wind howled, and the earth beneath their feet started vibrating with the approach of something massive. A great force was nearing; an earthquake, a freight train, or a far-off nuclear detonation. Whatever it was, it filled both Shepard and Athame with an ominous dread.

Victoria didn't look to her mate but she could feel, gloating?

The wind died and Liara spoke, "You call yourself a goddess for this galaxy to worship?" She remained calm and casually, almost rudely, dismissively, waved her hand at the child, "This," she pointed at the sky, "is a god."

"We are Harbinger," the words that would forever make Victoria's blood curdle and skin crawl boomed as if they were shaking the very pillars of creation. Out of the swirling black clouds descended none other than the first Reaper in all of its two kilometer menace. The enormous metal creature touched down, forelegs straddling the two lovers with an earth-shaking impact that actually caused Athame to leap back in surprise. Four golden eyes flashed devilishly at Athame as the beast came to a rest.

The goa'uld knew fear.

"This was a god until we ended it and all of its kind." She paused and looked at Shepard. "You are no goddess. This," she gently reached her hand out and re-grasped that of her beloved, "is a goddess. This woman rallied the peoples of the galaxy to fight the Reapers where no one else could. She led them to Earth, and then she took control of them. They were killing thirty-five humans per second, every second of every day. Not just humans on Earth, either. They were doing that on hundreds of worlds to hundreds of species, simultaneously.

"She stopped them. She is now them! This goddess uses her Reapers for good, helping the peoples of the galaxy, not for the worship of the masses. You and your kind are just worms, parasites. You are not even worth of the earth you crawl in or the water you swim through.

"And here is where you will die."

Liara's brow narrowed and she snapped her fingers. The child, too stunned to even get a word in edgewise, flashed to incandescence as Harbinger's magneto-hydrodynamic cannon roared to life and lanced out to meet it.

Just as quickly as Liara's manifestation of Harbinger had incinerated Athame's embodiment of the starchild-Asari the sky cleared and the lovers once again found themselves in the Armali park. Liara was out of her scuffed armor. She once again wore her sun dress. Shepard was dressed similarly. Victoria, shocked, looked down at herself; this was not something she normally would have picked off of a rack. And her scars were gone!

"What?" Liara asked coyly, "you look good in it."
She looked down again, "I do."

The sky dimmed momentarily and she looked up. Harbinger had silently lifted off and was flying away, momentarily eclipsing the sun. Suddenly it disappeared with a faint pop, as if a soap bubble had burst. Shepard looked back to Liara and she smirked.

A heartbeat passed. Two. Then she bodily threw herself at her wife and they kissed; long, passionately. They only stopped when Liara gently pushed her away and spoke.

"There will be time for that later, but we have work to do. I believe that Athame is bested, but you must be wary so long as the symbiote is within me." Shepard nodded. "Now we still must free ourselves and SG-1, find and rescue our daughter, murder that bitch Nirrti, and escape this station."

"Done," Shepard responded quickly but firmly.

Liara cocked an eyebrow, "You say that so easily."

"Liara," Shepard said running the pad of her thumb gently along Liara's cheek, "I love you."

"I love you," Liara replied.

"I would die for you."

"I would die for you."

"And now," Shepard said, leveling her gaze and hardening her voice, "I am going to kill for you."

Liara closed her eyes and took a breath to center herself. She opened her eyes to regard her mate, "I am ready. Let us do what needs to be done. Wait for my signal. You will know it when you see it."

With that, the Armali park disappeared.

With a flash Shepard was back on Ba'al's space station. She looked up to see Liara's eyes flash from the inky black of 'the bond' to the hateful orange associated with the goa'uld. Then, for a brief, fleeting, wonderful moment, her eyes returned to their beautiful blue within blue. Just as suddenly Liara's eyes rolled up into the back of her head, her jaw went slack, and she crumpled to the floor.

Shepard's stomach lurched with worry, but she had faith in Liara. As Athame's Jaffa rushed to their mistress' aide she brought herself to her knees; slowly as to not gain their notice. She distantly heard the Jaffa shouting to Athame in concern as she centered herself for the coming onslaught; she was going to tear these Jaffa apart! Just as soon as she got the signal, she would know it when she saw it.

Then it happened.

Liara flashed blindingly bright. Shepard smiled for a fraction of a second recalling a training video she had once seen in a military history course at the academy, do you know what to do when you see the flash? Yes she did, thought Victoria, yes she most certainly did! Summoning all of her biotic strength, she too began glowing like the surface of a blue sun. Then she lashed out at her Jaffa captors with all of her might.

It felt glorious.
Violent Femmes

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains graphic gore and depictions of intense violence.

Now.

Jack looked around the room. Jaffa were smeared everywhere. Holy shit, was all that came to mind. Just, just, holy shit! He literally shook his head, like a dog shedding water, trying to order his thoughts. Shepard and Liara held each other tenderly, both obviously overjoyed to be reunited. Despite the unpleasantness of only a few moments ago, and the still spotless goa'uld-supplied attire, in this nearly euphoric state, Liara seemed to glow. Jack couldn't also help but notice how endowed she was, either. Shepard, he thought, you lucky dog, you!

A loud thunk broke Jack's fixation on Liara's bust. Major Carter leapt back with a squeak of surprise as pieces of the Jaffa that Liara had deposited on the ceiling began peeling away and dripping down in large chunks with blood curdling crumping noises.

A random recollection; for a second Jack could remember the night before he shipped out for Saudi Arabia and Operation Desert Shield. He'd seen a man hit by a car. Totally random, a drunk driver and a drunk pedestrian met in a crosswalk; he just happened to be a witness. The sound of the collision, like a baseball bat hitting a wet burlap sack, was unmistakable. Just like this, he thought. O'Neil shook his head clearing the memory, here and now Jack, here and now, and again in amazement at the level of carnage the pair had wrought in such a short period of time.

"Holy shit, Doc!" Jack said, finally failing to contain his astonishment, "How did you do that?" Shepard regarded him coolly and cocked an eyebrow. "Uh, you too, Shepard?" he added out of politeness and a sincere desire to keep his insides internal.

"They had it coming," Liara said coolly, looking at Jack. O'Neil shuddered, she's one scary lady.

Shepard squeezed Liara's arms one more time and stepped away from her. "We don't have much time," she said, "reaching down to pick up her N7 Valiant sniper rifle." As if to accentuate her point, the floor shuddered with the impact of another hit from Lord Yu's fleet.

"Agreed," Liara said, all business. She removed Shepard's M77 pistol from her belt and offered it to the Spectre, grip first. Victoria tried to refuse as she finished checking over, reloading, and docking the rifle to her back, but Liara was insistent. "You are a better shot with it, Shepard," she shook it, arm extended, face set. Shepard, Jack noticed, not 'beloved', not 'my love', not even 'Victoria'. The ubiquitous, some would say overly saccharine, terms of endearment were gone. Liara was definitely 'all business'.

Reluctantly Shepard took her pistol, checked it over, and docked it to her armor. Liara walked over to the pile of SG-1's equipment and retrieved one of the FN pistols. "Besides, I have grown rather fond of this charming little anachronism," she said ejecting the twenty-round magazine from the Five Seven and inspecting it. White and black tips, steel core, light-armor piercing, Jack recalled, for that tacky chainmail bullshit the Jaffa wear. That particular pistol had come out of his gun belt, but he wasn't going to say no to Liara, not after what he just saw her do, that's for sure.
Liara bent over to rifle through the pile for a couple of spare magazines giving SG-1 an amazing view of her cleavage. Jack shifted self-consciously. Carter rolled her eyes. "Colonel, if you and Doctor Jackson are finished staring down my dress," she looked up at them and smiled, a facial expression which did not match her gown and headdress in anyway, "then you can gather your equipment as well. We will need to move quickly if we are to rescue my daughter before escaping this station."

"You too Master Teal'c," Shepard snickered, "No ogling." Teal'c centered himself, already recovering from the ruptured tympanum. Directing his attention to Commander Shepard he arched an eyebrow, and then he bowed his head slightly to the side in assent and apology. It would seem that even Jaffa appreciated the Asari aesthetic. Shepard winked.

Daniel Jackson's eyes stayed affixed on Liara. He stared at her, almost mesmerized. Shepard looked at him, incredulous. "Seriously, Daniel? What the fuck? You need a date that bad?"

"Huh?" he said, still staring. He shook himself, looked at Shepard, and then back at Liara, "Oh! No! I was just wondering." Both Shepard and Liara looked at him, cocking eyebrows. "How are you still alive? Goa'uld release a deadly nerve toxin when they die. I'm just surprised is all." He looked around rapidly, pushing his glasses up on his broken nose nervously, "Uh, very happily surprised that you're still alive."

It dawned on Jack that Daniel had made a very good point, "Yeah, Doc, what gives?"


"Pardon?" Jack asked.

"Did it occur to you that, even if that snake," Shepard said that last word with barely contained vehemence, "did manage to release its toxin, that it might not work on Asari? Her biochemistry is a complete unknown to this galaxy." Jack and Carter looked at each other pondering what she had just said. "Hell, I've seen combat footage from the First Contact War of a Turian sopping wet with what I guess you'd all call VX with fuck-all to show for it. Bastard just seemed pissed off to be sticky." Shepard shook her head.

Jack looked at Carter again and she shrugged.

Finally finding what she was looking for, Liara took two spare magazines for her Five Seven and, realizing that her gown had no pockets, shoved them down the front of her dress, concealing them in her cleavage. Jack's eyes went wide. She scowled, "I believe the expression is, 'get it out of your system', Colonel. I have no pockets; where else shall I put them?"

"An utterly sensible solution, Doctor," he responded, barely suppressing a smirk.

"Shut up!" Carter mumbled under her breath, squeezing her eyes shut ashamed at the bad pun, and elbowing him firmly in the ribs.

"Children, bigger issues," Shepard commented rolling his eyes at O'Neill.

"Yes! Children! Exactly! That's the other thing," Daniel stepped forward, clipping his P90 back into his harness. He pushed his glasses up on his broken nose again and said, "Daughter?" SG-1's collective jaws seemed to drop at that one; apparently they'd missed it or forgotten in all of the excitement. "You're pregnant?"

"Mazel tov?" Jack offered tentatively. He too started kitting up.
Liara cocked her head in confusion at the phrase. "No Daniel, I am no longer pregnant," which only seemed to confuse SG-1 further.

"Guess they do have Roe v. Wade in space," Jack muttered, just audible enough for Carter to hear him over the rustling of gear, and snarl her lip in disgust at Jack's quip. Well-guarded feelings for him aside, he did have an abhorrent sense of humor sometimes.

"Alright, I'm going to need a little bit more to go on than that," Daniel shot back, obviously not hearing Jack's inappropriate quip. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because it was none of your fucking business?" Shepard snapped back with uncharacteristic venom. She flashed a painfully bright blue.

"Yeah, Daniel," Carter chimed in, obviously agitated, and in no tone to help diffuse Shepard's anger, "their family planning decisions aren't any of your concern." She paused, "Unless you're buying them a car seat or something." Victoria took a breath and her biotics subsided with a faint pfft.

Jack cocked his head, struck a nerve, huh?

"Commander Shepard also likely judged it to be a personal matter with no bearing on the mission," Teal'c calmly observed. Shepard gently threw him a staff weapon which he caught deftly. "She had no way but to assume that rescuing Doctor T'Soni would also rescue their daughter simultaneously." A point, thought Jack.

"Besides," said Carter, "can you imagine the kind of bullshit that NID will try to pull once they find out that Liara is expecting?"

Jack looked at Carter. She almost never used foul language, plus no honorific. This whole situation was obviously causing her some serious distress. Struck a nerve indeed, he thought.

After a few moments' pregnant silence, Liara spoke. "I was approximately one week pregnant when I was captured by the goa'uld, Daniel; not an invalid." Liara continued with noticeable indignation, "Asari Commandos often embark on missions that may or may not result in combat while pregnant; at least until they start showing. When the leathers no longer fit properly, it becomes difficult to move." Daniel blushed somewhat in embarrassment.

Liara paused, recomposed to the analytical scientist the team all knew, and resumed speaking, "I believe that the System Lord Nirrti has taken the embryo from my womb, and is holding it somewhere on this station for study. The goa'uld Athame managed to keep the specifics from me, despite how thoroughly compromised it became towards the end; I can only assume because it was, itself, denied those details by Nirrti and Ba'al.

"I believe that the original intent was to capture and keep me solely for the purposes of medical and genetic study; something called hok'tar? But then Ba'al changed his mind. He decided that he wanted a plaything or a consort. Apparently everyone is enamored with my people." Shepard's eyes narrowed at that last comment. Jack had no way of knowing the special meaning that last term held for the Asari, particularly those who'd lived on the Citadel.

Liara's tone hardened as she spoke, as did her face and her posture. Shepard approached, but she did not reach out to her mate, did not offer any of the physical contact, support, or affection that the members of the SGC had come to know and expect of the pair. The Asari, they had all learned, were a very tactile race; this one and towards her bondmate in particular. But not here, not now. She busied herself with her omni-tool; they were both all business.
The Spectre's facial expression had transitioned to a slack, robotic mask; no more anger at having her family decisions questioned, of hearing that her wife was merely to be used to satisfy someone's curiosity or other urges. Both Liara and Shepard's expressions were devoid of mercy, but they expressed it in different ways. Shepard was a machine; cold, methodical, lethal. Whereas Liara was some sort of terrifying blue Valkyrie; a goddess of death and vengeance. They were both steeling themselves for battle, and it was becoming increasingly obvious to all they were willing to tear anything and everything between them and their daughter apart to see her safe, whether SG-1 wanted to come along or not.

Jack understood now how these women were able to overcome the obviously impossible odds that represented the Reaper War and win; to not only win, but bring together an entire galaxy of disparate or sometimes downright hateful races for the final assault. They were forces of nature. You could just as well stand in a Nebraska field and flip-off a tornado for what good it would do trying to stop them.

O'Neill realized something else. There would be no discussion of whether or not they needed to detonate the nuke, despite how badly damaged the space station already was. Shepard would likely be willing to set it off by hand just to spite Ba'al and Nirrti for what they had done to Liara; riding it down like Slim Pickens, waving her helmet and whooping in joy if she had to. She even scribbled a little message on the radiation case, Jack reflected.

"Now that I am free of the goa'uld's control and you are free from their captivity, we can rescue her and escape from this space station." Liara looked to Shepard who stopped working on her omni-tool long enough to glance knowingly at her wife. She nodded once. "Then we will repay them for their hospitality."

Jack looked around. Everyone was fully kitted up. He nodded.

Samantha Carter's heart thudded within her chest. She was no stranger to combat, or gore, or violence, or being held captive by poorly dressed space aliens for that matter. So, despite how outlandish an average person might have found the immediately preceding events she had just witnessed, this was all actually just another day at the office. What Sam couldn't abide, however, and what did have her blood up, was hearing that the goa'uld arch-bitch Nirrti might actually be in possession of Shepard and Liara's first child. And that's what that embryo is, she thought, if Shepard and Liara are going to regard it as their baby and more than just a clump of cells, then so am I. Being pro-choice cuts both ways, after all, thought Carter with a sardonic internal smirk. Strategic risk of the goa'uld unlocking the Asari genome notwithstanding, that was more than enough reason to give everything she had to help in the operation. After all, 'protect the innocent' was high on her list of reasons for joining the service in the first place.

Samantha didn't know if she'd ever be a mother herself. Granted, she always supposed she would be, career-permitting, but the time hadn't come yet. She still had things she wanted, needed, to do, and she was on no one else's time table but her own. Exactly how it should be, she thought to herself, which was one of the reasons she found Jack's sense of humor on the subject more off putting than usual. Shepard and Liara, between themselves, had obviously decided that now was their time. They had met their goals. They had given their due. They wanted their little slice of the American Dream, or Armali Dream, Sam thought, and they were going to have it. But then someone took it away. Major Carter bristled at the injustice of it.

She had found some small bit of surrogate maternity in Cassandra over the past few years, and she treasured it. Sometimes defending Earth from destruction was too much to wrap her head around, so she simplified it. She wasn't fighting for the sake of Earth. She was fighting for Cassandra, and so
She hated Nirrti with every fiber in her body for what she had tried to do to her adopted niece/daughter. Now she had yet another reason to hate that monster.

She tried not to be angry at Daniel for his presumptuous comments, or Jack's jokes, or even Teal'c taking a moment to look down Liara's dress. She was sure they meant well. Daniel wasn't some misogynist throwback asshole, and Jack was, well, Jack. Teal'c wasn't a bad person either; and besides, she'd snuck a peek too, much to her own surprise. Daniel's incredulous tone must have been a function of surprise. Surprise, yes, that's it, she convinced herself. At least O'Neill had the sense to keep his mouth shut; or at least speak under his breath. Carter knew Jack to be similarly open-minded, and that any objection he would have voiced would have been from a purely tactical point of view, but he hadn't voiced them. She doubted very much that her feelings for the Colonel were fully unknown to him, or not reciprocated for that matter, but the man did act like an asshole sometimes. She shook her head in frustration.

Tactically, what was done was done. Shepard wasn't unreasonable, as Teal'c had pointed out, in her assumption that rescuing Liara would be a de-facto rescue of her embryonic daughter. She couldn't have known that Nirrti would have removed it from Liara's womb for study. Of course, Carter thought to herself, that doesn't surprise me in the least. That was exactly something that bitch would have done. Carter bristled again at the thought. If she'd only asked me, confided in me, we could have planned for this.

But, again, what was done was done. They were here, they had their mission. Victoria and Liara were going to get their daughter back. They were going to have their happily ever after and, much to Sam's surprise, she was willing to die to help make that a reality. Carter looked herself over one last time. Every piece of equipment was back in place. Weapons locked and loaded, pack on and snug, knife in sheath. She nodded to Jack, he nodded back.

Now they just needed a plan.

Viking Vikki was in firm control of the situation. Unfortunately, she didn't like how the odds were stacking up against them.

For the umpteenth time she checked her omni-tool. The cyber warfare suite, which was a far far cry from what EDI would have been able to do in her sleep, still hadn't been able to break into the goa'uld space station's internal network. Unless something changed, she would be unable to generate any tactical advantage through sabotage.

"I've still got nothing with my omni-tool. I can't break into their network," Shepard reported. She looked at Liara, "Any ideas?"

"Through Athame I know where we must go," her face was set, she didn't even flinch at the mention of the name of the monster that had violated her, "and I doubt that there is any force on this station that could stop us, even if we cannot sabotage their computing systems. But it would be helpful to have access to the goa'uld computer systems; if for no other reason than to ensure they cannot escape with our daughter before we can get there."

"True, but I'm not having any luck with my omni." Victora waved her orange holography-encased arm in frustration.

"Hey," Jack spoke up, "how come Ba'al didn't walk off with your omni-tool when he grabbed your helmet? He seemed pretty jazzed up about the tech, and your omni-tool is probably more high tech-y than the helmet."
"High tech-y?" Daniel asked narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Jack's dubious use of the English language.

Still, the group looked at each other, it was a fair point. Jack looked pleased with himself. He had been getting a bit antsy at being 'all dressed up with nowhere to go', while Victoria and Liara sorted out the hacking situation.

"He was probably distracted," Liara spoke, "and I ensured Athame did not remind him."

Jack's eyebrows arched a good three centimeters at that, "Neat trick."

*An epiphany.* "Did Athame tell them about Glyph?" asked Shepard.

Liara smiled for the first time since they had rescued her, "Of course not, Shepard."

"What the hell is a Glyph?" asked Jack. He looked at Daniel, it sounded like the word *hieroglyph*, and that was his bailiwick. Daniel merely shrugged.

Ignoring Jack, Shepard thought a moment longer. She frowned, "I doubt my omni-tool has the range to reach your omni-tool directly. They'd be keeping your omni in the lab, right?"

"Yes," Liara said, "on both points. Without access to the station's internal communications network, it is unlikely you could be able to contact my omni-tool using point-to-point protocols from this distance." *Yeah, the shielding in the walls will just make that worse too,* thought Shepard. *Damned tinfoil bullshit.*

Jack and Daniel stood struck dumb by the techno-babble. They merely looked back and forth between the two lovers as they spoke, as if watching a volley in some sort of intellectual tennis match. Teal'c listened stoically as he kept his newly reacquired staff weapon trained on the door to the holding cell.

"Helmet," said Carter.

"What?" Shepard and Liara asked in unison.

"Your helmet has a fairly powerful transmitter and receiver, if I recall; just like the communications module in your armor. It's the backup for your armor's, right?" Carter pointed to an innocuous-looking pod inset into the back of her left shoulder pad. "I mean, you could talk to Normandy in orbit from the ground or from other ships when you were in the other place, right?"

Carter smiled as she continued, "I remember when Bill Lee and I were picking your equipment apart how multiply redundant the comm-system was. You could probably have the transmitter in your armor link to the one in your helmet, and use that as a bridge to Liara's omni-tool. So long as it's in range of the helmet on the other end, you're set."

Shepard and Liara looked at each other, each surprised the other had not thought of it first. Then they shared a knowing smile that was lost on Carter. *After all, Victoria wasn't the only one who found Carter's smile cute, especially when she was working on an engineering problem.* "Worth a try," Shepard piped up as Liara demurred; Carter arched an eyebrow wondering what unspoken interaction she had just missed. "Unfortunately," Victoria continued, "we don't know if my helmet will be anywhere near Liara's omni."

"Ba'al has a goa'uld underling named Nerus in his employ," Liara spoke. "He is very technically adept, and his laboratory is near the biology lab. He is examining my equipment there and it likely that Ba'al would have him examine the helmet as well. The two pieces of equipment may be close
enough to establish a connection."

"Plus," Jack piped up, "If they're fixing to jump ship, they might be bagging up all of their toys. Fair chance they're all be in the same bag of swag as we speak." He looked at Teal'c. "Do goa'uld collect swag?" O'Neill deployed the 'air quotes' and Teal'c merely arched his eyebrow in response.

Shepard smirked and held up her omni-tool to Liara, "Well, he's your assistant..."

"Which, since the goa'uld have not discovered it yet, I probably had Athame clandestinely program to only respond to your voice," she responded.

"You sneak," Shepard responded with a wink, "no wonder I fell in love with you." Shepard brought up her omni-tool and opened her communications protocols.

Nerus was getting nervous. Not only had he failed to crack the encryption on the blue beauty's computing device, but the entire space station was on the brink exploding under the weight of Lord Yu's attack. Lord Ba'al would, undoubtedly, soon abandon the station, and Nerus feared that he would be left behind for his failure to deliver any of the blue creature's technological secrets to him.

To make things worse, his benefactor Lord Ba'al had handed him another technological mystery; the amazing "N7" helmet. Nerus doubted that it contained nearly the amount of technology as the computing device, but it was still brimming with scientific secrets to unlock. If only he could unlock it!

He tended to eat when he was nervous, or all the time for that matter; and thus, he missed it when it when 'Murphy' came to visit the goa'uld for the penultimate time that day.

As a near-universal rule, the goa'uld were technological scavengers, stealing anything and everything they could from other races to further their overarching goal, neigh obsession, with galactic domination. It was what had made the goa'uld the dominant military power in the Milky Way. It was what prompted Ba'al to try to capture Liara and Shepard, at least originally with regard to Liara. It was what had kept Nerus busy the past several months tracking anomalous signals in the Stargate network, and the past several days pouring over this infernal computing device. Truly, it was what kept Nerus employed despite his, what were generally regarded as disgusting even for a goa'uld, eating habits and proclivities. But today it would also be their downfall, because it had prompted Lord Ba'al to greedily snatch up Commander Shepard's hardsuit helmet and leave it on Nerus' work bench; less than a meter away from Liara's omni-tool. And a meter was a pittance of a distance for the helmet's radio to transmit across.

The omni-tool, despite being an extremely powerful and high-end model was barely larger than the size of a pack of cigarettes. It also, more importantly to 'Murphy's' purposes, had no moving parts and no external indicator lights. Thus, Nerus didn't notice when the omni-tool established a link with Commander Shepard's omni-tool and booted up. To add icing to the cake – to say nothing of the icing on the donuts – he was so busy stuffing his face with frosted treats that he certainly didn't notice an 'incoming transmission' light inside the helmet briefly wink on, then off; since 'Murphy' was also never one to pass up a good pun. Or irony.

Shepard cleared her throat and spoke into her omni-tool, "Glyph, this is Shepard, respond; my location only."

A few seconds passed. Nothing happened. Shepard looked at Liara, and then at Carter; she felt
somewhat, embarrassed. "I swear, this never happens…"

Then, suddenly, her omni-tool lit up and a glowing white sphere expanded into view directly in front of her. SG-1 reacted instinctively and in unison, leveling their weapons at the holographic projection of the drone software, "Greetings, Commander Shepard."

"What the fuck is that?" asked Jack in a somewhat exasperated voice looking down the sights of his P90.

"Colonel," Liara said, "This is Glyph. It is a VI shell that helped me organize intelligence sources during the Reaper War." Liara looked at the drone with something approximating fondness. Liara's determined facial expression thawed momentarily, "Glyph, please say hello to Colonel Jack O'Neill."

Glyph merely flashed red in response; concentric spheres counter rotating, but otherwise unmoving. Shepard narrowed her eyes, glanced at Liara, and cracked a grin. "Glyph, I re-authorize you to interact with and follow orders issued by Doctor Liara T'soni."

Glyph returned to its normal color, and turned to regard Liara, "Greetings Doctor T'soni. Welcome back, it is good to see you unharmed."

"It almost sounds like he missed you," Shepard said as she tapped out a few commands on her omni-tool. A secondary interface appeared on Liara's hand. Shepard had just programmed the holo-projector in her omni-tool to emit an interface around the accelerometers implanted in Liara's right hand. If she didn't stray too far away from Shepard, she ought to be able to control her own omni through the remote link. Or at least Shepard hoped, she wasn't nearly the tech weenie that Tali was. "Do your thing, Shadow Broker." Then she turned to the balance of SG-1, "Let's keep the whole Glyph thing to ourselves, okay?" She winked conspiratorially, the action coupled with her once again murderous facial expression obviously making SG-1 uncomfortable, "I'll make it worth your while."

"I think I liked HAL9000 better," Jack responded, eliciting an arched eyebrow from Teal'c. Interestingly enough, the Jaffa had rather enjoyed '2001: A Space Odyssey'. Glyph looked O'Neill up and down in what Shepard could have sworn was indignation. "But if you say so," Jack continued.

"Glyph," Liara spoke, trying to get the group back on track, "Can you access the space station's computer system?"

"One moment, Doctor T'soni," the VI responded. It hovered in place, concentric spheres rotating, "I have access to the station's internal network, though most functions are compartmentalized on separate encrypted subnets."

"Can you access the computers or systems in the biology lab?" Liara asked in a hurried tone.

"Negative, Doctor T'soni. That system is physically separated from the networks I have access to."

Liara growled in frustration. Shepard looked at her mate with concern and mounting fury that even with Glyph's help they seemed so impotent to save their daughter. She plumbed the depths of her infiltration and sabotage training from N7 School for ideas.

"Very well," Commander Shepard was speaking now; not rage, not vengeance, not hatred, not just Viking Vikki. This was Victoria, the N7-trained Commander of the Alliance Navy; a starship captain, a leader of men and women. She spoke with cool confidence. She had a plan. "Keep trying to access the bio-lab, and inform us the moment you do gain access." Glyph bobbed once in assent.
"In the meantime; can you access station schematics, communications protocols, damage control, life support and gravity, and lighting?"

Glyph hovered for a moment. "Yes Commander, I have broken encryption on those systems."

"Excellent. Plot us least time routes to where our equipment is being stored and the biology laboratory, then upload them to my omni-tool. Also, prepare to seal all hatches and bulkheads parallel to that route and shut down life support, gravity, and lighting in those areas and decompress them if possible. When I command we're going to secure our path of advance and asphyxiate any Jaffa who might try to intercept us." She turned to look at SG-1, "Then we'll cut station-wide communications so what Jaffa remain won't be able to call ahead and warn their comrades we're coming and slaughtering everything that gets in our way."

She grinned, and, as one, SG-1 gulped.

The expanded SG-1 moved stealthily through Lord Ba'al's space station. It wasn't difficult. What with the thudding explosions and flickering lights, Jack doubted very much that anyone had even noticed that the strange glowing piñata named 'Glyph' had locked down and decompressed a large swath of the station. The damage control parties racing to and fro probably thought it was just another symptom of the general mayhem that had befallen them this trying day, he imagined.

Surprisingly enough, Jack thought with no small amount of disappointment, there hadn't yet been a call to 'prepare to repel boarders'. **Every other god damn alarm in this space station is going off.** Even if they had stumbled across anyone who wasn't completely absorbed in their own world at the one door that was too badly damaged for Glyph to seal, Jack doubted that they would have necessarily noticed his team lurking along the sides of the corridors; and **that suited him just fine.** Eventually, however, the path that Shepard's omni-tool indicated brought them out onto one of the massive space station's main thoroughfares; and the inevitable encounter with Ba'al's Jaffa had arrived.

Based on previous experience, O'Neill doubted that, short of them venting the compartment to space, the Jaffa could muster anything that would even slow Shepard and Liara down. However, some sort of 'Laser Zeppelin at the Planetarium' light-show coming from one of the biotics would be non-conducive to stealth, even with the radio blackout, so he took the lead. Liara, seemingly fully recovered yet more agitated than O'Neil had ever seen her, was in the middle of the pack, and Shepard was tail-end-Charlie. Coming up to a four-way intersection, Jack motioned to the team to come to a halt as he flattened against a gilded wall panel and reached into his breast pocket for a periscope. A quick, practiced movement and he had a good view around the corner. He didn't like what he saw.

Jack turned around to face the team as he shoved the periscope back into his jacket, "Listen up," he whispered, "on me!" He looked over SG-1 to make sure he had their attention and spoke, "Corridor continues for about twenty meters and opens into what Glyph says is the tech lab. Four Jaffa," he held up four fingers to drive his point home, "standing guard at the end of the corridor, looks like another four," he pumped his four fingers again, "in the anteroom itself."

Shepard brought up her omni-tool and tapped out a few commands. A ghosted diagram of the corridor showing glowing dots representing the approximate locations of the Jaffa overlaid on Glyph's route appeared. **Well, I could have done that, if I just had one of those damned omni-tools,** Jack thought with no small annoyance. He chastised himself; this was not the first time he'd wished in vain that he had something even approaching the level of technology of Shepard and Liara's omni-tools. **Let it go, Jack, let it go; maybe we'll get a new xbox or something soon.**
"Image is fuzzy, Colonel," Shepard said in an oddly detached, almost clinical, voice, "surveillance equipment in this section must be damaged, and the scanner can't quite make out what's in the lab, even from this distance. But I confirm your count, eight hostiles."

"Twenty meters is a lot of hallway, sir," Carter noted grimly.

"Yeah, and if there are any more of Ba'al's guards in the lab, they're going to hear us fighting these Jaffa and come out to help," added Daniel.

"True," opined Carter, "our weapons aren't exactly quiet, sir. Even if we had suppressors for the P90's they still make quite the racket." That was something of a disappointment for Samantha when she had joined the military, learning that 'silencer' was bit of a misnomer. Attaching a suppressor to a firearm didn't make it silent by any stretch of the imagination; it merely turned something that was obscenely loud into something that was just very loud.

"Then we must eliminate these guards as quickly as possible," Teal'c observed, unnecessarily. Still, once it was said a deathly silence fell over the group. Six pairs of eyes traded looks. A blue within blue pair narrowed in determination.

"Follow my lead," Liara said calmly as she checked the magazine of her FN Five Seven. "I will clear the way. You will know when it is time to break cover and join me." Without a second word or glance she toggled the pistol's safety into the FIRE position with her index finger and slipped it into the belt of her gown at the small of her back. The black plastic blended in well with the dark fabric.

The Asari stood and brought herself to her full height, gently folding her hands across her stomach below her breasts. Liara composed herself with a breath and her posture morphed from the slightly shy and introverted scientist that SG-1 all were familiar with, to one that only Shepard had seen before. Liara T'soni, an Asari Matron well before her time, assumed the poise and bearing of one of the most powerful Matriarchs in recent memory. With the goa'uld-supplied gown and headdress the façade was total and complete, Liara was channeling Benezia.

Chin held high in confident nobility, Liara T'soni / Matriarch Benezia / Athame, Matron-cum-Matriarch-cum-goddess, stepped around the corner and strode regally and confidently towards Ba'al's Jaffa guards. Shepard could do nothing but gape. "Don't sweat it, Shepard," Jack said with much more mirth than Shepard thought appropriate. "I've done this before," he winked, "they fall for it every time."

Shepard looked at Colonel O'Neill incredulously. Under normal circumstances she liked, even welcomed Jack's irreverent attitude, but she couldn't fathom how this was funny; especially with Liara's life on the line. We just rescued her and she's walking right back into the fray, and Jack's laughing?

He seemed to notice her consternation and motioned for her to calm down. Then he waved her up to his position and handed her his periscope. She eased herself up to the wall, desperately trying not to make a clunking noise against it with her armor, and put her eye to the eye piece. Then she slowly shifted so the objective lens just peeked around the corner.

Liara was half way to the Jaffa, still walking calmly, head held high in pride and confidence. The Jaffa had noticed her, turning to face her, though none had yet made a threatening move or pointed their weapons at her, why would they, she was their goddess so far as they knew. Shepard's heart pounded in her chest. Even with her biotics, she was outnumbered eight-to-one, and that dinky, mostly-plastic pistol was all she had; secured at the small of her back when he hands were folded in front of her.
O'Neill squeezed Shepard's shoulder. She just barely felt it through the armored pauldron. "I know you're upset," he said quietly. "I know you're thinking that you just got her back and she's going right back into the fray. I know that you're worried you're going to lose her."

Shepard pulled her eye back from the eyepiece, a minor, incredulous, fury building. But before she could snap at the Colonel, he continued, "And now you're pissed off at me prying into your personal life again. Well, blow me for caring; here comes a pep talk." He took a breath, "I get it. You're pissed off because you think that, somehow, your concern for her is selling her capabilities short, because you actually know what she's capable of. Well," she patted her armor, "suck it up princess, because she wouldn't be doing this if she didn't trust in you as well. Because you're covering her ass; her, perfect, round, blue ass." Shepard arched her eyebrow a good three centimeters. "You know what? We've all got her back; yours too. You're one of us now, like it or not. Plus, we're in the home stretch; it'll all be over soon."

Shepard pondered for a minute. What the fuck? Especially that last choice of words. "Colonel, that has to be the worst pep talk I've ever heard. Seriously," she hazarded a glance at him, "I'm glad you're a good shot, since you'll never make it as an actor." Christ, she thought, read some fucking Shakespeare. She stopped abruptly; Liara had made contact with the Jaffa.

Liara T'soni felt an unearthly calm. The day had been a cascading experience of terror and torture, yet now she was at peace. Her kidnapping didn't matter. The violation of her body and theft of her daughter didn't matter. The raping of her mind at the hands of the goa'uld which had the gall to call itself Athame, goddess of love and wisdom to her people, didn't matter. The fact that she had lured her beloved Victoria and her comrades in SG-1 into an ambush and capture didn't matter. The space station which was, quite literally, coming apart at the seams around her didn't matter. Thus, by comparison, the octet of Jaffa she approached were below her notice.

Those things did not matter to Liara T'soni, because she was on the offensive now. This was where things stopped happening to her, and where she started making things happen. She smiled inwardly. She was in control. She had the power. She was a goddess, so far as those Jaffa were concerned, even more so now that she was free of that parasite; they would never see it coming. Shock, surprise, and violence of action, she remembered one of the principles Shepard told her she had been taught in N7 School. The first of the Jaffa noticed her. He summoned the attention of his comrades. They observed her approach in respectful silence, bracing to attention, making no threatening moves. Why would they?

Just a few more meters, she thought. Liara strode confidently forward, every inch the goddess the Jaffa expected. In her inner self, however, she felt oddly in touch with her late mother the Matriarch Benezia. The human slave seamstresses had done a phenomenal job recreating her trademark gown, and wearing it filled her with a warm nostalgia. She drew such strength from it. Just as she had drawn strength from the memory of her mother while fighting Athame in that first strange mental plane; and how she hadn't needed it in her final confrontation. She smirked internally at how Shepard had interacted with ersatz-Benezia, and then quietly lamented that she had never had a chance to know her beloved. But those were thoughts for another time, for she had arrived among the Jaffa; it was time to act.

She looked at them in a regally detached sort of way. Then, without warning, and in the deepest voice she could muster, barked, "Kree, Jaffa! Bow before your goddess!"

They all seemed taken aback somewhat by the fact that Liara was not using the deep, warbling 'goa'uld voice', but her facial expression and demeanor brooked no disobedience. In unison they all dropped to a knee and bowed their heads, their staff weapons uniformly lowered to the ground at
their sides. "By your command, Mistress," said the Jaffa who was apparently the commander of this squad.

"That is better," Liara responded in a condescendingly disinterested tone. "Now, I seek my Lord Ba'al. Is he still in the biology laboratory?"

"Yes, Mistress," said the Jaffa, still staring at the floor.

"Excellent." Liara stepped forward towards the center of the anteroom. A few paces later and she was in approximately the center of the room, and surrounded by the Jaffa.

The Jaffa squad leader was young, dedicated, and as devout in his worship to his gods as he was skilled in his service to them as a soldier. As such, he would stand guard at this posting until relieved, despite the fact that it sounded as if the space station might explode at any moment. Dying in the service of his god would truly be an honor and a reward in and of itself.

As it was, he considered himself an exceptionally lucky Jaffa. Not only had he been given the honor of being posted to his god's own space station command center, but he had been able to lay his eyes on his Lord Ba'al's new consort, the Goddess Athame! And such a goddess she was! Granted, he thought her voice was a bit odd for a goa'uld, but she was so different and splendid that who was to say what else she might do? And besides, what does it matter what her voice sounds like? She was speaking to me!

Athame walked past him towards the lab, and, despite himself, he turned his head to hazard just one more look, just a peek, at the magnificent blue goddess. A violation of decorum, of course, but… His thoughts trailed off when he noticed something that didn't quite make sense. There was something tucked into her belt at the small of her back. It looked like black plastic in the shape of a weapon; a tau'ri pistol!

He was about to call his Jaffa brothers to arms when his whole world flashed a blinding blue-white.

Jack wasn't kidding, was all that Shepard could think. Liara had strolled right up to those Jaffa clowns, did the whole 'Jaffa kree' thing, and had them on their knees. God, I wish that worked on husks. A few more steps and she was amongst the Jaffa and very nearly out of sight, and Shepard's heart was pounding again. Then Shepard saw something she hadn't seen since she had helped Aria T'loak retake Omega.

Liara flashed a brilliant Cherenkov blue, threw her arms wide with a grunt, and a hemisphere of biotics expanded from her body. The Jaffa, still on their knees, were lifted from where they were and thrown bodily in all directions. Most flew into walls, one crashed loudly into the heavy doors leading to the technology laboratory, and yet another flew half way down the corridor that Liara had departed down.

That was obviously 'the signal'.

"Go go go!" Shepard shouted. She was moving without turning to check if the balance of SG-1 was in trail, or if Jack had even caught the periscope that she'd thrown at him. Victoria came to her feet and started sprinting down the corridor, Cerberus-enhanced musculature accelerating her body at Olympian speed. The Jaffa coming her way landed hard on his side and continued to slide towards her. Shepard didn't bother drawing a weapon, or even slowing down. Instead she activated her omni-blade. It flashed out savagely and she angled it towards the Jaffa's shoulder. The glowing-hot micro-manufactured blade caught the Jaffa dead-center on his left collar bone. She used her forward
momentum, and his opposing momentum, to drive to blade further down the length of his body. A subtle angling of her wrist and she didn't simply cleave off the Jaffa's arm but rather drove the blade deeper, running down his rib cage, riding the edge of his sternum, and then down into his abdomen. Finally, still gaining speed in her sprint to Liara's aide, the omni-blade ground through his Sacroiliac joint and emerged from the Jaffa's groin. She never even looked back at her handy work, or SG-1 splashing its way through the veritable lake of blood expanding from the raggedly bisected Jaffa.

Nerus was at his wit's end. He had failed to unlock the secrets of the computing device. Similarly, he had failed determine what secrets, if any, the "N7" helmet might offer his lord. His engineering tools seemed to be unable to even physically penetrate the casings to access the small amounts of the 'special material' inside. Ba'al would definitely be displeased with him to say the least. Not to mention that odd computing glitch in the stations command system that he'd been grappling with over the past several days. And, to top it all off, he was out of donuts!

The disgusting goa'uld technician ground his teeth, how could this day get any worse?

A loud thud sounded against the door to the anteroom. Nerus' attention quickly snapped away from the empty pastry plate and towards the gilded doors. What is that? The floor thudded against beneath his feet drawing his attention down. This noise was more distant, obviously another hit from Lord Yu's fleet. When is Ba'al going to order the evacuation and allow me to leave? Nerus was growing quite anxious, then he wondered for a moment if perhaps the door shuddering was related to Yu's fleet as well.

The door banged again, somehow louder, and he yelped in fear; images of explosive decompressions and writhing in agony as he asphyxiated in the cold of space raced through his mind. He had to get out of this room.

The floor thudded again. He'd had enough; the fear of a gruesome death as the result of Yu's attacking ships apparently outweighed the fear of a gruesome death at the hands of Lord Ba'al. He stood, turned, and waddled as quickly as his short legs could carry his over-ample body towards the biology lab. He knew his lord and Nirrti was there. If he only stayed close to Ba'al, Nerus thought, he would be less likely to be forgotten and left behind.

He didn't even think to turn back and gather up the aliens' technology to take with him, and that computer glitch was fully forgotten before he was half way across the room.

Liara T'soni was rage. Liara T'soni was fury. Liara T'soni was biotic violence made flesh. She was the whirlwind. Even had the Jaffa who'd noticed her Five Seven pistol fully understood what he'd seen, and even had he been able to raise the alarm to his brothers, it wouldn't have made any difference in the world.

Liara T’soni was the pureblooded daughter of one of the most powerful Asari Matriarch's in recent memory; and her father wasn't any slouch of a Matriarch either. Liara's mother had seen that her only daughter had been trained in biotics and the martial arts from a very young age, even by human standards; to the point that, in the other place, had she taken the time to focus and hone her skills she would probably have been one of the more powerful biotics in all of the Republics. Plus, she was a 'quarter Krogan'.

The dark energy flowed through her body with a euphoria bordering on the orgasmic. A far off, intellectual portion of Liara's mind cataloged that fact. She wondered if it was a function of finally being on the offensive, killing everyone standing between her and her daughter; now less than 50 meters from her. Or, could it possibly be the minute amounts of naquadah now coursing through her
body, a *parting gift* from *Athame*? She would have to ask Major Carter about that, but that was a discussion for another time.

She was too busy *enjoying herself*, enjoying herself *tearing these Jaffa apart!*

The first strike had caught them all completely by surprise. The rapidly expanding biotic bubble, something she'd seen through **the bond** that Aria had done on Omega, had thrown them all into the walls, stunning them. In one unlucky Jaffa's case, he'd been thrown clear down the hallway into the tender mercies of Victoria as she came rushing to her aid.

One of the Jaffa, somehow still coherent enough to know up from down, began levering himself up from the floor. Liara wreathed her hand in a blue biotic glow. She reached out. The Jaffa glowed and she pulled him towards her. The Jaffa floated helplessly half a meter from the floor towards his fate, absolute terror clear on his face. Liara's smile bore teeth and the Jaffa began to scream; his cry was cut short.

A blue blur from Liara's peripheral field of view, a thunderclap sonic boom, and a blazing flash of fire-red hair heralded her mate's arrival. Liara knew her wife's tactics and proficiencies too well, now it was time for **team play**. She impacted the helpless Jaffa like a cue ball on a break. As they were both enveloped in mass effect fields, the collision was nearly perfectly elastic, and the Jaffa zoomed away to literally splatter across the laboratory door.

Carter's boots pounded down the corridor with sickeningly wet slapping noises. The Jaffa that Shepard had **butchered** had left an unavoidable and expanding lake of blood, and SG-1 were all leaving bloody boot prints as they rushed to aid Liara and Shepard. Samantha suddenly realized she could hear her footfalls because of how quietly Liara and Shepard were subduing of the Jaffa guards. **Well, quiet is a relative term**, Carter reflected, **no gunfire had been exchanged, at least.**

As she came upon the anteroom, Carter witnessed something she'd never seen before, and may never see again. The two biotics were locked in what was, for lack of a better word, an elaborate dance. Bodies moved in unison, arms swept about in graceful arcs, Cherenkov blue ribbons of biotic energy rippled over and between them. It was **beautiful**. Yet for all of its elegance, it was a calm in a storm of carnage, for whatever it was that Liara and Shepard were doing with their biotic abilities was playing absolute havoc with the Jaffa. Chain mail clad bodies flew across and whirled about the room, tumbling end over end, sometimes crashing into each other violently. Still other times the Jaffa would careen wildly into a bulkhead or into the door to the laboratory.

As the **dance** went on and on, the Jaffa became increasingly mangled. Bones broke, limbs hung at awkward angles. Internal organs crushed, lacerated, or ruptured, blood oozed from their eyes, noses, mouths, ears, or stained the seats of their trousers. One Jaffa crashed into the ceiling and flopped back onto the floor, neatly folded backwards on himself. Yet another Jaffa was **inserted** head-first halfway through a wall, his buttocks and legs dangled helplessly and **lifelessly** at about shoulder height. Through it all, though, Liara and Shepard displayed serene, nearly beatific facial expressions. It was almost as if they had found some meditative peace in their violence; some release, some **joy.**

She's so beautiful.

Samantha Carter, a combat veteran and no stranger to death and carnage herself, shivered at the thought.

Nirrti looked up as the disgusting, tech-minded goa'uld Nerus waddled out of his laboratory into her domain. The door locked behind him. It wasn't bad enough that she had Ba'al hovering over her
shoulder, but now she had to deal with this? Between her benefactor's constant distracting presence, Athame's obviously pending treachery, wherever she was, and Lord Yu's forces attempting to shoot the space station out from underneath her it was a miracle that she was able to accomplish any scientific work. It was neigh impossible for her to plot her escape, that was for sure!

The floor thudded violently beneath her feet. She stopped her work just long enough to hazard a glance to Ba'al. He held his head high in feigned indifference. Nirrti turned back to her instruments knowing that this was an act, he must be terrified. Truly, his First Prime had just lost radio contact with all of his forces, and had been reduced to sending runners about to gather damage and status reports. It would only be a matter of time before the order to evacuate was given, if it weren't already too late.

She was ready. Nirrti had already bundled up all of her scientific data and notes to the secure server in the biology lab. All she had to do was transfer them to the mobile unit and pull the memory core, when Ba'al eventually gave the order. Any sooner would just invite his wrath as a sign of disrespect, and under the current stressful conditions even Ba'al might lose his cool and lash out at her. Of course, none of the data on the memory core would matter if/when her hacking device finally penetrated the computing system. It would copy the data to her hacking unit and then upload a time-delayed logic-bomb to the core. Ba'al would think that she'd upheld her part of her bargain, but he, or more likely that disgusting Nerus, would only discover corrupted code; hopefully long after she had escaped. Too bad, she thought, that discovery would probably not end well for Nerus.

Securing the embryo was almost as straight forward as securing the memory core, though the sequence of removing it from its cryogenic support equipment would take a few minutes longer than simply unplugging it. A fairly strict sequence of commands needed to be input to ensure a safe transfer. She was still a bit unclear on the details of how she would abscond with that item, however.

Alas, it seemed unlikely that they'd be able to salvage the ancient equipment itself in all of this chaos, but that wouldn't be such a terrible loss; for her. In fact, she somewhat looked forward to being the only goa'uld with access to such technology after this space station was destroyed. It was only proper, though, she thought. After all, she was the only goa'uld qualified to use the technology to its fullest anyway.

A somewhat harried Jaffa jogged into the laboratory, bowed, and reported to his First Prime. The aged Jaffa nodded solemnly, and dismissed his subordinate. He then fell to a knee and bowed deeply to his Lord and spoke, "My Lord, I report."

Ba'al's jaw clenched nearly imperceptibly, but he nodded.

"I crave your forgiveness my Lord, but Lord Yu's forces will soon wipe out the last of your space-based forces. They do not yet appear to be sending boarders, but all avenues of escape will soon be cut off. You must evacuate your person from this space station immediately."

Ba'al's jaw clenched tighter in obvious fury. Nirrti's eyes widened. Then she felt a subtle buzzing from one of the pockets of her gown, the hacking device! Her eyes widened ever so slightly more.

"And have you located Athame?" Ba'al asked, with what appeared to be a mixture of frustration and genuine concern on his face. Nirrti doubted he cared for Athame as an individual, but rather as an asset. Well,assets, she corrected herself with disgust.

"No my Lord, all of the runners I have sent to the detention area have either returned to report their paths blocked by sealed and depressurized compartments, or not returned at all." The First Prime shrunk slightly at Ba'al's resulting scowl.
Ba'al recomposed, "Very well, Jaffa. Kree! Obey your god; you will escort us to my shuttle." He looked to a pair of other Jaffa, members of his 'royal guard', "You and you," he pointed, "will assist Nirrti and Nerus in unloading the cryogenic container first. Your goddess Nirrti will instruct you." He motioned to his fellow goa'uld and then to the cryogenic storage unit containing the Asari embryo. The Jaffa bowed deeply and sprang into action. Ba'al turned to Nirrti, "Download your data, and begin the extraction sequence."

"With pleasure," Nirrti said with a smile, "Lord Ba'al."

Nirrti's delicate, intricately henna-tattooed hands reached out for the keyboard.

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The goa'uld, as a rule, were betrayers by nature. Given the opportunity, even the most seemingly subservient goa'uld would leap at the opportunity to grasp more power. Granted, not every goa'uld could, or ever would, rise to the rank of System Lord; but most tried. Even those who had otherwise cushy jobs in the service of more powerful goa'uld had 'betray the boss' on their 'to do' list.

One of the primary reasons there wasn't more turnover amongst the goa'uld of true System Lord rank, however, was that this overarching drive to betray and seize power tended to cloud judgment. Many goa'uld went off 'halfcocked', attempting to betray their betters without fully thinking the tactical or strategic situation through. They died when they were inevitably crushed by their opposition; usually taking thousands of hapless Jaffa and human slaves with them.

Nirrti's drive to betray was doubly true. Nirrti wasn't a plucky up-and-coming goa'uld, trying to gain that first tenuous hold of an empire. No, she was a System Lord in her own right, or at least she was until she was unjustly ousted from power by her peers. She was on a mission to reclaim what was hers and to resume the hok'tar research which would inevitably and rightfully give her dominance over all System Lords. Where most goa'uld bent on betrayal failed for lack of experience, however, Nirrti had no such handicap. She was a System Lord for untold centuries and supremely confident in her abilities.

Thus, that is why she was completely blindsided when 'Murphy' made his last appearance to spoil goa'uld efforts for the day; taking advantage of Nirrti's plan to turn on Ba'al, and her hubris to think that she knew what she was doing.

"Doctor T'soni," Glyph piped up suddenly, "I have detected another hacking attempt on the biology laboratory computer system."

Six pairs of eyes widened in surprise. Upon entering the technology laboratory and reclaiming Shepard and Liara's equipment, the team had been stymied by a secure set of doors leading to the biology lab. They appeared to be operated on the same isolated computer system as the lab itself. Shepard and Liara were preparing to use their biotics to blast through the door, but they were dubious as to their chances.

"Elaborate," Liara commanded.

"A local device, Doctor, it is in the biology laboratory itself," Glyph replied. "I am recording an increased rate of data transmission and broadcast strength. It was not powerful enough for your omni-tool's scanner to detect until now."

"Save the recriminations," snapped an obviously frustrated Shepard, "can you piggy-back that hack into the biology lab's computer system?"
The VI shell's projection seemed to regard the Commander for a moment, almost as if it were pondering what 'piggy-back' could possibly mean. Then it replied, "I believe so, Commander. Would you like me to use this opportunity to penetrate the biology laboratory's computing system?"

"For fuck's sake! Yes!" God, Shepard thought, I fucking hate this thing sometimes; goddamned space hamster was smarter than this.

"Working," Glyph bobbed up and down once. A seeming eternity passed. "I have access."

"Report," commanded Liara.

"The laboratory systems are self-contained but now under my control. I can open these doors, but I will need to reroute power around damaged systems."

"Can you seal the exits to the lab? Lock down the goa'uld's paths of escape?" asked Shepard.

"Negative, Commander," Glyph responded, "Those sections of the station are too badly disrupted from damage to the hangar bays. I cannot lock down all possible avenues of escape." Murphy's Law, Shepard thought, guess I was a little too overzealous with my distraction. Shit, bastards better not get away because of something I did.

"Fine, we'll just have to kill these fuckers before they can get away. Get these doors open!"

"In progress," Glyph bobbed again, "I am detecting a large amount of data being collated for download from the laboratory's computing system to removable media. I am also detecting the release sequencing of a cryogenics unit. Are these items of interest to you?"

Liara spoke quickly but clearly, "Glyph, delete all of the data you can, and stop the release sequence on the cryogenics unit. Prevent any attempts to restart it. Is that clear?"

"Yes Doctor T'soni."

It's gone! It's all gone!

All of the data, all of it, was missing from the laboratory's computing system. One moment it was there, prepping for download, the next it was gone! And my hacking device hasn't confirmed that it has successfully made a copy!

Nirrti, renegade goa'uld System Lord, was running out of options. Her initial plan of hacking into the space station's computer network, securing transport, and abscending with the Asari embryo and all of her research data after purging the local copies was failing apart. Granted, she had hacked into the space station's systems - detected only recently as a glitch by Nerus, but so had someone else! Some consolation! She was beyond seething, not just at the fact that someone else had been able to penetrate Lord Ba'al's computer system before, or at least at the same time as she had, but that they had also deleted all of her research on the Asari adult and the embryo. She had to assume that her hacking device had failed to make a copy, too! And I can't just take it out of my pocket and check standing in front of Ba'al like this, she thought.

Fortunately, the data on the adult could be replaced, if that prima donna Athame ever deigned to grace them with her presence again, but the embryo was proving to be another story entirely.

Whoever had hacked the records had also penetrated the control unit of the cryogenic storage equipment, and she was having a devil of a time opening it. Though that wretchedly disgusting Nerus was trying to help, even he couldn't figure it out; and through it all he was repeatedly and
maddeningly complimenting whoever it was who had hacked it on their skill. *All while eating a damn sandwich he's pulled from his robes!* Nirrti narrowed her heavily mascaraed eyes. If there was one thing she agreed wholeheartedly with Ba'al on, and there were only a few, it was that if he weren't so competent, Nerus should have died an excruciating death many years ago.

The floor thudded again beneath her feet. Lord Yu's fleet was still attacking, that was for sure, though it was increasingly difficult to differentiate between the explosions from actual impacts and from internal detonations. This space station was a loss, and the sooner they got off of it the better. Unfortunately, her original plan to forge deployment orders for an al'kesh seemed unlikely to work. She would need to make other arrangements; so, her eyes alighted on Ba'al's First Prime.

Ba'al's First Prime was under a suspended sentence of death for his failure to capture the *Flame Haired Banshee*, the loss of his attacking forces, including his own son to an atomic booby-trap, and the soon-to-be loss of this space station. Yet, for all that, he was still strong, proud, and *loyal* to his lord. *That could be hard to crack,* she thought, narrowing her eyes. For a moment she considered seduction. It was not unheard of, though exceptionally rare for a System Lord to take her First Prime to her bed; or, even more rarely, *his* bed. The Jaffa considered it an extreme, nigh-mystical honor. Somehow, though, Nirrti didn't think that would work in this case. This First Prime's loyalty, or at least his *continued* loyalty, was stemming from something else. Something that mere sex, even with a host as attractive as her own, wouldn't crack. *Perhaps if he were younger,* she mused, *though he does seem the virile sort.* She bit her lower lip in thought and returned her attention to the cryogenic unit. If push came to shove, she could probably hitch a ride with Ba'al, but *only* if her biological expertise were still of relevance. *Which meant she needed to get this unit open!*

"I have successfully deleted all copies of the data Doctor T'soni, but I am not able to fully deny access to the cryogenics unit. They will likely have it open before I can reroute power to the laboratory door," Glyph reported.

"Is there anything else you can do to slow them down?" asked Shepard.

"Nothing that would not be irreversible, Commander," the VI shell responded.

"Glyph," Liara said coldly, and with only a second's reflection, "Fry the controls on the cryogenics unit, raise the biohazard shield, and destroy the control unit for that as well. Then overload Nirrti's hacking tool the moment you have opened this door."

Shepard turned to Liara, all the color going from her face. Samantha's jaw dropped. Daniel looked horrified, and Jack's stomach lurched at the implication. Liara looked back at her wife, her jaw set. *It was the only way.*

"Executing now, Doctor T'soni."

Nirrti and Nerus jumped back in unison as the control panel on the cryogenic containment unit erupted in a hail of sparks and the emergency bio-containment field activated. Someone had just locked down the embryo, and she *certainly* wasn't going to be able to get it out now.

Lord Ba'al, goa'uld System Lord, ground his teeth in frustration. Everything was falling apart, and it was all that red haired bitch's fault; he just *knew* it! The *Banshee* appears to rescue her mate at exactly the same moment that half of his glider bays explode. Then Lord Yu of all people shows up and starts blasting the shit out of his space station, and *then* all of his computer systems freeze up, locking down any likelihood of him and Nirrti salvaging either the data or, more importantly, the
blue beauty's embryonic daughter. On top of all of that, *Athame* was nowhere to be seen. Ba'al supposed that Nirrti might be behind some of it, but he doubted it. Truly, he fully expected that she would betray him, if she hadn't started the process already; but he doubted *this* was *her* doing. No, this was the *Banshee*, with the help of that cursed SG-1.

The compartment ceiling thudded. He glanced at it momentarily before dismissing it as just another impact from Lord Yu's attack. They didn't have much time to affect their escape, of that he was sure. He sighed, it was time. Time to cut his losses. Time to move on. Time to set other plans in motion, to try other gambits; this one didn't pan out, but not all of them did. *Too bad*, he thought, *Athame was so beautiful.* Lord Ba'ál was about to order his First Prime to lead them to the glider bay when another sound drew him to the lab's far wall.

The door to Nirrti's biology lab opened on a whir of hidden motors and all eyes turned to look at the newcomers. *Athame* and the Flame Haired Banshee stood side by side, behind them stood SG-1. They were all armed. *Athame* and the Flame Haired Banshee had murder in their eyes; they glowed a painfully bright blue in unison. *Wait. No, Ba'al and Nirrti thought in unison, that's not Athame. Somehow Athame's dead. This is the original blue beauty, the Banshee's mate; they've come for their daughter.* Ba'al and Nirrti's jaws both dropped in response.

The goa'uld System Lords, finally, knew *true fear.*

Then Nirrti yelped in pain as her hacking device overloaded and exploded in her pocket, and she frantically swatted at her gown to put out the flames.

The door to the biology lab opened. Liara and Shepard both saw their quarry in the same instant and felt the same terrible rage. In unison they summoned their biotic energy and glowed a painfully bright Cherenkov blue.

Shepard's battle-honed senses assessed the space. Dominating one side of the compartment were several scientific instruments, one of which she imagined was the Ancient medical scanner. The one with the glowing containment shield undoubtedly imprisoned her daughter. Clear across the room stood a number of Jaffa, *the elite Praetorian Guard perhaps*, including what she imagined was Ba'al's First Prime. With them were those goa'uld fuckers themselves; Nirrti and Ba'al, plus some fat guy. Victoria actually bared her teeth and growled in anger at the sight. She dropped her helmet where she stood, and brought her M77 Paladin pistol up in roughly the same instant as the members of SG-1 leveled their weapons.

To Shepard's left, Liara similarly assessed the space. Much unlike her normal self she *didn't* take in all of the details. She only noticed *two* things; the disabled and locked-down cryogenics unit that contained her embryonic daughter and the goa'uld Nirrti who had taken, *stolen*, her from her own womb. Nothing else mattered; not the half dozen or so Jaffa, not Ba'al, not the fat slob-looking goa'uld, *nothing*. Ignoring her mate's shouts of caution she brought herself to her full height, braced her shoulders, and strode purposely forward. Liara showed *just* enough situational awareness to clear SG-1’s line of fire towards the Jaffa guards who were just now bringing their staff weapons to bear on the interlopers.

The lab erupted in a hail of weapons' fire.

However much Shepard or the other members of SG-1 wanted to kill the goa'uld's, the Jaffa guards were the principle threat, so they drew the first of the assault. Jack, Sam, and Daniel all expertly dropped to a knee, aimed at the same unfortunate Jaffa, and depressed the triggers on their P90's simultaneously. Dozens of 5.7 x 28mm light armor piercing bullets ripped through his silver chain mail armor, shredding his insides, and he crumpled to the floor.
One of the dead Jaffa's companions returned fire. The staff weapon blast barely missed Shepard's head as she took aim and drilled the Jaffa through the heart and spine with her M77. He went to the ground like a marionette whose lines had been cut. She shifted aim again and squeezed off another shot to a different Jaffa's head. The grain of sand-sized projectile reached out to the Jaffa at hypersonic speed and impacted with cataclysmic results. It also happened to arrive at the exact same moment as a staff weapon blast from Teal'c's own shot. The decapitated Jaffa actually stumbled for a moment, like a chicken whose head had been lopped off, neck and shoulders a mangled steaming ruin of charred pink flesh and bone, before tipping over. Shepard smirked in that his body must have also soaked up at least a dozen P90 bullets on the way down for good measure.

Two of the three remaining Jaffa shifted their aim to concentrate on Liara, still purposely striding towards Nirrti.

"Liara!" Shepard cried out in fear for her beloved. However elegant and sexy, she doubted the Benezia-gown would do shit to stop a staff weapon blast. The Jaffa opened fire, "Liara, no!"

Time seemed to slow down. For a fraction of a second, Shepard was convinced that, in her rage, Liara was walking to her death, oblivious to the threats around her. Shepard feared that she was going to stand there and watch the love of her life gunned down before her very eyes, not ten minutes after she had helped free her from the mental prison, mind-rape of a goa'uld symbiote.

The staff weapon blasts came in, impossibly slowly, and then there was a bright flash of blue light. Liara erected a small biotic bubble about herself. The first staff weapon blast impacted the bubble and, _ever so slightly_, changed trajectory as it diffracted through the gravitational shear of the biotic field. It arced up and away, harmlessly hitting the opposite wall near the ceiling. The second shot did the same, this time passing dangerously close to Liara's head before exiting the bubble; likewise doing no harm. Shepard's momentary crisis was over, _Liara was bulletproof!_ The Jaffa, confused, frustrated, and increasingly terrified, continued to fire with increasing frequency; yet not a single shot found Liara as she closed the distance.

When she was ten meters from the Jaffa Liara stopped, drew her FN Five Seven, and opened fire. The Five Seven held nineteen light-armor piercing cartridges in its internal plastic box magazine in addition to the one chambered; she expertly placed ten into each of the offending Jaffa's hearts. Even at ten meters, with a muzzle velocity of 650 meters per second and virtually no recoil, she landed all ten 'right in the ten-ring'. The slide locked back on an empty magazine and lightly smoking barrel. _Just like with her carnifex_, Shepard thought, _that's my girl!_

Finally, there was only one Jaffa, an aged man with a cape, standing between Liara, Shepard, and SG-1 and Nirrti and Ba'al.

The First Prime in the service of the goa'uld Ba''al knew he was a dead man.

He had failed his god utterly and repeatedly. Of course, like many aged Jaffa, he knew the true nature of the goa'uld; that they were not _actually_ gods, but that did not lessen the dishonor that had befallen him. The defense of his Lord's person, his domain, his ships, his troops, and his bases had been entrusted to him; he had proven unworthy of that trust. That was a dishonor any warrior could appreciate, regardless of what sort of master they served.

His failure was also a personal one. His own beloved son was dead. _Such a promising lad_. He was grooming him, with his lord's permission of course, to be his replacement as First Prime. When his time finally came, when his aged body was too old to accept a new prim'ta and he died, his son would carry on in the defense of his lord. But his son had died at the hands of the tau'ri; of _these_ tau'ri. Hubris on his part, that was the only explanation. _He_ should have anticipated the lengths to
which the tau'ri would have gone to avoid capture, not only of themselves, but of their materiel. He should have considered the use of an atomic fail deadly device; it was something he had once done himself after all. His son had become too audacious, and he had failed as his father and commander to teach him restraint.

He was only still alive now because he was still of use. When the current battle was over, he would be put to death; probably in a most excruciating way. Deservedly so, for what he had done, so far as he was concerned. What worried him more than his inevitable and painful demise was the fate of his sole surviving child, his daughter. Standard practice was to purge entire bloodlines when Jaffa fell into disgrace, and that was something he just could not accept. She was all that he had left of her mother, his beloved wife; ever since she had died in a raid by Jaffa loyal to a rival goa'uld many years ago.

Undoubtedly the renegade Nirrti was just waiting for an opportunity to ply him for his loyalty. The signs were there. Perhaps none of the other Jaffa had noticed, but he'd seen; the subtle hints of the inevitable betrayal, of the desire to escape from Lord Ba'al's hospitality. She would offer him his life, possibly even his daughter's, in return for her freedom and his loyalty. And perhaps something else if he was reading her body language correctly; the come hither looks of late. But there was only one thing he was interested in beyond his duty to his lord at this point, and that was his daughter's safety. There was only one who could guarantee that, despite what Nirrti would undoubtedly claim. Ba'al is many things, but he is not vindictive, the First Prime thought, he still may spare my daughter for my continued service even in the face of dishonor and death.

The aged Jaffa, dead man walking, disgraced First Prime in the service of the goa'uld System Lord Ba'al stepped forward and placed his mortal body between his god and the oncoming attackers in what he hoped wouldn't be a doomed attempt to save his daughter's life.

"Kree, Jaffa!" shouted Ba'al in what couldn't be anything but genuine fear as he reached down to activate his personal defense field. He took a step back as he looked into the eyes of the oncoming Asari. This was no longer Athame. That had just become painfully obvious. The Asari was no longer a resource to develop or an object to satisfy his urges; and she was no longer just beautiful, she was downright terrifying.

Ba'al didn't even notice Nerus and Nirrti slide in behind him to take advantage of his protective shield.

They all slowly backpedaled towards the door.

This is it, Victoria thought to herself, this is the rat-fuck son of a bitch who's been hunting us all these months, and that's the bitch who violated my beloved. They were both dead so far as Shepard was concerned, they just didn't know it yet. Plain old death was getting off too easy to Shepard's way of thinking, but, alas, she needed to make at least a few concessions to expediency. Victoria figured she'd pick up fatty for the spare.

The Jaffa guards had gone down like so many quail, but there was one left. Obviously Ba'al's First Prime from his golden forehead marking; she'd learned that much from speaking with Teal'c. He was placing himself squarely between his master and Shepard. Victoria's eyes narrowed. This was the man who commanded Ba'al's troops, turning the goa'uld's will into action. This was the man who had planned the ambushes and laid the traps for Liara and her. This was the man who had managed to get a bomb into The Mountain and nearly destroy it the day Liara arrived; the day Liara was shot! This was the man who had attacked the airbase, killed those Marines under Major Harper, and nearly killed the Major as well. And this was the man who had planned the ambush which had captured
Liara and delivered her into the clutches of these mind-raping, baby stealing *monsters*!

*Fucker's... Gonna... Pay!*

Yet, for a fleeting moment, Shepard couldn't help but admire him. He had to know he was about to die for a false god, but he was doing his duty anyway in the face of unwinnable odds. Truly, everything he had done to Shepard, her colleagues, and her friends had been; *doing his duty / just following orders*. *That* almost struck a chord with her; but only just, and only for a moment.

He leveled a staff weapon directly at her. *Well, if he wants to die for god and country*, she thought as she raised her M77 Paladin, *I better oblige him*.

Shepard centered the Jaffa's chest in her sight picture and squeezed the trigger.

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Ba'al's First Prime had the Flame Haired Banshee in his sights. Over a century of training ensured he wouldn't miss at such a short distance, especially since the Banshee was being so cooperative in standing perfectly still; her dazzling green eyes within a pale face, wreathed by fire-red hair provided him an excellent target. In fact, he was all but staring into them, down the barrel of the strange pistol she had so expertly used against his hand-picked royal guard not ten seconds ago.

His trigger finger had begun to depress the staff weapon's firing stud when he had an epiphany. *This woman, just like he, only wanted to save her daughter*. *That* much he had overheard from the many conversations between Lord Ba'al and Nirrti.

*She's here to save her daughter. How is that any different than me at this point?*

He mulled that thought over in the milliseconds it took before he fully depressed the firing stud. *No!* At the last possible second he shifted his aim a millimeter to the side. He would not begrudge a fellow warrior what he himself was trying to accomplish. Besides, Ba'al would never know he missed on purpose. *Nor would it probably matter anyway. Cultured or not, thoughtful towards his more loyal subordinates or not, he was still a goa'uld*, he thought sadly.

*His daughter was probably already lost, why should theirs be too?*

Shepard and the Jaffa fired at the same time. The M77's projectile crossed the distance at nearly two kilometers per second; for all intents and purposes, instantly. The incoming staff weapon blast took a figurative eternity to fly the same distance by comparison. Shepard's shot flew true, impacting the First Prime square in the chest, effortlessly penetrating his armor and sternum, deflecting slightly, but still piercing his heart before exiting his body by shattering through his left scapula. A fraction of a second later the Jaffa's shot missed Shepard by less than a millimeter. Unprotected by her helmet, which lay at the entrance to the lab where she had dropped it, the heat of the blast singed and curled some of the fiery-red locks that had become her namesake amongst the Jaffa. The acrid smell of burning hair flared her nostrils as burn-blisters welled up on her left ear. The glowing projectile sailed on and impacted the far wall harmlessly. It missed.

*It missed!*

Victoria was too busy to ponder how such an experienced Jaffa warrior could have possible missed her at this range. Shepard was trying to process the fact that her shot had penetrated clear through the First Prime and impacted Ba'al who flashed a bright sunrise-yellow. *That fucker has a kinetic barrier?!*

She squeezed the trigger and fired again; so did the balance of SG-1. Dozens of 5.7 x 28mm bullets
and several staff weapon blasts from Teal'c lanced out to meet the Jaffa. He bucked with the impacts, yet, miraculously, he still stood and held onto his weapon. The First Prime's staff weapon fired repeatedly and wildly as he danced macabre under the hail of gunfire, his trigger finger undoubtedly seized onto the firing stud without conscious thought.

Despite all of the damage he was absorbing, there still must have been just enough blood left in the dying Jaffa's brain to stay on in his feet; and, somehow, not a single shot had found his spine. Several shots did, however, penetrate his body completely and impacted Ba'al's protective shield as he and his goa'uld companions backed their way towards a now opening door on the far side of the room. Once again Shepard silently cursed that Glyph wasn't able to lock that door, *fuck you Murphy!*

Shepard's M77 clicked 'empty' on a saturated thermal clip. Lightning fast mental calculus told her that she'd never reload or get her Valiant rifle into play before Ba'al, Nirrti, and the goa'uld she designated *fatty* could make it to safety; but that damned Jaffa was still in the way. An idea, "Liara!' she shouted, "Singularity!"

Liara and Shepard both wound up their arms and pitched glowing orbs at exactly the same moment. Liara's singularity field impacted the dying Jaffa first by virtue of having a shorter flight. With a *ring* and a *thrum* the Jaffa lifted off of the ground. Shepard's warp field came in a fraction of a second latter and the resulting biotic detonation was spectacular. Ba'al's First Prime literally disintegrated in an actinic flash of light, busting like a water balloon, showering Ba'al, Nirrti, and Nerus in gore. The supersonic shockwave of the explosion, clearly visible in all of the smoke from the staff weapon fire and the nominally 'smokeless powder' of the P90 cartridges, expanded spherically in all directions. By now SG-1 was ready for such phenomena, but the goa'uld certainly weren't expecting it. They were knocked flat on their backs and slid the last few meters through the open door leading out of the lab.

Shepard realized immediately that she'd inadvertently helped Ba'al and Nirrti escape as the door on the far end of the lab began to close. She was filled with such a terrible rage that she had failed her beloved, that vengeance would not be hers for the violations that had befallen her, that she began to glow blindingly bright with her biotics. She drew from the depths of her biotic powers like she'd never done before, not since the final push at The Beam during the Battle of London, and she summoned a biotic charge. Victoria flashed the distance across the lab in an instant, but she was too late. She arrived at the now closed door with the thunderclap of a sonic boom, and the deafening groaning of metal as the force of the impact dented the very door itself. All of that, however, was drowned out by the primal howling of rage and frustration issuing from her beet-red face; because Shepard knew, in that instant, that revenge would not be hers that day. She would not feel the goa'uld's blood on her hands as she so wished. The soldier in her understood how fortunate they'd been in their mission, how 'chaos theory' or 'Murphy's Law' had certainly come into play in their favor. But 'Murphy' didn't play favorites, and this time the *good guys* lost the draw.

She felt victimized all over again, and this time it was partially her fault. She felt *she* had victimized her family, *she shouldn't have used a warp!* Anything *but a warp!* Tears streamed down her flushed
face and she continued to pound. *The great Viking Vikki*, Shepard thought, *the terror of the ICT Biotics Combat Tactics Course. How could you?* Victoria still held the record for top scores in biotics back at the N7 School so far as she knew; she had lived and breathed the 'TAP Principle', Tactic, Amplitude, and Precision for so long. How could she have so fucked it up here? *I let Liara and our baby down!* She was filled with anger and self-loathing.

SG-1 watched in stunned silence. They imagined Shepard would have kept pounding until the door, or her armored gauntlets and then hands themselves were splinters if not for Liara calmly striding up to her mate and gently placing a hand on her shoulder. Saying nothing, she squeezed once and Shepard stopped.

Shepard looked into Liara's eyes. Her face was sternly composed, but not unkind. There was no hatred in her magnificently expressive, blue-within-blue eyes. Neither was there any blame. Shepard understood that they would need to work through the day's events at a later time, that they *would* work through the day's events at a later time, but she also understood that Liara's love for her was unbroken. There was no sense of betrayal here; and that's all that she needed, *for now.* The transformation, so far as SG-1 could see it, was as complete as it was instantaneous. Victoria was back in control, and they had a job to do. The two lovers turned their back on the badly mangled door, leaving the goa'uld to their fates, and approached the cryogenics unit to attempt to save their daughter.

"What have we got?" Jack asked, unnecessarily, a few minutes later as he watched Shepard and Liara rather frantically work their omni-tools. Glyph floated serenely above them as they puzzled over the cryogenic unit, bio-containment field still shimmering in place.

"Jack," Daniel whispered in a somewhat resigned voice, "let them work." He held Shepard's helmet under his arm, having retrieved it from where Victoria had dropped it, and pensively watched the two women desperately try to free their daughter. Daniel looked at the two parents, at the sense of loss that was just now starting to appear on their faces with the realization that they might not succeed. He remembered his own loss; his late beloved wife Sha're. Daniel closed his eyes and actually found himself muttering a quiet prayer, two really; one, that they'd succeed, and another that, if they failed, they'd find peace.

Samantha watched as well. Her own hatred against Nirrti welled up inside of her, further fueled by her frustration that, for all of her vaunted technical skill and intelligence, she just *couldn't* help them. Plain and simple, Glyph had done too thorough a job at scrambling the control circuitry. Short of ripping the entire unit from the wall, *and even for biotics it was too big for that*, they were never going to get it open. *Plus, it wouldn't have even fit out the door if they did manage to rip it out of the wall.* The goa'uld had tried, but failed, to destroy Carter's family; alas, it wasn't looking like the same fortune was going to befall Shepard and Liara's. Samantha longed for the day when the galaxy would be rid of the goa'uld, and she *desperately* hoped that she would have a hand in their destruction. She silently squeezed her fists until her finger nails drew blood.

Jack and Teal'c alternated between watching Liara and Shepard work and watching the entrance of the laboratory for Jaffa. Shepard had so thoroughly damaged the door Ba'al had escaped through that neither of them thought it a likely threat axis. When they weren't watching for Jaffa, however, they were sympathizing with the young couple. However much Jack tried to suppress the memories, he *knew* what it was to lose a child. Personally, he wasn't one to consider a lump of cells a 'child', but if Liara and Shepard said it was so, that was good enough for him.

Jack knew it *hurt*, simple as that; he'd be at a loss to assign a better word. Plus, O'Neill didn't just know the pain of losing a child, but he knew the pain of being responsible for the death of a child
since, for all intents and purposes, he'd killed his son. He'd failed to lock up his pistol. He'd left it loaded where his son could get at it. He'd never even tried to educate him as to the dangers of handling it. It was his fault. This situation wasn't so different. They had initiated the lockdown, after all. He understood the logic. Hell, he agreed with it. It was the only way they saw at the time to prevent the goa'uld from absconding with their daughter. The tired platitude, it's better to die free than live as a slave, came to mind; not to mention the horrors a goa'uld like Nirrti might unleash upon the galaxy with control over Asari DNA. But, dead was still dead, when you got down to it; and a parent should never outlive their child.

He'd offer what help he could, when they asked for it. All he could hope for now was that they kept their heads in the game long enough to ask for it. O'Neill hazarded a glance to Teal'c. His face was surprisingly emotive; he obviously shared the sentiment and nodded solemnly.

Teal'c took his eyes off of the laboratory door for a moment, met gazes with Colonel O'Neill and nodded. Teal'c was never one for many words, but none were necessary here. The Colonel fully understood the pain that Commander Shepard and Doctor T'soni must be feeling, that much was obvious on his face. Teal'c too sympathized. Fortunately, though, he still had his son. He reflected upon his own fatherhood for a moment as he glanced at the frenetic parents, and then back at the door. His relationship with Rya'c had never been as close as he would have preferred; a function of his duties in his original position as Apophis' First Prime, and then as a renegade trying to shield him from harm. This situation, however, gave him pause. Children were precious, he was reminded, and he decided to try to renew his relationship with his boy; perhaps even introduce him to the strange tau'ri and her Asari mate who had influenced him so much in the recent months.

All the while, Liara and Victoria worked quickly, they worked quietly; but, ultimately, it was fruitless.

Liara paused, took a deep breath, and powered down her omni-tool. She turned to regard Shepard, still pounding away at her own holographic interface. After the first five minutes of effort, it had become apparent to the young Asari Matron that their efforts to free her embryonic daughter from the cryogenics unit would be fruitless. Glyph's sabotage of the control hardware and biohazard containment field was too thorough. Part of her had suspected that this would be the case when she had ordered Glyph to proceed, but suspecting and knowing were two very different things. The one 'saving grace', to use a human expression, was that, after they left the lab, there was no chance of any Jaffa or goa'uld sneaking back in and stealing her daughter. Her little one's fate was sealed to that of this space station, whatever that fate might be. And if I know Victoria, Liara thought, she would not leave such a thing to chance.

The floor shuddered violently below their feet. The time to evacuate had arrived, if it hadn't already expired, she reflected. She turned to SG-1 and nodded. They began checking over their weapons for the fighting retreat back to the exfiltration point. Then Liara turned to Shepard and gently placed her hand on her forearm, covering the omni-tool interface. "Shepard," she said in a quiet voice.

"Liara! Stop! I'm almost there, I can do this!" Shepard hissed, shaking Liara's delicate blue hand off.

Liara recognized that the movement wasn't as violent or forceful as Shepard could have made it, or would have made it if she really were trying to continue her work. Victoria just couldn't bring herself to give up. It was tragically endearing, Liara thought. But it didn't change the situation. She placed her hand again on Shepard's forearm; this time she grasped it firmly. "Shepard," she said in a firm, yet still soft voice, "it is time to leave. We did what we could, but now we must escape while we can."

Shepard turned to look Liara dead in the eye. Anyone else might have anticipated a fight, shouting,
whining, tears, perhaps recriminations, but not Liara. Liara T'soni knew her mate better than that. True, there was a rage behind those eyes, but it was not directed at her. It was directed at the goa'uld who had taken their daughter, and it was directed at herself. Liara knew that Shepard blamed herself for what had happened. They would work through those feelings; but not now, and not today.

Shepard sighed in resignation. "I know."

Victoria Shepard and Liara T'soni; war heroes, biotic adepts, loving spouses, and devoted parents-to-be turned to look at the cryogenics unit. They quietly grasped each other's hands, interlaced fingers, and took a deep breath in unison. Then, in their own ways, they both said goodbye to the daughter they would never know. They squeezed hands and released them. Then they turned and walked from the room.

Neither of them ever looked back.

SG-1 made it three quarters of the way back to the extraction point before they encountered resistance. The Jaffa they encountered immediately wished that they had been trapped in one of the depressurized sections that they were trying to circumvent.

Leveraging her previous success with the tactic, Liara led the way. Striding purposefully and confidently down the center of the corridor, the balance of SG-1 and Shepard stealthily crept along one of the corridor walls, ducking into alcoves as available. Since Jack very much doubted any Jaffa would be creeping up on them from behind, he allowed Shepard to take point of the main group and provide immediate backup to her wife. Having donned her N7 helmet, O'Neill could no longer make out her facial expression. But, based on her body language, and if it was anything like Liara's grim determination bordering on enraged, any Jaffa they encountered was going to have bad day.

_He would not be proven wrong._

The team was approaching an intersection when it happened. The corridor to their left led to a series of compartments that Glyph could not seal due to heavy damage to the automated doors; it was just physically impossible to close them. If _we're going to hit bad guys_, Jack thought, since this was actually the only set of doors parallel to their path that Glyph couldn't seal, _here's where they'll be_. And there they were. A squad of six Jaffa exited the adjacent corridor roughly five meters ahead of Liara giving Shepard and the rest of SG-1 barely enough time to dive into a miniature service alcove running parallel to where they'd been walking.

Jack flattened himself to a support column, made sure the safety on his P90 was in the FIRE position, and pulled the collapsible periscope from his jacket pocket. He peeked around the column and tried to listen to the exchange between the Jaffa and Liara; she would give them a _signal if/when she needed help_. He also heard the faint sound of Shepard's armored boots creeping forward. He considered ordering her to stop, but didn't bother. He doubted she would listen, _and after all, she did know what she was doing._

"Mistress Athame, you are unharmed," said the lead Jaffa with a bowed head and what sounded like a genuinely relieved voice.


If the Jaffa was surprised by her non-'goa'uld voice' it didn't appear on his face. "We were sent by our Lord to find you M'lady. We are to escort you him for evacuation." _News of her betrayal hasn't traveled this far, apparently_, Jack thought. He quietly thanked Shepard for having the forethought to order Glyph to scramble all internal radio transmissions.
Liara narrowed her eyes. "That will not be necessary, Jaffa."

"Why not, M'lady?" the Jaffa asked, honestly confused.

A micro-manufactured blade, nearly a half meter long, razor sharp and glowing red-hot erupted from one of his cohort's chest. The stabbed Jaffa, already dead for all intents and purposes, looked down at his ruined, smoking sternum in painless surprise. He couldn't even command his lungs to scream.

"This is why, asshole!" Shepard said.

Liara smiled wolfishly as she watched the Jaffa squad leader's jaw drop and eyes flick to his dying subordinate; first to his chest with Shepard's steaming omni-blade sticking out of it, and then up to the life draining from his eyes. She started drawing her pistol from her gown's belt at the small of her back. The Jaffa squad leader's horrified eyes flicked to Shepard's helmet-obscured face; Liara imagined Viking Vikki was smiling wildly under her partially closed mask. The Jaffa realized, this was the 'flame haired banshee'. Finally the Jaffa looked back to his goddess to see her Five Seven's muzzle barely two inches from his forehead. His eyes widened even further at the inhuman speed with which she must have drawn and aimed.

Liara's grin widened, she bore teeth; after all, she was not human! A snarl, "Kree, Jaffa!"

Liara squeezed her pistol's trigger and a 5.7 x 28mm steel-cored light-armor piercing bullet erupted from the barrel at nearly Mach 2. A fraction of a second later it emerged from the back of the Jaffa squad leader's skull, venting his brain cavity along with it.

To her left, Shepard enveloped her impaled Jaffa in a biotic field and launched him off of her omni-blade towards his comrades with a quick motion of her off-hand. The dead Jaffa's body rocketed towards three of his brothers in arms at near supersonic speed. Two of the Jaffa whiplashed around with audible cracks from their spines as they were taken bodily about the waist and the third crashed into the wall hard enough to fracture his skull; blood drained from his nose and eye sockets. Hardly losing momentum, Shepard stalked forward, drawing her pistol to complete her kills.

Trusting her mate to take care of the balance of the squad, Liara turned her attention to the remaining Jaffa. The squad's 2nd in command was so stunned that he hadn't made a single move to defend himself. That suited Liara just fine. Normally quiet and composed, Liara cried out in rage. She wanted to murder this Jaffa, and any Jaffa she might encounter on their way off of the station. Murder, she thought, not kill, murder.

Even as the Shadow Broker, when she had to order her wet-work squads into action, it was with a cold calculus; a precise, measured force. She never hesitated to kill when it was necessary, but only when it was necessary, and only after she had determined there were no other, better options. That methodical approach, learned in University and honed on countless archeological digs was nowhere to be found now. Liara was rage, pure and simple. The goa'uld had taken her daughter, quite literally a piece of her, away; and she wanted them to pay for it.

Surely, there would be other children; a far off, logical part of her mind understood this. In the other place she was actually still a mother. This daughter was gone, though, never to be replaced, not even by killing all of Ba'al's troops. But that wouldn't stop her from trying, she thought as she enveloped her right hand and pistol in a biotic field and brought it crashing down onto the last Jaffa standing's forehead.

The Jaffa's skull caved in, fracturing in multiple places under the biotically assisted blunt force trauma. Unfortunately, the force of the blow also fractured the reinforced polymer frame of Liara's
Five Seven pistol. The grip all but shattered, the magazine splintered badly, and live cartridges spilled out. Liara was mildly surprised that not a single shard of plastic had pierced her skin as she watched the barrel and slide, the only two components with substantial metallic content, fall to the floor.

Then she turned her attention to her prey. Dead before he even realized he'd been struck, the Jaffa crumpled to the ground, grunting sadly as his lungs emptied for the last time. Liara's lip curled in anger, she wanted to pound on him some more. The sound of Shepard's M77 Paladin discharging centered her thoughts and she reassessed her surroundings. The engagement was over, less than 20 seconds after it had started. No contest, but they had made a substantial amount of noise.

Shepard bounded up to her, reloading her M77 as she jogged. She signaled SG-1, "I hear more coming!" she hissed. "We need to move!"

SG-1 broke cover and started jogging down the corridor just as a full dozen new Jaffa appeared from the same compartment as the first squad. "Keep moving, SG-1," Liara said in a cool voice. "Shepard and I will delay them. Wait for us ahead."

"There's a bend to the corridor in 20 meters," said Shepard, "set up and wait for us there." O'Neill slapped her armored shoulder in assent as he ran past her.

As Major Carter jogged by, Liara reached out and swiftly lifted her sidearm from her holster. She smirked internally at Samantha's gasp and blush as her hands inadvertently swept across and up her inner thigh. Shepard's right, Liara thought, she certainly is cute. In a smooth fluid motion Liara flipped the safety to FIRE, ran a delicate finger over the 'loaded chamber indicator' to make sure it was in battery, spun on her feet, and crouched with her knees together as she raised the pistol in a single handed stance. Given the constraints of her gown's skirt and the placement of her off hand on her lap, she actually struck a rather demure pose as the Spectre enveloped a pair of Jaffa bodies in a biotic field and held them up as shields to absorb the now incoming staff weapon fire.

Liara shot below the glowing dead-Jaffa shield Shepard held for her, ripping off a series of double-taps. The first pair went a bit wild; one shot striking a Jaffa in the groin who went down howling in pain clutching his ruined manhood, and the second light-armor piercing bullet missing entirely to do its manufacturer proud by embedding itself fully two inches into a reinforced metal wall. The following five pairs were substantially better aimed now that Liara had settled in, finding kneecaps or shins of another four Jaffa. Liara sighed internally, if she weren't purposely trying to just slow the Jaffa down, she'd have been happier to consciously aim at their genitals, seeing the screaming writhing reaction of her first victim; she was that furious.

"Singularity, Liara!" Shepard shouted. Liara obliged and the front rank of Jaffa lifted off of the ground as they were trying to pick their way over their tripped up comrades. "Fuck you!" Victoria launched the now heavily charred and smoking Jaffa corpses at their floating brethren. The impact knocked fully half of the attacking force out of action, forming a pile of broken, moaning bodies and tattered chainmail. The two lovers rose and sprinted down the hall leaving the Jaffa to sort themselves out and give pursuit.

SG-1, Shepard, and Liara piled into the storage compartment amidst a hail of staff weapon fire and the door slammed shut behind them. Teal'c pirouetted and deftly shot a small serpent-shaped glyph on the gilded wall with his zat gun. Lightning coursed through the hidden electrical circuitry.

"This door is sealed," Teal'c reported, barely breathing heavily despite their near sprint down the last length of corridor. "However, the Jaffa on the other side will soon force it open again."

Jack looked at Teal'c and then at the door. As if on cue, a telltale ping pong of impacting staff
weapon blasts erupted. *We don't have much time,* he thought. He was about to open his mouth, to order his team to start erecting a defense while he contacted Thor for extraction, but someone beat him to it.

"Liara," Shepard said in a firm, clipped, commanding voice, "seal that door, please."

Liara nodded once to the commander, "Right away, Shepard," she said in an equally terse voice. She dropped the Five Seven pistol, slide locked back on an empty magazine, and turned to face the door. She glowed a bright blue. Jack and Teal'c had just enough time to get out of the way before Liara cut loose with a biotic blast that buckled the door and half of the bulkhead it was set into. Eyes wide, he looked at the Asari. She regarded him coolly, and nodded. The glowing aura of biotics about her body evaporated with a faint *pfft.*

"Probably need a plasma torch to get that open," Carter commented examining the handiwork. She knocked the door with her fist a couple of times to emphasize her point. "That or blow it; and you'd probably vent the whole compartment to vacuum if you did." She looked at the Colonel sheepishly, "I'll try not to say that so loud as to give them any ideas, sir."

Jack nodded emphatically and redirected his attention to the Spectre. He didn't much like how she'd taken command away from him like that, though he knew enough that now was not the time to press it. Especially when he saw the grim determination on her face and she moved about the storage room rapidly and with purpose. *And god,* he thought, *she's doing it right!*

Shepard had not lost herself to grief, nor had Liara. Neither had they allowed their anger at the situation to cloud their senses or judgment. Any normal person might have been crushed at what they'd just witnessed and experienced, at the decisions they had to make. Any normal person might have just lost it and thrown training and caution to the wind in the heat of battle during their fighting retreat to the exfiltration point. He'd seen that before, 'suicidal juggernauts'; seemed almost comic book, when he gave words to the concept, he thought.

But that hadn't happened with the Spectre and the Asari. No they had turned their heartache into a terrible focus. Already finely tuned weapons, the results of years of combat in what was still, for many at the SGC, a war on an unimaginable scale, Victoria and Liara had embraced their talents. Did they do it for vengeance, pragmatism, or catharsis? He wouldn't know until he could ask them, but they got results!

"Roswell, this is Shepard, do you copy?" Shepard said calmly yet quickly into her omni-tool.

A short pause later, Jack could just *imagine* the scowl at the call sign that Shepard had chosen for this phase of the operation, Thor spoke, "I read you, Shepard."

"We've reached the exfiltration point. Deliver the package."

A moment later there was a blinding flash of light and the W80 arrived. Shepard wasted no time. Walking up to it she spoke into her radio, "Transport successful, standby."

"Standing by."

As if to emphasize how Shepard had just upped the stakes by bringing a thermonuclear weapon into play, the staff weapon blasts on the door suddenly increased in intensity. The gilded paint began to blacken and peel with the heat.

Liara moved away from the door and scrutinized the bomb as Shepard brought the arming electronics fully online. She ran her hand across the polished metal exterior of the depleted uranium
radiation case, pausing to scrutinize where someone, probably Shepard, had scribbled 'Hi There!' with a magic marker. She let her hand linger as her eyes went wide with realization as to what the object must be. For a moment Jack wondered if she could be feeling the decay heat from the plutonium-239 in the fission primary. He decided he'd ask Carter about that later if he could remember, and if they all lived through it.

"Here, catch," Shepard said, as she tossed him the detonation remote. Daniel Jackson gasped as he realized Victoria had just tossed 150 kilotons casually across the room. O'Neill and Carter rolled their eyes in unison, nukes just didn't work that way. "I'm entering the arming code now."

"36 – 24 – 36."

Liara's eyebrows perked up.

Despite himself Jack broke into song, "I was gettin' bored and I got my kicks like 36 – 24 – 36."

Liara's eyebrows arched higher than even Teal'c could manage.

Shepard set the onboard timer for 10 minutes. Even if the remote control didn't work, or somehow Thor's ship was destroyed or went out of range, the bomb would go off when the timer hit zero. It was their backup. "I'm starting the fail deadly timer now." She hit the button, the clock started and an electronic buzzer sounded loudly; she synchronized a timer on her omni-tool. The staff weapon fire on the door intensified yet again.

The number on the clock began to tick. With a glowing fist Shepard destroyed the keypad on the bomb. "No one is going to be able to disarm this now. It'll be over soon little one," she observed to no one in particular in a quiet, surprisingly flat voice. She shook her head and raised her omni-tool. "Roswell, this is Shepard."

"I read you Shepard," responded Thor.

Jack handed the remote back to Shepard. She accepted it with a nod. Then she spoke, "Castle Bravo is a go, T-minus 9 minutes 50 seconds on the timer. Ready for extraction; six to beam up. Energize." O'Neil went wide eyed. She looked at Jack and quirked an eyebrow and smirked. "What?" The world flashed white.
This chapter contains violence and gore.

The name of this chapter 'Trinity's Child' has a three-fold meaning (pardon that possible pun). First, and most obviously in the context of this fandom, the trinity alludes to the three-phase lifecycle of the Asari. Second, the name is taken directly from a Cold War novel written by William Prochnau in 1983 depicting a nuclear exchange between the USA and USSR (which was made into a tolerable TV-Movie called 'By Dawn's Early Light'). Finally, 'Trinity' references the Trinity Test itself, the world's first atomic detonation, which took place at 5:30 a.m. on July 16, 1945 outside of Alamogordo, New Mexico.

Humankind has lived in the nuclear age for 70 years, and we've yet to destroy ourselves. Yay team!

Without further ado, I'll get to the chapter itself, which isn't much longer than this foreword, unfortunately. But here is an historically relevant quote from 'The Sarah Connor Chronicles' that I've always loved, and I think might also be relevant to this chapter as well:

"On July 16, 1945, in the mountains outside of Los Alamos, New Mexico, the world's first atomic bomb exploded. A white light pierced the sky with such intensity that a blind girl claimed to see the flash from a hundred miles away. After witnessing the explosion, J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted a fragment of the Bhagavad Gita, declaring, "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." His colleague, Ken Bainbridge, put it another way when he leaned close to Oppenheimer and whispered, "Now we are all sons of bitches."

Shepard looked out the viewport towards the slowly receding goa'uld space station. From this distance it didn't look intimidating at all. Its seeming innocence didn't belie any of the horrors it truly contained. Nor could she see the little life she would never know. Shepard ground her teeth. Don't fuck up, Shepard. See this through.

Victoria looked at the small device in her grip. Such an innocuous thing, she thought; simple in design yet terrible in purpose. The nondescript box sat comfortably in her hands, a benign-looking rubber-coated antenna pointed towards the viewport and the fury she would soon release.

Shepard turned the arming-key and lifted the transparent plastic guard off of the firing switch. She placed her gauntleted thumb upon the button and paused. In her mind's eye she could picture what would happen when she depressed the, fittingly, red button:

She could imagine holding the button down for the requisite three seconds. The radio signal would reach out the few hundred kilometers towards its destination at the speed of light. Within the goa'uld space station, ensconced within its still-sealed storage compartment, the W80 thermonuclear device would receive its coded detonation command. Its safety interlocks already disengaged in person by
Shepard, the weapon would obey its firing instructions and follow the programming encoded on its EMP-hardened tamper-proof circuit boards.

A small solenoid-driven piston would pump a precise amount of deuterium/tritium gas into the hollow core of the fission primary's pit. As the gas flowed, high energy capacitors would whine as they charged off of a small, yet powerful, chemical battery. All of these preparatory actions completed, the bomb would then wait for the remaining 1.8 seconds of the detonate command.

Approximately three seconds after she pressed the button, krypton switches would close firing detonators embedded in specially shaped conventional high-explosive blocks. Precisely focused shockwaves would rocket inward, accelerating wildly across the air-lens, and crush the hollow-cored plutonium pit from the size of a grapefruit into the size of a walnut. The suddenly supercritical mass of plutonium would undergo a rapid fission process, millions of released neutrons sparking new fissions as the runaway reaction increased exponentially, liberating terajoules of energy. The tritium/deuterium gas in the core would undergo fusion releasing yet more neutrons amplifying the reaction. A separate assembly of precisely-timed neutron 'guns' would fire flooding the fission primary with yet more neutrons, further amplifying the fission reaction, and ensuring the device ultimately reached its maximum yield of 150 kilotons of TNT.

But it wouldn't end there. X-rays from the primary would flood the radiation case turning its foam rubber packing into plasma. The 'weight' of the plasma and x-rays would compress the fusion secondary, igniting a powerful fusion reaction in the lithium-deuteride fuel and compressing the plutonium 'sparkplug' to super criticality freeing even more energy. The resulting maelstrom of high speed neutrons would initiate fast-fission in the natural uranium tamper and radiation case releasing yet more energy. Finally, its awful work done, the nuclear device would deposit its liberated energy into the air, metal, and plastic of the surrounding space station; and Shepard's daughter would die.

The duality of the device itself was not lost on Shepard. A nuclear weapon represented the epitome of dozens of disciplines, all brought together for a singular purpose. The top minds in the fields of physics, chemistry, metallurgy, electronics, engineering, precision manufacturing, and many others had devoted untold hours and creativity to fashioning perhaps the most horrific artifact ever wrought by the hands of man. *This is humanity at its finest,* Shepard thought in a detached surreal moment, *mankind at its most creative turned towards self-destruction in its extreme.* In Shepard's mind the mechanism was beautiful in its construction as well as its inherent contradiction. She was at once proud and ashamed to call herself human.

She knew, on a cold, intellectual level, that this was the best, the only, course of action. The gao'uld could not be allowed access to Asari physiology. The consequences of cracking the Asari genome would be catastrophic. On an emotional level, she knew that she would never, could never, allow her daughter to live as a slave to those monsters. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut in anguish.

Unfortunately, she couldn't assume Lord Yu's forces' attack would destroy the station; even now they were breaking off. Similarly, she couldn't assume that Lord Ba'al wouldn't return and succeed in retrieving her daughter from the lab. Something had to be done. She couldn't leave this to chance. This is the only way to be sure.

Suddenly she was no longer on the bridge of Thor's ship; she was concealed in a foxhole on Elysium. She watched helplessly though her binoculars as a Batarian slaver realized that one of his newly captured slaves was trying to hide her young daughter.

No! he struck at the woman with a large wooden club. She staggered back with the blow, a dull thudding noise. The slaver didn't stop there, however. He raised his cudgel and struck again, another dull thud with a hint of a crack. He struck again, the woman's skull opened with a wet slapping noise. He kept on beating her as her
daughter wailed in a high pitched tone that Shepard could still hear in her dreams.

The image changed. It wasn't a human child crying anymore, now she was Asari. The Asari toddler, who bore a striking resemblance to Liara, shrieked for her murdered mother, Liara herself, as another slaver reached down to carry her towards a recently arrived transport. Shepard did what she had already had to do too many times on Elysium; she activated her omni-tool and called in a mortar strike. Better to die free, than to live as a slave.

Elysium had been where 'Viking Vikki' had truly been born.

Shepard opened her eyes. This was no different. She knew what she had to do. It had to be! Yet she couldn't act. She stood there, frozen. Don't fuck up Shepard! You know what you have to do!

The last three years of her life had been building towards the day where she could settle down with Liara and raise a family in peace. She had died, at least once, fighting for it. She had come here, wherever here was, for the opportunity to achieve it. And now, by her hand, she would end it. Or she would, if only she could press the button.

But she couldn't. She, the murderer of Bahak, who had pressed the 'go' button on The Project without a moment's hesitation, and sentenced nearly a third of a million Batarians to their doom, couldn't kill just one.

She didn't have to.

There was a presence, and Liara appeared in her peripheral field of view. Shepard couldn't even turn to look a delicate blue hand appeared on her own so quickly. Liara's grip covered her own. She could feel her body heat. Victoria desperately longed for the bond. She needed to feel Liara, experience her calming love, share with her the anguish she was feeling. Liara will know what to do, she thought, she always does. But the bond never formed. Instead Liara pressed down on Shepard's thumb, depressing the firing switch with such force that Victoria couldn't have pulled her finger off of the button even if she tried.

Three seconds never felt so long.

The goa'uld space station erupted in an actinic flash; the expanding cloud of plasma carrying frigate-sized pieces of debris away in all directions. It was done. Shepard's first daughter in this universe was gone, never even having a chance to develop a heartbeat. I hope that bitch Nirrti went with her, Shepard thought in a quiet rage.

Shepard stared long and hard at the disintegrating space station. She watched until the ethereal glow of the plasma-cloud subsided. Only then did she turn to look at her beloved. She didn't see what she expected. Liara wasn't a mask of sadness. She wasn't a hollow shell of the woman she once was. That's how I feel right now, Shepard thought. She wasn't a traumatized former hostage or brain-rape victim. Instead, Liara was rage; pure, raw, rage.

"Come Victoria," she said in a flat voice which did not betray any of the fire in her blue-within-blue eyes, "Let us leave this place."

Shepard died inside.
Nuclear Proliferation Disclaimer:

As you readers may have quickly picked up, this chapter is an homage to a passage in Tom Clancy's 'The Sum of All Fears'; similarly, so is the following disclaimer.

I am not a nuclear engineer, physicist, or weaponeer. My understanding of nuclear weapons and their physics does not go much beyond the basic civilian's/Wikipedian's and, as such, none of what you just read could possibly present a proliferation risk.

Now we are all sons of bitches...
Senator Robert Kinsey was going places. He was a man with a mission; he had ambition, he had drive, and he had a plan. Senator Kinsey wasn't happy being a mere United States Senator. No, Robert Kinsey had his eyes set on higher office, and the Stargate Program was his ticket. He'd recognized it early on, of course; he was a smart, nay, brilliant man. But even he'd be the first to admit that his early plans had not quite panned out. That was one of the defining marks of great men, after all; the ability to recognize one's mistakes, learn from them, and overcome them to be even greater than you were before.

He had tried using reason at first. But try being the sole voice of fiscal responsibility and faith in the Lord and your own technology and tactics in a room full of technology-dazzled heathens. He should have known that rising to the top on his own merits of faith, both in the United States and the One True God wouldn't have been enough; especially with the likes of SG-1 pulling off insubordinate operations which could only hope to further antagonize Earth's enemies. But they had become the darlings of the current administration, so he had to bide his time.

Then he'd tried using subterfuge to discredit the members of the SGC, to get his own people on the inside. Distasteful, yes, but if it furthered a just cause, then all means could be justified. *Just* ends justified *any* means, after all; despite what the bleeding hearts might try to teach the children in the daycare centers that masqueraded as schools in this country. That hadn't panned out either, unfortunately. Once again, his plans were thwarted and he was forced to back off as one Colonel O'Neill held some allegedly incriminating information on him. He doubted the severity, but it was enough to give pause, change tack. There was no stopping the inevitable, but perhaps a more methodical approach was needed.

Then, providence had presented him with another opportunity to break the SGC to his will, to use it to achieve the goal that was his just destiny in the form of a beautiful blue temptress and her bulldyke thrall from another dimension. He almost sneered with how distasteful he found it. Then he centered himself and remembered to not turn his nose up at obvious gifts from on high. Everything happened for a reason, after all. Even if the attraction that the Commander showed towards the Asari harlot was unnatural and repellent, if it helped him achieve his goal, he would not give it a second thought beyond what was required to make use of it. At least not until this entire episode was well and concluded.

He smiled to himself. That whole situation might take care of itself better than he could have hoped for. Obviously, he would prefer to have the Asari and the Commander for study; and any unholy offspring if the surveillance video is to be believed. In fact, some of his financial contacts were still a bit sore that their initial attempt to harvest the Commander had not proceeded to plan. Loss of a potential payday aside, if they all ended up getting killed by the goa'uld, he wouldn't have to deal with any of them ever again. SG-1 dying in the process was a happy bonus.

In the event that SG-1 did happen to pull off one of their signature, unlikely successes, Kinsey had taken steps. Shortly after SG-1 departed, he had made a series of phone calls to NID. They were currently prepping secure facilities to take both Shepard and Liara into permanent custody for study. Whatever had gone wrong during the first attempt on Shepard would not be repeated. Plus, he doubted very much that she would try anything dangerous if they were also holding her beloved and any children that might drop out of her. On top of that, Shepard had become quite close with the Fraiser girl, and she would be much easier to capture and contain. A separate team was standing by.

*If they even returned.* If not, that was unfortunate, but that didn't really change things. He still had
enough dirt from this latest series of fiascoes to permanently bring the SGC under his and NID's control. It was easy, really. There had been plenty of eager volunteers willing to provide him with the information he needed on how operations were being compromised, procedures relaxed, decorum violated. It seemed that Hammond and the rest of the SGC were bending over backwards to integrate Shepard and Liara into their structure, tolerate their idiosyncrasies, give them free reign over how they conducted business; and look how badly it had come to bite them.

After SG-1’s departure he had once again staked out the main conference room. General Hammond had glared at him at first as he went to and from his soon-to-be-former office, but he had tuned that out quickly enough. Just like he had tuned out the constant presence of the Secret Service agent that the President had insisted he travel with. He would need to get used to those goons soon enough, he mused to himself with a smile.

Kinsey scratched out some more notes on his legal pad. The sound of his pen scraping against the paper soothed him; that sound meant power. He'd heard it said that 'the pen is mightier than the sword'; the sentiment in which that phrase was originally written was bullshit, of course. However much peace-loving hippies might like to convince themselves otherwise, power does flow from the muzzle of a gun; but in this country, ironically, a stroke of a pen is what puts those guns into action. At least in a formal sense in this digital age, he added to himself.

He could picture it now; President Kinsey signing bills into laws, shaping the country and the world to his image, using this very pen, his favorite pen. Not multiple pens that he could give away as trinkets to political hacks as souvenirs. No! There would be only this one; gold, fine point, iridium/osmium alloy nib. Eventually it would be put on display in the Kinsey Presidential Library. He smiled, thinking of all of the history that he and this simple little writing implement would make. As it should be. Kinsey was so caught up in his own fantasy that he didn't notice the Secret Service agent place a finger to his ear-bud, listen for a moment, nod to no one in particular, and silently leave the room.

The good Senator's first indication that something was wrong was when the lights went out.

It was all downhill from there.

Kinsey placed the cap on his pen and laid it on his pad with an annoyed expression. He looked about for someone to blame. He'd already decided who was going to find themselves without a job once he was through reorganizing this place; pretty much everyone who hadn't had a hand in helping him take over minus a few of the more pliable and indispensable of the scientific staff. The conference room was dark but not completely so. The emergency lighting had come on and cast the entire conference room in an eerie twilight.

"Alright," the Senator called out. "Whichever of you jackasses shut the lights off, turn them back on." Receiving no response he noticed that his Secret Service detail was missing. Having gone to lengths to ignore his presence as beneath his notice before, Kinsey was now bothered that the agent had left him without permission. He made a mental note to see that that particular agent's career came to an early end for the insolence. The Senator pushed away from the conference table and looked around. Hammond wasn't in his office, and he didn't hear anyone in the control room down the spiral staircase; thinking that odd he turned around to peer out the observation window overlooking the gate room. The lights there were out as well.

"What? Is this a union shop, or something?" Kinsey muttered to himself as he looked at his reflection in the glass and straightened his tie.

He noticed a new reflection with a start and his blood turned to ice.
He could feel all of the color leave his face, his jaw went slack, his testicles tried to find their way up towards his lungs. *Holy shit!* He swallowed hard, tried his best to recompose, and turned.

"Miss T'soni, I didn't hear you come in. I am so relieved you've come back unharmed."

The Asari said nothing. She merely regarded him. Kinsey looked at her. She was dressed, oddly. Traditional Asari garb for sure, but not the clothing she had been ordering through the internet. He wracked his brain. As a consequence of his position, he had access to all of the intelligence gleaned from Commander Shepard and Liara T'soni. Her gown and *headdress* seemed familiar but he couldn't quite place it. She was, he hated to admit it, beautiful. The dress was unadorned and subdued but it showed off *all* of Liara's curves. The plunging cut of the top accentuated her breasts, which he couldn't help but stare at for a moment. She held her hands folded just beneath her bosom, accentuating the effect. He chided himself, *when the devil wishes to tempt man, he certainly knows his weaknesses.* Her poise and the headdress lent her an air that was at once elegant and regal. She was, stunning.

*She's certainly playing this goddess thing for all it's worth, isn't she?*

"It's Doctor T'soni," a new voice. Kinsey's attention snapped to Commander Shepard. She stood, at 'parade rest', in a corner, partially concealed by shadow. She wore the same 'service blues' that she had been dressed in when Thor had absconded with her. *When did these two get back?*

"Of course," Kinsey managed to respond without any emotion.

Then he realized where he'd seen that dress before; *the Lady Benezia.* The harlot's mother had worn a similar dress and headgear when she was alive. According to the debriefing materials she had been *indoctrinated* by the enemy, turned traitor, and was killed by Shepard and her own daughter. *Matricide, huh, just racking up the sinful behavior, aren't we?* Then Kinsey remembered the other information on Benezia; about how powerful a biotic she was, how intelligent, how ruthless, and just how *closely* Liara had taken after her despite how little she liked to admit it.

For all of Kinsey's dreams and plans for the future that was his destiny, his *right*, he was also an intelligent and objective man. He believed, he *knew*, that he had the upper hand in the long run, but he could also appreciate that he was potentially, *at this very moment*, in *extreme* danger. These two *people* were killers, murderers. Shepard was a *war criminal*, for crying out loud! *And Liara,* well Kinsey was sure that she had all manner of dark secrets accumulated from her stint as the 'Shadow Broker'. He couldn't claim that what was rightfully his if he were dead at the hands of the likes of *these.* He needed to get safely away from them, have them taken into custody; then he could get back to his work of breaking the SGC to his will.

Kinsey looked around the room again. He was definitely alone. He needed to call for help. He needed troops, lots of them; fortunately he *did* have a few who he knew where explicitly loyal to him on base. He picked up the telephone on the conference table. There was no dial tone.

"Calling for help, Senator?" Liara asked in a level tone. If she was feeling any particular emotion, her face did not betray it. Kinsey looked to the Commander. She stood like a statue, her face was a mask.

"What have you done?" Kinsey tried to keep his cool. He returned the phone's handset to its cradle.

"I had been led to believe that you wished to speak with me. That you were, *disappointed,* that my offworld assignment and subsequent abduction prevented you from interviewing me in person. I was hoping that we could take this opportunity to remedy that disappointment."

Liara T'soni smiled gently and Senator Kinsey could have sworn his heart stopped beating for a
"You no longer wish to speak with me then, Senator?" Liara asked evenly, taking his silence as a response. "I assure you, I have time. I have already conferred with Commander Thor and Doctor Fraiser and we believe that I have suffered no long-term ill effects from having my baby forcibly removed from my womb by the goa'uld, or from being forcibly implanted with a goa'uld symbiote and subsequently expelling it."

Kinsey's jaw dropped. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"I have trouble believing that sentiment, Senator," she said evenly.

Under normal circumstances he would try to bully his way out, to threaten, to intimidate. The bluster was gone, however. Being a politician for his entire adult life had taught him many things, knowing when you'd been outfoxed was one of them. He wasn't sure what it was, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever know. But, based on that last comment, and its even tone of supreme confidence, he got the distinct impression that Liara knew something.

Still, he needed to try something to get out of this situation. He was still confident enough in his own skills that he could salvage the overall situation, if he could just avoid being murdered by an Asari with post-partum depression.

"Listen, Doctor," he started, "I don't know why you would think that I would be anything other than glad that you've returned safely. Or anything other than saddened by the fact that you had your baby taken…"

"Have you faced an Asari Commando Unit before?" she interrupted him.

"What?" Kinsey was caught flatfooted by the non sequitur.

"Few humans have," Liara said. Her tone remained even. Her face remained calm. Her body, however, began to glow a rich and almost painfully bright Cherenkov-blue. Faint arcs of static electricity played along the metallic flag poles and office chairs. The yellow pages of Kinsey's legal pad fluttered in the biotic field. His favorite pen rolled off of the pad, clattered to the floor, and rolled under the table. Small bulbs of lightning pulsed within the empty water pitchers and coffee machine carafes. The air in the conference room became a living thing with Liara T'soni its pulsing center.

"What are you doing?"

"It is very simple, really," Liara said. "You will drop the charade. You will tell us the truth. No more lies. No more deceit or machinations. If you do not; I flay you alive, with my mind." To drive her point home one of the conference table chairs rocketed forward under biotic force to catch Kinsey in the back of the knees. He fell into the seat in a lump.

"I… I don't know what you're talking about," Kinsey stammered.

Liara stood, motionless, as the lightshow intensified. Her facial expression didn't change. Her hands didn't move, instead they remained folded across her stomach beneath her breasts. Shepard remained like a statue in the corner as various objects in the conference room began to rise and hover in place. Kinsey swallowed hard. Liara regarded him stoically. She made no movement, she did not twitch, did not even blink; she was an ice sculpture. Chairs, telephones, glassware, pens and pencils all began swirling about the room with increasing speed. The air whistled with their passage. One ice-water decanter circled the room with such velocity that the air playing across its open top began to resonate with a deep mournful hum. The tone increased and decreased in pitch as it Doppler shifted
past him with each circuit around the room. The overall effect was to add a ghostly wailing noise to
the otherwise already terrifying lightshow.

Suddenly Shepard was moving. She approached him, walking directly towards the tempest of office
furniture and accoutrements. She didn't deviate in speed or course, yet not a single article struck her
despite some coming within millimeters. A far-away, analytical part of Kinsey's brain understood that
Liara not only had the power to *move* objects with her mind, but she had the control to place them
wherever she wanted; to *avoid* hitting whoever she wanted. That implied, of course, she could just as
easily *hit* whoever she wanted as well.

Commander Shepard stopped a few feet away from him. She towered over him, she was *enormous*,
a veritable amazon. She said nothing, she just regarded him. The coroner's report from his NID
subordinates came to mind unbidden. Shepard had, quite literally, *slaughtered* his men escaping. She
was no stranger to brutality, but that wasn't a secret. She also had a track record of killing politicians,
but she *only* did so with good reason. Even a politician as sly as he could recognize that treasonous
lout Udina needed to die. Kinsey was suddenly filled with confidence; this *woman* had nothing on
him. If she did, he'd be dead already. This was naked intimidation with nothing of substance backing
it. He could weather this storm. He *would* weather this storm, and it would make his eventual, his
*inevitable*, victory all the sweeter.

Shepard pivoted on her heels and stepped to his side. Kinsey took this, mistakenly, as a sign that he
had successfully stared the *Spectre* down. He had no idea how wrong he was; until she powered up
her omni-tool, of course. Suddenly, in a horrific ten seconds, Kinsey saw the coroner's report made
real. He nearly gagged. He didn't see Shepard smirk behind him. Liara's face didn't show *any*
emotion, the 'Shadow Broker' was too practiced for that.

The image shifted. He watched Shepard *interrogating* the survivors of her attempted vivisection. The
circumcision humor was particularly off-putting. He heard the phone ring. He heard his voice come
through.

He knew *what* they had on him; he knew *that* they had him.

With a loud bang all of the objects that had been circling the room dropped. A heartbeat later Kinsey
realized that they had all fallen into *precisely* the same places they had been sitting when Liara had
begun her *magic show*. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness as not only did Liara's biotic
field dissipate with a faint pop, but the emergency lighting failed with the tinkle of breaking glass.
Kinsey didn't move. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart, the rapid wheeze of his
breathing.

A bright flash of blue light, a thunder clap, Liara was inches from his face and glowing a painfully
bright actinic blue. He could feel his hair and necktie fluttering with the suddenly displaced air. The
hair on the back of his neck stood on end in the static electric field. She radiated heat; like sunburn in
an otherwise dark room. Liara's face was no longer the eerie neutral it had been throughout this
encounter. Her brow was furrowed. Her teeth, gleaming white and perfectly straight, bared in a snarl.

"Tell me, Senator. When will it be enough? You tried to dissect the woman I love more than life
itself, the woman who gives me my *babies*. The woman who has done more for the galaxy,
*including* this one, than you could ever possibly hope to do yourself, without asking for or expecting
gain or reward. You have tried to destroy this place, the one thing standing between this world you
hope to rule and oblivion, repeatedly.

"What will it take? How many lives need to be destroyed? How many careers ended? Would you
dissect me? My wife? My *children*? Carve us open and extract every milligram of eezo until there
was nothing left? Put us into research facilities. Breed us? Try to unlock the secret of true human
biotic potential? I have seen that, Senator, smarter more sinister men than you have tried and failed. We have killed them.

"What if you cannot get what you want by manipulating those here on Earth? Will you strike a deal elsewhere? Aliens to aid in the fight against the goa'uld, or will you try to play the goa'uld themselves? Play with fire long Senator Kinsey, and you are likely to be burned.

"Shall I show you the mind of a goa'uld? Show you what it is like to have another's consciousness forced upon you? Show you the hatred? The evil? Shall I break one of my people's most sacred rules and violate your mind like my mind was violated? Was raped? Or are you content to wait and find out for yourself someday?"

She leaned even closer towards him and reached out her hand, "It would only take but a touch of my hand."

The Senator knew what would come next; the black eyes, the 'embracing eternity', and then he would know. Kinsey lurched back in his seat to look pleadingly at Shepard. "Are you going to just stand there and let this happen?" he sputtered.

"No." Kinsey sighed a breath of relief. His eyes went wide when Shepard smiled a wolfish grin, oh shit. "I'm going to help." A strong hand came down on his shoulder, and the world went black.

The lights came on just as suddenly as they had gone out.

Liara T'soni and Commander Shepard stood side by side in the center of the conference room. Liara had resumed her original stoic pose. Shepard stood at 'parade rest'. Neither looked particularly put out by whatever had just happened. They regarded him. Senator Kinsey sat in the chair where he had fallen. I'm alive. I'm alive. The thoughts repeated through his head. What the hell was that?

Footsteps on the spiral staircase. The Secret Service agent had decided to reappear. Finally! Kinsey jerkily came to his feet. He straightened his tie. He was about to open his mouth, to order this underling to cover his retreat and take the Asari and the Commander away, to call the entire fucking Army if he had to, when he noticed him place his finger to his ear bud and speak into his cuff. More footsteps on the spiral staircase. Shepard snapped to attention, a parade-perfect motion; the leather heels of her shoes clicked softly as they came together. The President of the United States of America, trailed by General George Hammond entered the briefing room.

"Mister President," Kinsey said, placing himself between the two biotics and the President, "You're not safe here."

"Shut up, Bob," the President said dismissively. Kinsey recoiled as if struck. "I know what you've been up to here. I wish I could say I was surprised."

"A forgery!" Kinsey squawked, mind reeling. He could feel it slipping away.

"You know the level of technology they have."

"I think you've had enough Bob," said the President of the United States of America. "I had hoped facing Doctor T'soni and Commander Shepard personally would have afforded you the opportunity to at least try to make amends, but I guess I'm just the idealist the voters think I am." He turned to Liara, and stepped around the staggered Senator. His voice softened noticeably, "Doctor T'soni, I am very glad that your wife and SG-1 were able to rescue you from the goa'uld, and I am truly sorry for the loss of your unborn baby. I know it can't possibly be a consolation, but my wife and I have dealt with a similar tragedy, more than once, in fact; we feel your pain."

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leader of the free world reached out and gently embraced the young Asari Matron.

"Thank you for the kind words, Mister President," responded Liara. Her face remained the same neutral expression, if slightly surprised by the hug, but Kinsey couldn't help but think her voice sounded softer than when she was speaking with him. Without a second word, she gracefully took the hand of Commander Shepard and led her from the briefing room. The President gently clapped Victoria on the shoulder as she passed. When he was sure they were gone, the President turned to him.

"As for you, Senator," the President looked at Kinsey, "I think we should talk about your future career plans." The President walked past the Senator, unbuttoned his jacket, and sat at the head of the conference table. As he passed him, the Senator chanced a glance at General Hammond. He looked disgusted. A glimmer of hope.

"You know," the President continued, "I've been keeping tabs on the Commander these past few months; and Doctor T'soni after she arrived as well. I know exactly what you've been up to; that little NID freak show that Shepard managed to fight her way out of, all of the stuff on-base, even the offworld bullshit." Kinsey didn't like the President, but he appreciated a political operator when he saw one. He knew he was building to something. "You ask me, those NID doctors and security guards got what was coming to them." He paused and looked at the General, "What was it George? Leave him in a room with Shepard for a few minutes and see what happens? Was that the suggestion?"

"Yes, Mister President. I believe so, sir."

"Right," the President continued. "It was suggested to me, I won't say by whom, that I let Commander Shepard have her way with you. You know, tie up loose ends for all the nonsense you've been orchestrating. But I've decided to not ask her to use her omni-blade to flense you like a whale, so you could do a few things for me." He smiled. Hammond scowled. Here it comes, thought Kinsey.

"Your days of screwing around with the Stargate Program are over. You'll never be President, but you may get close; so long as you play along." Kinsey's heart sank, but only slightly; already his mind was racing at the possibilities. I can play this game.
Together they walked, arms linked rather than holding hands; for once Shepard observing proper rules of decorum befitting the uniform she currently wore. Together they walked, down the center of the corridors challenging all to make way. They were an imposing presence. Shepard wore her 'service blues' Navy uniform, shoulders back and head held high; Navy SEAL Trident gleaming proudly in the overhead fluorescent lighting. Liara still wore the goa'uld-made 'Benezia-gown' and headdress. She cast a downright regal aura as she glided effortlessly through the corridors. *Those goa'uld tailors really knew their shit,* thought Shepard. SGC personnel flattened themselves against the concrete walls as they passed; no one wanted to get in their way as they approached their guest quarters.

Silent eyes and jaw-dropped faces tracked their passage. Word had traveled quickly through this level of the SGC as to what had happened to Liara. For every one of Kinsey's *malcontents* who loathed the couple from the other universe, there were several times as many who genuinely liked or respected them. It didn't matter what universe she found herself in, it seemed, Victoria Shepard forged bonds of friendship with whomever she served with. The Airmen and smattering of Marines' hearts at once went out to Liara for her loss, and swelled with pride that their comrades had rescued her while dealing the goa'uld such a grievous blow. Many even raged silently that they could not have had a more *direct* part in the recent mission.

Normally Liara would have been subjected to an extensive and invasive battery of medical exams and scans to ensure that she was 100% symbiote-free. The SGC couldn't afford to have a goa'uld running around in their midst unchecked; especially one in control of a host with Liara's *abilities.* Fortunately, Doctor Fraiser and General Hammond were willing to take Thor's medical scanner and Shepard's omni-tool data at face value. There would undoubtedly be some further examinations to see what the long-term effects of naquadah exposure to an Asari might be, *or a study of the effects of eezo on a goa'uld for that matter,* but those would come later.

Presently the couple arrived at their quarters and Shepard opened the door for her mate. Shepard normally took a small amount of pleasure in the simple, old fashioned, un-liberated show of politeness by opening doors for Liara; a quirky idiosyncrasy of hers. This time, however, it didn't show on her face; she kept her neutral expression. Liara glided through and Victoria closed the door behind them. The Air Force Security Forces guard, who had been trailing them at a respectful distance, took up position outside in the corridor. The sentry sighed. He was one of the base personnel who had grown quite fond of the couple. He could tell that they were hurting, and it pained him.

Once the door shut Shepard wanted to deflate. It had been a *long day* after all. Less than a day, honestly, since Thor didn't need to worry about stealth nearly as much on the return leg. He really opened up the throttles most of the way home. *Home,* she thought, *I can't believe that this is home.* Even after all these month she continued having difficulty wrapping her head around that. Still, she resolved to stay strong for Liara. Macho, she knew, but she had only the tiniest of inklings of what this might have been like for her.
Be there for her, was all she could think. She shook her head and ground her teeth. All of her command training from N7 school, over a decade as an officer in the Alliance Navy, years as a starship captain and leader of men and women; and all she could come up with was was be there for he? Shit! thought Shepard.

She balled her fist and raged again that she had allowed this to happen. She was the fucking Shepard! She was supposed to protect her. She saved the galaxy from two kilometer tall death machines, and a foot-long snake had stolen and brain-raped her beloved and kidnapped their baby. Then she had been forced to incinerate her own child; a thermonuclear abortion, what the fuck!? Shepard felt so impotent. Shepard felt so unworthy.

How could you let this happen?

"Victoria," Liara said, breaking the trance, "could you help me please?" Her voice was calm, level; her face even. Victoria wondered if she could detect a hint of smile. No, she thought, but she's not frowning either.

"Of course, my love," Shepard responded. Victoria almost smiled herself. Liara was strong; stronger than her, that was for sure. Liara had inherited Benezia's strength of mind and will, Aethyta's too, not that Liara would ever admit it, as certainly evidenced by her overcoming the goa'uld symbiote on Ba'al's space station. SG-I had refused to believe at first, they had been sure that it was the goa'uld playing a trick, using Liara's actions to some nefarious purpose. But, Victoria had been equally sure that Liara would be able to overcome the goa'uld's grip on her mind, just as her mother had overcome Sovereign's indoctrination; at least for a little while. And she had been right! Liara had saved them, no doubt about it. If only they could have saved their daughter as well. At least they had kept her from falling into goa'uld hands.

Shepard tried to set those thoughts aside as she walked up behind Liara. She reached up and lifted the headdress from her crest. A new, fleeting thought struck her. She had never seen any pictures of Benezia without the headdress. Not that it mattered. Liara was even more beautiful than both of her parents and that was saying something. Shepard placed the headdress atop their bureau and moved to unzip her gown. They had already decided to keep it. It reminded Liara of Benezia, of the good times at any rate. She wanted some memento of her late mother, even if they had come about it in some strange, roundabout way. Plus, that goa'uld slave had really done an excellent job of it; it would have been criminal to let it go to waste. That seamstress is probably radioactive dust blowing on the stellar wind right now, thought Shepard, such a waste.

The goa'uld certainly know how to corrupt everything they touch, don't they, Shepard reflected, grinding her teeth. She shook her head. No! Well, we'll be damned if we let them corrupt this too! This dress belonged to the Lady Benezia T'soni, one of the most powerful, wise, and well respected Matriarchs in recent Asari history. Liara was its rightful heiress, and by goddess she was going to keep it!

Victoria unzipped Liara's gown and unclasped the choker collar. It fell to the floor, pooling about her blue feet. Liara was naked beneath. The borderline-iridescent dapples on her beautiful blue skin nearly sparkled in the soft lighting of their quarters. Victoria, despite herself, was mesmerized; she could lose herself for hours counting Liara's spots. Of course, Liara claimed the same thing about counting Shepard's freckles.

She centered herself. Shepard could feel her mate's body heat radiating unencumbered by the gown's fabric. Liara stepped out of her shoes and strode towards the bathroom suite. "I'm going to take a shower," she said at the door without even turning her head. Ablution, Shepard thought, they both needed it; physically and mentally. "Please join me after you undress." Liara's voice was even, not a
hint of emotion.

Shepard sighed internally, "Of course, my love."

Victoria placed Liara's gown on a hanger and hung it in their bureau. She placed the gown's shoes neatly on their shoe rack. She removed her uniform and placed it in the bureau as well. Naked she entered the steam-filled bathroom and opened the shower door. For a split-second she feared she would find Liara curled on the floor crying. I know that's what I would be doing, she thought. But, Liara just stood under the pelting water, arms wrapped about her breasts, steaming streams running steadily down her.

Shepard closed the shower door behind her and wrapped her arms around Liara. Be there for her, the thought repeated itself, over and over, through her mind. Of course she couldn't initiate the bond herself, but she longed for it. Victoria wanted to feel Liara within her; she wanted to feel her pain. Victoria wanted to accept what had happened unto herself, to accept the burden, a penance for her failing her, anything to alleviate the suffering I know you must be feeling.

Liara was in conflict. She felt Shepard's arms tighten around her. She felt her warmth; even under the hot water. She wanted nothing more than to bask in her mate's love, to forget what had just happened, to wash it clean from her mind and soul. Taking a shower was just a metaphorical way of doing that, she supposed. Athame had made sure those slave girls had kept her body quite physically clean, at any rate. But, just as much as she longed for intimacy with her beloved, she feared it. Her experience with the goa'uld had been so violating. Some thing had forced itself into her mind without permission. Was that what it was like for Mother? Hands beating on glass, watching her body move against her will? It had put a perverted spin on what was the life-blood of her people, the bond, and she didn't know if it would ever be the same for her again.

That scared her. That scarred her. That was almost as terrifying as what they had done, what they had forced them to do to their daughter. She was Asari, the bond was as much a part of her as her beating heart, or breathing lungs, and the goa'uld tainted it!

That was just one of the reasons why she could not have gone through with it with Senator Kinsey, even if he had not blacked out when he did. It was funny, as Shadow Broker she had ordered countless men and women to their deaths, but she could not bring herself to violate someone's mind. Even if the fucker did deserve it, she thought. It was just one of those things that separated her from the animals, she supposed. She stopped that line of thought in its tracks. She knew, without a doubt, Shepard would not have been so kind had she the same gifts that were her own birthright. Viking Vikki would have left Senator Kinsey a quivering mass of drooling mental patient, locked within the confines of his own nightmares until the physical body died of old age or neglect; and she would not love her any less for it. That opportunity was passed, she thought, best not to think about it. Don't shop after you buy, was the human expression Victoria was fond of saying. Though, in retrospect, she should have probably given him a solid head-butt.

Aethyta would be disappointed with me.

Shepard's embrace trailed lower to her abdomen to rest over her womb. Liara's breath hitched in her throat. As if having her mind violated by the goa'uld symbiote was not bad enough, losing their daughter was the ultimate insult. Liara was too grief-stricken to even weep, it was just too much. They both wanted her so badly; Shepard doubly so.

She remembered a discussion she and Shepard had had early on in their relationship, after her resurrection by Cerberus. Shepard had told her how growing up she never really wanted children, that she never really bought into the 'great menstrual-life-force of the universe' as she put it; and that
she was overjoyed when her mother took her to get her first implant. Lieutenant Hannah was not really concerned with her daughter becoming a teen mom, her preferences were already clear by that time, but, apparently, the monthly cramping amongst the Shepard women was legendary and anything that could make that go away was a godsend. Liara still had difficulty wrapping her head around how the human female reproductive system worked; it was such an odd way of conducting business.

However, after her resurrection it was no longer a matter of choice. Victoria just could not have children anymore. The requisite hardware was damaged beyond repair and removed, what hadn't been lost somewhere in the upper atmosphere of Alchera; and that was something that not even Miranda Lawson could fix. Victoria lamented the fact that she could not give her daughters any human siblings to grow up with. Victoria lamented that she and she alone had to bear the reproductive burden. And now Victoria was obviously pained that this affront had befallen her.

*No, this is not your fault,* she thought, still unable to bring herself to form the bond. *You did not do this. You did not bring this upon me or our daughter.* She turned to look Shepard in the eyes. They appeared to have lost some of their luster. She gently kissed her beloved on the lips and brought her into a tight embrace.

Finally they cried.

They cried for some time.

Then they shut off the shower, dried their pruned skin, and climbed into bed. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

Shepard found herself in a forest. A dark forest. A dead forest. The trees' leaves, what leaves there were, were all a sickly black. What light there was cast everything in a grey hue, almost color-saturated, as if it were shining through fog or ash. She had been there before. *Oh god, I know this place.*

*Shepard...*

*Shepard...*

*No, oh god no!* Eerie, ghostly, wispy silhouettes of smoke milled about. They seemed to form groups and disburse at random intervals.

*Shepard...*

*Shepard...*

*...Her children were to be ours, raised to hunt and slay...*

Victoria squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She didn't want to do this again. She didn't want to relive this nightmare. She hadn't been to this place since the night before the assault on the Illusive Man's base. *Please no! Just, no!* She opened her eyes and saw movement through the blur of tears. She felt compelled to follow.

*Shepard...*

*Shepard...*
…Had to be me, someone else might have gotten it wrong…

Victoria squeezed her fist tightly. She could all but feel the W80's firing button under her thumb. Tears flooded around her eyelids.

Shepard…

Shepard…

…It's, quite a view…

The blinding, actinic flash.

…You did good, child. You did good. I'm proud of you…

Victoria's vision blurred with tears once more. Anderson's final words, now only a whisper, resonated within her heart despite her thudding pulse. Please wake up, Shepard. Just wake up! She shouted to herself, hoping to end the nightmare; but she didn't.

She never did.

She blinked hard and saw it again; a small figure moving amongst the trees in the distance. A thundering fog-horn-like sound nearly deafened her. The Reapers were coming, she needed to hurry.

She ran on.

________________________________________

Liara found herself in a forest. A dark forest. A dead forest. She had never been here herself, but she knew this place. She had seen it in 'the bond'. This was the place of Shepard's nightmares.

Liara…

Liara…

A voice, perhaps from one of the multitude of wispy, smoky figures called her name. Goddess, what is this place?

…You do not know the privilege of being a mother…

Liara was startled, that almost sounded like her mother's voice; whispering, somewhat distorted. She looked around. She saw movement in the distance. She started running towards it.

Liara…

Liara…

…To shape a life, turn it towards happiness or despair…

Liara squeezed her fist. She could all but feel Shepard's hand beneath hers as she slammed home on the nuclear device's detonator.

The brief, soul shattering hitch in Shepard's breathing as she realized what she had done.

…You've always made me proud…
A Reaper's fog-horn sounded. Liara ran faster. Her heart pounded.

Shepard finally came upon the small figure, but it wasn't what she expected. Oh no, this isn't right, she thought, this is worse, oh so much worse. This wasn't the little boy from her nightmares, the avatar of the Catalyst. She looked down upon a small Asari child, perhaps the same age as the boy from her dreams. She wore unremarkable Asari clothing. Her face, however, bore an eerie resemblance to the late Matriarch Benezia. Is this what my daughter would have looked like?

The Asari child ran into the waiting arms of another Shepard, just like in her previous nightmares. Unlike her previous dreams, however, Liara was crouched next to her. They all wore casual civilian clothes, no sign of the military or the war here. The happy family embraced warmly, turned to regard her, and smiled. Then, a flash of light, and in horrifying slow-motion their skin blackened, steamed, smoked, and burst into flames; as if they'd been caught in the thermal pulse of a nuclear weapon at close range. Shepard could feel the ghost sensation of the button under her thumb again.

Through it all, they kept their smiling gazes fixed on her; even as the heat charred lips and peeled away cheeks to show gleaming, toothy, macabre grins. Then their eyes popped in miniature steam explosions and sloughed away, leaving rapidly hollowing eye sockets; finally revealing a trio of smiling bone-white skulls. She could tell her own from the gold crowns on the molars.

They seemed so happy together.

As in all of her previous nightmares, a little piece of Victoria Shepard died inside at the sight of it.

Shepard heard a gasp. She turned to see Liara, another Liara. She, like herself, was dressed in combat armor. A little piece of her had just died inside as well.

Wake up.

They both opened their eyes at the same time. The nightlight in their guest quarters cast just enough glow that they could see the tears running down each other's faces. Liara had once explained that it was not unheard of for young couples to form the bond while asleep, only enough to share dreams, without intending to. Victoria quickly concluded that this is what had just happened. She sighed and also came to another conclusion.

"I don't think we can stay here anymore."

Liara merely nodded.
"I still can't believe we're letting this happen."

"Are you suggesting you'll disobey the orders of the President, Colonel?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't dream of saying that." Colonel O'Neill leaned back in the conference room chair and smiled cheekily at General Hammond.

Hammond scowled back at the Colonel. In general he let the Colonel get away with quite a bit of glib, when they were in private. Hammond was more concerned with performance in the field than inconsequential things like office politeness and protocol, and the Colonel always got results; but, at the moment, they were not alone. All of the members of SG-1 had assembled in the conference room the morning after the President and Senator Kinsey's exit.

The entire experience had left a sour taste in his mouth; that was for sure. He was grateful to his Commander in Chief for the house cleaning he could do, getting those Kinsey-supporting malcontents out of his command was a godsend, but the idea that the Senator was getting off scot-free was troublesome. Perhaps scot-free wasn't completely accurate, Hammond corrected himself, but he'd prefer to see the treasonous politician in a 10' x 10' concrete box wearing an orange jumpsuit. Perhaps somewhere just shy of a hundred miles south of Key West, he mused. Something told him that Kinsey would find a way of slipping the chain that the President thought he had looped around his neck. When that inevitably happened, there would be trouble.

But that was in the future, there was the present to deal with. "Please let me see if I understand this," the General continued, "Commander Shepard personally detonated the nuclear device and destroyed Ba'al's space station?" He had the report, of course. He just wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

"Yes, sir," responded Jack. "Well, I think they both pressed the button at the same time, sir."

"I see." Hammond winced internally at that revelation. That must have been an excruciating decision to make, he thought. "And there was no way that you could have recovered the embryo from Nirri's lab before you escaped?" Again, he'd read the report, but he wanted to hear his subordinates say it. He always wanted their impression and insights on their missions; those didn't always make it into the written report. And with good reason, too, he thought, considering who else was reading their mission documents.

"No, sir," responded Major Carter, "It sounded like that computer program of Liara's, Glyph, wasn't very subtle in disabling the station's systems. Also, Thor couldn't transport it out of there. Between the shielding of the station, the bio-containment field, and the traces of eezo in the embryo, he just couldn't get a lock." She shifted in her chair, obviously uncomfortable with the entire situation. "We kept Nirrti and Ba'al from getting their hands on it; her, pardon me," she corrected herself, "but at the same time we couldn't rescue her either."

"Even if we'd pried the entire thing out of the floor," Daniel added, "we wouldn't have been able to fit the cryogenics unit out of the door to the lab and then move it to the extraction point." He sighed sadly, "There was just no way."

"I see." Glyph? None of the written reports had mentioned the program by name. They just said that Shepard had been able to use a cyber-warfare system on her omni-tool to infiltrate the goa'uld computing system. He filed that thought away for a moment; he made a mental note, not even
scribbling it down in the margins of his notepad. Then General Hammond leaned back in his chair.

Once again he mulled the scenario over in his mind. He couldn't imagine the pain parents who outlived their children went through, and Shepard and Liara had just had to kill theirs with a nuclear weapon to prevent her from falling into the hands of monsters. *It must have been hard on Jack too,* General Hammond realized. He decided he didn't even want to ponder if he could have made a similar choice if placed in that situation.

"You said that Thor believes that Ba'al and Nirrti managed to escape from the station before it was destroyed, and that they evaded Lord Yu's forces?"

"Thor's ship's scanners detected a shuttle leaving the station and escaping into FTL. It's supposition, but it seems logical that one or both of them were aboard," Major Carter replied. "I don't think we'll know for sure until we or the Tok'ra run across them again."

"I see."

There was a few moments' silence.

"General, I know I'm not usually the one to say things like this," Daniel spoke up, "but I think we ought to discuss it so we can be supportive of their decision." He had everyone's attention now. "I don't think Shepard and Liara can ever go through the gate again. Thor said he could track the eezo and mass effect field interactions with the gate network, *all of them,* and I don't think it's a stretch to assume that's *exactly* what Ba'al was doing." Carter shifted uncomfortably in her chair. *She still blames herself,* Hammond observed, *he'd have to speak with Jack about diffusing that situation before it could metastasize.*

"If Ba'al did it once," Daniel continued, "he can do it again; and if Ba'al can do it, presumably, another goa'uld can do it. I don't think we should bank on the rest of the System Lords being stupid. Someone else is bound to figure it out, if not only by espionage against Ba'al."

Daniel took a breath and sighed, "If Shepard and Liara can't use the Stargate anymore, then I doubt they're going to want to stay cooped up in The Mountain. What do we do with them?"

Daniel's tone was even. His last comment was out of caring and concern, even love. He wanted to find a place for Shepard and Liara where they could live in happiness and safety, not someplace where the world would be safe from them. Victoria and Liara were not ones to live lives of confinement, they were mistresses of their own destinies; anything less would be a cruelty. Coming from someone else, Hammond might have been concerned. But Daniel wasn't advocating carting Shepard and Liara off to Area 51 or to some camp somewhere. They needed a home, because, as he said, they couldn't go through the gate anymore. It was just too risky.

The members of SG-1 shared a worried look with each other. A flash of light and suddenly there was a new presence in the room. "Thor! Buddy!" Jack rolled back in his chair producing an audible crunch from the wheels, jumped up, and offered him his seat. "Have a seat."

The grey alien took the offered seat and General Hammond quietly thanked god. While he actually quite liked interacting with Thor, he was always rather unnerved when the diminutive Asgard walked about. Colonel O'Neill joked about buying him a pair of pants next time he was in town; perhaps they should send him a care package. Besides, he looked more *dignified* when seated in his command throne somehow.

As Jack returned to his place he bent down to the floor and retrieved a crushed fountain pen. Hammond quirked an eyebrow, that pen looked *familiar*. Then he smirked internally with
"We were just talking about you Commander Thor," General Hammond said amicably.

"I know," the alien responded just as pleasantly.

Teal'c arched an eyebrow and looked at Major Carter. Her eyes went wide at the implications and she scribbled something furiously in her note book. Thor regarded her, "You wish to discuss the final disposition of Commander Victoria Shepard and Doctor Liara T'soni."

"Indeed," a new voice from the spiral staircase. Commander Shepard and Liara stood, arms linked. Liara wore a casual Asari dress. Shepard had changed into her Marine Corps-style fatigues. "I asked Commander Thor to remain in orbit above Earth," Liara said evenly, "I believe that there is much we need to discuss. But there is one more that must arrive before our conversations can begin."

As if on cue the Stargate activated, the alarms blared. "Unscheduled offworld activation!"

"That would be her now," said Thor, and he rose from his chair and made his way towards the gate room.

Shepard, Liara, Thor, General Hammond, and SG-1 entered the gate room as the Security Forces teams were manning their positions. They deployed in fast, well-oiled precision; M2 heavy machine guns swiveled towards the gate, troopers crouched behind barriers and trained their rifles. Charging handles were cocked, safeties flipped to the FIRE position. The Stargate engaged with all of its usual brilliance and nothing happened for several seconds after the formation vortex subsided. Under normal circumstances, General Hammond would have long since ordered the iris closed; but, this time, he had elected to keep it open. Based on Liara and Thor's reaction, it sounded like they had friendlies inbound. It wouldn't do to have them atomized on contact with a solid wall of titanium-trinium alloy.

A lone figure came through the event horizon and the Stargate disengaged. She was of average height and wore what appeared to be flowers and twigs woven into her hair. Her dress was purple fabric of varying textures. She folded her hands in front of her and smiled.

"Lya!" said Major Carter. The Nox woman smiled gently and nodded her head.

"Stand down!" ordered General Hammond, and the Security Forces troopers lowered their weapons and activated their safeties.

Lya walked down the embarkation ramp and stopped before Thor. They traded salutatory nods; members of the 'four great races' meeting as old friends and equals. Without a word or a glance to anyone else she then turned to Liara. She held out her hands. Liara took them in hers. They touched foreheads for a few moments with their eyes closed. The rest of the assembled stood about in what would have been an awkward silence if not for the shuffling of the Security Forces' boots on concrete as they left the gate room. Finally they opened their eyes and released their hands.

Lya turned to Commander Shepard. "Victoria. Liara has explained to me you and your wife's situation. With the advice of Supreme Commander Thor and the consent of my fellow Nox, I can offer you sanctuary with us if you wish it. Commander Thor has offered to transport you to our world since you cannot use the Stargate without risking the goa'uld tracking your movements."

Commander Shepard smiled to the Nox woman. She looked at Liara and they shared a nod. This issue had already been settled between them. She didn't even twitch at the use of the word sanctuary. The fact that that word might hold a particularly sinister meaning for Shepard and Liara was either
lost on or forgotten by SG-1 and General Hammond.

"Miss Lya, thank you for your generous offer. Liara and I would like to request asylum with your people." She turned on her heels, braced her shoulders, and looked General Hammond squarely in the eyes, "General Hammond, after much reflection and discussion with Liara, we have decided that we can no longer serve the SGC in any useful capacity as our transiting of the Stargate would bring undue attention to your operations. I must, respectfully, request to resign my commission with the United States Navy, and that our persons and possessions be given leave to depart with Thor at the earliest opportunity, sir."

Silence.

Shepard's words were precise. They were polite. They were not quite quiet, but Victoria was definitely not using the command voice they all knew she was capable of. The only thing that surprised the members of SG-1 more than the swiftness of the Nox's arrival and offer of asylum and Shepard and Liara's acceptance of it, was how quickly General Hammond replied.

"Granted Commander Shepard," he said with a small smile. He stepped forward, and to Shepard's surprise held out his hand, "It has been a true privilege to serve with you Victoria, however briefly."

"Just like that?" Shepard and O'Neill asked in unison. Victoria was a bit too stunned to keep from accepting a warm handshake from the General.

General Hammond merely smiled like Shepard imagined he did whenever he saw his grandchildren, "I anticipated that you would want to leave the service when you were reunited with Doctor T'soni, and that you would need to find some sort of offworld accommodation." He looked at Daniel knowingly. "I had the opportunity to discuss the matter with the President yesterday evening, and he agreed. I owe him the phone call, but I'm sure that he'll find this arrangement acceptable. I just wish it were under better circumstances."

He turned to Liara, "I'm so very sorry Doctor T'soni. You and Commander Shepard are more than welcome here, but I will fully support you if you wish to relocate with Commander Thor and Miss Lya." Liara said nothing, but took the General into an embrace and kissed him on the cheek. His bald head blushed red, much to the amusement of all present.

Shepard smiled and turned to Thor, "I think we have some good byes to make and some packing to do, Commander Thor. But, I believe that you can start by transporting anything with a dark energy signature in the base armory to your ship. That ought to account for the balance of Liara and my armor and weapons." Thor nodded. Shepard imagined that some unseen command was being passed to his ship's computers. The armory crew was probably having fits wondering where all of her gear was disappearing to. Victoria turned to General Hammond, "No disrespect General, but possession is ten tenths of the law. I intend, with Miss Lya's permission, to dig a deep hole near my new home and lay those items to rest. Along with, I hope, the memories of all the things I had to do with them." *Mama put my guns in the ground, I can't shoot them anymore.* Shepard's voice flattened out in an odd sort of way, and Liara reached her arm out and took her beloved's hand in her own. The Nox woman nodded. "Perhaps I'll plant a garden over them."

"Of course, Victoria," Lya commented. "I believe that the Lady Benezia was quite fond of flowers," Shepard arched an eyebrow and shot a glance to Liara, she cracked the faintest of smirks. "We look forward to nurturing your creative side," she smiled evenly.

"I shall return to my ship, Commander Shepard," Thor said. "You may contact me when you are ready to depart. SG-1 has a device for this purpose." With that he disappeared with a flash of light.
"I too shall depart," said Lya, "and prepare for your arrival." She smiled and nodded to the group. Then she pressed a small device on her wrist and the Stargate activated suddenly; no dialing preamble. She glided effortlessly, almost Asari-like, up the embarkation ramp, and disappeared through the event horizon.

The Stargate disengaged.
Epilogue

Just as soon as they had appeared, seemingly, Shepard and Liara were leaving. Not much was said as the Spectre and her beloved exited the gate room and made their way towards their quarters. There was no rush, really, to depart, but neither was there any real impetus to stay. A quick departure, they decided, was safest. Made for less drama in farewells, less doubts, and less temptation for any last minute chicanery on the part of NID; not that they expected any of that after the _show_ they’d given Kinsey.

Shepard reached under their Ikea bed for her duffel bag and placed it upon their comforter. With a start she realized she had no idea what to pack. _I saved the galaxy from total genocide, and I don't know what to pack for my exile_, she thought. _My exile_, she thought again with an internal sigh, _is that really what it is? Shit._

Liara must have seen the look of confusion on her face for she smiled. Victoria's heart melted. Some of the sparkle seemed to be missing from Liara's eyes since the disaster with the goa'uld, but she was smiling. _It's a start._ Whatever joining, however briefly, with the Nox woman had accomplished, it was apparently therapeutic. Shepard was struck by the briefest pang of jealousy. A _stranger_ had helped her mate where she had failed. Aside from their unintentional melding during last night's nightmare, Liara had not bonded with her since during her rescue.

Victoria was hurt. _She wanted to be the one to help, it was her job;_ it made her feel like even more of a failure than for allowing the trauma to befall Liara in the first place. Macho, perhaps, but that was how she felt; and, as Liara was fond of pointing out, _feelings are neither right nor wrong, they just are._ Just as quickly as the feelings had appeared, fortunately, they were gone. She was just happy that Liara had found some relief. Where it came from didn't matter.

The young Asari Matron crossed the room to take her hands in her own. She squeezed them and said, "_The weather is temperate and, despite their outwardly primitive lifestyle, the Nox are more technologically advanced than even the Asgard. We need only bring our personal possessions, the rest will be provided to us. Lya has promised that we shall want for nothing._" She gazed deeply into Shepard's eyes. She saw the trepidation.

"_Do not fear my love. We do not depart to incarceration, nor is this exile from friends and family. We have each other, and the Nox will become bosom friends to us. If we wish it, it may even be possible to send correspondence to Earth, though delivery may be extremely sporadic as the Asgard do not maintain contact with the Nox or Earth on a regular schedule._"

"_Lya has seen, through me, your experiences and pain. She has offered her support, and that of her people, to help you come to terms with what you have seen and done. They will help you heal your scars; spiritual, and _physical_, if you wish it. As always, you have my love and support in all things._" She smiled, warmly. Some of the luster returned to her eyes. "_We are as one, now and forever, nothing has changed that._"

Coming from anyone other than Liara, Shepard would have seen such a revelation as a profound breach of trust. The nightmares, the crying fits, the sleepless nights, these were all scars that Victoria went to no small lengths to hide from others; a metaphorical contradiction to the physical scars on her body she made no efforts to conceal. She knew, though, that Liara revealed her secrets to the Nox woman solely out of love and knowledge that she could help. It made her love her wife all the more so. She took a deep breath and released it slowly. This was all happening so quickly, and that was where much of the trepidation was coming from. She found calm in control and planning, and here was neither.
It would be ok, of that she was sure, however. She trusted Liara's judgment completely, and not just because she was her wife. Liara was now, for all intents and purposes, the Matriarch Liara – Mother of the Asari Race; dare she say Athame, were it not for what the goa'uld had just done to that name, and its actual less-than-innocent Prothean origins. She was drawing from a wellspring of knowledge and patience that were her birthright, much as Javik had said to placate her in his quarters back on SSV Normandy. Only now it was true, and it was bringing the shattered pieces of Victoria Shepard and Liara T'soni back together; then bonding them as a glorious whole. If Harbinger could only see us now, Shepard thought with a sardonic smirk.

Shepard realized, she could overcome any adversity alongside her mate; and fate, skill, and no small help from SG-1 had delivered her from the goa'uld.

"I'll follow you anywhere, my love," Shepard said in Liara's native tongue, if a bit haltingly. Her pronunciation was improving, but she still spoke with a thick Armali accent; a consequence of learning more from Liara than she'd ever covered in ICT's language classes. There was definitely truth to the old cliché that, 'the best place to learn a language was in bed'.

They kissed, on the lips, tenderly at first, but with increasing passion. Liara was definitely beginning to open up more and more since her rescue; apparently Asari could process trauma more quickly than humans. Or, perhaps, it was just this Asari? Victoria had no intention of pushing the issue but she was heartened nonetheless.

Soon their lips parted. They held each other for a few more moments, eyes locked, hearts thudding within their breasts in joyful unison. Then they separated to go about their work. Shepard removed a few sets of casual clothing for each of them from their dresser. She grabbed the lingerie and the Asari-style robes Liara had bought online. She neatly folded the Benezia-gown and headdress that the goa'uld slave had made and laid it all on the bed next to her duffle bag. Shepard left the US Navy uniform in the bureau, but she removed the SEAL Trident and other insignia from it and placed them in a small case. She couldn't imagine needing them where she was going, but the soldier in her treasured the trust that her adopted service had placed in her; it didn't seem right to just leave it in a closet when they left. There was still plenty of room to spare, yet the spacer-kid in her felt no need to find things to fill it; old habits die hard, apparently.

She went into their private bathroom to retrieve their toothbrushes and personal items, alas, no Cision pro-series toothbrushes. A pity, Shepard thought. Traynor was really onto something with those. Her gums had never felt as good as when she had picked up her own. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Liara knock the surveillance camera out of position with her biotics and begin working on her omni-tool. The holographic interface lit up in exclusively Asari script, just in case there were other video cameras watching. Her high-end laptop activated in sympathy and text and figures, mostly gibberish, began dancing across the screen. The laser printer on the desk spooled up with a whining sound, printed off a few dozen pages, and fell silent. After a few moments of that, barely long enough for Shepard to pack up their dental and shower kits, Liara ejected a USB drive which she placed into her pocket, and her laptop's hard drive, along with anything else with a memory chip in the room, began destroying itself. She went to work on Shepard's laptop next as Victoria placed the assembled items into the olive drab green bag. Even the NSA cryptographers at Fort Meade would have difficulty recovering any data from their equipment. And if they finally did, they'd be surprised to learn Liara had copied over all of her data with illustrated copies of the 'Kama Sutra', 'The Joy of Sex', and as many digits of Pi as she could fit before thoroughly rotating the 1's and 0's on the hard drive through the Gutmann Method.

In the bond, Shepard had jokingly called it their 'escape plan', the destruction of any incriminating data and potential hand-off to a trusted alternate of the 'Shadow Broker' network. The information network and financial resources that the 'Shadow Broker' had been able to assemble on Earth of this
place were still intact, and would remain so; tended to by a lobotomized variant of Glyph that Liara had released into the internet. The network and resources were too potent to just give up, however, so Liara left behind a way of contacting the electronic custodian and resuming control. All she needed to do was figure out how to give the key to someone she trusted without anyone noticing. Shepard wholeheartedly agreed, just so long as Glyph didn't turn into 'Skynet' and destroy the human race; a comment which elicited the most adorable confused look on Liara's face.

Shepard was too busy folding her field jacket to fit into the duffle bag to notice the wolfish grin cross Liara's face.

The bags were packed.

They were ready to go.

The goodbye notes, written on omni-tool aboard Thor's ship, were printed. Victoria had thought it a bit ghoulish at first when Liara had suggested they write them on their flight back to Earth. She had barely opened up to her about her ordeal, and the whole exercise rang frighteningly of composing a suicide note to her. Still, Victoria decided to be supportive, and it had certainly allowed her an opportunity to arrange her thoughts towards her friends at the SGC. The assumption that they would be leaving was sound, they couldn't stay after this; they just couldn't. It was just the details of their departure and retirement that they couldn't have known at the time.

Of course this was part of the legit component to the 'Escape Plan', it couldn't be all smoke and mirrors. NID was aware of the rather sizeable 'day trading' account that Shepard had amassed; even after all of the Ikea furniture and lingerie she had bought, not to mention their sizeable DVD collection. Liara had taken an unexpected liking to the classic 'Godzilla' films, much to everyone's surprise. Those earnings needed to go somewhere, and while their goodbye letters afforded them a good opportunity to disseminate them, they were all stuffed with cashier's checks and gift cards, Liara doubted very much that the NID would just assume that all of Shepard's online dealings were on the up and up and let them just give it away. Undoubtedly they would use some sort of tax loophole to have the IRS snap all of the money up, or at least cause the would-be beneficiaries a lot of headaches. So, Liara decided to do the next best thing; she had Shepard give all of the 'official' earnings, minus some nominal gifts, to Jack.

Liara was sure that Jack wouldn't really care either way; he probably didn't need the money given his lifestyle and family situation, and he would definitely enjoy running the NID around in circles as he cashed out Shepard's day trading account to buy a new telescope or pickup truck or whatnot.

Of course, that was only the official earnings. What Liara wanted was to distract NID, the IRS, and any other nosy or greedy three-letter-acronyms from the 'unofficial' earning that she and Shepard had amassed through the 'Shadow Broker' network, so they could leave at least some token of their gratitude to a select few members of the SGC and their immediate families. And if they could make NID chase its tail a bit in the process, thought both Victoria and Liara, a colloquialism that actually did carry into Asari, all the better.

They would be leaving a lot behind for their friends, gift cards notwithstanding. If they only knew, Liara thought, happily. None of them, nor their children, nor grandchildren, or in the case of General Hammond great grandchildren would ever have to worry about college, home ownership, or retirement. A few years after their departure, each of their beneficiaries would be getting a visit from a courier with details on their new, discreet fortune. 'Back to the Future 2'-style, as Shepard had said, whatever that meant, Liara thought. Liara had even set it up that she could add people to the list right up until the moment of departure, since she could communicate with the 'network' through the base's wireless systems; one of the first hacks she had put in place upon arrival here.
Of course, that was just the money! The real treasure was the network, and that was going to the one person who Liara was supremely confident would use it to its full effect; and, more importantly, use it justly.

That was the thought on both of their minds as they made their rounds through the SGC. Shepard and Liara bid their farewells to all of the people who had touched their lives. Some of them were mere acquaintances who received a hearty handshake and a kind word or two of thanks.

Others who were closer friends like Staff Sergeant Syler or Chief Master Sergeant Harriman received a hug from Shepard, a peck on the cheek from Liara, and a thin envelope. Syler stuttered in surprise how much he'd miss them, and Victoria admonished him to watch out for errant bolts of lightning.

The people for whom Liara and Shepard had written more elaborate and noticeably thicker going away letters warranted more time, but they still felt a quick break was preferable. No drawn out chats. No tears. No, I'll miss yous. No, 'good hunting', or 'good luck out there', or similar bravado. For a moment Shepard worried they were coming off as cold, but she was sure that the members of the SGC would understand.

At one point they passed the surviving members of SG-8 in the corridor. They stood against the concrete walls in silence, held textbook-perfect salutes as they past, but said nothing. Their commander smiled at Liara, and nodded in respect. That was all. Nothing else needed. The SGC knew their own, regardless of the color of the skin or the sweep of the scalp; they were happy to see them get their just rest. And honored to have served with them.

Presently, they came to the infirmary. Both Liara and Shepard wanted to express their gratitude to Doctor Fraiser, and to give both her and Cassie gifts to remember them by. Something more useful than the Mars-rocks that Victoria had already given them. Cassie had such a profound impact on Shepard when she first arrived in this place. Victoria and Liara doubted they would have had the happy ending they now enjoyed if not for the intervention on Doctor Frasier's back porch that Cassie had provided. She's going to grow up to do great things, they shared the sentiment.

When they entered Doctor Fraiser wasn't immediately evident, but Victoria noticed that one of the beds was occupied. A flash of movement caught her eye. Major Harper, alive, well, out of surgery, and conscious lay in the bed. Next to him sat Corporal Jones, rapidly un-interlacing his fingers from Harper's and pulling his hand out of sight. Shepard hardly noticed the swiftly subsiding burn marks on Jones' hands and face.

It hit Victoria like a thunderbolt. The awkwardness. The reaction at the mention of Jones. The near-violent reaction to the homophobia and bigotry-motivated violence exhibited by the airmen at the offworld airfield. It all came from the heart with Major Harper. Shepard turned her head to look at Liara and arched an eyebrow. She mirrored the gesture, obviously understanding the situation as well. There were depths to Harper than neither of them had appreciated. Victoria realized, too, the risk to his career the Major had taken by coming to her defense offworld, and the risk he and the Corporal were taking now by visiting in the infirmary. The UCMJ of this era was very specific; Harper and Jones walked a fine line, near a flame that could burn them both. Shepard's heart went out to them both. It was men like these who had paved the way for women like her.

In stilted Armali, Shepard said, "Add them both to the preferred list."

In a much smoother, almost melodic accent, Liara responded, "Of course, my love."

They both nodded knowingly to Major Harper and Corporal Jones. They nodded back. Then they were gone.
At last the couple came to the gate room, SG-1, Doctor Fraiser – they finally found her, and General Hammond had assembled to see them off. Of course, Thor could transport them to his ship from any place on the entire planet, but there was something fitting about departing from here.

Now Shepard and Liara spent a little more time making their farewells, but only slightly so. Shepard thanked General Hammond for all that he had done for her and her wife, and expressed how honored she was to serve under him, however briefly. Victoria shook his hand and then favored him with a hug. General Hammond had seemed almost like a father-figure to her, especially in his concern for Liara's wellbeing; somehow a simple salute and handshake didn't seem like enough. Liara too thanked the General for keeping the NID at bay for so long, protecting her wife from their designs long enough for her to arrive and even become her wife, and made him blush a deep beet-red with a peck on the cheek. SG-1 snickered quietly at the display.

Both Shepard and Liara made their farewells with Doctor Fraiser. They expressed their gratitude for what she had done for Shepard early on after her arrival in this place. Liara in particular thanked her, and asked her to relay her appreciation to Cassie. Deep down, she feared that Victoria wouldn't have survived the NID interrogation if not for the kind words that the young woman had share with her wife. The couple both told the physician to take care. Cassie would grow up to do amazing things, but she needed a caring and loving mother like Doctor Fraiser in her life.

Shepard shared a warrior's handshake, grasped at the forearm, with Teal'c and a silent bow of respect. She thanked him for serving as a sounding board, and wished him luck in his continuing fight to free his people from bondage. Then, in a surprising turn, Teal'c thanked Victoria and Liara for reminding him of the importance of family, empathizing deeply for their loss, and said that he would try to improve his relationship with his son.

Bidding Daniel farewell was bittersweet. Shepard had been blessed by fate and the multiverse with her happy ending, reunion with her beloved, while Daniel had lost his to the goa'uld. Doctor Jackson had come to terms with it, but the irony was not lost on them. Feelings of loss like that do not just disappear, even if Daniel did not begrudge the couple for it. Still, Daniel would miss them dearly, and the feeling was mutual.

Jack snapped off a sardonic salute, and Shepard favored him with a hug. "The check's in the mail Jack," Victoria said, "Make sure you buy something nice before those NID dicks garnish your wages." Colonel O'Neil cocked an eyebrow and smiled accepting one of the relatively thick envelopes they were handing out to SG-1, Doctor Fraiser, and General Hammond. For all of the trouble and frustration that Shepard had caused him, he was sorry to see her go. She was an excellent soldier, a holy terror on the battlefield, and, when she wasn't being a superior, bitchy know-it-all, an actually interesting person he would gladly call friend. Likewise, Liara was a refreshing presence in the SGC. For their part, Liara and Shepard would miss Jack. Had their realities played out differently, they didn't doubt that he would have fit right in on SSV Normandy.

Finally there was Sam.

Of all the members of the SGC, Shepard thought, she would probably miss Major Carter the most. She was a kindred spirit. A powerful, driven woman, fighting on the bleeding edge of a war for the very survival of the human race; Carter was even more amazing for doing so at a time where such a role was almost exclusively reserved for males. Part of Victoria was sad that Samantha never showed an interest in her advances. Had Liara not reunited with her, Shepard would have considered her almost the ideal mate. Alas, she thought, don't dwell on 'might have beens'. They shared a warm, but chaste, hug, and a wished each other luck.

Liara stepped forward, looked Carter in the eyes, and said, "It has been my great fortune to have
known you Major Samantha Carter. I will miss you greatly." Major Carter opened her mouth to respond when, with a bright flash of biotics, Liara reached out, wrapped her arms around the human, dipped her over, and kissed her.

Everyone's eyes went wide. Daniel and Hammond's jaws dropped. Jack smiled so widely he feared his face might break.

"More tongue!" shouted Shepard.

Everyone in the gate room, and the control room, was so fixated on the kiss, which, surprisingly, Major Carter seemed to actually be responding to as she reflexively reached up and wrapped her arms around the back of Liara's neck and back, that no one noticed Liara slip a small USB drive into Samantha's pocket. This place's Earth now had a new 'Shadow Broker'. Sam, one of the most moral people Victoria and Liara had ever met, would undoubtedly use her newly found power for good; of that Shepard and Liara were sure.

Liara released a stunned Major Carter and nodded to her wife. Sam took a few staggering steps back, nearly tripping until she bumped into Doctor Fraiser, and wiped her lips with the back of her sleeve. She looked at Daniel who stared at her blankly, then Teal'c who arched his eyebrow a good five centimeters.

Shepard smiled and shook her head in amusement. She nodded to Colonel O'Neil. "Ready when you are," she said.

Jack raised the Asgard communications device. "Thor, this is O'Neil, do you read me."

"Yes, Colonel O'Neil," came a voice.

"Two to beam up." He held Victoria in his gaze for a moment, "Energize."

Victoria and Liara linked hands. A fraction of a second later there was a blinding flash of light and they were gone. Almost as fast as the visitors had arrived at the SGC they had disappeared.

Everyone looked at Jack with a wry facial expression at his choice of words.

"What?" he said with a smirk.

Carter frowned and shook her head.

THE END
Coda

Chapter Summary

This Coda represents an idea I had for a potential follow-on series for 'New Beginnings'. I don't have plans to pursue it in the near future, but I cannot rule out that I won't either.

Sorry for the vagueness. I guess you'll just have to keep your ears up. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Doctor Meredith Rodney McKay, Head Scientist of the Atlantis Expedition, smoothed his jacket for the sixth time.

"Jeeze, Rodney," chided Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard, Commanding Officer of the Atlantis Expedition's Military Detachment, "will you stop," he paused, seeming to look for the right word, "preening? You're acting like a damned peacock!"

McKay looked at Sheppard with a scowl. Despite his Mensa-level intelligence, John seemed to like cultivating an outwardly simple air, often resorting to low humor and name calling; much to Rodney's chagrin. Still, his chastisement seemed to have had its effect. McKay straightened his uniform jacket one last time, a full-on 'Picard Maneuver', and stilled his hands.

"Just wanted to make myself presentable for our newest crew members," he replied, chin held high in haughty defiance. Then he turned and made a showy display of looking Colonel Sheppard up and down, "Something you might want to consider doing."

He looked down at his uniform. "Excuse me?"

"And would it hurt to shave once in a while?"

John ran his hand across the stubble on his face and shot Rodney a look. "You know, I don't see why you need to be here to greet them."

"Well," he puffed his chest out a bit, "I was the one who re-programmed the Pegasus gates so that they would ignore the dark energy interaction, granting them freedom of movement through this entire galaxy." He gestured expansively with arms, with that last comment, taking in the room as if it were the entire Pegasus Dwarf Galaxy. "I figured they'd want to meet me."

"And why are you here?" He folded his arms before him as he regarded his friend. "You think they're a security threat? Or if they were, you could stop them?" He laughed and smiled. "Those two Valkyries could slaughter all of us if the mission reports are to be believed." Suddenly his smile slipped from his face, it wasn't quite so funny when you really thought about it.

"Jeeze Rodney, I'm here to greet our new guests; maybe even do a little recruiting." He turned to Rodney and winked. "Besides, I had the graphics guy make up patches for them; I wanted to give them as a welcoming present." He held up a few patches. A graceful sweeping pattern, The Asari Republics, for Liara; a Systems Alliance and SPECTRE Wings for Sheppard's shoulders, and the coveted, at least for Shepard, N7, for her breast. They'd fit right in with the multi-national crew who
each wore the same uniform save for their respective national flags on their shoulders.

"After all they've been through, you think they're going to want to wear those; or uniforms at all?" Rodney chided. "You're just here to ogle, and they'll know it. Me on the other hand, I liberated them!" He bobbed on the balls of his feet once in triumph.

John shook his head. "You didn't spring them from jail; and don't forget, the Nox gave them the code to do it, Rodney," John countered, rapidly trying to change the subject. "They all but handed it to you when they showed up on Midway. You just installed it. You're like the 'Geek Squad' for the Pegasus Galaxy." Rodney deflated somewhat. Jesus, we're like an old married couple, thought the Colonel; especially if McKay was probably right about his ploy with the patches. "Though, I think your stock with Bill Lee and Pete Kavanagh might have gone way up. I can't imagine what the last week has been like for them, cooped up with those two on Midway while you got that code installed and checked out."

Rodney laughed, "Wasn't that video hilarious! I could watch that over and over again."

"I have a copy saved on my computer."

"Great! I love the bit where she drops his laptop on his crotch. Oh!" McKay paused, "do you know half the SGC still calls Kavanagh 'beef with broccoli'?"

Sheppard smirked. "Nice. But seriously, I'm not buying it, why are you here?"

"Well, if the Doctor is going to be on my staff."

"She's not going anywhere near your staff, Rodney. She's married."

Ahem.

The two men whirled on their heels to face Doctor Elizabeth Weir. "Doctor Weir," Colonel Sheppard nodded.

As if on cue, and saving both men from a potentially embarrassing conversation, the Stargate activated. The IDC from Midway was confirmed and the iris shield deactivated; the gate-room security detachment relaxed somewhat. A few seconds passed with no activity. Then a large plastic crate, enveloped in an ethereal Cherenkov-like blue glow, floated through the event horizon. John took a close look at it. The edges were encrusted with dirt. Atop sat an olive drab green duffle bag adorned with a rather large and colorful floral wreath. The crate floated several yards into the gate room and settled onto the floor.

Several seconds passed and they appeared. Their arms were linked. One's arms were pale white with freckles; the other's sky-blue with near-iridescent spots. One of the arrivals had flame red hair reaching half way down her back, the other had a sweeping blue crest which reminded John of the tentacles of a cuttlefish. They wore open toed sandals and ankle-length sundresses. They were, simply put, beautiful.

John's eyes narrowed briefly. Something wasn't right. Then he realized it. Shepard's scars, nearly legendary amongst the members of the SGC, were missing. They're gone! Neat trick, he thought.

The new arrivals looked around at their new home as the Stargate disengaged behind them. The blue beauty was obviously thrilled at the scientific prospects. John had read her file. She was an archeologist by training and undoubtedly looking forward to puzzling over the City of the Ancients. The human woman regarded her new surroundings with a much more critical, and weary eye. John immediately recognized the look. This was a hunter, a killer, she was sizing up threats, looking at
sight-lines, looking for cover; the new arrival had seen and done *things* that she wouldn't soon forget, if ever.

*A kindred spirit.* John's heart actually went out to her.

Doctor Weir stepped forward to begin the introductions.

The Stargate transit from Midway Station to Atlantis was decidedly longer than any other Stargate trip they had ever taken before. No wonder too, they were going half way between two *galaxies*! The priceless look on Bill Lee and Peter Kavanagh's faces when they had suddenly appeared in Midway's gate room a week ago had almost made their layover bearable, *almost*; but she was *definitely* done with that.

Her time with the Nox had been therapeutic. They were so peaceful. They were so understanding. They were so caring. They wanted to help her and Liara so badly, even if she didn't feel like she deserved it. She had done such *horrible* things in her lives, how could she be so deserving of such a wonderful wife and new friends who cared for her so? In the end, however, all parties involved agreed it was time to leave. Shepard wanted nothing less than to put war behind her, but the pastoral life was not for her. It wasn't for Liara either, when you got down to it.

When it became obvious that they were *ready* to leave, their hosts had told them they could alter the gates to *ignore* the dark energy interaction. They did not need to worry about the goa'uld, nor anyone else for that matter, tracking their movements. They could return to Earth if they desired it. Though, they had a better idea, if she and Liara were interested. Liara had made her first career out of studying a long-dead race that had, seemingly, left its legacy of technology behind for the peoples of the galaxy to pick up and utilize. The Nox offered her the opportunity to study this *place*'s equivalent, their former colleagues the *Ancients*.

So, after allowing one of Atlantis' scientists time to modify the Nox's computer code for this galaxy's gate network, here they were; tens of thousands of light years from Earth, in another galaxy, in a floating city eerily reminiscent of the Citadel, built by a long-dead race. *Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.*

"Doctor T'soni, Commander Shepard, welcome to Atlantis, I'm Doctor Elizabeth Weir, Atlantis Expedition Commander."

Liara shook the offered hand, "A pleasure to meet you Doctor Weir."

Weir shifted her attention to Shepard, "Commander."

"Please, just Victoria," Shepard replied in as friendly a voice as she could manage to a stranger, "I'm retired now."

"Of course," Weir said with what appeared to be a genuinely warm smile. "Please, let me introduce you to Colonel John Sheppard who commands our military detachment, and Doctor Rodney McKay who leads our science team."

"Shepard."

"Sheppard," Shepard said with a nod. Victoria paused and narrowed her eyes in thought. Then she cocked an eyebrow and looked off into space as if trying to dredge her memory for something.

"Something wrong, Shepard?" asked Liara.
Victoria's face screwed up in thought. "Um."

"Shepard?" asked Colonel Sheppard.

"Sheppard," Victoria said with more conviction. Then she shook her head again, clearing her thoughts. "That felt," she paused, "very, familiar."

Chapter End Notes

I would like to express my profound gratefulness to all of the readers who have stuck with this story from the beginning, or those who have just dropped in from time to time. This was the first serial that I ever wrote (originally on fanfiction dot net), and it was a very interesting experience getting constant feedback (mostly positive - usually constructive). Mass Effect is one of my favorite Sci-Fi universes and, from the get-go, I thought it would be neat to see how they might interact with the SG-1 bunch. Hopefully you weren't disappointed.

I'm glad I finally got around to bringing it over to this site to share it with this community.

I hope you liked it. May we all meet again in another story.

Anna

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!