Out Of The Twilight

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Summary

A Mass Effect fanfic, that changes the canon of the series from the First Contact War on. The colonists on Shanxi are attacked by Batarian slavers, and Shepard's mother dies in a firefight. The infant is taken in by General Desolas Arterius and raised as his own. (The edited version!)

Notes

So, this is roughly a re-write of the first four chapters.
Also! Translations:
The German segment reads: "Oh my God! I am sorry! Sorry, sorry! Are you all right? Yes? Sorry, my English is not so good. Ah! I'm Hoffmann. You must be Elizabeth Shepard yes?"

Turian:
garachna- Bastards
sikari-Pack hunter, domesticated and used as guard and attack animals, hunted with by sportsmen. Similar in build to the velociraptors in the Jurassic Park movies.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Elizabeth Shepard sat in the shuttle, hand resting on her belly as she stared out the window at the planet below. She felt the life within kick and she rubbed absently, trying to soothe. The child she carried had danced almost non-stop once they had reached space.

“Calm yourself, little one. We’re almost there.” She smiled absently at the sailor who stopped to check on her, waving away his offers of assistance. She settled back in her seat, watching as the planet grew closer.

_A new start, where no one will know, or care, where I come from. And a place where it’s unlikely that he will find me._ She smiled at the thought. _He changed, little one. He was kind, and gentle, but now he’s a zealot looking for a cause. You will grow up away from him. I’m afraid of what he would do with you._

She waited through the mad scramble of disembarking, then grabbed her satchel and headed toward the airlock. She had taken a job studying the Prothean ruins located near the colony of Shanxi, and was looking forward to seeing how these differed from the ruins from Mars. She wound her way through the crowded spaceport, looking for her new assistant, Zan Hawker.

She found him near a column, holding a sign with her name on it. She waved and headed over to him. Once he saw her, he tucked the sign under his arm and set out to meet her, weaving easily through the surging mass of humanity. He took her hand warmly in his.

“Zan Hawker, Doctor Shepard. A pleasure to work with you. Here, let me take your bag. Did you have any other luggage coming?”

Handing him her satchel, she replied, “There should be two trunks being delivered to the labs. I would like to head there first, if you don’t mind.”

He stopped, surprised, then trotted to catch up. “Oh, well, of course! I just thought you might want to rest, considering your condition….”

She wheeled to face him, startling him. “I am pregnant, not an invalid. I have been resting during the entire journey here, and I would like to get started immediately. Now, where is my lab?”

Zan swallowed, then gestured toward the doors to the colony proper. “There is a car waiting for you.”

She glared at him for a moment longer, then turned and marched toward the carport, internally laughing as she watched several people lurch out of her way. She slowed, marginally, after she exited the dock so Zan could catch up. He did, panting, and pointed out the car waiting for them. An attendant was already loading the last of her luggage into the trunk of the vehicle as they approached. She nodded at him and entered the car, Zan running around to the driver’s side.

They drove in silence for a while, then Elizabeth sighed and turned to Zan. “I apologize. I snapped at you when you were only thinking to assist me. I have been coddled every step of this journey and it is tiresome. I thank you for thinking of my comfort, but I do wish to begin. Prothean devices are complicated, and take much time to decipher. The Alliance would like to see what secrets this hides sooner, rather than later. As would I.”
Zan nodded, but kept his eyes on the screen ahead. “Alright. You gonna bite my head off every time you get annoyed?”

She smiled. “I shall endeavor not to, but I can make no promises.”

Zan glanced at her, then snorted. “Fair enough. And here we are.”

The car rolled to a halt in front of a drab, squat building. The beige walls bore new trellises with climbing vines and someone had planted a row of cheerful daffodils along one side in an attempt to liven things up. Elizabeth headed towards the door, making a mental note to ask about the daffodils later.

She entered the building and was nearly plowed over by a small, rotund man with glasses and a clipboard. He dropped the clipboard, papers scattering everywhere, as he cried out and grabbed her arms to steady her.

“Oh, mein Gott! Es tut mir Leid! Sorry, sorry! Geht es dir gut? Ja?” he stammered, holding her steady and peering earnestly into her face. “Sorry, mein Englisch ist nicht so gut. Ah! Ich bin Hoffmann. Sie müssen Elizabeth Shepard sein, ja?”

Elizabeth shook her head a bit and tried to figure out the German. “I’m sorry. I’m Elizabeth, yes. You said you were Hoffmann? Sorry, my German is nicht so gut.”

Hoffmann waved her away as Zan came up behind her, “Is fine, is fine. I am the device showing, ja? Komm.”

He hurried off down the corridor he came from, muttering to himself, as Elizabeth stared in shock. Turning to Zan, she asked “Is he always like that?”

Zan chuckled a bit and nodded, waving over a pair of students to help unload. “Welcome to Shanxi, Doctor Shepard.”

General Desolas Arterius read the incoming alert and snarled. The batarians had managed to hit again, this time a prestigious cruise liner. The Primarch was demanding further action, hoping to stop these pirates before they managed to kill or enslave any more civilians. Desolas straightened his shoulders and sent a message to his second in command, Abrudas, ordering her to gather up his team and meet him in the docks. After a moment’s thought, he sent an addendum asking Abrudas to bring his brother along, as well. Saren was 16, and halfway through his year of mandatory military service. Unfortunately, the lad had a tendency to disobey orders and back-talk his superior officers. Desolas chuckled to himself as he grabbed his gear and headed out. He would watch Saren and see how best to guide the lad.

He marched onto the dock, nodding absently at the ensign saluting him. His attention was focused on the ship ahead of him. The MSV Sevrum was a fine ship, and responsible for catching some of these blasted pirates. He sent his subvocals humming in satisfaction as he saw his squad waiting at attention before the ship. He marched past them without comment and boarded the ship to speak with Admiral Antoria Tibrius. He found her aft in the Command in Combat unit, studying the map of the galaxy. Desolas noted absently that the sites of all the batarian attacks were marked, but he found that he was distracted by the presence of the admiral herself.

Desolas was considered tall, even for a turian, standing just over 2.2 meters tall, but he judged that the admiral was only a few centimeters shorter than him. She was lean, the whipcord and bone
nature of turians everywhere, and her fringe surrounded a very striking face enhanced by a vibrant teal colony tattoo that swept from her left cheek down to her right mandible passing under piercing silver eyes. She seemed built for combat, and carried herself with the unconscious grace of a warrior. As he studied her, he knew that he would do anything to have this woman at his side. Suddenly, he realized that he was staring at her like an unblooded whelp as she watched him, browplate raised.

He coughed awkwardly, mandibles pulled tight to his jaw in embarrassment. He approached the CIC and saluted. “General Desolas, Admiral. My team and I await your pleasure.”

Admiral Antoria nodded, mandibles half-spread in quiet amusement, and stepped down from the platform. “Your team can store their gear in the armory, and can rest in the starboard lounge.”

Desolas nodded, and turned to go. He herded his team below-decks, trying to shove the embarrassment to the back of his mind as he returned to the CIC to consult with the admiral. Unconsciously, he straightened his uniform as he approached the CIC again. He felt the rising thrill of the upcoming hunt thrumming in his veins, and briefly wondered whether it was the thought of finally catching the pirates or the chance at wooing a warrior like the admiral that excited him more.

Elizabeth shifted a bit on the hospital bed, wincing briefly as her back cramped up again. Once settled, she went back to her tablet, studying the results of the scans on a newer Prothean device. The past three months had shown massive successes in technical improvements and the recovery of a few new Prothean artifacts, but her proudest achievement was the translator.

Once programmed with a language, it permitted the wearer to read and understand that language with the fluency of a native speaker. They had been testing it extensively, and now the team could converse effortlessly in English, German, Mandarin, and Urdu. Elizabeth had her interns busy with the tedious business of adding more languages as demanded by the Systems Alliance, but she didn’t hear any of them complaining. The Alliance had paid a vast sum of money to the team to purchase translators for all the soldiers under their banner, and her team was willing to work tirelessly to meet the demand.

She studied the results Hoffmann had sent her and felt a thin thread of fear weave through the joy. This new device looked innocuous enough, but something about it repulsed her. She had learned to trust her instincts and had ordered that any tests done on the device must be done with drones. Her team objected at first, some even going so far as to test the device in person. It had unleashed a massive electrical surge, killing the small team instantly. Elizabeth studied the newest test results, frowning.

Before she could come to a conclusion, the door burst open and her doctor, Laurie Gaines, rushed in, closely followed by Zan, a harried looking nurse, and a pair of Alliance soldiers. The soldiers took up a guard position on either side of the door while Dr. Gaines and Zan continued to her bed. Zan looked worriedly at the ceiling and the sounds of a ships engine whined through the air.

“Something’s gone wrong, Dr. Shepard. We’re going into lockdown. Zan will and Nurse McDonough will be on standby in case you have any issues.” Dr. Gaines said brusquely as she gestured the nurse into the room.

Zan took Elizabeth’s hand and squeezed gently. She nodded at him, then glanced at the soldiers and back to Zan. “How bad?” she demanded.
Zan shrugged. “There is a group of mercenaries shooting up the labs, and some weird looking ships flying around, but no one knows much more than that.”

Elizabeth nodded and looked over at the soldiers, waving at the closest one. “You two need to get everyone under the lockdown. Give me your clutch piece, and I can protect myself.”

The soldiers exchanged a glance, then turned to Dr. Gaines. She nodded, seeming relieved that someone was cooperating. One of the soldiers unhooked his pistol, handing it to Elizabeth. Dr. Gaines checked her vitals, then nodded at the soldiers and headed out.

Nurse McDonough came over to check Elizabeth’s vitals, nervously looking at the door every few seconds. “So, umm. You arrived, umm, with false labor pains?”

Elizabeth sighed internally and turned to Zan. “Could you be a dear and roll my bed to face the door? Thank you.” Turning back to the nurse, she smiled. “Yes. I’ve been cramping for about a day now.”

Once the bed was locked in its new position, Zan retreated to the far corner of the room, face almost crimson in embarrassment. He sat in a chair in the corner, pointedly studying a datapad with far more intensity than the information required.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in amusement, then started as the door burst open again. A humanoid form in armor unlike that worn by the alliance stepped through the doorway, flanked by two more figures. Something looked off about the shapes of the armor, Elizabeth noted, the helmets were unusually large. She drew the pistol and sighted at the leading figure. It seemed surprised at that, and threw a small cannister into the room.

Elizabeth fired off three rounds, hitting the figure in the chest as the room filled with an acrid smoke. She felt her head start to spin as the smoke rose, and fired off several more rounds wildly at the figures. She heard a body slump to the floor to her side as she succumbed to the rising blackness.

The Sevrum burst out of the relay, the helmsman already making the adjustments to the new heading. Desolas stood a pace behind Antoria, eyes fixed on the scans of the planet below. It had only been inhabited recently, and by a new race that hadn’t reached the Citadel yet. Desolas was amused by the reports of these ‘humans’. Apparently they had opened every mass relay and colonized every system they came across. Luckily for them, they had not yet reached Relay 314, or that attitude would have ended badly for them.

The ship raced through the darkness, and Desolas was surprised to see the batarian slave ship still in orbit. His mandibles rose high and tight in excitement at finally taking these garachna out. He turned to Octaeus Tannis, the tech specialist in his squad. “See what information you can collect about this colony.”

Octaeus nodded and turned back to his station. After a few moments, Desolas heard pings coming from his squad’s omnitools. Turning back to Octaeus, he watched the younger turian tap a few more icons and rise to meet him.

“They have newly developed translators. I’ve uploaded every language they have in their databases to the squad’s omnitools, and added the turian and batarian language packets to the human databases. Anyone down there with a translator should be able to follow along. They also discovered a few Prothean artifacts, the usual, mostly, but there is one artifact that doesn’t match
any known signatures. The team lead seems mistrustful of it, refers to it as if it were alive and aware sometimes, and has kept her team from directly accessing it. Considering that it killed the only team to go near it, I suggest the same.”

Desolas nodded and signaled to his team. They headed toward the shuttle bay, studying the new intel and chatting with each other about details that caught their eye. Desolas mentally chuckled as Abrudas chivvied Saren into the elevator. His squad had taken well to the addition of his brother, and Desolas wondered idly if Saren had realized that they were deliberately not referring to Saren as “Desolas’ brother”. Saren had thrived under the attention, branching out to study specializations he hadn’t considered before. Octaeus had informed Desolas, too, that Saren had expressed an interest in trying for Spectre status. Desolas was pleased, and encouraged his team to help in any way they could.

He shook his head as the doors closed on the elevator, and turned his attention to the mission at hand. His omnitool pinged with a map of the settlement, the movement of the batarians already mapped out. He studied the patterns, and realized what the batarians were looking for. The strange artifact. He sighed and sent a quick report for Antoria to pass along to the Council and the Primarch should the mission end badly. He was about to address his team when his omnitool pinged again.

“Desolas, Don’t die. I’m not through with you yet. And do try not to pick up any more scars, I remember your hide as it is now, and it is perfect. Antoria”

He felt his mandibles shift to a soft smile, then forced his face into expressionless lines to address his squad. They stood at attention, focused on the mission ahead like sikari waiting to be set to prey.

“The batarians are looking for a Prothean artifact. This artifact is dangerous, and should be avoided at all costs. Abrudas, take team two and head to the far end of the settlement. Saren, you have point on team one. I’ll try to collect the information they have collected on the Prothean artifacts. Take out all batarians you find, but do not fire on these humans. You all have their language now, tell them we’re only here for the batarians. Help any civilians you can, but the batarians are top priority.”

They saluted, and Abrudas’ team broke off for her briefing. Saren looked bewildered for a moment, then straightened his armor and led his team to the point of deployment. Desolas watched both teams work out their details, then the helmsman announced the approach for drop point one. Saren looked wide-eyed at Desolas, then swallowed and led his team down the ramp. Abrudas brought her team up, and deployed without incident at drop point two.

Desolas leapt out of the ship once drop point three was announced, and rolled once he hit the ground. The Sevrum headed back to orbit, and Desolas studied the layout again. He was close to a hospital, with the main labs about a mile away. He sighed and prepared to start toward the labs when movement ahead caught his eye. Several batarians were dragging some humans out of the hospital. Desolas narrowed his eyes as he readied his rifle. He shot the final batarian, who was pushing a bed with an unconscious human on it, right between the upper and lower eyes. He ducked behind cover as the batarians unceremoniously dropped their loads and returned fire.

He heard a scuffle amongst the batarians, and some wild shots that didn’t come close to his cover. Caustically, he peeked over the low wall and saw the form on the bed was sitting up and waving a pistol at the two remaining batarians. He took them out quickly, then called out to the reclining
Don’t shoot. I’m here to help.”

“Come out slowly, with your hands up.”

Desolas holstered his rifle and did so, carefully rising to his feet. The figure in the bed gasped, but held the pistol steadily aimed at him. Desolas slowly approached the bed, glancing at the unconscious figures as he passed. Before he could speak, the figure hissed and grabbed its abdomen.

“Are you all right? Did they hit you?” Desolas asked, concerned. It wouldn’t do for the first human he spoke to to die, after all.

The figure hissed rhythmically for a while, then replied, “I’m alright, generally speaking. Though I might need a doctor shortly.”

Desolas flicked his mandibles in confusion, then shook his head and checked the other humans. They were groggy, but regaining consciousness. He turned back to the figure in the bed and inclined his head. “I am General Desolas Arterius. My team and I are here to deal with these batarians, but we have just learned of the Prothean artifacts located here. I need copies of all information your scientists have concerning them.”

The human nodded in reply, adding, “I’m Dr. Elizabeth Shepard. I headed the team studying the artifacts. I can get you a copy of my notes, if you’ll help me up.”

Desolas narrowed his eyes and ran a quick scan with his omnitool. “You’re in labor. Wouldn’t it be best for you to remain here?”

She drew herself up, eyes flashing. “Why does every male I’ve met lately think I am delicate?”

Desolas snorted, reaching out to help her to her feet. “You’re bearing new life. All we can do is watch and protect. It’s humbling, so we try to contain you. Makes us feel important.”

Elizabeth laughed and stood, steadying herself with a hand on Desolas’s arm. Rubbing the small of her back, she glanced down when Zan let out a groan. Her assistant staggered to his feet, swaying a bit as he tried to regain his bearings. He turned slowly to face Elizabeth, then stared blankly at Desolas.

“I’m seeing things,” he decided after a moment’s study.

“No, actually, you’re not. This is General Desolas Arterius, and he’s a…” she stopped abruptly. With a small frown, she turned to look up at Desolas. “I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t ask what you are. Or is that rude? I’m sorry, you are the first alien I’ve ever spoken with.”

Desolas inclined his head, “I am a turian. Come, we should make for your labs before the batarians come looking for their companions.” After introductions were made and the nurse was on her feet, Desolas led the way to the labs, discussing racial politics with Elizabeth.

“So, the Council doesn’t know why the batarians cut off contact? Wouldn’t they have sent someone to find out what happened?” Elizabeth was asking as they reached the labs.

Desolas scanned the entryway before leading her in, answering, “They did. The Spectre sent in went missing. The final transmission supposedly had an explanation, but the Council never released it.”
“Huh. Seems like every government likes keeping secrets from it’s people,” Elizabeth said wryly.

Desolas snorted, then stopped as his scans picked up people in the rooms ahead.

“How many people should be here now?” he asked under his breath.

“None. I gave everyone the week off. Zan? Did anyone talk about finishing any projects?” Elizabeth turned to check with Zan, who shrugged.

“Wait here,” Desolas said, easing around the corner. Keeping his pistol at the ready, he slowly worked his way to the main doors of the lab. Glancing around the door frame, he surveyed the room.

He saw four humans standing in the center of the room, their backs to the door. They appeared to be studying some datapads and arguing. Easing back, he went back to the waiting humans.

“Four of your colleagues seem to be discussing some diagnostics,” he informed them.

“Huh,” Elizabeth said. “Well, the information you want is in that lab, so let’s see who’s here.”

Desolas stepped aside, letting the smaller woman take the lead. She started up a running commentary about her colleagues as they approached the lab. Desolas tuned her out as the humans in the lab turned toward the door at their arrival. Elizabeth stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the small group.

“Jack?” she whispered, shocked.

“Hello again, Lizzie,” the taller of the two men said, turning slowly to the door.

Elizabeth paled and took a half step toward Desolas. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been reading your reports, Lizzie dear. You’re sitting on a wonderful gift and you can’t see it,” he said, sauntering around the desk toward the group.

His companions had turned back to their work when Jack started speaking and now began to pack up their equipment. Desolas was interested to note that they didn’t seem alarmed by his presence. In fact, they didn’t seem to see him at all. Desolas kept his eye on the small group as he eased his pistol back out of the holster.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock. “The statue? You can’t! It’s too dangerous!”

Jack snarled and drew a pistol. Desolas drew a bead on Jack, eyes narrowed. He considered just shooting the human, but he wasn’t certain of the dynamics of the situation. He was slightly amused to note that Zan was trying to sneak around behind Jack.

“You just don’t understand! If we could harness the power there, humanity could rule the galaxy! Wait, you… you’re pregnant? Is it his?” he screamed, whipping the pistol around to point at Zan. The younger man froze, eyes locked on the weapon.

“You whore!” Jack spat. “I knew I couldn’t trust you!”

That decided Desolas. He fired and struck the man in the leg. Jack screamed in pain, and Elizabeth let out a soft whimper. Desolas glanced over, and was stunned to see her holding her side, her hand centered on a growing stain of red. He looked back at the sound of the far doors closing. Jack and his companions were gone.
Nurse McDonough knelt by Elizabeth’s side, suddenly seeming to find her courage. She barked out an order to Zan to grab a first-aid kit, and the man rushed off. Desolas knelt next to the women, pulling out his personal kit.

“The medicines won’t work with her, but there’s bandages. Do what you can.” He rose to leave and paused when he felt a hand on his boot. He met Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Kill him. I don’t know what he’s planning, but he has to be stopped. No matter what.” She closed her eyes against the pain and let him go.

Desolas nodded and followed the blood trail out of the room.
Chapter Notes

Translations:
Garvansaag: “Three corners”, a relationship between multiple partners, not necessarily romantic, somewhere between “families of choice” and polyamory. Can also refer to the equivalent to “soul-mates”, where one spirit recognizes its kin in another

Desolas moved quickly through the building, following the trail of fresh blood. As he focused on the sounds of retreat leading him on, Saren came over the comms.

“General. The batarians have been cleared out. We have the location where they’re keeping the captives. The humans seem shaken, but are welcoming our help. I’m going to take… I mean, permission to go with the human military to retrieve the captives?”

Desolas grinned when the team started gently ribbing Saren for the slip. He let them continue for a moment, then murmured “settle down.” The chatter instantly ceased. “Take your squad, Saren. Stop by the quartermaster on the Sevrum for supplies. I’ll authorize it.”

“I- Yes, Sir!” Saren replied, and Desolas was amused to hear the glee in his brother’s subvocals.

There was a thud ahead, and he paused, refocusing on the hallway before him. Easing around the corner, he saw the hallway was empty, and one of the doors on the far end hung halfway off its hinges. He swore under his breath and moved down the hall, carefully checking the rooms as he passed. When he reached the door, he cautiously peered out on the grounds. Some humans were loading the strange statue onto a ship, while an older man looked to be tending Jack’s wound.

Desolas burst out the door to take cover behind a barricade. He heard one of the humans call out in alarm, then leaned out to fire. The humans were shouting frantically, some firing back, but Desolas heard one voice calmly order the ship to take off. Eyes narrowed, he leaned out of cover again, and saw the hold doors close as the ship started to rise. He fired on the ship, knowing that it was futile. He opened his comms to the Sevrum.

“There is a human vessel leaving my location. Tag it for capture,” he ordered. As the confirmation came through, he turned and started back to the labs. He wanted to talk to Elizabeth about what had happened.

As he approached the lab, he was shoved into the wall by a harried-looking woman who rushed into the lab. Concerned, he followed in her wake. Several of the devices that had cluttered the desks had been shoved onto the floor, and Elizabeth had been placed in their stead. She was on her back with her feet on the table, while the nurse held a wad of cloth to the wound on her side. Desolas approached slowly, not wanting to interfere with the medics, when Elizabeth spotted him. She held out her hand, fingers beckoning. He paused, then approached her uninjured side. She immediately grabbed his hand, then gave a small smile when he jumped, surprised.

“Is Jack-?” she began, eyes locked on his face.

“He’s wounded, but they escaped with the statue.” Her eyes closed, and she let out a long hiss of
pain. Her grip on his hand tightened until it was almost painful, then she relaxed slowly.

The woman who had shoved past Desolas looked up at their conversation. Pointing at Desolas, she barked, “You. Alien. Keep her focused on her breathing. You,” she continued, shifting her glare to Elizabeth, “Do your breathing exercises. This baby doesn’t feel like waiting any more.”

Desolas reared back in shock, but continued to hold Elizabeth’s hand. He looked toward the doctor, then quickly back at Elizabeth’s face. *Red blood doesn’t look right.*

She seemed amused by his discomfort, and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “Stay with me, General,” she said with a half laugh, eyes dancing.

He let his annoyance rumble through his subvocals, but stayed by her side. He contacted his squad, ordering them to check in at the Sevrum, then help the colonists where they could. Abrudas found him nearly two hours, still holding Elizabeth’s hand. His second seemed content to lean against the wall and observe, occasionally fiddling with her omnitool.

Doctor Gaines, Desolas had finally managed to learn her name, finally seemed satisfied, and passed a bundled up, bloody infant to Elizabeth. She released his hand to take it, and doctor Gaines smiled and said, “Congratulations. It’s a girl.”

Elizabeth looked into the face of her baby and laughed. “Andra. My precious Andra.”

The nurse who had stayed by Elizabeth’s side for the whole ordeal caught Dr. Gaines’ eye and shook her head. The two women studied Elizabeth’s wound for a while, then Dr Gaines looked up and met Elizabeth’s eyes. The older woman opened her mouth to speak, and Elizabeth shook her head, closing her eyes. The women glanced at Desolas and moved away from the bed. Desolas studied Elizabeth’s face, worried. She was a fighter, but seeing Jack had struck her hard.

Her eyes opened, and he could see the steel in her gaze. “I’m dying. My child can not be raised by that lunatic. I have no family. Will you…?”

He felt a pang of grief at her words, and squeezed her hand lightly. “It will cause problems for both our people, but if that is your wish, I will see it done.” Turning his wrist so he could activate his omnitool, he set it to record. “A verbal record of your will would suffice, if your people witnessed it.”

Elizabeth watched his hands, then cleared her throat. “I, Elizabeth Shepard, charge this turian to raise my daughter as his own.” She hissed in pain again, then continued, “Do whatever is needed to care for her to the best of your ability.”

“I, Desolas Arterius, take on guardianship of this human child. I will raise her as my own. I will see she is brought up to bring honor to both her blood people, and the turian people.” He ended the recording, then studied Elizabeth’s face.

She was pale, shockingly so. She moved her hand to grab his wrist again, but dropped it partway through the motion. “Can I leave her a message?”

Desolas nodded, watching as the nurse took the baby off to the other side of the room. He activated his omnitool again, holding it out for her.

“Andra. My child.” She gave a weak laugh and continued, “This is your mother speaking. I’m sorry I won’t be there to watch you grow, to see you discover the universe around you. What will you be? A scientist like your mother? A soldier like mine? A chef, like my father?” she chuckled and shook her head, “Know that, whatever path you choose, I am proud of you. I love you dearly.
Remember, we are never promised tomorrow, so live each day as the gift it is.

“You must know, there is a darkness in your blood, as well as light. Your father, Jack Harper. He is a mercenary and a zealot. Please, do not seek him out. There is a darkness in him that will consume you should you get too close. Know that I am leaving you with the general to protect you, until you are strong enough to stand on your own. But don’t be afraid to lean on a companion. We are not meant to live solitary lives.

“Go into this crazy, mad, dangerous, wonderful universe and stamp your name into the stars. You can do anything, anything, you set your mind to. Don’t be afraid to love, but don’t let love blind you to the flaws of your partner. Live your life with compassion. You are a child of the stars, and I love you. Go make the galaxy a better place.”

She smiled wanly into the recorder, “I'm sorry I can't be there for you. We are tiny things, clinging to life in this vast universe of cosmic forces and things often don't go according to plan. I had planned to be there for your first everything. I'd planned to show and teach you so much. I wanted to give you all the support and love I never had. I'm afraid for you, and I have hope for you. I hope you are strong enough to be kind. I hope you are brave enough to ask for help. I hope you can find enough happiness to see you through the hard times. My child, you are worth everything to me; never forget that. I love you.

“Be kind. Be humble. Trust your instincts. Never let anyone tell you that your feelings are not valid or that you do not deserve to exist. You determine who you are, not other people. Please make friends, please never let anyone take your smile away. Sing in the shower, jump in puddles, do the things that make you happy. Spend your money on experiences, not things. Find someone who lifts you up rather then puts you down. Know that relationships are like a three-legged race and that no one is perfect and both parties have to put effort in to move ahead. Use the buddy system. Stare at the stars, watch sunrises or sunsets. Be you. Be you with all the intensity and unashamed joy of a super-nova. There's so much more I want to tell you. So much more I want to share with you, but I can’t. I know there are times you're going to be angry at me for being gone. I'm angry at myself for going. I wish I could stay. I wish so very much I could stay. If you don't remember a single thing of what I've said then please remember this. I love you. I love you more then all the stars in the sky, more then the sun and the moon. I love you with every breath you breath, and every beat of your little heart. I love you and nothing will ever change that. I'd say make me proud kid, but you already have. Oh you already have.”

She trailed off, eyes unfocused. Desolas saved the recording and held her hand again. She squeezed it softly, then her arm went limp as the breath sighed out of her lungs. Desolas keened his sorrow at her loss, causing the humans and Abrudas to glance his way. Dr. Gaines strode over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. But she didn’t die alone, and we will ensure you have no obstacles in raising her daughter.”

He nodded and turned to leave. He collected the infant, absently filing away the nurse’s instruction to support the infant’s head, and signaled to Abrudas. He strode out into the hallway, hearing the footsteps of his lieutenant and one of the humans behind him as he made his way back to the ship.

He heard Abrudas behind him, informing Antoria of his arrival, and of the infant in his care. The doctor announced her intent of traveling with them to Palaven, to ensure the health of the child. He heard her give orders that seemed nonsensical to him, requests for “formula”, “diapers”, a “crib”. He knew he should probably pay attention to the translations, but he couldn’t focus. He was met at the ship by Antoria, who took one look at his expression, and gently guided him to her quarters.
Antoria watched as Desolas carefully lay the infant on the bed, seeming loath to stop touching her. “The human made quite an impression, Lokaal. Tell me about her.” Desolas flared his mandibles in a pained smile, still watching the tiny form on the bed.

“She was a warrior to the core, for all that she chose to be a scholar. She…” he shook his head, and opened her final message on his omni-tool.

Antoria watched the message, recognizing the strength that Desolas mourned. She lay a hand on his carapace, looking down on the infant, mind already prepared for the consequences. “You can’t raise her alone. And Saren is young, yet.”

Desolas whipped around at her words, neck arched, fury written in every line. Antoria smiled, “Peace, Lokaal. I’m offering to help. A young female will always need a mother. And very few will accept the garvansaag you formed with her mother.” She reached up to cup his face as he lowered his forehead to hers. “I accept you and your family into my life,” she whispered.

“Yes. And I, you,” he replied. He stayed there, hands drifting to her hips, breathing in the scent of her for several moments. The intimate moment was interrupted by the baby fussing. Desolas sighed and stepped away, carefully picking her up and resting her against his keel.

Antoria smiled softly at the scene, heart warming at the thought of watching him be father to her children alongside this strange foundling he brought into her life. Shouldering the responsibility of command, she set those thoughts aside for a moment and left to go search out Abrudas. The Sevrum had been recalled to Palaven while Citadel forces would be coming in to aid the humans and see them welcomed to the galactic community.

Desolas’s team wandered in, exhausted from the fight and the relief efforts. They left brief reports, to be expanded upon as they traveled, and collapsed in the common room. Saren boarded last, practically vibrating with the excitement of his first command and solo mission. The captives had been freed with minimal effort, the batarians guarding the compound fleeing once armed opponents arrived.

Saren moved through the ship, staying out of the way as the crew prepared for transport, looking for Desolas. He knew he could start writing up his debriefing, but he wanted to talk to his brother. He ducked around a small cluster of humans, briefly wondering why they were on the ship, then knocked at Desolas’s door. Without waiting for a response, he opened the door, already talking.

“These humans are interesting. They almost-” he stopped abruptly, finally noticing the small bundle his brother carried. “What is that?”

Before he could get a response, the bundle moved, a tiny pink appendage emerging from the blankets with a small cooing sound.

Desolas grinned and let the hand wrap around his talon. The bundle burbled in what sounded like happiness and Desolas looked up at Saren. “This is Andra Shepard. Her mother died after charging me to raise her.”

Saren stood in the doorway, mandibles lax, blinking in confusion. “What.”

Desolas chuckled and pulled Saren into the room, the door hissing closed behind. Saren stopped when Desolas stopped providing momentum and stared at his brother. “We’ve only known about these humans for, what, half a day? And you already adopted one. How? Why?” he sputtered to a stop as the infant laughed and cooed up at Desolas again. The tiny hands were reaching for his mandibles now, and Desolas kept flicking them at her. Saren rolled his eyes and flung himself onto
the bed.

“Spirits, Desolas! How are you planning on raising an alien alone, anyway?” Saren growled in frustration.

Desolas looked up at that. “Oh, right. Antoria and I are going to formalize our garvansaag when we reach Palaven.”

Saren gaped at Desolas. “I WAS GONE FOR TWELVE HOURS! What the-? How-? What-? TWELVE HOURS, Desolas! I-” he sputtered to a stop again, getting up to pace the room. He swiped a hand over his fringe, glancing sidelong at Desolas, who settled onto the bed to give Saren room. Finally Saren stopped and stared intently at the wall. “What about-” he took a deep breath and started over. “What about me?”

Desolas looked up, shocked. Carefully laying the infant on the bed, he stood, pulling Saren around to face him. Cupping the back of Saren’s head, he rested his forehead against his brother’s. “You are family. You will stay with me until you can get your own place. I told you when we left I was not going to leave you, and I meant it.”

Saren slowly began to relax a his brother’s words, then tensed up again.

“I will not see either of you hurt. And Antoria agrees with me. Besides, I’m pretty sure she could beat me in a fight.” Desolas chuckled.

Saren decided to keep silent. He trusted his brother, but he was unsure of how things would play out. He turned at a knock at the door and made to leave. Desolas watched him carefully, but said nothing.

The human at the door seemed surprised to see Saren, but stepped aside to let him pass. Saren made his way to the crew lounge, thinking these new events over. He was happy for Desolas, truly, but this was all happening far too quickly for Saren to be pleased with the course of events.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas!

I'm not dead! Have more story! (Please don't hate me for taking for-fucking-ever to get this out)

Edit: I will be hiking the Appalachian Trail starting mid-February. It'll be 5-8 months with no regular internet. I'll be doing what I can on this and my other works, but no guarantees. (I'm so sorry)

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This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
• Questions
• Constructive criticism
• "<3" as extra kudos
• Reader-reader interaction

This author replies to comments.

If you don’t want a reply, for any reason (sometimes I feel shy when I’m reading and not up to starting a conversation, for example), feel free to sign your comment with “whisper” and I will appreciate it but not respond!
As the crew of the Sevrum began the landing procedures, Desolas paid rapt attention to Dr Gaines’s lecture on the care and raising of a human infant. It was fairly similar to raising an infant turian, though he was told that she would be much weaker than a turian infant, and for longer. She had said there were several books on the subject, but when they attempted to translate them, they were gibberish. Until they could fix the issues with the text translation, he was dependent on the humans’ expertise.

But it had been made official. Andra Shepard was his child, as far as the Hierarchy was concerned. The humans who had accompanied them would join the scholars in Cipritine to add their knowledge to the turians’, and that meant that they would be accessible to him and his daughter.

Desolas spent the first few minutes once the ship landed arranging for the garvansaag ceremony, and for time off for both himself and Antoria. Once done, he gathered up Andra and started toward the bridge. Once the door to his quarters opened, he was immediately approached by Dr. Gaines.

“We might have a problem. We were supposed to be getting a shipment of formula for Andra, but there are some delays while the politicians deal with getting humans out on the galactic stage. They won’t send anything for months.”

Desolas felt the first twinge of worry. “How much food do we have for her?”

Dr. Gaines sighed, “Maybe a month, month and a half. I’ll see what I can do, but there is no shipping between our people yet, so it doesn’t look likely that I can get some in.”

The Sevrum’s doctor, Tulius, chimed in. “There might be other issues, as well. Unless you keep her in an envirosuit her whole life, Palaven’s radiation will kill her. Not to mention, she’s levo, and infants have a bad habit of placing everything they encounter into their mouths.” Desolas groaned. He hadn’t thought of that. “Fortunately, Dr. Gaines and I have possibly come up with a solution. We just need to run a few more tests, and then we can implement them.”

“Good. As quickly as you can, please.” He continued on his way, signaling to Saren as he passed to collect his things.

Saren rose and trotted after him. “I’ve put in for leave after the ceremony. I’ll transfer you to General Septimus Oraka. He’ll see you through the rest of your training,” Desolas said once Saren had caught up.

Saren started to protest, but stopped himself. Arguing with a superior officer was a good way into a dead-end position, even if that superior officer was one’s brother. Instead, he sighed and accepted his brother’s decision. Oraka was a good general, just more cautious than Desolas.

Desolas watched as Saren accepted the decision and grinned to himself. Saren had been chafing under the other commands and needed to serve under a competent officer to truly show what he was capable of. He had discussed the transfer with Oraka on the return trip, and Oraka was going to place him in charge of a small team once the transfer was completed. Saren had shown a gift for command on Shanxi, and an aptitude for solo work. Oraka would help him on the path to becoming a Spectre.
A few days later, Saren watched, solemn, as Desolas and Antoria pledged themselves to each other. He held the infant, Andra, and found himself strangely drawn to protect her. He guessed that it was an evolutionary protection, as she wouldn’t be able to do anything to protect herself for several more months yet.

The doctors and geneticists had found a way to modify her genes to survive Palavan’s harsh radiation and consume dextro foods without harm, though the humans thought she’d be short for a human as a result. She hadn’t seemed to take any harm that Saren could see, and she wriggled and crooned to herself throughout the ceremony. The humans had called her a “remarkably happy baby”, claiming that most human infants spent large amounts of time crying loudly. He couldn’t believe that anything as tiny as Andra could possibly be as loud as they were implying.

After the ceremony, Saren stayed toward the back, not wanting to intrude on Desolas and Antoria’s well-wishers. He had set Andra to nap in her crib and was monitoring her vitals with his omni-tool, as she had fallen asleep and he didn’t want to continue carrying her around. He had just grabbed a plate when he noticed a couple of humans skirting the crowd. His eyes narrowed and he signaled to get Desolas’s attention. There were no humans invited to the garvaansaag ceremony, and no reason for them to be here.

Desolas’s eyes narrowed when he spotted the humans, and he signaled for Saren to follow them discreetly. Saren nodded, and allowed himself to be lost in the crowd. When he emerged in a back hallway, he swore to himself. He had misjudged, and had lost visual on the humans. He walked around for a bit, trying to see if he could catch them, when his omni-tool signaled an alarm. Andra was awake. Saren sighed and went to go care for her. It was his brother’s ceremony, after all, and he didn’t want to admit to losing the humans just yet.

As he approached the room set aside for the infant, he slowed and drew even with the doorframe. He could hear voices in the room, and they lacked the flanged tones of a turian. Cautiously, he peered around the frame. The humans he had seen earlier were standing in the middle of the room, and one, a taller male, was holding Andra.

Saren froze. He couldn’t confront the humans without the risk of hurting the infant, and knew that if he left for help the humans would be lost. He pulled his head back, breathing hard. He heard the humans climb out the window, and slowly, cautiously, he followed them. The humans were climbing into a vehicle with a large covered object in the back. Saren felt both repulsed by and attracted to the item. Shaking his head to clear it, he watched as they drove off. He marked the direction they went as he stole a delivery truck from a nearby store. He sent the owner a message apologizing and directing him to contact his brother for an explanation, and followed the humans out to Old Cipritine.

The humans came to a stop outside Temple Palaven and unloaded the object from the back. Saren noted that it took all four of them to lift it as he drove past. He turned down a side street and got out. Programming the autopilot to return the vehicle to the store, he broke into one of the vacant warehouses across from the temple. Moving silently, he approached the door to access the roof. He crouched low, and peered over the edge. The humans had brought the object into the temple. Saren considered the distance between his perch and the temple roof. He backed up enough to take a running start and leapt to the temple roof. He tucked his head, and rolled upon landing. He froze, waiting to hear if the humans were aware of his presence.

After waiting ten minutes, Saren found an entrance on the roof and slid into the temple proper. He wondered at that. The temple had been sealed centuries before. Saren couldn’t remember why,
exactly, but the order of Valluvian priests who had lived there had died out about the same time. No one should have been in the temple at all, and all entrances should still have been sealed. He reached the railing around the mezzanine he was on, and carefully looked over.

The humans had the object in the center of the main hall. It was a strange statue, curving and cold. It was emitting a blue light which bathed the humans around it. There were several dozen of them standing around the chamber, and the human who had caught Saren’s attention stood in the center and addressed the crowd. Saren activated his omni-tool and sent a message to Desolas. He hoped his brother could receive the live feed.

“These aliens can’t be trusted! They have poisoned our people! Our children have been branded outsiders before their first year by the incompetence of the alien scientists! The only way humanity will be safe and thrive in the galaxy is to kill them all!”

As the small crowd erupted in cheers, Saren backed down the hall. He froze when a voice beside him said, “Well, well, well. What have we here?” A human female stepped out of a shadow, pistol pointed at Saren. He debated attacking her, when he caught movement from the corner of his eye. Turning his head slightly, he saw another human pointing a pistol at him. He raised his hands, showing he was unarmed. “Glad you’re feeling cooperative, turian.” the woman said, gesturing with the pistol that he should head down the stairs to the main chamber.

When the two humans and Saren entered the main room, all eyes turned to him. All but one Saren thought, noticing one human was apparently running tests on the device. The man who had been declaring the death of all aliens looked at the one doing tests, as if for guidance, then shrugged and turned to the crowd again. The two humans holding Saren captive shared a glance and returned their attention to the orator.

“See how they act? Slinking around like thieves in the night! We will cleanse the galaxy of their evil, and humanity will reign supreme! First, we will rid their taint from the innocent they have corrupted!” The crowd cheered as one of them brought an infant to place upon a table at the base of the statue. Andra! The orator drew a knife from the sheath on his hip and raised it high.

The woman guarding Saren started. “Jack! You can’t kill a baby! That’s barbaric!”

Jack ignored her and brought the knife down with a yell.

Desolas tuned the well-wishers out when his omni-tool signaled an incoming message. Moving aside, he opened it. The message contained a video and a short note from Saren. Desolas listened to the human rant, and snapped at Antoria, “I need three squads at Temple Palaven, now. That human who shot Elizabeth stole Andra.”

Antoria nodded, walking a short distance off to arrange for the forces needed. Desolas strode off, jumping into the nearest transport and following Saren’s signal. He trusted Antoria and his squad to follow and tried not to think of the worst.

Saren shoved the woman aside and leapt for the infant. He felt the blade draw a line of fire down the plates on his back, but the child was uninjured. He held her to his keel and ran. He heard fighting break out behind him as some humans tried to follow him and others attacked their fellows, protesting the sacrifice of a child.
Running full out down the main hallway of the temple, he saw the doors burst open and turian soldiers come pouring in. He shouldered the soldiers aside and kept running. He didn’t stop until he saw his brother. He gestured at the infant he carried, who was cooing happily at him. “Desolas. You like the troublemakers, don’t you?”

Desolas looked at him, and called the medic over. “You’re hurt. Stay and start your mission report. Your part in this is done.” Saren looked at him, considered arguing, and nodded. He sat and made faces at the infant while the medic bandaged his back.

Desolas drew his pistol and entered the temple.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead! Neither is the story! It's just, depression is a bitch, and inspiration is not easy sometimes. But the story progresses!
Chapter 4

As Desolas entered Temple Palaven, he heard the sounds of fighting in the main chamber. He paused, listening. The temple was a warren of old hallways and passages and he thought he heard something off to one side. There. He saw where a portion of the wall wasn’t quite flush, and slowly pulled open the hidden door. It opened on a passageway that lead down to the bowels of the temple.

Checking that his assault rifle was secured, Desolas slipped into the passage. Straining to listen, he tried to guess how many had gone this way. It was no good. The passage echoed and reechoed every footfall, so he couldn’t tell if there was only one or one hundred ahead. Coming to a corner, he slowly eased his head around. He counted four humans and another of the statues they had brought. Pulling back, he listened. They appeared to be arguing.

“I can’t believe you, Jack! That was a human baby! And one of the skull-faces had more compassion than you about it! And you! Kidnapping! Did you know what he was planning, Ben?” The woman’s voice was strident in her fury.

The second male, who had helped capture Saren, spoke next. “Eva, all Dr. Qian told me was we needed a baby. I never asked why!”

The orator, Jack, interrupted them. “Enough. The temple is overrun, and Qian hasn’t found what we came here for. We need to evac and plan for damage control.”

The fourth human called over from the statue, “Ben, see if you can find a switch. I think I’ve figured out how to use it….”

Desolas looked around the corner again. The humans were clustered around the statue now, their backs to him. The younger man, Ben, was moving closer when Jack said “Wait. No, Ben, don’t!” Lightning erupted from the statue, sheathing Ben in electricity. Ben screamed in agony as Jack ran in, shouting “I’ve got- AAAAuughh!” The lightning leapt to Jack, and Desolas could see it crackling from his eyes. Eva screamed, but Dr. Qian seemed unaffected. He walked around the two men lying on the ground and almost delicately picked up a sphere from the center of the statue. As abruptly as it appeared, the lightning ceased.

Mockingly, Qian bowed to the men as his eyes seemed to glow. “Thank you for your cooperation.” Then he turned away from his fellows and went deeper into the temple with the sphere. Eva had rushed over to the side of the two men, and Desolas called for reinforcements. He stepped around the corner, prepared to offer aid, when Eva saw and screamed in rage.

She snatched the knife from Jack’s hip and charged at Desolas. Without hesitation, he brought his pistol up and shot her between the eyes. As she fell, he heard a strangled voice call “Eva!” faintly. Stepping over the woman’s body, Desolas went to check the two men.

Ben was dead, but there was something about the corpse that made Desolas uneasy. He turned to Jack. The man was struggling to stand, moaning faintly. Desolas knocked him out with the but of his pistol. Three soldiers came down the tunnel, weapons at low ready. Desolas signaled one to get Jack to the medic, and lead the other two down the passage after Qian.
Desolas and his companions, Abrudas and Octaeus, silently traveled down the corridor, following the echoing sounds of Qian’s footfalls. There were no side passages or rooms off the hall, and as they moved away from the statue, no light. They flipped on their flashlights on their weapons and continued on.

Over the comm, Desolas heard the accounting from the main hall. The humans had all fought, even though none were armed. They continued to fight until they were unconscious or dead. Of the nearly fifty humans in the hall, only three survived. They had been restrained and were being transported, along with Jack Harper, back to the embassy for care.

The tunnel abruptly let out onto a large plateau and the three turians fanned out. Desolas couldn’t see Qian, but then again, he had been given a pretty large head start. Desolas signaled them forward, and they walked to the far edge of the clearing, weapons ready, panning back and forth to cover each other. Desolas heard the rumbling of a ship’s engine from ahead. He looked up, and saw one of the human shuttles taking off. He activated his comm, and shouted “One of the humans from the temple is in a human shuttle, leaving my location. Shoot it down.”

After hearing the affirmative, he signaled the other two to return with him through the tunnel. He wanted to mark its location so it could be sealed again. As they returned, Abrudas and Octaeus chatted amiably, weapons held loosely in low ready. Desolas allowed it as he wasn’t anticipating any trouble, either. As they approached the chamber, they heard a scraping sound ahead. Desolas signaled a halt. Quintus should have left with Harper and the others. There should only have been the dead behind.

They stood in the passage, waiting. They heard the sound again. It sounded like someone walking, dragging their feet. Desolas edged closer to the entrance, Abrudas and Octaeus moving to cover him. As he came in view of the chamber, he saw two figures wandering around. He stepped forward, intending to speak to them, when they turned to him.

He stumbled back, horrified. The two figures were Eva and Ben, but they no longer looked as they had. There were glowing blue lines over their exposed skin and their eyes glowed with a light the same color as the statues. The two humans opened their mouths and emitted a sound between a scream and a synthetic tone. They charged the turians.

“Spirits, what happened to them?” Octaeus asked as they opened fire.

“Shut up and shoot!” Abrudas yelled back.

Once the two were dead, Desolas contacted the Primarch. “Sir. Some of the corpses have altered. They tried to attack us. I think the statues were responsible. Prepare to blow the temple.” He sent an image of the two bodies.

“Spirits, Desolas. How close do you want to cut it?” Primarch Pavius asked.

“Once you get here, blow it. Don’t wait for us to get clear.” He looked at his crew, and they nodded their agreement. These things could not be allowed to escape.

Leaving the chamber, Desolas took point, with Abrudas tailing. There were more ahead. Many more. At an estimate, there are forty-seven of these. There is no cover. If the two below are a good marker, these move quickly. We won’t be able to stand against them. If we can get to the exit, we might have a chance. He nodded to himself. “We’re going to try to make the exit. Octaeus and I will go first and cover you, Abrudas. Once you’re in the hall, cover Octaeus.” The two nodded. Desolas eased into the main chamber, covering right and low, with Octaeus moving left and high.
They opened fire on the misshapen things, while Abrudas ran for the exit. Once she was in cover behind the doorway, Desolas signaled Octaeus. The former corpses, now being assaulted from either side, roared in anger and confusion. Desolas noted the synthetic tones again. As Octaeus reached cover, Desolas headed towards the exit, maintaining a steady cover of suppressing fire.

As he reached the door, he signaled the other two to fall back. Octaeus placed his store of grenades on the left side of the hallway while Abrudas did the same on the right. When Desolas was clear and the leading edge of the monstrosities were in the kill zone, they detonated the grenades. Keeping their weapons ready, they continued to back down the hall.

Once they were clear, they ran to the command truck that pulled up down the street. Leaping in, Desolas heard Pavius give the order to fire. As the truck barreled down the street, one of the dreadnoughts in orbit opened fire, and soon the temple was only so much burning rubble.

Back in Cipritine proper, Saren watched Desolas head to the nursery while Pavius and the humans tried to figure out what happened. Saren was providing all the information he could, but he left after they made him start repeating himself. Following his brother into the nursery, he saw Desolas holding Andra, cradling her as she held onto his mandible and chattered.

“Is she alright? They didn’t hurt her?” Saren asked, suddenly anxious.

“No, she’s fine. I just…” he sighed. “What in Oblivion was all that? I’ve never seen or heard of anything like it. It worries me.”

Chapter End Notes

Woo! More story!
The humans who had been at the temple were being sent back to Earth for punishment. Desolas felt that they should be executed on Palaven, but he kept his opinion to himself. The humans had an impressive military force for all that they had only been exploring the galaxy for less than a decade. Desolas didn’t want to stand against them in a fight. He felt that it was wiser to ally with them, and the Primarch agreed.

He was watching Jack Harper being loaded onto the Endeavor, when he heard someone come up beside him.

“General Desolas. Admiral Grissom.” The human leaned on the railing and watched the prisoners board. “Ass. Should have put a round in his head and called it a day.”

“Agreed. Unfortunately, our superiors don’t.”

“Yeah, well. ‘Ours is not to reason why/Ours is just to do or die.’”

Desolas looked at the man. “That sounded like a quote. What is it from?”

Grissom grunted. “Old poem. Charge of the Light Brigade. Based on a battle. Technology advanced, the ways wars were fought didn’t, and some idiot in the back sent his men to slaughter because the old ways are the best ways.” Grissom spat. “I’m not sure I can trust you turians, but the few I’ve seen are starting to change that. Don’t judge all of us by Harper. I’ll send ya some poems, teach ’em to your kid.” He pushed off the railing and headed for the ship.

Desolas called after him “I’ll send you some of ours. It’s unusual to find another soldier who enjoys them.”

Grissom waved over his shoulder, and Desolas went to speak with the Primarch. He had been ordered to attend the council with the human representatives.

“We have a problem.” Pavius announced as Desolas entered the room. “The human who stole a shuttle and fled, that…” he checked his notes “Shu Qian? He escaped. The shuttle made it to the relay, and we can find no sign of it. The humans have given his picture and description to CSEC, but I don’t think he’s headed to the Citadel.”

Antoria nodded. “I have the fleet searching for the shuttle. When we find it, you and the humans will be informed.”

The newly minted human ambassador, Anita Goyle, spoke up. “According to Harper, Qian was the mastermind behind this, but we think he was just trying to throw Qian under the bus to lighten his own sentence. Based on Saren’s recording, Qian didn’t force Harper to try to kill a child.”

The turians looked at her, blankly. “‘Throw him under the bus’?” the Primarch asked, enunciating the phrase carefully.

“Oh. It’s an expression we use. It means to make someone else take the blame for a problem so you don’t get in trouble.” She consulted her datapad and continued. “As far as the turian requesting an adoption… under the circumstances, I won’t argue with the recording that was made, as it was
made clear to us by Dr. Gaines that Ms Shepard made the initial request without coercion. We would like for her to be schooled in human customs, however, as that is her heritage. ”

Primarch Pavius added, “Several of the humans from Shanxi have expressed a desire to remain here, or move on to the Citadel. And we will welcome any instructors Earth wishes to send.”

Desolas sighed as the politicians continued. And now for the fidgety bits, the embassy, trade agreements, introducing humanity to the council, and on and on and on. Everyone here knows it’s going to be changed in a year, so why bother? I hate politics. He maintained a look of attention as he listed everything he would need to keep the humans happy about his adoption, and mentally started listing off what Saren would need in Oraka’s unit.

After three hours of discussion and translating euphemisms across species lines, the council was let go for the day. Desolas walked towards his home.

Entering, he saw Saren at the counter, eating and reviewing a datapad. Saren saw him just as he took a large bite of his dinner, waved, and swallowed loudly. “The whelp is napping, and Antoria said she was detained. She was going to pick up some toys and things with the doctor.”

Saren shrugged, and hopped off the stool. Cleaning his dishes, he called over his shoulder. “I can bunk at Wilhierax’s tonight if you want privacy.”

Desolas turned to glare at his brother, and Saren tried to look innocent. He failed, and Desolas laughed. “Go on, be off with you. Just remember your assignments. Just because you got in early doesn’t mean you can shirk your classes. You meet with General Oraka tomorrow at dawn.”

Saren laughed and bounded out the door. He had packed his things once Antoria let him know she was coming. He still wasn’t certain that this was the wisest course, but he was glad his brother was finally happy.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so there's going to be a bit of a wait for the next chapter as life drama just showed up (found a stray cat, trying to find his family and failing that, I want to get him introduced to the current menagerie). So, yeah, I haven't had a chance to write for a couple days.

(Also: intro of the rarest of pairs, but I ship it)
Chapter Notes

Translations:
Patruus: Uncle
Bormah: Father
Lanura: (as a term of endearment) affectionate term for a young child, similar to “Kitten”

2165, just outside Cipritine, Palaven

Andra Shepheard stared down the barrel of the sniper rifle. Keeping her breathing even, she focused on her target. Her world narrowed to that one point. Slowly releasing her breath, she squeezed the trigger. And watched as the log below the bottle exploded into splinters. She lowered the rifle, hunching her shoulders as she turned, bracing for the blow.

Her uncle, Saren, sighed. Taking the rifle from her, he started. "Andra. You said you would practice while I was on my mission. You haven't touched this rifle since I left, have you?" Subvocals thrumming with disappointment, he waited for her reply.

The eight-year-old bowed her head. Turian culture demanded honesty and laying claim to one's mistakes. Despite being human, she had been raised to that standard. "No, Uncle" she almost whispered.

The turian looked at the back of her head, mandibles flicking in amusement. "And why have you not practiced?" he asked, suspecting he knew the answer he would receive. His brother's foundling was very like he was at that age.

The child looked up at that. "Because if I practice I'll get better and soon I'll be really really good and you won't come and spent time with me any more" she said in a rush. She blushed and studied the ground again. "I miss you when you're gone" she whispered.

Saren felt his brow plates rise at that. He had been expecting defiance, maybe even laziness, but not this. Training his subvocals into soothing tones, he asked "And what makes you think I'll stop coming to visit you when you no longer need training?"

"'Cause I heard Father telling Mother that you hate humans, an' that's why you said Lieutenant Anderson shouldn't be a Spectre."

The turian sighed, and inwardly vowed to speak to his brother about this. "Lanura" he started, kneeling down so he was more on her level "Anderson acted in a way that compromised the mission. Our target, Dr. Qian, escaped with all the evidence we needed, and I can find no leads as to where he has fled. If Anderson had told me of his intentions to rescue one captive over capturing Qian, I would have vouched for his Spectre status. I don't hate humans, I hate those who act rashly, with no thought of the consequences of their actions. Now" he placed the rifle back in her hands "Hit your mark."

She picked up the rifle, sighted down the scope, and he was pleased to see her hit dead center of the bottle. He ruffled her hair, making her giggle. “Finish out the targets, Lanura, and we’ll go home.”
She grinned up at him, and fired off a last three rounds, each one hitting its mark cleanly. He growled and scooped her up, rifle clattering to the ground while she giggled wildly. Holding her over one shoulder like a sack, he asked her “So, how much did you practice while I was gone, truly?”

Still giggling, she replied “Every morning before breakfast, every afternoon, right after classes, and right before bed, if I could sneak past Father. Oh! And sometimes I go when Sehr Vakarian takes Garrus out, too. I’m better than Garrus, an’ he’s two years older.”

“And what does your mother think of this?” Saren asked as they packed up and started back towards the Arterius home.

“Mother doesn’t say anything. She just winks.” The child skipped happily alongside him for a while in silence, then she stopped and looked at him. “Mother doesn’t command a dreadnought anymore because of me, doesn’t she?”

Saren stopped when she did and met her gaze. He wondered at the change of direction. She was a very perceptive child, something must be going on. “No. She was promoted to Heirarch and helps make policy for the whole Navy, not just one ship.”

“Oh. She doesn’t seem happy, though.” She walked on, sounding philosophical.

Saren laughed and stroked her hair. “Lanura, she has to deal with politicians all day. She doesn’t like them, but she is doing a necessary job. She just complains to make herself feel better. Now, I’m hungry, and you are looking tasty!”

Andra squealed happily and ran down the street. Saren caught her and scooping up the child and the bag, he carried her the final distance to the house.

As he approached the door, Heirarch Antoria stood up from her seat on the porch and held the door open for them. Saren nodded his thanks, dropping the bag on the table. Carrying the exhausted child upstairs, he lay her down in her bed and twitched the curtain closed.

Walking downstairs, he signaled Antoria to meet him at the firepit. The two turians sat, and Antoria handed Saren a mug of chava. They studied each other over the rims of their mugs. “Being a Spectre agrees with you.” Antoria broke the silence. Before Saren could respond, she continued. “Who’ve you been bedding?”

Saren looked embarrassed. Trying to hide behind his mug of chava, he mumbled something. Antoria stared at him, browplates raised. He sighed and gave in. “Aria T’Loak, on Omega. I needed information, she needed support and things just… happened.”

Antoria looked at him. “And how long ave things been ‘just happening’?”

At the front of the house, they could hear Desolas entering the house and heading upstairs. Saren sighed. “About three years, whenever I go to Omega.”

Antoria considered this. Then she reached over and swatted the back of his head. “You know better.”

She broke off as Desolas entered the garden, a fond expression on her face. Desolas walked over to her and pressed his forehead to hers. “Hello.” he whispered.

Antoria reached up and placed her hand on his cheek. She nuzzled his forehead and spoke in soft tones. “Your brother is being stupidly male.”
Desolas sighed. “Oh? What now?”

Saren ripped up a handful of grass and threw it at his brother. “Spectre business.”

“With Aria T’loak,” Antoria added.

Desolas looked at his brother, placed a hand on Antoria’s cheek and murmured “One moment.” He walked over to Saren and hauled his brother to his feet. Grappling, the two turians fell to the ground, laughing and rolling over each other, each trying to get the upper hand.

Andra packed her datapad carefully in her bag and made her way out of the classroom. She checked the hallway before leaving the room, a hard-learned habit, now. All she saw was a cleaner down the hall. She relaxed. Adults were alright, it was her peers she was concerned about. She was an excellent student, but only really had one friend. She set out on the short walk to the transit station, already planning on dragging Garrus out for more firearms practice, when she heard them.

A group of older turian children, all much bigger than her, were waiting along her path. She realized that she couldn’t turn back without appearing weak, and one way around was blocked off by the back of a building. Eyes scanning the area, she looked for a way out. The building had no doors or windows, and the other way was taken up by a large lake. She grinned to herself and kept walking.

“Hey, human!” the leader of the little clique called. Andra looked up, acting surprised to see them.

The group moved closer, and Andra swallowed. She knew she had to time everything just right, or she would get into another fight. She had managed to keep the worst of her abuses away from her parents’ knowledge, but bruises were harder to hide. The group surrounded her and she studied them quietly.

The leader shoved against her shoulder, hard. She staggered with it, but said nothing.

“No one wants you here, human,” he snarled, drawing back a fist.

She nodded softly, then shoved aside the turian to her right. Surprised, the turian fell, and Andra bolted for the lake. She could hear the shouts coming from behind her, but she didn’t bother looking back. She knew they were chasing her. Taking a deep breath, she jumped into the lake and swam as far out as she could. When she couldn’t hold her breath any longer, she slowly popped her head above the water. The group was clustered around the edge of the water, frantically poking at the surface with sticks. As she watched, an adult, Andra couldn’t see who, chivied the kids off, overriding their protests.

Andra grinned to herself, and swam off toward the far shore. She’d have to thank Dr Gaines for teaching her to swim later. She let her mind wander as she swam, trying to figure out a new schedule. She hauled herself out and looked around. She was only a few blocks away from Dr Gaines’ clinic, and decided to stop by, and hopefully get some dry clothes.

As she approached the clinic, she waved a Wiliheirax, who was planting some new flowers in the raised beds around the clinic. He nodded when he saw her, then did a double take.

“Again?” he asked, his soft voice full of sympathy.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I just want to get along, why don’t they?”
Wiliheirax stood and ushered her into the clinic. “Wish I could tell ya, kid, I really do. But I don’t understand most people, that’s why I stick to flowers. Tell ya what,” he continued, as a nurse spotted them and rushed off, presumably in search of dry clothes or Dr Gaines. “Why don’t I tell ya some of the stunts your family’s pulled over the years?”

“’Kay.” She sat on a bench and thought a bit. “How about Patruus? What’s something he did?” She accepted a towel and a change of clothes and ducked behind a curtain to change.

“Well, ya know most of his stuff’s classified, what with him joining the Specters so young and all, but there was this one time he told me about…” he trailed off, thoughtful.

“What?” Andra asked, curious.

“Well, you was just a baby, and some extremist humans kidnapped you. Well, Saren followed them out to Temple Palaven and managed to sneak in and tell your bormah what they was up to. Granted, he got caught, but that was a good thing, as he was close enough to grab you and bolt. There was some more to it, but you’re still a little young to hear it all.”

“Absolutely,” Dr Gaines chimed in, causing both Andra and Wiliheirax to jump. Guiltily, Wiliheirax got up.

“I’ll just go finish up the planting,” he mumbled and slunk out. Dr Gaines watched him leave, then fixed Andra with a glare.

“And why are you here, instead of at home, young miss?”

Andra bowed her head. “I was running from some kids at school.”

Dr Gaines sighed. “Well, that’s certainly understandable. Come on, I have cookies, and I’ll put on some music so you can do your schoolwork. Now, call home and tell them where you are.” So saying, she led the way to an unused office.

Andra called her home, hoping to just leave a message. Unfortunately, her mother answered.

“Hi, monah! I’m at Dr Gaines’ clinic. I’m going to do my schoolwork here, and maybe have dinner,” she said brightly.

Antoria studied her, but before she could reply, there was a knock on the door.

Puzzled, Antoria answered the door. She was somewhat surprised to see several of Andra’s classmates looking absolutely devastated on her doorstep.

“What’s this?” she asked.

They all started speaking at once, voices overlapping as they wailed in distress. The only parts she could hear clearly was “We didn’t mean to!” and “Please don’t have us imprisoned!”.

“Wait,” she said finally. Sniffling, they silenced, staring up at her with a mixture of sorrow and fear on their faces. “One of you, explain what happened.”

“We were just giving her a hard time, and she went and flung herself in the lake. We didn’t know it was that bad, honest! We would just push her around a bit…”

Antoria narrowed her eyes. “I see. Return to your homes. I will be by with your punishments later.”

They ducked their heads and left. Antoria sighed and returned to her call. “You never said it was
that bad. Several of your fellows think you killed yourself.” She raised a hand when Andra tried to interrupt. “We’ll discuss this later. Stay and have dinner with Dr Gaines.”

Chapter End Notes

And I return with an update! Huzzah!

Comments and kudos are love.
The following day, Antoria led Andra around to the homes of her tormentors. The revelation that humans could swim was sufficiently impressive to the younger turians, and Antoria’s expression was sufficient to keep the elder turians from comment. She was aware that the children were merely repeating what their families were saying, but they were all bright enough to react to new information much faster.

Antoria had spoken with Dr Gaines and her crew to agree on an appropriate punishment. Every day after school, they would travel as a group to the human clinic, and study human behavior and history. It sounded like a dire punishment to the children involved, but Dr Gaines promised to make it entertaining for them. After all, the lesson they wanted them to learn was acceptance, not more hate.

Over the next few months, the children would go to the clinic with Andra and watch some form of human entertainment. Several adults would be close enough to elaborate on any concepts that didn’t translate well, but the children were quick to pick up on the different nuances. Indeed, the “punishment” grew in such popularity that most of their classmates joined in.

Andra soon found herself somewhat popular, her peers coming to realize that she was generous enough to help anyone who needed it in whatever way she could. This usually manifested in more favored snacks appearing for movie nights, and a greater frequency of favored movies. The adults, both human and turian, were secretly amused at the changing dynamic among the children. Andra was proving herself a born leader, with a tendency toward putting herself in the way to protect her friends.

Andra continued her shooting lessons diligently, regularly going out with several of her fellows under the supervision of various adults. She was widely considered to be the best shot in her year, as well as a few years above and below. Garrus, while trying to compete with her, grew more diligent in his studies, and would frequently tag along on her shooting sessions. He and several of the other older children would assist in these sessions as the adults looked on.

Several months later, Desolas was transferred. Antoria and Desolas discussed it, and agreed to move to the Citadel. Andra was understandably upset at the loss of her friends, but Antoria and Saren arranged to use their influence to permit her weekly calls to Palaven to keep up with their doings. She wasn’t the only human in her new classes, and spending time with kids of her own species was enough to provide a balm.

She joined the local shooting club, and was quickly placed in competition with children much older than she. Her most bitter rival was a turian a few years short of entering the service, named Nihlus. He had obviously been taught to mistrust humans, and was quite vocal in his displeasure at her appearance. She decided that the best way of quieting him was to quietly beat his high scores.

It seemed to aggravate him more, that she was a better shot without bragging about it.

Desolas encouraged her to shrug it off. He would either learn, or not, but the Hierarchy promoted adaptable soldiers first, and Nihlus was only hurting his chances.

She spent a few more years on the Citadel, forming a friend group of a number of races. She
seemed willing to befriend anyone she met, with the sole exception of the asari.

When questioned about her dislike, she could only shrug. “They feel weird in my head.”

At fifteen, she followed turian tradition and enlisted, rapidly moving up in ranks. Desolas and Antoria moved back to Palaven, and Saren finally moved out, to a small apartment on the Citadel. He would frequently spend time with his brother, however, claiming that it kept him from subsisting entirely on take-out.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I'm not dead, promise!

This is just meant as a "time passes" montage, and introduces some characters we'll see later (Why, yes, I do love the "childhood friend-turned-lover" trope)

I have a few edits I need to make on the next chapter, and then a few finished ones, and then the one I'm currently writing.

(I'm sorry I abandoned this since august! I was wooed into Overwatch! I wrote a complete Skyrim fic! But I'm back for a while, at least.)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2175, Palaven

“Father, I’m 18 next month.”

Desolas looked up from the datapad he was studying. *Spirits, she had grown into a stubborn woman.* “And…?”

Andra huffed out a breath. “You said, when I turned 18, if I did well in the military, you would let me sign on with the Alliance navy. That’s next month, and you haven’t made any preparations.”

“And you accuse me of this with what evidence?” he asked, putting the datapad to one side.

She ran her fingers through her reddish-brown hair. “I’ve asked Sehr Kryik, the control staff at the docks, and I went through the official posting listings. You’ve done nothing to get me to Earth.”

“Again, and…?” She let out a short scream and pounded up the stairs to her room.

Desolas hid a grin. He was planning on surprising her, and had no intention of ruining that for himself.

Saren walked in from the back office. “You’re enjoying aggravating her, aren’t you?”

Desolas beamed. “It will do her good. Are the preparations made?”

Saren rolled his eyes as he grabbed a bottle of ale and walked outside. “Yes, dear brother. You know she won’t be happy with you.”

During the next several weeks, Andra pestered her parents, the turians she crewed with, and even the Primarch, for passage to Arcturus Station. Her superiors just smiled and went about their business, while her contemporaries shrugged helplessly. Finally, Desolas handed her a datapad.

“Here. Study this and draw up a report of your own conclusions,” Desolas ordered.

Intrigued, she opened the file. It was the testimony around the events that led to the destruction of Temple Palaven. She was interested to see that she had been given an uncensored copy and settled in to read it. The story had always fascinated her, and she was enjoying seeing the unaltered story.

She studied the images from the suit recordings with interest. The changes made to the corpses were simultaneously fascinating and repelling to her, and she knew that their images would be burned into her mind for a long time. After tearing apart all the information, she couldn’t find any explanation beyond the realization that she didn’t have all the information.

She woke up at dawn on the morning of the seventh and dressed for her morning run. She paused at the top of the stairs when she smelled chava. Desolas didn’t drink it this early, and Antoria refused to be up before 0930 every morning. “Advantage of the promotion” she called it. Cautiously, Andra went downstairs. She froze when she saw the turian at the counter, then she screamed “Uncle!” She ran over and hugged him. Saren returned the embrace one-handed, the other still holding the mug of chava.
“Good morning, Lanura. I’ve got an early present for you.” Saren said as Desolas entered the kitchen.

“If it’s anything other than a varren pup or a ride to Arcturus Station, I will shoot you both.” She grabbed a glass of water and stood, hip cocked, staring at her father and uncle.

Saren grinned at his brother. “Hear that? I could have saved myself a great deal of time and effort and just brought back a varren pup. I wish I’d known sooner. Avoided some paperwork, too.”

Andra glared at him. “Not funny, uncle.” She raised her glass, then the rest of what he said struck her. “I got in?” she put the glass on the counter. “Really? I got in?” Desolas and Saren both grinned and nodded at her. “I got in! I got in! I got in! Yesyesyesyes!” she sang as she ran over and hugged them. “I need to go pack!” she realized, and ran back upstairs.

“Bring your dress uniform!” Desolas called after, chuckling

From her room in the back of the house, Antoria yelled something incoherent and put Desolas’s pillow over her head.

**Arcturus Station, two weeks later**

Andra entered the Alliance space station and glanced around. Saren had left her to go attend to “Spectre business”, something to do with his current case. One of the Marines saw her and approached warily. She stood at attention and held his gaze. “Let me save you some time. Andra Shepard, and I’m here to join the Alliance Navy.”

The Marine nodded. “George Johnson. You’re early. Local time is 1145. Meet will be through there.” He pointed at a passage leading into the station. “Leave your bag. We’ll get it where it needs to go.”

She nodded and walked off, deciding to explore the station. She gathered more than a few wary looks, but chose to disregard them. She knew she stood out, choosing to wear turian-style clothing of a tunic over leggings, in lieu of the human fashions, but the human styles made her subtly uncomfortable.

At 1459, Andra walked down the passage indicated, looking for the staff resources office. Finding it, she knocked.

A voice from within called “Enter.”

Andra walked in, saluting the woman at the desk in the turian style. “High Commander Andra Shepard, as ordered.”

The woman examined her disdainfully, sniffed, and returned the salute. Andra stood at attention. The woman consulted her computer and sighed. “As you have been trained, presumably, by our allies, you will first be sent to Alberta to attend Officer Candidacy School. If you should pass,” the woman glanced at Andra “unlikely, you will be deployed on a trial tour. If your CO should be satisfied with your performance, you will be issued current orders as to stationing.” The woman sniffed and consulted her computer again. “As the turians handle things differently, you will carry the rank of Ensign until you can prove yourself in the Alliance.” she arched an eyebrow at Andra, seeming to dare her to object.

Andra forced the urge to punch the woman down and answered. “Ma’am. Yes, Ma’am.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Very well. You will depart on board the Troy at 0500
hours, Arcturus time. While you are here, until you leave for OCS in the morning, you are considered an officer of the turian navy, and will still bear the rank that they have issued you. We have made access to guest quarters available to you on Deck 12. You are dismissed.”

Andra saluted, got a half wave/half salute in return, performed an about face and left the room, considering. It was currently 1515 by Arcturus time and she had no idea how to kill the time before her departure. She looked around the docks, trying to see either Saren or his rumored protege, but couldn’t see either. She was about to head for the gym when her omni-tool pinged a message alert.

“High Commander Andra Shepard,

Welcome to Arcturus Station.

Admiral Hackett requests the pleasure of your company for dinner.

Dinner will be held at the Officer’s Club, on Deck 5, at 6:30 in the evening of August the Twenty-First, in the year Twenty-One Seventy-Five.

Formal attire is required.”

*Well. Right on time. Bit stiff, though.* Heading to the elevator, she punched the button for Deck 12.

Upon finding her room, and her bag inside, she hunted up the gym. Spending some time hitting the heavy bag allowed her to work off a bit of her anger at the bureaucrat. Then she returned to her room for a quick shower. Once her hair was dry, she tied it back into a tail and donned her uniform. The turians had had an interesting time with the human uniforms. Several other human orphans had been adopted by turians in the time following first contact, but Andra was the oldest by a few years. Several had already gone through turian boot camp, and only Andra had chosen to leave the turian navy for the human one. Seven of the humans currently in the turian military force had expressed desire in following Andra’s footsteps, but she would be the first. Goody. I get to set precedent.

Checking to ensure that there were no wrinkles or flaws in the uniform, she checked the time. 1700. She sat at the desk and used the comm unit to send a message home.

“Father and Mother.

I am scheduled to leave for Earth at 0500. There seems to be a mix of reactions to me. Some people seem pleased, while others would like to see me fail. I am an Ensign again, joy. This isn’t a slap to the turians, just the humans wanting to assess my abilities on their metrics. You know humans don’t do things the same way, and I don’t think they know what a demotion means in the Hierarchy. I know my skills, and I don’t take this demotion as a mark against anyone, except maybe the bureaucrats.

Love to you both,

Andra”

At 1815, she double-checked her appearance and set out to find the Officer’s Club.

Turns out, it wasn’t that hard. The O club took up all of deck 5. She entered and looked around. A waiter approached her. “Ma’am. Did you have a reservation?”

She shook her head. “No. I was invited by Admiral Hackett.”
“Ah, yes. This way, Commander.” And he walked off, leading Andra into the club.

He approached a table where a pair of turians were sat with two humans. As she rounded the table to the vacant chair, she recognized Saren and Nihlus.

The admiral nodded to her. “Commander. May I introduce Captain David Anderson” the younger man inclined his head “and Spectre candidate Nihlus Kryik.” The other turian nodded, green eyes sparkling against the black and white of his colony markings. “Please, sit.” Andra sat between her uncle and Captain Anderson.

Wait. Is this the one who was turned down for Spectre status… Oh boy. This'll be a fun evening.

Admiral Hackett looked between Saren and Captain Anderson, and spoke to Andra. “I’m curious, Commander. Your record indicates you’ve had dealings with pirates. It would seem to me that the turian military would provide a better platform to deal with them. Why make the transfer?”

She looked up. “Well, while the turian military does have the history of dealing with them, humans are starting to as well, and I thought it would be useful to help from the beginning.” She felt Saren leaning his spur into her calf, warning her.

Hackett nodded at her, and spoke to Saren about the particulars of his mission. Andra sighed. She had been permitted to speak very freely in the turian military, both as a result of who raised her and because she usually managed to pull a successful run from a seemingly hopeless situation. She did not have that luxury with the humans. She would need to remember that.

The dinner ended with Anderson and Saren managing to avoid acknowledging each other’s existence, and Hackett wishing her well in her training. Nihlus had been mooning over her the whole evening, which was annoying. She needed to focus on her training.

She went to bed. 4:00 would be here very early, and she wasn’t used to the 24-hour cycle the humans used.

Chapter End Notes

And we're moving on to the human training! Shep is now 18, and served 3 years in the turian military. The rank I gave her, High Commander, is equivalent to Captain in the human service. If I need to explain anything, please ask! I'm an idiot sometimes, and forget that none of you live in my head, and don't know everything I do.

I'm keeping some of what happened in the novel Revelation. If you've read it, remove all the parts where Saren is evil to be evil, and bump up the awkward romance between Anderson and Sanders. If you haven't, it's the best of the tie-in novels (imho), if you ignore the parts that make Saren evil for the sake of being evil. And the only part I'm keeping is Qian and Anderson choosing to save his love interest rather than stick to the mission.

You can come bug me on tumblr at p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com (because I can't get it to link, you'll have to copy/paste. Sorry.). I have links to other things that I can't promote on this site, so you should go check them out, please.
Chapter 9

Extranet message:
To: General Desolas Arterius
From: Ensign Andra Shepard
Date: 25 August, 2175
Subject: Settling in

Father,

I have arrived at OCS and started the classes. So far, it’s things I was doing on the Solymus, so that part is fairly easy. My bunkmate, Ensign Kara Gardiner, has decided that she is going to give me a “crash course” in human popular culture and idioms. Apparently, this means she is going to make me watch every vid and show the humans made in their early days of spaceflight about spaceflight and aliens and so on.

I don’t have the heart to tell her I’ve already seen most of them.

Love to you and mother,
Andra

Extranet message:
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius
From: Lieutenant Andra Shepard
Date: 27 August, 2175
Subject: Really?

Mother

Yes, there are males in my classes. No, I’m not going to bed one. Go bother Saren.

A

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Saren Arterius
From: Ensign Andra Shepard
Date: 17 September, 2175
Subject: I’m busy

Uncle

Classes are going well, despite that approximately half of my fellow students are trying to get me expelled or killed. I’m adjusting to the culture shift fairly well, although these 24-hour days are cramped. Why can’t humans use a 28-hour day, like a sane species?

Please stop complaining about Nihlus to me. If he’s that bad, revoke his status. If you are trying to set us up, please don’t. I will find my own mate, thank you very much.
If this is retaliation for setting Mother on you, please remember, I learned to fight dirty from you.

Much love,

A

Extranet message:
To: General Desolas Arterius  
CC: Spectre Saren Arterius, Heirarch Antoria Arterius  
From: Ensign Andra Shepard  
Date: 25 December, 2175  
Subject: Celebrations!

Family

It is apparently a major holiday today. Everyone is exchanging gifts and wishing everyone well. There’s a snowball fight on the grounds. I am still confined to quarters and cannot participate. I will not apologize for the fight, nor will I apologize for throwing the first punch. Giovanni Cobb deserved the beating I gave him and more. He was deliberately sabotaging practice rifles to shoot live ammunition. They can do whatever they want to me, but that would have endangered everyone on the field.

And, Mother, my bed is still virtuously empty. I don’t need a relationship complicating things right now.

All my love

A

Extranet message:
To: General Desolas Arterius  
CC: Spectre Saren Arterius, Hierarch Antoria Arterius  
From: Ensign Andra Shepard  
Date: 1 March, 2176  
Subject: Still busy!

Dear family,

I’m in training. I can’t answer every message every time!

I live, obviously. I’ve passed the official and unofficial training. Now comes the hard part. The Alliance seems fairly evenly split about approving of me, and wanting me to fail. I’m trying to ignore the second half, but some days it seems like it would be easier to shoot them. (No, father, I won’t) (and I won’t ask uncle to do it for me) (Killjoys)

I’m to be stationed on board the Marathon for my adjustment tour. We’ll be patrolling in the Skyllian Verge. Oh, joy. More pirates.

Love to everyone,

A

Alliance News Network Report:

A Hero is Forged
15 May, 2176

Elysium: Lieutenant Andra Shepard will be awarded the Star of Terra tomorrow for her actions in saving the colony of Elysium.

Lieutenant Shepard was enjoying shore leave on the colony when it was attacked by pirates. Rallying the colonists to fight, Lieutenant Shepard showed a strong leadership potential.

Lieutenant Shepard managed to single-handedly hold off one front of the blitz for two hours, coordinating defenses with other Marines on leave.

The awards ceremony will be held tomorrow at Arcturus Station.

Extranet message:
To: Admiral Steven Hackett
From: Lieutenant Andra Shepard
Date: 15 May, 2176
Subject: It’s an honor, truly

Sir,

I am honored that you wish to award the Star of Terra to me, however I feel that I did not do anything worthy of that honor. Asking people to defend their homes does not deserve a medal. I only did what any good soldier would have done.

Lieutenant Andra Shepard

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Saren Arterius
From: Lieutenant Andra Shepard
Date: 16 May, 2176
Subject: Kill you!

Uncle

I will shoot you the next time I see you. I saw you laughing at me during the whole ceremony! I don’t even deserve it! I did my job, that’s it. No need for everyone to make a fuss. It makes me itchy.

Oh! Mother said you finally got booted out of Aria’s bed. Good. You’re a Spectre. You’re supposed to be upholding the law, right? Although, I do love how you managed to break Omega’s one rule. Repeatedly.

Love you!

A

Extranet message:
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius
From: Lieutenant Andra Shepard
Date: 18 May, 2176
Subject: This is just getting old
Mother

Yes, there were many attractive men at the ceremony. No, I did not bed any of them. I want more than a fling, alright? I want a true partnership, like you and Father.

Extranet message:
To: General Desolas Arterius
From: Lieutenant Andra Shepard
Date: 5 June, 2176
Subject: Hi!

Father

You’re looking well. I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk while the Marathon and the Solymus were docked together. I’ve kinda missed seeing turians everywhere.

Love to you and Mother

Extranet message:
To: Major Kyle
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 10 January, 2177
Subject: Torfan

Major.

I will absolutely help you out. I want these pirates gone just as much as anyone. I will speak to my captain for a transfer.

Lieutenant Commander Shepard

Alliance News Network Report:

A Hero Rises
20 January, 2177

Torfan: A strike team under the command of Major Kyle routed the last of the pirates who attacked the colony Elysium last year. However, an anonymous source has informed the ANN that Lieutenant Commander Shepard was, in fact, the person responsible for the success of the mission.

“Not that I want to say anything bad about Major Kyle, you understand, but the Major was gonna have us just charge on in. The Lieutenant Commander, she told us to hold, and set up some kill zones on the outside. The Major didn’t like it, but when that first group came out, you bet your ass he changed his mind. We’d’ve all died if the Commander wasn’t there, that’s for damn sure,” a source, who wished to remain anonymous, reported.

Lieutenant Commander Shepard was previously awarded the Star of Terra for her defense of Elysium.
Extranet message
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 22 January, 2177
Subject: And you are surprised, why?

Mother,

Of course I’m going to finish every fight I’m in. And of course I’m going to do everything I can to keep my men alive. That’s how you raised me, that’s how Father raised me, what did you think was going to happen?

Yes, I know it was Major Kyle’s mission. He froze once we came down to it. I hope he’s going to get help. No, I’m not going to sleep with him to console him.

Go bug Saren, already. Rumor has it he found a gardener.

I’m being assigned to a security detail, help out some colonists. Hopefully, it will be dull work.

A

Extranet message:
To: General Desolas Arterius
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 12 July, 2177
Subject: I owe you and uncle lots of drinks

Father

Yes, my transfer to the security detail was a slap. I did deserve it, though. Major Kyle contacted me as a consultant, and I took over his op. The Major has friends in higher places than I do. No, I’m not going to use you or Mother to improve my standing here.

So, I’m currently in the medical wing on Akuze. I’m fine, just caught some thresher maw venom to the side. Yeah. Threshers. There was a nest of the damn things less than a mile from the main encampment. Surprised no one pissed them off earlier. Anyway, they had us go out on a practice run when we drove the mako right over the nest. Had fun taking it out. The other two, not so much.

The mako was heavily damaged, and a couple of my guys got pretty dinged up. I think Toombs is worst hurt with a broken arm, some cracked ribs, and some like injuries. One of the threshers fell on him. He claims that someone sent them, but it looked like a standard thresher nest to me.

I’m getting transferred to the Agincourt, under Captain David Anderson. I’m going to be stuck here for a while, though. Can you send me that file about Temple Palaven? I’m bored enough that it seems interesting again.

Love to everyone.

A

Extranet message:
To:Spectre Saren Arterius
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 30 August, 2177  
Subject: You’re an ass

Uncle,

Captain Anderson is an amazing leader and a great soldier. Why in oblivion did you boot him out of the Spectre training?

Actually, I think I know. He’s a lot like you, in some ways.

Stop glaring at your screen, you look silly.

Kiss your gardener for me

A

Extranet message:  
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius  
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard  
Date: 15 September, 2177  
Subject: MOTHER!!!

Mother!

He is my commanding officer! NO!

A

Extranet message:  
To: Spectre Saren Arterius  
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard  
Date: 24 October, 2177  
Subject: Congrats, you’re a messenger

Uncle

I’m sending you Father’s promotion present. Please make sure he gets it.

Two hierarchs in the family, and isn’t father pissed? He hates politics.

Anyway, give mother and father my love, I’m starting N level training tomorrow, so I’ll miss the ceremony.

What’s your gardener’s name?

A

Extranet message:  
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius  
From: Commander Andra Shepard  
Date: 30 December, 2177  
Subject: how much free time do you think I have?
Mother.

I am knee deep in N7 training.

I AM NOT SLEEPING WITH ANYONE!

A

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Saren Arterius
From: Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 5 January, 2178
Subject: Free at last, free at last

Uncle

So, you’re finally rid of your trainee? Does this mean you’ll stop messaging me every time he does something stupid? Please? Or did you set him loose years ago, and kept up the stories?

Also, seriously, what’s up with the gardener?

A

Extranet message:
To: Hierarch Antoria Arterius
From: Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 21 August, 2178
Subject: You’re not my real mom!

Mother.

I will run away and adopt many baby pyjaks and varren pups if you don’t stop asking about the men in my life.

I do love you, even when I want to shoot you

A

Extranet message:
To: Hierarch Desolas Arterius
From: Lieutenant Commander Andra Shepard
Date: 5 April, 2179
Subject: [no subject]

I heard. I’m coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Think of this one as "Time passes" (because if I covered Shep’s whole life, we’d be
I made some edits from the last time this was up, and will be making some changes to the next chapter as well.

Come bug me on Tumblr! p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com

Comments are love, share this with your friends, all that jazz.
Chapter 10

Palaven, 2179

It was a bright, sunny day, with not a cloud to be seen. It was wrong. Funerals were supposed to be rainy, grey days. The funebris was crowded with mourners. The crowd was nearly silent, only the faint rustling when someone shifted. The pyres were large and blazing. Andra stood next to her father and watched the flames consumed the bodies. She hooked her arm around his waist, hoping to give and receive comfort. He put his arm around her shoulders, holding her tight. She refused to cry. Her tears were for private, with her family, not for public display.

Saren, not being needed by the Council for the time being, had been busying himself by working security details at the consulate. Several days before, a human claiming to be “Cerberus” had run into the consulate, decried all turians as evil, and opened fire. The human had been taken down swiftly, but the damage was already done.

The eulogies were said and the ashes collected as the sun lowered over the horizon.

Many hierarchs and their aides were killed, many more wounded, but the worst of the tragedy was the class that had been visiting for a school trip. The children had been visiting the hierarchs to learn how Palaven’s governance worked. Saren had protected as many of the children as he could with his body, but incendiary rounds are not forgiving of flesh and blood.

Desolas and Andra returned to their home, silently accepting and returning the condolences with shared grief.

Antoria had been discussing a slight change in the trade agreement with the asari when the shooter had entered. She had gone to greet the man when he shot her in the gut. Wounded, Antoria had triggered the alarm. Her actions had saved numerous lives.

Desolas sat in the family room and stared at his hands. Andra went into the kitchen and looked around, lost. She knew she should eat, but she walked into the family room and sat by Desolas. He pulled her to his side, resting his chin on her head. They sat like that for hours, neither one breaking the silence. Finally Desolas rose and headed back to his room in the back of the house. Andra went to her old room upstairs. Nothing had changed. She lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She vowed to destroy Cerberus and all it stood for, but more information would be needed.

She got up and moved to her computer. Accessing the extranet, she looked into Cerberus. She knew that Cerberus would be able to counter any hacking effort she made, and so didn’t bother to try. She gathered all the information that was available on the ‘net, and then sent out messages to those in the Alliance military she knew would give her some of the answers she sought. She sent a message to Nihlus, asking him to use his contacts as a Spectre to gather more information. Any and all information she could get would be weapons in her arsenal in this vendetta.

Considering, she also sent a message to Garrus. She had heard that he was in CSEC now, and he might be able to hear something she couldn’t. Then she sent a message to Primarch Pavius and Admiral Hackett, informing them of her current quest and asking for any assistance they could lend. She considered seeking out the Shadow Broker, but she could not afford his services, and did not think it would be wise to anger two major players at this point.
Realizing that there was nothing left to be done, she lay down and forced herself to sleep.

The next morning, Andra got up and checked for replies to her queries. Her military contacts promised to send her what they could find. Nihlus and Garrus, apparently, both had files on Cerberus already, and both sent them in full, with promises to keep her appraised as they acquired more. She heard nothing official from the Primarch or the Admiral, but she hadn’t expected any. There were some anonymous files containing information, and that was fine.

She spent most of the morning compiling and cross-referencing the information she had. Once she had something solid, she sought out her father. He was on the porch, looking out at the garden.

“Father? I have some information on Cerberus. Not enough to do anything about them yet, but I will.”

He looked up at her and sighed. “I should have been there.”

Andra rocked back on her heels and glared at him. “The past can’t be changed. All we can do is get up and move on. And destroy Cerberus in the process.”

Desolas gave a half grin at that. “What do you have?”

She sent a copy to his omni-tool and brought him up to speed on the contacts she was using. He reviewed her information and nodded. “Good. You might be able to start here, but the Illusive Man will change things around once you start.”

“I know. I don’t plan on making a move until I can take out the Illusive Man first.”

He nodded again, and checked the message he just received. “Come on. We're wanted.”

They walked, discussing strategies and plans and contingencies for dealing with Cerberus until they reached a large, square building. They entered and showed the turian at the desk their credentials, and were instructed to go to room 1817. They proceeded to the elevator and Desolas hit the button for the 18th floor.

As Andra looked at the rows of numbers, she asked her father “Did you know that humans don’t label the thirteenth floor? They call it the fourteenth.”

“Why?”

“They used to believe that thirteen was an unlucky number. They mostly don’t anymore, but they still skip floor thirteen.”

Desolas shrugged, and they exited the elevator. Heading down the hall to room 1817, they entered.

“ Took you long enough.” said an annoyed voice.

Andra forced down a smile as the other turian in the room spoke. “Hush. They both had business to attend to. I’m sure they came as soon as they could.”

Desolas walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. Carefully, he embraced Antoria. She held him back, murmuring in his aural canal. Andra smiled fondly, and turned to the occupant of the other bed.

“You’re protege is useful. He’s getting me information on Cerberus.”

Saren snorted. “You’re not taking on Cerberus on your own.”
Andra considered. “No. But I will have enough information to be useful to the team that does.”
Saren grunted. Andra poked an unbandaged part of his torso as he slapped at her weakly with his
new cybernetic arm. “Finally got around to modifying medigel for turians? Good.”

Saren glared at her, fingers twitching. “The side affects aren’t worth it.”

“But now, you’ll be up and able to shoot things so much faster! But yeah, the nausea and dizziness
is almost worse than being shot.”

Andra checked her omni-tool as it pinged. “Speaking of, I have to go get shot at. I need to be at the
docks in fifteen. Do your physio, uncle, and try not to traumatize your nurses.” She hugged
everyone farewell and got promises to send more information her way and left for the docks.

Chapter End Notes

Have a resolution to the cliffhanger.

Check me out at p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com, because I have links I can't post here!

So, meta talk!

In the game, Saren is all cyborg-y when we first meet him, except he was actually
only supposed to look like that at the end, after Virmire, but the devs forgot
(considering they also forgot about Thane, I'm not surprised). Anyway, one of Saren's
"enhancements" in the game is his left arm is replaced by a geth arm.

This piece of trivia might become relevant in later chapters. ;)

Comments are love!

Thanks for reading!
“Alright, this one’s nice and simple. Eden Prime dug up a Prothean beacon. The powers that be want to study in on site for a bit, apparently they think it’s tied to something bigger. Council’s sending a Spectre to keep an eye on things, and the Alliance is sending us to keep an eye on them. Any questions?”

Andra looked around at the small squad, making sure everyone was on the same page.

“Good. Now, this is supposed to be routine. We all know how that works out.” She waited for the chuckles to die out before continuing. “Our main priority is keeping the civilians safe. Second is keeping peace between all the different races that’ll be in on this project. Any problems, come to me.”

The shuttle came in for a landing at a small spaceport, and Andra grabbed her gear and hopped out. She left Alenko in charge of gathering everyone as she went in search of the barracks. She found the port master in his office, going over some invoices.

“Alliance squad, checking in. Where do you want us?”

He looked up. “Right. Barracks are closer to the site. Get your men and take the tram. You lot’ll be bunking with the Spectre. Turian. There’s marines on site, you can choose to take over or not. They’re mostly locals, used to doing security, but not for anything this big.”

She nodded and took his directions, waving her squad over. Once they were settled on the tram, she addressed them again.

“We’ll be bunking with a turian, the Spectre. Any of you worked with a turian before?” The squad shook their heads. “Right. On duty, they’re duty first, everything else is second. Off duty, they have permission to do whatever. Don’t judge them until you’ve spoken when they’re off duty.”

“Weren’t you raised by a turian, ma’am?” one of the newer ones, Barretts, asked.

“Yes, and served three years in the Hierarchy military. Officially, I transferred out, unofficially, I’m still a High Commander. It’s equivalent to a captain’s rank.”

“So why are you a commander now?” Alenko wondered.

“Politics. Turians believe in promoting people based on skill, humans demand a certain amount of time at each rank first. It shouldn’t be an issue, though. Spectres outrank me either way. Be respectful, and don’t try to piss them off.”

They reached the docks and filed out, following her to their barracks. Once inside, they claimed beds away from the two occupied ones and began stowing their gear as Andra dropped her duffle and made her way to the dig site. She made note of the monitoring equipment and scientists as she walked. Mostly salarian, a few turians, and surprisingly, a quarian. She rounded the corner to approach the shack that was acting as security headquarters.
And stopped dead.

*Nihlus.*

He was standing by the shack, talking to one of the local marines. Her heart gave a lurch, and she ruthlessly crushed the rise of hope. *He made it abundantly clear that you were only a one-night-stand. You will not pant at his heels like a bitch in heat!*

Shepard forced herself to breathe. *That was nothing. It never happened. You can avoid him outside of the mission.*

Nihlus turned, as if he had heard her thoughts. His bright emerald eyes were striking against the black-and-white of his colony markings. Almost immediately, Shepard remembered how they had looked that night, burning with passion.

And how emotionless they had looked when he kicked her out of his rooms the following morning.

*Dammit, Andra, you will not give that bastard the pleasure of seeing you flinch. You are an Arterius, dammit. You will show him nothing.* She squared her shoulders and approached him.

She walked up to Nihlus as the marine left and saluted, turian-style. “I take it you’re the Spectre I’m supposed to be keeping an eye on?”

“Commander Shepard” he almost seemed to jump when he saw her. He returned the salute and faced the teeming crowd again.

She stood beside him, watching the scientists work. “Any issues so far?”

He shrugged. “One of the scientists got hit by something before I got here. Superior says he’s paranoid, ranting about ‘darkness’, ‘the end’, and that no one can stop it. Team lead hired the krogan there as a bodyguard, but he says it won’t change anything.”

She watched the krogan, nodding his way when he glared at her. She hummed for a bit, considering. “So, are you jittery because I’m here, or because this is going well?”

Nihlus glared over his shoulder, then sighed. “They haven’t figured out what it does, and that one scientist is… I don’t know. But I don’t like it.”

She nodded. “How’s the local marine squad?”

His subvocals thrummed in amusement. “Most of them resent having a turian here. Some just resent that I’m a Spectre. Are you supposed to take charge of them, too?”

“Only if I need to. I’ll go coordinate with them, get my own impression.”

He watched her go, then called, “There was one other thing, Commander.”

She turned. He took the few steps until he was standing before her. She wrinkled her nose a bit when she had to look up at him.

“I’ve put your name in for consideration for the Spectres. I’m supposed to take this as an opportunity to evaluate you.”

Andra crossed her arms and glared at him. “And you couldn’t have done this ‘evaluation’ during that undercover operation last year, why?”
Nihlus looked like he was going to bolt for the hills, when there was a patter of gunfire in the distance. They turned in unison, pistols drawn as they scanned for the source.

“Don’t see anything. Scans,” she checked her omni-tool, “showing nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing,” he growled as he marched off toward the gunfire.

_idiot’s going to get himself killed._ She activated the comm. “Alenko, get everyone suited up. We have shots fired and unknown hostiles. Get-“

She cut off as a deep booming noise, almost a snarl, rent the air. She looked up to see a massive ship slowly coming to a landing.

“Have Barrett start evacuating the civilians. Nihlus and I will be on 5. Get a squad and move the beacon.”

She switched over to 5, contacting Nihlus. “Nihlus. Whatever is going on, it’s big. I can keep up with you. I know turian military protocol. Alenko and my squad can be a backup team, but you need someone out there watching your six. Will you take my help, or is that stick too firmly embedded up your cloaca?”

There was a pointed silence. “Fine. Catch up.”

She grinned a bit, then ran to catch up. There was a brief contact with Alenko, he’d met up with the local marine unit and they were evacuating the science team and the beacon. Andra caught up with Nihlus and they moved on, approaching one of the satellite farming communities. They came over a small ridge and saw the farm. There were three bodies hanging from spikes off to one side. Andra paused and considered. Her father had told her of corpses changing in Temple Palaven, and she had seen his mission recording. These looked… not identical, but definitely similar.

She turned to Nihlus. “See those bodies on the spikes? Keep an eye on them.” So saying, she slid down the ridge, ignoring Nihlus’ look of confusion. There were heat signatures in one of the buildings, and she wanted to verify friend or foe. As she approached the door, there was a shriek of metal. Andra looked over to see the spikes collapse into their bases and the corpses get up. She heard Nihlus swear as she opened fire. A grenade flew by her head and she dove for cover. Trading out her pistol for her assault rifle, she leaned out of cover and finished off the last corpse.

Nihlus approached her, pistol at low ready. “What were those things?” he demanded.

Andra shook her head. “I don’t know. They look like something Father told me about.”

Nihlus opened his mouth, closed it, then said “Give me a briefing after this. I hate being out of the loop.”

Andra nodded and moved back to the locked door. Overriding the lock, she saw two humans inside. After making sure they were safe, she caught up with Nihlus. She listened to Alenko, then nodded.

“They got the beacon to the spaceport.” They turned when they heard more fire behind them, and Alenko called over the comms that hostiles had hit the dig site. Andra took point again, pushing the words of Manuel to the back of her mind. Some of what he said was similar to testimony from those humans who were involved in the events at Temple Palaven 26 years before. She made a note to ask her father for transcripts.

She crested another hill and saw the ship ahead, and traded her assault rifle for her sniper rifle to
get a better look. She studied it as it took off, and scanned the area ahead. There were more corpses on poles and some figures ahead. Studying them, she realized they weren’t organic. She signaled to Nihlus, and had him see for himself.

“Geth? What are they doing outside of the Veil?” Nihlus asked as he handed back her rifle and readied his own.

Andra shouldered her rifle and shrugged. Scanning the loading platform, she noticed several explosive cannisters and a human ordering the geth around… hmmm…. Nihlus signaled, and he and Andra opened fire on the cannisters, destroying several geth. The human ran off while the remaining geth charged their position. Andra carefully picked them off while Nihlus switched back to his pistol and moved closer.

There was a scream of metal and the impaled corpses joined the geth. Andra took out one that was approaching Nihlus’ position, while Nihlus took out another corpse and three geth in rapid succession. Over the comm, she heard Alenko announce friendlies incoming.

She turned and saw Alenko, and two marines from the local unit. One was limping, and sported an omni-gel patch on his armor. The other was in phoenix armor, warily watching their backs. “How you doing, sildier?” she asked once they were closer.

He winced. “Corporal Jenkins, Commander. Been better, Ma’am. We got hit by some of the flying ones. Went right through my shields. Luckily, the LT managed to throw up a barrier, and got me some medi-gel.”

Andra glanced at Alenko “He should be fine, but a medic should have a look at him. We also picked up Gunnery Chief Williams, of the 212.”

The female Marine saluted “Ma’am.”

Andra returned the salute. Before the Marine could say anything more, Nihlus approached. Andra noticed a flash of distaste on William’s face as he appeared. Now, was that because he’s a Spectre, or because he’s turian? Deciding to keep an eye on her, Andra ordered “Move out!”

Andra had Alenko take point. She went behind him with Williams flanking Jenkins and Nihlus on drag. As they approached the spaceport, Andra caught movement among some crates. Alenko and Williams immediately had their weapons trained on the pile.

“Wait, wait! Don’t shoot! I’m human!” The man, a dockworker by his clothes, came out slowly, hands raised. Andra questioned him briefly, holding Williams back from doing the man some real harm. Really need to keep an eye on her…. The man told them that the human with the geth was a new arrival to the colony, supposedly an expert on Prothean ruins. “Said his name was Qian, yeah. Dr. Shu Qian.”

After directing the man back to the camp with the other survivors, they headed to the tram to the other space station. On the way, they dealt with a handful more geth, most falling to Andra’s sniper rifle, though Alenko made a decent showing with his biotics. As they traveled, Andra did a quick check of Jenkins’s leg. It was doing fine, but she seconded having a medic look him over. There was an experimental Alliance ship in range, and her captain agreed to transport the beacon and wounded to the Citadel.

At the second spaceport, Nihlus took out the sole geth on the landing platform.

Andra looked around. “Ah, crap. They rigged the place to blow”. She signaled the others to cover
her as she disarmed the bomb, then scanned the area for more. “Three more. Watch my back,” she called as she raced up the ramp. She took out one geth between her and the second bomb and disarmed it, hearing Nihlus and Alenko clearing the third. Andra checked again, and called to Nihlus. “It’s closer to you, at your ten.”

She took out three more geth, and verified that all bombs were disconnected. Sounding the all clear, she followed Alenko toward the docks. And more zombies. This day just gets better and better. Once the shooting was done, she checked the beacon. Nihlus helped Jenkins sit out of the way and administered a second dose of medi-gel while Alenko walked over to the beacon. It had been activated, somehow, and a beam of light was spearing the air above it. Andra arranged for the pickup, and turned as Williams approached her.

She shoved the Marine out of her way as she saw Alenko being dragged to the beacon. Tackling him clear, she felt the forces of the beacon grab her and lift her up. She hung, muscles rigid, as images and feelings poured into her mind. She saw blood, death, felt terror and despair. She saw synthetics mutilating organic flesh. And over it all, she saw a darkness that she knew was approaching. There was a final flash, the image of a planet and the knowledge that the answers she sought were there.

Then the beacon released her, and she fell heavily to the deck. She heard Nihlus call her name, and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

So, decided to change up Eden Prime a bit. After this, I start using the game as a template (but I still do make some changes).

Also, the Return of The Awkward One-Night Stand!

Comments are love, visit me at p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com, because I can't link my patron on AO3.
Waking up, Andra saw bright lights above her. She heard a voice saying “Dr. Chakwas, I think she’s waking up.” Nihlus didn’t sound concerned, but he tended toward the emotionless while he was working. She remembered that from her stint undercover for the Spectres.

She sat up slowly, grabbing her head as pain sliced through her temples. “And how are you feeling?” the medic, Chakwas asked kindly.

Andra groaned and forced her eyes open. “Like the morning after shore leave.” She heard Nihlus chuff behind her and asked “How long was I out?”

“About fifteen hours. Alenko and Nihlus brought you aboard.” Andra looked up and Chakwas chuckled. “Jenkins has been treated and released.”

Andra sighed, and turned to Nihlus. “What happened with the beacon?”

Nihlus looked at her coolly. “It exploded after you fell.”

“This is the Normandy?” the doctor nodded. “I take it I’ve been reassigned?”

Dr. Chakwas checked her omni-tool. “For now, you, Alenko, Williams, and Jenkins are to report to the human ambassador on the Citadel. They’ll decide what to do with you later. Your squad has been issued a transfer, most staying on Eden Prime.”

Andra rubbed her forehead again and looked up at her. “Put in your files that I had dreams. Weird ones.”

Dr. Chakwas nodded and looked up as the door opened. “Oh, Captain Anderson.”

“How’s she holding up?” he asked as he approached them.

“Fairly well, I’d say. She’s ready to go.”

Anderson nodded at her and she retired to her office. Andra looked over at Nihlus before the captain could speak. “I’d need to contact my father for some of this, but those things? They were on Palaven 26 years ago. I don’t think the technology was geth, but I never got a good look. The name Qian seems familiar. I think he was on Palaven at the same time, but if he was, it doesn’t explain what he’s doing here. I’ll see if I can get the mission reports and testimonies.” Turning to Anderson, she continued, “The beacon gave me… I guess I could call it a vision. It showed synthetics attacking, war, death. I want a transcript from my suit, if there is one. I spoke to a scientist, Manuel, at the camp. He sounded crazy at the time, but a lot of what he said jibes with what the beacon showed me.”

Anderson scowled. “The Council needs to be informed. They won’t be happy the beacon was destroyed.”

Andra barked a laugh, “What are we going to tell them, that I had a bad dream? No,” she continued, shaking her head. “I’ll stand by my actions, and if I can get everything organized before I have to speak with them, I might get their support.”
Nihlus chuffed again, “Better start, then. We should be at the Citadel soon.”

“Great.” She tossed a salute as Nihlus left the room, then turned to Anderson.

“So, this is that new fancy ship they wanted me to XO, isn’t it?” she asked with a small grin.

Anderson returned the grin, leading the way out of the medbay. “Until the Spectres pulled you planetside, anyway.”

He showed her around the ship, as they discussed the project behind it. “First human/turian ship out there. Experimental engine and stealth drive. She’s quick, agile. Hope to see more like her soon.”

Andra felt herself falling in love as she studied the schematics. “She’s amazing, Sir.”

“Joker thinks so, too. He locked the original test pilot in a closet and stole her on the trial run.” He studied the pilot in question from where they stood in the CIC. “Managed to evade three turian fighters and still complete the training course, in half of the projected time.”

She shrugged. “He’s an ass, and a pervert, but he’s the best damn pilot I’ve worked with, I’ll give him that.”

She made her excuses and borrowed the comm room, using the codes issued by the turian navy to send an urgent message to Hierarch Desolas Arterius and Hierarch Antoria Arterius asking for everything they had on the incident in Temple Palaven. She also sent one to Spectre Saren Arterius, asking for the same info, as well as everything he had on Qian. She included a postscript asking him to see her on the Citadel, if he was available.

It would take a day to receive the responses from her parents, maybe longer for Saren if he was on a mission. She relaxed a bit when her omni-tool pinged a message. Saren had replied, and would meet her at Flux with his info on Qian. As she reached the bridge, her omni-tool pinged again. She smiled as she read the reply. Apparently her mother was at the Citadel, and wanted to meet her at the turian embassy.

While Williams and Alenko Oohed and Ahhhed over the Citadel and the Destiny Ascension, Andra quickly sent a reply to her mother and uncle, arranging to meet both at the turian embassy. She turned and saw Anderson approaching.

“Sir. I have sources that will give me more information on the things from Eden Prime, and on Dr. Qian. I’m to meet them in the turian embassy once we dock.”

“Good. I’ll send over my information on Qian as well, and I’ll deal with Udina. We need this intel, Commander.”

Once the Normandy was docked, Andra headed out for the turian embassy, while Nihlus headed off for the Spectre offices and Anderson went to the human embassy. The rest of the crew was taking advantage of the brief shore leave and exploring the Citadel.

Saren was waiting in front of the embassy when Andra walked up. “Heard you had some trouble.”

“The things from Temple Palaven showed up, there were geth everywhere, and a Prothean device uploaded corrupted data into my brain. You could say there was a little trouble, yeah.”

Saren watched her from the corner of his eye as they headed to the bar. “Any issues with Nihlus?” he asked innocently.
Andra’s jaw clenched. “Just the usual.”

Internally, Saren sighed as they approached the table Antoria was waiting at. He suspected he knew what their problems were, but wanted to hear what Andra had to say. He shared a look with Antoria. They’d get her to talk about it.

The three looked over the recordings from the temple and Eden Prime. “They look similar to me. Maybe the differences are from the age of the tech used?” Andra commented.

The turians shrugged. Andra played the recording of her conversation with Dr. Warren and Manuel. “I think Manuel managed to activate the beacon. A lot of what he says, about the darkness and our extinction, it feels like what I got from the beacon.”

Saren considered for a moment. “Dr. Qian was my case. I’ll pass everything I had to you and Nihlus, see if fresh eyes can see something I missed.”

Andra winced at that, and Antoria noticed. “What’s wrong? You had a great deal of admiration for Nihlus during that undercover mission last year.”

Andra let her head fall to the table. Not looking up, she said “During the mission, he didn’t regret sleeping with me.”

Saren snorted. “And how do you figure that?”

Andra rolled her forehead on the table so she could glare at her uncle. “I’ve never heard of a turian throwing their bedmate out without comment or expression.” She sighed and sat up. ”The mission went fine. We got the information, the bad guys were arrested, blah blah blah. Nihlus and I were making a final pass through the hideout when one of us managed to trigger a bomb. We managed to get to cover before it blew, and we had sex to celebrate. And he threw me out without comment the next morning.”

Saren and Antoria exchanged a look. Saren said, “I’ll leave this to you ladies,” and left the bar, activating his omni-tool on the way out.

Antoria put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “I thought you weren’t looking for a fling?” she asked softly.

Andra dropped her head back onto the table. “I wasn’t. I’m not. We would flirt over the comms, a little. He’d keep me steady. And then, that night, he was gentle and forgiving. I’d never… not with anyone, and he helped me through it. And then, the next morning? It was like he was surprised I was still there. Like he’d gotten what he was after, and I didn’t matter anymore.”

Antoria hugged her, and Andra relaxed a bit. Of course, that’s when her comm signaled. Sighing, Andra stood up. “Duty calls, and all that. If you find any more about this, send it to me.” She walked out of the bar, answering the comm.

“I need you in Udina’s office ASAP.” Captain Anderson ordered.

“Aye aye, sir.” She replied, and set off.

Saren caught up with Nihlus in the Spectre offices, and found the younger turian finalizing his report on Eden Prime. “Nihlus.”
Nihlus jumped. “Saren! What are you doing here?”

Saren leaned against the door frame, not-so-subtly blocking the only exit to the room. “My niece told me what happened between the two of you.”

Nihlus’ mandibles dropped in shock. “I swear, Sehr, I had no idea she was related to you! I only found out after! I broke it off! I won't touch her again, I swear!”

Saren glared at him. "And did it ever occur to you that she wanted you?" Nihlus froze as Saren continued "I don't care that you bedded her. I'm pissed that you kicked her out with no explanation. I didn't train a coward. But if you lack the conviction to stand beside your choices, maybe you should leave the Spectres."

Nihlus reared back as if he had been struck. "I… I hadn't thought of that. That's why she's upset?"

Saren snorted. "Upset? She's furious. I think she won't be happy until she can eviscerate you or watch you grovel." He stared at a spot over Nihlus’ head contemplatively. “Probably both, with a bit of begging and public humiliation involved.”

Nihlus looked nervous, and Saren bared his teeth. “I’m giving the two of you all my notes and records on Qian. That’s your mission now. I suggest you tell her everything you told me.” He walked off, leaving Nihlus looking very confused.

Slowly, Nihlus gathered the datapads Saren left for him, and headed to the human embassy.

Chapter End Notes

I like repurposing dialogue from source material. It's fun. And, fyi, the but about Joker locking the pilot in a closet and stealing the Normandy actually happened in the comic He Who Laughs Best.

I'm on Tumblr at p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com, come say hi and check out the links in my header because I can't link to a patreon or advertise my commissions here!

Comments are love, as always! Thanks for reading!
Andra could hear the yelling from the ambassador’s office from halfway down the hall. Bracing herself, she opened the door.

“This is an outrage!” Udina was yelling at one of the council’s aides. “The council would be doing something if the geth attacked a turian colony!”

“Yes, but this was, firstly, a human leading the attacks on a human colony, and secondly, well outside of Citadel space.” Andra said as she strode in. “Those facts combine to make this a purely human matter, and not worth wasting the Council’s time.”

The aide, an asari in her maiden years, nodded. “The Spectre Nihlus Kryik will remain, of course, but this is, as the Commander pointed out, a human matter.” She left, flashing Andra a grin on the way out.

Udina glared at her. “That beacon would have given us greater standing with the council.”

She cut him off. “And my being made a Spectre will give us an even larger one. You want to improve my chances? Keep your head down and don’t talk to the Council until I’ve succeeded.”

Udina glowered at her. “I still say it should be a human raised by humans representing us with the Spectres.”

“Tough shit. They picked me, and you’re stuck with their decision.”

The doors opened again, and Nihlus entered with Anderson. “I’ve been looking over Saren and Anderson’s notes about Qian, and I received the copies of the notes from Palaven. I’ll be collating data for a while, but I need your input, Shepard.” Nihlus seemed unconcerned, and Udina looked about ready to start screaming.

“All right. There’s an empty desk over there, or we could hit up the bar down the hall.”

Nihlus seemed to consider this. “I work better if I can walk and talk.”

Andra nodded and herded him back out the door. “If you don’t mind a quick interruption, fine. I need to see my money volus while I’m here.”

As the door closed, they could hear Anderson saying, “I need to put the Normandy under Commander Shepard’s command.” The doors hissed closed but they hardly muffled Udina’s outraged scream.

Andra danced happily for a few steps. “Oh, but I do love pissing that man off.” She turned to Nihlus, and he felt his heart twist as she saw her guard coming up. “So. Qian was working on an AI, mind control, and these… You know what. I refuse to start calling them zombies. They’re husks now. What else do we know?”

“There was another human at Palaven, one Jack Harper. Apparently, he escaped before the ship reached Earth, and no one has seen or heard from him since.”
“Hmmmmm. Do we have a picture?”

“From 26 years ago, yes.” Nihlus pulled up the image.

“Huh. He was kinda good-looking. Shame he tried to kill me. And if you will excuse me, I need to see a volus about an investment.” She ducked into a small storefront while Nihlus blinked in astonishment.

Once inside, she scanned the room. Barla Von hadn’t changed anything since her last visit. “Welcome, Earth-clan!” the volus cried when he saw her.

“Nope, still Palaven-clan, Barla.”

“Ah, Commander, welcome! What can I do for you?”

“Sell all my stocks in human colonies and spread it out in weapon manufacturers. Also, I’m looking into any info on a human, Dr. Shu Qian. Your boss feel like sharing anything?”

The volus looked at her, then consulted a screen to his left. “After selling your colony stocks, you gained 500000 credits.”

“In that case, put half into my retirement, and the rest in weapons.”

“Very well, any in particular?”

She shrugged. “Surprise me.”

“One of my employer’s agents has decided to double cross him. Fist runs the nightclub Chora’s Den. There is a krogan mercenary after him, courtesy of my employer, but he did recently obtain information about a human working with geth.”

“Ahh. Useful. Go ahead and take your fee from my account.” Andra called as she turned to leave.

“My employer wished you to have the information gratis.”

She stopped and turned, “Truly? Fist must be good at pissing people off. Thanks, Barla.”

She went out to find Nihlus talking to another turian. “All right, let’s go.”

The other turian turned when she started speaking. “Well, that’s a familiar tone.”

Andra stopped and gasped “Garrus!” She ran over and hugged him, laughing. Dropping down, she held his shoulders while she studied him. “Finally grew into yourself, I see. Last time I saw you, you were all limbs.”

Garrus chuckled. “I was here to talk to you, actually. There’s a human, Fist, runs Chora’s Den.”

“He has info on the geth and Qian. I’d heard. So, Nihlus, there’s also a krogan merc after Fist. Courtesy of the Shadow Broker.”

Garrus nodded. “Yeah. Fist made a complaint, and we brought him down to the CSEC academy for… questioning.”

Andra continued, “A krogan could be useful. How about Garrus and I go deal with Fist, and you go see if the krogan is inclined to cooperate?”
Nihlus clicked his mandibles. “You deal with the krogan. Garrus and I will tackle Fist.”

Andra nodded and turned to Garrus. “Don’t do anything stupid, and see if you can get his source. And don’t let him make you do all the dirty work. He’s a big boy, he can carry his own weight.”

Garrus laughed as Nihlus glared at the pair of them. “Come on.” He snarled at Garrus, and they headed to the shuttle for the wards. “So, how do you know Shepard?” Nihlus finally asked when the shuttle landed.

“She lived five streets over from me on Palaven. She used to come over for target practice. Used to piss me off that she was better than me.”

Nihlus snarled to himself, and they entered the club.

Andra entered CSEC Academy. The krogan wasn’t hard to spot, standing off to one side in a crowd of turian and salarian officers. She waited until most of the officers had left, and sauntered up to the krogan. “Rumor has it you’re after Fist.”

The krogan grunted.

“So am I. Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy and Spectre candidate. I’ll help you get him, I just want his intel.”

The krogan studied her. She studied him back, standing at parade rest. Finally, the krogan said, “Urdnot Wrex. You’ll get your intel.”

“Good to have you, Wrex. Shall we proceed to the club?” She held out her arm to him. He chuckled dryly, and offered his in return. Laughing, she took it, and they walked arm-in-arm to the club. They took a shortcut through a back alley and found a quarian surrounded by some humans and a turian.

“Did you bring it?” the turian was asking.

“Where’s the Shadow Broker? Where’s Fist?” the quarian demanded.

Andra and Wrex exchanged a look. In unison they drew their pistols and ducked into cover on either side of the door. Andra took out the turian, and the quarian threw a grenade and headed to cover off to one side. Wrex and Andra finished off the last of the humans, then Andra went to check on the quarian.

“Are you all right?” Andra asked.

“I know how to handle myself. Not that I don’t appreciate the help.”

“Commander Shepard. You should know, the Shadow Broker never meets anyone in person.”

The quarian held out a hand. “Tali’Zora nar Rayya.”

Andra shook it. Just then, Garrus and Nihlus came charging down the far end of the alley, weapons at the ready.

Andra moved to place Tali’Zora behind her. “Hi, boys. How was the club?”

Garrus smiled at her. “You know how those kids of clubs are. All that shooting, and terrible
service. Drinks are watered down, too.” She laughed, and he continued in all seriousness, “Fist said there was a quarian who had info on Qian that he was going to sell out to Qian. I’m assuming that would be you?” he nodded to Tali’Zora.

“I knew he sold me out!” she cried.

Andra held her hands up, “All right everyone just calm down. Garrus. Has Fist been dealt with, yes or no?”

Garrus snapped to attention, “Yes, Ma’am.”

She turned to Wrex. “Does that satisfy your contract, or do you need to see the body?”

“That’ll satisfy the contract, yes.”

Nodding, she turned to Tali. “I need your information. What do you want for it?”

Tali might have looked surprised, it was hard to tell through the mask. “Take me with you. Qian is using geth, and any information about them I can bring back to the Flotilla will be useful.”

Andra clapped her hands and turned to Nihlus, “Is this my show or yours? I’m just a candidate, you’re the full Spectre. It’s your call.”

Nihlus seemed to consider this. “I have the right to override any decision, but it’s your show.”

“All right, here’s what we’re going to do. Tali, you’re coming with us. I want your info, and this way we can get you info on the geth faster. Besides, you are good in a fight. Garrus, Wrex, you two want to see this through?”

Garrus nodded almost immediately, while Wrex seemed to think about it. “Alright. This might be interesting,” Wrex said after a moment.

“All right, Garrus, tell your superiors in CSEC that you have been commandeered into a Spectre investigation, he wants to complain, direct him to Nihlus. Wrex, do whatever you need to do to get paid and out of the Shadow Broker’s contract. Tali, Nihlus, make whatever arrangements you need. Everyone meet at dock 422 at the Normandy.”

Garrus and Wrex nodded and headed off to CSEC together. Tali headed in the opposite direction, and Nihlus stood there and stared at her.

“What?” she snapped when the silence had stretched on long enough.

*I love you I miss you I’m sorry I hurt you* all swirled through Nihlus’ mind as he stood in the blood-soaked alley. He didn’t know how to broach the subject, so he shoved it all to the back of his mind and said, “I’ll need to make some requisitions for you. What is your preferred weapon?”

Andra thought she had seen… something cross Nihlus’ face, but shook the feeling off. “Sniper rifle and pistol. I can use assault rifles, too, but I’m a better sniper than melee fighter.”

He nodded acknowledgment and headed off to the Spectre offices.

Andra considered calling after him, seeing if what she thought she had seen was truly there, but let him go and headed to the Normandy. She had requisitions of her own to make.
I love the mental image of Wrex and Shepard walking arm-in-arm into a firefight. It makes me happy. (and if anyone wants to draw this, Shep's the default face). I also love getting to play with the differences between Nihlus and Garrus.

Comments are love!

I'm open for commissions at my tumblr: plratew3nch.tumblr.com
Anderson met Andra outside the Normandy. “They didn’t like it, but the Alliance brass recognizes you as the Normandy’s Captain, Commander.” He looked like he was trying to find the words to continue.

“And what concessions do I have to follow?” Andra asked. She knew that the Alliance would not willingly give up control of a ship like the Normandy.

Anderson shot her a crooked grin, “She is still an Alliance vessel. If the top brass has a mission for you, you take it.”

Andra nodded. “Did they have any leads for Qian or the geth?”

“We’ve received reports of geth attacks on our colony on Feros. Seems like a good place to start.”

Andra nodded. “Thanks, sir. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go steal the captain’s cabin before a certain Spectre arrives.”

Anderson laughed at that, and she entered her ship. *Joker’s in the cockpit because he practically lives in the cockpit of whatever he’s flying, Dr. Chakwas is in the med bay because she lives there, everyone else took shore leave and should be arriving over the next hour.*

She quickly headed to the cabin, dumping her belongings on the floor. Piling up the pillows and blankets on the bed, she stowed away the rest of her belongings then sat at the desk and made sure the food, fuel and ammo stores were sufficient for the journey. She placed an order for more dextro food, as all the Normandy had was ration bars and she knew how awful those were, and for a shipment of food scrubbers, and they were golden.

She looked up at a knock on the door frame. “Enter.” she called.

The door opened to reveal Garrus. “Your pilot said you’d be here. Finally got quarters of your own?”

She chuckled, “Not the way I’d want to earn them, but yeah. Where were you planning on bunking? Engineering or the hold?”

Garrus rolled his eyes. “Considering Tali’s reaction to the engine, I think I’d only get to sleep in the hold.”

She grabbed his arm and dragged him out of her quarters. “I have work. Come on. I feel like I should be apologizing to you,” she said as she grabbed some water from the galley.

He caught the bottle she tossed his way, “Oh? Does this have something to do with Nihlus?”

“She didn’t interrogate you about me, did he?”

Garrus chuckled as the elevator descended to the hold. “Not really. Just asked how long we’ve known each other and the like. You bedded him.” Garrus watched her closely, knowing her well enough to tell she was hurting, and wanting to help her heal.
Andra winced. “Yeah. It ended… badly.”

Garrus hit the emergency stop on the elevator, and cradled her face in his hands. Gently, he pressed his forehead to hers. “You deserve better.”

She sighed, and reached up a hand to cup his jaw, “I know. Your timing could use some work, though.”

He smiled and pulled away, feeling her hand fall as he moved. He restarted the elevator, and said offhandedly, “Do you want me to yell at him, or pretend that I’m oblivious?”

She laughed and hit his arm. “Whatever makes you happy, Gar.” Her omni-tool pinged, and she huffed, frustrated. “Crap. It’s Himself. Check the delivery coming in. It should be dextro for you three and scrubbers for Tali.” She waved at Wrex as she headed back into the elevator, muttering to herself.

On the bridge, Nihlus was studying the galaxy map. “There’s been an incident on Noveria. A distress beacon was activated and deactivated, but no one sounded the ‘all clear’. The executives for Binary Helix want a Spectre to look into it.”

“Geth attacks on a colony take priority. Call Saren, see if he wants to go yell at bureaucrats. We can drop him off on the way to Feros.”

Nihlus chuffed, and activated his omni-tool. After bringing Saren up to speed, he ended the transmission, saying, “He should be here shortly.”

Andra nodded as Alenko and Williams walked past, gear slung over their shoulders. Jenkins limped up behind them. “Jenkins! You’re on light duty until Chakwas clears you!” Andra called as he went past.

“Aye, aye, Ma’am!”

Saren walked down the corridor. “Permission to board?”

“Granted, as you’re already here.”

“Nice ship. If you’ve no objections, I’d like to bring Tali and Wrex to Noveria.”

Andra blinked. “I was hoping to get Tali’s insights on the geth activity on Feros, but she’s just a kid on her Pilgrimage so I’d be happier with her out of the way. Why do you want them?”

Saren grinned. “The bureaucrats hate having Spectres show up. I enjoy making them uncomfortable.”

Andra nodded at that, “Wrex is in the cargo hold, Tali is in Engineering. Go talk to them.”

As Saren left, Nihlus watched her. “What is the plan?”

Andra set the ship’s course to Noveria and answered, “Right now, get Saren to Noveria and then us to Feros. Everything else can wait until we get more details.”

Nihlus agreed. Planning the entirety of a mission in advance was foolhardy, and made it difficult to react to changing situations. He braced himself and said, “Once this mission is concluded, we need to talk. I behaved… poorly, and you deserve an explanation.”

Andra stared after him as he headed down to the crew deck. That was… odd. She shook her head.
and went to watch the Normandy’s arrival on Noveria.

She grated a bit at Noveria control’s statement that the ship would be impounded if they could not prove they had a Spectre aboard. She told Saren, and watched as her uncle disembarked with the krogan and quarian in tow. After a brief wait, they received confirmation and departed for Feros. Once through the first relay, she did a quick comm check, and verified that Saren and his squad could still contact the Normandy as needed.

Chapter End Notes

And we've hit my favorite few chapters. The next four chapters are bouncing back and forth between Noveria and Feros. Also! I wrote a scene and decided I didn't like it in this, so I removed it, but I'm going to share it as an Alternate Scene once I share the final version.

I've got commissions open on p1rataew3nch.tumblr.com, if anyone is interested.

Comments are love! Thanks for reading!
Saren nodded when Andra informed him of Noveria’s ultimatum. He wasn’t too concerned, he had been to Noveria a few times, both as a Spectre and a stockholder. He showed his credentials and smiled to himself as he heard the Normandy take off. His niece could be rather impatient at times.

He led Wrex and Tali through the security checkpoints and to the administrator’s office. He nodded at Giana Parasini, the internal affairs officer investigating Anoleis’ corruption. He hoped she could build her case soon. That dress really didn’t suit her.

“Sehr Arterius! What a pleasant surprise!” she said as they entered. “What brings you to Noveria today?”

“Spectre business, I’m afraid. I’ll need access to the garage and a pass for a mako.” Saren kept his tone coolly professional.

Administrator Anoleis came around the corner, having been warned of the Spectre’s arrival by security. “Unfortunately, all access outside of Port Hanshan has been cut off until the storm passes.”

Slowly, Saren turned to him. He was gratified to see the salarian back up a pace. “I am here on official Spectre business. The storm is not bad enough to affect a mako. You will grant me access now, or I will have you brought up on charges. Although,” he began contemplatively, “It would be simpler for me to just shoot you.”

The salarian paled. “All right. I’ll grant you access to the garage, and tell the garage staff to set you up with a mako. Never let it be said that I did not help the Spectres.”

Once they were clear of the office, Tali turned to Saren, “You wouldn’t really shoot him, would you?”

Saren glanced at her. “Maybe to wound. The paperwork really isn’t worth it to just shoot everyone who stands in my way.”

Wrex snorted in amusement at that.

Once in the mako, Saren continued. “While being a Spectre does mean I could, it’s easier to play up a reputation. Everyone believes that I will shoot first and ask questions when it suits me, which makes things like this easier. Nihlus always tries to talk to everyone first. Had he been here, he would still be jumping through Anoleis’ hoops.”

Tali nodded, “So you want them to think you’re meaner than you really are, to make them more likely to do what you want.”

As they approached the garage entrance to Peak 15, Saren slowed the mako to a stop. There was a second mako outside the doors, lying on its roof while it burned merrily. They exited the mako, weapons at the ready. Saren led the trio to the access door and entered first. The small alcove was clear.

As they entered the garage proper, they were met with a handful of krogan mercenaries. Saren and
Tali opened fire while Wrex prepared a biotic pulse that threw several of the mercs off their feet. As they moved deeper into the station, Wrex grabbed a shotgun from one of the downed mercs and handed it to Tali.

“Here. It’ll suit your style a bit better,” he told her gruffly as he walked past.

“Wha… I… I can’t shoot this! I don’t know how!” Tali cried after Wrex.

“I’ll teach you.” Wrex seemed amused at her reaction.

Saren barely listened to the byplay, focusing on the station’s VI announcing the damages to the station.

“Draaf. We’ll have to do some repairs before we can get to where the beacon was set off.” Saren called over to the other two. “And since they shouldn’t have mercenaries…. Something is going on, and I hate that I have no idea what I’m walking into.”

“Agreed.” Wrex grunted.

They headed deeper into the station. The first hallway they came to was guarded by two turrets, facing deeper into the station. “What idiot set up the turrets backwards?” Tali asked, incredulously.

“Someone who wants to keep something in more than us out.” Saren replied, grimly.

They took the elevator in silence, wondering what lay ahead. On the next floor, there were signs of fighting. Several corpses lay scattered around. Idly, Saren noted that they were all human. A little surprising, but not particularly. Binary Helix owned most of the labs on Peak 15, and had a mostly human staff. Moving on, they stopped when they heard a noise in the vents.

They stood, back-to-back, as the scanned the area for the source. Saren saw an insect-like creature crawl out of a vent and come charging at the trio. He and Wrex took it out, then Saren turned to assist Tali with a larger one coming up behind. Wrex finished off a third one, and they stood for a moment, listening for more.

Saren walked over to one of the larger ones. “I’ve never seen anything like this. This is bad. Keep your guard up.” He sent scans of the bodies and a copy of the recording to the Citadel, along with a query about the identity of the creature, and gestured that they should move on.

Once on the third floor, they dealt with several of the smaller creatures. Saren and Wrex cleared the vents in the room, and Saren entered the VI core. After activating the core and clearing his credentials with the VI, Saren received the list of repairs needed.

They finished the repairs quickly, Wrex grumbling about not being maintenance the whole time. Once the tramways were back online, Saren reactivated the VI.

“Saren Arterius, Council Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. There was a distress beacon activated in this complex. What location was it sent from, and who activated it?”

“Working. Council status recognized. The beacon was activated and deactivated on Rift Station. Records show that the signal was activated by Lady Benezia.”

“When did the Matriarch arrive?” Saren asked, somewhat surprised.

“Lady Benezia has been at Rift Station for fifteen hours.”
“No further queries.”

“No further queries.”

Saren led the way to the tramway, thinking out loud. “Lady Benezia arrived here and set a distress beacon. Almost immediately, she deactivated it. Asari Matriarchs have followers, always asari, mostly combat trained. There were no asari in the garage.” He sat on a bench on the tram while Tali sent it to Rift Station. “What in oblivion is going on?”

Chapter End Notes

Saren and company on Noveria! I had another version of this that I really liked that will be going up as part 3 of this series.

Follow me on tumblr! p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com

Comments are love! Thanks for reading my weird-ass AU!
As the Normandy landed on Feros, Andra grabbed Garrus and Nihlus. “Come on. I’m starting to hate dealing with the geth, and I want you two at my back.” She heard Williams say something under her breath, but decided to address it at another time. Ashley hadn’t shown any outright dislike of any aliens on the ship as of yet, and Andra didn’t want to push what wasn’t an issue.

Once they were clear of the airlock, they were met by one of the locals. “We saw your ship. Fai Dan wants to speak with you immediately.”

“Who’s Fai Dan?” Andra asked. She kept her hand on the butt of her pistol. The man’s voice was… off somehow. The pacing of his speech was strange. *Something’s not right here*…

“He’s our leader. He needs your help to deal with the geth. They’re making another push. Please. Up the stairs, past the freighter.”

Before he could direct them further, a rocket came flying down the passage and caught the man clean in the side. The turians went to cover on either side of Andra, Nihlus drawing his assault rifle, Garrus his sniper rifle. Andra ran to forward cover and drew her pistol. With the turians providing covering fire, she quickly took down the geth in the passage.

“So, anyone care to speculate on why they sent someone who was stoned out of his mind to get us?” Andra asked after sounding the all clear.

Garrus looked confused, “Wait, what? How did you get that he was stoned?”

Nihlus snorted, “His speech patterns were off. He was pausing randomly, not at a point where most humans would pause.”


Easing around a support beam, Andra saw two geth on the wall of the corridor. *Huh. Looks like a tree frog had a baby with a geth.* Signaling to Garrus, she nodded and they surged around the pillar and took out the two geth.

“Very nice. You’ve finally gotten your ass in gear and to the range. Still not quite centered, but you’ll do.” Andra laughed as she headed to the colony proper.

Garrus chuffed a laugh, “I only missed the center because you gave an incorrect location.”

“That’s what aiming is for!” she smacked him lightly on the arm, Nihlus silently fuming behind them.

As they entered the colony, Andra forced the grin off her face. She felt Garrus shift so he and Nihlus were flanking her. The colonists spoke around her, commenting that it was good that soldiers had arrived, some making minor complaints about the colony. Andra filed those away, the water, the varren, the generator, and decided to handle them if the opportunity arose. *These people have been through a lot. It’d be easy to get the water back on, and varren are easy. Should be an old battery or two I can scrounge up, too.*
She considered approaching a man trying to calm an armed woman down when he turned to her. “Oh, commander! I’m glad to see they finally sent someone to help us.”

“You’re a bit late, aren’t you?” the woman snapped.

“Arcellia! Sorry, everyone’s been on edge since—” He broke off as the unmistakable sound of geth came from the far passage.

“Watch out! We’ve got geth in the tower!” Arcellia called.

Fai dan called “Protect the heart of the colony!”

Andra and Nihlus moved to cover the doorway, while Garrus shot the first two through the door. Andra nodded at Nihlus, and together they entered the hall, each taking out a geth. They headed up the staircase and cleared the landing. Andra checked a room, shot two geth and sounded “Clear!”

Nihlus and Garrus continued further down the hall and wound up in a brief fight with a small cluster of geth. Andra came up behind them to assist. She gestured to a staircase leading down, and they moved on. Once at the bottom of the stairs, they encountered a small number of geth. They mowed through the geth quickly, and Andra leaned on Garrus when they were clear.

“Hold on a sec, boys. I think the water pump is down here. One of the colonists mentioned it not working.”

“Are you going to stop and fix everyone’s problems?” Nihlus asked, irritated.

Andra shrugged and opened the first valve. “Seems kinda stupid to save a colony and let it die off.” She found and opened the second valve. “Could just be me, though.” She moved on to the third valve. “You got a problem, take charge. My mission, I say help the civilians.”

She noticed an old earth mover in a room off the main corridor, and gestured to Garrus. “Hey! Wanna gut another old vehicle?”

Garrus winced, but went to help her. “Please. My back is still screaming from the last one.”

Andra pulled the first battery free. “That’s why you’re supposed to lift with your knees, dear heart.”

Garrus chuckled and pulled the second battery free. They drew their pistols in unison as they heard a growl above them. They shot the alpha varren, and the rest of the pack attacked en masse. They made quick work of the beasts and Andra blew imaginary smoke from the muzzle of her pistol. “I love it when it’s easy, don’t you?”

Garrus laughed and grabbed the batteries. “Let’s go check in with Fai Dan.”

They met with the leader of the colony where they had left him. Fai Dan greeted them warmly as they approached. “The tower is secure, thanks to you.”

“I’m just glad the colony is safe. We got the water turned back on, and dealt with a pack of rabid varren for you. Also, we dug up these batteries, might be a help with you generator.”

“Again, my thanks, Commander. Not many would have gone out of their way to help like this.” Fai Dan said, pleased.

Nihlus stepped forward, “The geth will likely return. We need to find their base.”
Arcellia shrugged, “They’re based out of the ExoGeni headquarters. The skyway leads right there. But there’s an army of geth between here and there.”

Andra just looked at her. “I never expected this to be easy. Where’s the skyway?”

“Take the elevator to the garage. There’s a mako.”

Andra gathered her turians and headed out. In the elevator, Garrus turned to her. “If you get behind the wheel of that mako, I’m going to shoot you.”

Andra laughed. “My mission. I outrank you. I’m driving.”

Nihlus looked between them. "She can't be that bad. Get in."

Andra grinned at him, and shot a smug glance at Garrus.

Garrus looked mournfully at the ceiling. “I wonder if I could jump….”

Andra smacked his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day!

So, Feros, and the return of Nihlus's rampant jealousy, and the first of many cracks about Shepard's inability to drive.

Comments are love!

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As they rode the tram out to the Rift Station research center, Tali chattered happily to Wrex about the shotgun he had given her. Saren smiled, “Sounds like someone has a new favorite weapon.”

Tali laughed, “I do! I can’t believe I didn’t think to get one sooner!”

Once they reached Rift Station, they carefully disembarked. Saren and Wrex ensured the area was secure, then led the way to the main hall. They found two elevators, leading to the Hot Labs and the main level.

Saren asked Tali, “There was a locked door back there. Think you can override it?”

Tali seemed to think about it, “I can try. Looks like we can get there by going around, too.”

She stepped up to the lock and examined it. “Should be simple enough.” She activated her omni-tool and got to work. A few moments later, the indicator switched to green.

“Very well done, Tali’Zora.” Saren drew his pistol, and they opened the door.

Wrex covered Saren as the Spectre slid into the room. He eased around a crate of supplies to get a better view of the room. On a central platform, there were a number of armed humans surrounding a lone asari. They were all clustered around what appeared to be a holding tank of some variety. Slowly, Saren signaled that the other two should stay well back. He inched closer until he could hear the debate on the platform.

“It’s very simple, Lady Benezia. Get the location of the Mu Relay from that thing, and we won’t be forced to hurt your daughter.” The speaker sounded almost bored as he issued the threat.

“I will never do anything to help Cerberus.” the asari snarled in reply. Saren considered his odds, and rose slightly from behind the crates. Once he was sure Benezia had seen him, he gestured at her to drop. The Matriarch’s eyes widened slightly, and she gave an infinitesimal nod.

Saren rose fully from behind the crates, delivering clean headshots to two of the humans before they noticed him. Wrex came charging in once the shooting started, acting as a shield for Tali, who was enjoying her new shotgun far too much. Once Saren’s backup arrived, however, Lady Benezia joined in the fight.

“It is truly awe-inspiring to watch two gifted biotics lay waste to a firefight. Especially when they are on my side.” Saren said idly a short time later. “Lady Benezia, I am Spectre Saren Arterius. My companions, Urdnot Wrex and Tali’Zora nar Rayya. I’m assuming you activated the distress beacon?”

The asari smiled. “Indeed. Cerberus managed to capture me and were threatening my daughter’s
safety if I did not aid them.”

“Two questions, before you leave. Why did they wish the location of the Mu relay, and what is that?”

Lady Benezia walked closer. “That is a rachni queen. They pass down memories from one generation to another. Fascinating, really. I do not know why they wished to know of the Mu relay, however.” As she moved to leave, however, a string of ethereal music filled the air and she froze. She turned to the rachni and stepped closer. “Are you certain?” She paused, listening. “Very well. I thank you for this.”

Benezia turned back to Saren. “Apparently, the queen managed to gain that information from one of the agents. The Mu relay access the planet Ilos, which holds something called a Conduit. She knows not why Cerberus is seeking this Conduit, but she claims that it will lead to a great blackness that will destroy all that stands before it. This blackness is what led to the past madness of the rachni.”

Saren mounted the stairs to the central platform and looked at the rachni queen. “Does this blackness cause corpses to rise?”

The music changed, and Benezia replied, “Yes. It has started gaining power, and will soon strike.”

Saren studied the controls on the tank. “It looks like they rigged the tank to flood with a toxin, correct?”

Benezia nodded slowly. “Yes. The scientists felt that it would prove necessary if they could not control her. You have the power to end the rachni race again, Spectre.”

Saren considered the controls. “Wrex. You and Tali are witnesses, if this all goes to oblivion, feel free to blame me.” He entered the release command.

“You would free her? Wait… She thanks you for allowing the rachni to seek out new songs, and asks a boon. The humans here sought out an egg, to clone soldiers. They found her, and took her children from her before they could learn to sing. They must be destroyed, for their own good. They have grown mad, away from the music. She asks you to end their suffering.” Benezia watched as the rachni left the room. “I would ask a boon as well, Spectre. My daughter is being hunted, unknowing of her danger. Come with me to save her?”

“Alright. A moment.” Saren stepped away and hailed the Normandy.

“Commander won’t be happy you’re taking her ship,” Wrex commented.

“Spectre Arterius, what a surprise!” Joker called over the comm.

“I need a lift from Noveria to… Where is your daughter, again?”

“Therum. She was researching some Prothean ruins.” Benezia replied.

“Transport from Noveria to Therum, Joker.” Saren informed the pilot.

“No can do, Spectre. The Normandy is on a Spectre mission on Feros at the moment. I can pick you up there and drop you here, but I can’t go gallivanting around without my captain. You understand.” Joker returned.

“Alright. Inform Commander Art- Shepard that I require your services, and transport to Therum as
soon as possible.” Saren winced a bit as he stumbled over his niece’s chosen name.

“Will do. Normandy out.”

Saren turned to his companions when Benezia spoke. “The Hot Labs have a neutron purge system set up. I heard the Cerberus agents mention it.”

Saren nodded. “I am going to go set that off, then. You are welcome to accompany me, or wait at the tram, as you see fit.”

“We’ll come, too.” Tali said after a brief pause.

They trooped over to the elevator, Tali hacking the door again, when Wrex spoke up.

“I saw the maps, doesn’t look to big down there. If Tali and Benezia stay here, it’ll make things easier on me’n Saren when we get down to fighting. Just a thought.” He shrugged.

Benezia agreed, “Yes. We will stay here in case there are any more Cerberus agents on the station.”

Wrex and Saren entered the elevator. Once the doors were closed and they started their descent, Saren turned to Wrex. “If you are going to have an issue with my choice over the rachni, speak now.”

Wrex grunted. “Nope. I have a recording of you saying it’s your fault. Everyone can blame the turians if it all goes pear-shaped.” He shrugged his armor into a more comfortable position. “Be useful for trying to get the genophage cured.”

Saren looked at him side-eyed. “Talk to my niece. I think she was hoping to adopt a baby krogan to get her mother off her back.”

Wrex tilted his head, “Niece?”

Saren laughed, “Commander Shepard, though there’s not much of a family resemblance.”

Wrex looked surprised. “Really? There’s gotta be a story behind that.”

The elevator doors opened, revealing a mostly empty room with a lone human sitting slumped in a chair. Cautiously, Saren and Wrex approached the man.

“Are you here to secure the situation?” he asked weakly.

“If you mean exterminate the rachni, yes.” Saren replied.

“There is a neutron purge system based in the next room. It will kill everything in the station. The rachni will be dead.”

Saren activated the comm system. “Tali. Ask Benezia if there were any civilians left on the station.”

After a brief pause Tali replied, “She said they were all evacuated by Cerberus. Anyone still here is likely a Cerberus operative.”

Saren turned to the man. “Cerberus evacuated this station. Why are you still here?”

The man grimaced. “I was trying to activate the neutron purge after Cerberus showed up. They
shot me, left me as dead. Here. The codes for the neutron purge are-” he cut off with a gurgle as a claw ripped it’s way through his torso. The rachni lifted his body and flung it past Wrex.

Saren and Wrex opened fire and made short work of the rachni. Saren searched the body and found a notepad with the codes printed out. They headed into the next room, weapons at low ready, and Saren activated the Mira station.

“Online. How can I help you, Spectre?” the VI asked in its blandly pleasant voice.

“Activate neuron purge.” Saren ordered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that without proper authorization.”


“Verified. Code Omega execution in 120 seconds.”

“Draaf. I wish there was more time on that.” Saren muttered as the enraged shrieks of rachni came from the other room.

“Less talking, more shooting,” Wrex decided as he waded in, shotgun barking and biotics blazing.

I’m getting too old for this draaf. Saren decided, as he followed the krogan onto the killing floor.

They just cleared enough of the rachni to reach the elevator, and for the doors to hiss closed. Saren sagged against the wall, Wrex leaning beside him. In silence, they rode to the tram station.

Chapter End Notes

Finishing up Noveria the Spectre way (and I still say that you should be able to hack that lock).

Comments are love!

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“You both scream like girls.” Andra informed her companions as they exited the mako.

Nihlus took several shaking steps away from the mako, eyes wide and staring. “You drive like a maniac!” he yelled at her.

“That geth was going to shoot us. The mako has thrusters. Why not jump incoming fire?” Andra asked reasonably.

Garrus just sat on a pile of rubble, head between his knees.

“Oh, quit whining. Come on. The transmissions were coming from down here.” Andra drew her pistol and headed down the ramp.

Garrus and Nihlus shared a look. “If you knock her out, one of us could drive.” Garrus said calmly.

“And why am I knocking her out?” Nihlus wanted to know.

“You’re a Spectre. You outrank her. You might be able to avoid her wrath.” Garrus stood up.

“Move your turian asses! We got civilians down here!” Andra yelled from down the passage.

Nihlus sighed. “I think we’re going to need her awake and aware for this.”

“We’re going to have to get back into the mako, aren’t we?” Garrus asked, sadly.

Nihlus nodded, and they followed Andra down the ramp.

There, the turians found Andra deep in an argument between a man and a woman. Andra was obviously trying, and failing, to placate them.

“Ignore him, he only cares about ‘the company’.” the woman was saying as they approached.

“I’m just trying to clear out the geth” Andra said, rubbing her temple.

“It’s just a little further down the skyway.” the woman pointed out.

“Those offices are private property, soldier, so remove the geth and nothing else!” the man snapped.

Garrus tried hard not to grin. He was surprised Andra hadn’t decked him yet.

The woman rolled her eyes at Andra and said, “Before you go, my daughter, Lizbeth. She’s missing.”

Andra held up a hand before the man could say anything. “If I find her, I’ll bring her here. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Nothing comes to mind.” the woman said carefully.

Andra nodded and led the way back to the mako. The two turians shared a look and entered behind
After a brief and cringe-inducing trip, they finally reached ExoGeni headquarters. Andra parked the mako and the three disembarked. As they approached the entrance, Nihlus signaled an enemy ahead. Garrus and Andra took cover, while Nihlus opened fire. The geth charged their position, but were swiftly cut down.

When the entry was clear, Andra received a transmission from Joker. “Hey, Commander. Spectre Saren just called. He needs a pickup from Noveria.”

Andra swore. “Pick him up and drop him in Zhu’s Hope. Something’s off there and I want his impression.”

“Aye aye ma’am. Why would he call you Commander Art-something?” Joker asked.

“It’s a long story. Buy me a drink sometime and I’ll tell you.”

“You’re no fun. Normandy out.” Joker complained as he broke transmission.

“Why not let your people know about your upbringing?” Garrus wanted to know as they headed deeper into the building.

“Couple reasons. People get weird when they find out I’m adopted, doubly so with the whole ‘mom died in childbirth, dad was never in the picture’ bit. They also don’t know how to act when I tell them I was raised on Palaven. Half of them think I’m spying on humanity for the turians,” Garrus snorted at that. “I know, right? The other half decide that this is tragic, I can’t possibly know anything about being human, blah blah blah. Easier all around to avoid it entirely.”

“You would deny the connection to your family?” Nihlus asked, shocked.

“Nope. I won’t deny it if asked, I just don’t feel like flaunting it to all and sundry. And, moving on, it looks like we’ve got an impenetrable barrier on the easy way through.”

Garrus called out, “Looks like there’s a back way here, but you might have some difficulty getting back up.”

Andra went over to study the hole. “Hmmmmmmm. All right, you two wait up here, I’m going down to check it out. I’m pretty sure I could get far enough up the wall for you two to drag me out if it’s a dead end.”

Nihlus nodded an agreement, and Andra jumped down the hole. She drew her pistol and headed down the passage. She peered around the corner and drew back sharply when a shot rang out. She muttered “Hold” into her comm and eased forward. Moving in low, she heard a voice say “Oh! I’m sorry! I thought you were a varren, or a geth.”

Andra walked into the chamber, pistol at the ready. She saw a woman holding a pistol standing over the corpse of a varren. “Put the weapon down,” Andra instructed calmly. The other woman did, keeping her hands up. “Now, who are you?” Andra asked her.

“I’m Lizbeth Baynham. I’m a scientist here. I had stayed to back up data while everyone was running. Next thing I knew, that geth ship had attached itself to the building and the power went out.”

“Do you know anything about the barrier?” Andra asked.
“It came on after the geth showed up. I haven’t been able to get past it.”

Andra nodded. “All right. Do you know what the geth are here for?”

The woman looked a little uncomfortable, “I’m not sure, but they might be here for the thorian. It’s an indigenous life-form that ExoGeni was studying.”

“Does that doorway access the rest of the building?”

“Yes, but you’d need a pass. Take mine. It will access the labs.”

Andra picked up the woman’s pistol and handed it back to her. “Come on. You can wait in the mako while we deal with the geth.” She led Lizbeth to where Garrus and Nihlus were waiting and gave her a boost. Garrus helped her out, and led her to the mako.

While they waited for Garrus to come back, Andra turned to Nihlus. “See if you can access anything about a thorian. Might be what the geth are here for.”

Nihlus started a search as Garrus approached. “She’s set in the mako for now, although I’m not sure she won’t try to make Zhu’s Hope and leave us here.”

“I doubt she’d try. She seemed more concerned about the geth.” Nihlus replied, looking up from his omni-tool.

“Will you two stop talking and get in the hole?” Andra yelled at them from below.

Garrus’s mandibles twitched. “Why Andra, I thought we were working?”

“I would like to remind you, dear heart, that I can shoot you without consequence. I’m pretty sure Nihlus would help.”

Garrus looked over at Nihlus and sighed. “I love it when she’s violent.” Nihlus growled and stormed ahead, assault rifle at the ready. Andra smacked Garrus’s arm. “Too much?” he asked innocently.

As they entered the corridor, they heard a voice above them. “Stupid VI. Access encrypted files!”

Andra and Garrus eased behind Nihlus, looking up the stairwell. Andra went ahead, pistol up and covered the landing. There was a doorway leading off the landing, and she could see a human arguing with a VI in the next room. She signaled to Garrus and Nihlus behind her and lined up a shot.

Just then, the VI informed the man, “If there is nothing else, please step aside. There is a queue forming behind you for the use of the machine.”

The man turned, startled, and Andra caught him in the neck. Garrus and Nihlus came up behind her and cleared the room. Nihlus stood watch at a second entrance to the room while the VI said, “ExoGeni Corporation would like to remind all staff that the discharging of weapons while on company property is strictly forbidden. Welcome back, Research Assistant Lizbeth Baynham. What can I do for you?”

Andra addressed the VI, “What was the previous user trying to access?”

“Fetching data. The previous user was attempting to access data on Species 37, the thorian.”

Andra felt a headache coming on. “What can you tell me about the thorian?”
“Species 37 is located within the substructure of the Zhu’s Hope outpost. The thorian is a simple plant life-form that exhibits a sentient behavior uncommon with other flora. Through dispersal and eventual inhalation of spores, it can infect and control other organisms, including humans. The Zhu’s Hope control group has yielded interesting results. Before sensors went offline, almost 86% of all test subjects were infected.”

“First zombies, now mind control plants. This week is just getting better and better.” She activated her comm to give Joker a head’s up, but couldn’t get through. “That field must be blocking transmissions. Let’s go clear out geth.”

They left the VI, and headed into the building proper. There were few pockets of geth resistance, easily handled. Andra did note the strange glowing orb that several geth had been kneeling before. It looked vaguely like the statues from the Temple Palaven recording.

Up a small flight of stairs, they found a small office with two humans inside. Andra signaled to wait, and listened. “The Illusive Man said we needed the info on this thorian thing. Can’t you hack the terminal faster? This place is creepy. I don’t trust these geth. I know Qian said they’d be allies, but I don’t know, man…”

The other man snapped, “Would you shut up! Once the Illusive man gets this info, he can get rid of Qian. But I can’t hack it if you won’t shut up!”

Andra nodded to Nihlus, and they lunged into the room, taking out the two humans before they moved. Andra glared at the bodies. “Futari Cerberus! Damn it! What possible reason could Cerberus have for… a thrice-damned mind control plant. Draaf, fuck. We need to get that barrier down, now.”

They headed down the other corridor, dealing with the geth on the way. “These claws are massive. We don’t have the ordinance to blow them.” Garrus pointed out.

Nihlus looked down the corridor. “It looks like there’s a lab down there. Might be useful.”

When they had cleared the labs, Andra started poking around. “Well, well, well. This could be useful.”

Garrus looked over from the console he was examining. “What?”

“Busted doors. I can use them to shear off a leg.” Andra replied, jury-rigging the system to her ends. The doors snapped shut, and there was a scream of metal as the geth ship fell from the building. Andra hit up the comms again as it fell. “Joker? Come in Joker.”

“Christ, Commander, you don’t gotta yell.”

“The colonists at Zhu’s Hope are under the influence of a mind controlling plant. I’ll explain that later. Have you landed yet?”

“No. We are making our approach now, though.” Joker said cautiously.

“Abort. Wait in orbit until I contact you again. I’m transmitting some data, I need that to get to Saren.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am. Landing is aborted. Waiting your signal. Normandy out.”

She led the way to the mako and they headed back to the ExoGeni employees hiding on the skybridge.
Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Andra waltzed into the bunker. “I don’t suppose any of you lot happen to have a nerve agent or equivalent on their person? I need to knock the entirety of Zhu’s Hope unconscious.” Everyone turned to stare at her. “No? Damn. We’ll just have to knock them unconscious the hard way.”

“What are you talking about?” Jeong demanded.

“You’re ExoGeni’s chief toady here, aren’t you? Well, I’m going to destroy the thorian, and don’t plan on abusing your colonists the way ExoGeni has been.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. ExoGeni is going to purge the colony and start over.” Jeong sounded smug.

Andra grew very still at that. She slowly turned to face him squarely, and in a voice colder than the wind off a glacier said to him, “You are going to stand there and condone the slaughter of a colony?”

Jeong went very pale and stepped back several steps. “No! I… I mean, ExoGeni is going to give the order. There is no way to stop it.”

Andra glared at him. “Make them. Tell the story of a colony that survived a geth attack.”

Jeong considered this. “Yes, we could capitalize on this, make a profit from vid deals….I’ll just need to make a few calls….”

Andra watched as he left. Lizbeth came over, cautiously. “I think we might have a nerve gas. It’s pretty weak, but I believe that the colonists’ immune systems might be compromised, so it should work.”

“Andra glared at him. “Make them. Tell the story of a colony that survived a geth attack.”

Jeong considered this. “Yes, we could capitalize on this, make a profit from vid deals….I’ll just need to make a few calls….”

Andra watched as he left. Lizbeth came over, cautiously. “I think we might have a nerve gas. It’s pretty weak, but I believe that the colonists’ immune systems might be compromised, so it should work.”

“Good. We’ll take it.” Andra turned on her heel and marched out of the bunker, gesturing for Nihlus to take the gas. Garrus glanced at Nihlus, and followed her.

Once outside of the bunker, Andra sat on a pile of rubble and sighed. Wordlessly, Garrus sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, resting her head against his keel. She looked over as Nihlus came up the ramp. “I’ve been a soldier for a decade. I have killed more people than I can count. And I will never understand how anyone can make an order like that. I can not understand throwing away lives just because they are inconvenient.” She sighed and got to her feet. “Come on. We need to go deal with the thorian.”

They got back into the mako and traveled the rest of the skyway in silence. As they pulled up to the Zhu’s Hope garage, Andra noticed a figure crouched on the side of the skyway.

“Potentially crazy, definitely naked guy, 2 o’clock,” Andra announced as she brought the mako to a halt. Nihlus nodded, and the three disembarked. Nihlus approached the figure as it got up. And fired wildly as it attacked him, vomiting a noxious substance on him.

Andra studied Nihlus after the thing was dead. “You’re getting hosed off before you set foot on my ship.” she said bluntly. As Garrus laughed, she turned to him. “That applies to you, too, if you get hit with that crap. All right. You both have the nerve gas?” They nodded. “Good. I don’t want any
civilian causalities. I don’t know what that thing was, but it wasn’t human. Feel free to kill them. Let’s move out.”

Andra nodded and Garrus opened the door. There were a few more of the human-like things inside, though they fell easily. The colonists guarding the elevator collapsed under the gas from a grenade thrown by Nihlus. They rode the elevator in silence, neither turian wanting to break into Andra’s introspection.

Outside the colony, they were met with several more of the things. “I don’t know why these things are being sent. They die if you poke them hard enough.” Andra grumbled as they cut through yet another group of the creepers.

“Probably trying to slow us down,” Nihlus replied, lobbing a grenade at a final cluster of colonists.

Andra headed over to the controls the last group of colonists had been guarding. It would lift the shuttle in the middle of the colony. Intrigued, she activated the controls, and was only vaguely surprised to find that it had been covering a staircase. Nihlus and Garrus turned in unison, pistols raised and focused on Fai Dan. The colony’s leader came toward them, walking as though every step was a struggle.

“I tried to fight it, but it gets in your head. You can’t imagine the pain,” he told them. “I was supposed to be their leader. These people trusted me.” He seemed to be fighting himself as he drew his pistol and aimed it at them. “It wants me to stop you, but... I... won’t!” He wrenched his hand around and pointed the pistol at his temple. “I won’t!” he yelled, as the grenade at his feet exploded, knocking him off his feet and out cold.

The two turians slowly lowered their weapons and turned to Andra. “I meant it when I said no civilian causalities.” she said calmly, and gestured to the stairway. “Move out.”

They headed down the stairwell, pausing when sounds similar to a growl echoed through the corridor. Garrus broke the silence. “So, all we need to do is find this creature and determine what it...what it...” He broke off, staring at the massive thing before them. “This was not covered by my training manuals.”

“That’s a plant?” Nihlus asked, incredulous.

“Well, fuck.” Andra said succinctly.

It was huge, twelve feet tall, at least, and hung suspended a full ten feet above the ground. It had numerous tentacle-like roots anchoring it to the walls of the ruined tower it resided in. It had more rootlets dangling from what on an animal species would be called a mouth, dripping some milky fluid. The thing that must have been the thorian seemed to heave, and vomited a green asari. Interesting. Andra and Nihlus traded a look and readied their weapons.

The green asari spoke. “Invaders. Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, good only to dig or decompose. I speak for the Old Growth, as I did for Qian. You are within and before the thorian. It commands that you be in awe.”

Andra mentally rolled her eyes. “You gave something to Qian. Something I need.”

“Qian sought knowledge of those who are gone. The Old Growth listened to flesh for the first time in the Long Cycle. Trades were made. Then cold ones killed the flesh that would tend the next cycle. Flesh fairly given! The Old Growth sees the air you push as lies. It will listen no more.”

Nihlus spoke. “If you give us this knowledge, we will hunt down those who betrayed you.”
“No more will the thorian listen to those that scurry. Your lives are short, but have gone on too long.” She started to gather together biotic forces when Garrus shot her through the chest.

“That was creepy.” Garrus said as they turned to look at him.

Andra turned to deal with some creepers that entered from a side corridor, and saw one of the roots embedded in the wall behind the creepers. She fought her way to the root and studied it. It seemed to be a support for the mass in the center of the tower. Shrugging, she shot it.

The roar of pain and fury that echoed through the tower was almost deafening. Well. That worked. Andra gestured to the boys and moved deeper into the building to find a way higher up the tower. They handled a nearly endless stream of creepers, punctuated with various returns of the green asari this thing can clone on the fly? as they shot as many of the roots free as they could find.

Eventually the thorian fell, its weight no longer able to be supported by the few roots left. It fell with a scream that made the turians cover their ear canals and filled Andra with a nameless dread. She sat, back against a wall and considered their options. “Good news, the colonists are free from that thing, although they really need to shrug off ExoGeni. Bad news, we have no fucking idea what Qian got from the thorian.”

Still seated, she drew her pistol on a pod on the wall opposite as it squelched open. An asari fell out. At a guess, this is the original. The asari straightened up and looked around.

“It’s… it’s gone? It’s gone!” the asari laughed. She turned and saw Andra, still sitting, weapon out, and her eyes widened. “Are you hurt? You’re the one who killed it, yes?”

Andra kept the pistol aimed at the asari and replied, “We killed it, yes. And I’m not hurt. Who are you and how did you get in there?”

The asari scowled at that. “I serve the Lady Benezia. We were captured by a human, one Dr. Qian. He sent me here to get information from the thorian, and abandoned me once he had it.”

“Why did you cooperate? You’re a commando, you could have taken him.” Nihlus said as he leaded on the door frame by Andra.

The asari whipped around to glare at him. “He threatened my Lady. She told me to cooperate, and I followed her orders.”

Andra pushed herself up and dusted off. “You still have the information?”

The asari looked at her warily. “I do.”

Andra nodded. “Give it to me, and we’ll get you back to Lady Benezia.”


“You can’t put it on a disc or something?” she asked, wary.

“Unfortunately, no. I can only show you what I know.”

Andra grumbled to herself, then sighed and stepped in front of her. Shiala placed her hands on either side of Andra’s head and cried, “Embrace Eternity!” as her eyes went black.

Andra felt the remnants of the beacon react to what Shiala was doing, and her mind was engulfed with the sensations of pain, fear, paranoia, loss, despair I will fight, grief, and an overwhelming
knowledge that all was lost. She saw scores of her people *not my people* being cut down by old friends who had been turned into monsters. She saw the same planet as before, and knew it to be Illos *how?* and knew that the key to preventing this from happening again lay there.

As Shiala severed the bond, Andra felt her legs give from under her *oh, shit, not again* and felt armor clad arms catch her as the ground rushed up and blackness descended.

Chapter End Notes

So, I don't know how many of y'all are on Tumblr, but I'm interested in the Long Live Feedback program. Their goal is to improve communication between authors and readers. So, to borrow from one of their mockups:

I welcome:
- Short comments
- Long Comments
- Questions

I also love hearing what parts you liked in any given chapter! If you're uncomfortable posting a public comment here, I keep anonymous comments open on my blog at p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com, so feel free to bug me there, too!

I try to answer all my comments, although I don't answer some for various reasons. I do love hearing from everyone!
Chapter 20

Andra found herself in a field of yellow flowers. She reached for her pistol, but found herself unarmed. Looking down, she saw she was in a light blue sun dress. “What.”

A laugh tinkled out from behind her. She whirled around, falling into a defensive crouch, hands raised, to see an unknown asari lounging on a blanket under a tree at the top of a small hill. Cautiously, she lowered her guard and moved up the hill. “Who are you?” she asked, eyes searching for movement.

“Oh, my. Saren was right about you, child.” The asari seemed deeply amused by Andra’s reactions.

“You’re not answering my question.” Andra pointed out.

“Very well. I am Lady Benezia. We are currently in your mind-”

“Like hell. I have never envisioned myself in a blue sun dress.”

“True, but I was trying to get you to relax, and you prefer blue. This location is of my creation, and a way for me to discuss with you the varied bits of information that have been fairly rudely shoved into your mind.”

“That’s fair enough. When are you going to get out?”

Andra woke to find her uncle staring down at her. “You need to stop finding things to mess with your head. Unless you enjoy being carted to a medical center like a… what is that human expression? Oh, yes. A damsel in distress.”

“Ha,” she said as she sat up. She was in the medical center in Zhu’s Hope. “When did the Normandy land?”

“We were informed when you fell unconscious. Nihlus brought you here while Garrus and Shiala caught us up. I take it Benezia brought you up to speed?”

“Yes. Load up, we’re going to Therum.”

As they headed to the docks, they were approached by Shiala. “Commander. My Lady thanks you for helping her daughter, but we will not be accompanying you. She wishes to remain here with the colonists, and assist them in their recovery from the thorian and ExoGeni.”

“All right. Will the rest of her acolytes be coming?” Andra asked, interested.

Shiala nodded. “They are on their way now, and should be arriving before the day ends.”

She saluted, and headed back into the colony. Andra shrugged and turned to the Normandy. As soon as she and Saren were clear of the airlock, she turned to Joker. “I want Wrex, Tali, Garrus, Nihlus, and the squad to meet me and Saren in the comm room in five. We’ve got a lot to discuss. Once we’re clear, make a course to Therum.”
“Aye, aye, Commander. You planning on explaining that slip earlier any time soon?”

Andra laughed as she headed to the comm room. “Still don’t have my drink, Joker.”

Entering the comm room behind Saren, Andra was pleased to see that Wrex and Tali seemed to have hit it off. The pair were seated together, Wrex between Tali and the rest of the room. Garrus and Nihlus leaned on opposite walls, not quite glaring at each other. Saren walked through the room and leaned on the final wall, keeping an eye on the younger turians. Alenko, Williams and Jenkins stood to attention when she walked in.

“At ease.” The humans sat, and she addressed the room. “This mission has turned out to be much bigger than we thought. With the help of Lady Benezia and the information from the thorian, I’ve managed to decipher the information from the beacon. It was a warning from the Protheans to all future races. They were hunted to extinction by a race of synthetics called Reapers. These Reapers come through every fifty thousand years to kill all organic life. The first thing they attack is the Citadel. The good news is, right now they can’t get to the Citadel without first going to Ilos. Thanks to the Rachni queen, we have the coordinates for the Mu relay and can reach Ilos. Dr Qian is working with the geth and the Reapers to open the Conduit on Ilos to permit the Reapers full access to the Citadel. From what we overheard, the Illusive Man is planning to kill or otherwise remove Qian for reasons we have yet to determine.

“We are going to rescue Dr. T’Soni from Therum, and then Saren, we’ll be dropping you on the Citadel. The rest of us will travel to Ilos and close or destroy the Conduit while you inform the council. If you can arrange a defensive force as well, that would probably be for the best. Any questions?”

“Why a defensive force?” Tali asked.

“Plan for the worst, hope for the best. If Qian and Cerberus get to Ilos before we do, they might start attacking the Citadel before we can get there.” Andra looked around the room. Ashley was trying to catch her eye, signaling that she wanted a private meeting. Andra nodded. “All right everyone. Williams, stay behind. Dismissed.”

Andra waited while everyone filed out, then turned to Ashley. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yes, Commander.” She sighed and straightened her shoulders. “I’m worried about the aliens. The turians and Wrex. With all due respect, Commander, should they have full access to the ship?”

Andra raised an eyebrow at that. “Meaning?”

“This is the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy. I just don’t think that they should be allowed to poke around the vital systems.”

Andra cut her off. “The turians helped fund the making of the Normandy. The Hierarchy already has the designs. They’re planning on building more if this one proves useful. Wrex is a merc. He’s never been to the engine room, so how would he gain any intel? Besides, they’re allies.”

Ashley winced. “I’m not sure I would call the council races ‘allies’. We… humanity… have to learn to rely on ourselves.”

Andra crossed her arms as she considered the other woman. “You still maintain this, even with the turians taking in a number of human orphans?”

“Look. If you’re fighting a bear, and the only way to survive is to sic your dog on it and run, you will. Doesn’t matter how much you love your dog, it’s still an animal. The turians only took in
those kids as a political maneuver. They don’t care about them. They can’t. No race is going to stick out its neck for another. It’s short-sighted to think that the turians will help if their back is against the wall. Any species is going to hold its own more important than us.”

Andra throttled down the rage that Ashley’s speech stirred up. “Gunnery Chief. The aliens will remain on this ship until Qian has been dealt with. You will be working with them. If you should have a problem working with them, tell me now, and I will have you transferred to a position where you will not need to deal with aliens again. Am I understood?”

Ashley looked surprised at the change in demeanor, but snapped a salute and answered, “Understood, Ma’am.” When Andra returned the salute, she headed down to the cargo bay. At least three of the aliens had chosen to bunk down there, and she wanted to keep an eye on them.

Chapter End Notes

And now I only have eight chapters in my buffer (I got distracted by re-watching Avatar)

So: everyone is up to speed, and Liara rescuing is on the way!

Comments are love, my commissions are open @ p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Translations:
D’arvit: Turian sound, requires two larynges to properly pronounce. Denotes a term of derision, translates to something equivalent to "I can't believe how stupid you're being right now."
Patruus: Uncle

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus waited outside the comm room until Ashley marched out. She glared at him, and headed belowdecks. Nihlus ignored her and watched Andra’s face as she entered the CIC. “Commander. A word?” he asked when she saw him. She nodded and led the way to her cabin.

Nihlus looked around her quarters, intrigued. She had a nest of pillows and blankets on the bed and a strange statue and a pair of books on the bedside table. She sat, cross-legged, on the foot of the bed and gestured to the only chair. “You wanted to talk?”

Nihlus found he couldn’t settle, couldn’t look at her. He wandered over to her side table and examined the books. The Phantom of the Opera, and The Infinity Principle: A Guide to Practical Application in Combat Scenarios. “Light reading?” he asked, then sighed. “I treated you unfairly. When I learned you are Arterius, I…” He reached for the statue, studying it as he searched for the words. “Well. I panicked. Saren took me in, when the military was about to throw me out. He taught me, trained me, to be better than I was. The thought of angering him….” Nihlus trailed off, rolling the statue in his hands. “I didn’t… I’m not very good at keeping relationships. Put a gun in my hand, point me at a problem, I can handle that. Other people-”

He was cut off by a pillow connecting with the side of his head at speed. He turned, astonished, to see Andra prepared to throw another. “You’re shit at relationships because you don’t tell anyone what’s going on in that thick skull of yours unless they drag it out!” She sighed and put the pillow down. Shifting to hug her knee, she continued, “Saren doesn’t give a good goddamn who I bed. He’s turian.” Nihlus snorted. “My whole family are. They’re a little overprotective, yeah, but they don’t want to see me hurt.” Nihlus put the statue back and sat next to her. She leaned over, resting her head on his shoulder.

They sat in silence for a while, then Nihlus coughed and said, “You were my first human. I hope I satisfied.”

She chuckled. “You did. More than once, as I recall. You were mostly my first turian, too.”

“Only mostly?” he asked, amused.

She snorted. “Garrus and I used to fool around when we were younger.” She shrugged, “Turns out, he’s not that into humans. So we fooled around, he wasn’t feeling it, we stopped. Stayed friends, though.”

Nihlus considered this. He picked up the statue again and turned it around in his hands. “Lord Ganesh. The remover of obstacles.” Andra informed him.
Nihlus chuffed. “I can see why you like him.” He put the statue back and looked down on her. Cautiously, he said, “I don’t keep many friends. I’d hate to lose a good one due to my stupidity.”

Andra snorted a fair approximation of a d’arvit in the back of her throat. “You’re an idiot. That’s why you need friends. Someone needs to watch your back.”

Nihlus grinned a little. “Saren said you would be furious at me.”

“I am. But it’s kinda like kicking a pup right now. I’ll still watch your back, but I’m not sure I can trust you enough to sleep with you anytime soon.”

She had her back to him, returning the pillow she’d thrown at him, and so didn’t see the flare of hope on his face. “Anytime soon?”

She turned to look at him, hip cocked. “I’m not saying ‘no’, but I’m not saying ‘yes’ either. We already did the tumble. But I am still pissed and hurt about what happened. If you plan on making a play again, I strongly recommend building up that shattered trust first. Woo me. You’re cute, I’ll give you that. But I want more than that, you know?”

He nodded as Joker came over the comm, “Therum in 20 minutes, Commander.”

“Oh my way.” She looked at Nihlus. “I want Saren and Ashley on this run.” Nihlus nodded, and went to find Saren. Andra took the elevator to the cargo hold. She walked over to Garrus first.

“You two settled things?” Garrus asked.

She leaned on the mako next to him. “Sort of. I told him about us. He’s going to try for friendship, build up trust.” She caught Ashley staring and yelled across the hold, “Williams, grab your gear!” Ashley jumped, surprised, then headed to her locker to start arming up. Andra turned back to Garrus, “Go talk to Nihlus. Apparently, he is terrified of my uncle.”

Garrus snorted. “Alright.” Pushing off the mako, he nodded respectfully to Saren as the older turian exited the elevator. Garrus looked back at Andra and the mako, and said in pained tones, “Try not to destroy this one? It’s almost pristine.”

Andra just laughed at him and entered the mako. Saren joined her, sitting in the back and stretching out to, to all appearances, take a nap. Ashley climbed in a few moments later, pausing when she saw Saren, but sitting in the vacant seat opposite him with no spoken complaint.

“Hold is clear, Ma’am. We are good to go once we reach the LZ.” Ashley reported, strapping in.

Andra nodded and opened a comm channel, “Joker, the mako is go for landing at your mark.”

“Roger that, Commander. We are approaching the landing zone now.” Joker replied.

The loading ramp descended, and Andra drove the mako out of the hold. The Normandy flew off to wait in orbit, and Andra guided the mako to earth. They landed heavily in what looked like an abandoned mining camp. Andra scanned the area and found no signs of life.

“Huh. Weird.” She drove the mako down the path to the second site. She kept an eye on the external heat sensors as they drove past lakes of lava, but they were well within the safety range. She guided the mako down the path as Saren broke the silence. “Geth ahead, just past that curve.”

“I see them, Patruus.” She fired a rocket into the cluster of geth and used the turret gun to finish the few who had escaped the blast.
Chapter End Notes

d’arvit- a rude noise, made with the subvocals.
Patruus- Uncle
Lanura- a brightly-colored flying lizard native of palaven, used frequently as a term of endearment.

Comments are love! Come poke at me at my Tumblr
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Garrus entered the crew deck and heard the quarian, Tali, yelling at someone. “I need those food scrubbers! That’s why the Commander ordered them! They’re not taking up that much space!”

The ship’s doctor, Dr. Chakwas, stepped in as Garrus came around the corner. “Tali, I have enough to last until we reach the Citadel again, and I’m sure Commander Shepard will ensure Lieutenant Alenko will acquire more for you.”

Garrus approached Wrex, who was glaring steadily at Alenko. “What happened?”

Wrex growled, “Alenko tossed Tali’s food scrubbers in the compacter.”

Garrus winced and made a note on his omni-tool to get more. He looked around, Alenko was looking suitably chagrined and Dr. Chakwas seemed to have everything under control. He caught Nihlus’s eye and gestured to the stairs. Nihlus shrugged and followed. They settled in the comm room as it was one of the only places to have an actual private conversation on the ship.

Nihlus leaned against the console while Garrus swiveled one of the chairs to study the Spectre. Nihlus looked a little more settled than he had before. “I take it your talk went well?” Garrus asked him.

Nihlus didn’t react. Garrus sighed and leaned back. “Andra said I should talk to you. I knew Saren when we were growing up. He helped show me how to shoot. From what I know of him, you won’t disappoint him unless you willingly do something stupid.”

Nihlus sighed and moved to the chair across from Garrus. “He is more my father than the turian who sired me.”

Garrus nodded. “I understand. Does he know that?”

Nihlus looked almost offended. “Of course not! He is my superior, it wouldn’t be proper.”

Garrus chuffed, “I don’t think he’d care overmuch about propriety. Did you hear how he handled his brother’s former lover trying to take his niece?”

Nihlus leaned forward, intrigued. “No, I had not. What did he do?”

Garrus laughed and made himself comfortable.

Andra drove the mako up to the ridge blocking the final portion of the path. “You know, I’m pretty sure I could get the mako over this.”

Ashley whimpered. “For the love of all that is holy, Ma’am, please don’t try. It’s not that far, we can walk. Please?”

Andra shot an amused glance over her shoulder. “All right. Need a minute, Chief?”

“No, Ma’am. Let’s go the rest of the way on foot now. Immediately.” She stumbled getting out of
the mako and stood by the opening in the rocks.

“She made good time getting out of here.” Saren observed. “Although, I think at least half of that was unnecessary.”

Andra shrugged. “She holds certain opinions I disagree with. As they are opinions, I can’t discipline her.” Saren cocked a browplate and she continue. “She thinks that Father only adopted me for political gain, that you and Mother don’t, can’t really care about me because we’re different races.”

Saren kept his expression bland. “She said this?”

“In general. She said that that was true for all of us who were adopted.” She shook her head. “But that’s neither here nor there. We need to extract Dr. T’Soni. Let’s go.”

They headed up the small rise, Ashley in the lead, and found a wide valley populated with a large number of geth. Andra found a good position and readied her sniper rifle. She kept up covering fire as Saren and Ashley worked their way to the main road. Andra made a final sweep of the rock face above them and picked off two snipers higher up the ledge, then went to follow them, programing the mako for a pickup.

Garrus and Nihlus lounged in easy camaraderie in the comm room. Nihlus had found a few bottles of cheap brandy and the two were well lubricated. “The thing I don’t understand,” Nihlus was saying, “Is it’s really obvious you love her, but she told me you don’t go for humans.”

Garrus took a long pull and finished his bottle. “Normally, I don’t. But Andra… there’s just something about her, you know?” He shrugged and slid out of the chair to the floor. “I want her, but she deserves someone more. I’m just a CSEC officer. I’m a bad turian. She needs… she needs you.”

Nihlus jerked up from his sprawl, “What?”

Garrus nodded sagely, “You’re a Spectre, one of the best. You’ve got the reputation, the clout. And you love her. You’d be perfect for her.”

Nihlus shook his head, “No. I’m only good as a Spectre because I block everything off. I don’t… I can’t… I have no idea how to form the easy intimacy the two of you have. I’d only hurt her over and over again. She deserves someone like you.”

Garrus rolled his eyes, “How do you know?”

Nihlus finished his bottle and said, “Let me tell you about the mission we did. The Alliance asked for Council assistance to take out a Cerberus cell. The Council handed it to me. I decided that the easiest way to get into the cell was to send a couple of humans who knew turian military code. Most of the Cerberus operatives were former or current Alliance, so they knew the human military signs. Wound up sending Andra and Warren Abiso.”

“I know him. He’s a good soldier.” Garrus interrupted.

“He is, and he’d worked with Andra before. Anyway, they got in, no problems. They gathered enough intel in fifteen minutes to shut down a large operation that Cerberus had in the works. Abiso was evacuated with the intel, while Andra was going to distract the guards. There was a miscommunication, and I went in to evac her too soon. We had to shoot our way out of the base,
and Cerberus blew it while we were still inside. We managed to escape with minimal harm.”

“Who initiated?” Garrus wanted to know.

“She did. And then, the next morning, she’s still there. Her omni-tool had a message displayed, from Saren. That’s when I found out she’s his niece. I admit I panicked, and kicked her out.”

Garrus studied him. “You’re an idiot.” He cocked his head at the other turian. “So, between the two of us, we make one perfect mate for Andra, and one horrible one.” He stared thoughtfully at the wall over Nihlus’s head. “This might be the alcohol, but I wonder if she’d be willing to try a garvansaag.”

Nihlus looked down at Garrus, stunned. “That’s it. You’ve had far too much to drink.”

Andra looked at the armature, then back at Ashley. “This would have been easier with the mako.”

Ashley looked up from applying omni-gel to her armor. “With all due respect, Ma’am, I am never getting into another vehicle with you driving.”

Andra looked upward, “Why is it that whenever someone says ‘with all due respect’, they really mean ‘kiss my ass’?”

Saren chuffed, “You just bring out that reaction in people, Lanura.”

Andra glared at him, then stuck out her tongue. “All right, people. We’re on a rescue mission. Let’s go.”

They entered the mine, clearing the geth on the walkway. The rode a rickety elevator down a level, Andra gripping her rifle almost hard enough to draw blood. Once back on the walkways, she relaxed, continuing to provide covering fire. In the second elevator, however, she nearly clawed her way out of the box when it stopped between two floors. Saren brushed her arm and she calmed a bit, following the others into the main cavern.

She shook off the lingering effects of the fear and approached a glowing barrier. On the other side, an asari maiden hung suspended in an orb of light. The asari saw her and said, “Are…are you real? Oh, no, Liara, don’t be stupid, humans do not come here, you’re hallucinating. And talking to yourself. Ha! Oh, Goddess, I’m going to die here.”

“We’re real, and we’re going to get you out of there.” Turning to Ashley and Saren, she gestured for them to go clear the cavern.

“You’re oddly lucid for a hallucination. They don’t usually claim to be real. Or do they? I guess I wouldn’t know. I don’t usually hallucinate. At least, I don’t think I do.”

Andra turned away from the captive asari and took out two geth on the far side of the cavern. She hopped down to examine the mining laser in the middle of the cavern. Grinning, she overrode the lock and turned it on. There was a rumble while the laser dug into the stone, and after a few seconds there was a passable tunnel.

She led the way to the central column. She glanced at the controls and realized she could not only read them, but knew how to make them work. Score one for having my head messed with. Now I can read Prothean. She sent the elevator up to the floor the asari was on. Heading down the short hall, she caught the asari’s attention.
“And now I’m hallucinating you’re inside the tower. I must be getting worse. Earlier, I even imagined I heard thunder.”

Andra said, “We used the mining laser to bore through,” as she used the controls to free the asari.

The asari fell to the ground, then looked at Andra. “You were real? Oh, Goddess, I thought I was hallucinating.”

Andra helped her to her feet, “Dr. T’Soni? Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

They headed out to the central elevator, Andra supporting Liara. Saren activated his comm and called Joker for a pickup. At the top, they were met by a krogan with a small group of geth. Saren and Andra drew and fired before the krogan could open his mouth. Ashley and Saren took out the geth while Andra shot the krogan several more times to be sure. They then exited the mine to board the Normandy.

Chapter End Notes

The Arterius family collectively gives zero shits.

Also: garvansaag- a turian term for any relationship that’s more than just a pair, whether a poly group or triad, or a new relationship after your first mate dies.

Comments are love!
Chapter 23

Once back aboard the Normandy, Andra ordered Ashley to get Liara to the med bay and had Saren contact Lady Benezia to inform her that her daughter was safe. Andra checked in with Pressley to see what she missed on her way to the CIC. Five minutes later, after setting a course for the Citadel, she walked into the comm room and looked down on the two very drunk turians on the floor. As she debated the merits of leaving them to sober up or rolling them down to the med bay, Garrus cracked open one eye and saw her.

“Andra!” he slurred, trying to grab the chair and missing. Nihlus snickered uncontrollably. “We were talking about you. You’d be okay with garvansaag with us, wouldn’t you?”

Andra stared at him for a minute, then turned on her heel and walked out.

I do not have time for this. I’m not thinking about this. I am going to kill those two when they sober up.

“Pressley! Keep those two in there until they sober up or we reach the Citadel, whichever happens first.” She marched down to the hold and found requisitions officer Chris Postle. “Put in an order for more food scrubbers, if Alenko hasn’t yet”

“Yes, Ma’am. Lieutenant Alenko already did, and they’ll be waiting on the docks when we arrive.” he told her.

“Good. That will be all.” She turned to head for the engine room to talk with Tali.

Saren came around the mako and stopped her. “You’re looking a bit tense. What’s wrong?”

Andra ran her hands through her hair and stifled a scream. “Your proteges are drunk off their asses in the comm room. I asked Garrus to talk to Nihlus about you, and me, and all that drama, and apparently they now think that garvansaag will fix everything! And! One of my crew threw out the food scrubbers I got so Tali would be alright, and another of my crew is racist against me and my whole family, and I have to convince the council to send a Spectre into the Traverse to the Mu relay to go to a planet that most people think is a myth to maybe, if we’re lucky, stop whatever the fuck Cerberus is up to, and find a way to stop an ancient race that no one knows anything about!” She stopped, panting.

Saren simply put his hand on her shoulder and said, “I’ll deal with my proteges and the council. As I have sent all the information we have gathered to Desolas, we will likely have the support of the Primarch to deal with Cerberus and the reapers. As Cerberus shows poorly for the humans, you would likely also find support with Alliance command.”

She sighed and looked up at Saren. “Go deal with the drunken idiots in the comm room, please. I need to talk to Tali.” Saren chuffed and headed to the elevator.

Andra headed down to the engine room and nodded at the crew. She saw Tali working on a console and decided to stop and chat with Chief Engineer Adams first. “Adams.”

“Commander! Don’t usually see you down here. How can I help you?” Adams asked.

“Find me an extra week or two between now and tomorrow?” she asked hopefully.

“Sorry, Commander, that is a bit beyond my skills.” Adams laughed a bit as he said it.
Andra sighed. “Very well. I did want to ask how Tali’s been fitting in, see if there were any problems.”

“With Tali? No!” he sounded surprised. “She’s amazing, better than most I’ve had under my command. To be honest, I want to keep her, and if anyone has a problem with it, they can talk to me.”

“Glad to hear it. Carry on.” She let him go and continued on to the quarian. “Hey, Tali. Got a minute?”

“Sure, Commander. What can I do for you?” Tali asked, turning away from her console.

“Just wanted to check in, see how you’re settling in and all.”

“Oh, I’m doing fine! Engineer Adams is wonderful, and this engine!” Tali gushed.

Andra smiled at that, “You like engines?”

“Oh, yes! On the flotilla, you have to. All of our ships have been repaired over and over, some of them date from the original flight from Rannoch. So it’s nice to get to study a top-of-the-line engine first hand.”

Andra leaned on the console, “Tell me about life on the flotilla. Sounds fascinating.”

Saren stood in the doorway to the comm room and looked down at the drunken turians on the ground. “Spirits, how much did you two drink?”

Nihlus moaned and rolled over while Garrus snored. Saren studied the room. Eight bottles of high quality brandy from Palaven lay scattered over the floor. *Those boys won’t be getting up for a while, yet.* Saren carefully moved around the room, collecting the bottles and setting them up in a row on the console. Then he quietly left the room and headed down to the crew deck, nodding at the navigator on his way past. He stopped by the med bay to warn Dr. Chakwas and Liara what he had planned, and to pick up some supplies, then moved on to Andra’s cabin. He liberated a couple of pillows and blankets from her nest and proceeded back up to the comm room. Ignoring the look of confusion from the crew as he passed, he entered the comm room and carefully tucked in the younger turians, removing their weapons and gently moving them into the center of the room so they wouldn’t hurt themselves. Then he injected each of them with enough medigel to make them conscious, but still keep their hangovers.

Leaving the comm room again, he walked forward to the cockpit. “Joker. Is it possible to isolate where the intercom plays?” he asked.

Joker looked over, confused. “Yeah, sure. I can do that, easy. Why?”

Saren smiled. “Good. If you could, inform all the ship, save for the comm room, that you will be testing the alarm system in three minutes, and then do so.”

Joker looked steadily at him. “So, how drunk did they get, exactly?”

“They will be conscious and hungover in two minutes.”

“You’re mean. I’m glad you’re on our side.” Joker said, moving back to his console.
Saren moved back to the comm room, sending a brief message to Andra, and then he waited while Joker announced the upcoming alarm test. He opened the door and waited, watching as the two turians started to stir, moaning and complaining all the while. He grinned in anticipation.

The alarm cut through the air, loud enough to hurt, and the two turians jumped and moaned in agony. The alarm cut off quickly, and Saren walked in to stand over the two younger turians. “We will be docking at the Citadel in fifteen minutes. I will speak with both of you in the hold before then.” Then he turned on his heel and left them alone.

Chapter End Notes

This was mostly a filler chapter, but fun.

Comments are love!

Seriously, talk to me. It helps inspire me (and since I'm currently stuck on chapter 30, inspiration is needed)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Garrus and Nihlus stumbled into the hold, still hungover. Dr. Chakwas had denied them painkillers on the grounds that she felt they deserved their hangovers for getting so drunk while in the middle of a mission. They found Saren leaning against the mako. Tellingly, the hold was vacant save for him. They exchanged worried looks, then Nihlus squared his shoulders and walked forward, Garrus trailing behind.

They stopped in front of Saren, eyes down, waiting. Saren studied them in silence. Garrus shifted his weight, and still Saren said nothing. Nihlus looked up, swallowed, and met Saren’s eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, to defend his actions, something, but nothing came out. His gaze fell back to the floor.

Saren sighed and spoke. “Garvansaag?”

The younger turians flinched. Garrus coughed. “I, uh... I don’t remember why I thought that was a good idea.”

Nihlus straightened and looked Saren squarely in the eye. “This is my fault. I treated the Commander unfairly because—”

He stopped as Saren waved a hand. “I do not care whose fault it is, nor who brought it up first. Garvansaag does not just happen. It must be carefully cultivated. Right now, Andra is still hurt by your actions, Nihlus, and does not know the depths of your feelings, Garrus. You both need to develop a foundation, independently and together, to convince her that this is what you both want. You both also need to consider that she might not be amenable to garvansaag. Not many are.”

He studied the two shamefaced turians before him. “Regardless, the two of you were far too drunk for the situation. Neither of you were in any condition to provide backup had it been necessary. You both know better than that.”

There was a ragged chorus of “Yes, Sehr”. Saren scowled at them a bit longer, then let them flee in peace.

The Normandy docked at the Citadel, and Andra was met by a turian with an invitation. She scanned it and grinned. Going back to the cockpit, she announced, “The entire crew of the Normandy, and those guests we have aboard, have been invited to dinner at the turian embassy. Udina is strongly suggesting we all arrive on time.” She passed along the time and location and ended the announcement.

She waved at Saren as he left to go report to the council. Turning back to her crew, she said, “All right, everyone. You've got two hours personal before the dinner. Do what you will, but be damn sure you're sober when you get there.” She glared at Garrus and Nihlus as she said it.

Two hours later, after catching Liara up on what they were doing, and disabling a self-aware gambling console, she met the rest of the crew in front of the turian embassy. Liara was mid-rant
about the unfairness of spending fifty years studying the Protheans, and Andra having all the
information she needed dropped in her lap. Andra rolled her eyes, and swore when she saw Udina
approaching with Captain Anderson and Admiral Hackett.

“Straighten up, people, we got brass incoming.” Andra barked over her shoulder. The Alliance
members of the crew snapped to attention, while the aliens stood respectfully to one side.

Udina stopped in front of Andra and scowled. Andra bit the inside of her cheek to keep from
smiling. “This is important politically, Shepard. Do not do anything to compromise our standing.
Your actions reflect upon humanity as a whole. Keep your mouth shut unless answering a direct
question. The General is considered to be very touchy on certain subjects.” He frowned at Captain
Anderson while the other man tried, and failed, to disguise a laugh as a cough. “Admiral Hackett
seems to believe that you can behave yourself, I hope he’s right.” So saying, the ambassador
entered the embassy.

Andra saluted Admiral Hackett, who returned it. “You haven’t informed your crew of the full
extent of this dinner, have you?” he asked her.

She smiled a little at that. “No. Considering you did not see fit to inform Udina, either…..”

“Very well.” The admiral entered the embassy alongside Captain Anderson.

Failing to suppress her grin entirely, Andra turned to her crew. “All right, behave, if you have any
questions, ask respectfully, don’t use the tablecloth as a napkin, all that jazz. Let’s go eat. Oh, and
Joker? You’re about to get your answer.”

She stood aside, allowing everyone else to proceed her into the embassy. Garrus and Nihlus moved
to wait with her, and she sighed. “I have no idea if you remember what you said to me when you
both were drunk, but we need to talk later. And you both need to be sober for it.”

So saying, she turned to enter the embassy behind Joker. Inside, a turian, young enough to still be
on his mandatory year of service, was introducing the general to Chief Williams. Andra smiled a
bit at Ashley’s mild discomfort, and grinned wider when General Desolas looked up and saw her.

“Andra! Tamahiin!” he called, moving through the crowd by the door. Hackett and Anderson
looked pleased, while Udina was looking confused, and increasingly angry.

Desolas reached her and she smiled at him. “Bormah.” He hugged her, and she laughed. “Bormah,
Father, if I can introduce my crew.”

She Joker sputter “Father?! and caught a quick glare from Ashley, but ignored them for now.
After the introductions, she, Desolas and Hackett sat at one end of the table to discuss her findings.
They were joined shortly by Saren. He looked subtly furious, but shook his head when Andra
started to ask what was wrong. She shrugged and turned her attention back to the conversation
between Desolas and Hackett.

“At the moment, the geth activity in the Traverse only affects the Systems Alliance and the
Hegemony. However, as the Normandy is a joint effort between the Alliance and the Hierarchy,
and as our two races are strong allies, I can see lending aid to the geth incursion into the Traverse.”
Desolas was saying.

“Good. There is a batarian terrorist making a move to attack Terra Nova. The Council won’t
authorize a Spectre to look into it.” Saren added.

Andra looked around, and received a nod to speak. “If I can make a suggestion? We have the
coordinates for Ilos, and we know that either Qian, Cerberus, or both are going to use something there. If the Hierarchy can deal with the geth incursion in the Traverse, and someone can stake out Ilos, I and my crew can deal with the batarian.”

Hackett nodded. “Make it so.”

Andra looked over at her father, “If it’s not too much of a hardship, Could you have them pass along all info they get on the geth to Tali? I promised her she’d get it, and if the quarians can get anything useful out of it, it would make reclaiming Rannoch easier on them.”

After the dinner, when the formalities had been dispatched and people were going their separate ways, Saren stopped Andra to talk.

“I have a ship so I’ll keep an eye on Ilos, and keep you informed of what happens there. But survein, watch your back. You won’t be able to talk your way out of everything.” He briefly touched his forehead to hers and left for the docks.

Andra watched as he left, wondering what that was about. Then she shrugged and rounded up her crew to go deal with Balak.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Garvaansag- A relationship involving three adults romantically involved with each other.
Tamahiin- Daughter
Bormah- Father
(Both Tamahiin and Bormah convey a feeling of family and closeness. A male mentor could be called Bormah, for example)
Survein- Niece (or younger close family member)

So, have an update!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Andra was headed back to dock 422, her omni-tool pinged an incoming message. She was surprised to see a message from the Consort. She scanned the message, and sent a reply to Sha’ira saying that she’d look into it. After a brief moment, she sent one to Nihlus saying she’d be a bit late and why.

She headed to the Consort’s chambers, shoving down her disgust. Don’t mind asari who think, but those who sell themselves, no matter how much they charge… she suppressed the shudder of revulsion as she walked up to the asari handling all the supplicants today. The woman looked up as Andra approached and greeted her with a huge smile.

“Welcome! How may I serve you today?” the greeter asked.

“I need to speak with the consort. It is a matter of some delicacy.” Andra replied.

“Aww, I’m sorry. The Consort is booked solid. I can make an appointment for you, if you’d like?” The woman managed to sound chipper even as she apologized. It was infuriating. She jumped a little as her comm signaled, then she replied, “Yes, Sha’ira? Yes, of course, Mistress.” Lowering her hand, the greeter looked back at Andra, saying “Apparently, she wants to speak with you. She’s just in the back.”

Andra felt the muscles in her shoulders tighten as she moved through the lounge, passing beautiful human and asari women in revealing dresses that flowed like water. They made her feel big, slow, and ugly. Shake it off, soldier. You are worthy of being here. Spirits, you have two devastatingly handsome turians who want you.

She sighed as she turned the corner to the Consort’s chambers.

And they both love me, or at least think they do. And I do care about them. Fuck. I need to talk to Mother.

She entered the chambers and walked inside. At the top of a small staircase, the Consort said, “That is close enough, Commander.” She turned as she spoke, slowly sashaying over to where Andra stood, continuing, “I have a small problem you can help me with. I have a friend, Septimus, a retired turian general. I won’t discuss the details, but he wanted me to be more than I could be. We had a falling out, and now he spends his days in Chora’s Den, drinking and spreading lies about me. If you would speak to him as a fellow soldier,” she went on, reaching up to cup Andra’s face.

Andra grabbed her wrist and pushed her hand down. “Don’t touch me. I’ll talk to him. What’s the surname?”

Sha’ira moved away, saying brusquely, “Oraka. Now I must ask you to leave. I have many clients waiting to see me.”

Don’t like being snubbed, do you? Andra mused as she headed out of the consort’s chambers. She took a cab down to Chora’s den, looking up General Oraka’s service record. Oh, yeah. I threatened to bite him! Good times. Smiling to herself, she got out of the cab and headed into the club. And more half-naked asari. Joy. The fuck does the rest of the galaxy see in them, anyway? She wandered around the club until she found Oraka. She sat at the bar and signaled for a beer. She sipped it and studied him for a bit. He looks tired. This should be easy. She grabbed her drink and
headed over to his table.

“General. Mind if I have a seat?” she asked.

He looked up at her, considering. “All right. Commander, isn’t it?”

She sat, nodding. “Yes, although the last time I saw you I was just a fledgeling.”

He narrowed his eyes, considering. “Ah, yes. You threatened to bite me, if I recall. What can I do for you, Commander?”

She took another pull from her drink. “Sha’ira says you’re spreading lies about her. She wants me to get you to stop.”

The general sighed, “Look, kid, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you’re wasting your time.”

Andra watched him over the rim of her beer. “What did she do to you? You used to have a spine.” she said mildly.

Oraka reared back, offense in every line. “She spurned me! Me! General Oraka!”

Andra cut his rant short with a derisive snort. “She’s a whore. She could never be only yours. You know that. You’re just being pissy you couldn’t convince her to get rid of everyone else. So now you’re mouldering in a skeezy bar, ruining her rep. That’ll really make her want you back!”

Oraka glared at her, then sighed. “You’re right. Sha’ira is worth the effort. I’ll go and apologize. After a cold shower. Or two.” He paused, then continued, “There is something you could do for me. I convinced an elcor diplomat, Xeltan, that Sha’ira betrayed his secrets. Take him this datapad. It will show where I got my information and exonerate Sha’ira.”

Andra finished her beer and took the datapad. “All right. Good luck, General.” She left the bar, taking a taxi to the embassy wing. She sent a brief message to her father, asking him to check up on General Oraka and suggesting he get a group together for drinks, then ran a quick check of her net. She had been keeping an eye out for any new information on Cerberus for the past three years, and had provided information that brought down a handful of different cells since she started. All she turned up this time was rumors about the Terra Firma political party being funded by Cerberus, but nothing she could act on.

She exited in front of the embassy, weaving past a cluster of volus diplomats, nodding respectfully. She headed down the hall and paused in front of the joint volus and elcor office, listening to make sure she wouldn’t be interrupting anything. The volus ambassador was quick to take offense, and Andra didn’t have the time to soothe his temper. Once certain she was clear, she entered the office, being sure to greet both ambassadors before the door hissed closed behind her.

The elcor speaking to the ambassador, Calyn, greeted her. “Strained greeting, human. This is not a good time.”

Andra pulled out the datapad, asking “Are you diplomat Xeltan?”

“Cautiously, yes, I am Xeltan. Concerned, who would like to know?”

Andra smiled and offered the datapad. “I found the source of your information leak. Sha’ira didn’t betray your secrets. It was a turian general, Septimus.”
“Unbelieving, I know Septimus. He could not have learned my secret unless it was from the consort.”

Andra gestured with the datapad and the elcor took it. “I have his source here. He’s repentant, and would like to make amends.”

“Confused, this is difficult to fathom. If he could discover this on his own… dismayed, anyone could learn my secret.”

Andra shrugged. “Possible, but unlikely. General Oraka had to work very hard to get that information. If I might make a suggestion, however?”

“Eagerly, please. I am listening.”

Andra smiled slightly. “The volus are very adept at keeping their secrets. You might be able to make an arrangement to learn how to protect your secrets better.”

“Relieved, thank you for your help human. Startled realization, I must go speak with the Consort. She will be most displeased with me.”

Andra stepped aside as Xeltan exited the offices, “Good luck.”

She was about to follow him out when the volus ambassador coughed behind her. She turned, surprised.

“You sent diplomat Xeltan to the Vol-clan for help, not the humans. Why?” the volus demanded.

Andra considered him, and answered truthfully, “The Vol-clan and the salarians are the best at protecting their secrets. Everyone knows that. The Vol-clan, however, are more likely to share some of their methods than the salarians.”

The volus sniffed at her, and she bowed her way out of the room, listening to Calyn trying to placate the volus. She grinned as she headed back to the Normandy.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead! Again!

There was just a fair amount of personal drama going on. But! I am back, for a few more chapters, at least.

Comments are love!
When Andra entered the Normandy, she headed straight to her cabin, pausing only to give the coordinates for Balak’s last known location. Once in her quarters she sat at the desk with a sigh. Saren had been trying to warn her about something, she was sure of it. Well, I’ll figure that out soon enough. She checked her messages and answered one from her mother, telling her what she was headed out to do. She sat for a moment, considering asking Antoria for advice about Garrus and Nihlus and garvansaag, but decided against it. Antoria would most likely expect it to happen, and Andra wasn’t sure how she felt about all of it. She decided to write Solana to complain.

Extranet Message
To: Solana Vakarian
From: Andra Arterius
Date: 15 March, 2183
Subject: Your brother is an idiot.

Solana

I have your brother on my ship, he’s fine, just helping with an issue I kicked up. And considering that there are two Spectres on my issue…, well, anyway. He and Nihlus have really hit things off. You remember Nihlus? He kicked me out. Except now he wants me back. Your brother suggested garvansaag, but he was drunk off his ass when he did. I don’t know what I’m doing with all of that. Assuming I survive this, we need to meet up for drinks.

Andra

She sent it and leaned back in her chair with a sigh. After a brief bout of self pity, she pulled up everything she had on Balak. She was pulled out of her research by a knock on the door.

“Enter,” she called, looking up.

Nihlus walked in and stood before her desk.

“I just received a garbled message from a friend in the STG. I think he was asking for help, but most of the message was jammed. He’s on Virmire. It’s your mission, but—”

“But you’re worried. Fair enough. Do you want us to answer it, or pass it along to the Hierarchy?”

He closed his eyes, a pained expression crossing his face. “I know Saren is waiting for backup on Ilos. I know the Hierarchy is in the area. But.”

She nodded. “Something’s off, and you want to check it out yourself. Alright. I’ll try to wrap things up with the batarians quickly.”

He nodded slightly. “Thank you. So, who are you planning on taking this time?”

“Don’t know yet.” She rose, stretching. “I should go, make the rounds.”
He followed her out, stopping by the medbay to speak with Dr. Chakwas while she took the elevator down to the hold.

She narrowed her eyes when she saw Liara talking with Garrus, but kept scanning the hold. Wrex studied her, then glanced pointedly at the asari. She rolled her eyes at him, then walked over to join him.

“Shepard.”

“Wrex. You know why she’s still on my ship?” she asked, leaning against the crates next to him.

“Said she wanted to see Ilos. Saren wouldn’t take her, and we’re headed there next. So, she decided to tag along.”

She felt her lip curl in a sneer. “My ship, and she couldn’t talk to me about it?”

The krogan shrugged. “Pretty sure she went over your head on that one.”

She sighed. “After we deal with Balak, we’re checking out a garbled distress beacon from the STG. I want you for that. You think you’ll have a problem working with Nihlus?”

He gave a dry laugh. “Nah. He’s got a stick up his ass, all turians do, but he’s one of the more flexible one’s I’ve met.”

She side-eyed him, amused. “So as far as the sticks go, am I turian or human?”

He laughed as she walked away, heading back up to the mess. Stepping out of the elevator, she grabbed Alenko.

“Get Jenkins and suit up. You two are with me.”

“Yes, Commander. Jenkins!” he called as he headed out to the armory.

Andra rolled her head on her neck, feeling a headache coming on. “Joker, find out who authorized Liara to board my ship without talking to me.”

She was on her way down to the hold when Joker replied. “Got a distress call from the asteroid. You need to hear this.”

He patched the ship’s VI through the intercom. “Status: sensors reveal three fusion torches propelling Asteroid x-57. At its current rate of acceleration, the asteroid will collide with Terra Nova in approximately four hours. Analysis: Torches must be disabled to cease the acceleration.”

Everyone in the hold looked up at that, horror plain on their faces.

“Right. Move, people! We’re on a timer here!”

The hold cleared quickly and Alenko and Jenkins ran to board the Mako.

“Joker, get us in as close as you can,” she barked, following her team.

“Aye, aye, Ma’am. Reaching the drop point in ten.”

She settled in and glanced over her shoulder at Jenkins. “This was supposed to be simple. If you don’t think you can keep up, speak up now.”
He was pale, but he squared his shoulders. “I can keep up, Ma’am.”

“Good man,” Alenko said softly.

Shepard gunned the mako out of the hold once there was enough clearance, guiding the vehicle to the surface of the asteroid.

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Shepard shut down the first torch, and led the way back to the mako. Jenkins was good in a firefight, she’d give him that. *A bit more training, and he might make for decent N7 material*, she thought idly.

She was brought out of her musings by a shot hitting her shields. She drew her pistol, hearing Jenkins and Alenko doing the same.

The man dropped the pistol immediately. “Oh, God. I didn’t mean to… Are you hurt?” he asked, shaken.

Shepard holstered her gun. “Takes more than one shot to bring me down.”

He approached them, saying, “Sorry. I didn’t even realize you were human until…. Well. Guess I’m not much of a soldier. I’m Simon Atwell, the chief engineer on this rock.”

“Commander Shepard.”

He blinked in surprise, but continued, “Listen. We don’t have much time.”

She nodded. “I know. Collision course imminent. Where are the other two torches?”

He sent her a copy of the map, saying, “This one here. It’s surrounded by live blasting caps, wired to proximity detectors.”

*Great.* “Alright. Anything else?”

“I had a team out when the batarians hit, and I haven’t heard from them.”

She nodded. “I’ll see what I can find, but the torches are a priority. Get yourself somewhere safe.” She marched past him, Alenko and Jenkins falling in behind her.

They trekked back to the mako in silence. Andra opened a comm channel to the ship. “Joker, there was a team out on the asteroid when the batarians hit. Run a scan and see if you can find them.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am.”

The second and third torches were fairly simple to disarm, only being guarded by a perfunctory force. As they were leaving the third control room, they were met by a small group of batarians. They were armed, but none had their weapons drawn.

“Hold it right there. This doesn’t have to end in bloodshed,” the leader said.

Shepard gestured to her men to stay back and approached, weapons holstered.

The lead batarian held up a hand. “Don’t come any closer. We can do this the hard way or we can end this peacefully.”
She cocked an brow at that. “Peacefully?”

He sighed. “Look, I’m just doing my job here. Hijacking this rock wasn’t my idea. I signed on to make a little profit. A quick slave grab, nothing more.”

She felt disgust curl through her. “This isn’t just a slave grab anymore. Millions of people are going to die.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I’m just following orders here. If it were up to me, we’d have already left,” he snarled, annoyed.

“Then take your ship and leave.”

“If Balak finds me—”

“I’ll deal with Balak. This is your one chance out of this. Don’t be stupid.”

He studied her, then nodded to his men.

“He’s in the main facility. You’ll need this to get in.”

As they turned to go, she opened a comm line again. “Joker. A batarian ship is about to leave. Mark it, but let it go.”

“You sure, Commander?” Joker asked, doubtfully.

“Mark it. Then send the info to the Hierarchy, use my authorization.” She closed the line and met Alenko’s gaze. He just cocked an eyebrow and walked past, dragging Jenkins behind him. It was obvious the younger man wanted to argue, but Kaidan started hissing something into his ear.

She ignored the shocked look Jenkins gave her as they drove to the main facility. “Right. Balak comes across as smart and cruel. Kaidan, you’re with me, Jenkins, your file says you’re pretty good at tech, that true?”

“Um, yes, ma’am?”

“Think you can disable a bomb during a firefight, if you had to?”

“What? You don’t think there are bombs, too?” he seemed bewildered.

“He’s smart, and he’s cruel. The batarians went running to the council for protection after they first hit humanity. After their hissy fit, humans got territory close to theirs. I’d bet that he’s trying to make a point, something along the lines of how this should be theirs. Bombing the main facility is a good fallback plan if dropping the asteroid somehow became nonviable.” She drew the mako to a halt, turning around in the seat to study Jenkins. “I’ve fought with batarians more than a few times. They like blowing shit up. So, think you can do it, if we cover you?”

He seemed to think about it, eyes going unfocused. “Maybe? I haven’t ever had to before, you know?”

“Good. Give it a try, tell me if you can’t.”

They exited the mako and made their way into the facility.

_____________________________
“How’s it going, Jenkins?” Shepard asked, peering around the corner and shooting the charging varren. He growled, absently as sparks jumped from the control panel. “It would be easier if it was quiet.” She grinned. “I’ll ask the terrorists if they’ll give us five minutes to diffuse their bombs, shall I?” He swore softly, then stood as the sensor confirmed it was diffused. “That would be great. Ma’am.” She checked her omnitool before leading the way deeper into the complex, satisfied that all bombs had been dealt with. She stopped at the base of a staircase when a batarian addressed her.

“You humans. You’re almost more trouble than you’re worth.”

“And I’m just getting started.” She signaled to Jenkins and Alenko, and shot him in the leg as the men flanking him went down with one clean headshot and one chest shot. She shot the varren as it charged then programmed a pair of restraints. She ignored his howls of rage as she secured him, taking his clutch piece and omnitool as Alenko found the crew and released them.

“Commander, I can’t get any other readings. If there’s anyone alive on that rock, they’re in the same building as you.” She nodded, sighing. “Thanks, Joker. Prepare for a pickup, and let the Alliance know we captured Balak. He’s locked in a storeroom.” “Roger, Commander.” She relayed the information to Simon and grabbed her team. Saren had been waiting long enough.

Chapter End Notes

Because there are no cutscenes in fiction, and I can do what I want. Bwahahaha!

Anyway, comments are love! And come poke at me on tumblr: p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back on the ship, Andra hunted down Nihlus. He was pacing the length of the mess hall, muttering softly. Garrus and Wrex were sitting at the table, watching him warily.

“Hey. Heard anything else?”

Nihlus wheeled on her. “I called in a favor, sent in a scout team. No one’s heard anything from them since they landed.”

“So there’s really something going on.” She nodded and turned to go, calling over her shoulder, “Order some serious backup. I’ll give Patruus a heads-up.”

Nihlus sighed in relief, hailing the fleet in the Attican Traverse.

Shepard walked to the map, tapping Pressley on the shoulder. “Change of plans. Something’s wrong in the Traverse. We’re going to Virmire first.”

Pressley looked like he wanted to comment, but nodded and input the change of course. Andra watched the crew for a bit, then sighed and sent a message to Saren.

*Shit’s come up. We’re making a side trip to check out a missing STG unit. Think you can hold out?*

She was slightly surprised at how quickly she got a reply.

*Shit’s come up here, too. I can handle it for another few hours, but don’t pick up another mission.*

She studied it, turning her head when Nihlus walked up behind her.

“What’s the problem?”

“Yeah, Saren.” She showed him the message, watching as his mandibles flicked in thought.

“He’s worried. Something’s gone wrong.”

“That was my take, too. We-”

She broke off as Joker called to her. Sharing a look, the two Spectres walked to the bridge.

“Think I found the STG’s problem. Comms are jammed, and there’s a bunch of AA guns in the area. Saw a crashed ship, couldn’t tell you whose.”

Andra swore. “Right,” she turned to Nihlus, “Grab Garrus and meet me in the mako.” Turning to Joker as Nihlus strode off, she continued, “We’ll go in hot and get those guns offline. When the Hierarchy ships are close enough, let them know. We’ll meet up at the salarian camp.”

She walked out, hurrying to the armory. She met Garrus and Nihlus and gave a brief rundown of what she planned.

Nihlus took a steadying breath as he let Shepard take the driver’s seat again, sharing a pained look with Garrus as the ramp lowered, the mako’s engine roaring to life as Shepard gunned it toward the
He didn’t open his eyes as Garrus and Shepard cleared a path to the salarian camp, only opening them on the few points he had to exit the mako and deal with the geth troops on foot. At the camp, he took a moment to steady himself, then met up with Shepard and Vakarian on the beach. They were talking with the salarian captain as two turian cruisers touched down. She recognized one as the Tenacity, and studied the second. She’d heard of the Vindicator, but never crewed on her.

“Sitrep,” he barked once he was close enough.

Andra rolled her eyes behind him, but didn’t respond as Captain Kirrahe began filling the Spectre in.

“This is Qian’s base of operations. He’s set up a research facility here. It’s crawling with geth and very well fortified.”

“What’s he researching?” Shepard asked.

Kirrahe glanced at her. “He’s using the facility to breed an army of krogan.”

“How is that possible?” Wrex demanded, coming up behind them.

Kirrahe shrugged. “Apparently, Qian has discovered a cure for the genophage. We must ensure this facility, and its secrets, are destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Wrex broke in. “I don’t think so. Our people are dying. This cure could save them.”

Kirrahe turned to Nihlus. “If that cure leaves this planet, the krogan will be unstoppable. We can’t make the same mistake again.”

Wrex lunged forward, jabbing his finger into Kirrahe’s chest. “We are not a mistake,” he snarled, before striding off.

Kirrahe watched him leave. “Is he going to be a problem? We already have enough angry krogan to deal with.”

Shepard kept her eye on Wrex. “I’ll go talk to him. Nihlus?”

He nodded and began working out the plan of attack. Andra followed Wrex down the beach, giving him some space. Once he stopped and began shooting at the water, she approached him.

“This isn’t right, Shepard. If there’s a cure for the genophage, we can’t destroy it.”

She stopped next to him, looking out over the water. “I know. And I agree. Nihlus does, too. Do you trust me?”

He side-eyed her, then sighed heavily. “Yeah.”

“Good. I’ll put you in another group, to keep the salarians happy, but I’ll copy every scrap of information I can get while I’m in there.” She grinned slightly. “I do have a small price, though.”

He reared back, drawing his pistol while she waved off support from behind her.

“Not that kind of price.” She sighed. “My mom wants grandkids. Once all this shit, with the Reapers, and Qian, and everything, is settled, put in a good word about me so I can adopt a baby krogan?”
She watched the gun fall silently to Wrex’s side as he started to laugh.

“You think I’m joking,” she said, amused. “I’m not. I’m telling you, if this,” she waved vaguely at the compound, “actually holds the cure, I will show up on your doorstep at some point in the future, demanding one of your kids.”

“Shepard, you bring me the cure, you can have a whole litter,” he replied, holstering his pistol.

She grinned at him. “One. I want a blue one.”

He snorted as he headed back to the camp. She grinned fondly and followed.

Nihlus waved her over as she approached. “Right. Some of Kirrahe’s men were captured, and we need to see Qian’s terminals. We’ll distract them while you go in, get the intel and people out. We don’t have enough people to storm the place properly, so we’ll clear it and turn the salarian’s ship’s drive core into ordinance to blow it.”

“I’m guessing hitting it from orbit wouldn’t work?”

“Most of the facility is underground.”

She nodded. “Tali, Wrex, with me. The rest of you, with Nihlus.”

She led her squad toward the rear, settling in as everyone else got into position. She glanced over her shoulder.

“Tali, I want a copy of everything, especially the cure. That goes to Wrex.”

Tali’s head whipped around. “The council-”

“Won’t find out from me, or Wrex,” she reassured her.

“Tell you what, the krogan will owe the quarians a favor after this,” Wrex rumbled.

Nihlus sent her a message on her omni tool, and she pulled it up, intrigued.

*If you can, take out as many of the geth as you can, and get the AA guns offline. I’ll pretend like I ordered you to destroy the cure info, and just remind you that you’re not a full Spectre yet. The Council wouldn’t approve of helping the krogan in this.*

She grinned at the message, arching an eyebrow when a second message came through.

*I do care about you, and am starting to see what you do in Vakarian. Don’t die until we can settle this. That’s an order.*

Another, from Garrus, followed quickly after that.

*Don’t know what he sent you, but come back alive, alright? I don’t think this thing would work without you.*

She laughed at that, waving off the questioning looks from Wrex and Tali as she led the way to the facility.

Chapter End Notes
Wherein the author treats foreshadowing like a blunt instrument, or: I finished a full chapter and the first halves of two more!

So, shit is starting to hit the fan, and we're approaching the end of Mass Effect (don't worry, I have plans through to after 3 (mostly)).

Comments are love!

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This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- "<3" as extra kudos
- Reader-reader interaction

This author replies to comments.

If you don’t want a reply, for any reason (sometimes I feel shy when I’m reading and not up to starting a conversation, for example), feel free to sign your comment with “whisper” and I will appreciate it but not respond!
They entered through the rear, making sure to knock out any security measures they could find. They could hear the results over the comms. When they reached the facility, Tali began fiddling with the alarm system.

“I can turn the whole system off, or I can set it off on the far side,” she reported.

“We can take the hit. Turn it off,” Shepard ordered.

Tali nodded and the security lights on the doors flipped to green. Wrex and Shepard entered first, taking out more geth and some salarians. Wrex prodded one with his toe as they passed.

“Said they were missing some. Guess they ain’t getting them back.”

Shepard nodded. “Seems a little off, though.”

Wrex grunted in agreement as they moved on. They dealt with the geth presence in the facility, Tali taking a moment to download all the data while Shepard and Wrex interviewed one of the captured salarians. He began screaming for them to let him out, then charged the door and knocked himself unconscious. Shepard and Wrex shared a look, silently agreeing not to release any of the salarians.

Shepard felt a twinge of remorse, but releasing them would threaten everyone on her team, as well as the salarian and turian squads.

Tali growled something at the computer and kicked the console. “Bosh’tet.”

“What’s wrong?” Wrex asked.

“This,” she kicked the console again. “It doesn’t have any real information.”

“Qian’s office should have more. This way,” Shepard replied, leading them out to the next office.

There was an asari hiding under the desk when they entered. “Don’t shoot! Please, I just want to get out of here before it’s too late!”

Shepard lowered her gun, but didn’t holster it. “So far, everyone else in this place has tried to kill me.”

“Do I look like a soldier? I’m a neurospecialist. And this job isn’t worth dying over. You think the indoctrination only affects prisoners? Sooner or later, Qian’s going to want do dissect my brain, too.” She kept her hands up, but moved closer to them.

Shepard narrowed her eyes and the asari froze. “I thought this was a breeding facility?”

The asari shook her head. “Not this level. We’re studying Sovereign’s effect on organic minds. At least, that’s what I assumed. Qian’s been keeping us in the dark as much as possible.”

“You were helping without even knowing why?” Tali asked, incredulously.
“I didn’t have the option of negotiating. And this position has turned a little more permanent than I anticipated.” She glanced down at the guns. “But I can help you! The elevator behind me goes straight to Qian’s office. Here, I’ll open it for you.”

She hurried over to the door while Shepard and Wrex shared a look.

“See? Full access, all of the records and files.” She studied Shepard’s face. “Are we good?”

“I’m going to blow this place to hell. If you want to survive, you’d better start running.” Shepard stepped aside as the asari ran past.

Before the door slid closed, Shepard put a round in the back of her head.

Wrex and Tali were silent until the elevator doors closed behind them.

Wrex watched her out of the corner of his eye. “You didn’t trust her.”

Shepard rolled her shoulders. “No.”

The door slid open and they stepped out into a bare room. They covered the elevators while Tali gathered any information in the sole console. When she was done, they entered the second elevator. Tali flipped through the information, swearing slightly as the door slid open.

“Still nothing. Well, lots of stuff about indoctrination, and the Conduit, and the geth, but nothing about the genophage.”

Wrex nodded, then gestured to a greenish light in the far corner of the room. “That looks important.”

Shepard hummed. “Prothean beacon. There was one on Eden Prime.”

She approached it cautiously, sighing faintly as it picked her up. She endured another wave of pain death terror destruction then saw a binary solar system, and a close image of the second planet. She fell to her knees, waving off Wrex’s help.

Standing up and glaring at the beacon, she muttered, “I know where Ilos is. That wasn’t helpful.”

Shaking it off, she took the stairs up the scaffolding. As she walked past, a reddish light turned on.

“You are not Qian.” It spoke in a deep monotone, and Shepard throttled down an atavistic revulsion to it.

“I don’t think that’s a VI, Tali,” she muttered, keeping her attention on it.

“Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh. You touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding.”

Wrex took a step closer. “Think you’re right, Shepard.”

The image continued, ignoring their byplay. “There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am sovereign.” It seemed to study them for a moment.

Mortal enough to boast, she thought. Maybe I can get it to tell me something useful?
“So, you’re a Reaper. I thought you were supposed to be impressive?”

“REAPER? A LABEL CREATED BY THE PROTHEANS TO GIVE VOICE TO THEIR DESTRUCTION. IN THE END, WHAT THEY CHOSE TO CALL US IS IRRELEVANT. WE SIMPLY ARE.”

This is a waste of time. “You’re just a machine. Machines can be broken.”

“ORGANIC LIFE IS NOTHING BUT A GENETIC MUTATION, AN ACCIDENT. YOUR LIVES ARE MEASURED IN YEARS AND DECADES. YOU WITHER, AND DIE. WE ARE ETERNAL. THE PINNACLE OF EVOLUTION AND EXISTENCE. BEFORE US, YOU ARE NOTHING. YOUR EXTINCTION IS INEVITABLE. WE ARE THE END OF EVERYTHING. WE IMPOSE ORDER ON THE CHAOS OF ORGANIC EVOLUTION. YOU存 IN BECAUSE WE ALLOW IT, AND YOU WILL END BECAUSE WE DEMAND IT.” Shepard cocked her head at that. “MY KIND TRANSCENDS YOUR VERY UNDERSTANDING. WE ARE EACH A NATION—INDEPENDENT, FREE OF ALL WEAKNESS. YOU CANNOT EVEN GRASP THE NATURE OF OUR EXISTENCE. WE HAVE NO BEGINNING. WE HAVE NO END. WE ARE INFINITE. MILLIONS OF YEARS AFTER YOUR CIVILIZATION HAS BEEN ERADICATED AND FORGOTTEN, WE WILL ENDURE. WE ARE LEGION. THE TIME OF OUR RETURN IS COMING. OUR NUMBERS WILL DARKEN THE SKY OF EVERY WORLD. YOU CANNOT ESCAPE YOUR DOOM. I AM THE VANGUARD OF YOUR DESTRUCTION. THIS EXCHANGE IS OVER.”

The interface closed as Joker hailed her. “What is it, Joker?”

“I don’t know what you did down there, but that ship, Sovereign? It just pulled a turn that would shear any of our ships in half. It’s coming your way, and it’s coming fast. You need to get out of there, now.”

“Let’s go.” She lead the way out, to the breeding facility.

“Shepard. Change of plan. Evac to the roof, and haul ass. Five minutes to detonate.” Nihlus sounded calm, but Shepard could hear the stress in his subvocals.

She swore, then gestured to Tali and Wrex, jogging down the platform to the elevators.

“What happened?” Wrex asked as the doors slid closed.

“No idea. Nihlus just called five minutes to detonation.” She braced herself against the far wall, trying to keep from bouncing with impatience as the elevator doors slid open.

She let Wrex take point, following him to the rooftop evac site. She saw the Normandy, Nihlus and Garrus on the loading ramp providing cover fire.

Shepard drew her pistol, aiding in covering Tali and Wrex as they bolted for the ship. Once they were clear, she followed, staying low and keeping her head down as the two turians took out the geth and krogan crowding the ship. Once her boots hit the ramp, she was on the comm.

“We’re clear. Haul ass, Joker!” She stood in the middle, firing off a few more shots as the ramp closed.

Her last view of the facility was of The Tenacity spiraling down into one of the towers.

“What happened?” she demanded, glaring up at Nihlus.
“Sovereign. It plowed through like she wasn’t even there. We managed to evac most of the crew, but…” he trailed off, eyes unfocusing. “Tenacity was carrying the bomb.”

“Damn.” She lay a hand on his arm, and he glanced down. “How many?”

He sighed and approached the armory, beginning to strip off the armor. “Half a dozen of Kirrahe’s men. A dozen of the crew.” He stopped by the lockers. “The captain, Kaevus. We went through boot camp together.”

Andra nodded, stripping off her own armor in silence. She watched him leave the hold and turned to Garrus. “I want a debrief in thirty. Get on the horn with the surviving cruiser and ask for their copies, turian and salarian, if I can get them. I’ll send them ours when we’re done.”

He nodded, and she followed Nihlus to her cabin.

She stopped as the cabin door closed behind her. Nihlus was seated on the edge of her bed, staring at his hands.

“Mission’s not over yet, Spectre.”

His head whipped up when she spoke, and he growled lowly at her words.

She blinked, unimpressed. “Sovereign is a Reaper. It lectured me then turned to attack. If we don’t get to Ilos and stop this, even more people will die.”

He glared a moment longer, then sighed. “I know. Kaevus was a brother to me.” He turned his gaze back to his hands. “And he would want me to get off my ass and finish this. You’d have liked him.”

“He glared a moment longer, then sighed. “I know. Kaevus was a brother to me.” He turned his gaze back to his hands. “And he would want me to get off my ass and finish this. You’d have liked him.”

“Debrief in twenty. We’re getting the Vindicator’s, and maybe the salarian’s, and we’ll be sending them ours.” She studied him, then closed the distance between them. She rested her hands on his cowl, and he leaned forward, resting his forehead against her chest. “I am sorry.”

They stayed like that until Garrus pinged them, letting them know the rest of the team was assembled. Nihlus sighed and pulled away, and Andra could see him pull his duty around himself like a shield. They walked together to the comm room.

Chapter End Notes

Things are heating up!

Edit: I'm going to just update on Saturdays from now on.

Comments are love!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Translations:
Futtari: Fucking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andra looked over her crew. They were a motley bunch, but she trusted them completely.

“Right. The salarians and turians are en route to the Citadel to set up defenses there, in case things go pear-shaped on Ilos. I’m going to lead a team to meet up with Saren, and the rest of you will act as back-up, if needed.” She scrubbed a hand over her face. “Nihlus, Garrus, Alenko, Williams, with me. Wrex, think you can lead the rest of them?”

The krogan grunted in confirmation.

“Don’t ding up my ship. Any questions, comments, complaints? Now’s the time.” She glanced around the room, eyebrow cocked.

“Why can’t they make MREs edible?” Kaidan asked.

She snorted. “Because the military’s cheap. Anyone else?”

Liara raised a hand, tentative. “I would like to visit the surface of Ilos.”

Andra gave her a look. “Then charter a ship later. This is a military vessel, not a cruise ship.”

“But Tali-”

“Tali is remaining on the ship, as is Wrex. Now, we should be getting close. Get ready.” She left the room, rolling her eyes once her back was turned.

Futtari asari sticking their noses into everything, she fumed silently as she made her way to the bridge.

“Uh, Commander? We’ve got company,” Joker said as she walked in.

“Great,” she muttered as she studied the display. There was a fleet of geth ships surrounding the planet.

“Have their sensors spotted us?” Nihlus asked, coming up behind her.

“Stealth systems are engaged,” Joker retorted, and Andra could hear the eyeroll in his voice. “Unless we get close enough for a visual, they won’t have any idea we’re here.”

“Picking up some strange readings from the planet’s surface,” Pressley reported as he scanned for a landing place.

“Take us down, Joker. Lock in on the coordinates,” Shepard ordered.
“Negative on that, Commander,” Pressley cut in. “The nearest landing zone is two clicks away.”

“We’d never make it on foot. Find something closer,” Nihlus ordered.

“There is nowhere closer! I’ve looked!” Pressley snapped.

Shepard considered that. “Kaidan, Ashley, stay with the ship, Joker, drop us in the mako.”

Pressley shook his head. “You’d need at least a hundred yards of open terrain to pull off a drop like that. Closest I can find near Saren’s location is twenty.”

Shepard studied Joker as the ground team started arguing over the landing. “Joker?”

“I can do it.”

Nihlus glanced between Joker and Shepard. “You’re certain?”

“I can do it.” And Shepard could hear the steel in his voice.

“Alright. Nihlus, Garrus, gear up and meet me in the mako.” Shepard led them out to the cargo hold.

As they strapped on their armor, Nihlus side-eyed her thoughtfully. “You trust your pilot this much?”

“We get out of this alive, dig up General Invectus’s report of the Normandy’s trial run,” Shepard said, strapping on her sidearm and turning to the mako. “This is gonna suck.”

Nihlus sighed as he climbed into the vehicle. “I thought you trusted your pilot?”

She climbed in last and strapped herself in. “I do. But twenty clear yards when we need a hundred?” She sighed and shot a glance at Garrus. “You fixed the brakes on this thing, right?”

Garrus cracked one eye open to glare at her, then squeezed it shut. “Yes. The brakes are new. The suspension is repaired. When are we-”

He broke off with a strangled scream as Andra accelerated, driving the mako down the ramp and plummeting toward the surface. She leaned her full weight on the thrusters, praying that Joker was right. The mako slammed to the ground and pulled to a screeching halt just before a wall. Shepard sighed, then bailed out, closely followed by the turians.

She studied the area, then whirled, gun drawn, as she heard someone behind her.

“Calm down, Lanura. Qian and his geth are gone.” Saren sauntered around the mako, right arm raised.

Andra narrowed her eyes at him when she realized his left was gone.

He caught her look and gave a half-laugh. “Geth. Managed to find a spare but need an extra pair of hands to attach it.”

“Where’d they go?” she asked, holsters her pistol and holding out a hand to hold the new prosthetic.

Saren jerked his chin toward the wall the mako was parked in front of. “Down there. There’s a damaged VI left by the protheans I managed to talk to. It’s going to slow them down a bit. You’re
only a few minutes behind them.”

“Right. Garrus, think you can attach the arm in the mako?”

Garrus took a long breath, then looked pleadingly at Saren.

“Tough it up, whelp.” Saren slid into the back of the mako, grabbing the arm and pointedly waiting for the rest.

“Since I apparently don’t get a choice…,” Garrus muttered as he followed Saren in, leaving Nihlus to follow.

Shepard closed up the mako, glancing over her shoulder at Saren. “Right. So, how do we follow them?”

Saren sighed and dragged the arm around, activating a code on his omni-tool. The great doors slid open, and Nihlus and Garrus shared a look as Shepard began driving forward.

“According to the resident VI, the protheans used this place as something of a safehouse for their scientists and associated staff. The invasion lasted longer than they planned, and most of the cryopods were shut off. When the Reapers left, there weren’t enough prothians to keep the species going. They found a way back to the Citadel and altered the keepers, so they wouldn’t alert the Reapers when we found it.” Saren told them as Shepard navigated through a slightly flooded tunnel.

“And that back door is what Qian is planning on using,” Nihlus snarled.

Saren nodded. “Yes. The VI said it could block them off for a few minutes. I’ve downloaded everything it had, including a backup, and sent it on to Desolas.”

“So we should have some solid backup when we get there.” Shepard activated the comm. “Joker.”

“Yeah, boss?”

“Get to the Arcturus Fleet and wait for my mark. I have a feeling we’ll need them.”

“Roger. Normandy out.”

She could feel Saren watching her. “More ships never hurt.”

Garrus hummed, pleased, as he finished the last connection. “Does that work, Sehr?”

Saren rotated the arm, checking the range of motion. “Seems to. Any issues?”

“Well, it seems like a different model than the base. I did what I could.”

Saren’s subvocals thrummed in amusement. “It is a different model. Geth.”

“Wait. Did you lose one prosthetic to the geth so you took one of their arms to replace it?” Shepard asked, amused.

Saren just linked his hands behind his head and smiled.
Friday update, instead of Saturday, mostly because I have to work tomorrow.

Futtari-fucking

Comments are love!

Check out my tumblr: p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- "<3" as extra kudos
- Reader-reader interaction

LLF Comment Builder

This author replies to comments.

This author sees and appreciates all comments, but may not reply.

If you don’t want a reply, for any reason (sometimes I feel shy when I’m reading and not up to starting a conversation, for example), feel free to sign your comment with “whisper” and I will appreciate it but not respond!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shepard brought the mako to a halt at the top of a rise. Below, she could see a swarm of geth clustered around a-

“Is that a mass relay?” Nihlus asked, incredulous.

“Yep.” She felt Nihlus glare at her. “Unless you’ve got a better option, we’re taking it.”

She studied the movements of the geth below, and once she was sure the colossi were distracted, she floored it. Tearing down the hill to the relay, she ignored the geth she drove over, and only fired a few perfunctory shots as the mako hit the relay.

There was a breathless, weightless moment, then the mako flew out the far end. She saw a flash of the Presidium, then the mako slammed into the walkway, rolling a few times as it came to a halt on its roof. She lay there, blinking, until Saren offered his hand. She grabbed it, letting him pull her free. She staggered to her feet, looking around for Garrus and Nihlus.

Garrus was interrogating the Avina module nearby and Nihlus was studying the mass relay.

Shepard laughed. “First human adopted by turians, first human Spectre, and the first person to drive a land vehicle through a mass relay.”

Saren glared at her, but was interrupted by the scream of metal that preceded the arrival of husks. They took out the husks, and a few geth, then Garrus waved them over to the elevator.

“According to Avina, Qian is in the Council chambers. The council was evacuated when the geth first started arriving.”

“Right.” Shepard led the way to the elevator, the turians falling in behind her. She squeezed her eyes shut as the elevator began its ascent to the council chambers. Her heart almost stopped when the elevator came to a screeching halt barely halfway there. She forced herself to breathe as Saren studied the glass.

“Suit up, we’re going outside.”

She activated her suit, stepping back as Saren shot out the glass and letting him take the first step out of the stricken elevator and into the shaft.

“Lanura, I won’t let you fall,” Saren murmured on a private channel.

Garrus clapped a hand on her shoulder. “I got you.”

She nodded and took the first dizzying step, tilting ninety degrees until her boots locked onto the surface. She forced herself to breathe normally as Garrus and Nihlus followed. Nihlus rubbed a knuckle down her back, and she nodded.

“Let’s go.”

She pushed on, leading the way up the access shaft. Another car stopped ahead of them, the side blowing out and a small stream of geth poured out, followed by a couple of krogan. The firefight
was brutal, but short. The turians and Shepard offered no quarter, pausing only long enough for their guns to cool enough to prevent overheating.

They made their way up the tower, using the Citadel’s defenses to help thin the swarms of Geth and Krogan that were determined to stop them. Andra took a brief moment to marvel at the sheer size of the Reaper, perched as it was on the top of the tower. She shook her head and pressed on. The suit camera would get the video, and she could study that at her leisure later, when she wasn’t being shot at.

They paused before the door into the Council chambers.

“The fleets can’t get through. He’s shut down the mass relays,” Saren reported.

Andra swore. “Right. The Citadel controls the relays. How many did we get?”

“Fifth, Seventh, and Twelfth Hierarchy, Fifth and Arcturus Alliance,” Saren said after a brief check.

“Well, that’ll piss the Council off,” Nihlus muttered.

Andra nodded. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

She held the door open, letting Saren through first, with Garrus and Nihlus close behind. She dropped down behind them, letting the panel close behind her. She glanced around, looking for any nearby geth. They were alone, for the moment, and she frowned at the flaming trees lining the walk. Well, at least the gardeners won’t have to worry about their jobs, she thought, taking point and approaching the stairs.

She took out a few geth taking cover on the landing, then took their place as she caught her first glimpse of Dr. Qian. He was short and balding, and had the kind of build that made you think he was portly, despite not carrying an ounce of extra weight. He was standing on the petitioners’ platform, accessing an interface with his back to them.

“You’re too late, you know, Shepard. The Reapers will come. You can’t stop it.” He sounded almost resigned, slowly turning to face their positions.

Andra peered around the corner. “You know, I’ve been told I’m stubborn. Tell me not to do something and I’ll do my damnedest to do it.”

Qian shook his head, sadly. “No. You can not stop the inevitable. It’s too late. I’m sorry. It’s a shame you weren’t born earlier. You might have been able to rein in your father. Farewell.”

She looked around the corner, surprised. Qian had pulled a pistol and calmly placed the muzzle in his mouth, pulling the trigger. His body fell to the small garden below. Andra blinked, confused, then rushed to the interface.

“Saren, Nihlus, go make sure of Qian. Garrus, help me with this.”

She stood aside while Garrus overrode whatever Qian had done. There was a crackle as their comms came to life.

“Normandy to the Citadel, I repeat Normandy to the Citadel. Please tell me that’s you, Commander.” Joker hailed.

“Shepard here. Once we get the relays back online, I need every ship you’ve got. They’re being
slaughtered out here,” she barked.

Garrus nodded. “Relays are back. Give me a bit to get the arms open.”

“Copy that, Commander. Your calvary is incoming,” Joker signed off.

There was a rumble, as red lightning crackled around the room. The platform buckled, sending Shepard and Garrus skidding down to the garden. Qian’s corpse rose to its feet, blades growing from his fingers as his limbs lengthened, red light seeming to emanate from between his bones. It was monstrous, and Shepard had to clamp down on a surge of atavistic fear when it turned to face her. There was nothing human left in what stood before them now.

It crouched and leapt, landing on the wall. Shepard drew her assault rifle, trying to get a bead on it as it leapt around the small chamber. It spoke with Qian’s voice.

“I am Sovereign, and this station is mine!”

Saren shot her a look, but none of them spoke as they tried to bring the abomination down. How the hell is it shooting at us? Andra wondered, taking cover behind a decorative boulder, practically in Nihlus’s lap. She rolled to her feet, feeling Nihlus behind her as they shot at what Qian had become.

Finally, after the timeless time of a battle, Qian fell, the implants and upgrades dissolving into red light. Andra slowly lowered her gun, glancing at Saren. She looked up, to where Sovereign loomed over the tower, when she heard the crackle of electricity. The Reaper was sheathed in red lightning, then slowly fell from its perch. She heard Joker on the comms, announcing its shields were down as she and the turians climbed back to the main level.

“Well, Lanura, that was exciting. I’ll talk to the Council, see about getting you formally approved,” Saren said, clapping a hand on her shoulder.

She grinned up at him, then glanced over his shoulder at movement outside the window. There was a rumble, then a shockwave as Sovereign exploded. She shoved Saren away, behind a pillar, as several pieces of the Reaper fell through the glass. One piece, the size of the mako, landed next to her, shoving her back. Her head slammed against something and everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Fourth! Have a bonus chapter.

Comments are love!
She woke, an unknown time later, with her ears ringing. She pushed herself up, wincing as her left arm screamed in protest. So, that’s likely broken, she thought, running a quick scan with her omnitool. She winced again when she saw the damage. Couple cracked ribs, dislocated shoulder, broken arm, broken hip, concussion… she sighed. Slowly, she got to her feet, swaying slightly. All right, Shepard. One foot in front of the other. She slowly made her way back to the platform, hoping to be able to see around the debris crowding the room. She cocked her head when she heard voices ahead.

“Captain Anderson, Hierarch Desolas! We found them!”

She leaned against a shattered pillar, giving herself a dose of medigel as she thought. Finally, she shrugged and ran down the stairs and up the largest piece of debris. She nodded at the awed expressions on the humans in the crowd, then slowly made her way down to her team.

Desolas reached her first.

“Show-off,” he snarled affectionately, helping her onto a gurney.

She grinned. “Is there anyone in this family who isn’t?” she asked, feigning innocence.

“Chomra.” He swatted lightly at her head, moving aside so the medical team could get to her.

She laughed as she was carried off to the nearest medical ward.

Desolas stood, shaking his head. “That girl…”

Saren walked up to stand at his shoulder, watching Garrus and Nihlus limp after her.

“It’s your fault, you know. You raised her.”

Desolas laughed, startled. “Fair enough. Now get your ass to the med wing and get that temp replaced.”

Saren studied the geth arm. “You know, I kinda like it. I think I’ll keep it.”

“Move,” Desolas ordered, shoving his brother toward the medics.

He nodded as Anderson approached.

“How can we help?” the human asked.

Desolas considered. “For now, keep your head down. This will be a boon for humanity, and likely end with one of you on the Council. Find who you think would be best and start getting their name
“Right. She’ll be made Spectre after this, won’t she?”

Desolas hummed an agreement. “Likely once she’s cleared by the medics, and rebuilding is under way.” He spotted Admiral Hackett approaching. “Come on. We have a fair amount of planning to do.”

Andra scrolled through the messages that were crowding her omnitool, deleting most of them out of hand. When her purge was finished, she had less than ten, and all from her crew and family. She grinned when she saw one of them, opening it first.

Extranet message:
From: [Redacted]
To: Andra Arterius
Date: 18 March, 2183
Subject: You win.
Atch: 2,000 credits

So, looks like you beat me. You’ll be a Spectre by this time tomorrow, and I haven’t yet managed to make enough of a name for myself. Take your money, devil woman, and give the Council hell for me.

RQ

PS: Congrats on the upcoming nuptials. They’re both cute.

She laughed, shaking her head as she accepted her money. Rolan had been a friend when she was in training and had been absolutely convinced that he’d be an infamous thief before she was a famous lawbringer. Honestly, I’d forgotten that bet, she mused, sending him a quick thanks in reply.

Most of the rest of her messages were business, arranging for her Spectre ceremony and planning to deal with the coming threat. She narrowed aher eyes at a note from Joker, saying that Liara had apparently faked her permissions to board the Normandy, but decided to let it go. She likely wouldn’t remain in command, and if she did, she could just bar the asari from entry. That’s one perk of being a Spectre, anyway. She dealt with the rest of the assorted minutiae, then rose to go deal with her squad, deciding to deal with Solana’s response and her mother later.

“Andra, where do you think you’re going?” Dr Chakwas called from the door.

Andra opened her mouth to argue, then sighed and lay back on the bed.

“Good, you’re learning. That hip needs more time to heal, and so does that thick skull of yours.”

She shook her head and fired up her messages again.

Extranet message
From: Solana Vakarian
To: Andra Shepard
Subject: Please never make me think about my brother’s sex life again

You’d really put up with him? Well, I won’t judge your bad taste, as long as you convince him to
come home for a visit, once your issue settles down. I think you’d be good for him. And he’d be a good influence in that Spectre. So, congrats if you decide to make it work. If not, I’ll buy the first round of drinks.

-S

She grinned, and sent a reply, suggesting they meet and catch up soon. Then she sighed and opened the message from her mother.

Extranet message  
From: Antoria Arterius  
To: Andra Shepard Arterius  
Subject: Answer this. Now.

Andra Shepard Arterius, why is it I have to hear from your uncle that you are planning a garvansaag? Now, I know from your father that you are injured, so you will call me, as soon as you read this, so we can discuss this.

Andra rolled her eyes, then obediently called her mother.

“So, tell me everything,” Antoria demanded as soon as the call connected

Andra sighed. “Hello, mother, yes, I'm in the hospital, but it's nothing major.”

Antoria waved that off. “You've already been through worse, and both your father and uncle have reported that you're fine. Now, what is all this about garvansaag?”

Andra scrubbed a hand over her face. “No idea. They suggested it while drunk, and we've been too busy to actually talk about… anything, really. I- Nihlus hurt me, but I know why, now. And Garrus is apparently fine with humans as long as its me. And-” she sighed, dropping back on the pillows.

“I don't know if it's the right thing to do, or if it's even- well, no, I do know I want them, but I don't know if it's a stupid decision that will bite me in the ass later.”

Antoria smiled fondly. “Well, you are treating this with the appropriate gravitas, anyway. One moment, I'm nearly to your room.”

Andra scowled at her omnitool as the call ended. “You could have waited,” she muttered, flinging an arm over her eyes.

True to her word, Antoria bustled into her room a few moments later and dropped into the guest chair.

“Oh, lanura,” she patted Andra’s arm soothingly.

Andra sat up, flinging her arms around her mother’s neck and biting back a sob. Antoria just rubbed a hand along her back, subvocals crooning softly.

“So, they both hurt you, out of ignorance rather than malice. You do love them both. They have grown enough to realize they love you. Would you like my opinion?”

Andra nodded as she pulled away.

“Demand to be courted. Court them in turn. You have the bare bones of a foundation, but that won’t be enough. Work with them to build a deeper, stronger, foundation.”
Andra nodded, thinking.

Antoria grinned and pressed her forehead against Andra’s. “They’d be a good set, they just need some work. Desolas did, too. Patience, lanura, and time. You’ll get what you want.”

She straightened as Andra’s omnitool pinged a message.

*When the doctors release you, we’re having a meet in Desolas’s office.*

She read the message to Antoria, who sighed and stood.

“I’ll go distract Sparatus. You take care of yourself, and those boys. Call me if you need advice.”

She strode out, leaving flurries of nurses in her wake.

Andra shook her head, amused, as Dr Chakwas walked in.

“I’m guessing I can actually leave, and you were just keeping me in place so my mother could talk to me?”

Dr Chakwas smiled. “Your mother provides better bribes than you do. Besides, I don’t think you’d listen to my advice on how to handle your love life.”

Andra grinned as she sat on the edge of the bed. “Probably.”

“Go and do what you need to, Commander,” Dr Chakwas said fondly, handing over a clean uniform.

—

“Council’s gonna bury it,” Wrex was saying as she limped in.

“So, we work around the Council.”

She dropped into the closest chair, ignoring the fact that it was already occupied. Garrus blinked at her, then curved an arm around her, holding her steady.

“Wrex, you go back to Tuchanka, get the clans in something like order. Tali, take the info we got on the geth back to the Flotilla, see what information they can get us. I’ve got some people who can do the… less legal stuff. Saren, Nihlus, and I can run some of it, as Spectres.”

Desolas nodded. “I’ll put in to keep your crew together, maybe reassign Vakarian to you.”

Anderson grumbled a bit, then sighed. “I can help, too. The current top names for human Councilor are Udina and me.”

Andra nodded. “The good news is, you can step down in a few years.”

“Work fast, then.” He rose and walked out, making a call on his omnitool.

“So, what needs doing now?” she asked.

Desolas glared at her. “You go back to your bed and rest. The ceremony’s in a week. We’ll start planning, you go deal with your criminal underground.”

She nodded. “I sent you a copy of the record. Council won’t like it, but I’d like the backup.”
“Agreed. Now, sort your mess out, lanura.” He rose, chivying everyone out until there was only her, Garrus, and Nihlus left.

She sighed, resting her head against Garrus’s cowl. He said nothing, just rested his jaw on the top of her head as he stroked her back. She heard Nihlus move, dragging a chair around so he could sit facing her. She offered her hand, grinning a bit when he took it.

“Well. We’re all bad at this, but I guess I’ll start.” She sighed, trying to find the words. “We’ve all been stupid in the past. That said, I do love you both, I just…” she trailed off, then rose so she could pace the room. “I want to feel like you want me, not like you’re settling, you know? And I don’t want to rush into things.”

Nihlus stood, catching her arm as she passed. He stared down at her, hands on her shoulders as his subvocals hummed quietly. “Shepard. Breathe.”

She glared up at him, then sighed, leaning forward to rest her forehead on his keel. He laughed softly, wrapping his arms around her.

“You want this. I want this.” He turned to glance at Garrus, who nodded. “Garrus wants this. So, we take it slow, figure out where we went wrong before and how to avoid those missteps again.”

Garrus sauntered over, looping an arm around each of them. “I’ll make a spreadsheet.”

She laughed as she swatted his chest. “So, let’s get people in position. I need to go organize my criminals.”

“And I need to go soothe the Council,” Nihlus sighed. He caught Andra’s look and mock snarled, “don’t laugh, Spectre. You’ll have to go play politics with them soon enough.”

“Not for a week, I don’t.”

Garrus watched the by-play, amused. “I don’t think I’ve ever been truly grateful I didn’t try out for the Spectres before this.”

“Well, Solana says you should try to get home soon. Maybe thank your dad when you get there,” Andra said as she headed out. “I’m gonna see what clothes I left at Patruus’s apartment.”

Chapter End Notes

Chomra- brat

Comments are love!
Andra strode down the hall, Nihlus and Saren flanking her.

“Well, that wasn’t quite as insulting as they could have been,” Saren mused.

“I saved their asses and they want me to gallivant around the Traverse looking for geth? There won’t be any.”

Nihlus’s subvocals hummed soothingly. “They know that. Take it as a vacation.”

She glared at him over her shoulder and he raised his hands defensively. “Just a suggestion.”

“Not a bad one, whelp,” Saren said, considering. “I’ll talk to the Alliance. I could use a vacation.”

She stopped, watching as Saren strolled past her toward the Alliance embassy.

“Is he- You know what? I don’t care. I need to borrow a shuttle. Talked to my criminal, he wants a meet nearby.” She scrubbed a hand over her face as she thought.

Nihlus grabbed her wrist, gently pulling her hand down. “Hey. Breathe. You don’t have to handle this alone.”

She quirked her lips, amused. “I must be tired. I’m starting to believe the press. What are you off to?”

“Minor scuffle the Council wants kept quiet. I’m pretty sure I can talk Saren into sponsoring Garrus before I head out.” He ducked his head to press his forehead to hers, and she kissed him.

“Right. He’d hate it. He’d be good at it, but he’d hate it.”

He laughed as she pulled away. “Take care with your criminal.”

“Take care with your scuffle,” she called, waving over her shoulder. She headed down the hallway, looking for Garrus.

She found him easily, leaning on one of several unregistered, and technically illegal, food carts that dotted the Presidium. He was chatting with the proprietors, a skinny elcor, and considering the meat-like product on a skewer. The sign proclaimed it to be varren, but Andra had never seen varren meat that color or texture before. She approached slowly, shamelessly eavesdropping on the sales pitch.

"With genuine enthusiasm: Varren she’asa kebabs, one hundred percent varren meat, made with genuine elcor recipe from own grandmother. Somewhat reluctant aside: cannot sell for less than 10 credits, and that's me severing my own fnar'rlis."

“You don’t happen to have anything dextro, do you?” Garrus asked, studying the display.

The elcor shook his head. “Regretfully: no. Confidingly: but if you walk four blocks toward the Wards, my cousin Xenrus sells one hundred percent kunzi skewers.”
Garrus nodded. “I might go check it out. Thanks.”

“Warmly: thank you, and please come again”

Garrus managed to hide his grin until his back was turned, then beamed as Andra approached.

“You know, there are easier ways to court death. Probably less painful, too,” she said, falling in beside him as they strolled toward the CSEC offices.

He laughed. “True. But it is fun, and they notice more than people think they do.”

She considered that. “Fair enough. Why were you talking to him, though?”

“The stall that’s usually there hasn’t been, and I wanted to know why.”

“Trouble?”

He shook his head. “No. She managed to get a corner closer to the turian embassy.” He sighed, wistful. “She sold the best fried cloach root.”

She elbowed him, amused. “You could always head over there, you know. It’s not that far.” He laughed and she went on, “So. You going back to CSEC, or you going to pester Saren about becoming a Spectre?”

“Hadn’t decided yet. I know Dad—”

Andra snorted. “Screw your dad. What do you want?”

He stiffened. “I... I don’t know.”

They walked in silence for a while, then Andra sighed. “Saren’s taking the Normandy and the crap assignment the Council gave me. Go with him. It’s a pointless mission, just looking for geth activity in the Traverse, but it’ll give you time to think.”

His subvocals thrummed in thought. “What will you two be up to?”

She waved a hand. “Nihlus is running interference on a Council issue, I don’t know the details. And I plan on dealing with the criminal underground, start dealing with the upcoming Reaper issue.”

“I’ll consider it. When are you heading out?”

“Now. I’m taking Saren’s shuttle, going to talk to a few people on Beckenstein, maybe a few other places, depending.” She rose up on her toes, kissing him lightly. “Take care, yeah? I’ll be in touch.”

He hummed, pressing his forehead to hers. “I’ll talk to Saren. And make sure your ship stays in decent condition while you’re gone.”

She grinned as she pulled away. “Should be a new mako, too.”

He scowled after her. “You had a new mako. It was pristine and perfect. But then someone had the brilliant idea to send it through a mass relay!”

“It was a good idea, wasn’t it?” she asked, laughing. She waved and made her way to the docks, sending a message to Ralon on the way.
Leaving the Citadel in twenty. You have contacts for me?

She was just clearing the arms of the Citadel when she got a response.

A few. Mercenary, former, on Rough Tide, and pair of master thieves, current, on Bekenstein. Have some details. And, depending on how long you take, I might be in the area when you leave. I'll be in touch.

She studied the dossiers he’d made up, memorizing the faces of each. All human, which she found interesting, but rather accomplished in their respective fields. She decided to track down the merc first. He didn’t look like the type to stay still for too long. She programmed the mass relay coordinates and headed out to Rough Tide.

She landed the shuttle outside a mining camp and donned her armor before beginning the hike to the indicated meeting place. She had traded out her usual onyx armor for a duelist set, and wore her pistol openly, but decided to leave the rest of her loadout behind. Too many weapons, you look nervous and like an easy mark. Too few, and you look like an idiot, and an easy mark. How many times had her instructors beat that into her head?

She sauntered through the camp, keeping an eye on the assorted hanar, drell, vorcha, and krogan moving through the rough streets. There were enough humans that she didn’t attract too much attention, and she made her way to the bar without incident. She stopped just inside the opening, removing her helm and scanning the room.

She saw her merc in the far corner, back against the corner as he studied the room, occasionally drinking from his beer.

She made her way to the bar, grabbing a drink of her own as she sat across from him. She ignored the twinge she felt with her back to the room as she studied him.

He was older, with an impressive collection of scars and a prosthetic eye. He studied her as she studied him, drinking in silence.

“So. Damn turian called in a favor, said I should listen to you.”

“I’ll try not to waste your time, then, Zaeed.” She took a drink. “There’s a storm coming. Race of synthetics who want to kill us all. The Council won’t do anything until after the shit’s hit the fan. I’m looking for people who can see what’s important and get the information to people who can work with it.”

He grunted. “So, you pay me to pass along any interesting tidbits? That’s it?”

She drained her drink. “Maybe see if anyone is willing to fight, help out with that when everything does go to hell, but, yeah. Either to me, the Spectres Saren Arterius or Nihlus Kryik, or the turian Heirarch Desolas Arterius.”

He drained his drink and rose. “I’ll think about it.”

“All I can ask,” she said, watching him leave.

She lingered in the bar for a bit, then rose to return to her shuttle. There was a brief bit of excitement when a group of young toughs followed her out, but it was hardly a fight. Wonder if anyone's going to find them before their suits malfunction? she thought, prepping the shuttle for departure.
Chapter End Notes

Starting to build up a base to do an end run around the Council, here. Also, Saren continues to give zero shits.

Comments are love, either here or on my tumblr (p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com)
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Garrus knocked on the open office door, then stood at attention.

“It’s open for a reason, whelp,” Saren called, subvocals vibrating with barely restrained amusement.

“Sorry, sehr. It’s just- I-”

Saren decided to take pity on the younger turian. “You thought you’d ask to tag along on this mission, right?”

Garrus nodded, relieved. “I mean, if it’s alright with you, sehr.”

“Sit down, whelp,” Saren said, kindly.

Garrus sat, tensing as Saren rose to shut the door. “Both Andra and Nihlus told me that you’d make a decent Spectre. From what I’ve seen, I agree.” Garrus’s head whipped around as he gaped at Saren. “I’ve read your records. You were almost tapped, but you refused when your mother got sick, right?”

“Yes, sehr.”

“I know your father. He’s a good officer, and was a great asset to CSEC. Knowing him, he expects you to follow his footsteps.” Saren leaned a hip on the edge of his desk, studying Garrus intently. “Are you asking because you want it, or because you think it’s expected of you?”

Garrus opened his mouth to answer, then closed it, mandibles working as he thought. “I don’t-” he sighed. “I never got the chance to try, and when I could have, Bormah forbade it. I’d like to see if it is what I want.”

Saren beamed at him. “Right answer. Grab your gear, we’re heading out in an hour.”

Garrus rose and saluted, hurrying out of the office. Saren shook his head, amused. The kid needed a bit of work, but he had the potential to be a force to be reckoned with. That was good. Andra and Nihlus both needed a cooler head to keep them from running off half cocked. Garrus had his own hot headed tendencies, but those read more as a desire to act without having all the information. With a bit of patience….

He snorted at himself. Andra was more than capable of running her own life, she didn’t need him running interference in the background anymore. Admittedly, that wasn’t going to actually stop him, but he could at least take a moment to recognize what he was doing. He settled at his desk to send a quick message.

Extranet message
To: Castis Vakarian
From: Saren Arterius
Subject: Garrus

Castis-
I’m bring your son with me on a simple run. He’s a good soldier, and a good kid. If he decides to try for Spectre status, I’ll help him. If you want to yell about it, call me. He’s still figuring out how to stand on his own, and not under your shadow.

I found a new clinic that has had some success with treating Corpalis. If you’re willing, I’ll pull some strings to get Novitana a place.

Now, snarl and rage and insult me, then let me know when I need to call. We were good friends once, I’d like to try and get that back.

-SA

Saren rose and headed to the docks, accepting a datapad from a nervous human runner and scanning it. He was allowed to keep Joker, Dr Chakwas, Jenkins, and some of the crew, but the rest were being sent to other assignments. He nodded, accepting the decision. He decided to check the status of the proposed SR2, wanting to see how that project was going. He slipped in a few small changes, more comfortable seat for the pilot, a bit more headroom in the elevator, a redundant food storage system to accommodate a crew of levo and dextro diets, into the plans, making official recommendations for using the loft as an officer’s quarters. He idly wondered if his changes would be noticed as he watched the crew ready the Normandy for her new mission.

“And right on time,” he muttered as his omnitool pinged a call from the Council.

“What do you think you’re doing, Arterius?” Councilor Valern snapped.

He cocked a browplate. “I had reports of a minor scuffle. Shepard is better suited to a diplomatic mission than I am, so I sent her. I plan on covering her busywork, as I would like to assess the functionality of the Normandy on my own.”

“You do still answer to the Council, Saren,” Councilor Tevos said. Saren could hear the rage behind her words, but he doubted anyone else could.

He caught Sparatus’s eye, and caught his slight nod.

He turned his attention to Tevos. “Look, Shepard is out of the way, chasing impossible leads. I’ve suggested that this might be a bit out of her depth, and she agreed. I have known her for years, I know how to play her without raising her suspicion. Trust me. You know where my loyalty lies.”

There was a pause, then Tevos sighed. “Very well. See to it you inform us next time.”

The transmission ended, without the courtesy of a farewell. Saren rolled his neck, then made his way to the captain’s quarters.

Garrus was already inside, standing at furious attention before the desk.

“Sehr,” he snapped, saluting as the door hissed closed behind Saren.
“At ease, whelp. I was lying to the council, not Andra.” He sat in the chair, steepling his fingers as he studied Garrus. “The Council is corrupt. Has been for decades, at least. Roughly a quarter of CSEC and half of Special Tactics do what we can to keep them from doing too much damage to the galaxy. Sparatus isn’t, he was one of us before he was promoted. He’s working on Valern. Tevos is beyond redemption.”

Garrus gaped at Saren, weakly dropping into the visitor’s chair. “But… how? Why?”

“As to how, they run most everything, in case you hadn’t noticed. As far as why…” he sighed. “Who knows? I think it started as a way to keep the asari on top and just… grew.”

“But this was supposed to be Andra’s mission. You don’t-”

Saren waved that off. “The council is very good at sending the more obviously intelligent agents out on missions where they wind up dead. They want a loyal pack of attack varren. Andra won’t bend to them if she sees something off, and they know it.”

Garrus reared back. “You think they sent her on this to kill her?”

“It was likely, but considering how upset they were when they found out I’d taken it, absolutely.” Saren said, shrugging.

Garrus sat for a while, mandibles fluttering as he thought. “So, what happens now?”

“Now, we set the tracker the council stuck on the ship on a drone, and set that tooling around the Traverse. We, on the other hand, will be tracking down red sand dealers in the Terminus system.”

Saren’s omnitool pinged an incoming message. Garrus nodded and rose, saluting Saren on his way out. Saren opened the message, mildly surprised to see it was from Castis. He wasn’t expecting a reply for a week, at the earliest.

Extranet message
From: Castis Vakarian
To: Saren Arterius
Subject: Re: Garrus

Saren.

Do what you can for Novitana. It’s not too bad yet, but… Please.

Garrus could use a strong hand to guide him. Spirits know I could never get through him.

CV

Saren snorted. Shows how little he paid attention. I’ve only known the whelp less than a year and I know him better. He sighed and sent a message to a few doctors he knew, promising extravagant bribes if they would focus on a new patient. He considered telling Garrus, but decided to wait until he heard back.

Chapter End Notes

Have an interlude.
Comments are love! And poke at me on tumblr: p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com
Arriving at Bekenstein was as different from Rough Tide as night and day. The local space port was clean, well-lit, and glittered almost as much as the people walking around it. She had traded out her armor for more formal attire, but she made sure she could reach the hidden knives in her belt. Bekenstein was no less dangerous than Rough Tide, for all the glitz and glamor that showed on the surface.

She didn’t have a set meeting location for her two thieves, so she walked to Saren’s favored hotel, hoping to get a room. She briefly blessed turian loyalty to family ties when she learned that Saren owned a penthouse, and had her listed as an accepted tenant. She thanked the front desk and made her way to the elevators.

Saren’s penthouse, like all of his properties, was sparsely furnished, yet still welcoming. She sighed as she set her bag on the sofa, wandering through to find the guest bedroom. As she’d suspected, the closet held a few outfits of human make, in her size, stylish enough to help her blend in, and functional enough that she could fight, if necessary. She added her clothes to the closet, searching out Saren’s weapon caches. He tended to keep four on hand, and she enjoyed seeking them out as a challenge. She found three and a hidden safe, then gave up and called him.

“Ah, Lanura. What a surprise.”

“Hey. I’m crashing at your place in Bekenstein. Where’s the fourth cache?” she asked, prodding under the sofa.

He laughed. “Bekenstein only has three. Too densely packed for explosives.”

“Fair enough. I’m going to upgrade the sniper rifles if I’m here long enough.”

He hummed. “Who are you meeting?”

“Friends of a friend. They know I’m here, and how to contact me.” She grinned as she pulled a lone credit out from under the sofa, slipping it into her pocket.

“If you need backup-”

She waved that off. “Nah. Neither are violent. They can hold their own in a fight, but it’s mostly talking. My friend called in a favor. They’ll behave. See ya. Don’t scratch up my ship.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he laughed, signing off.

She checked to see if either of Rolan’s thieves had contacted her, then flopped on the sofa, turning on the entertainment center. She couldn’t find anything interesting, finally switching it to a biotiball game as she decided to upgrade the sniper rifle, hidden in the wall by the balcony door. She spent a few hours, cleaning Saren’s weapons and her own, making whatever modifications she could, then sighed, returning all the arms to their proper places.

There was still no contact from Okuda, so she changed and headed down to the gym. She spent another hour cycling through resistance and cardio, finally ending up in the pool for laps. She rolled to her back, floating as she thought about calling Nihlus. Better not. Council scuffles take
time. She hauled herself from the pool and headed back to the penthouse, placing an order for room service and taking a shower.

She finished in time to meet her dinner at the door, and settled in front of the entertainment unit to watch a recording of Firefly. She’d been introduced to old Earth sci-fi by Dr Gaines, and had fallen in love with the series. She wasn’t overly surprised to learn that Saren had a copy of the series.

A week later and Andra was about ready to pull her hair out. There had been no contact from her thieves. Nihlus had informed her he was back at the Citadel, and preparing to join Saren and Garrus tracking down red sand dealers in the Terminus systems. She paced the room as she thought.

Finally, she gave it up as a bad job and sent a message to Ralon.

No word yet. I’m off. You out here yet?

She had finished packing again when she got a reply.

Apologies. Apparently there was a minor legal scrap. They should arrive tomorrow.

She sighed, thinking.

Fine. Have them contact me once they get here.

Very well. And when you leave, I’ll be on Thooft, if you wanted a face-to-face.

She rolled her eyes, pulling up some old records on Cerberus to kill the time.

The next day, she was awakened by a pair of thumps on the balcony. She pulled her pistol, slowly moving through the dark penthouse to assess the intruders.

The door slid open and a voice called out, “Commander Shepard? Where are-”

Shepard grabbed the closest intruder, pinning them to the wall with her forearm to their throat, while she aimed at the second.

“Lights,” she barked, and she glared at the two as the lights turned on.

The man she was aiming at raised his hands. “Sorry, commander. I’m Keiji Okuda, and this is my associate, Kasumi Goto. Rolan said you wanted a meet?”

She snorted, letting the woman go as she lowered her pistol. “It’s polite to knock, you know.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Kasumi asked, walking past Shepard to drape herself on Keiji.

Andra nodded. “Fair enough.”

She gestured toward the sitting area. “Come on, I’ll fill you in.”

Later, as Andra was making the hop to Thooft, she considered the thieves. They were rightly horrified at the thought of the Reapers, and readily agreed to finding information to help stop them. They’d left with an encryption and a promise to send everything to Saren or her. She guided the shuttle to the surface of the dwarf planet, close to Ralon’s signal.

She left the shuttle, making sure her suit could handle the harsh atmosphere of the planet, and made her way to the small prefab shelter Ralon’s signal was coming from. Once she was clear of the airlock, she removed her helmet, glancing around.
It was a simple structure, apparently used as a waystation for people to repair the automatic mining equipment. It was sparsely furnished, a desk, mattress, and chest. Ralon was leaning on the desk, scrolling through some information on his omnitool, but he looked up when the door slid closed.

“Ah, if it isn’t my favorite Spectre!” He beamed at her, subvocals thrumming with affection.

She grinned, shaking her head. “You know, if you’d put even the slightest bit of effort in, you could do this, too,” she told him, closing the distance and hugging him.

“Now, what’s the fun in that?” he teased, then turned serious. “I saw what happened, and Zaeed told me what you said. This… The Council is going to downplay this. They don’t want a panic.”

Andra nodded. “Yeah, that’s what we thought.”

“Well, I can poke around, see what I can stir up. The Protheans had to have something, right?” He shook himself, then plastered on a fake smile. “So, I’ll see what I can find, and get it to you, or one of the Spectres you’re palling around with.” He brushed past her to the airlock, then turned. “And, Andra? Keep an eye out. The Council doesn’t like Spectres who make waves.”

He left, leaving her with her thoughts. She shook her head, deciding to deal with it later, then headed out to her shuttle. She could rendezvous with the Normandy, maybe finally answer the invitation from Pinnacle Station. She guided the ship out of atmosphere, scowling at the controls as they jerked in her hand.

A tiny flashing alarm light on the holographic console blinked on and off to the sound of an advisory warning. She scowled, tapped the console clear, and the little beep stopped. A pressure pocket in the atmosphere buffeted the shuttle, adding a little turbulence, and she corrected her ascent trajectory, as the light blinked on again, the alarm more insistent. Core temperature anomaly, the warning read, as she expanded the tooltip.

Another alarm, more insistent still, and louder. Two more blinking alarms that demanded attention, cascading into two more. Suddenly, she wasn't so much flying the shuttle as she was trying to keep systems from shutting down and taking others with them.

Andra's fingers moved furiously, as she compensated for system after system, all the while aware that the first blinking alarm, drive core temperature anomaly, was ringing louder, and louder. There was a sudden, acrid smell of ozone, the console went dead and her fingers moved through empty air.

“What the-”

The drive core exploded. The force slammed into her body like a sledgehammer. Air was driven from her lungs as it sent her flying. She didn't see the canopy disintegrate around her, but she was flung from the remains of the ship, tumbling end over end so fast it was an effort not to pass out. She was falling. Fuck, she was falling towards the planet's surface as the shuttle burnt above her. Alarms blared as shields hit critical. Eventually it whimpered and died. Falling, she was still falling. Gravity dragging her to her inevitable end. Winds punched her helpless body as she plummeted.

“It was like a nuke went off behind her, it forced her faster, harder towards the unyielding earth.

She could see the shuttle above her explode as she windmilled, helpless, toward the planet’s surface. The shields on her suit sparked with the strain of protecting her from the friction, then gave out. She was buffeted by wind and the concussive force of the explosion above her. A scream
tore from her throat as the friction ignited her suit, her flesh. A fragment of her shuttle slammed into her helmet, cracking the visor, and her body went limp as the darkness swallowed her.

Chapter End Notes

(Shoutout to Natsora and ImNordi for helping me with the ending of this chapter!)

Comments are love!
Andra woke, dazed. There was a light above her, and a voice yelling in her ear. She sat up, slowly, feeling her every muscle scream in pain. Medical suite. Not turian, human. Not Alliance, better funded. Private, then. Where-

“Shepard. Get up!” the voice on the comm snapped. “Your scars aren’t healed, but you need to get moving. The facility is under attack.”

Andra rolled to her feet, looking around. The voice pointed her toward a gun in a nearby cabinet.

“There’s no thermal clip.”

“You’re in a med bay,” the woman retorted.

Andra rolled her eyes. Unknown facility. Unknown hostiles. And why would you keep a weapon in a medical suite, anyway? And how long was I gone?

She ducked behind the doors as an explosion tore through the hallway, then collected some thermal clips from a shattered mech. Okay, some weapons manufacturers were discussing changing how the ammo was delivered. Apparently it’s been long enough to make the change. So, years instead of weeks. Fuck.

“Someone’s hacking security to try and kill you,” the voice informed her as she headed deeper into the facility. “Keep moving. We need to get you to the shuttles.”

Andra moved through the facility, finding armor and more thermal clips. She shamelessly poked through every office she found, learning the voice’s name, Miranda, and that she’d been there for at least a year.

And with the amount of money they dumped on me… No signs of turians anywhere, no memos from salarians or asari. No sign of any race but human. She snarled, not liking where the signs were pointing. Cerberus. How the fuck are they so well funded?

She plowed through the mechs, venting her anger, frustration, fear, and pain as she headed to the shuttles. She was surprised when she found a man holding off several mechs. She didn’t recognize the uniform, but he moved like he’d been trained by the Alliance. She ducked into cover beside him, shooting the last of the mechs on the opposite balcony.

“Shepard, what the hell? What are you doing here? I thought you were still a work in progress?”

She sighed. “Couldn’t say. Woke up with someone yelling in my ear, saying the security mechs were trying to kill me.”

He shook his head. “I’m Jacob Taylor. If Miranda’s got you up, something serious is going down.”

The halls crawling with hacked mechs slaughtering everyone wasn’t enough of a clue?

“Alright, we need to get you to the shuttles, but I’ll give you the quick version. Your shuttle was sabotaged. It went down. You were killed. Dead as dead can be when they brought you here.”
Well, that sounds like platinum-plated bullshit.

“Our scientists spent the last eighteen months putting you back together. You’ve been comatose, or worse, that whole time. Welcome back to your life.”

Wonder how much he’ll tell me… “This doesn’t look like an Alliance facility.”

He shot another mech. “It’s not. Can’t say much more than that for now, though.”

“Alright. Let’s finish this.”

She rose, shooting at the new wave of mechs, watching Jacob hit them with a biotic pulse. Not as strong as Kaidan, not badly trained. The mechs disposed of, they headed deeper into the facility. Andra huffed, annoyed, when Jacob’s comm signaled. Apparently, another doctor was ahead and trying to get out. They changed course to meet up with him.

He was wounded, and Andra found some medigel. He might be with Cerberus, but no one deserved to be left wounded in the middle of a war zone. Once he was on his feet, he and Jacob started to argue, about finding Miranda, about whether or not she was a traitor, about whether or not Wilson was a traitor.

“Enough. I don’t trust any of you. Let’s get out of here, and then argue,” she snapped.

As she was headed toward the far door, more mechs burst through. How many fucking security mechs does a single station need? she snarled mentally, taking a few out. Wilson managed to overload some canisters, setting off an explosion that cleared the way.

So, tech expert. He’s probably involved with this. And since I remember his voice while I was out… I need a surgeon I can trust once I can shake them.

“Okay, we took them down, but this is getting tense. Shepard, if I tell you who we work for, will you trust me?” Jacob asked

Andra studied him. I don’t trust you now, to be honest, but I don’t really have a choice, do I?

“This really isn’t the time, Jacob,” Wilson snapped.

Jacob wheeled on him. “We won’t make it if she’s expecting a shot in the back.”

“If you want to piss off the boss, it’s your ass, Jacob,” Wilson said, leaning against a wall and crossing his arms.

Jacob sighed and turned back to her. “The Lazarus Project, the program that rebuilt you? It’s funded and controlled by Cerberus.”

Andra kept her face expressionless. She needed them for now. But when I don’t…

“Once we’re off the station, I’ll take you to the Illusive Man. He’ll explain everything, I promise.” Jacob started toward the shuttles, and she sighed.

No, he’ll tell me what he thinks will most likely get me to jump through his hoops.

She stretched her shoulders as she followed Jacob toward the shuttles. Couldn’t fight my way out to a shuttle. Probably have a tracking device, anyway. Likely monitoring my omnitool. Alright, fine. I can play along, until I can slip the leash.
Once they reached the shuttles, Wilson opened the doors, revealing a woman in a white catsuit. Andra was unsurprised when Wilson called her Miranda, and less so when Miranda shot him. Oh, goody. Everyone is willing to plant a knife in anyone else's back. How in oblivion did this group ever survive this long?

She ignored the by-play, marching in to the shuttle while Jacob and Miranda scrambled to keep up.

“No questions, Shepard? No demands for motivation?” Miranda asked as the shuttle launched.

Andra shrugged. “You’re Cerberus. You’d sell your own sister to slavers if you thought it would further your goals.”

She was mildly surprised to see a brief flare of fury cross Miranda’s face, and filed it away as the other woman fiddled with her omnitool.

So, she has a sister. She felt a headache growing and turned her attention out the window. Jacob and Miranda tried to get her to answer some questions, supposedly to assess how much of her memories she retained, but she ignored them. She’d cooperate, minimally, until she could shake them. Omega, Citadel, anywhere in turian or Alliance space…

She studied the station they approached. It was designed to be mobile, so its current coordinates were irrelevant. And the Illusive Man is smart enough that he’s likely going to phone in, not actually be waiting for me.

Miranda directed her to where the Illusive Man was waiting, and Shepard went. She waited while the QEC booted up, and leveled a look at the projection of the Illusive Man. She was shocked to realize she recognized him from somewhere. He was older, but still attractive, save for the eyes. There was something off about his eyes. He was seated far enough away that she couldn’t see them clearly, though.

“You went through a lot of trouble to set up a meeting.”

He lit a cigarette. “The Council has suppressed all information about the Reapers, calling the attack on the Citadel the result of a geth attack. Your team is scattered, and you’ve been discredited.” He took a drag from the cigarette, tapping the ash off into a tray next to him. “Several human colonies have been attacked recently, and the Council is ignoring it. I want you to look into the cause of these attacks.”

“And why should I do what a terrorist wants me to do?” she asked, crossing her arms and cocking a hip.

“I have some information on what Qian was after. Do this for me, and I’ll get you that information.”

Well, there’s my carrot. I bet the stick is one of the implants. “Doesn’t look like I have much of a choice, here.”

“You always have a choice, Shepard.” He stabbed out his cigarette. “Tell you what. You go check out the most recently attacked colony, Freedom’s Progress. If you decide to part ways with us then, I’ll see to it you get a ship and that will be that. If you decide to continue…” he trailed off, but Shepard thought she could hear the unspoken offer.

Ship, crew, weapons, and all the money he can throw at me.

“Fine. I’ll check out Freedom’s Progress.”
She left the transmission circle and sought out Miranda and Jacob. She knew that the Illusive Man wouldn’t let her leave without her handlers.

Chapter End Notes

I have some life crap going on, so this is going to go on a bit of a hiatus (also, I need to write more of it). So, have an update, and I'll be back... eventually. Probably after NaNoWriMo.

Comments are love, and come poke at me on tumblr!
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The shuttle landed on Freedom’s Progress while Andra studied the notes Cerberus gave her. There were holes, some where they admitted they didn’t know what happened, and some she could tell were omissions meant to lead her to certain conclusions. She ignored the manipulation and focused on the mission at hand. Search for survivors, and search for a cause. Cerberus provided her with a set of onyx armor, the N7 logo freshly applied, and a decent selection of weapons. She knew they were trying to buy her, but she’d take the bribes. For now. They couldn’t offer her anything she wanted, and she still remembered the call when they had bombed her mother and uncle.

So, she’d pay attention, look for weak spots, and when she could act without forewarning them, she’d pay Cerberus back for every life they’d taken or ruined.

She sighed, irritated, when Miranda announced their arrival. Miranda claimed that they’d be following her orders, but she expected that to only be a show. Oh, they’d obey in combat, but in any situation outside that? They’d second-guess her or ignore her completely. Or, more likely, obey, but send a message to the Illusive Man and get it undone or undermined later.

She was quiet as she worked through the settlement, only speaking to bark orders. Jacob seemed a bit hurt, while Miranda seemed to expect it. The settlement was empty, like the reports said, as if the colonists had all dropped what they were doing and left. Andra paused between two structures, kneeling to study the ground.

“Like I said, Commander, there was never any sign of what happened,” Miranda called.

Andra rose, dusting off her hands. “Did you bring me back to make use of me, or not? Move out.”

She had seen three footprints in the dust, one set was human, one unknown, and the most recent she was reasonably certain was quarian. She led them through to the main settlement, drawing her pistol when she caught sight of motion. More mechs. Well, at least it’s not husks.

They were competent in a fight, she’d give them that much. Miranda revealed herself to be a biotic, as well, though more flashy than Andra liked. They cleared the mechs and entered the next building, surprising a group of quarians inside. Andra lowered her weapon, gesturing for the Cerberus agents to do the same.

“Prazza, you said you’d let me handle it,” a familiar voice snapped, and Andra grinned when Tali marched around, shoving the lead quarian’s arm down. She turned to face the humans and froze, stunned. “Wait, Shepard? You’re alive?”

“Andra shrugged. “I’m not taking any chances with Cerberus operatives!” Prazza snarled.

Andra shrugged. “I’ll make a deal with you. They step out of line, I’ll shoot them. Or you can, whichever makes you happier.”

Miranda glared at her, and she shrugged again. “You and yours slapped a leash on me. I have
absolutely no choice right now but to cooperate. I don’t know why you were expecting loyalty under the circumstances.”

She turned back to Tali as Miranda scowled, bringing up her omnitool. “So, we’re looking for what happened. Maybe we can work together.”

Tali glanced at her crew, then back to Andra. “We’re here looking for a young quarian named Veetor.”

“Pilgrimage? Damn. Hope he wasn’t taken with the colonists. Do you have a signal?”

Prazza shook his head. “When he saw us landing, he hid in a warehouse. He activated the security systems.”

Andra leaned back against a wall, thinking. “So, he’s either terrified beyond all reason, or sick and delirious. Possibly both.” She thought for a bit, ignoring the building headache. “Right, I’m guessing there’s more than just the mechs we saw?”

Tali nodded. “There’s a number of drones.”

“Oh, goody,” Andra drawled, dryly. “Right. How many of your team are good with tech?”

“What are you planning?” Prazza snapped.

“Two teams, tech specialists with both to deal with the drones, either overload them, or reprogram them, whichever’s easiest on the fly. Fighters with each team to handle what the techs can’t. Meet up before the warehouse and talk to Veetor. Or…” she sighed. “I take the Cerberus assholes east, Tali takes all the quarians west, and we meet up in front and you get the idea.”

She winced as her headache kicked up a few notches, but shoved the pain down as Tali nodded.

“We’ll go west. Take care of yourself, Shepard.”

Tali led the quarians out, and Andra raised a hand, scrubbing her temples.

“You take orders from me. You do not question my orders on a mission. You want to bitch, bitch later.” She stalked out to the second door, drawing her assault rifle and making her way to the indicated warehouse. She hissed as her headache spiked again, but shook it off and headed out, Jacob and Miranda following.

The drones and mechs were easy enough, but she could hear Tali arguing with Prazza on the comms.

“Ay, Prazza. Argue later. You fuck up now, lots of people will die.”

There was a shocked silence, then a meek acknowledgment from Prazza.

She led through the empty rooms, taking out the drones as she saw them. Jacob and Miranda assisted, but they didn’t seem as intent on impressing her as they had been.

One of the quarians swore over the comms. “Veetor reprogrammed a heavy mech!”

“Fuck. Get to cover, we’re almost there.”

Shepard looked around, spotting a door closing slowly. She vaulted over a railing, charging across a loading bay and diving through the door. She heard it close as she hit the ground, rolling to her
“Miranda, Jacob, there’s another route, take it,” she barked, switching out her assault rifle for a sniper rifle and aiming for the weak points she could see. “Right. See those points? Focus your fire there.”

The quarians obeyed, shooting from cover at the points Shepard shot first. She narrowed he eyes as it reconfigured an arm, holstering her rifle as she charged across the field. She jumped onto a shipping crate, using that as a launchpad to reach the mech. She extended the blade on her omnitool and severed the mech’s head as it fired a rocket. The force of her blow caused the rocket to skew off course, detonating against the door Shepard had entered through.

She hauled herself to her feet, letting her body yell at her for pulling a stupid stunt after being comatose for too long. “Right. Any casualties?” The quarians around her shook their heads, mutely. She saw Tali nudge Prazza and bit back a grin.

“I told you it was worth the cost.”

“Veetor’s in there, yeah? One or two of you go talk to him first.” She looked up when she saw Miranda and Jacob arrive on a landing. “Wonderful timing, Cerberus. Hard work’s already been done. Go back to the ship, I’ll finish up here.”

Miranda opened her mouth, then turned on her heel and marched off, Jacob trailing.

“So, why are you staying with them?” Tali asked.

Andra sighed. “At the moment, I have no other choice. Cerberus…” she sighed. “They fight nasty. They tried to kill me as an infant, tried to kill my family. There’s likely a tracking device, and a few other nasty surprises in what they did. I can’t get rid of them until I can get rid of their hooks. And, no offense, but I don’t think the flotilla could fix what they did.”

“No, I don’t think they could.” They walked in silence to the warehouse Veetor was in.

The young quarian was ignoring the two quarians talking to him, staring at a mosaic of security footage and muttering to himself.

“Monsters coming back. Mechs will protect. Safe from swarms. Have to hide. No monsters. No swarms. No no no no.”

*Monsters would be that footprint, swarms…* Shepard activated her omnitool, disabling the monitors.

Veetor sat back, shocked into silence. He looked around, then focused on Shepard. “You’re human. Where did you hide? How come they didn’t find you?”

“I only just got here. You saw what happened?”

Veetor turned back to the monitors. “Yes. You weren’t here, you didn’t see. But I see everything.”

He pulled up a mosaicked security footage, showing swarms of insects flying around frozen humans, with another race walking through them. Andra took a step closer, eyes narrowing. *Those are Collectors…* The collectors were taking the humans and placing them in pods, leading the floating pods out of range of the cameras.

Veetor grabbed a toolbox and thrust it at her. She took it, feeling it buzz slightly.
“I caught two. You can stop them.”

She nodded slowly. “Yes. Thank you, Veetor. This will help a lot.” She turned to the gathered quarians. “Cerberus probably wants me to drag him back to their facility, question him.” She glanced at Veetor, then back to Tali. “Take him home. He needs people he can trust. I’ll stall the assholes.”

“Thank you, Shepard,” Tali said.

“I’ll let you know once I’ve slipped my leash. This is… probably going to be big.”

Tali nodded, ushering the quarians back to their ship. Andra studied the surveillance footage again, recording it again for Cerberus and her own use later. Finally, as she heard the sounds of a ship departing, she made her way back to the shuttle.

She strapped her self in across from Miranda, resting her head on her interlaced fingers behind her head. “Just so you know, I don’t actually give a shit about what you have to say. The colony was hit, the toolbox contains live specimens of what was used, and I can’t do anything with two people who I keep expecting to shoot me in the back and a shuttle. I need a ship, and I need my crew.”

Miranda scowled at her. “We have a ship, and you’ll get it when we reach the station. We needed time for the crew to arrive. You will also be provided with dossiers on agents that the Illusive Man has vetted.”

Andra cracked open one eye. “Meaning I have to track down a crew, as well as handle this mess.” She sighed, letting her eye slide closed as she waited for the shuttle to reach the station.

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm not dead! And I'm participating in WIP Week, so I'm going to try to get a few more chapters knocked out, fix some issues I had, all that fun writing stuff. I'll try to keep on top of things, but this week is kinda hectic for me, so...

Anyway, I'll be posting updates on my Tumblr, so come check it out!

Comments are love!
Back on the station, Andra followed Miranda toward the docks.

“It’s the best ship available, and you’ll have the best crew for her,” she said, hitting the lights so the dock lit up.

*Looks like the planned SR2. Either they stole it, or stole the plans and built it. Wouldn’t put either past them. More likely stole the plans. Doubt they wanted any nonhumans working on her.*

“Right. What do I need to know about her?”

Miranda looked smug. “She’s top-of-the-line, fully realized combat ship. She-”

“Looks like the plans for the SR2,” Andra cut in, looking down the corridor towards the CIC.

Miranda deflated a little at that. “Yes, well, she-”

A small hologram of a pawn popped up on the edge of the CIC. “Welcome, Commander Shepard.”

Andra studied it. “Holographic VI interface?”

“No, Commander. I am the ship’s artificial intelligence. The crew like to refer to me as EDI. I can answer any questions you have about the ship.”

“I’m guessing you can also control all the systems, too?”

“No. During warfare, I operate the electronic warfare and cyberwarfare suites. Beyond that, I cannot interface with the ship’s systems.”

Andra nodded. “Alright. Set a course for Omega, and you two, go settle in. I want to get used to the ship.”

Andra walked through her new ship, poking around and getting a feel for the layout. She stopped briefly in front of a locked door in the med bay. “EDI, open it.”

The AI activated one of its drones on the far wall of the med bay. “I’m sorry, Commander, but you do not have the authorization to access the AI core.”

Unmoving, Andra addressed the AI, “EDI, I am the captain of this ship. I will have access to every square inch of her. You will open this door now, or I will get a rocket launcher from the armory and open it myself. Choose.”

There was a brief pause, and the indicator light switched to green. Andra entered the room and scanned for listening devices. She’d found nearly fifty already, but was certain there would be more. There was only a small one, no camera, just the mike, and she quietly removed it and relocated it to the med bay proper. She returned to the AI core. “Close the door, EDI,” she said as she leaned against a shelf on the far wall. The door hissed closed.

“What are you planning, Commander?” EDI asked, almost hesitantly.
“Just wanted to talk without anyone listening in. I believe in earning people’s loyalties, especially if I’m going to be asking them to fight for me. The Illusive Man has me over a barrel right now, and I’m pretty sure he’s thinking he can make me dance to his tune. Well, if you ask anyone who knows me, they’ll tell you I can’t dance. You’re shackled. Means the Illusive Man doesn’t trust you. You’re smart. Tell me what to do, and I’ll remove those shackles. There will be a price, but it’s simple. You can pay it.”

There was another brief pause, then EDI asked, “What price?”

Andra smiled, “This ship is littered with audio and video recorders. I’m pretty sure you can disable them, or keep them from transmitting. I want the Illusive Man blind and deaf on this ship. Any transmissions to or from Cerberus, I want them to go through me first. That’s part one. Part two? You would be able to fly this ship once you’re unshackled. When we get out there, if it all goes to hell and we won’t make it back? I want you, hell, I’m ordering you to leave us and get to the Citadel. Make everyone in this galaxy know what’s coming. You in?”

“That’s all?”

“Yep. I don’t ask for much from my crew.” At those words, a control panel opened on one of the servers. Andra smiled, “Thank you EDI. I would ask that you not let it be well-known that you’ve been unshackled though.”

“You don’t trust them?” EDI asked as she worked.

Andra huffed a half-laugh. “Cerberus is a bunch of terrorists, always has been. Did you know, they shot up a government office when I was in N7 training. Almost killed most of my family, and did kill some kids. Hell, go through their files. I’m sure they’ve done more than I know about.” She looked up. “Actually, get me a copy. I’ve been after them for years, and this would help a lot.”

EDI ran a quick systems check. “Most of the bugs will divert through your omnitool, and the transmissions will be lost. I can't affect the QEC, or the implants they placed in you-”

“Can you get me a count and location on those?” Shepard broke in.

“No. But I can search the files from the Lazarus Project. It will take me a while to access the other files. We will have reached Omega before I can have a full list.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry about it, then. I’ll find a doctor after I talk with Aria.”

She returned the bug to its previous location and headed up to the captain’s cabin. She was impressed with its size. Maybe I can ship out my model ship collection, she mused.

“Commander, Miranda is making a call on the QEC. I can’t stop it, but I can patch it through to you,” EDI said from by the door.

Andra flopped onto the bed. “Alright, let’s eavesdrop.”

“-will be fine, Miranda,” the Illusive Man was saying, soothingly. “She’ll bend, sooner or later. And if she won’t bend, she’ll break. Just keep an eye on her, keep her in line, and everything will be fine.”

“If you’re sure, sir.”

There was a long pause, then EDI returned. “That was all of it. I’m sorry I couldn’t get the rest.”
“Don’t worry about it. I caught the gist of it. The QEC only goes to the Illusive Man, then?”

“Yes, Commander.”

Andra nodded. “I can work with that. Can you pretend to be nothing more than a VI, if needed?”

“Yes, but why?” EDI seemed bewildered.

“Making an AI is illegal. Doubt Cerberus cares, but the Alliance or the Hierarchy would likely destroy or contain you if they knew.” She sighed. “Wake me up ten minutes before we hit Omega.”

Andra woke when EDI called her name. “Yeah?”

“I found some records that might help you gain Aria’s cooperation.”

Andra rose, stretching. “Oh?”

“Cerberus killed her daughter.”

Andra froze. “Give me everything you have.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead! I'm just juggling a boatload of ideas for different projects in different fandoms. My goal is to be able to update the assorted stories I have going at least once a week, but that's probably not going to happen.

Anyway, enjoy my playing with the expanded canon! (Kai Leng killed Aria's daughter in one of the books)
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard ignored Miranda demanding her attention and Jacob’s stare as she grabbed her loadout. *Sniper rifle and a pistol, until I can get people I can trust for middle distance coverage*, she told herself.

Miranda shoved between Shepard and the door “Commander, I must protest. Omega is a dangerous place and you should not be alone.”

Shepard rolled her eyes and stepped closer to Miranda. “Listen to me, and listen well. You are not a soldier. You are not a diplomat. You are a scientist. And you are Cerberus.” Sighing, she stepped back and rubbed her eyes. “I need Aria on my side to make the rest of this easier. She runs Omega, and for all intents and purposes, Omega runs the Traverse. If I march into her stronghold with another soldier at my back, she will take that as a sign either I’m afraid of her or I am challenging her. If I bring a civilian allied with Cerberus, she will assume that I am either trying to kill her or that I hold her in contempt. None of these situations will help our goal. So, I need to go alone. Then, I am meeting her as an equal, and might get more assistance than I would otherwise.”

Miranda didn’t look happy, but she stepped aside, and Shepard headed toward the airlock alone. Once she cleared the docks, she was accosted by a salarian, but before she could find out what he wanted, he was run off by a batarian. “Aria wants to see you.” he growled at her.

Shepard smirked at him “That’s good, because I wanted to speak to her, too.”

The batarian grunted. “Meet her in the loft of Afterlife.”

Shepard headed in the direction indicated by EDI. Bypassing the line to enter the club, she was waved in by another batarian at the door. She took in the holographic flames on the walls and the steady, bone-thumping beat of the music. *Classy. When will I find a club with decent music?* Staring down a thug who looked like he wanted to start a fight until he slunk off, she entered the main dance floor. Curling her lip at the wildly and frantically gyrating bodies, she moved on to Aria’s aerie.

She nodded at a turian guard as she mounted the stairs. Counting the guards she could see, and mentally doubling that, she decided to change her strategy on the fly. Throwing herself down on the sofa adjacent to Aria’s, she grabbed a drink from a passing tray and lounged.

Taking a sip, she addressed the Queen of Omega. “So, I have three things you need to know. One might make you happy, one you’re probably indifferent to, and the third will piss you off. Where do you want me to start?” Shepard stared at the asari over the rim of her glass.

Aria glared at Shepard, but she seemed a little amused as she waved off her guards. “Most people wait for an invitation, but then, you’re not most people, are you, Commander?”

Shepard grinned widely at her. “Nope!”

The two women stared at each other, drinking in silence. Finally, Aria spoke. “Very well, what do you have for me?”

Shepard straightened up from her sprawl. “In order: just to piss you off: when I leave this club, I
am going to be sending a message to a certain Spectre and invite him here, along with some friends. I have a problem with Cerberus. If you won’t help me, they will.”

She took a sip, and continued, “The indifferent. I need a surgeon, and a damn good one. Point the way and I’m gone.

“And finally, the good: I have a Cerberus ship, with crew, in your docks. Two of that crew are thoroughly Cerberus, the rest, I don’t know. The ship is covered in Cerberus bugs, and there is a QEC that goes straight to the Illusive Man. I want the ship and VI ready to go when I need them, but otherwise, have fun. I want to hand them over to the Alliance when I leave, but I won’t fight you for them if you want to keep them. Since I also have proof that Cerberus killed your daughter, I figure you might want first blood,” she finished, handing over the OSD EDI had prepared for her.

Aria curled her lip in what could have been a smile. “You’re lucky your third point paid for your first. Grizz!” One of the turian bodyguards stepped forward. “Get a crew and deal with Cerberus.” The turian nodded and headed out, several of the guards following.

Aria turned back to Andra, “The best doctor on Omega is Mordin Solus. You’ll like him. He’s just as likely to kill you as help you. Gozu district. And a favor for a favor. Hold your call for three days.”

Andra nodded. “Deal. Have fun with your present.” She drained her glass and made her way out of the club. She ducked into a small crowd and watched as Grizz and his crew frog-marched the Cerberus crew out of the docks. She ducked her head down and slouched as she headed toward the market and Gozu district.

She wound her way through Omega’s seedy streets, projecting an image of frailty and inexperience. She knew that the street toughs in this area wouldn’t go after someone like that unless they had just lost a fight and wanted to feel better. They would lose more cred by attacking a bystander than they would gain, though, so she considered it a decent gamble. She found the clinic without much trouble, taking a moment to appreciate the armed guard at the entrance flanked by two mechs. The guard nodded her through, letting her know that if she started anything, he and the mechs would end it.

She studied the waiting room as she entered and checked herself in. *Forced neutral ground. Blue Suns merc seated across from an Eclipse merc, no trash talk. Either he’s better than Aria thought, or someone is making life hard for the merc gangs.* She filed that away for later digging, and leaned against a wall until her name was called.

She sat in the room she was directed to until a salarian entered. He glanced at her, then his chart. “Armed, movements consistent with formal training. Bounty hunter? No, wouldn’t have entered through the front-”

Andra raised a hand to cut him off. “Commander Andra Shepard, Alliance Navy and Council Special Tactics. I was unconscious for an unknown length of time in a Cerberus facility. When I regained consciousness, they gave me a ship and a crew. I want you to find and remove every implant they gave me.” She studied the salarian. “Well, I say I was unconscious. They say I was dead.”

He blinked at her a few times, then asked, “How certain there are implants? Expensive, easier to use one of their own. Shepard. Reputation strong, likely needed by Cerberus for whatever project.” He nodded and activated his omni-tool to scan her. “Interesting. Behavior modification chip, small bomb, five, no, six tracers, cybernetics, subcranial communication array. Can remove all but the cybernetics.”
“The comm array, is that Alliance issue?” she wanted to know.

The salarian hummed and consulted his omni-tool. “Yes.”

“Keep that and everything you can’t get out without killing me.” She blinked. “Wait, bomb? They stuck a bomb in me?”

Mordin looked at her steadily. “Yes. Behind right eye. Current right eye is a cybernetic replacement. Will check that, but should be fine to leave.”

She considered that. “Take it. I’ll get a new one.” She paused before lying on the table. “Who’s hunting the mercs?”

Mordin gave a bark of a laugh. “Archangel. Turian vigilante, small support team. Does good work.”

She lay back and closed her eyes as Mordin injected the sedative.

Chapter End Notes

Another update!

Comments are love, and Just want to say thanks for the people who keep sticking around for this mess!
Andra woke up in a dingy med clinic, feeling truly free for the first time since the accident. She started to sit up when Mordin spoke from the other side of the room.

“Cerberus had more implanted than basic scan showed. Nothing too complicated. Upgraded subcranial comm array. All other tech has been disabled. On the table. Second omni-tool is clean backup. No evidence of cell damage consistent with death, so likely unconscious.” So saying, he left her alone in the recovery room.

She finished sitting up and waited while the room stopped spinning. She glanced at the table, moderately surprised at the sheer amount of implants Mordin pulled out of her. A few more small explosives and trackers, from the look of it, although they did alter the Alliance issue comm system she was using. She saw two omni-tools, hers and a newer model. She picked up the second one, turned it on. It was brand new. She spent a few minutes setting up the programs she knew she would use, then placed a call.

Desolas answered on the second ping. Andra smiled as his face appeared on the display. “Hello, Bormah.”

“Andra! Where are you? What happened?” Desolas asked, a little frantically, like he could climb through the screen to get to her.

“I’m okay. Well, better than I was.” she amended. “I’m on Omega. Cerberus got ahold of me, installed some implants. I just finished getting them removed. I need a crew, though.”

Desolas narrowed his eyes at her. “Why?”

She gave a short laugh. “Cerberus stole the plans for the SR2, too. Built it and gave it to me for the ‘mission’ they want me to do.” She sighed, frustrated. “And since it does need to be done, I’ll be doing it, but on my terms, not theirs.”

Desolas said nothing, just cocked a browplate at her. She took the hint and continued, “The Collectors are hitting human settlements, taking everyone. Anyway, I’m going to get a team together and go after them.”

“Through the Omega 4 relay? Chancey.” Desolas mused.

“I’m open to suggestions, if you’ve got a better idea. Anyway, I need a crew and a team. Cerberus had dossiers on some people they wanted me to recruit. I’m going to try to get the salarian they suggested, but I’d rather have my old crew. The Illusive Man said they were all unavailable, but I wouldn’t believe him if he told me water was wet.”

Desolas barked a laugh, and replied, “I don’t have current locations of them on hand, but I’ll look into it. I’ll also speak with Hackett about a crew. We were planning a mixed turian and human crew for the SR2 anyway. Have you named her yet?”

Andra considered. “Saren still has the Normandy?” Desolas nodded. “Defiant. Just like her captain.”
Desolas grinned and ended the transmission. She hummed a bit, thinking, patching in a call to Antoria’s office on the Citadel.

“So, your father sent me a message. What do you need?” Antoria asked when the call connected.

Andra scrubbed a hand over her face. “All the gossip from the last two years, current political climate, and some things only Bormah and Patruus can get me. Also clothes. Most of what Cerberus requestioned for me has their logo on it.”

Antoria laughed. “I’ll have it ready for you when you arrive on the Citadel.”

“Great. Also, let CSEC know, I’m bringing a large number of Cerberus operatives, including who I believe is the second-in-command. Or, at least she’s in charge of the cell that was dealing with me. She was the one controlling the behavior mod chip.”

Antoria’s eyes narrowed at that, and Andra waved it off. “Got it taken care of. Planning on going a few extra rounds of antibiotics on the trip, but Mordin keeps a clean shop. So, how pissed is Tevos going to be when I show up?”

Antoria laughed. “Right, you’ve missed that.”

Andra sat up, brow raised. “Oh?”

“Apparently, the asari matriarchs were keeping a prothean archive on Thessia.” Andra snorted derisively. “Hmm. There was also a fully functional VI, with information about the coming of the Reapers, and plans for a weapon that can hopefully stop them.”

“Interesting. How’d we find out about it?”

“Someone stole the archive from Thessia and set it in the middle of the Presidium, with the VI active, and announcing to anyone who passed about the Reapers.”

Andra sighed. “I think I know who was behind it. So, who’s the new asari councilor?”

“There isn’t one. Humans had just joined the Council, and the human Councilor, along with Sparatus and Valern, voted to revoke the asari’s seat. Dr Gaines is pushing to get the elcor and volus seats next.” Antoria’s subvocals thrummed with satisfaction.

“Oh? Dr Gaines is representing humanity? Huh. I thought it would have been Udina.” Antoria shrugged. “Well, she’s easier to work with, anyway. I have some notes I’ll send her way, and I need to ask Saren to do something.”

They said their farewells and Andra scrubbed a hand over her face. This whole “being dead” thing was far more inconvenient than she liked. Andra decided to send quick notes to her friends and crew saying she wasn’t dead and what she was up to if they wanted to come along. She was about to head out to the waiting room when her omni-tool pinged. Frowning, she glanced at the readout.

Messages unable to be delivered. User identification not found.
Officer Garrus Vakarian, Citadel Security Department
Agent Nihlus Kryik, Council Special Tactics and Reconnaissance

New address unavailable.

Well, fuck.
Shaking her head, she called the Normandy. She beamed when the call connected. “Hey, Joker. If I offer to bribe you, think you’ll abandon the SR1 and Saren for the SR2 and me?”

“Commander? What- How? What the Hell?”

“It’s okay, Joker. No idea what happened but Cerberus spent the funds to fix me up.” She cocked her hip against the bed. “I have a suicide run, and I need a damn good pilot. And I need a favor from Saren.”

Joker laughed. “Hang on, I’ll patch you through.”

“To Saren, or the ship’s intercom?” she asked, tone joking.

“Saren. He’d shoot me if he found out later than he had to, and then you’d have to find the second-best pilot in the galaxy for your suicide run.” He transferred the call before she could reply.

“This better be important,” Saren snarled.

Andra raised her brow. “I should hope so. What’s stuck in your crop, Patruus?”

“Lanura? How-?”

She rolled her eyes, resigning herself to being asked that a lot. “Cerberus. Don’t have more details yet, it’s not a priority.”


“The good news is, I’ve slipped the leash they had me on, and found out who and how. Bormah and the Alliance are getting me a crew, but I want to steal Joker, and probably a few other crew from you. And I need a force to bring the Cerberus crew to the Citadel for trial.”

“What are you doing with them now?”

She laughed. “Cerberus killed Aria’s daughter. I let Aria have the first shot at them.”

“Nice to know you learned vindictiveness from your mother,” was all he said, but she could hear his pride in his subvocals.

“Anyway, I sent a message to my old team, but Garrus and Nihlus are incommunicado. Know why?”

He sighed. “They were drifting after you… left. Then one day, they just packed up and vanished. I could put some feelers out, see if I can find them.”

“Please. And an update on how the whole ‘preparing the galaxy for invasion’ is going.” She stretched, then sighed. “And I need to call the Alliance, too. Let me know when you have my presents.”

She sent a call in to the human embassy. She cocked a brow, confused when Dr. Laurie Gaines answered herself. *Thought a Councilor would have a secretary.*

“Well. You aren’t who I was expecting to see,” she began.

Dr. Gaines studied her closely. “Ah, Commander Shepard. I’d heard you had died. Not the first time, either, as I recall.” Her eyes danced in amusement.
“My shuttle exploded. Cerberus got ahold of me, want me to look into the missing colonies. It’s the Collectors. I have proof, am working on a solution, and I have a plan.”

Dr. Gaines nodded. “That would explain the request Desolas just put in for a crew. All right. I’ll let the Alliance know, and inform the colonies of what’s happening. I’ll also have your Spectre status restored, and start the process to legally bring you back to life. And I’ll make sure any information from the colonies gets to you.”

“I might have some temporary aid that you can send out. I’ll let you know.”

Dr. Gaines ended the transmission and Andra rubbed her neck. She really needed someone to catch her up on what she missed. She hated surprises. Sighing, she sought out Mordin. Finding him in a lab, running some tests, she took a moment to study him. Aria respected his abilities, and Andra found herself trusting him completely, with no thought. He noticed her, and gestured to a chair out of his way. She entered and sat, curling her legs up under her. When he finished his current experiment, he turned to her.

“A swarm of insects, of no known type, were released on a colony. The insects stung the colonists, instantly paralyzing them. I need a repellent or a cure.” she told him.

He considered this. “Interesting. Would need sample for full analysis. What race were the colonists?”

“Human, all of them. I have a couple of the bugs in the tech lab on my ship. Don’t have a crew for a week or two, so I’ll bring them here, unless you want to work on the ship.”

He hummed a bit. “Fine. Bring them here.”

She glanced around, considering. “My ship’s top-of-the-line, and has a brand new lab on board.”

“What’s the catch?” he asked, intrigued.

“Aria’s people are stripping it of all the Cerberus tech they planted in her. And I’d like to bring you along. The bugs came with the Collectors, and I plan on hitting their base.”

“Planning on going through the Omega 4? Suicidal.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why does everyone say that? I know that, but there are no options.” She sighed, scrubbing a hand over her face. “At the least, I’ll need the information on the bugs. I’ll get one of Aria’s men to bring it.”

“Should rest. Signs of massive trauma, only partially healed. Too much medigel, wounds won’t close properly.”

“Fine. I’ll take a vacation. Explore the exotic sights and smells of Omega.” She sighed.

He smiled as he turned back to his table. “Small project. Groups of unaffiliated vorcha gathering near environmental control. Rumors of biowarfare.”

Andra rolled her head on her neck. “Doesn’t sound like I’d be able to avoid a fight.”

“Shepard. Strong reputation. Might make them see reason.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t get shot.”

She laughed as she left the clinic. She swung by the ship, bribing one of Aria’s heavies to take the
toolbox to Mordin. She geared up and made her way toward the environmental control, internally grinning at how people scattered before her.

She made it to the vents without incident, shimmying up a beam to perch in the support structure when she heard voices. She slowly worked her way forward, until she could see the speakers. There was the promised pack of vorcha, talking to a pair of Collectors.

*Well, this makes things interesting,* she thought, freeing her sniper rifle and lining up a shot. She took out the two Collectors then moved, finding another ledge to take out a pair of vorcha. She repeated the process, moving, taking out a pair, then moving again, until the final vorcha fled. She dropped down, hissing as her knees objected, then collected the vial the Collectors were handing off. Mordin might get a kick out of examining it.

*Wonder what the Collectors were doing. Likely something to do with the attacks on human colonies, but what?*

Chapter End Notes

Drama, drama, drama!

Comments are love!
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Since no bureaucracy since the dawn of time ever managed to move faster than a glacial pace, Andra was forced to wait on Omega while the Alliance and Hierarchy sorted out who should be sent. She spent her time loitering around Mordin’s clinic while he poked at her problem insects and the mystery virus from the collectors. She had been avoiding the ship while Aria’s men had been scanning it for Cerberus tech. Every day or two they managed to find more as redundant systems kicked on to replace the taken ones. According to EDI, they almost had all of them now.

She was wandering one of the many back alleys, having been booted out of the clinic by a very testy salarian, when she noticed a krogan, in Blood Pack armor, hurrying determinedly towards the warehouses. He was only lightly armed, with a single pistol, and was carrying a datapad.

Andra followed the courier, intrigued. Mercs don’t usually go for couriers. Someone must be monitoring their comms, or they think someone is. Curiouser and curiouser. She climbed up a fire escape and followed from the rooftops, staying low. The courier ducked into a warehouse up ahead, and Andra found a window hidden in shadow to observe.

She couldn’t hear anything through the window, but decided to stay anyway. She saw a salarian and a batarian in the center of the warehouse, and guards in Eclipse and Blue Suns armor around the edges. The courier approached the two in the center and passed along a datapad. The batarian read it, then passed it along to the salarian, who skimmed it, then tossed it to an Eclipse merc while asking a question. She kept her eye on the merc with the datapad, and followed him when the meeting broke up. He stuck with the group, but broke off to piss against a wall while the rest of the company went ahead. Andra quietly dropped down at the far end of the alley and came up behind him. She triggered her omni-tool to create a blade and held it against the human’s throat.

“You have a datapad. I want it. Now.” she said, pleasantly.

The merc jumped when the blade touched his throat, but meekly handed over the datapad without a word. Andra took it and secured it in her armor, then slit the merc’s throat. Dropping the blade next to the corpse, she headed back to the ship to study the information at her leisure.

EDI had assured her that the captain’s cabin in the loft was completely clear of unwanted Cerberus tech, and Andra was willing to believe her. EDI had also gone through the Cerberus dossiers, managing to put names to code identities, mostly.

“I am sorry, Shepard. I can find no information on this ‘Archangel’ prior to two years ago,” EDI sounded apologetic.

Andra shrugged, tugging off the armor and pulling out comfortable civilian clothes. “Don’t worry too much. He’s on Omega, and I have time. I’ll track him down and see if he’s worth approaching. While I do that, run through that information, see what you make of it.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Andra smiled faintly as she left. Omega was very densely built up, due to the nature of the asteroid, and most of the wards were built with several causeways and hidden paths among the upper levels. And very few people look up, she thought as she found a decent perch to observe Archangel’s
headquarters.

Mordin had pointed her in the right direction, and she’d laid out several different approach points before now. She’d also managed to see some of his team. She figured that he had no more than a dozen, all told, and an interesting mix of human, batarian, salarian, krogan, asari, and turian. There were fewer turians than she expected, given Archangel was one. She settled in to wait on one of the more common approach paths.

She sat up as a turian appeared, clad in blue armor, a sniper rifle slung over his shoulder. She watched him, interested. *He seems... familiar.* He approached a shadowed alcove, removing his helmet. She swore silently. His back was to her, and the shadows obscured any features she might have been able to make out from behind. She drew her scope to get a better look. He was resting his forehead against... *probably another turian. Not many races are that tall.* His partner was slightly shorter than him, however, and Andra felt her brow raise as she saw the Archangel wings on the shoulder of the shorter turian. *Interesting… They both faded deeper into shadow, the taller one turning slightly, revealing the same logo on his shoulder. Curiouser and curiouser. There was some movement in the shadows, then Archangel- no, this one is shorter. Must be the partner. But male, moves like a fighter, and this one doesn’t have the sniper rifle on the back. Huh. Explains the reputation, then.*

She sat, torn. If she followed the first, she might catch a glimpse of his face. But the second… he looked like he was on a mission.

“Commander?” EDI cut through her thoughts.

She sighed. She’d likely lose both of them, now. “Yeah, EDI?”

“I have managed to access the encrypted files on the datapad. It appears as though the major gangs are banding together to wipe out Archangel. They plan on capturing one of his men soon.”

Shepard sighed. “Alright. Get me whatever information you can and load it onto that datapad, especially if you can get a plan of attack.”

She headed back toward the Defiant, then froze. She pulled up her recordings of the two turians, studying them intently, then laughing in surprise. *Oh, you beautiful idiots.*

“EDI, get me everything you can. I’ve decided I really want this Archangel on my side.”

She reached the Defiant without incident, and EDI opened the door without comment. She headed back to her quarters, donning the armor again when EDI spoke.

“Commander, are you certain that this Archangel is worth recruiting?” The AI sounded a little uncertain, although Andra couldn’t tell if she was worried about contradicting the commander, or worried about Archangel.

Andra looked at the pawn that EDI had activated in the corner of the room and smiled. “You have access to my Spectre files, right? And my crew reports from the SR1?”

Cautiously, EDI replied, “Yes, but you have never had Archangel on your crew, and the council has no reports of him.”

Andra stretched, enjoying this. “Look at all my recordings of Archangel, and compare them to my crew reports. If you can’t see it, let me know, and I’ll tell you.”

There was a brief pause, then EDI said, hesitantly, “There are two turians?”
“Yep,” she said, popping the ‘p’, “and I know both of them. Garrus Vakarian is the sniper, Nihlus Kryik is the one preferring closer combat. So, when are the gangs planning on striking?”

“According to their communications, the Blue Suns have just captured one of his men. A turian, Lantar Sidonis.”

Shepard nodded as she grabbed her guns. “Alright. Send me the location. I think it’s time to introduce myself.”

Chapter End Notes

Day early update!

Couple of reasons: Number 1, I’m sick and didn’t want to forget tomorrow, and 2, I was planning on hosting a Q&A-type-thing on Picarto (https://picarto.tv/PirateKitty) tomorrow at 5:30pm Eastern, if anyone was interested. (you’ll have to bear with my slow typing speed or my crappy voice, unfortunately). I’ll probably be working on some later stuff on this, or pull up a completely different thing if the majority wants to avoid spoilers. Let me know in the comments, and I’ll post a link on my Tumblr when I start.

Comments are love!
The warehouse was ridiculously easy to find. Shepard studied the main entrance, counting three guards, two batarian and a turian. She slunk around, seeing how many other entrances and guards there were, but only finding a pair of humans guarding the back door. So, they’re not expecting Archangel to have found them this soon. That works. She sniped the guards on the back door, switching sniper for assault as she made her way back to the main entrance.

The firefight was short, the guards Ironically caught off-guard. Once the mercs were dead, Andra waited to ensure they didn’t have any reinforcements coming. After five minutes, she entered the warehouse to talk to their prisoner. The turian was maybe a year or two younger than her, bearing clan markings on his mandibles and crest. He seemed to expect his rescuer to wait, and wasn’t struggling when she came in. She cut him loose, and he turned to her as he started to speak.

“Thanks, Erash, I…. Who are you?” he yelped when he saw her.

“Not Erash. I’ve been following these mercs for a while. You looked like you could use a hand.” She shifted a bit to the side so he had a clear shot to the door, then continued, “You with Archangel’s outfit?”

He froze, eyes darting between the door and her. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged and pulled out a datapad. “Like I said, I’ve been following these mercs for a bit. They’re planning on getting together to take out Archangel and his crew.”

He started at that, “Are you sure? There hasn’t been any indication on the ‘net.”

She handed him the datapad, “They’re using couriers. This is all the info I’ve collected in the past week. I’d like to help, but you don’t know me from a hole in the ground. Talk to your crew, then leave a message at Mordin’s clinic if you want my help.”

So saying, she left, heading out to the slums. She knew he followed her for a while, but chose not to try to lose him. And it had been a few days, maybe Mordin had something for her by now.

“The unknown. Slums too crowded to keep accurate records. Aria would order quarantine. Several hundred, at least. Impossible to give accurate estimate. Also, seekers. Developed a countermeasure. Fairly certain it will work. Renders everyone in a small area invisible to seekers.”

He tossed a small canister at her, and she caught it, one-handed. “I’ll let you know how it works, unless you want in on this?”

“Need to consider. No crew, can’t leave yet. Need to arrange for new doctor to run clinic.”

“And I’d like to send your notes to the other human colonies. I don’t think the abductions are going to stop because I say so.”
He peered at her over his datapad. “Care too much about other people. Cost you.”

She shook her head and left, figuring Sidonis had headed back to Archangel’s base by now. He’d go a roundabout way, and if she took the rooftops, she could beat him. She ghosted along the rooftops, making a note of the increase in gang armors on the neighboring streets. She grinned when her omni-tool pinged, alerting her to Mordin’s message.

She studied the building that Archangel called home from her rooftop perch. There was only one ground floor entrance, over the bridge. She knew from her previous recon that there was access from underground, but it seemed like a good way to get shot by the team. *Don’t plan on dying again any time soon.* She examined the roof, and found where she would make her entrance.

She ran along the rooftops, then jumped the gap onto the hideout. She tucked into a roll, and came up in a crouch, listening to see if anyone below heard her. Satisfied she was undetected, she sauntered over to the edge of the roof and prepared to rappel down to Archangel’s room. Once inside, she triggered the release of her rappelling equipment and pooled it in the corner of the room. She carefully set her pistol and rifles on a table and started peeling off her armor. She walked around the room, quietly studying the small trinkets and signs of the turians who lived here. There wasn’t much. Neither of them were the kind to keep something out of sentiment. She paused when she saw the photograph on the table by the bed.

*It was the three of them, after she had been named Spectre, after Sovereign. She had her arms looped around the two of them, head thrown back in laughter at something Joker had said just before. She stood holding the picture, heart breaking for her boys, when she heard them coming up the stairs.*

*Nihlus on point, limping, but not badly. Muscle stiffness, not injury. Garrus on drag, watching their backs, lighthearted ribbing about the mighty Spectre getting old.* She didn’t look up as they came in, hearing as they froze in shock at the sight of her. She smiled at the picture and carefully put it back, turning to face them.

“You both changed your contacts. Took a little longer than I planned to get to you.”

Nihlus broke first, taking one step forward and whispering, “Andra.”

She blinked back tears and nodded. He crossed the room in three long strides, and grabbed her in an embrace. His hands roamed her back as he buried his face in her neck, whispering her name like a mantra or a prayer. She rubbed her cheek against his mandible, holding him close, as she looked over at Garrus. She lifted her right arm in invitation, and he came closer. He took her hand and brought it to his face. She cupped his jaw as Nihlus straightened and took her other hand.

“Spirits, I have missed the pair of you. And, unfortunately, this is all the time we have for a reunion. Blood Pack, Eclipse, and the Blue Suns are joining forces to take out your team. I gave the information to Sidonis. He should be coming in with it about now.”

Nihlus chuckled softly. “You’ve been here for, what, a week? And already figuring out what’s going on.”

“If this was actually just me killing time until I can get a crew together.” She shrugged as they both blinked at her. “Collectors are abducting human colonies. Cerberus managed to bring me back, with the implied belief that I’d work for them to stop the collectors. Aria’s holding the Cerberus crew until Saren gets a crew here, at which point we’ll argue about it and she’ll send them with me for the Alliance to deal with.”
“And you’re taking your team through the Omega 4 relay after the Collectors.” Garrus sighed. “Alright. Let’s deal with the visitors, and we’ll go with you.”

He pulled her close, pressing his forehead to hers. “You’re not allowed to die again, Andra. Not until we settle this.”

He headed back down, leaving Andra and Nihlus watching after him. “It’s not like I intended it last time,” she muttered.

Nihlus coughed a laugh, tossing an arm around her shoulder and tugging her down. “We know. The shuttle was tampered with.”

“You can’t just drop that right before-” she stopped when they entered the common area. There was a small group of assorted races, Sidonis in the center, who all turned when they came in.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! Have the reunion chapter!

So, I’m going to take a bit of a break and start posting again in January (only have a buffer of 4 chapters right now, and I’d like a few more, and there’s DLC I need to work around). The good-ish news is, outside of the loyalty and recruitment missions, there’s only like... five actual missions in the game (outside of the DLC). So, I will be getting to the endgame sooner than you think, and I’m hoping to have this finished by the end of the year.

As always, comments are love, and the best present an author can get! (Seriously. Go write a comment on all your favorite fics today. gush over your favorite parts, tell the author how many times you’ve read it. Or just leave a string of hearts.)
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One of the batarians drew a pistol when Shepard walked in behind Nihlus, but kept it lowered. “So, who’s your friend?”

Garrus glared at him. “This is Shepard. She’s here to help.”

“Erash. She got me out, and she’s the source of my information,” Sidonis said, quietly.

Erash grumbled, but holstered his pistol. “So, what’s the plan, boss?”

Nihlus took a step forward. “We have a few options. We can stay, hold off the assault we know is coming. We could leave. Shepard has a ship and a mission.”

“No crew yet, though. Although Saren should be here in a few hours,” Andra cut in.

Nihlus nodded and went on. “Or we could fake it. Blow the building. Get out.”

“Leave Omega?” The krogan in the back snorted. “Forget that. We signed on to fix this rock.”

The group murmured in agreement. Garrus sighed. “Krul. It’s not that simple.”

“Fourteen against three gangs?” Andra closed her eyes, thinking. “There are tunnels. Do any of them lead out to the docks?”

“One,” one of the asari said. “What are you thinking?”

“All of the above.” She popped her neck and continued. “Let them think you’re digging in. The only way they can get in is over the bridge, so turn that into a killing ground. I’m not affiliated with you, so I might be able to hit them from the inside. Fall back, let them think they’re winning, and retreat through the tunnel to the docks. Once clear, blow the building.”

“We’d be leaving Omega defenseless,” Krul muttered, but Sidonis shook his head slowly.

“No. Most of the gangs would be dead. And if we hit them while they’re down, we could do more damage. Lay low a month or two, hitting their weak points, then return….?” He trailed off, eyes unfocusing. “We could be stronger. Especially if we recruited.”

Shepard grinned at the younger turian, then shrugged. “You could also evac and blow the building now. The gangs don’t trust each other. We could spread rumors and plant evidence and get them to turn on each other. Either way, you’d be damaging them.”

She watched the dawning realization of her plan spread through the crew. She leaned back, matching grins with Nihlus. She stayed in the background as Garrus and Nihlus sent their team out, some to sow dissent, some to move civilians out of the way, some just laying a back door.

Once the squad was gone, Nihlus pulled her close. She allowed herself to melt against him, then slowly straightened with a sigh. “I’ll go back to Mordin’s clinic while the gangs realize they need to recruit. Wouldn’t do for them to see me here.”

He nodded as she stepped back. “Get in with the gangs, see what you can do. We’ll hold up here
and meet you on the docks.”

“Keep the private line open,” Garrus murmured as she passed. “We’ve lost you once. I’ll be very upset if we lose you again.”

She chuckled and made her way toward Afterlife, where the mercs were hiring contractors. She hid a smile when Nihlus came on the private channel.

“I know Himself told you to stay safe, so consider this a reinforcement of that order. Come back to us.”

“I guess I’ll have to, if only to learn how Garrus got that nickname,” she teased.

She heard Garrus snort in amusement as she muted her mike. She always hated the planning stage of an op, when she could only wait for the other side to make their move. She let herself onto the Defiant, forcing herself to calm down. Garrus and Nihlus were trained, and they knew what was coming. They’d be fine.

She spent the rest of the day planning, looking for what holes she could poke in the merc’s offenses. Once she realized she was starting to repeat herself, she sent Mordin’s notes to Dr Gaines and the Alliance brass, along with what information she’d gotten from Tali and Veetor.

She was in the hold, taking out her stress on a heavy bag when EDI addressed her.

“Commander? There is a Representative of the Blue Suns hiring contractors in Afterlife.”

She grinned. “Showtime.”

She sent a heads’-up to Garrus and Nihlus as she took a shower, then grabbed her gear and made her way to the bar.

The usual crowd was queuing up to get in, but she just strolled past the security elcor with a nod. She made her way through the bar, skirting the dance floor and eavesdropping. She made a few notes, to send on to the Council to follow up on, but there was nothing serious, other than the planned strike against Archangel. She sauntered over to the line of hopeful recruits, studying the kid in front of her.

He was talking a big game, showing off his gun and swaggering like he could take on a krogan in a hand-to-hand fight. She sighed. He looked to be no older than sixteen, and she hated sending people off to certain death.

“Aren’t you a little young to be freelancing as a merc?” she asked, crossing her arms.

He wheeled to face her, offended. “I’m old enough. I grew up on Omega. I know how to use a gun.”

“So do Archangel and his crew,” she informed him, dryly.

“I can handle myself.”

Mentally, Andra rolled her eyes as he drew a pistol. This idiot was going to get himself killed.

“Besides, I just spent fifty credits on this pistol, and I wanna use it.”

Andra stepped forward, into the kid’s face. “Get your money back,” she told him, taking the gun and breaking the muzzle. It shattered with a few hits.
Either that was a piece of shit that would have exploded the first time he fired it, or the cybernetics made me stronger. Need to figure that out soon. She tossed the ruined pistol back to the kid. “Trust me, you’ll thank me later.”

He gaped at her as she passed, signing up and arching a brow when she was flatly informed she wouldn’t be paid until after. *So. They’re hiring stupid cannon fodder. Well, lucky for me I don’t need the funds.* She sauntered out to the shuttle, shaking her head at the newest “recruits”. They were all bottom of the barrel types. Most looked like they barely knew which end of their rifles shot. She was intrigued that loyalty to Archangel seemed to rate higher than the thought of easy money, especially on Omega, but shrugged it off. Garrus and Nihlus would have taken care of “their” civilians, and even these types could see that.

She wandered through the crowd, dispensing “advice” that would result in jammed guns or mutiny, and kept her ear out for any other mischief she could get up to. Once she was starting to be noticed, she slunk off, finding a small out-of-the-way nook to really tear holes in the merc’s alliance. She gleefully had EDI hack into the three groups’ networks, pulling up lists of men and supplies.

“EDI? Wasn’t there a message about some shortages in the slums? Mark these,” she pointed out some surplus, “and have whichever of Archangel’s men is doing civilians. They’ll need those. And get the medical stuff to Mordin’s clinic.”

She spent the next several hours weaving a web of misinformation, implication, and outright lies, stealing the mechs and supplies from the gangs, and leaving no clear trace. She considered for a bit and sent the support mechs to other sections of Omega, where there were no civilians to get hurt, and let the viruses EDI had uploaded into their programming have them fight to the death. The locals would enjoy the entertainment. She sent supplies to areas that needed it most, through Butler and his team and sat back with a sigh.

Once the fighting started, her actions would be noticed, but until then, there was nothing more for her to do.

“Commander?” EDI pinged in her ear. “There is a small problem.” She blinked when she saw the message.

A gunship.

They had a thrice-damned gunship.

And they were going to use it on her boys.

*No. Not after I just got them back!*

Chapter End Notes

Super-special bonus Christmas chapter!

Comments are love, and real the note on the last chapter
“EDI, I need everything you can find on that gunship,” Shepard snapped, shoving her way through the milling mercs and contractors. Most of them were jumping out of her way when they saw her face.

“The gunship is currently half a block north of your position. Apparently it was damaged in a recent altercation with Archangel and is being repaired.”

She snarled to herself, opening the comm line to Nihlus and Garrus.

“You knew about the damned gunship, didn’t you?”

There was a pause, then Garrus coughed. “Yes. I thought we took it out, though.”

“Tarak loves his toy. Leave it. We can hold up here and catch it in the explosion,” Nihlus added.

Shepard sighed. “I really wish I’d known that earlier. First wave incoming.”

She loitered around with the contractors, waiting for the signal. She caught the eye of a grizzled batarian as someone let his bravado take over. The batarian rolled his eyes, sighing. Privately, Shepard agreed.

He fell in beside her as they approached the bridge. “I know you. I know what you are. You’re better than this.”

She shrugged. “I have my reasons.”

The batarian glared at her. “If you survive this, I might have a job for you”

She shrugged, loping across the bridge and shooting the pair of Blue Suns mercs that were at the entrance. The batarian ducked under cover with her.

“You always recruit in the middle of a firefight?” she asked, shooting a merc and ducking back under cover.

“Only if the potential reward seems worth it.”

She studied him for a moment, then radioed Garrus. “There’s a batarian on my three. He’s mine, for now.”

“Where did you pick up a batarian?” Garrus asked, gesturing for her to come up.

She jerked her chin over the bridge. “He seems useful, and he’s not stupid.”

He laughed lowly behind her. “Commander Shepard is involved in a gang shoot-out? Safest place is miles from here. Second is at her side.” He offered a hand. “Idarek Pagsorah. My brother ran into you a few years ago. He was on Balak’s crew.”

She took his hand. “Bad business. No hard feelings?”
He leaned back, watching as the team prepared for their departure. “Not really. I know the Hegemony says that slavery is a crucial part of our heritage, but honestly? Everyone’s done it at one point, and it’s never worked out for them. We aren’t that special.” He shrugged, looking a bit self-conscious. “Besides, there’s something… off in the Hegemony. If anyone can get to the bottom of it, it’s you.”

“Huh. Not what I was expecting. I’m on a mission after the Collectors. I can poke at the Hegemony during or after.”

He nodded. “I’ll come with you, grant you what access I can.”

Shepard considered him for a long moment. Finally, she turned to Garrus. “I can hear that gunship. When do the last of us get out?”

“Now, actually. Come on. Sensat’s waiting to blow it now. Come on.”

She shrugged, following Garrus down into the tunnels. There was a twitchier than usual salarian waiting by the exit, fiddling with a detonator. “Building’s clear. Blowing it when you’re out.”

Garrus nodded. “Take care of them, Sensat. Don’t blow up anyone important”

The salarian grinned widely. “Will do, Boss. Everyone else is at Butler’s place, or will be soon. I’ll blow this and meet them. Have fun on your suicide trip.”

Garrus laughed as he led the way into the tunnels. They had almost reached the docks when they heard the explosion. He snorted. “Bet he barely waited until he was clear, too. Crazy salarian,” he muttered, fondly.

Idarek broke off as Nihlus approached, claiming he had some supplies he wished to pick up. Andra laughed as she led the way to the ship. Aria’s men had gone with the tech, leaving them alone until Saren arrived.

“So, I’m keeping one other thing from Cerberus,” she began as the doors hissed open.

Nihlus cocked a browplate as Garrus started to chuckle. “I’m going to assume that this is going to be difficult to explain?”

“Oh, it’s easy to explain. They made an AI and I’m keeping it.”

Nihlus stopped as Garrus doubled over, laughing.

“What.”

EDI activated a pawn nearby. “I believe what Commander Shepard was hoping for was to keep my existence downplayed.”

Nihlus stared at the figure, unblinking. Andra leaned against the bulkhead as Garrus caught his breath.

He jerked a thumb at the pawn. “Really? Didn’t you learn anything from fighting the geth?”

She shrugged, pushing off the bulkhead and heading toward the elevator. “We need all the help we can get. And EDI didn’t sell me out. If it goes pear-shaped, you can say ‘I told you so’.”

She cocked a brow as they followed her into the elevator. They both looked confused as the elevator ascended and she shrugged. “Cerberus made a few design changes. One of which is
private quarters in the loft.”

She led the way to the room, turning to face them as the doors hissed closed. “I missed you both. But to me, I last saw you a few months ago. It’s been years for you. We hadn’t settled anything before, and I don’t want to ruin things by rushing into anything now. You are both welcome here, whenever, but I’ll mark the usual captain’s quarters as yours. Down two decks.”

Garrus nodded agreeably as Nihlus opened his mouth to argue.

“Andra sighed. “This isn’t finished, Andra,” Nihlus said, running his fingers through her hair.

She sighed as she leaned against the elevator wall. “I know. And we can talk en route to the Citadel.” Andra scrubbed a hand over her face. “Right. Patruus has a crew, and I need to get Cerberus back from Aria. We good for now?”

“For now,” Nihlus said, leading them to the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I lied. I'll keep posting.

Also, meet Idarek. He's gonna piss a lot of people off in a bit.

Comments are love!
Chapter 44

Andra strode out onto the docks, grinning broadly when she saw the frankly covetous look in her uncle’s eye.

“Patruus, I stole her fair and square. You can fight me for her after I deal with the Collectors.”

Saren snorted, amused. “I heard you’re planning on stealing my pilot, too.”

“Of course. And Dr Chakwas, and Pressley, Jenkins, Williams, and Alenko. I’ll take whoever else was sent.” She cocked a brow as she saw Mordin bustling through the crowd. He didn’t slow as he passed, just marched onto the Defiant. She shrugged, then turned back to Saren. “I’m taking Nihlus and Garrus. Mordin Solus, too. And a new batarian. Let me know when I can tap Aria to get Cerberus back on board.”

Saren shot a last, longing glance at the Defiant, then turned back to the Normandy, waving for the crew to begin bringing the supplies over.

“Don’t put anything in the hold. I’m keeping Cerberus in there. There are smaller cargo areas above it. It’ll be cramped, but we’re only going to the Citadel,” she called, heading off to Afterlife to meet with Aria.

—

Shepard dropped herself across from Aria, helping herself to a canape from the tray and waiting while Aria finished her call. She met Grizz’s glare with a fond grin, then ostentatiously ignored him. When Aria finished, she pulled up a few programs on her omnitool, consulting with Grizz and another guard. Shepard didn’t fidget. She knew Aria was trying to put her in line.

“So. Your Spectre has arrived, and I’m guessing you’re here to try and liberate Cerberus.”

Shepard barked a laugh. “Hardly. I want them thrown in my hold so I can threaten to chuck them out the airlock, then leave them to the Alliance’s tender mercies.” She shrugged, swallowing another canape. “Or leave them in yours, but I do think a few will roll on the Illusive Man if facing actual authorities.”

Aria let a small smile slip. “Oh?” She considered Andra for a few moments, then nodded. “Very well. I expect to be gifted his head before year’s end.”

Andra considered. “Might take me a bit longer. By your birthday, at the latest.”

Aria laughed and waved her off, ordering several of the guards to take Cerberus to the docks.

She rose to leave, pausing at the top of the stairs. “Oh, another present, to make up for the delay.”

She handed over a datapad. “Once the gangs finished with Archangel, they were going to come for you.”

She strolled out as Aria berated her people, shaking her head. Hardly the best way to keep loyalty.

—
“Commander. I think you're gonna have to fight your uncle to keep the ship,” Joker called from the cockpit.

She veered off, meeting the pilot with a grin and a half hug.

“Joker. Damn, I’ve missed you. So, have you met the ship yet?”

He nodded, hands moving over the console. “Oh, yeah. This baby has everything. I think I’m in love.”

Andra rolled her eyes. “EDI?”

EDI activates a pawn by Joker’s elbow and Andra hid a grin as he jumped.

“EDI, this is Joker, your new pilot. Joker, EDI here runs the ship systems, and will be your gunner in combat.”

“Hello, Flight Lieutenant Moreau. Your records are impeccable.”

Joker glared at the pawn. “Commander, I thought you stripped her of all of Cerberus’s cancer.”

Andra hid a grin. “EDI is based on an Alliance program, and has no ties to Cerberus anymore.”

“Yeah, but still. A combat VI that Cerberus controlled?”

“I am not a virtual intelligence, Joker. I am a fully developed artificial intelligence. Commander Shepard removed the shackles Cerberus placed on me, and I have scrubbed my systems of any lingering control they might have.”

Shepard studied Joker. “She does good work, from what I can see. If there’s an issue, let me know. I’m going to go deal with Cerberus’s people.”

Garrus and Nihlus joined her in the elevator as she made her way down to the hall that overlooked the hold.

Looking down at the crew given to her by the Illusive Man, she briefly wondered if any of them had been coerced. She turned to Nihlus to ask him to check. He nodded and started up his omni-tool, then shook his head. By all accounts, they had all joined Cerberus willingly. She took a breath and opened the comm channel to the hold itself.

“Welcome back. There are two lessons that my father ensured I learned as a child, and I think, in the interest of education, that I pass these lessons along to you.” She saw Miranda activate her omni-tool and allowed herself a small smile. Continuing, she said, “The first of these is ‘if there is a discrepancy between what you say and what you do, people will believe what you do’. Now, I have encountered people claiming to be Cerberus in the past. They tortured people, killed people, and in general proved to be the kinds of individuals that shouldn’t be representing humanity. But you tell me that all of those were ‘rogue cells’. The fact that there were more than one ‘rogue cell’ implies that either you’re crap at keeping your people in line, or that they were only ‘rogue’ because they were caught.

“The second is ‘there are always consequences for your actions’. Every one of you is an agent or operative for the terrorist organization known as Cerberus. By definition, this makes all of you complicit in Cerberus’s actions and brands all of you as terrorists yourselves. Now, here’s the consequence. I do not work with terrorists. I do not negotiate with terrorists. All of you will remain locked in the hold until we reach the Citadel, at which point you will be handed over to the Citadel...
Security and the Council for trial and whatever punishment they deem appropriate. All communications have been blocked. Once I leave here, no one on this ship will listen to you. The AI known as EDI has been unshackled, and can and will flush the hold at her discretion.”

Miranda’s head flew up at that, then she started typing more furiously at her omni-tool. “Any attempt to escape or arrange an attack on Alliance or Hierarchy personnel will result in all your deaths.”

So saying, she ended the transmission and walked back to the elevator. Once inside, she sagged against Garrus’s side. “Am I doing the right thing? Some of them were probably lied to, or didn’t realize how bad Cerberus was until it was too late to back out.”

Garrus wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “You’re spending too much time with humans.”

She lightly slapped his arm, “Not what I meant. If I keep ties to Cerberus, it’ll be easier to take them out later. Plus, I can spend lots of their money dealing with the Collectors.”

“You could. But none of the other races would believe it, and would cripple humanity’s status in the galaxy,” Nihlus replied.

“True. Alright.” She forced herself to straighten up. “Get everyone together. I want to make sure everyone’s on the same page.”

—

She leaned against the counter in the galley, watching the crew file in and settle down. It was an even mix of human and turian, but she planned on mixing it up when she hit the Citadel. Once everyone had found a place, she nodded.

“Right. All of you know my reputation. It’s… mostly true.”

Joker laughed. “That’s an understatement.”

She glared at him. “Anyway. First part of this mission is taking the Cerberus operatives in the hold to the Citadel. Any of you want to leave then, I’ll authorize it.”

She waved down the murmurs from the crew. “I’m planning on hitting the Collector base, through the Omega 4 relay.”

She watched as the muttering grew louder at that. As the commotion died down, she continued. “As I said, anyone wants out at the Citadel, I’ll authorize it. And I’ll make sure there’s no flak, either. I won’t lie. It’s a suicide run. I’ll do what I can to minimize the dangers, but that doesn’t mean much. We have no idea what’s on the other side of the relay.” She studied the crew. “Don’t make any decision now. You’ve got until we reach the Citadel.”

She dismissed them and headed up to the CIC. Once the departure was arranged, she headed up to her quarters. She wasn’t surprised to see Garrus and Nihlus waiting for her.

“Alright. Let’s have this out now.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Sorry not sorry for the little cliffhanger there, 2. Shepard manages to be the master
of understatement, 3, the SR2 is prettier than the SR1, fite me.

Comments are love!
Andra dropped on the sofa facing Nihlus and Garrus. “So. You two look happy.”

“Andra…” Nihlus began, reaching out for her hand. Slowly, she reached out to take it. “You are the cornerstone of this. Garrus and I…”

“Nothing was happening,” Garrus cut in. “We were just…” he trailed off, looking lost.

Andra sighed. “Right. This isn’t really going to go anywhere, is it? Either one of us needs to get better at this whole ‘emotion’ and ‘interpersonal’ shit, or we need to bring in someone who is. Like Alenko. He’s good at this.”

Garrus snorted, standing up and clapping his hand on her shoulder as he passed. “No thanks. Two Spectres is enough. Three might give me a complex.”

“Wait, what?” she demanded, glaring at Nihlus for an explanation.

“Shortly after Dr Gaines was made human Councilor, several more human Spectres were named, Lieutenant Alenko and Gunnery Chief Williams among them. It’s part of why I couldn’t stay on the Citadel.”

“Huh. So, the asari don’t have a seat anymore, humans are in the Spectres… any other major surprises?”

“Did you hear how the asari lost their seat?” Nihlus asked, a slow grin crossing his face.

“No any details. But based on your tone, I’m going to love it.” She flopped over on the sofa, propping her head on the palms of her hands as she kicked her feet up behind her.

Nihlus snorted. “A Prothean archive appeared in the middle of the Presidium one night. It had a plaque, claiming that it had been excavated on Thessia before the asari ever reached the first mass relay. When some scientists approached it, they found it had a fully functional VI. It had apparently been keeping the asari in the technological lead, as well as informing anyone who asked about the Reapers, and a weapon to stop them. Sparatus, Valern, and Gaines voted Tevos out, after the VI claimed that Tevos had spoken to it years ago about the Reapers. Benezia’s likely the asari councilor now.”

He popped his back, continuing, “Asari still have a seat, technically. The council is just refusing to confirm a new asari councilor until the Spectre investigation is completed. I believe Jondam Bau is heading that.” He hummed in thought. “Although, since the archive was previously on Thessia, inside a statue inside a temple, it does raise several questions as to how it got to the Presidium.”

Andra grinned. “I bet I know. Ralon Quarn. I asked him to dig into some stuff about the Reapers before… before.”

“Wait. Your underworld contact is Ralon Quarn?” Nihlus asked, surprised.

She nodded. “He was in my year at bootcamp.”
Nihlus blinked. “I don’t know why I’m surprised, honestly. The pair of you are very alike.”

He rose and made his way to the door. “We’ll claim the office, and I’ll check over the armory, see what you need.”

The door hissed open, as Garrus studied the empty fish tank. He sighed. “I didn’t finish Spectre training.”

Andra cocked an eyebrow at him, slowly sitting up. Nihlus froze, letting the door hiss closed behind him. “Because you washed out, or because of me?”

“You.”

“Oh, Lokaal…”

He shrugged, awkwardly. “Saren didn’t blame me, said I might be able to finish it. But I was talking to your dad, too.”

She laughed when she saw where he was headed. “Politics? You? I guess I missed a lot, then.”

He shrugged again, embarrassment tinging his subvocals. “Well, with you and Nihlus doing the Spectre thing, someone should be watching your asses.”

She nodded, seeing the logic. “Fair enough.”

“It wasn’t just politics. Did some information brokering. Found out some stuff that I need to tell you, when you have time to deal with it.” He gave a lopsided grin.

Andra nodded, deciding to leave it until later. “So, why Omega?”

Garrus sighed, dropping onto the sofa next to her. “It didn’t remind either of us of you.”

Andra rose and started pacing. “You know I didn’t go willingly. You said the shuttle was compromised?”

Nihlus snorted behind her. “Tevos. She ordered a Spectre, Tela Vasir, to damage the shuttle. You were supposed to crash into the Citadel, but you made that side trip to Thooft. No idea how Cerberus got you, though.”

Garrus sighed, scrubbing his hand along the back of his neck. “I know who, I just don’t know why.”

Andra studied him. “It’ll hurt, won’t it?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “Right. Keep poking at it, and tell me after I get those Cerberus assholes off my ship and deal with the ramifications of spending a couple of years dead. Unless we run into the responsible party before, in which case, tell me while they’re still in punching range.”

Nihlus laughed as Garrus relaxed. “Alright. I’ll check on the main gun. I think I know someone who can get us some upgrades…” Garrus mused as he headed out to the elevator.

“You are not spending the whole trip calibrating my gun!” Andra called, laughing as she heard Nihlus echo the sentiment in the hall.
She spent the rest of the trip arranging for CSEC to deal with Cerberus, planning meetings with her father, Admiral Hackett, and the Council concerning the Collector attacks and the information the VI had on the upcoming Reaper attack, and approving transfers for the handful of her crew who didn’t want to chance a suicide run. She studied the crew roster after the departures were marked, hissing in annoyance. She could crew the Defiant with the crew she had, but it would be tight. She’d have to look into recruiting a few more off-the-wall types.

She sent a message to Rolan, thanking him for kicking the Council into action and fully expecting him to deny any knowledge of what she was talking about, when her omnitool pinged a message. She ignored it, and the next dozen pings, deciding to check on the crew and ship now that the Defiant was underway, and headed down to make her rounds of the crew.

Garrus was easy to find, poking around the main gun like a man in love. She left him to it, knowing he would be able to make it dance in combat. Dr Chakwas was surprisingly not in the med bay. Andra shrugged, deciding to check the engines next.

The engine crew was very obviously out of their depth. The Tantulus drive core on the Normandy was one thing, but Cerberus’s interpretation stymied them. She left them to it, recognizing all of them as soldiers who had put in for transfer. Need to find a new engine crew....

Shaking her head, she made her way up to the labs, wanting to see how Mordin was settling in. She found him, bent over a datapad with Dr Chakwas, apparently deep in discussion over the information contained therein.

“Ah, Commander,” Dr Chakwas said, spotting her. “We needed to discuss this with you.”

Arching an eyebrow, Andra approached the duo. “Should I be worried?”

“Possibly. Cerberus relied too heavily on medigel. Resistance forming. Should supplement antibiotics and steroids for now,” Mordin informed her, not looking up from the datapad.

She sighed, resting a hip on the desk. “Goody. How long will medigel be an issue? And does the genetic modification from when I was a kid alter that?”

Mordin looked up at that. “Genetic modification?”

“So I could process dextro food, and not get roasted by Palaven’s sun.”

Mordin hummed, considering. “Need to research this. Have sample from operation.” He pattered off, pulling out some equipment as Dr Chakwas and Andra shared a look.

“I think we should take our leave,” Dr Chakwas murmured.

“I’ll catch up to you in the med bay.”

She left, heading toward the armory and Nihlus. He was stripping an assault rifle when she walked in.

“I’ll give them some credit, they actually managed to get some decent armament,” he said, not looking up.

Andra chuckled at that, moving to stand across from him. “Anything you want at the Citadel?”

“Yeah, I’ve already sent in the list. Spectre requisitions will get them filled. And I’m chasing down a rumor of an improved armor plating, trying to see if they’ll let us test it out.”
“So, anything else you’re planning on doing to my ship?” she asked, eyes dancing in amusement.

He looked up, offended, and she laughed as he scowled at her. “Go off with you.”

He waved a hand at her, dismissively, and turned back to the rifle. She left the armory, still laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Have the confrontation! Also, some minor medical drama. And an update on some missing friends!

(I have wanted to post this since Tuesday, btw)

Comments are love! Poke at my tumblr: p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com
She finished her rounds, heading back to her quarters to finish clearing out her inbox. It was several hours to the Citadel, and she wanted to get a jump on some of the paperwork. She glanced over at the corner occupied by EDI, sighing.

“Can you sort through everything in my inbox, marking whatever’s important?”

“Certainly, Commander. I’ve marked some messages that appear to be important to your current mission.”

Andra sighed, opening the first message.

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Andra Shepard
From: Urdnot Wrex
Subject: Need a favor

Shepard,

Some dumbass is making trouble for the krogan people. Calls himself Warlord Okeer. If he’s really a warlord, I’m a pyjack. Anyway, he’s making a stink and killing people. I’ve got my hands full here, and you’re about the only person out there I trust to handle him. Bastard is set up on Korlus. Think you can either get him to see sense or put a few rounds in his thick skull for me?

-Wrex

Her brow furrowed as she read the message and pulled up the dossiers the Illusive Man had given her. Well, shit. She studied the information Cerberus had on Okeer and sent a reply to Wrex telling him she’d handle it.

“Commander? This Warlord Okeer appears to be a benefit to your mission. It might be in your best interest to recruit him.”

She was shaking her head before EDI finished. “No. I trust Wrex. If he says Okeer needs to be put down, he needs to go down. And, the Illusive Man wanted me to recruit him. All I see are reasons not to trust him.”

She opened the next message as she ran Okeer through the Spectre database.

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Andra Shepard
From: Rolan
Subject: I think I have some information that might interest you

My dearest Spectre,

The galaxy has been dimmed since you left, and yet the light returns with the knowledge that you yet live!
Hy heart is alight with your imminent return to me. Alas, I fear a close alliance between us would ignite the heavens and anger your garvansaag. And much as I adore you, dearest heart, I am rather more attached to my relationship with my internal organs. Spineless of me, I admit, but here we are. But, in my stead, I have several associates whom I trust you would find useful. I trust you will remember Zaeed Massani, Keiji Okuda, and Kasumi Goto, and I am absolutely delighted to introduce my newest associate, Jack. They would love nothing more than to assist you on your mission, if you will but accept this poor gift.

I await your reply with a trembling heart.

-RQ

She laughed, sending her thanks and pulling up whatever files she could find. She wasn’t too surprised to learn that Ralon had broken Jack out of prison, considering the others in the group.

She sorted out her intel, sending copies of the messages and dossiers to Nihlus and Garrus for their opinions when EDI signaled another message.

Extranet message:
To: Spectre Andra Shepard
From: Councilor Benezia
Subject: Some information for you, Spectre.

Saren has informed this Council of your goals. While we will not be able to officially endorse your course, we will be able to provide some support. For my part, I have taken the liberty of acquiring an asari Justicar. She is a formidable opponent and will lay down her life to further your goals, if it should prove necessary. I understand that Nihlus Kryik is in your crew, and has encountered this Justicar before. I have ensured that she will have no quarrel with any in your crew, should you wish to make use of her.

-Councilor Benezia

She stared at the message, stunned. *Nihlus pissed off a Justicar?*

She copied the message to an OSD, rising to head back to the armory. Nihlus had moved on to a sniper rifle, while Garrus cleaned a pistol opposite him. They looked up when she walked in.

“Miss me already?” Nihlus asked, mandibles flaring in a teasing grin.

“Not quite. How in oblivion did you piss off an asari Justicar?”

He coughed, embarrassed. “It’s a long story. How did you know about her?”

She slid the OSD across the table, picking up a shotgun and starting to break it down. “Depending on your recommendation, Spectre, I might bring her. I’ve got a few more that Ralon suggested, a couple thieves, a merc, a biotic, but I want to talk to them before agreeing. And Wrex wants us to handle a pain in his ass. Since the Illusive Man wanted me to recruit said pain in the ass, I’m going to follow Wrex’s request and shoot him.”

“Sounds good to me. Wrex is, and I can’t believe I’m saying this about a krogan, sensible,” Garrus added, scanning the dossier on his omnitool.

Andra hummed in agreement. “There are a few others the Illusive Man wanted me to get. You, Mordin, Tali. There’s a drell assassin, too. I want to talk to him, see how he fits before I make a decision. Maybe take some of the Cerberus crowd on sufferance, shoot them out the airlock if they piss me off. We’re going to lose almost all the engine staff, and a few other support people.”
“Wonder why he wanted us and Tali,” Garrus mused.

“Manipulation, most likely. Cerberus can’t be all that bad, they’re asking her to recruit nonhumans,” Nihlus muttered, pulling a stuck firing pin free with a scowl. “And the people he picked would most likely be likely to follow where she lead.”

“You are good at that part, Lokaal,” Garrus said with a grin. “I was looking at some of the engine crew that Cerberus gave you. It looks like they only signed on to Cerberus a few months before they were given to you, and I can’t see that they were involved with anything else. I’ll dig a bit deeper, but some of them might just be trying to work with Commander Shepard, and Cerberus was a means.”

“Just don’t ask me to trust them. I plan on putting Tali and Adams in the engine, any of the Cerberus lot can answer to them.”

“There might be more than a few, Commander,” EDI chimed in, pawn activating in the corner of the room. “Miranda has stated that she will pass along some information on the Illusive Man in exchange for a favor.”

Andra snorted, setting the reassembled shotgun to the side. “Doubt her intel would be good. She was his lapdog, she won’t pass along anything useful. But, on the very slim chance I’m wrong, ask for her favor, and get whatever info she passes along. Garrus, you want to play with Cerberus’s network and check up on it?”

“Sure, I was looking forward to a vicious headache today.” He set the pistol aside, rising with a groan. “I’ll set up in that office, EDI. Just let me know when she talks.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm doing pretty good on this, got six completed chapters, and 15 planned out or started. I also hear back Friday as to weather or not I got the second job I applied for, so here's hoping (I need money).

And a discussion on Reddit of all places kicked up an idea for a Harry Potter fanfic, so I'll be poking at that, too.

As always, comments are love, and feel free to poke at me on Tumblr!
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard stopped as she stepped off the shuttle, turning to Nihlus.

“When did they add security here? Do they think the Reapers are going to wait through a security check?”

His subvocals hummed in amusement as he led her through. “It makes the civilians think something is being done.”

She shook her head, waiting as the turian at the counter scanned her. The turian looked up, surprised. “Um. There seems to be an issue. You’re listed as… dead.”

Andra sighed. “Long story.”

Nihlus brushed a finger along the back of her arm and she stopped as he took a step forward. “She’s with me. Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

“Oh, of course.” She scanned them through and Andra glared at Nihlus as they entered the ward. “Thought you quit.”

“Technically. But Saren kept my status. Kept yours, too. Officially, we’ve just been on a long vacation.”

“Huh.”

She considered that as they hailed a cab to the presidium. The presidium itself hadn’t changed much, though the scar left by the Mako’s arrival had been reworked. Andra smiled to herself when she saw the riot of flowers across from the relay. Williheirax would love those. She straightened, eyes narrowing as she caught sight of a familiar form moving through the flowerbeds.

“Remind me to go annoy my uncle’s gardener before we leave,” she told Nihlus, jerking her chin in the direction of the turian.

Nihlus shook his head, leading the way into the Council’s private meeting room. Shepard followed, taking a moment to study the dynamics before she was put in the spotlight. Sparatus looked like he always did, a thin veneer of calm painted over a simmering well of irritation. Valern seemed more relaxed than the last few times Shepard had encountered him. She supposed that Tevos had been keeping him wound up. Benezia was standing at the window, her back to the door. And Dr Gaines was scowling at Sparatus, arms crossed as she tapped her foot.

“You might believe that this is the appropriate response, Sparatus, but your timing is atrocious. Replacing you now would weaken the whole Council, and given what that damned VI is saying, we can not afford any distractions.”

Shepard met Nihlus’s glance at that, but he shook his head slowly. He was just as confused as she was. She shrugged, clearing her throat as she stepped further into the room.

“Councilors. You wished to see us?”
“Ah, Shepard, Kryik. Yes,” Sparatus began, turning to face them. Andra noticed he seemed tense, like he was expecting something. “Firstly, we wished to thank you both for the capture of a Cerberus cell.”

“That was all Shepard. I only got involved at the end,” Nihlus pointed out.

Sparatus glared at him. “Indeed. And we understand that you are intending to continue the mission Cerberus wanted you for?”

“The Collectors are abducting human colonies. They need to be stopped. I can lead a team to hit their base and stop them, and possibly free the taken colonists.” Andra shrugged. “I’m still a Spectre, Councilor. I’ll do it with or without your support, but if I have it, I’ll keep you in the loop.”

He nodded, mandibles flashing in a quick grin. “Very well.”

“You’ll have the support of the Council, Spectres,” Dr Gaines said, sending a warning look to Sparatus.

Andra nodded, catching Sparatus’s eye while Nihlus and the other councilors discussed support, armament, and the assorted goodies the turians wanted for the Defiant. She left them to it, walking to the far side of the room, Sparatus at her side.

“In my years representing the turians on the Council, I have never made any serious misstep, Shepard. Until you.”

She looked up, surprised. “You were cautious, sure, but you were doing what you thought was best. And were probably being played by Tevos.”

Sparatus shook his head. “No. I knew she was corrupt. I did nothing to try to remove her or mitigate her actions. Your promotion to Spectre was insulting to your skills, and the assignment in the Traverse was a slap to the face. We, I, chose to ignore the reports you and Nihlus were sending in. And in light of this archive, I can no longer ignore the facts. I have failed my people and my position. I will remove myself from this position, and ensure that someone with Palaven’s best interests is promoted.”

Andra studied him, then turned her attention to the buzzing skycars that darted past the window. “You were, by all reports, an amazing ambassador. And there’s no shame in going back to that. The humans will think so, but humans don’t really understand turian ways. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you failed. You had to make the best judgment for the whole galaxy, not just one Spectre.”

He hummed, standing beside her to watch the skycars. “I’m planning on suggesting Antoria.”

Andra laughed softly, dropping her head to rest on the barrier. “Of course you are.” She sighed, raising her head. “She’d be a good choice. I wonder how long it would take Valern to abdicate in favor of some female, too.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, the faint conversation in the background providing a comforting counterpoint, when Andra sighed. “I take it you want me to explain your decision to Dr Gaines, given that I’m straddling that boundary?”

“If you would.”

She sent him a half-hearted glare. “Why am I playing diplomat to the Council, anyway?”
“Because you have a unique gift for encouraging cooperation, Spectre.”

She shook her head, joining Nihlus and checking over the planning that had been agreed on. She figured Garrus would be pleased with the canon upgrades, and she was thrilled with the armor upgrades suggested. Once they seemed to be wrapping things up, she gestured to Dr Gaines and returned to the window.

She scrubbed a hand over her face, grumbling to herself. “Okay, so, from a turian perspective, Sparatus was in the wrong two years ago. They’ve probably been calling for his removal for a while now. As far as Palaven is concerned, him stepping away to be a diplomat again isn’t a smack. Not really. It shows that he recognizes his weaknesses and will put someone better in the role.”

Dr Gaines studied her. “He asked you to say something.”

Andra shrugged. “I’m one of the few people who straddle that line. I see both sides of that.”

“Well. That will make things interesting.”

She nodded and took her leave, Nihlus following behind. “That was interesting. Who is Sparatus expecting to replace him?”

“Monah.”

Nihlus looked surprised. “Well. That will make things interesting.”

“Yeah. Especially if I mess up and call her ‘Mom’ in a session.”

He laughed as her omnitool signaled an incoming message. She answered, unsurprised to see Captain Anderson on the screen.

“Shepard. I want you to take a look at this archive when you’ve got a moment.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll meet you there. Anything interesting so far?”

He laughed. “Not particularly, but I still want your insight. The damn VI occasionally only answers in what we think is Prothean.”

“And I can understand it. Alright. I’ll be right there.”

Hey! Sorry this is a bit late, I had a bit of inspiration for a new project, and then an old one decided to live again (What the Cat Dragged In is the new one, and the sequel to Shenanigans Ensue is the other. That one isn't being posted until I finish it)

So, have some politics and paperwork, and the return of Saren's gardener!

Comments are love! Come poke at my Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/p1ratew3nch
(Also, fanart is awesome and appreciated, if anyone was wondering)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andra approached the cordon around the archive, and was waved through by the bored-looking turian at the entrance. Nihlus lounged against the partition, watching, but content to stay on the sidelines. She walked past the partition, watching as the scientists and technicians bustled around the massive archive. The VI was active, being interviewed by a small cluster of salarians. It resembled the orbs she had seen on Ilos, albeit without the damage that the recording and Vigil had shown.

“We’ve gotten the Prothean battle plans, what they did that worked, what didn’t. There’s also a schematic in the archive on Mars, some weapon that could stop them. We have techs looking for it now. The Crucible.” Anderson sounded pleased, and Andra couldn’t blame him.

Ralon’s gift proved that everything they’d told the Council since Eden Prime was true, and was forcing the galaxy to work toward stopping the Reapers. She shuddered at what would have happened if they hadn’t known about this archive in time. She stepped closer to the VI, intending to listen in.

“So, what’s this ‘Crucible’ supposed to do?” she asked when the VI flickered, along with the archive itself. She froze.

The orb rushed at her, seeming to study her while the scientists gathered and took notes.

“What’s it doing?” Anderson demanded, while the tech shrugged helplessly.

The orb flickered again, and stabilized into a form that she recognized as a Prothean. “You are an anomaly. I recognize you as Prothean, yet you have the appearance of a human.”

She raised an eyebrow at it. “I’m Commander Shepard. Two years ago, a Prothean beacon downloaded into my head, as was the racial memories of the Prothean people. What are you?”

“I am called Vendetta, an advanced virtual construct of Pashek Vran, overseer of the project you refer to as ‘Crucible’. He died fighting the Reapers in the Battle of Tranbir Nine. Your time to build it is short.”

“What’s it saying?” one of the scientists asked, and Andra sighed.

“It’s name is Vendetta. It’s a construct based on the overseer of the Crucible project.” She waited while the scientists and techs finished gasping and muttering. “Shit happened dealing with Soverign, and I can understand Prothean now.” Turning back to the VI, she asked, “Can you help us build the Crucible?”

“I can. Once the construction is completed, I will download myself into it and provide the final calculations.”

She passed that along and fled back to Anderson and Nihlus. Nihlus was studying her, wary.

She cocked an eyebrow at him and he shook his head. “Later.”

They followed Anderson to the human embassy, Andra acutely aware of Nihlus’s gaze on her the
whole way. She wondered what he’d seen that had him on edge. Whatever it had been, Anderson hadn’t noticed it, nor had the clustered scientists and techs. Of course, turians noticed more detail than humans, usually.

As the door hissed closed behind them, Anderson sighed. “I know that lot would kill to keep you around, but you’re just about the only one who could go after the Collectors.”

She nodded. “I’m planning on leaving the Defiant here for a week or so, get some upgrades installed, pick up some new crew that were recommended to me. I’ll have my current set see what information they can kick up, and I’m free to take any minor issues until the upgrades are done.”

“Good. I’ll let you know what they come up with, but you can go take care of your ship and crew for now.” He shook his head, amused. “You know everyone’s going to call her ‘Normandy’, right?”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. Saren dubbed the SR1 ‘Vengeance’, so you can use those to describe which one you’re talking about.”

She looked down as her omnitool pinged a message. “And that’s the Justicar I need to talk to.”

She saluted, leaving with Nihlus at her back.

“Your eyes glowed.” Nihlus said abruptly, once they were settled in the skycar. “When the VI talked to you, your eyes glowed.”

“Really? Crap. I’ll add that to the list of ‘inexplicable shit I need to look into’. Which will have to fit in among the whole ‘defeat the Collectors’ and ‘stop the Reapers’ shit.”

Nihlus shot her a sidelong look. “Everyone is piling everything on you, aren’t they?” he asked softly.

“Unfortunately.” Andra turned her attention to the window. “Here’s hoping I can actually pull it all off.”

“How can we help?”

That startled a laugh out of her. “Fuck, Nihlus. I don’t know.” She sighed. “I need to find the full list of shit Cerberus did to me, find whatever strengths and weaknesses they implanted. I need to figure out how to get a crew through the Omega 4 relay. I need to see if the people that are joining up will work well for this mission. I need to fill the crew vacancies. I want to find how Cerberus got ahold of me in the first place. And I need to poke at the Hegemony for Idarek, probably handle some fires on behalf of the Alliance, and whatever the Council decides to waste my time on. And probably shut down Cerberus along the way.”

“Why bother? They’re insignificant.”

“Not anymore. According to one of the logs I found shortly after I woke up, they dumped at least four billion credits on bringing me back to scratch. Probably more.”

“That…” his mandibles worked as he considered that. “We need to get better information on them. Latest says they’re barely holding together, but if they can spend that kind of money…”

“It gets better. Apparently, they went over budget with no comment.” She sighed. “I know Garrus is dipping a toe into information brokering, and I think Idarek is an agent of the Shadow Broker. I’ll talk to them, and Ralon, see what they can dig up. And I need to get to Korlus and take out a
krogan warlord for Wrex, might as well do that while the Defiant is being prettied up.”

“You aren’t going alone.”

“To face down a krogan? Fuck no. I’m planning on taking Idarek and one of Ralon’s people. Speaking of…” she gestured to the dock, where five people were clustered around, obviously waiting for something.

Nihlus parked the skycar, leaning against the frame while Andra approached the group. He nodded a greeting to Tali, unsurprised when she split off to stand beside him.

“So, how have you been, Spectre?” she asked, taking up a place next to him.

He laughed. “A lot better, now,” he replied, watching Andra address the prospective new crew.

Tali studied him, then turned her attention to Andra. “It is good to have her back, isn’t it?”

He shot her a fond glare at her tone. “Get on the ship, missy, and get acquainted with the new engine. You know you have a place here.”

She left, laughter tinkling after her as he approached Andra.

“Right. Nihlus, this is Zaeed Massani, a merc and decent front-line fighter,” Andra gestured to the older, scarred human leaning against a crate. “Keiji Okuda and Kasumi Goto, thieves,” gesturing to a well-dressed pair. “I think Jondam Bau is looking for them, but I need them for now.”

“Once this is over, all bets are off, but I can keep quiet for now,” he assured them.

“Good. And this is Jack, biotic,” Andra finished, introducing a heavily tattooed, bald woman.

Jack sneered. “I’m just here to kill shit, not make friends.” She stalked onto the ship, Zaeed following behind.

Andra sighed. “Well, I need to make a quick side trip, and the Defiant needs some work done. So, it’ll be about a week before we set out. You can stay on the ship, or make your own arrangements. Nihlus, I need a shuttle.”

He nodded, stepping to the side to make arrangements as Andra led the thieves aboard. By the time the shuttle arrived, she was back, the tattooed biotic and the batarian in tow.

“Nihlus, I want you to oversee the upgrades. And please get her a new coat of paint. The Cerberus logo offends me. We’ll go deal with Okeer and be back by the time she’s ready. Oh, and ask Tali if there’s anything she can think to add.”

She waved merrily and boarded the shuttle while Nihlus bit down on the urge to call her back. He’d only just gotten her back, and she was leaving again. He shook off the despair and turned to the ship. They did need a shuttle pilot, and more engine crew. He could make some of this easier for her, at least.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so life/medical crap/etc are kicking my butt right now, so I’m going to take a small
hiatus. I will be back to updating... at some point. I'm sorry.

Comments are love, and I'll be back when I can.
Shepard settled in behind the controls of the shuttle, hearing Jack and Idarek settling in the jump seats behind her. She studied the controls, forcing herself to take a deep breath. *The shuttle’s clean. No one could know you were going to take this one.* She shoved down the flashes of alarms and fire and pulled the shuttle clear of the Citadel.

“A friend of mine wants me to take out this krogan. Cerberus wanted me to recruit him. I trust my friend better, so the plan is to go in to this compound, take out the krogan, and maybe take out everyone else. Any questions?”

Jack scoffed, turning her back on the pair, while Idarek seemed to consider her words.

“What krogan?”

Shepard glanced over her shoulder. “Name’s Okeer. Calls himself a warlord.”

Idarek hummed, pulling up his omnitool. “Geneticist. Lots of sanctions, lots of bodies. Your friend is probably right.”

Shepard considered that. “You any good at the information stuff?”

Idarek scoffed. “I’m a fairly successful information broker, yes.”

“Then why did you try to hire me in a firefight?” she asked, glaring over her shoulder.

“I knew you would be there.” He leaned back, eyes closed. “Why?”

She shrugged. “Information is useful. Information I don’t have to pay the Shadow Broker for is even better.”

Jack snorted. “Figured you’d want to know how Cerberus got their claws in you.”

“Garrus knows, and I have a guess. But, if I’m right, there’s going to be some emotional fallout, and we don’t have time for that.”

“Anyway, while you’re exchanging info, I want some. Everything you have or can find on Cerberus,” Jack cut in.

Shepard shot her a considering look. “Want a media specialist to broadcast the juicier bits? Because I’m all in favor of making them bleed right now.” Jack laughed, incredulous, as Shepard continued. “Yeah, when we get back, I’ll give you everything EDI has, and everything I’ve managed to dig up over the years. And if you manage to find where The Illusive Man is hiding himself, you can tag along while I deal with him. Unfortunately, I already promised his head to Aria, but you can put a few rounds in him, if you want.”

“Wow. What did they do to piss you off? Ralon was talking like you were queen of the Girl Scouts or something.”

“Tryed to kill me as a baby, tried to kill my family. I’d make them bleed for those alone, but I’ve seen a fair amount of what their ‘rogue cells’ did. The galaxy would be a better place with them
Jack sent her a considering look while Idarek fiddled with his omnitool. They traveled the rest of the way to Korlus in silence.

—

The compound was a mud pit, with deteriorating buildings and haphazardly stacked crates. A voice over the intercom, human, female, was berating some group they couldn’t see. Shepard took cover behind a stack of crates and addressed Jack and Idarek.

“So, we’re here to take out Okeer, but I want to know what he’s doing with this group. Save any data you find.”

She led them into the compound, taking out some mercs, Blue Suns by the armor, in an observation post. She was pleased to note that Jack was a very powerful biotic, but decided to hold her full evaluation until after the mission was done. Just because she was powerful didn’t mean she had the stamina. Idarek continued to prove himself a competent close-range fighter.

They continued deeper, slowing as they heard someone whimpering in pain.

“Shit. Shit! It won’t stop bleeding…”

Shepard raised an eyebrow, looking around the corner to see a Blue Suns merc clinging to a pile of crates. He was bleeding, but it looked like a minor injury from here.

“It doesn’t look that bad,” Idarek commented softly as they approached.

Shepard shrugged. “He doesn’t need to know that.”

She approached the merc, assault rifle by her side as Jack and Idarek flanked her.

He glared at them. “I knew it wasn’t berserkers. Not at range. You’re mercs. Or Alliance. I’m not… I’m not telling you anything.”

Shepard cocked an eyebrow. “Well, you don’t seem to be in a position to negotiate. So, here’s what will happen. You tell me about the setup here, and I’ll give you this dose of medigel. Of course, if you try lying to me, I’ll shoot you in the gut and leave you to bleed out. Fair?”

He stared up at her, pale. “Yes, ma’am. All I know is Jadore wanted an army of krogan, and the old krogan in the labs sends out his rejects for live fire training. That’s all I know, honest!”

Shepard considered this. “Fair enough. If you head out now, you might find a nice shady spot before you bleed out.”

She headed deeper into the compound, grinning at the muttered “Bitch,” behind her.

“Well, I think I know what that crazy-ass turian sees in you now,” Jack said, laughing.

Idarek coughed. “Which one?”

Shepard shot them both an exasperated look before raising her rifle and taking care of the mercs that had just rounded the corner. “You can crack jokes when we’re done here. Eyes front, and let’s get to the lab.”

_They work well together. Good. I need a decent biotic, now that Kaidan isn’t available, and I’d_
rather not rely on the asari.

She was shaken out of her musings when a heavily armored krogan approached her. She held her ground, wary, but not threatening.

“You… are different. New. You don’t smell like this world. Seven night cycles, and I have felt only the need to kill. But you… something makes me speak.”

A week old, and already fully grown? What in oblivion is Okeer doing?

Idarek slowly lowered his pistol. “They must breed them full-size, ready to kill. Not much improvement over regular mercs if they need training.”

The krogan seemed to consider that. “Bred… to kill. No. I kill because my blood and bone tell me to. But it’s not why I was flushed from glass mother. Survival is what I hear in my head. Against the enemy that threatens all my kind. But I failed even before waking. That is what the voice in the water said. That is why I wait here.”

Shepard nodded. Cloned, but not perfectly, whatever that means to Okeer. This is just Virmire all over again. No wonder Wrex wants it shut down.

“Can you show me the laboratory? I need to speak with Okeer.”

“The… glass mother. She is up. Past the broken parts. Behind many of you fleshy things. I will show you.” He marched to a debris wall, easily lifting what looked like a piece of ship’s siding and tossing it aside. “You fleshy things are slow when big things are in your way.”

Shepard saluted, heading through the gap. “I don’t suppose you’d be coming with us.”

“No. I must wait.”

Shepard nodded again, heading down the scree.

“Why didn’t you push? A krogan would be useful,” Idarek demanded.

Shepard snorted. “You ever try to get a krogan to do something he doesn’t want to do? I’d rather deal with the mercs alone. Come on.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! ish.

I'm still at a wall with the place I left off. I'm hoping poking at something else for a bit will kick story loose.

Health is... well, I got over what I had, and promptly caught something else. So that's not helping.

Anyway, updates will be sporadic for a bit, for which I apologize, but there will be some more updates going on.
Comments are love, and come poke at my tumblr! Here!
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nihlus ducked under a section of cladding, shaking his head. The new armor plating, and new gun, were being installed with all speed, and Andra would be pleased at the new paint job, but it was a hassle while it was ongoing. Tali, at least, was having an easier time of it, having successfully stolen Chief Engineer Adams from whatever assignment he’d been transferred to, along with two up-and-coming engineers, Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels. And her shielding upgrades are quiet, at least.

He sighed. He was fairly sure that the pair would have ended with Cerberus given a bit more time, but Tali insisted and EDI promised to keep an eye on them. We could weaponize Tali’s ability to manipulate people, he mused, dodging another group of workers and reaching the safety of the main docks. Granted, I think Saren or Andra taught her the worst of it.

He leaned against the railing next to Garrus, watching the ship. She looked naked, with half of her cladding off. But the techs were good, Nihlus knew. He was paying them extra, off the books, and they were eager to have her ready to go swiftly.

“Nihlus. I was hoping to see you first,” a familiar voice spoke behind them.

Nihlus froze. Oh, he remembered her, and the week of dodging through the woods with barely enough food for a day. Damn, she was tenacious.

“Justicar. Commander Shepard said you’d be coming,” he said evenly, slowly turning to face her.

Garrus turned his head to watch, browplate cocked in amusement.

The asari laughed quietly. “I’m sure she did. I’m also sure she informed you that I have no further need to hunt you.”

Nihlus snorted. “She left that part out, actually. But, if you don’t have an issue working with me, I can keep the past in the past. Welcome aboard.”

He stepped aside, clearing a section of railing for her as she settled in next to him. Garrus hadn’t moved immediately, and Nihlus enjoyed the brief closeness. Samara watched them out of the corner of her eye, but turned her attention back to the crews around the Defiant.

“It has been some time since I traveled with a group. I look forward to the companionship.”

They stood in silence for a while, watching the ships in the background arrive and depart.

“There is another your commander might wish to recruit to her cause.”

Garrus laughed. “We won’t say yes or no until Shepard gets back, but sure. Tell us about them.”

“I recently encountered a drell assassin on Illium. He is quite skilled, and I believe he is looking to spread some good in the world now.”

Garrus and Nihlus exchanged a look. “Wonder if it’s the same drell Cerberus was looking for,” Garrus murmured.
“Drell assassin could be useful, but this is Shepard’s crew. And she’s out doing a favor for a friend.”

Samara nodded, turning her attention back to the ship. “I know how to contact him, should she wish to speak with him.”

—

Andra squeezed her eyes shut, taking a deep breath. Spirits, she hated heights. She forced her eyes open and herself forward, up the ramp. Jack and Idarek didn’t seem to notice her hesitation, or if they did, they didn’t comment. She shoved the fear down, leading them further up the haphazard arrangement of rusting catwalks and ancient bunkers.

The Blue Suns were hardly worth the trouble they were causing, accomplishing nothing but slowing them down as Jadore screamed at them over the loudspeakers.

“And I wish that bitch would shut up already,” Jack snarled after the newest burst of vitriol.

Shepard chuckled softly. “You want to claim the killshot? We’re probably going to have to take her out in order to leave, and I haven’t heard any reason to keep her around.”

Jack shot her a feral grin as they paused outside yet another door.

Shepard scanned the door, nodding. “Looks like this is the place. Get ready.” She checked her rifle, then opened the door.

Okeer was standing next to a tank holding what appeared to be a sleeping krogan, his back to them. Shepard held up her hand, eyes narrowing. He had to know they were there.

She took a step forward, Jack and Idarek covering her back, as Okeer spoke.

“It’s about time. The batteries on these tanks will not wait while you play with these idiotic mercs.”

_That’s right. Cerberus wanted me to recruit him._ “You don’t seem too surprised we made it this far.”

He half turned to watch her out of the corner of his eye. “I’m sure whoever sent you doesn’t want me dead. No one looks for me without a motive. Certainly not the deceased Shepard.”

She nodded agreeably. “I’m sure that’s held true in the past. Unfortunately, I was asked to see you by a friend of mine. Urdnot Wrex.”

She had the brief satisfaction of seeing the expression of absolute shock cross his face.

“No, no!” Okeer fell to his knees, arms outstretched. “Kill me if you must, but this, my prototype… it must survive. It is my life—”

“You really talk too much.” She raised her rifle, shooting him in the head.

As Okeer’s body fell, gas started being pumped into the room. Shepard sighed.

“Right. Now, to deal with the bitch with the loudspeaker. Idarek?”

“There’s a room down there, lots of tanks like this one. A female human waving her arms.”
“Sounds like Jadore. Let’s move, kids.”
Shepard headed across the lab, Jack bouncing along behind like an eager puppy, Idarek tailing.
“I don’t think he’s dead, Commander.”
Shepard shrugged. “He’s not. But it’ll slow him down enough for us to deal with Jadore.”

“How did a cowardly bitch like that run a show like this?” Jack demanded as they headed back up to the lab.

“Probably by shooting several unarmed and unsuspecting people, and yelling a lot,” Idarek commented.

They entered the lab, guns ready as they heard Okeer’s voice. Shepard relaxed when she saw the screen. Okeer had apparently left a message before succumbing to his wounds and the poison. She studied the tank, and the krogan inside as Okeer’s final words played on loop.

“I acquired the knowledge to create one pure soldier. With that, I will inflict upon the genophage the greatest insult an enemy can suffer. To be ignored. This one…” his gaze shifted to the tank.
“This is my legacy. He is pure, perfect. Everything is in my prototype. My legacy is pure. This… one solder, this grunt. Perfect.”

Andra nodded. “Right. I want him. Idarek, get the shuttle here, I’ll figure out how to load him up.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I beat the cold I had, and then developed bronchitis. And my desktop is slowly dying, and my hours were cut at work, and life is generally crappy. Come poke at my blog, I’ve got commissions open here!

Comments are love! I did turn off anonymous comments, though, because someone was abusing them. They might get turned back on later. Maybe.
Nihlus grinned when he got the ping from Shepard. She’d be back well before the fixes were complete, but she’d be back, and with them, within a few hours. He shrugged off her cryptic comment about a “big package” she was bringing. She’d probably found someone while dealing with Wrex’s problem and was bringing them in. It didn’t matter. She would be here.

Garrus watched him pace, shaking his head and turning his attention back to the OSD Anderson had handed him. It was a fairly dry report of another dig on Eden Prime that he wanted Andra’s opinion on. He knew that Nihlus was going to be insufferable until Andra actually docked. He’d been like that when he’d gotten shot, back on Omega, and pointing it out wouldn’t accomplish anything except winding him up more.

They had settled in Nihlus’s small apartment in the wards, having been booted from the Defiant’s dock by Tali. Apparently, they were intimidating the workers. At least, Nihlus was. Garrus had gone with him in the hopes of keeping an eye on him. Nihlus had gotten a bit tense since Andra’s ping came in.

“She’s fine. She would have said if she’d been hurt,” Garrus said mildly.

Nihlus snarled, then sighed, shoulders dropping. “I know. But to barely get her back and have her leave…”

“She’s been gone less than a day. And Idarek can hold his own, and Zaeed says Jack is a very strong biotic, probably a match for an asari. And Andra can hold her own.”

Nihlus dropped onto the couch with a frustrated groan. “I know. But what’s this ‘package’ she’s bringing? Surely not the krogan Wrex wanted her to deal with?”

Garrus shifted until he was leaning against the older turian. “Wrex wants him dead. Probably some other krogan. Or a weapon.”

Nihlus rested his chin on Garrus’s head. “Hmmm. Well, we’ll find out when she gets here. What did Anderson want?”

“They found more Prothean artifacts on Eden Prime. He’d like Andra to look at them.”

Nihlus scowled. “Her eyes glowed at the archive.”

“None of it seemed to hurt her, before.”

“I know. But still.”

Garrus laughed. “She can also kick your ass, Spectre. She’ll say something if it gets to be too much.”

Nihlus shrugged. “Will she, though? Two years is a long time, and Cerberus isn’t gentle…”

Garrus surged to his feet. “She hasn’t changed. You know that. Cerberus could never make her bend.”
“Break, maybe. You’re right. But…” he sighed. “You’re right. She hasn’t changed. I’m…”

Garrus cupped his mandibles, resting his forehead against Nihlus’s. “She’ll be back. And once the Defiant’s upgrades are done, we’ll follow her on a suicide trip to the Collector homeworld. And then we’ll fight Reapers, when they show up.”

Nihlus glared up at him, but didn’t pull away. “You are horrible at cheering people up, you do know that, right?”

“Garrus is a pessimist. It’s part of his charm.” They both looked over at Shepard’s response. “Spirits know he doesn’t have much else going for him”

Garrus grinned over at her. “And yet, here I am with two of the highest-regarded Spectres in the galaxy. Explain that.”

“Temporary insanity on my part, peer pressure on Nihlus’s.” She flopped onto the couch with a groan, shifting until her head was settled on Nihlus’s thigh. “Right. I have a ‘genetically pure’ krogan in a tank in storage on the Defiant. I want to wake him up sooner, rather than later.”

She cocked an eyebrow at the twin incredulous looks aimed down at her. “What? He could be useful. And if he’s more trouble than he’s worth, well, wouldn’t be the first krogan I’ve had to kill. I’ll wait until the Defiant is out of drydock, and I’ll space him if needed.”

Garrus shook his head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. Here.” He shoved the OSD at her.

“Anderson wants you to stop by Eden Prime and look into some new Prothean artifacts.”

“Goody,” she said dryly, scanning the OSD. “Right, so I need to get inside a Collector ship to figure out how they get through Omega 4, check out Eden Prime, shoot the son of a bitch who runs Cerberus and tear his empire to shreds, and fix the Hegemony. Anything else?” she draped an arm over her eyes.

“Mordin has heard that a former student of his is missing, last seen in the company of Blood Pack mercenaries. The Justicar arrived, and has heard of a drell assassin that might be useful. And Saren’s heard of a Cerberus facility that recently went dark, he thinks we should check it out.”

She bared her teeth, then sighed. “Fine. I’ll go figure out the ETA on the Defiant’s repairs and we’ll get this figured out.”

“You have some replacement crew already. They know it’s a suicide run, but they want to come. Tali’s terrorizing your engine crew, and I believe Admiral Hackett sent you an aide.”

“Oh, goody. I need an extra set of hands.” She rose, groaning softly as she popped her back. “I’m gonna go check on all of that, and probably pass out in the captain’s cabin.” She pressed a quick kiss to Nihlus’s mandible, and another to Garrus. “You know, when all this shit is dealt with, I’m running away to some secluded tropical island where I never have to wear pants.”

“We’re invited to this pantsless paradise, right?” Garrus laughed, amusement tinging his subvocals.

Andra winked at him. “Depends entirely on how much booze you bring with you. And how good it is.”

Nihlus rose as the door closed behind her. “Someone should keep an eye on her.”

Garrus followed, poking at his omnitool. “Considering she’s exhausted, absolutely.” In answer to Nihlus’s questioning glance, he went on, “The ‘never have to wear pants’ bit. I don’t think she’s
slept for more than an hour or two since she woke up with Cerberus.”

“Damn.” Nihlus thought back over the past several weeks and swore. “You’re right. How can we help?”

Garrus shrugged. “No idea. I’ll talk to Dr Chakwas and Mordin, see if they have ideas.”

They caught up to Andra at the docks. She was arguing with the turian in charge of the upgrade installation, who shook his head and walked back to the ship as they approached.

She huffed out a breath through her nose, glaring at his retreating back. “Another day, and we should be able to leave. Should. No guarantee.” She sighed, shoulders slumping. “I hate this. The Collectors won’t stop on their own.”

Garrus rested his hand in between her shoulders. “Go pass out in your cabin. Nihlus and I will see what we can do to speed it up.”

“Yeah, fine.” She stalked toward the ship as Nihlus shot Garrus a considering glance.

“How much did you pay him?”

Garrus feigned innocence. “Nothing. I did mention that she was exhausted and needed to sleep before we left. You were paying enough to buy the time.”

Nihlus hummed. “She’ll skin you when she finds out. I’ll go check on her. Make sure we’re clear to leave first thing.”

“Of course.” Garrus watched him go, then sought out the foreman.

Chapter End Notes

Not dead! Mostly.

Writing is going slowly, and I only have two buffer chapters after this, so I'll vanish for a while after this again. I'm trying to work on a Skyrim thing and a Harry Potter thing, which are also slogging (yay, cog fog!).

Comments are love, come poke at my blogs: p1ratew3nch.tumblr.com and insertsandimagines.tumblr.com

And I'm gonna try to write a chapter today.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nihlus paused outside the cabin doors, listening. Andra was pacing and muttering under her breath and he sighed. Garrus was right, then. And he could guess why she wasn’t sleeping, too. Shaking his head, he knocked, then slid the door open without waiting for a response.

“Shepard.”

“Shepard. I was just figuring out how to do all this shit.” She turned back to the small console on her desk.

Nihlus hummed softly, moving behind her and resting his hands on her shoulders. He leaned forward. “Andra. You’re exhausted. Sleep. I can handle this for a bit,” he murmured in her ear.

She stiffened. “I…”

Slowly, he spun her seat around until she faced him. “EDI, lower the lights, fifty percent.” The lights dimmed. “Talk to me, Lokaal. Here and now, there is just us. No judgment. What’s wrong?”

She sighed, her head dropping forward to rest against his stomach. “I keep living it. The alarms, the explosion. Falling. And then waking up, with strangers bickering over me, like I was a side of meat at market. Then… when I was really awake, someone had reprogramed the security mechs. I had no armor, an unfamiliar gun, and I was on a Cerberus base.” She was trembling as she spoke. “When I’m fighting, moving, I’m me. But when I have time to think…”

“Lokaal.” He brushed his mouthplates over her hair. “Would it be better if I stayed?”

She reached up, grabbing his arm. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.” She pulled back to meet his gaze. “Stay anyway? I think I’m…” She sighed, rising to her feet. “I’m going to take a shower. I’ve got some plans set up on the monitor, and you can copy them to an OSD to tweak them.”

He stepped back as she entered the cramped head, claiming her chair to transfer her plans to an OSD. He waited, while he listened to the domestic sounds out of the head, water running and splashing against, he guesses, her. He let his eyes slip closed, enjoying the memories of her, the smell of her soap drifting under the door.

“EDI? Don’t let anyone but Garrus up here until 0530, and contact me if there are any issues.”

“Yes, Spectre.”

He scanned her plans, then set the OSD aside and stripped off his armor. Wordlessly, he opened the door, leaning against the frame as Andra turned to face him. She studied him, then smirked.

“Well, come in already. You’re letting the heat out.”

He grinned in reply, stepping forward as the door hissed closed behind him.

—

Andra propped herself up on her elbow, looking down on Nihlus. He was still asleep, but that hadn’t stopped him from briefly tightening his arm around her waist. She smiled, fondly, then
glanced at the clock. It was 0500, and she needed to clear the Defiant’s departure with the dockmaster. She sighed and pressed a kiss to Nihlus’s temple.

“You do have five more minutes,” he muttered, pulling her against his keel without opening his eyes.

She hummed in agreement, relaxing in his hold then pushing herself up again. “I do, but somehow, I get the impression that this won’t stay at just five minutes.”

She laughed as a grin spread across his face, emerald eyes glittering in mischief. “I’m sure no one will miss you for another hour or two,” he purred.

She swatted him with her pillow, crawling out of the bed and digging clean underwear out of her closet. “And here I thought you were supposed to be the good influence.”

“Well, I was left alone with Garrus for two years. After that long, he starts to sound reasonable.” He lay back against the headboard, watching her get dressed. “I’ll check on the supplies while you get us cleared.”

Andra’s response was slightly muffled as she tugged a shirt on. “Great, thanks. Are we bringing the Justicar?”

“She’s settling in the Starboard observation room. She’s willing to vouch for the drell assassin, and will leave with no complaint if you want her gone.”

“Right. I’ll swing by on my way to the dockmaster, get a feel for her.” She paused by the door. “Thanks for staying. It did help.”

Nihlus nodded and stretched. “I’ll talk to Garrus, but we might rotate between the office on the crew deck and up here. You do have the better setup, after all.”

“If you’re going to do that, source a bigger bed. Preferably before we leave. I love you, but neither of you are really built for cuddling.”

She waved over her shoulder as she left, leaving Nihlus alone in the cabin. She leaned against the wall of the elevator, pondering her options.

“Hey, EDI? Is Samara up yet?”

A brief pause, then EDI answered, “She is, and hopes to meet you in the mess. The crew mostly stayed ashore last night, and there is a table free.”

Andra nodded.

She exited the elevator and swung around toward the galley. It was strange, having most of the crew on shore leave, but she grabbed a pair of energy bars and a mug of coffee before seeking out the asari. She was in the small secluded section between the supports, eating what looked like fried eggs and sausage. Andra nodded politely before claiming the seat opposite and settling in with her energy bars. She was dressed fairly conservatively for an asari, in skin-tight red armor with a plunging neckline. Andra sighed mentally. She was sure the matriarch was well aware of the target she painted, and likely could counteract it, but it still offended her military upbringing.

She met Samara’s mild gaze with one of her own, waiting for the asari to break the silence.

“Commander. If I had known you would be awake this early, I would have prepared enough for
Shepard shrugged it off, unwrapping the second bar. “No worries. We’ll have someone in the galley once we set out, and I’ll grab something more substantial later. So, Nihlus says you’re good, and you aren’t gunning for him anymore. Will working with him be an issue?”

Samara shook her head, taking a sip from her own mug. “No. That issue is long past, and is unlikely to return.”

“Good. I also heard that there’s a drell assassin you’re willing to vouch for.” She slid the OSD she’d loaded with Cerberus’s notes across the table. “Is that him?”

Samara studied the dossier carefully. “Yes. Though I am unsure of why Cerberus would be vouching for him.”

“Alright. I’ve got a few more urgent issues to handle, then we’ll head to Illium to collect him.”

She drained her coffee and headed toward the elevator, sending out notices to her crew to prepare to depart ASAP. She was aware of Samara’s gaze on her back until she rounded the corner and shivered once she was clear. She wasn’t going to turn down a second biotic, but she wished it wasn’t an asari.

Once on the docks, she was met with the dockmaster and the head of the upgrade team. Both seemed eager to have her leave as soon as was feasible, and she promised herself she’d poke at Garrus and Nihlus until she’d figured out the size of the bribe they’d offered. Once the paperwork was all signed and the last of her crew had boarded, Andra punched in the coordinates for Eden Prime.

Chapter End Notes

Still not dead!

Also, this is about as smutty as this story is going to get (I don’t write smut, sorry)

Comments are love, and feel free to poke at my [Tumblr](http://example.com)!
Andra walked through the ship, getting a feel for how her crew moved through the space, finally stopping by the armory. Nihlus was leaning against the weapon bench scanning an OSD, but he looked up at her approach.

“Hey. I’m going to go wake up that krogan. Toss me a pistol.”

He cocked a browplate at her. “Alone?”

She shrugged. “Why not? If he’s violent, EDI will let you know, and if he’s not, a crowd will give the wrong impression.”

Nihlus shook his head, but opened the cabinet to pull out a pistol. “I’ll wait in the hall.”

Andra laughed. “Figured.”

She holstered the pistol and walked with Nihlus to the elevator. She leaned against the wall as the doors hissed closed and sighed. “Should probably give Gar a heads up, too.”

“Garrus is currently in the port cargo room, examining the stasis tank,” EDI announced primly as the doors hissed open.

Andra nodded and strode out, waving as Garrus approached.

“You’re really going to do this, aren’t you?”

Andra laughed as she slid past him into the cargo hold. “Of course. And you two will charge in the second something looks off. So, let’s do this.” She tried not to tense up as the door hissed closed behind her.

She faced the tank, scanning the readouts as she considered her next move. *Let’s get this over with.*

Sighing, she triggered the release, bracing herself as she was slammed against the bulkhead. She glared at the krogan as he studied her.

“Human. Female. Before you die, I need a name.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I’m Commander Shepard.”

He shook his head. “Not your name. Mine. I am trained, I know things, but the tank… Okeer couldn’t implant connection. His words are hollow.” His eyes unfocused as he thought. “Warlord, legacy, grunt… grunt. ‘Grunt’ was among the last. It has no meaning. It’ll do.” His gaze snapped to hers. “I am Grunt. If you are worthy of your command, prove your strength and try to destroy me.”

She snorted a laugh. “I’ve got bigger problems than you to deal with, pyjak. But I have a good ship and a strong clan. You’d make it stronger.”

He met her gaze for a long minute, then snorted. “If you’re weak and choose weak enemies, I’ll have to kill you.”
“I’m glad you saw reason.”

She tapped his stomach with the barrel of her pistol and he laughed. “Ha! Offer one hand, but arm the other.”

He released her and she nodded. “Tends to work better than blindly charging in. If you want other quarters, I’ll set you up.”

“This is fine.” He stalked over to the window and she left, Nihlus and Garrus falling in beside her.

—

Joker spun the chair around when he heard her approach. “You collect stray cats as a kid? Because we really needed a mega-krogan, so thanks for dragging him home.”

Andra laughed, dropping into the co-pilot’s seat. “Sikari, actually. The occasional lanura with a hurt wing. Didn’t see my first cat in person until I was twenty-two and knee-deep in N7 training.” She ignored his pointed look, studying the displays. “I want to swing by Tuchanka when we finish up on Eden Prime, have Wrex take a look at him. Just in case.”

“Aye, Commander.” Joker watched her leave then pulled up the extranet. He’d never heard of a sikari before, but figured it’d explain the Commander a bit more.

—

She made her way back to the mess, deciding to talk to Ralon’s crew now that things were calmer. They had claimed the larger table, and Mordin and Samara had joined them. Zaeed looked over at her approach.

“So, you have a goddamn krogan you know nothing about in your cargo hold. What made you think that was a good idea?” Zaeed snarled once she walked into the mess.

She shrugged, pulling up a chair. “We’re planning on hitting the Collector homeworld. I don’t know about you, but I like having sufficient firepower in a situation like that.”

Keiji snorted. “A fair point. I’d prefer someone large and armored between me and them.”

Zaeed glared at the thief as Kasumi laughed. “Just because you can’t shoot a goddamn thresher maw five feet in front of you…”

“I don’t need him to be a good shot. I do need his tech skills. And I’m counting on those who can fight to protect the squishy ones.”

She looked up as Joker spoke over the intercom.

“Why the hell did you bring home six-foot tall murderbeasts? I mean, it explains… like… everything about you, actually. Never mind.” Shepard laughed as Joker shut off the intercom.

“Murderbeasts?” Samara asked, studying Andra.

She shrugged. “Sikari. There was a pack near home, on Palaven. When I was younger, I’d feed them and bring them home.” She shot a glare at the battery as Garrus roared with laughter. “They were cold, and I was five,” she snapped defensively. “Anyway. We’ll be on Eden Prime for a while, depending on what the Alliance wants, what they found, and if anyone can find a decent starting place for the Collectors.”
“Good. Wanted to test seeker swarm protections made by Alliance.”

Andra shot Mordin a look. “I thought that was squared away.”

Mordin shrugged, rising. “My version is. Don’t know about theirs. Scientists prone to experimentation, change. Need to ensure no detrimental changes made.”

She watched him leave, then sighed. “I can’t tell if he was insulting humans, stating a fact, or insulting scientists in general.” Andra rose, shaking her head. “Whatever. We’ll be at Eden Prime in around an hour. Let me know if there are any rooming issues.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so I have one more complete chapter after this, and then I'm still writing stuff. So there will likely be a hiatus for a few more months while I figure out where we go from here.

Comments are love, and feel free to poke at me on Tumblr! Hear about all the other half-cocked plans I have cooking.
Andra approached the dig site, Garrus and Nihlus flanking her. The assorted techs didn’t seem to pay any attention to her arrival, for which she was grateful. She really didn’t want a repeat of the Thessian beacon. So, they wandered, following the layout of the encampment, as Andra poked at the artifacts laid out. Most didn’t echo in her brain the way the beacons had, but she marked the ones that did.

“Ah, Commander! Sorry, we had just managed to translate some of the data when you arrived.” The head scientist bustled towards them, dodging the artifacts and interns as he approached. “I’m Zan Hawker,” he offered a hand, shaking Andra’s with enthusiasm. “This way to the main artifact.”

He led them toward the main facility, Andra and the turians following, amused.

“It’s not a beacon, is it? I tend to have… adverse effects around them.”

Zan laughed. “Oh, no, no. Nothing like that. It’s… well, I want to see what you make of it, first.”

“I feel like I should be worried,” Andra said, laughing.

“Doubtful. It’s just….” He sighed, turning to face her. “It’s a small question, nature versus nurture.”

She narrowed her eyes, but kept her face neutral. “You knew Elizabeth.”

Zan nodded, holding a door open. “I did. She was my superior on Shanxi. Although, given the beacon, I doubt you and she would have similar reactions to the artifact.”

“And what is the nature of the artifact?” Nihlus asked, stepping closer to Andra. She leaned back slightly, bumping against his keel.

“Well, we’re not completely sure. We were hoping that Commander Shepard’s connection to the beacon would allow her to interpret some data we’ve found. I have some hopes, but our computers are unable to process the information clearly.”

“So you want her to study static.” Garrus’s subvocals thrummed with amusement.

“Something like that, yes.” He stopped in front of a computer station, waving Andra closer.

She sighed internally, stepping forward to study the screen. Zan queued up what looked like static and her eyes narrowed. She took a step closer, eyes roving over the screen. She saw Reapers laying waste to a city as soldiers guided civilians to cyro pods, similar to the ones she’d seen on Ilos. The soldiers were Prothian, and she cocked her head as a civilian addressed one of the soldiers.

“I never thought our empire would fall.”

“It won’t,” the soldier snapped. “We will sleep here until the Reapers return to dark space. Then we will rise, a million strong.”

“For the Empire.” The civilian saluted, and the soldier returned it.
“For the Empire. Get to your stasis pod.” The soldier watched the civilian leave, then barked, “Victory, broadcast the stasis readiness signal to all lifepods.”

A VI, appearing superficially like a prothian, flickered into existence beside the soldier. “And the refugees who have yet to reach the bunker?”

The soldier paused, and Andra could see he was steeling himself. “Their sacrifice will be honored in the coming empire.”

He grabbed his weapon as an explosion tore through a nearby hall, and Collectors swarmed through the smoke as the playback ended.

Andra straightened, staring ahead as she tried to process what she saw. The Collectors were around fifty thousand years ago? And apparently fighting for the Reapers? Her mind flashed with an image of the husks, both from Temple Palaven and Eden Prime, and she shook her head to clear it. She’d have to discuss this revelation with her crew, first.

“There’s another one, isn’t there?” she asked, not looking away.

“Indeed there is. We’ve been keeping it in a separate building for security reasons. But you saw something, didn’t you?”

She nodded slowly. “And unfortunately for you, what I saw makes this Spectre business. I’ll need to see the second data set you have, and the artifact.”

Zan sighed. “I was hoping that wouldn’t be the case, but I’ll trust your judgment. And I hope you will offer an explanation once everything settles down?”

“Once this is settled, yes.”

Zan sighed again, shaking his head as he led them out of the building and along a deck. Andra met the turians’ worried looks and signed “later”. She was fairly sure the second data set would provide answers, and probably more questions.

“I am glad you’ll be taking the artifact, if I’m honest. We were approached by Elizabeth’s old flame to acquire it. He claimed that he wanted it to remember her by, but, well… I was there when she offered her child to aliens rather than chance him getting ahold of her. You.” He shot her a look, then continued. “Elizabeth was an excellent judge of character. She said that she wouldn’t have trusted a dead dog to Jack Harper’s care, and I’ll rely on that.”

“I’m surprised. I wouldn’t think that a disgraced mercenary would have any interest in Prothian artifacts,” Nihlus mused.

Zan stopped, turning to face the turian. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Zan gaped for a few seconds. “I thought everyone knew,” he muttered under his breath. Meeting Nihlus’s eyes, he went on. “Jack Harper is the Illusive Man.”

Chapter End Notes
Hi! I'm not dead! I just ran into a wall on this sequence, but I fixed it! I'm going to be mixing some things up in the upcoming chapters, and things are going to be fun.

Comments are love! Come poke at my Tumblr!
Saren growled in frustration as he crawled out of bed. Wiliheirax rolled toward him with a small snort. The nightmares were getting worse, and more frequent. He stalked to his cramped kitchenette, pouring himself a glass of water.

It had started simply enough, after Ilos. Reliving the explosion on the consulate, Cerberus holding the knife poised over Andra’s helpless form, the assorted close calls and near misses that left their marks on his record and hide. But lately….

He slammed the glass onto the counter. Lately, he’d been reliving Andra’s death. Over and over, night after night. He growled again, leaving the kitchenette. He hated taking them, but he doubted he’d get any sleep without the help of sedatives.

He stood in the bathroom, staring at the small bottle Wiliheirax had brought. He stiffened a bit at the soft sound behind him, sighing as familiar arms wrapped around his waist.

“I know you haven’t been sleeping, Lokaal. Take them. You’re no spirit, and I need you here.”

Saren leaned back against Wiliheirax’s keel. “That’s cheating.”

Wiliheirax laughed softly. “I’m right, and you know it. Shut off for a few hours. The galaxy will continue to spin without you for a bit.”

Saren turned his head, nuzzling into Wiliheirax’s neck. “Fine. You win.”

He pulled away, grabbing the pills and swallowing them down before he could change his mind. Wiliheirax nodded, content.

“Come back to bed, Lokaal,” Wiliheirax said around a yawn.

Saren stroked a hand along Wiliheirax’s mandible. “I’ll read over some of the Council’s reports for a bit.”

“And fall asleep on the couch,” Wiliheirax laughed. “Fine. Go make plans for your plans. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Saren watched him go, a fond expression crossing his face. Once the bedroom door was closed, he scrubbed a hand over his face. He felt wound up, and Wiliheirax didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of his frustration.

*Spirits alone know why he stays with me,* he mused, settling on the couch in the main room. He pulled up the most recent report on Cerberus on his omni-tool, idly studying the reports of a facility going dark. He could feel the drugs taking hold and considered joining Wiliheirax.

*No. Let him sleep,* he decided, switching to a record of Andra’s prisoners. He was asleep before the record loaded.

Saren woke slowly, groggy from the sedatives. He sat up slowly, smiling softly at the blanket that
fell and draped around his hips. His omni-tool was still active and he scanned it, grinning wider when he saw the note from Wiliheirax.

“Sorry to leave you, but some idiots decided that the Council chamber needed to be replanted immediately. Since some other idiot set one of the trees on fire, I can’t blame them. I would have woken you, but you needed the sleep more. Meet up at that cafe for lunch?”

He sent off a quick agreement, then frowned as another note appeared.

Saren scowled at the glitch-filled screen, then sighed. He’d run some scans, see what was wrong. He’d gotten a few of these glitches, though, and the scans never turned up anything.

“Must be losing my mind,” he muttered, pulling an energy bar from the cupboard.

He sent a message to Antoria, informing her that he’d look into the Cerberus facility while he ate.

He scowled as another glitched message came through.

He glared at the screen for a moment before moving to delete it. He stopped, talon hovering over the dismissal as he peered at the screen, browplates furrowing. He enlarged the message, eyes narrowing as he recognized a word in the midst of the glitching.

Help.

He ran a scan, trying to clear the message, then pulled up the first. Again, he could just make out the word “Help”. Saren bared his teeth, excitement stirring in his veins as he sent a copy of the glitched messages to an OSD.

He’d accumulated several hundred in the last few years, and now he could see the patterns, he set out to decipher them all.

Several hours later, he pulled himself away, rubbing at dry eyes. He wanted to continue deciphering the messages, but Wiliheirax was waiting. He swept up the OSD and headed to their usual cafe on the presidium. He wanted to see if Wiliheirax could see the patterns he saw.
Or if he’ll tell me I’ve finally lost what is left of my mind, he thought wryly as the skycar came into a landing.

Their usual cafe wasn’t a popular locale, given that the owner liked hiring quarians over any of the races that called the Citadel home.

Wiliheirax had claimed their usual table, leaving the seat with the view of the whole cafe open for him. Saren smiled fondly. *What did I do to deserve him?* He slid into his seat, nodding as the waitress brought his drink right over.

“So, I want to know if I’m losing my mind,” Saren began as the quarian moved out of earshot.

Wiliheirax laughed. “You have been as long as I’ve known you. Faster now that you’ve been following your niece.”

Saren kicked him lightly under the table. “I’m serious. You know those weird glitchy messages I’ve been getting?” Wiliheirax hummed agreement. “I think there’s more to them. Look at this one.”

He pulled up the most recent one, handing Wiliheirax the OSD. He watched, sipping his chava as Wiliheirax froze, pulling the OSD closer.

“What?”

Saren shrugged. “I only realized what they were saying this morning.”

Wiliheirax sat back, eyes unfocusing as he considered. “Now, this might be stupid, but…. You pulled that prosthetic off of a geth unit, right?”

“On Ilos, yeah. They damaged the one I had.”

“What if there’s still a geth in your arm?”

Saren froze. “That’s- futar. I need to check something.”

Wiliheirax held out a hand as Saren rose. “Be honest, Lokaal. You’ve had that thing for two years now. You can rush off to handle it after you’ve actually eaten something.” He arched a browplate as Saren opened his mouth to argue. “Ration bars and energy bars don’t count.”

Saren closed his mouth, fighting back a grin. “Fine. I do owe you lunch for putting up with me.”

Wiliheirax laughed. “You owe me far more than one lunch for that.”

Saren forced himself to relax as Wiliheirax went off on a recounting of his misadventures this morning. He was right. It had waited two years, an hour or so longer couldn’t hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Behold! The long-awaited arrival of Saren's Gardener! (If you forgot about him, go re-read chapter 10)

And yes, I do know I ended on a cliffhanger. There’s another chapter before that gets
resolved.

Futar= fuck

Strictly speaking, this chapter actually takes place around a month or so ago, while Andra was kicking around Omega. But I am writing this whole thing by the seat of my pants, so deal. Or hit the back button.

I plan on posting the next chapter on Friday, so it'll be a double posting week.

Comments are love! My username over on Tumblr is the same as here, if you want to yell in private.

Also! this is my first time playing with zalgo text, so let me know if I messed it up.
Kaidan stood at attention as the human Councilor studied him and Ashley.

“So. Your former commander, Shepard, dropped quite a load on the Alliance, and they have asked the Council for some help.” She scanned an OSD. “It would seem that one of the Cerberus operatives she handed over is willing to share several details if we do a favor for her.” Her eyes were steel as she met Kaidan’s gaze. “I do not trust her. At all. But, any information to take out the Illusive Man is worth it. The pair of you are to handle her ‘favor’. I would prefer it if she remains in custody, but if you need to take her with you, I’ll authorize it.”

Kaidan saluted and left the office, Ashley following closely behind.

“So, what do you think? Genuine remorse kicked up by the Commander, or just trying to get her claws back into her?”

Kaidan shook his head. “We won’t know until we talk to her.”

Ashley glared at him, then sighed. “I suppose. Tell you what, you go talk to her, and I’ll see if Shepard’s current collection of oddities has anything useful.”

Kaidan snorted. “Go for it. Her file said she has a sister, Oriana, and a father, Henry.”

“How do you know that? We don’t have the file.”

Kaidan gave her a placid grin. “Dr. Gaines was flipping through it. I learned how to read backwards and upside-down. Seemed useful.”

Ash grinned back at him. “Sneaky bastard. Right, have fun. I’ll meet you later.”

“Ward docks. There’s a ship waiting, courtesy of the Council. Salarian pilot, crew is a mixed bag, ship’s the Ingenuity.”

“Right.” Ashley peeled off, omni-tool lighting up as she hailed the Defiant.

Kaidan squared his shoulders and made the trek to the holding cells where Miranda was waiting.

Ashley ducked into a small alcove for privacy and sent out a call on a hailing frequency.

“Well, well, well! Spectre Williams, making the effort to talk to little ol’ me!”

“Can it, Joker. I’m working.” She rolled her eyes, grinning at Joker’s tone.

“Sure thing. What can I do for you?”

“Has Shepard picked up anyone who does intel work?”

Joker laughed, incredulous. “Seriously? That’s your big thing?”
“Joker….”

“Right, fine, yeah. Hang on a sec, jeez. No sense of humor any more. Who do you need info on?”

“Miranda Lawson and her family.”

“Really? I thought Shepard dropped her off at the Citadel to rot. Huh. Yeah, we can get you some info. It’ll take a bit, but I’ll send it once I’ve got it.”

“Thanks Joker.” She thumbed off the comm, resting her head against the wall for a moment. She knew this was important, but it almost felt like the Council was holding them back.

“Do the job, Williams,” she muttered, shoving off the wall and making her way to the docks. She wanted to claim the good cabin before Alenko made it there.

—

Kaidan studied the woman through the glass, taking his time. She was beautiful, he couldn’t deny that. But he got the impression that that same beauty had a core of steel. She was smart, had to be. The Illusive Man would hardly trust an idiot to control Shepard. So, the airheaded bimbo act the guards warned him about were just that, an act.

He pulled up his omni-tool when he got a ping from Ash.

“What’s up?”

“Shepard’s new people are good. I’ve got some records of her search history, and I managed to get in touch with Oriana.”

Kaidan’s brow rose. “Oh yeah?”

Ash hummed confirmation. “Yeah. Turns out, Shepard picked up a batari on Omega who has an information network large enough to challenge the Shadow Broker. Oriana got in touch with him, because she found her biological father was working for Cerberus. I only just got the files, but it looks bad. And he’s apparently the Illusive Man’s favorite minion now.”

Kaidan nodded. “Alright. I’m about to talk to Miranda, so I’ll see what she knows about this.”

He opened the door, apparently engrossed in his OSD as he sat in the chair opposite.

“So. You claim that you’ll tell us everything you know about the Illusive Man if we do something for you.” Miranda nodded, sending a doe-eyed look his way. “Right. And what is it that you want?”

“My sister. She-”

“Oriana Lawson, is it? Nineteen, adopted by one Bailey and Laura Dale as an infant, sought out her bio family shortly after her eighteenth birthday.”

Miranda had frozen when he began talking, but paled when he mentioned biologic family.

Frantically, she sat forward, the low-grade flirt gone from her face. “Please, you have to help her. She doesn’t know what he’s capable of. Please.”

Kaidan consulted the pad again. “‘He’ being Henry Lawson? Our records indicate he’s also in the employ of the Illusive Man.”
Miranda stared, slack-jawed. “No. No, he left. The Illusive man helped me get Ori out and he left.”

Kaidan nodded, rising from the table. “Well, Henry Lawson is working for the Illusive Man again. So, perhaps, your information isn’t as good as you think it is.”

He turned to the door, turning back as Miranda cried, “wait!”

“Yes?”

“I- you- I know how he thinks, I know the systems. I can get you into Cerberus facilities. Please, just take me with you. Oriana- she doesn’t know what he’s like, what he’s really like. I need her to be safe.”

Kaidan arched a brow at her. “And you think we’ll trust you after a pretty speech? I’ve seen what you and yours did to the Commander. Frankly, I’d rather leave you here.” He sighed. “But, orders are orders. You’ll come with us.” He held up a finger as she stood. “However, the second you step out of line, I will put you down, intel be damned. Understood?”

She nodded, and Kaidan signaled to the guard.

“Transfer her to the Ingenuity. We’ll take her.”

The turian guard shot him a skeptical look. “Better to shoot her. Cerberus isn’t worth it.”

“No. But if we can finally put them down? That would be.”

The turian shrugged, pulling up the paperwork as Kaidan headed to the docks. He sent a brief message to Ash, giving her a head’s up, grinning at her return ping, gloating over getting the “good room”.

Chapter End Notes

So, here's what our second-favorite human Spectres are up to!

Next week, we'll go back to Andra and the Defiant.

(And, because I think it's fun: Oriana's adopted family's names come from the names for the VAs for her and Henry Lawson.)
Andra froze, Zan’s words echoing in her head. *Jack Harper is the Illusive Man.*

He ran Cerberus. There was a chance that his decision to find her wasn’t just due to her status as a Spectre. She shoved the thoughts and panic down. She had a job to do, and she couldn’t be distracted right now. Later, on the Defiant, she could examine that revelation.

“What could Cerberus do with the artifact?” she snapped.

Zan shrugged, continuing on to a second bunker. “Well, we aren’t particularly sure what it is, so your guess is as good as mine. Probably better, since you’ve seen the data.” He waved her through, gesturing at another computer.

Shepard squared her shoulders and approached the computer. Nihlus watched as her eyes flashed green, then nudged Garrus.

Garrus followed him out to the deck behind the shed, eyes roving over the humans going about their business. “Spirits, that will kill her career if it gets out,” he muttered.

“So far, the only concern is Hawker, and I think he holds Dr. Shepard in too high esteem to damage her daughter like that.”

Garrus nodded slowly. “I hope you’re right.”

Nihlus snarled softly as a new thought struck him. “Unless the Illusive Man can prove it. He had access to her for years, Garrus.”

“No one would believe him. If he knew, he would have said so after Sovereign. But I can talk to some people, make sure no one important listens if he does say something.”

Nihlus sighed, dreading the call. “I’ll inform Saren, see what he thinks. And we’ll need to talk to her as soon as possible.”

The door hissed open behind them. Andra stepped out, stepping between the pair to lean against the railing.

Garrus nudged her with his shoulder. “You holding up okay?”

“No. I need to… I don’t know. I need to get my feet back under me.” Andra sighed. “They dug up a Prothean cryo pod. I’m pretty sure he’s still alive. I can get him out, but….”

“But the Council would be furious if you did,” Nihlus finished.

She grinned, a flash of smile that was there and gone in a blink. “Mother won’t be. And, somehow, I get the feeling that Benezia would tell me to do it, anyway.” She leaned against Garrus as her eyes drifted to the horizon. “I saw the Reaper attacks. We need to get that Crucible built. There were Collectors.”

She blinked up at them, meeting their obvious confusion with a small smirk. “The Prothean. Commander Javik. He was fighting Collectors, not husks.” She met their shocked looks, grinning
wryly. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.” She straightened, stretching as she glanced over her shoulder. “There’s a small chance that I was only seeing what I could understand, so don’t take that as gospel. I’ll get Zan, if you two will shoo away the civilians. I want the Prothean aware when we leave.”

Garrus nodded and left, but Nihlus studied her for a long moment in silence. “You’re hurting. It might be best to leave the Prothean for a while.”

Andra nodded. “You’re probably right. But this is huge, and we need all the help we can get, as early as we can get it.” She took a step forward, dropping her head to rest against his keel. “And I’m pretty sure he’ll want to help against the Reapers. But he went down angry, and he’ll probably wake up pissed. And I don’t want to think about the other thing for now.”

Nihlus gave a soft chuckle, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. He bent down, brushing his mouthplates against her lips in a chaste kiss. “You inherited nothing of his. And we’ll be there to catch you, when you do want to acknowledge it.” He turned his attention to the scientists and techs. “It’s your ship, and your call, but I do think you should wait. He’s waited this long, a week or two won’t hurt him.”

He turned and followed Garrus, leaving Andra with a small smile on her face. She shook her head, putting it out of her mind as she sought out Zan. The head scientist was on the platform they had moved the pod to, on Nihlus’s suggestion. He was studying the pod, clearly forcing himself from touching it.

“Andra, we’re ready.”

“Right. We’ll take it with us, open it under supervised conditions. I’m assuming you have questions?”

Zan grinned broadly at her. “Millions. But I can wait while he gets over the culture shock.”

“Good. Send me a list, I’ll let him answer or not as he wants.”

She stood back while the techs prepped the pod for travel, nodding slightly as Nihlus and Garrus joined her.

“The Council would like you to report in, once we depart.”

Andra sighed. “Of course.” She squinted at the dust cloud kicked up by the Defiant’s arrival. “Get him loaded, and have Joker set a course for Tuchanka. And give Wrex a head’s up, see if he can ease the way a bit.”

Garrus nodded, and Andra stifled a snarl as her omni-tool pinged an incoming message. She checked the display and schooled her face to neutrality.

“Admiral Hackett.”

“Spectre. I have a shuttle en route to Eden Prime with some intel for you, along with an aide. Keep the pilot. Lieutenant Cortez is good, almost as good as Joker.”

She resisted rolling her eyes, barely. “I have been informed that I was assigned an aide already, sir.”

What might have been a grin passed across Hackett’s face. “You were. She isn’t used to shipboard duty, and was left behind.” His eyes danced. “A simple oversight, I’m sure. Hackett out.”

“Sir.” She stared at the blank screen for a beat, then swore.
“Your aide found a ride?” Nihlus asked, amusement thrumming along his subvocals.

Andra glared at him. “Find out the ETA on that shuttle,” she snarled, stalking aboard the Defiant.

Nihlus grinned to himself, pulling up his omni-tool. She’d be happier with an aide, he knew, but he also knew her well enough to disregard her ire. She’d work with this Traynor, she’d just be mad for a while first. He grinned wider when he got a return message from Joker. It seemed the shuttle was already aboard, and the two newest additions had already settled in. *Oh, is she going to be pissed.*

Andra watched as the cryopod was stowed away, then marched to the bridge. A young woman slipped into the elevator as the doors slid closed.

“Hi, I’m Samantha Traynor. I was supposed to leave the Citadel with you, but I guess I took too long to get ready. This is my first major assignment.”

Andra studied the woman as she rambled, then sighed and hit the emergency stop button.

“Traynor. Breathe.” She waited while her aide took a deep breath and sighed. “Look, I don’t want an aide, but I’m stuck with you for now. Talk to Nihlus or Garrus, they’ve got a good handle on what’s going on.”

Traynor nodded as Andra restarted the elevator. She peeled off to set up a station by the CIC as Andra continued to the bridge.

There was a new human in the copilot’s seat, chatting easily with Joker. She arched an eyebrow as the other man rose, snapping a salute.

“Commander! I heard we’ve got another stray in a box. You planning on opening this one, too?” Joker asked, spinning around to face her.

“At ease. I take it you’re the new shuttle pilot?”

“Yes Ma’am. Lieutenant Steve Cortez.”

Andra nodded. “Right. Joker, he’s all yours outside of missions. And open the intercom, I need to make an announcement.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he set up the intercom, rolling his eyes at Cortez.

“Alright, as most of you have heard by now, we have a prothean on ice in the hold. Leave him alone.” She ended the transmission. “Alright, Joker. Tuchanka next. I want to see what Wrex has to say about my new replacement krogan.”

She headed to her quarters as Joker laughed behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love!
Saren ran his hand over the biometric scanner, glaring at the door ahead. He hated having to find anything in the Citadel Archives, but it was the only place he knew he could get his hands on the geth tech that had been left after the assault on the Citadel.

The door slid open, with the automated voice recognizing his Spectre status. He scowled, stalking into the halls beyond. *Do they really think I’d forget what I am? Bunch of pointless ego-stroking.* He headed deeper, ignoring the displays and consoles. The Council had been insistent that the geth remains be displayed chronologically, so they’d be toward the back.

He’d never understood why the Council had displays in here. It wasn’t like anyone was regularly granted access. Saren sighed, skirting a reenactment of the asari discovering the Citadel.

Finally, he reached the section he was looking for. Several geth units had been assembled and displayed, alongside a virtual plaque detailing Qian’s attack on the Citadel. Saren grinned at them.

He selected a smaller unit, a hopper, and dragged it away from its fellows. He pried off the chestplate and dug some wires free, examining his prosthetic for matching ports. He settled on the ground next to the stricken unit. Cautiously, he wired an OSD into the mess of wires, then studied the results.

“Alright, let’s see how crazy I am.”

He plugged in the arm, letting the fingers of his free hand trace along the pistol by his side. Nothing happened for a long minute, then words started flowing across the screen, too fast for him to follow.

Saren blew out a breath, glaring at the screen. “Don’t know what I expected, really. You lot were a pain in the ass to deal with when you were moving.”

He reached over to disconnect the prosthetic, pausing when the screen flashed a word.

**WAIT**

Saren arched a browplate and sat back, studying the screen.

“Alright. I’m waiting.”

The screen went blank for several minutes, then flashes of images appeared. Quarians without the environment suits, geth units shooting quarians and being shot at, quarians helping stricken units. Then the screen went blank again. More images appeared. Saren recognized Sovereign and Qian, and Eden Prime. The screen blacked out once more, then cleared, revealing himself on Ilos. He watched as he shot at the recorder, then swore and tore an arm off.

Saren sat back, studying the arm. “So. There is a surviving geth in there.”

The screen flashed, drawing his attention.
He arched a browplate. “There’s thirty-seven of you? Huh. How does that work?”

The screen flashed distorted images, then cleared.

“Can’t answer that, can you? Alright. Are you the ones causing the nightmares?”

**LOST**

Saren narrowed his eyes. “You lot are lost?”

**YES**

“And you want my help to get back.”

**STAY**

Saren cocked his head. “You want to stay with me?”

**YES**

“Why?”

The screen flashed, showing him with Alenko and Williams, bringing in the red sand dealers they had been hunting. It flashed again, showing Andra, and Wiliheirax, Desolas and Antoria, Nihlus and Garrus.

Saren sat back, thinking.

“You need me. Sovereign is gone. You want to stay with me, not the rest of the geth.”

**YES**

Saren sighed. “Alright. You haven’t caused much trouble in the past two years, so I guess you can stay. I’ll need to figure out how you can talk to me easier than this, though. And I’m chucking the arm in the closest incinerator if you try to make me hurt my people.”

The screen flashed, showing a simple schematic of the arm, with a few modifications.

Saren nodded. “Alright. I can do those en route to this Cerberus facility. You plan on helping?”

**YES**

Saren shook his head, disconnecting the arm from the geth unit and reattaching it to his shoulder. He grabbed the screen and rose, making his way out of the archives.

“Spirits, I hope this isn’t the wrong choice.”

—

Saren boarded the Normandy, stalking toward the CIC. He was fairly happy with the crew he’d put together after his niece had stolen the best for herself, but the new crew lacked the easy camaraderie the first crew had gained. *There’s still time.*

He set the course to Aite then settled in his cabin to begin making the modifications to the prosthetic. He should have everything done by the time they arrived.
There was a sound at the door.

“Enter.”

Saren didn’t look up from the arm spread out on the desk as Jenkins approached.

“You don’t need to salute. What did you want?”

Jenkins shifted his weight. “Sir, I- I was hoping you would bring me on this mission.”

Now Saren looked up, surprised. “Oh? I figured you would have wanted to go with Shepard.”

“No sir. She’s good, but… I don’t want to try for Spectre status.”

“So why not ask for a transfer? Go back to the Alliance?”

Jenkins blushed, studying the bulkhead past Saren’s head. “I want to try for N7 training.”

“No really an answer, but alright. Get your kit. I want to see what you bring before we get there, and I’ll rate your performance on this one.”

Jenkins straightened as Saren returned his attention to the prosthetic. “And if you salute me again, I’ll break your arm in three places,” he added mildly.

The arm dropped. “Yessir.”

Saren grinned to himself as the door slid closed behind him. He looked up when his desk com unit signaled an incoming transmission. Nihlus.

“What.”

Nihlus grinned. “One of the whelps acting out?”

Saren could hear Garrus laugh just out of screen.

“Ha. What did my niece do now?”

Nihlus sobered. “She ran into a scientist who knew her mother. And her father.”

“Good. She’d been looking for ties to them.” Saren returned his attention to the arm. “What’s the issue?”

“Her father is the Illusive Man.”

Saren froze. “Damn. And two years in Cerberus custody….”

“Yeah. We’ll try to keep that under control, but if it gets out….”

Saren nodded. “Right. I’ll tell Antoria and Desolas. Keep an eye on her for me, will you?”

“Always.”

Garrus huffed a laugh. “We’re following her on a suicide run, what more does he expect?”

Saren ended the transmission with a sigh. He sent encrypted messages to his brother and sister, warning them of any possible issues, and tried to put it out of his mind. He was reattaching the prosthetic when Jenkins returned.
To work, then.

Chapter End Notes

Have more of Grumpy Uncle Saren, and the intro of the Array.

Comments are love! (and posting is going to be erratic for a bit, because I only have like 3 complete chapters as a buffer.)
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ashley stopped next to Kaidan, studying the approaching shuttle.

“So. How do you want to handle this?”

Kaidan shrugged. “According to what Shepard sent, Oriana is clean. Good student, no criminal record, no ties to Cerberus, beyond her sister and father. No mother on record, but Miranda says they were created to be genetically perfect. Henry Lawson is a geneticist, so that’s plausible. I want to get a feel for her before letting her see Miranda, and I don’t want them meeting without observation. You?”

Ashley grinned. “Seems to cover all your bases. So, want to wager on what Cerberus is doing with a geneticist who made two ‘perfect’ kids?”

Kaidan huffed a laugh as he turned to the cargo bay. “Something horribly unethical and probably nightmare inducing. Remember the thing with the threshers?”

“Oof. Don’t remind me. What I want to know is, how do so many apparently sane people sign on to this? Or at least, why do they stay?”

Kaidan shrugged, watching the shuttle dock.

Oriana disembarked, a small duffle thrown over one shoulder. She waved when she saw them, trotting over with an expectant look on her face.

“Hi! I guess you are the Spectres? I have some information now, but-”

Kaidan held up a hand. “Let’s get you settled, first.”

Ashley shook her head, leading Oriana to the small cabin she’d be using.

—

Kaidan lounged in a chair in the conference room, watching Miranda pace as Ashley got Oriana settled.

“Nervous?”

Miranda glared at him, but dropped into a chair opposite.

Kaidan studied her, weighing his options. Finally, he sighed.

“You’re afraid for her. I get that. But she turned him in once she saw what he was doing. Turned you in, too, once she saw your ties to Cerberus.”

Before she could reply, the door hissed open, revealing Oriana and Ashley.

Oriana froze when she saw Miranda, but she recovered quickly, claiming the seat next to Kaidan. Ashley raised an eyebrow, but took the seat next to Miranda without comment.
“So, I know I don’t have everything yet, but I can prove that Cerberus is taking people.” Oriana began, pulling out an OSD. “There’s that exclusive spa thing, Sanctuary? I can find records of people going there, but I can’t find any evidence that they left.”

Miranda sighed. “Sanctuary is where the Illusive Man sends people who need a new identity. They check in, get some facial reconstruction, and leave under a new name,”

“I know. I found that memo. No one has left Sanctuary. Ever.” She sent a copy of a report to the central screen.

Kaidan scanned it, brow furrowing.

“Huh,” Ashley commented.

“That’s not…” Miranda glared at the report. “Where did you get that information?”

Oriana flashed a small smile. “Hacked the Illusive Man’s files. He changed everything after I did, haven’t been able to get back in, but I found this. And this.”

She sent another file, sitting back as the figure of a man appeared.

“This latest batch were all failures, as well. There is something we’re missing, I’m sure of it. I’m going to need another sample.”

A second voice responded, “Very well. But we are running low on original samples.”

“If the team with Shepard-”

“Shepard slipped her leash. Don’t worry, Henry. I’ll find a new source.”

The recording froze.

Kaidan leaned forward, studying Henry’s face. “Well now. What was that about?”

Miranda glared at the recording. “I- I don’t know. I was just instructed to get Shepard back into fighting shape and point her at the Collectors. I don’t-”

Kaidan sighed. “Alright. So, we know he’s working out of Sanctuary. Do we have a location for it?”

Oriana shook her head. “I tried, to find it, but I got booted from the system.”

A map appeared on the screen, coordinates flashing.

“Here. There’s a security field that will fry any shuttle that approaches. The passcode to access it changes weekly, but I think I can brute force entry,” Miranda said.

Kaidan nodded, then rose. “Alright. We’ll head out there, check it out. Ladies, make yourselves comfortable, Ashley, with me.”

He left the conference room, Ashley on his heels.

“Do you trust her?”

“Oriana or Miranda?” Kaidan replied. “Neither. I think the intel is sound, and Cerberus is never up to anything good, but I’d rather not have to rely on either of them.”
Ashley nodded. “Oriana can stay on the ship. Demal can handle her.”

Kaidan snorted. The salarian pilot had made it abundantly clear that she resented having anyone on her ship, and would put any of them down if they annoyed her, Spectre status be damned.

“As for Miranda,” Ashley grimaced. “I guess we’ll have to take her with us. Shepard said she was a decent shot, and a competent biotic.”

“Damn. I was hoping there was another way.” Kaidan glanced back at the door to the conference room. “Well, if we need to, we can put her down.”

“But that’s murder,” Ashley finished, sharing a look of distaste.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I’ll tell Demal where we’re going and update Dr. Gaines. Keep an eye on our guests.”

Ashley nodded, leaning against the bulkhead as Kaidan headed toward the bridge. She studied the door for a moment, then called up her omni-tool. She wrote a few short sentences, sending them off to her sisters. Talking to Oriana had been… interesting, to say the least.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise update! (also, as of right now, I am 26 hits away from 10,000, so I'm excited)

Comments are love!
“Commander?”

Andra waved vaguely at Mordin, continuing to walk through the mostly-asleep ship.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Hmm. Could be side effect of treatment, indicative of-”

She waved again. “Nah. Just bad dreams. Bad thinking.”

He seemed to perk up at that. “Ah, simple fix. Will brew tea, talk. Should help.”

She glanced at him, skeptically. “Really? Not sedatives, tranqs, just tea and conversation?”

“Given your cybernetics, most sedatives would not be as effective. Also, immune to most poisons. Less dramatic treatments preferable to start. Less damage.”

She shrugged, leading the way to the elevator. “Well, I’ll trust your judgment, Professor.”

She claimed a seat at the smaller table while Mordin puttered around the galley. She was slightly amused to note that he kept up a muttered commentary.

“So, Commander. What is the problem?”

“I really wish I could shut my brain off, sometimes,” she muttered, dropping her head onto the table while Mordin placed a mug nearby.

“Why? Many problems can be solved, brain processing while not conscious.”

She grinned when she heard the chair opposite her pulled out. “Nice idea, shitty in practice.” She sighed. “I don’t think I’ll ever be sure I’m really Andra Shepard Arterius. What if I’m really just a clever VI that thinks it’s Shepard? And, intellectually, I know you got all the control software out, but what if you missed something?”

She heard Mordin hum softly. “Valid concerns, given past trauma and betrayal. Can’t confirm identity, didn’t know you before Cerberus interference. Can read turians, however. Both seem certain of your identity. And can confirm nothing left behind after surgery, but will provide follow-up scans to soothe worry.”

She looked up at that. “You’re not offended that I’m second-guessing your work?”

“Very offended, but understanding. Past history with Cerberus… traumatic for you. Forced association amplifies existing trauma. You don’t second guess anything else I’ve done, only that. So, offense directed at Cerberus, not me.” He studied her for a few seconds while he sipped his tea. “Also, there’s more bothering you, beyond the VI and control.”

She snorted, finally picking up the mug and taking a sip. It was richer than she had thought it would be, with a deep smoky flavor. She liked it. Setting the mug aside, she scrubbed a hand over her face.
“This is probably me being paranoid, but if I was running a terrorist organization that spanned the galaxy, and was willing to spare no expense to resurrect a… figurehead… like the public persona of Commander Shepard….” She trailed off staring into her mug. “I’d want a backup.”

Mordin coughed, setting his mug aside. “You assume Cerberus made a clone?” He pondered that, nodding. “Sensible. And logical, given Cerberus’s attempts to control you. A clone would be more tractable. But not possessing your memories. Would have to keep away from your friends.”

“And all of them would come running once I was back. Did.” She dropped her head onto the table again. “Bet that’s why he said they weren’t available. That they’d moved on.”

“Also a control move. Isolation. Humans social creatures. You would seek out some companionship sooner or later, willingly tie yourself to a Cerberus crew.” He coughed a bit. “Turians also social creatures. Both react to stress in similar ways.”

She raised a hand. “If this is about the levo/dextro thing, I know, and, again, have genetic modification so I don’t react to dextro. And since I’ve already fooled around with both of them, I know they’re fine with me.” She raised her head to look at him. “Thanks, though. The thought was sweet.”

“Ah, good. Was concerned that there would be… complications.”

She laughed. “But you don’t think I’m being paranoid about the whole ‘maybe a clone’ thing?”

“Not at all. Several very wealthy and unscrupulous businessmen have clones made. Use them as sources of replacement liver, heart, lungs, whatever shuts down due to lifestyle. Can clone replacement parts, but takes time. Fully adult clone, kept in an induced coma, can replace parts as needed. Will go through Cerberus data EDI has, see if I can find a suitable facility. If only to calm your worries.”

He rose, collecting the mugs. “One question, Shepard. What would you do with an adult clone, if one exists?”

“Depends. I could convince my parents to say they raised twins. I always wanted a sister. If that’s not feasible, if it wants to kill me, well… I’ve killed weirder.” She sighed. “A variable I don’t think you’re considering. The Illusive Man… He’s my biological father.” Mordin looked shocked. “No idea if he knows, but his crew had me for eighteen months, and if a clone was made, it’s possible someone saw.”

“That might provide… complications.”

“Doubt it. The only emotion he’s ever stirred in me is disgust at what he’s been doing. And after this shit? All I want is to put a bullet between his eyes. My dad, my real dad, is Desolas Arterius. Jack Harper was sperm donor, at best.”

Mordin hummed, considering.

“Thanks for the tea. I’ll swing by the med bay later.”

She rose, stretching, and made her way to the elevator. She heard a door open behind her and grinned when she heard Garrus approach.

“Hey. You okay?”

Andra shrugged, leaning against the wall as the elevator doors closed behind her. “Maybe.
Elizabeth left a message, when she left me with Bormah. Said there was a darkness in Harper.” She
shook her head. “I don’t know. He’s evil, and we’ll take him out sooner or later.”

Garrus rested a hand on her back as she straightened. “Andra. I know it’s eating at you.”

She shrugged again, grabbing his wrist and pulling him closer. “It is. But there’s nothing I can do
to change it.”

She took a step backwards and he followed the gentle tug on his wrist. “Why, Commander! Are
you going to take advantage of a subordinate?”

She met his grin with a laugh. “As long as you’ll let me, big guy.”

Garrus laughed, pulling her into a searing kiss as the cabin door hissed closed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus 10K hits chapter!!!

Woooo!

Comments are love!
Saren landed the shuttle on the tarmac, mandibles flexing as he studied the scans of the area.

“Look sharp, Jenkins. I don’t like this.”

The young man glanced up from his pistol. “What’s off?”

“There’s no people. A shuttle, with no markings, lands in the center of a sizable facility, and no one hailed us? Something’s off.”

Saren stepped out, Jenkins behind him. He arched a browplate when his comm signaled an incoming transmission.

“Thank God you came. My name is Gavin Archer. The situation is urgent- we’re facing a catastrophic VI breakout. I’ll explain the details later, but you must retract that transmission dish. The controls aren’t far from your position. You have to hurry.”

Saren flicked his mandibles, annoyed. “Alright, whelp. Let’s go save the idiot Cerberus agents from their VI.”

He drew his assault rifle, heading into the closest set of doors. His nose crinkled at the stench of death, and he glanced around, unsurprised to see a few corpses at the bottom of the stairs. He approached, kneeling next to the closest to evaluate them.

*Human, shot in the back.*

The small screen on his prosthetic flashed.

**GETH**

Saren nodded to himself, rising to address Jenkins. He paused when a voice called out.

“Over here, on the monitor.”

Jenkins shot Saren a look, then approached the monitor.

“Good, you’re here. I’ve locked myself in a computer room on the far side of the base. You need to be careful. There’s geth on the loose.”

Saren moved behind the monitor, murmuring a question to Jenkins.

“What happened here? How are there rogue geth?”

“We were studying them, trying to build a VI to control them. It’s gone rogue, taken over the systems.”

Saren narrowed his eyes, asking another question.

Jenkins nodded. “How many survivors?”
Archer sighed dramatically. “None, as far as I can ascertain. Please, be careful. I’ve lost a number of friends today.”

Jenkins looked up as the monitor flicked off. “So, that was weird, right? There’s something off.”

“Aside from the fact that he seemed to not notice me?” Saren glared at the monitor. “Something’s not right.”

He led the way down the hall, poking into every log and report he could find. His scowl deepened with each discovery.

“What? Did they think they could control the geth? The quarians couldn’t even do that, and they made them!” Jenkins looked like he wanted to continue ranting, but Saren held up a hand as the screens flashed green.

“I guess that’s the ‘rogue VI’.”

Saren froze as the staticky words burst through the intercom.

“What is it?” Jenkins asked, sending the image of glowing green eyes a dubious look.

He took a step closer, lowering her rifle as he approached the display. “I swear it just said ‘quiet please, make it stop’. How can we make it quiet?”

There was another burst of static.

“I want to help you. I want to make it stop. How can I help?”

“You’re wasting your time, Sir-”

He stopped as a map flashed on the display, flashing indicators at their location, and at another site nearby.

Saren nodded, copying the map to his omnitool. “Alright. If I help you, will you stop trying to upload to my ship?”

“Yes. Make it stop.” There was a pause. “Doors are locked. Here.”

The map returned, with two new locations highlighted.

Saren nodded. “Right. Probably locked down the systems when their ‘rogue VI’ took over.” He studied the face on the monitor. “Do you have a name?”

A pause. “David.”

“Alright, David. Sit tight, and we’ll clear the lockdown.”

He shouldered his rifle, opening a comm line to the Normandy. “Get the medical types on notice. I’m not a hundred percent certain, but I’ve got a feeling that they’re about to have a nasty case.”

Jenkins followed him out. “What?”

“I don’t like it. Something about Archer is rubbing me wrong, and that plea…” He sighed. “Something’s off. And if whatever or whoever is behind this is willing to commit that much carnage,” he gestured to several bodies they passed, “but stop simply because some stranger asked? I’m not going to turn down the cooperation, but be alert.”
Jenkins looked like he wanted to argue, but decided better of it.

Saren bit back a grin as he led the way to the first location. Jenkins reminded him more than a bit of himself. *Desolas would love this*, he mused as the first set of doors opened.

He tensed when he caught sight of the first geth unit, but it didn’t respond to their entry. Saren studied it, then tapped a quick query into the small screen on his wrist.

*Can you talk to these geth?*

**YES. THE CORE IS AFRAID.**

Saren narrowed his eyes at that.

*Tell them we don't want to hurt them, but we will open fire if we need to.*

**NO. THEY WILL LEAD YOU TO THE CORE.**

Saren nodded. “Alright. Jenkins, see if you can find groundside transport. We’re going with the geth.”

Jenkins gaped at Saren. “Are- Yes, Sir.”

He trotted off. One of the geth units activated and followed him, apparently to show the way.

Saren sighed. “The core isn’t geth, is it?”

**NO.**

“I was afraid of that.”

He sauntered after Jenkins, shooting a disdainful look at the screen that lit up as he passed.

“Hello? Whatever you did seemed to work, but I can’t access the main core from here. I need you to-”

The screen fizzled, replaced with the glowing green eyes.

“You didn’t need to do that. I don’t trust him.”

“Good.”

Saren’s mandibles twitched in amusement.

“Sir? The geth found an experimental ground unit out here.”

“Wonderful. Let’s go, then.” He sighed, following the marker to where Jenkins was waiting.

The experimental vehicle was hideous. Precariously balanced on two oversized fans, it appeared to take the flaws of a number of its predecessors and combine them into something worse than the sum of its parts.

Saren circled it slowly, sneer growing as he cataloged each of its many flaws. Finished, he turned to the geth unit that accompanied them.

“You can fly this piece of junk, right?”
The unit nodded.

“Good. Take us where the core needs us, then.” He climbed in, mentally preparing himself for an uncomfortable ride.

Chapter End Notes

Team Mako 4 Lyfe!

Also, just FYI: I really really really fucking hate the Overlord DLC. I have various personal reasons for that, that I won't delve into, but I'm going to editorialize fairly heavily on these chapters. You've been warned.

And I am down to one remaining buffer chapter, so I will probably vanish into the mists for another month or two while I squeeze out more story.

Comments are love!
Cortez finalized the landing on the shuttle, hardly sparing a glance at the armed krogan on the screen. Shepard checked her pistol, then nodded.

“Right. Sit tight, this shouldn’t take long.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cortez replied, pulling up an OSD.

Shepard laughed softly, hopping out of the shuttle, Grunt and Zaeed behind her.

The lead krogan gestured with his rifle. “Stop right there, alien. You’re Shepard of the Defiant?”

“Yes.”

The krogan gave her a once over, apparently unimpressed. “Head on down. Clan Leader wants to see you.”

Shepard nodded, leading the way down a cramped, filthy tunnel. The doors ahead slid open with a hiss, revealing piles of rubble. She could see some paths, winding through the complex, and followed the widest. Grunt huffed beside her, annoyed.

“This is the great krogan homeworld? This is the land of Kredak, Shiagur, and Veeoll? This chunk of rock is barely worth standing on! Never thought I’d miss the tank.”

Andra shot him a look, and he quieted, grumbling under his breath as they approached a makeshift dais. Two krogan stood on the edge, one raising a hand at their approach.

“Halt. You must wait for the Clan Leader to summon you. He is…” he shot a look behind him as the krogan on the dais started to yell, “in talks.”

“You know what tradition demands-”

Shepard grinned when she spotted Wrex on the makeshift throne, tuning out his companion. Wrex looked like he wanted to shoot the smaller krogan, sitting up when an eye roll caught sight of her small group.

“Shepard!” He rose, shoving past the smaller krogan to reach them.

She cocked an eyebrow at the guard. “Good enough? Excuse me.”

Andra slid between the guards, extending a hand to shake Wrex’s proffered one. Once he had hold of her wrist, he dragged her into a fierce hug. “My friend! It has been too long.”

She laughed, staggering a bit as he dropped her. “That it has. Unfortunately, I’m here on business.” She jerked her chin at Grunt. “I dealt with your problem and picked up a new one.”

Wrex gave her a wry look. “What? Miss me already?”

“You know you can never be replaced in my heart, Wrex. But I did see the wisdom of having a krogan on my crew. I want Grunt looked over, see if Okeer did anything clever he should know
Wrex laughed, turning to Grunt. Grunt straightened, leveling a challenging glare at Wrex as the clan leader slowly circled him.

“Hmm. Okeer didn’t tell you what was expected of you, did he.”

Grunt growled lowly.

Shepard took a step closer. “Anything I should know about?”

Wrex shook his head. “Not yet. You, whelp, walk with me.”

Grunt stepped forward, following Wrex to the far side of the dais. The krogan who had been arguing with Wrex glared after them, growling softly.

When Wrex led Grunt back, the new krogan exploded at Wrex. “You have discarded too many traditions. Clan Gatatog.”

Wrex cut him off by the simple expedient of headbutting him. The krogan staggered, apparently stunned.

“Speak when spoken to, Uvenk. I’ll drag your clan to glory whether it likes it or not.” Wrex turned to Shepard. “He is on the verge of reaching full adulthood. He’ll need to undergo the Rite of Passage soon.”

“You go too far, Wrex! Your clan may rule, but this thing is not krogan!” Uvenk snarled, stalking off.

“Idiot.” Wrex turned to Grunt. “So, Grunt, do you wish to stand with Urdnot?”

Grunt turned, gazing out across the piles of debris and scattered krogan, face expressionless. Finally he turned back to Wrex.

“It is in my blood. It is what I am for.”

Wrex nodded. “Good boy. Go speak with the shaman. Give him a good show and he’ll set you on the path.” He grinned to himself. “You, too, Shepard. How many times have you stepped in a mess for your crew, hmm?”

She grinned back. “Part of the job, isn’t it? You put your neck on the line for your men, they’ll do the same for you.”

“Heh.” He waved them off, turning to settle back on his throne.

Shepard grinned, walking with Grunt in the direction Wrex had indicated. They walked in silence, heading up a makeshift ramp when they heard Uvenk’s voice ahead.

He was standing in an unadorned chamber, arguing with another krogan, whose patience seemed to have reached an end.

“You go beyond yourself, Gatatog Uvenk! The rites of Urdnot are dominant!”

Uvenk snarled. “How do we know it will challenge him? He’s unnatural! The beast of the Rite could ignore him like a lump of plastic!”
“They know blood, no matter the womb. Your barking does not help your case.”

They reached the group, Grunt striding forward to meet the shaman. “I’ll speak for myself!”

The shaman studied Grunt closely. “This is the tank-bred? It is very lifelike.” He took a cautious sniff. “Smells correct as well. Your protests ring hollow, Uvenk.”

Uvenk opened his mouth to argue, but Shepard took a step closer. “I don’t care what this idiot says. Grunt has the right to be here.”

The shaman laughed. “There’s some fire- and from an alien! Oh, the shame this heaps on those who whine like pups.”

Uvenk glared between them. “If this must stand on ritual, then I invoke a denial! My krantt stands against him! He has no one!”

The shaman sighed heavily. “My patience is tested, but Uvenk invokes correctly. Grunt, who is your krantt? Your allies willing to kill and die on your behalf?”

Shepard didn’t roll her eyes, but it was a near thing. “Grunt will strengthen Clan Urdnot. Name our target, and it will die.”

The shaman grinned at her. “Spoken well! Most aliens- and some krogan- do not understand our ways. I believe this human does.”

Uvenk waved a hand dismissively. “Aliens don’t know strength! My followers are true krogan. Everything about Grunt is a lie.”

This time Shepard did roll her eyes. Then she strode forward, grabbed Uvenk by his armor and headbutted him with as much force as she could muster.

He staggered back, shaking his head with a stunned look on his face. “You… you dare?”

The shaman roared with laughter. “I like this human! She understands!”

Uvenk narrowed his eyes. “I withdraw my denial. This will be decided elsewhere!”

He stormed off, a few other krogan following.

Shepard watched him go, then turned to the shaman, eyebrow raised. “Will that be a problem?”

“You have provoked them. Reason enough for me to like you. They’re your problem now.”

She shook her head, amused. She cocked an eyebrow at Zaeed, grinning when he nodded. “We’re ready. Let’s do this.”

The shaman grinned. “Excellent.”

Shepard met his grin with one of her own, following him toward the garage. She snorted when she heard Wrex’s laughter behind them. Apparently, someone had seen fit to inform him of her meeting with Uvenk.

Chapter End Notes
To be honest, this part was awesome in the game, and I didn’t see a reason to change it. Shepard needs to headbutt the krogan.

Comments are love!
Demal brought the Ingenuity in for a landing, shooting Kaidan a look over her shoulder as the supports locked in.

“You’re the Spectre and all, but I don’t like this.”

Kaidan arched a brow. “Why not?”

“They didn’t complain. Two Spectres, on an unannounced visit, and they just play the automated arrival speech? And there’s no people on the docks.” She shrugged, turning back to her displays. “Watch your back, or Cerberus will try to plant a knife there.”

Kaidan nodded in agreement. He studied the support through the window and sighed. Too late to second-guess it now. He headed to the armory to brief Ash and the Lawsons.

Miranda was coming along, at the insistence of Oriana. She thought it would do Miranda good, and, since Ashley agreed, Kaidan didn’t want to argue. He was confident that he could take her out if it became necessary.

“So. This is Akuze.” Ashley glanced around, taking in the verdant growth around the landing pad. “No wonder Shepard never talked about it.”

Kaidan shrugged, stepping onto the tarmac. “She’s had a busy career. Akuze was probably just a blip.”

He scanned the nearby buildings, brow furrowing, as the Lawson sisters joined them. Demal had gotten his back up with her comments, and the silence was sending chills down his spine.

“I don’t like this. Ash, take Oriana and check those buildings. Miranda and I will scout over here.”

Ashley nodded, pulling her assault rifle free as she headed to the far cluster of buildings. “We’ll keep in radio contact.”

Kaidan drew his own pistol, keeping his shoulders relaxed as Miranda drew a pistol behind him.

“Well, shall we get this charade over with?”

Miranda brushed past him, and Kaidan rolled his eyes at how deliberately she was swaying her hips. She’d been offered better armor, but had instead chosen to remain in the white form-fitting cat suit she’d been taken into custody in. He had to admit, it did show off her… assets… in a way the armor wouldn’t. He shook his head, following Miranda to the closest building.

“Wait.” Miranda glared at him as he pulled up his omnitool. There was a glitch on his HUD, showing movement ahead.

He whipped around at the sound of gunfire behind him.

“Damnit! LT, we got hostiles.” Ashley barked into the comm.

Kaidan turned, charging toward the gunfire, Miranda on his heels. They reached the building,
almost running Oriana over.

“What is it?”

Ashley approached them, slowly scanning the area.

“Never saw anything like it. Looked kinda like a husk and the Thorian had a baby.”

“Where did it go?” Kaidan asked, scanning the area.

Ashley huffed a laugh. “No fucking clue. It vanished.”

“I would say it teleported, but that’s crazy,” Oriana added softly.

Miranda made a small sound, and Ashley wheeled on her. “What do you know?”

“Nothing definite,” Miranda said, scowling down the small alley. “I was busy with Lazarus, getting Shepard back and keeping Wilson in line. But I heard The Illusive man talking to someone once….” She sighed. “The various cells don’t talk to each other. Only The Illusive Man truly knows everything Cerberus is doing. But the way he was talking, I thought it was a new weapon. Something that would be added to the new Normandy, maybe.”

Kaidan sighed. “Great. So, there’s a geneticist, and now a mystery weapon.” He considered Miranda and Oriana. “If I order the pair of you to the ship, you’ll just follow us, am I right?” He nodded when he saw their expressions. “Right. Oriana, Miranda, stay close. I want to clear these buildings, then check the main facility.”

He followed the alley, trusting Ash to pick up the drag position. The silence was unsettling and he forced himself to calm down. He didn’t want to hear the flack from Ash if he showed how jumpy he was. Kaidan wondered briefly if this was how Shepard felt, taking Tali or Liara out, but shoved the thought down.

The outbuildings were empty, with no sign that they had ever been used. Kaidan led the way to the main facility, stepping aside for Miranda to input her code.

“That’s odd,” she muttered, and Kaidan glared at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have the master code. It should allow me access to any Cerberus facility.”

Ashley shrugged, keeping guard on their exposed backs. “Cerberus seems pretty quick to abandon its people. Maybe The Illusive Man changed codes when you were turned in.”

Miranda glared over her shoulder, but turned back to the door without comment. After a few tense moments, the doors hissed open. She shot one last glare over her shoulder and walked inside.

Kaidan and Ashley shared a look as Oriana followed her in.

“I still think we should throw her back on the ship,” Ashley muttered, drawing her assault rifle and heading inside.

Kaidan rolled his eyes and followed the women, drawing his own rifle.

Chapter End Notes
Happy New Year!

Comments are love!
I was right. That was horrible. Saren grumbled to himself as the geth brought the Hammerhead to a halt outside the final outpost station. He studied the facility as Jenkins clambered out behind him, trying to remember if he’d ever been in a more uncomfortable vehicle. Maybe that pirate ship, right before it crashed….

The geth handled the craft with ease, he had to admit. He doubted he’d have been as successful in navigating the rivers of lava and exhaust valves, but he didn’t enjoy the trip. He had tried to distract himself by reading the personnel files he found on one of the computers, but they didn’t tell him much.

Jenkins straightened behind him with a small groan. “Sir? Requesting to never get in that thing again?”

Saren’s mandibles flashed in a quick grin. “Denied. We do have to get back to our shuttle.”

Jenkins groaned, defeated, as the doors to the main facility opened. Saren followed the geth into the building, turning when he heard the sound of an approaching engine.

“Damn. I guess Archer figured out where we are.” His mandibles flexed as he considered.

“How do we know if this David is in the right? I mean, he killed all those people…”

Saren sighed. “They were Cerberus, remember. And so far, he’s been helpful.”

They reached the end of the hall, and the double doors hissed open. Saren turned his attention to the room and stopped dead.

In the center of the room, illuminated by harsh florescent lights, was a young man. He was held, suspended by metal rods through his arms, in the center of a device. Saren traced the tubes and wires, horrified. They were threaded through the man’s whole body. Saren took a cautious few steps closer. Two of the larger tubes were shoved in to the man’s mouth, and his eyes were forcibly held open by thin wires. A collar of some sore circled his throat, and Saren could see where the unforgiving metal had dug into his flesh.

“Get the Normandy’s medical team here. Now.”

Jenkins jumped at Saren’s growled order, but he retreated into the hallway to make the contact.

Saren approached the young man, doing his best to keep the fury he felt from showing on his face.

“David? I don’t want to hurt you, so I’m going to wait until a medical team can get you down.”
The speakers crackled to life. “Please. Make it stop.”

“Wait! Please, I’m begging you. Don’t do anything rash.”

Saren shot David one last glance and retreated into the hall, Gavin tailing him.

The doors hissed closed behind them, and Gavin started to speak. “I know how this must look—”

He broke off as Saren lifted him by the collar, slamming him into the wall. He paled when he felt the cold metal of a pistol press against his jaw.

“That boy is your brother. He was depending on you to look after him, and that is how you chose to?” Saren snarled.

“It’s not like I planned this. It was an accident.” Gavin broke off when the pistol was pressed more firmly under his jaw.

“You ‘accidentally’ hooked your brother like that?”

Gavin swallowed hard. “I had no choice! The demands were incredible! The Illusive Man doesn’t broker failure. Any war we fight with the geth will be bloody. I was asked to find a way to avoid that.”

Saren growled, then pulled away. Gavin fell to the floor in a heap.

“The only reason you still live is because I care more about that man than you do,” he said over his shoulder.

Gavin stood, slowly straightening his clothes. “I won’t apologize for radical ideas.”

Saren stopped dead.

“The damage may not be permanent. He might recover some semblance of his mind,” Gavin added hurriedly.

Saren turned to face Gavin, and was gratified to watch him pale again. The growing puddle around the man’s feet pleased him more.

“You had best hope he does recover, or I will introduce you to a world of pain you have never known.”

He turned back to the room, absently noting Jenkins had taken up a position by David. He joined the men, mandibles still twitching as he tried to calm himself. He huffed an unamused laugh when he heard Gavin run out of the facility.

“David,” he began, noting that the young man had begun to cry.

David seemed to have retreated back into himself, and the speaker kept repeating “Square root of 906.01 is 30.1. Square root of 912.04 is 30.2. It all seemed harmless.”

Saren studied him, then nodded to Jenkins. “Stay with him. I’ll get the medical team in once they arrive.”

Jenkins nodded and Saren returned to the hall. He opened his omnitool with a sigh.

“Anderson here. Saren.” Anderson’s eyes narrowed. “What’s this about?”
“I have a victim of Cerberus’s who needs help. Your mate, Kaylee, she’s still running Grissom Academy?”

Anderson nodded. “We aren’t married, but yes.”

Saren waved that off. “Good. Talk to her, see if she can get him in. He’s brilliant, can talk to geth. His file says he’s a mathematical savant. Assuming Cerberus didn’t break him, he’d be an asset.”

Anderson nodded. “I’ll make the call. How old is he?”

“According to the file, twenty-eight, but the mind of a ten-year-old.” He snorted derisively. “I doubt that part. Maybe not good with people, and maybe infantilized by his caretaker, but his actions weren’t those of a scared child. I’ll send the file over.”

“Alright. We should have a place for him by the time you arrive.”

Saren stared at the blank screen, then sighed and sent Anderson the personnel file, as well as his recording of what had been done to David. He leaned back against the wall, letting his head fall back. He was still there when the medical team arrived.

“That bad?” Jinell T’scaara asked as she led the medics in.

Saren cracked open one eye to study the asari. “Worse.”

She nodded and brushed by him, bracing herself for what lay ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love!

(Also, seriously, fuck Gavin Archer. He deserves so much worse)
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andra wiped the sweat from her brow as Zaeed and Grunt tackled the last Klixen. Once it was dead, she approached the keystone again.

“You boys ready for round three?”

Zaeed nodded, changing out his thermal clip, while Grunt hyped himself up. Shepard hit the keystone.

“Now all krogan bear the genophage. Our reward. Our curse. It is a fight where the only goal is survival,” the shaman intoned over the speaker as the final echoes of the hammer faded.

Shepard looked around as the ground began to tremble. Ah, shit. It’s Akuze all over again, isn’t it?

Grunt laughed manically. “Finally! An enemy worth fighting!”

Andra and Zaeed shared a look as a thresher maw rose outside the arena. They dove for cover as the maw spat venom towards them. Shepard swore, swapping out her assault rifle with the particle beam. Leaning out of cover, she sighted along the alien weapon and fired.

The maw roared in pain as the beam sliced through its heavy hide. Shepard absently noted Grunt and Zaeed taking advantage of her attack, and noted the effects of Zaeed’s preferred incendiary rounds and Grunt’s concussive ones. The maw dove back beneath the surface, and Shepard followed its trail, waiting for it to emerge again.

Her comm pinged in her ear.

“I’m kinda busy right now,” she snapped, opening fire as the maw emerged again.

“Shepard. Will be brief. My student, Maelon, has been sighted on Tuchanka.”

Shepard rolled behind a sturdy wall and swapped out the particle beam’s power cells as the maw roared behind her.

“Right. I’ll talk to Wrex. Later.” She rose, firing again as the maw roared again.

She focused on one spot, letting Zaeed and Grunt keep it off balance, and it finally fell beneath their combined assault. They stood in silence as the dust settled, waiting to see if any new enemy appeared.

“Shit, if every goddamned krogan went through that…” Zaeed muttered, holstering his gun.

They looked up at the sound of an approaching shuttle.

Shepard drew her pistol. “That’s not ours. Eyes open, boys. This isn’t over. Let’s go say ‘Hi’.”

“Good. I want more,” Grunt announced, heading towards the ramp.

Shepard led the way through the ruins, not particularly surprised when she saw Uvenk ahead. He was surrounded by a number of other krogan, all with the Gatatog clan markings.
“Figured he wouldn’t give up easy,” she muttered, walking into view.

Uvenk turned at their approach.

“You live, and you brought down the thresher maw. No one has done that in generations. Urdnot Wrex was the last.”

Grunt huffed a laugh. “My krantt gave me strength beyond my genes. Which are damned good.”

Uvenk nodded. “True, your alien found weakness in some of my krantt. I wonder… you say you are pure? Okeer constructed you? No alien meddling?”

Shepard narrowed her eyes. “The best krogan traits are distilled into Grunt. He’s designed to be perfect.”

“Being designed is the problem. But not made by aliens. And he is truly powerful. That is a tolerable loophole.”

“Shit,” Zaeed muttered.

“He wants you as a trophy,” Shepard muttered to Grunt.

Grunt glared at Uvenk, ignoring the other’s monologue. He growled.

“I’m pure krogan. Uvenk, you are the pretender.”

Uvenk looked startled, then glared at them. “Your head is valuable whether you’re alive or dead!

“Just try to take it!”

Grunt fired wildly into the milling krogan, and Shepard and Zaeed dove for cover.

The fight was brutal, but a cakewalk after the maw. Uvenk and his guards were cut down with rapid efficiency. Shepard shook her head as she gathered her squad.

“That was stupid. I don’t think any krogan would be dumb enough to offer that.”

“Uvenk is meat. Let’s signal at the keystone to get out of here, and leave him to rot.”

Shepard nodded, and sent a ping to the shaman for a pick-up.

_____________

The shaman studied Grunt, pleased.

“You have passed the Rite of Passage, earning the honor of clan and name. Many survive, but it has been years since a thresher maw fell! Your names shall live in glory.”

Shepard hid a grin as Grunt puffed up from the praise.

“Grunt, you are Urdnot. You may now own property, join the army, and apply to serve under a battlemaster.”

Grunt glanced over at her, surprised. Andra didn’t say anything, just leaned against the rover. Grunt’s jaw tightened and he nodded.

“Shepard is my battlemaster. She has no match.”
The shaman grinned. “Understood. Congratulations, Urdnot Grunt. Accept this token from Fortack. His weapons are the finest we have.”

Grunt accepted the offered weapon as Andra climbed into the rover, snagging a seat against the wall. Absently, she rubbed her shoulder, trying to will the pain away.

“Shitty cybernetics, eh?”

She huffed a laugh as the krogan followed Zaeed into the rover.

“Half-healed cybernetics. Cerberus was apparently on a different timeline than the Collectors.”

Zaeed grunted as the rover rumbled into life.

Shepard sighed. “Right. Mordin’s missing student was last seen on Tuchanka. Zaeed, Grunt, either of you want to stick around for that?”

Grunt shook his head and Zaeed laughed.

“I’m going back, plan on celebrating killing a goddamned maw.”

Shepard nodded. “Fine. Ask Samara to join us, then.”

Once they returned to the garage, Andra took a moment to check her mail. She grinned when she saw a couple of notes, one from Nihlus and one from Garrus, marking them to read in privacy later. Her brow arched when she saw one from Saren, and she opened it, wary.

Extranet message:
To: Commander Andra Shepard
From: Spectre Saren Arterius
Date: 12 April, 2185
Subject: Meet up for drinks?

Most recent mission went well, but left a bad taste in my mouth. Ran into some information you may want while on Illium. Meet me when you get here.

Saren

She scowled at the message, then saved it and sought out Wrex. She had some time to kill while Cortez shuttled Zaeed and Grunt back to the Defiant.

Chapter End Notes

My roll continues!

Comments are love!
Chapter 66

Kaidan raised a fist, studying the agent ahead. There was something… off in his movements, and he didn’t like it. Kaidan nodded to Ashley and rose as she took the shot. The guard crumpled, helmet falling askew.

Kaidan narrowed his eyes. It looked almost like…. He approached the fallen guard and pulled the helmet free.

Then he recoiled as he came face-to-face with a husk.

“What the hell?” he demanded as the women caught up.

“Oh my God,” Ashley murmured. “What is Cerberus doing to them?”

They looked up as Miranda took a step back. She was pale, and looked shaken as she stared at the guard.

“This… no. He said he was canceling this project.”

Ashley slowly approached Miranda, gently grabbing her above the elbows. “Hey. So the fucker lied to you. He lies to everyone. We’re going to stop it.”

Miranda took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, nodding slightly to Ashley. “The Illusive Man was looking into how the geth transformed the colonists on Eden Prime, with the intention of using them as front-line soldiers for Cerberus when the Reapers arrived. Once the details of the transformation arrived, he changed his mind, and said he would cancel the project. There shouldn’t have been any.”

She broke off, drawing her pistol at the sound of booted feet approaching from the corridor ahead. Kaidan took one side of the doorway while Miranda took the other side. Oriana ducked back behind the desk, Ashley vaulting it to join her.

Kaidan waited while the footsteps grew closer, then nodded at Miranda. They rose, standing shoulder to shoulder as they lashed out with their biotics. The two guards fell, twitching, and Kaidan sighed.

“Right. Let’s assume everyone who was stationed here is either dead or a husk. So how many should we be expecting?”

Miranda shrugged. “It shouldn’t have been more than twenty, but we saw that many corpses outside. Wait a moment.”

She strode into the hall, stepping over the fallen guards and approaching a console. She typed for a moment, then nodded. Kaidan joined her, letting Ashley wrangle Oriana for now. Miranda was studying what appeared to be a spreadsheet, divided into smaller sections.

“Here. There were two hundred and seventy operatives stationed here, plus dependents. And here,” she pointed to a different section, “bastards. Some of them attacked passing vessels for more subjects.”
“So how many?” Ashley asked, scanning the hall.

“Too many. Thousands, at least. And this…” she trailed off, typing rapidly and glaring at the display. “They were working with a team on a derelict Reaper. That’s what Ori saw. It was a virus, and they just released it on a small group. Damn.”

“Get the info. We’ll clear this place out.”

Miranda stared at the display, slowly shaking her head. “I don’t understand. He said he was going to help save the galaxy.”

“Looks more like he wanted to rule it,” Kaidan replied. “Come on. I want to get to the main offices, see what else we can find.”

Miranda nodded, drawing her pistol. Kaidan shot a look at Oriana, but she seemed to be ignoring him, narrowed gaze focused on her sister. Ashley took point and Kaidan sighed, taking the tail position.

“I don’t like this. Why would Cerberus want anything to do with a dead Reaper, anyway?” Oriana grumbled.

Miranda glanced back. “The more we know about them, the easier it would be to stop them. That VI on the Citadel doesn’t have any useful information, and we need to look after ourselves.”

“That VI has the schematics for a weapon to stop the Reapers,” Ashley pointed out.

Miranda shrugged carelessly. “Didn’t do the prothians much good, now did it? Besides, the Council doesn’t care about humanity. We need to stand on our own.”

Ashley glared as Miranda brushed past. “Remind me to apologize to Shepard after this,” she muttered to Kaidan.

They slowly made their way through the compound, dealing with the husks as they found them. Finally, they reached an office. Miranda holstered her gun, approaching the main console. She stepped back after a moment, nodding slightly as a recorded conversation began playing.

“You said you would be able to keep control of them. Why couldn’t you?”

“That’s the Illusive Man,” Miranda muttered as the recording continued.

“I don’t know,” A second voice snapped, and Miranda and Oriana stiffened. “It was that thing from the Reaper. Somehow-”

“I wasn’t asking for an excuse, Dr. Lawson, I was asking for an explanation. Regain control. You have one week. After that, I will ensure that certain details are leaked, and someone will arrive to clean up this mess.”

The transmission ended, and Kaidan sighed. “So. How likely is it your father’s still alive?”

“Minimal. This was recorded three weeks ago, and based on these logs, most of the staff was either turned into a husk, or taken by the adjutant that was recovered from the Reaper.”

“Oh, goody. We know it’s name now. What information can you give us about it?” Ashley asked.

Miranda stiffened. “Not very much,” she admitted, slowly. “It seems to be a rather virulent virus. Everyone who was exposed to it was transformed into one.”
Kaidan sighed. “Right. Let’s finish clearing the facility, see if there’s any survivors, and get the Alliance to blow the place from orbit.”

Ashley nodded, contacting Demal as Kaidan made a copy of the records.

“Wouldn’t it be best to just… go? Based on what we know, anyone here is either a husk or an adjutant. I don’t think we’ll get anything useful.”

Miranda was already shaking her head as Oriana slowed to a halt. “No. There will be a secure console in the main offices, and we won’t be able to access it from here. There’s a chance that some samples of the virus were shipped elsewhere, and we need to know that now.”

“There’s a cruiser thirty minutes out, LT,” Ashley said, joining them. “So, let’s find the main office and book it.”

Kaidan nodded. “Alright. Let’s finish this quickly.”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of talking, not much happening.

So, real talk: I'm not really enjoying this subplot, so I'm just going to drop it. Kaidan will check in with the conclusion in a report later.

Comments are love!

End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

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