Disconnected
by Imperator

Summary


The Milky Way is a changed place. Synthesis is gradually transforming the way its inhabitants communicate, and seems to promise a golden age. Following the Reapers' mysterious departure reconstruction began, and after nearly a year marooned in the Crucible Day Event, a mourning Kaidan Alenko and the Normandy crew survivors were reunited to undertake a mission that uncovered a secret from the waning days of the Prothean Empire, and the means to restoring Hadrian Shepard to life (albeit with no memory of his final day on Earth).

With Shepard back, he and Kaidan embark on a peacetime errand in the new Normandy SR-3 to help restore some normalcy to the galaxy that was left fractured by the Crucible Event's disruption of the mass relay network. But an enigmatic new antagonist stirs, powerful and bent on taking apart the rising new society purchased with Shepard's sacrifice, launching the newlywed husbands and allies new and old in a race to stop them.
The haul is turning out to be even longer than I anticipated.

After writing my first ME fanfic/headcanon, "A Longer Haul," to give "m!Shenko" the happy ending that I wanted so badly for them following Synthesis- the ME3 ending that appealed most to me and by extension my primary Shepard, Hadrian'- two things happened. First, I got a very kind reception from readers on . A number of reviewers took my interpretation to heart, and encouraged me to proceed with the sequel I was kinda'-sorta' mulling over. And second, I found I still wasn't quite ready to put aside these characters (and maybe I never will be). I just love them and their story too much, and the post-Synthesis galaxy started to swirl with possibilities.

So I forged ahead, and a year after ME3 released (and ~10 months after I published "ALH") I've finished "Disconnected," wherein I explore some themes that preoccupy me. There's the question of how Shepard deals with his resurrection (again), this time knowing that it was a more meaningful sacrifice than man-hours and credits- a stranger gave his life so that Hadrian could enjoy the fruits of his labours. But the way that came about meant that Hade doesn't actually know exactly how he died, so he's in a bit of a quandry- "what did I do to deserve this?" I guess it's a crisis of grace. And his new husband, Kaidan, is in the position of wanting to just enjoy their second chance together. This, of course, demands the pain of separation.

"Disconnected" introduces a new antagonist, the Puritans, who serve a dual purpose. One the one hand, they're a metaphor for the politically and morally contentious practice of drone warfare in the modern global village- when people are increasingly connected by the ability to communicate, how do you victimize people except to silence and dehumanize them? It speaks to killing by the impersonal push of a button. But they're also the less sympathetic 'voice' that objects to Synthesis- a stand-in for my fellow gamers who argued (wrongly, in my opinion) that it marked the end of individuality, of freedom, and a betrayal of everything Shepard fought for. The Puritans make that judgement by ignoring, as some gamers do, the personal account of the good Synthesis achieved. I did try to be fair, though, and the story does include another 'anti-Synthesis' advocate- who may come as a surprise- to give credit to those who offered a more nuanced criticism of that ending.

More than anything else, though, "Disconnected" is fundamentally about communication- learning to communicate, and failing to. Wanting to, sometimes needing to, and sometimes not being able to. Whether it's not understanding what your spouse is feeling, or it's struggling to be heard by people who disagree with you- from the revelations that come out of new relationships, to an immigrant family's polyglottal dinner table- I wanted this story to stress how vital it is that we open ourselves up to the possibility of getting to know each other better, to cultivate respect and affection and forgiveness; and to show the serendipity that can happen when our minds are open that way. Appropriately, my Shepard's Buddhism moves a bit more to the foreground- I felt it fit because the galaxy's entering an 'era of compassion,' and because Shepard's 'good karma' has kinda seen him 'reincarnated.'

I started writing it before Extended Cut, before there was Leviathan, and finished it just days before the release of Citadel, so I've also tried to reconcile in one way or another the content that was released after I wrote "A Longer Haul." A lot of the immediate and general post-game stuff that I wrote for "ALH," I'm kinda pleased to say, felt pretty prescient, but Leviathan and Citadel both wove threads into the canon that are now dangling in my continuity. So I've tried to touch upon them in editing, allowing them to peek through here and there.

That said, I feel like- providing there's sufficient demand to warrant the work of extracting the
story that's continuing to unfold in my head- at least one more installment is now in order. To tie up loose ends, and to deal with the aftermath of Puritans' incursion. But I can already tell that it would dwarf "Disconnected." So I would really appreciate feedback, to help me refine my work and as a sort of assurance that there's an audience for it. Otherwise I could just sit back and watch the movie in my mind and spare my fingers a lot of typing- the better to save them for playing Multiplayer (1,010+ hours and counting).

[May 5 edit]: For anyone curious about the SR-3 I've envisioned, the main & lower deck layouts are posted on my deviantart profile. A search for "CSV Normandy SR-3 should find them.
Previously... (recap of Mass Effect 3 [pre-Extended Cut, pre-Leviathan, pre-Omega, pre-Citadel] and "A Longer Haul")

"Crucible Day" marked the end of the Reaper war. With the destruction of the mass relay network, the abrupt and mysterious departure of the Reapers from the worlds of the Milky Way, and the crash of the SSV Normandy SR-2 on a world between Sol and Arcturus, the assembled peoples of the liberation fleet stranded at Earth set themselves to the study of the ruined Citadel and Charon relay. Peace between the diverse aliens— even synthetics— came surprisingly easy, and eventually it was discovered that the same 'Crucible Event' that wrecked the relay network and preceded the Reapers' departure had also left a mark on the galaxy's inhabitants. The individuality and free will of synthetic life-forms like EDI and the geth were rendered inalienable by a dissemination of software, and organics acquired a biomechanical enhancement of uncertain origin, facilitating clear emotional communication with each other and— over time— hints of the same with synthetics. The alterations emerged gradually over the months following Crucible Day, but combined, this "synthempathetic" capability between sentient beings promised to usher in a new era of galactic peace and 'consensus.'

For Major Kaidan Alenko, marooned with the crew of the Normandy far from home, victory over the Reapers and their cycle of extinction was missing one thing: Commander Hadrian Shepard. Having finally acted upon their long-constrained feelings for each other, after the attempted Cerberus coup d'etat at the Citadel their relationship was blossoming. But after being violently separated from his partner and losing contact with his allies, Shepard died aboard the Citadel, leaving Alenko heartbroken and charged with leading Shepard's crew in their struggle to survive. After nearly a year stranded, the Normandy crew was rescued by the first in a new line of collaboratively-built interstellar-capable vessels commissioned by the new 'Consensus Council'- the CSV Shepard. Once aboard and reunited with the members of Shepard's crew who'd been stranded at Earth, he was informed by Liara and Javik that their study of the Mars prothean archive had uncovered a lead on a possible ancient medical technology capable of resurrecting Shepard.

When Shepard arrived at the lost prothean research outpost, Kaidan and his cohorts discovered preserved in stasis the last eight thousand survivors of the adori— an ancient counterpart to the asari removed from Thessia by the Prothean empire just prior to its collapse. The adori were capable of assimilating the genetic identity and biochemically encoded memories of other beings, becoming their precursor's 'regenesis.' Fortuitously, Kaidan had genetic material of Shepard's left behind from their night together en route to Cronos Station. Liara T'soni was outraged by the very concept of the protheans exploiting her people's 'cousin race,' and after wrestling with the morality of the issue, Alenko agonized over his decision to leave Shepard at rest. Then EDI intervened, giving Kaidan- and the galaxy- the gift he didn't dare ask for.

But fate had one more hurdle for Alenko. En route back to Earth, with the adori named Vattan undergoing a slow metamorphosis into the reincarnation of Shepard, EDI and the geth crew of the Shepard discovered that his transformation potentially threatened the very future of synthempathy for the whole galaxy. Acting without any sanction and with the help of EDI and the Shepard's geth 'virtual crew,' Alenko stole the recovered Normandy with Vattan-Shepard aboard, and used the Shepard's experimental mass relay drive to arrest the development of Vattan's synthempathetic architecture, allowing him to complete his change while preserving the gift for everyone else at the cost of rendering Kaidan and Shepard-to-be 'behind the curve,' their synthempathic evolution halted.
Upon their return to Earth, Alenko was incarcerated for his insubordination, prevented from learning what became of Vattan. But months later, while serving his sentence, Kaidan was visited by his Shepard, reborn, with no experience of the raid on Cronus, or of the battle to liberate Earth, or of the year that followed. Shepard used his public status as galactic saviour to arrange Kaidan's release- though Alenko was discharged from the Alliance military to serve exclusively as a Council Spectre- and the 'new' Shepard (his origin classified by the Alliance pending revelation of the adori to the galaxy, for their protection) was placed on detached duty with a new ship, the Normandy SR-3, and his newlywed husband at his side as they were tasked with helping to rebuild a galaxy still recovering from the Reaper war.

Terms: Project Phoenix Flight- a program established after Crucible Day, PPF is a collaboration to develop new 'conduit-drive' starships for the Consensus Council using data gleaned from studying the Ilos conduit and post-C-Day Charon relay; to spin off innovations from those vessels to upgrade the ships that survived the battle for Earth, so that they can eventually return their crews to their homeworlds; and finally, to find placements for the surviving crew of ships lost against the Reapers. Phoenix Flight's officer pool comprises thousands of personnel from every space-faring race, as well as hundreds of thousands of geth program volunteers eager to serve as 'virtual crew' aboard new ships.

Timeline so far-

Kaidan Born – Wed Aug 18, 2151
Shepard Born – Thurs Apr 11, 2154
Eden Prime attack – Mon Apr 14, 2183
Saren defeated – Thurs Jul 10, 2183
Normandy SR-1 destroyed by Collectors – Tues Jul 29, 2183
Shepard revived by Cerberus – Sun Jul 3, 2185
Omega Relay "suicide mission" – Sat Oct 1, 2185
Normandy returns from Galactic Core – Sun Oct 2, 2185
Alpha Relay incident – Wed Oct 12, 2185
Shepard surrenders to Alliance custody – Fri Oct 19, 2185
Invasion of Earth begins– Tues Apr 4, 2186
Crucible Day – Sun Jul 9, 2186
Normandy SR-2 returns to Earth – Fri Apr 20, 2187
Shepard "2.0" wakes up – Fri May 11, 2187
Marriage – Sat May 26, 2187
Arms crossed, a look of consternation on his face, Kaidan Alenko looked out the forward viewport of the Normandy SR-3 at the garden world below.

"What are we doing here?" he asked, sounding frustrated "The fight is out there. Millions of lives in the balance, and we're sight-seeing? " He turned and looked urgently at Shepard, leaning to his side against the frame of the open cockpit door behind them. "We have to get to Palaven! Or Tuchunka... or Earth... or... wherever, I don't know- where do you suppose the fight would be if anyone were fighting?"

Hadrian and the other bridge crew smiled at the theatrics- a couple even offered amused applause- and the commander shrugged. "Hard to say. But that was good. Sounded very earnest, you almost had me believing there was trouble somewhere."

"Indeed," EDI said from the co-pilot's seat, "before you dissembled with regards to the location, you were quite convincing. Afterwards, it became clear that you were making a joke."

Kaidan made a face, clearly appreciating the critique less than EDI had appreciated his mock seriousness. "Thanks, EDI, when you put it that way... Sheesh... Ah well, at least if the Council decides they don't need Spectres anymore- what with everyone getting along now- maybe I can get into acting."

"Or stand-up comedy," Joker offered sarcastically.

"It isn't too late to make that movie I suggested that time," Shepard's smile flashed something sly and he winked. "We're still young and hot."

"OH, hey, look at that, it's Eden Prime!" Joker interrupted, pointing out the viewport, trying to change the subject. "I bet you guys will be wanting to stop flirting and start the mission right away, right?" There was muted laughter around the CIC as everyone carried on with their work. In the week and a half since they'd set out from Earth on their maiden voyage, the crew was quickly becoming accustomed to a more casual environment than they might have been used to. The newlywed Spectres had decided to set a new tone for their new command together in a changed galaxy- 'our ship, life's short, so relax a bit.'

"Suppose so," Shepard said, relenting. "Lots of refugees out there on wrecked worlds still looking for somewhere nice to re-settle. Let's see about arranging some real-estate for them." He and Kaidan turned and marched purposefully up the walkway past the bridge stations on to the CIC-proper, rounding the triangular main console, and Hadrian mounted the handful of steps and take his seat on the raised section over the central holo projector. "Nymandra, open a channel to the colony please."

Normandy's newest communications officer, an asari assigned to the Project Phoenix Flight officer
pool following the destruction of her ship in the battle for Earth, began signalling the colony's capital from her console to Shepard's left. The new ship's science officer, a salarian named Pardik Hallis, approached Shepard with a datapad.

"One especially promising site for expansion west of the existing centre," Hallis suggested. He tapped the pad, swiped his fingers toward the main holo projector, and the display came alive with a 3D map of the surface. "Construction of one additional power plant and some prefabricated housing, enrichment of agricultural land to south, area could support an additional population of two thousand initially. Skilled workers could develop infrastructure for subsequent waves of immigration."

"I have an administrator Thomas Copeland, in the capital city of Gardener, Commander," Tebeus announced.

"Comms centre, please, Lieutenant. Kaidan?" Hade patted his chair as he got up to leave the command centre, and Alenko moved to take his place.

"While you've got them, ask the concierge if the honeymoon suite is available," Kaidan quipped after him.

"Everyone have your bags packed, after the survey and the negotiation's complete we're spending a few days before we head to Rannoch. Post-war R&R, that's an order," Shepard announced.

Having delivered a server of geth programs from the Crucible Day fleet to the turian shipyards at Aephis, to get them started on the fleet modernization program intended to incorporate conduit drives into existing ships across Council space, their next assignment was to deliver a QEC system to the quarian homeworld. Reclaimed just weeks before Earth was, most of the quarian population and billions of geth had been isolated there since the relay network collapse, and in return for the entangler Normandy was to pick up and transport another geth server and some physical platforms from Rannoch and ferry them back to Earth for Project Phoenix Flight.

Kaidan and Shepard had both been looking forward to re-visiting the quarian homeworld to see how much of the reported progress they'd made with the geth's help during the months after Crucible Day and before the Council started commissioning conduit drive capable ships to start restoring interstellar infrastructure. And they had some 'real estate' of their own to stake out- the Admiralty Board had promised them some land for a home away from home in gratitude for the commander's pivotal role in resolving their war for the planet.

They were milk runs. Errands. Not exactly leisurely affairs, because they would make life better for people who were still suffering the Reaper War's after-effects, but not urgent. Seconds didn't cost them lives. It was a new galaxy, and so far they were relishing it.

-X

Three hours later

-X

Hadrian and Kaidan stepped lightly into the penthouse of Gardener's prime hotel, Original Oasis.

"What can I say, nobody can say no to me. I'm irresistible," Shepard laughed, walking backwards, hands raised in a mock conciliatory gesture.

"I suppose saving civilization twice will have that effect," Kaidan said, sliding his jacket off and draping it over the back of a chair in the foyer. "Just don't get cocky. If you think like that then
sooner or later you're going to ask somebody for too much and they're gonna turn you down."

"Ahh, don't bust my bubble. Let reality kick in on its own schedule. Until then... want to get 'cocky' with me, husband?" Shepard grinned wickedly and tugged Kaidan by his belt toward the picture window overlooking the city's main promenade. "It isn't the observation lounge window, but..."

"You just won't be satisfied until we get caught, will you? Were you always such an exhibitionist and I just never noticed?" Kaidan shook his head and sighed, smiling.

"The two of us together makes me feel... bigger. Expansive, like I could bust out of my skin. And like you said one time, I want the whole galaxy to know. I want to show us off to everyone. I want 'em all to see how happy you make me. Maybe it'll give them a lift, too." Hadrian hooked his finger in Kaidan's belt loop, holding him close, and leaned with his arm over his head against the window frame and looked down on the people coming and going below. "They could certainly use some good news, after everything they've been through."

Kaidan put his arm around Shepard's waist and leaned into him. "Yeah... well, at least everybody's been getting along. People who can feel each others' pain all seem to prefer to talk rather than tussle and share rather than shoot."

"It's so weird," Hadrian said, shaking his head. "You know it's been six weeks since anyone pointed a gun at me? I think that's a record." It took a moment for Kaidan to process- again- that, after a fashion, Shepard- this Shepard- was only six weeks old, the 'reincarnation' of his Hadrian via the assimilation of his genetic identity and encoded memories by a 2,000 year old adori 50,000 years 'out of time.' As far as he was concerned, everything that had happened since the morning of the Normandy's raid on Cerberus' headquarters- nearly a year's worth of time- was a second-hand story. Including Shepard's own actions on Earth that day that changed everything.

"You were in custody on Earth for four months before the invasion," Kaidan said, trying to direct the conversation toward some common frame of reference.

"And every guard carried a gun. Which they occasionally had to point at me... when I asked for too much." Hadrian chuckled, actually sounding a touch nostalgic.

"What's really weird is not having fired a gun in almost a year, outside of the range I mean... Peace is weird." Kaidan looked to Shepard and smiled. "Good weird, though."

"I wish I could take all the credit." Hadrian looked down at his hand, then raised it to his mouth and bit at the corner of his thumb idly. "But, you know... that's still his."

It was unusual, and frankly jarring, to hear Hade mention his 'predecessor,' who lived and died- then lived, and died again, technically. He'd been warned by the other adori he'd met, Satteveh, that such moments would come up where he'd be reminded that the man he was with was not- and had come to know that he was not- the original. But then, he had thought about the discrepancy himself just moments earlier, and the synthempathic connection the two had forged over the past few weeks had grown strong enough that even when they weren't focusing on it, they still seemed subliminally 'tuned in' to each other. Now Kaidan thought of another of those moment's he'd had with 'the original' Shepard, on Cronos station, one of the ones his resurrection wouldn't remember.

"You're Shepard enough for me," he said. He took Hadrian's hand and started drawing him back toward the bed, eliciting a smile. When they reached it, Kaidan rotated their bodies and gently pushed Hadrian backwards onto the bed, climbing on top, straddling the vanguard and leaning down to kiss him. When he sat upright again, he reached between their pressed-together pelvises to slowly start undoing Shepard's belt and pants.
"Hard to believe it was only a couple years ago and a few miles from here that everything started for us- the prothean beacon and Saren and those heretic geth." Shepard smirked and slid his hands up Kaidan's t-shirt, squeezing his pectorals. "Remember how skinny you were back then, compared to now?" he laughed.

"My responsibilities got bigger. I hit the gym to keep up," Kaidan smiled, then flexed his chest a bit under Hadrian's hands. Shepard bit his lip and growled approvingly, then turned his hands over and reached up the grip the t-shirt's collar from the inside. Kaidan slapped his hands. "No- do not tear another of my shirts," he said sternly. There was a mischievous twinkle in Hadrian's eye.

"Ooh, y'know I kinda get a kick out of you giving me orders like that."

"Mnhmm, I can feel the 'kick' you're getting out of it." Alenko leaned down again, Shepard pulling the t-shirt up over Kaidan's head in the process, and their mouths found each other again. Now, I recall you saying something about us getting it on here?

'I believe I more accurately said I wanted to fuck you here.'

'Well, then, we'll need to get rid of these.' Kaidan gently bit Hadrian's lower lip, got up again, and shimmied off the foot of the bed. Smiling, Hadrian pulled off his shirt and then draped his husband's t-shirt over his face, inhaling Kaidan's scent from it and curling his left arm above his head while the sentinel pulled off Shepard's boots and then his pants, revealing his 'tenting' black boxerbriefs. Eyeing the growing bulge and watching Hadrian start groping and tugging at it with his right hand, Kaidan licked his lips and stripped off the rest of his own clothes. Once he stood fully exposed, he hurried to fish their 'supplies' out of his travel bag before setting them on the bed and climbing back on top of Hadrian's knees. He put his hand over Shepard's, helping to stroke him through his underwear. Hadrian groaned and started writhing excitedly.

"Are you wearing a different cologne?" came Shepard's breathless voice from under his t-shirt. "This is sort of like... vanilla and brown sugar"

"You like it?" Kaidan asked, and squeezed Shepard's hard-on a bit tighter, rubbing his stomach with the other hand.

"Mmmnnhh- I love the sort of apple pie smelling stuff you normally have on, the Radian? But this is nice too. Aww man... okay- off- need these off." Hadrian tried to remove his shorts but Kaidan kept their hands clasped together, sliding up and down, drawing him closer to climax. Hade groaned and then whimpered a little. "Nnnhh- s-stop... I- I want to..."

Kaidan chuckled and relented, pulling Shepard's hand off and holding it pinned to the bed at his side. When Hadrian reached down with his free hand Kaidan intercepted it and held it to the other side, then, grinning, he leaned down and kissed Shepard's waist, traced the muscular line where his abs met his obliques with his nose. Finally he nuzzled his face against the bulge in his husband's shorts, and pressed his lips to the waistband to tug them down with his teeth.

"Oooh god," Shepard moaned as they slid down little by little. He wriggled his right hand out of Kaidan's grip and put it on Alenko's head, running his fingers through his hair and pulling his face closer, gasping at the sensation of Kaidan's breath hot against his groin.

Once he'd exposed Shepard's throbbing hard-on, Kaidan squeezed his hand under Hadrian's hip and firm, flexing cheeks, grabbed his boxer-briefs from the back and pulled them down entirely. The two felt each other's quickening arousal through their wireless connection, like snowballs racing side-by-side down a slope, growing and accelerating together, trading material where they touched.
As Kaidan positioned himself astride Hadrian's pelvis and reached back to get him 'geared up,' Shepard's hands found his hips and rubbed them eagerly. One hand wandered inward, wrapping around Kaidan's own erection and starting to stroke it, sending a dizzying wave of pleasure up Alenko's spine. He struggled to concentrate on applying the lubrication between them, then finally collapsed forward, nuzzling their foreheads together through his t-shirt that was still laid over Hadrian's face like a veil. He saw it puffing up over Shepard's mouth with excited panting, and used his free hand to fold it up, exposing the commander's lips but leaving it over his nose and eyes like a blindfold.

"Mmmhh- where did you get it anyway?" Shepard panted, breathlessly. Kaidan pressed their lips together as he started to lower himself slowly, wincing ever so slightly as the pressure increased against his sphincter.

'What? Where did I get what?' he thought as their tongues wrestled with each other. He closed his eyes and started to see dazzling flashes of light as he bore down and felt Shepard start to slide inside him. Hadrian's fist tightened and he pumped Kaidan's cock faster, coaxing him into it, the pleasure making it easier to relax.

'The vanilla and brown sugar stuff. It's familiar but I can't exactly place it...' Kaidan took a deep breath and as they kissed he experienced a sensory flash from Shepard via their connection- that sweet, swallow-you-whole smell of the cologne that he'd gotten desensitized to.

He wasn't sure exactly how it happened... it was probably the lusty atmosphere of the moment, enveloping and assimilating the answer to the question. But in the instant he thought of Steve Cortez- who favoured 'the vanilla and brown sugar stuff' and had given Kaidan a bottle of it as a wedding present, having remembered Kaidan making an approving comment about it during their time stranded at Xi Bootes- he briefly pictured the shuttle pilot... there, with them... naked with his bronze complexion, perhaps straddling Hadrian's waist, taking Kaidan in, looking back over his shoulder into Kaidan's eyes with those brilliant blue eyes of his.

"Whoah," Shepard blurted out in surprise, turning his head a little to break their lip-lock. "Really?"

Kaidan physically shuddered from the feeling of shock he received from Hadrian, then froze in place, feeling heat rise in his face. He swallowed hard and sighed, embarrassed but still also a littlewhelmed with the sensations- Hadrian still inside him, and still gripping his twitching manhood, but stopped cold. After a pause, Shepard reached up with his free hand and pulled Kaidan's t-shirt off the upper half of his face revealing raised eyebrows.

"Hi, still me under here," he said in a tone that was a bit hard to decipher. It wasn't exactly angry, and there was surprise and a hint of teasing- his expression even looked a little bit amused- but there was an unmistakable trace of hurt. "A bit early in the honeymoon to be thinking about adultery, ain't it?" He gave a little hip thrust- playfully punitive- but Kaidan gasped and grunted with a bit of pain as the sudden awkwardness had caused him to tense up. He gritted his teeth, and sensing his discomfort Shepard withdrew a little.

"I'm sorry..." Kaidan said sheepishly in a low voice. "You just... asked about that, and I thought about him, and in the moment... and when we were marooned, we sort of bonded. It was over how we both missed you- nothing happened!- but it was while we were still getting used to the synthempathy thing, and I occasionally picked up some... thoughts... from him, like transference of feelings, and I..." But the stammering delivery of the explanation even sounded kind of sketchy to Kaidan himself. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "It was just a thing that popped into my head, it didn't mean anything."
"Hmm," Hadrian said, the corner of his mouth twitching downward for a moment. "Well it isn't a big deal to me, I'm not freaking out or anything, but ah... this could be a problem..."

"I'm not...! I mean, you're enough for me, please don't think that I'm thinking otherwise!" Kaidan pleaded.

"No, I mean..." Hadrian half-chuckled, and shook his hand a little, wagging Kaidan's now flaccid member, "the problem could be your feeling guilty over one little thought. Now I'm feeling that and it's kind of... ah..." Kaidan noticed that the discomfort in his hind end had abated as Hadrian had lost his own erection too.

"Kind of killed the mood... right." Kaidan sighed and pressed his mouth against the nape of Shepard's neck. Sorry.

"It's alright," Hadrian said, sounding- or trying to sound, at any rate- undisappointed. "We can take another crack at it later if you want to. You know I'll be down for it."

Wincing a little, Kaidan dismounted Hade and rolled onto his side, laying an arm over Shepard's chest and a leg over his pelvis, holding him close. The two laid there for several long minutes, processing their feelings over the interruption. Eventually Hadrian lifted Kaidan's t-shirt off his forehead and gently draped it over Alenko's head.

"Maybe we should have a shower first," Shepard mused, running his fingers through Kaidan's hair. "Then put on some of the Radian, hm?"
The next day, Jun 19, 2187

Walking down the main Gardener promenade holding hands, Hadrian and Kaidan checked out some of the colony's storefronts. They'd been looking for some kind of memento for their cabin, since Eden Prime featured so prominently in their relationship. Besides being the site of their first mission together, if Shepard hadn't returned here during the Reaper invasion and recovered Javik from his ancient stasis pod, then Kaidan might never have learned of the prothean bio-science base on Nibanna Vedi, and never have had the opportunity to 'resurrect' his love.

That return had been settled, administratively at least, by classified decree of the Alliance and the Council; the 'new' Shepard would be treated like the old one- still a Spectre and still nominally attached to the Systems Alliance Navy with the rank of lieutenant commander- until and unless he betrayed the fiction that he'd been comatose for a year following the Crucible Event and divulged that he'd been given his new lease on life by adori regenesis. It was still sorting itself out in little ways, though. Shepard's old crew who'd taken part in the discovery of the adori knew the truth, but many of his new ship's people didn't. His own mother didn't, and was still fuming at Admiral Hackett for supposed concealing of his supposed condition for nearly a year. But Hannah Shepard had soldiered on, directing Cooperative and Diplomatic Projects at the Alliance's post-war Joint Advanced Starship Design Bureau. She'd helped design the SR-3 for Kaidan's presumed return to duty, in fact, before she even knew her resurrected son would be assuming command instead.

Now Shepard and Kaidan were discussing their ideas for their 'summer home' on Rannoch, and how odd it might be having geth for neighbours, standing in front of a florist that touted a local breed of something like an orchid- supposedly unkillable and unique to the planet- when both of their omni-tools beeped, alerting them of incoming messages. Hadrian withdrew his hand from Kaidan's and booted his up, and Nymandra's face appeared in the holographic vidcomm display.

"Shepard residence," Hadrian quipped, smiling broadly and looking over the top of his aviator-style sunglasses.

"Commander. Sorry to interrupt your leave time, but the Council is calling on the QEC. It seems important," the asari reported. Shepard's brow crinkled and he removed his shades, hanging them from his shirt collar.

"Hm. Tell them I'll be there shortly, I just have to get a cab back to the space port." Nymandra nodded and her image blinked out. Hadrian looked at Kaidan, brow furrowed slightly in confusion. Important? What could be going on? he wondered.

Kaidan shrugged. "A problem with one of the other new ships, maybe? Engine troubles? I think the closest one is the new explorer prototype, the Solus. I can't imagine what else would qualify as an emergency anymore."

"Well, I'll head back to the ship and find out what's going on." Hadrian booted up his omni-tool to summon a taxi with the local tourism app. "You should get one of those, the red one, it's nice," he said, nodding toward the displayed orchids.
"The most expensive one? The new galaxy is more compassionate, but market economics is still alive and gouging."

"Just turn on the charm," Shepard grinned, "tell them how much you like it, do a subtle name drop, they're bound to cut you a deal."

"I'm Spectre Alenko, and this is my favourite florist on Eden Prime?" Kaidan said, making a sceptical, slightly teasing face.

"Oh zip it. That was cute, but all those shops on the Citadel are gone. I'm not even sure that's funny- it might be too soon," Hadrian grimaced. Under any other circumstances, though, even he had to admit it was a clever prod.

"Meet back at the hotel or aboard the ship?" Kaidan asked.

"Oh, no, you get that ass back to the hotel- if it's an 'emergency'" Shepard made 'air quotes' with his fingers "then I'm not cutting short our shore leave for nothing, we worked too hard for it. But if it's really important I'll call you and then the rest of the crew back."

Twenty minutes later, as he was stepping back into their hotel room with the red orchid- which the vendor had given him free of charge the moment she recognized him, and learned that it was for the cabin Kaidan shared with Commander Shepard, no less- Alenko's omni-tool beeped. He opened the vidcomm application to see Hadrian's face, looking grim.

"Get back to the Normandy," he said. "It's important."

-X

CSV Normandy SR-3, an hour later

-X

"Almost two hours ago, the Council lost all contact with Rannoch. We're being dispatched to find out the reason for the communications blackout," Shepard told his assembled command crew assembled around the conference table in the secure complex of diplomatic and command facilities on the main deck's port side behind the CIC. Besides Kaidan, Nymandra and Hallis, there was Joker, EDI, Adams and Chakwas, who'd followed them from the SR-2; Iren'Vanos and E51/76, the prototype's quarian and geth propulsion and power distribution engineers; and Delegate, the chief 'digital crewman' from the CSV Shepard, who had been 'punished' for its participation in Kaidan's unsanctioned actions aboard that ship with reassignment to the same position as primary intermediary between the organic and virtual crew aboard the new Normandy. The command crew was rounded out by an Alliance lieutenant, Dan Moore, who was Normandy's new chief of security and leader of its specialist ground team, and one of his Project Phoenix Flight marines who doubled as the primary gunnery officer, a turian named Torvan Imperatus. Though built by the Alliance, the SR-3 had been commissioned by the Council for its two human Spectres, and so Shepard had had the opportunity to assemble a cosmopolitan crew of Alliance and PPF officers.

Steve was sitting in, too, and Hadrian noticed that Kaidan hadn't made eye contact with the lieutenant since he walked into the room.

"I thought they didn't have a QEC yet, though? And I thought that quantum entanglement systems couldn't be jammed or eavesdropped upon?" Adams asked.

"No, that's right on both counts," Iren interjected, hands clasped in front of him on the conference table. "All of the communication outside Rannoch's star system since the destruction of the mass
relays has been facilitated by the geth. On Crucible Day there were geth all over the galaxy taking part in the war against the Reapers, and ever since they've conveyed messages for the rest of us via their galaxy-wide FTL networking. They've been our only line of communication with most worlds that didn't have entanglement communicators after the relays were wrecked."

"All geth telemetry from system-Tikkun has terminated, however," Delegate confirmed. "We continue to receive ping replies and data routing from the our nearest comm-net buoy two point three four light-days outside the star system, but no signals from the planet or platforms stationed in-system."

"Is it possible that they're fighting again?" Joker asked. "I mean I hope they aren't, but if they were, could cutting off communication be part of it?"

"Prior to cessation of communications there were no inter-geth data streams indicative of any resumption of hostilities with creators. Additionally, while blockading creators' outbound proxy traffic would serve to conceal a conflict from third parties, terminating contact with all other geth outside system-Tikkun would not be conducive to-"

"But is it possible?" Iren cut in, clearly concerned. Delegate's 'facial' shutters flicked and Kaidan could swear he detected annoyance from the platform, but pretty much anyone else at the table-with the exception of Hadrian- could probably tell better; his conspiracy with EDI and Delegate aboard the Shepard to return Shepard to life without sacrificing the dawning synthempathetic 'field' had resulted in cutting short the development of the synthempathic architecture, rendering the two of them- alone in the whole galaxy- 'behind the curve' of understanding others' thoughts and feelings, especially the strange perspective of synthetics.

"There is a non-zero probability that geth and creators at system-Tikkun have once again engaged in hostilities. The likelihood that geth would initiate such hostilities, however, is extremely remote," Delegate responded. "As is the likelihood of creator instigation, we presume."

"Other explanations possible," Pardik offered, curious and trying to be optimistic at the same time. "Perhaps geth on Rannoch have undergone some sort of 'evolutionary' event, ceased acting as communication proxies out of disinterest. Perhaps adopted an insular lifestyle en mass. Or perhaps throwing first party. Countless possibilities with an emergent new form of life."

"Maybe they discovered sex and they're having a planet-wide swingers' party," Cortez joked. Hadrian swore he saw Kaidan squirm awkwardly and start to blush, while Moreau looked at EDI and a deadpan expression.

"That does it- EDI, you're staying here," he said. Shepard jumped back in before EDI could retort, or before anyone else could offer their own theories.

"Pardik's right, though, the geth have been a race of full AIs for almost a year now and at the speed their minds work, the Rannoch subset of their consensus could have stopped squawking for any number of reasons- the possibilities are so wide open that it's probably pointless to speculate. It was our next stop anyway, so let's just go and check it out- hopefully it's nothing- and we'll resume our shore leave afterwards. Somewhere nice, I promise. EDI, Rannoch will be the farthest trip any conduit drive ship has taken since the Shepard rolled off the line, any revisions to our estimated ETA?"

"Refinements to the technology in general since its inception, and fine-tuning of our drive in particular by Lieutenants Adams and Vanos, have extended the viable range of each individual jump to six hundred fifty-one light-years. Assuming an average layover of two and a half hours at each stop along our path to find a suitable location to ground the core's static charge, we should
arrive in approximately twelve and a half days."

"And once we've plotted grounding locations between the two points, subsequent trips should be faster," Adams added. "That's the biggest thing slowing us down right now, is not knowing for sure when and where we'll be able to dump the static sinks, so we end up having to make more and shorter jumps."

"Alright, so a little less than two weeks this time out," Shepard pensively put his hand over his mouth for a moment before looking up around the table to several of his people in turn. "Lieutenant Moore, just in case eleven months of peace and quiet has made us all soft, I'd like you and your team to run some ship-wide battle readiness drills en route. Boarding and counter-boarding procedures, and so on. Work up a schedule with Kaidan, nothing too disruptive but be thorough."

Moore, a vanguard himself, nodded affirmatively. "Aye aye, Sir, I'll try to make sure that if anyone actually shoots at us we remember how to shoot back."

"Adams, I'd like you and EDI to conduct damage simulations and dee-pee readiness testing. And see if you can come up with any further tweaks to improve our performance, I'm sure there are still some bugs that could be worked out of the Normandy, where she's brand new."

"Yes Sir," Adams acknowledged.

"And Nymandra and Delegate, keep working at re-establishing some contact with the geth at Rannoch. We've got over six thousand geth programs loaded aboard this ship, surely some of them can put their virtual brains together and come up with something." Shepard tapped his fingers on the desk and stood. "Call the crew back, I want us to put out in two hours. That'll be all."

The assembled officers rose and filed out except for Kaidan and Moore. The twenty-eight year old lieutenant had been chosen for the new stealth recon frigate after distinguishing himself during the battle for Earth, and when he was offered any position in the nascent new fleet afterwards he'd asked- even before Alenko's return to Earth with Vattan mid-transformation into the new Shepard- to serve aboard the first new ship that the Alliance named 'Normandy.' When the SR-3 was commissioned, Admiral Hackett had run the lieutenant's assignment up the flagpole with her new commander, and it seemed now that Moore's prescience had landed him under his idols. He wasn't overly imposing, about five foot eight but he was lean, with short light brown hair and wide grey eyes and an easy but professional demeanour. What little Kaidan knew about him so far was that he had a thing for very old comic books from Earth, and had a story about why he didn't drink heavily anymore but he didn't care to tell it.

"Sirs, just to clarify," he said, "any suggestions about how to conduct combat training when people aren't even really comfortable hitting each other anymore? I stone-cold killed a few hundred Reaper troops on Crucible Day, but since then... the last time I seriously yelled at one of my guys, I felt like an asshole for the rest of the day. I can still play drill-sergeant if I don't take myself too seriously, but... All this sensitivity and understanding crap, it's kind of a double-edged sword, frankly, Sirs."

"Hallis might be of some help with that, chief," Kaidan suggested. "He's been installing holographic projectors all over the ship, I think his idea was to let the virtual geth crew present themselves anywhere, any time, without having to upload to one of our stock of platforms. You must have some simple VI programs to simulate enemy combatants for immersive VR sims- get a little help integrating them with the ship's array and you could do dummy-fire exercises against them."

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Major," Moore nodded, appreciative but with a slightly thoughtful frown- maybe because he hadn't thought of it himself.
"No problem, but, ah- you know I'm not a major in the Alliance navy anymore. I retired to focus on my duties as a Spectre for the Council." Kaidan looked sidelong at Hadrian. They both knew that wasn't exactly the whole truth- that in order to resume his Spectre duties the Alliance had discharged him so that they could release him from his incarceration for his unauthorized mission to bring Shepard back from the dead. But they couldn't talk about that, and as everyone else's synthempathetic abilities grew day by day they just had to hope they could continue to pass off the 'official version' of events- that the Commander Shepard who'd boarded the Citadel that day had spent a year in a coma, and been revived by his retrieved XO and partner on an unsanctioned personal mission to find a long-lost prothean healing machine. At least until the Alliance and the Council were prepared to publicly speak the truth.

This time, anyway, Moore seemed to buy it. Or if he sensed that it was a story, he gave no indication. "Ah, you'll always be 'Major Alenko' to me, Sir. The brass were crazy to let you go."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Kaidan smiled. Moore departed and Kaidan and Shepard were alone.

"You know who'd want to be aboard as long as we're going that way, especially if there might be trouble."

"I know," Hadrian replied, sighing a little. "But Tali's sixty-five hundred light-years in the wrong direction, and besides, she's doing important work. We'll see her again, and Liara and the rest of them, when we get back from Rannoch. Things change, you know? Friends and even families eventually go their separate ways when people are needed where they're needed. It's a new galaxy. It might not need the old team doing the same old thing anymore."

Kaidan looked out the window to their left at Eden Prime's blue sky and shrugged. "Maybe. Though if it's all so new, why does this feel eerily familiar? The two of us, aboard a brand new ship called Normandy, about to jet off towards a planet with a communications blackout on our shakedown cruise? You don't get a creepy feeling about this?"

"Everything old is new again," Hadrian quipped. "So what was with you, anyway, not even looking at Cortez?"

"What? Uh, I don't know, it just felt a little awkward after the other day," Kaidan blushed a little.

"We recovered in fan-fucking-tastic form the other day, the cleaning staff at that hotel are going to think we held a prom night gang-bang." Shepard nudged Kaidan playfully, putting a hand on the back of his neck and drawing him close. "And like you said, it was just a thought, not a 'thing.' You guys are friends, don't get all weird toward him." He kissed Alenko's forehead then a swat on the seat of his pants. "Go on, get outta' here, I've got to get back on the entangler to bring the higher-ups up to speed on this and then log it. Before we leave, why don't you contact one of the delivery companies and see if you can get us some of those sun-dried tomatoes they had at that market? I want to make you something tonight but if I have no tomatoes it'll just be stupid."

"Those weren't tomatoes- he called them mutatoes and I'm pretty sure they're more like giant grapes."

Shepard grimaced, a little confused. "Man... the galaxy's weird sometimes. Well, see what you can do? I want to treat you nice before I treat you nasty again."

"Uh huh. Well shave your face before then, under this uniform I look like I was wrestling with a badger wrapped in sandpaper."

"I was only doing as I was told," Had said with an innocent tone, crossing his arms, smiling
wickedly, and chewing a bit on his lower lip at the recollection. "And you weren't complaining at the time."

"Well, now I'm telling you to shave. And I retired a major so I would outrank you."

"Yes Sir, Major Hotness, Sir."

Kaidan rolled his eyes and shook his head, smirking, and headed out. Despite their levity, he still had a bad feeling about Rannoch. After how hard-won their victory there had been, for the whole planet to go silent seemed like a bad omen. But surely the geth and quarians couldn't be at each others' throats again? The geth were helping the civilians offloaded from the quarian flotilla to resettle their ancestral homeworld, and that was before synthempathy. Now it was probably ground zero for the greatest collaboration of organic and synthetic lifeforms anywhere in the galaxy, with the possible exception of Earth where tens of thousands of ships that had taken part in the Crucible Day assault had been stranded together ever since, waiting for some way to follow in the conduit drive testbed ships' footsteps.

At least this time one thing was different: Hadrian was loving him... and cooking for him.
"Come on, your lazy, out-of-shape slackers! Twenty more! Maybe. Unless I change my mind." Moore marched slowly up the line of crew members doing pushups on the floor of the port side hangar. Shepard had him whipping the entire crew into shape, and he'd even submitted himself to the extra drill. He had a cocky smile on his face as he breezed along through the workout, Kaidan just keeping up at his side. Some of the others were struggling, though.

"One! Two! Three! Let me hear you groan, kids! Four! Five! Come on, I love the smell of your sweat! It gets me hard!"

"I'll believe it when I see it!" Shepard laughed out loud. Moore's head snapped like a catapult in Hadrian's direction and he stalked back down the row.

"Was that supposed to be some kind of joke!?" he barked, leaning down to shout near Hadrian's head. "That's twenty more for you, Commander Smart-ass! Sir." Hadrian grinned and Kaidan clenched his teeth to fight back a smile that might get him in trouble too.

"Six! Seven! Eight! And pray that the commander doesn't give me any more lip or it'll be more for everybody!" Nine! Ten!"

On the other side of Shepard, Cortez groaned loudly and his arms gave out. He crumpled to the deck panting and cracking up with exhausted, anxious laughter. Moore was in front of him immediately, on his knees in front of the pilot and yelling sternly.

"I'm sorry, Mister Cortez, do you find the idea of a painful death because of a lack of upper body strength funny?"

Steve moaned and started laughing harder- of course, the question was absurd. But when he caught his breath he replied with "no, Lieutenant, but I've got nothing left!"

"I'll take the rest of his, El-tee!" Shepard called out.

"Well isn't that sweet of you, Commander- are you in loooove with him?"

"We succeed or fail as a group, Lieutenant," Hadrian answered.

"Less talking, more counting!" It was one of Moore's ground team, Corporal Ben Herman, who was also keeping up with the workout just fine. Moore hurried to the corporal's place and told him to do ten more.

"Eleven, boys and girls! Twelve! Thirteen! My name is Lieutenant Moore and I love to give you more pain- I call it Moore pain!"

Now Kaidan cracked a laugh at the marine's caricature.
"Ten more for the XO!"

"I'll take ten from the XO!" Hadrian shouted, looking to Kaidan and winking.

"Was that another joke!? Was that a dick joke, Commander Smart-ass!? Sir!?"

"If the XO's packing ten I wouldn't call that a joke!" Cortez called out merrily.

Despite their pain, everyone on the floor started laughing and flopping to the deck. Amid the banter, Moore had lost all control over the group, but it wasn't the first time Shepard had reduced the training sessions to such a state over the last few days.

"That's it! That's it, you're all done except for our illustrious commander! You all make me sick! You've got twenty-seven left to go, Commander Smart-ass!"

As Moore barked a count at Shepard, Kaidan and Cortez and the other crew- except for the ground-team members, who as a rule kept going as long as anyone was going- pulled themselves groaning to their feet and staggered to the benches along the interior wall. Kaidan grabbed his towel and wiped his forehead as Cortez dropped heavily to the bench beside him.

"So is he a masochist the rest of the time, too, or just when we're doing PT?" Steve asked breathlessly, bumping his shoulder against Kaidan's.

"He doesn't like pain, no," Kaidan chuckled, resting his head back against the wall. "He's just kind of an adrenaline junkie."

"A thrill-seeker. Lucky you," Cortez laughed, stretching out his arms, bulging from the exertion. Kaidan suddenly became aware of the musky, masculine smell of the pilot, and swallowed hard.

"It has some perks. He's a bit of a handful sometimes, though."

Cortez snorted, and Kaidan felt a hint of his affection, and somewhat repressed attraction, for the two of them.

"Did he have that much stamina before, or does it seem like he got a bit of an upgrade from... you know...?" Kaidan 'tisked' quietly and shook his head a little.

"From that thing that we can't talk about in mixed company?"

"Sorry... So... any new intel about Rannoch, or are we still flying in blind?" Steve winced as he stretched his neck.

"Still no comm traffic out. I think even the geth crew are starting to worry. I'm still not much good at 'reading' them, but Delegate actually seems preoccupied whenever I talk to him."

Hadrian finally finished his push-ups and he and the other marines got up off the deck. Moore barked "get lost!" and gave Hadrian a light, playful kick in the ass as he walked over toward the bench and then turned to talk to his ground team that had gathered around him.

"I think he's starting to warm up to me," Shepard smirked as he picked up his towel, wiped the sweat from his face, and unzipped his N7 hoodie- which he was wearing without a t-shirt underneath- to squeeze the towel under his arms. With a sideways glace, Kaidan noticed Cortez stealing a discreet look at the commander's hard, sweaty torso.

"How could anyone not?" Steve grinned.
"You were showing off a little, don't you think?" Kaidan asked. Hade shrugged, zipped his sweater halfway back up and pulled the hood over his head, smiling.

"Maybe a little. But we all need the work-out, right? If we're heading back into a scrap, we need to be ready. Peacetime's made us a little soft." Shepard looked over at the marine team, who were clearly gearing up to do some more drill without the rest of them, his expression a little wistful, as though part of him missed the simplicity of training hard all the time and leaving the big decisions to others.

"So you do think we're flying toward a fight, Commander?" Cortez asked, sounding concerned.

"Well whether it's an internal thing or an external thing, something's kept Rannoch completely silent for nine days now. If it's something unfriendly, it's unfriendly and packing some serious power to suppress the whole system. I hate to say it, but it could be bad." The three, along with Nymandra and a couple of the other crewmen, sat or stood in silence a moment, contemplating what might lie ahead, until Cortez smacked his palms on his thighs and rose to his feet.

"Well, if we might be headed toward our deaths, there's one more thing we need to train for," he said earnestly. He grabbed Kaidan's wrist and pulled him up, too, then Hadrian's, drawing them from the wall to the middle of the fight deck and looking up at the ceiling. "EDI! Can you stream my dance folder to the hangar?"

A pulsing musical beat started sounding over the intercom speakers, filling up the bay. Kaidan was pretty sure he recognized it from Purgatory before the Citadel was destroyed, and he rolled his eyes and smiled dryly.

"We still need to teach you to dance worth a damn, Commander. Come on, show us some of those moves of yours." Steve started dancing on the spot and motioning to coax Alenko and Shepard to join in. After a moment, tired as he was and with seeming reluctance, Kaidan started to join in. The marine team stood back, watching and chuckling, and just audible through the music Kaidan heard Nymandra scold crewman Haynes to the effect that she was an officer of the Council fleet, and was never 'a dancer.'

"Is this-" Shepard chuckled, "you've got to be kidding me. Steve, your music is almost two hundred years old."

"It isn't my fault dance music on Earth has stagnated since the early twenty-first century!" Cortez laughed, brushing the criticism off. "They could have invented new instruments, or genetically engineered a wider range of hearing. But ooh no, they just kept recycling and remixing and rehashing, eventually going through every possible permutation until they figured out what was commercially successful and then flogged it non-stop ever since. Don't blame me for a hundred and eighty years of non-evolution."

"Fair enough" Shepard grinned, and after listening a bit more to take in the rhythm, started playing along, alternating stepping from side to side and slightly swaying his shoulders and hips.

"Oh. Wow. That's a damned shame," Moore remarked, making a face. None of his crew looked very impressed with their CO's leaden flailing, but they did seem to be enjoying the music, and Dan walked his team a little farther down the hangar deck to begin hand-to-hand drills.

"Oh man," Steve laughed, giving Hadrian a playful shove, "that's just tragic. Here, look- your husband's got some moves- watch us and learn." He leaned a little closer to Alenko and closed his eyes, the track starting to animate him from head to toe. Watching him, Kaidan suddenly felt intensely self-conscious; he wanted to join in, but with Hadrian watching them he was afraid it
might come off wrong if he enjoyed himself too much. He looked warily at Shepard, who was still smiling, looking unperturbed.

'Go on,' he heard in his head- Shepard's 'voice'- and he tried to relax. He reached out, took Hade's hand, and drew him close behind him until they were pressed together back-to-front. Hadrian put his hands on Kaidan's hips and started to follow his lead, the heat of his body blazing against Kaidan's back. As the couple moved together, Cortez- his eyes still closed- swayed closer, his hands brushing against Alenko's waist. Realizing how close they were, he restrained his movement a little but his hands found Hadrian's on Kaidan's hips, and he opened one eye a crack to verify his suspicion. Smiling at the sight of Shepard moving a bit more gracefully, he looked into Kaidan's eyes.

Hade's breath was hot against the back of his neck and Kaidan started to feel a stirring in Shepard's sweatpants against his rear. In front of him, Cortez closed the gap a bit more, their chests brushing against each other lightly. Their heady, sweaty scents all mixed together.

A visual of the three of them, naked and tangled together on a bed, flashed through Kaidan's head, but it had that feeling of 'translation' to it- like it was being received via synthempathy from one of his dance partners, though he couldn't tell from whom, or even if he wasn't fooling himself into believing it had come from someone else- and he gasped, suddenly feeling himself start to stiffen.

Cortez's eyes widened a bit at the same time, and Kaidan felt Hadrian inhale sharply. Had they all felt that?

"Oh! Uh... wow... sorry?" Steve blushed a little, backing off a step.

"I... ah..." Kaidan stammered.

"Yeah," Hadrian chuckled inscrutably, "well..."

"I'm, ah, not sure where that came from," Cortez whispered, smirking awkwardly.

"I might have some idea," Shepard quipped. Kaidan cleared his throat and took Hadrian's hands in his, turning partway to face him.

"Maybe we should all cool down a little," he suggested sheepishly, a bit pleadingly, "I need a shower."

"Not the worst idea I've heard," Shepard added. The pair turned to Cortez, the three of them exchanging somewhat questioning looks for a moment, then Hadrian said "we'll see you later, Steve."

Cortez smiled a bit tightly, eyebrows raised in the middle, as Kaidan and Hadrian walked past the spectating crew out of the hangar. They passed the Med Bay and the mess, and started down the long starboard side corridor that connected the crew section to the CIC, bridge, and the elevator to their cabin. As they walked, Alenko's pace started to quicken and after a moment Hadrian jogged a couple steps to catch up.

"Hey," he laughed softly, "what's the matter?"

"You 'saw' that too?" Kaidan asked, looking dead ahead and feeling embarrassed.

"If you mean what I think you mean, yeah, I got the picture."

"I don't- I don't think that was me," Kaidan stammered, "but I'm not sure, I mean I felt all three of
"It's not a big deal," Hadrian said, sounding light-hearted about it. "Whichever one of us it was, I think it was kind of understandable, don't you?"

"We've been married a month," Kaidan sighed, holding up in front of the memorial wall in the alcove inset to the wall across the hall from one of the viewports. "I love you, I don't- I'm not looking for anything more from Cortez. I don't want you to think that I'm... I'm not being unfaithful."

"I never suggested you were," Shepard said, offering an understanding look and taking Kaidan's hand. "And I'm not worried. That time on Eden Prime, it was a bit startling, yeah. But listen, I'm not worried. That 'flash' wasn't a big deal. We were kinda having a moment. I'm not upset, and you shouldn't be either."

Kaidan took a deep breath, looking out the window at the moon of the small, rocky planet they were descending to dump the drive charge into. He leaned against the wall and shook his head, face still feeling flushed with emotion. "I never thought I'd see a down-side to this new ability, besides how other people's hurt can kind of rub off," he said, "but this... I wonder how many other couples out there are getting fucked up by intrusive thoughts about other people that they can't just keep to themselves or deny anymore? I mean it's not uncommon, is it?"

"Without a doubt," Shepard agreed softly. "You shouldn't feel so guilty over it. We aren't our thoughts, and our thoughts aren't good or bad, they're just our thoughts. And if one of us thinks about someone else, it isn't the end of the world. Unless- you know- it also just happens that it's the end of the world and it's a coincidence. I suppose we'll find out in a few more days."

Kaidan laughed, still feeling a bit exasperated. "Do you think he knows? I mean, are things going to get weird?"

"Well if he didn't know the idea existed, I'd say he does now-" Kaidan groaned quietly and covered his face with his hands "-but so what? It doesn't have to get weird if we don't treat it like it's some big, awful thing. It's just an idea somebody had." Shepard cocked his head a little to one side and grinned. "It isn't even the worst idea I've ever heard of. But listen, I mean it, I'm not worried and I'm not upset."

"So Buddhists don't get jealous?" Kaidan asked, sounding a bit more sarcastic than he meant to.

"I don't get that worked up over idle thoughts. Mostly." Hadrian followed Kaidan's gaze out the window and he gently swung their hands from side to side between them. "He's cute, and we both like him, and he likes us, and we were grinding together- I don't think anybody's guilty of any thought-crime. Dwelling on it is what might cause tension."

"I suppose so," Kaidan conceded wearily. "I just- I don't want any wedges between us, and honestly, I don't want you to think that I'm carrying some secret 'thing' for someone else. We haven't had this long enough to be bored of each other yet, and I don't want everything to get fucked up by thinking about cheating."

"I won't hold your thoughts against you. I'm not sure any of us can afford to do that anymore. As for cheating- that's for us to define between ourselves. It's our relationship- our marriage- we set the terms."

Kaidan raised his eyebrows and took a deep, thoughtful breath, putting his hands in his pockets, leaning against the edge of the viewport and gazing outside again. "Whew..." he said, "that sounds
like the lead in to a talk about an open marriage."

"An honest one, at any rate," Hade shrugged. "But for argument's sake, if we were talking about that, what would you have to say?"

After a pensive pause, Alenko shook his head. "I... y'know, if you'd asked me a few years ago, I'd have been shocked, maybe even offended. Probably would have thought you were an ass and told you to go fuck yourself."

"You were a bit more uptight back then," Shepard smirked. Kaidan shot him a brief, faux dirty look, but suppressed a small smile of his own.

"I thought I was pretty open-minded, but I didn't know how sheltered and... ugh... 'old-fashioned' my ideas actually were. Since then I've seen... man... asari communes on Illium, a reform Mormon colony on Benning, five-parent families on Bekenstein... and despite what I thought when I was younger, all of them seemed to work. Those people seemed happy. And with you, now that we're together... it feels safe. It's like..."

"Like we could do whatever we want as long as we're together," Hadrian finished. "That's how I feel about it. Like as long as we're honest with each other, nothing could come between us. So I'm not worried. Whatever we might think, or whatever we... might decide to do about it? I trust you. I have no need, or use, or room left for jealousy."

"It's weird," Kaidan said, reaching out and grasping Shepard's hand, squeezing it. "Weird that that comes so easily. That you can make me feel so... secure, I guess... even after everything we've been through. You'd think I would be obnoxiously paranoid about losing you- to someone else, or some new catastrophe, or who knows what... but I just... It's like you said. I guess I don't have room for it anymore." He looked down at their intertwined fingers. "I just want to make the most of every moment we've got and stop worrying about whether we're doing it 'right,' according to anybody. Just living it, and letting it be good."

"Now that sounds like my practice rubbing off," Hadrian smiled and pulled closer to his XO, kissing him on the cheek.

"Well I'm glad it has. Anyway... how about a shower? You really do smell" They both chuckled, and looked longingly at each other, and finally resumed walking hand-in-hand to the elevator behind the CIC.
Normandy surged out of its corridor of zero-mass space projected ahead of it by the 'mini mass relay' slung under the main superstructure and the gimbaled rings of the system wound down to lock in their nested configuration. The sublight engines lit up and the stealthy frigate began its approach toward Rannoch several minutes away.

The CIC was a buzz of activity. EDI announced that the IES heat sink system was engaged and she was launching the Normandy's new swarm of satellite intelligence drones, controlled by geth programs, to expand her sensor horizon. From his place overlooking the main holo projector Shepard looked to Delegate, Nymandra and Hallis in turn at their stations around the triangular operation centre. "Reading anything now that we're here?" he asked.

"No... well, yes," Nymandra replied. "There are no conventional communications, but I think we finally have a culprit for why- I'm picking up widespread jamming. The whole system appears flooded with radio noise, it's a mess. All of the standard communications frequencies- a massive bloc of the electromagnetic spectrum- are being blasted with static." She rubbed her temple, looking frustrated as she tried to make sense of her sensor readings. "But passive optical sensors and lidar are still fine."

"The interference is severely impairing SID swarm functionality. Engaging direct laser uplinks to restore communications with Normandy." Delegate warned. Shepard grimaced and shook his head.

"Bring them back in. We'll have to make do without them. EDI, this seems right up your ally- what can you make of this?" The ship's AI responded over the intercom.

"Ubiquitous radio frequency pollution is not consistent with either known geth or quarian strategies in war. It would not benefit either of them, as their conventional tactics depend heavily upon reliable communication between ships or platforms. However, analysis of the interference spectrum's signal strength gradient indicates the point of origin is indeed Rannoch."

"Joker, take us in closer. Plot to enter orbit above the main resettlement site."

"If there's a bright side," Kaidan offered from his place to Hadrian's right around the main console, "the Reapers didn't tend to blast radio noise like this when they were invading, either, so unless they've changed their routine it doesn't seem like their doing."

"If you call that a bright side. Sounds to me like it must mean someone new stirring up trouble, and that means unknowns."

"Scans detecting debris of quarian and geth ships in area," Hallis reported, blinking and sounding anxious. "Substantial debris."

"And I don't suppose with all this jamming we're detecting any distress signals from survivors' escape pods, if there are any?" Shepard asked.
"No, I'm afraid not, Commander," Nyandra sighed. She was still sweeping the comm channels for any distinguishable signals but it was plain to see that her frustration was mounting. "There's nothing intelligible in any of this, it's just a solid wall of junk transmission drowning out everything. The energy requirements to generate this much jamming would be incredible."

"Delegate, could you assign extra programs to analysing the optical and lidar scans? I don't want anything to escape the sensory capabilities we've got," Hadrian said.

"Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander."

As Normandy glided toward Rannoch's horizon to slip into orbit, Hadrian started to feel growing anxiety... but for the first time in a while, it felt like it was all 'his own,' isolated from the others'. He looked at Kaidan and frowned.

"What are you thinking?" Alenko asked.

'That whatever's going on here has been going on since the blackout began... and that if they're set up to jam the whole system, they're tough customers. We might be too late to do much good.'

Kaidan nodded and leaned forward, gripping the rail of the wrap-around master console. 'It even seems quieter in here, you find?'

'Conspicuously.'

At that moment Shepard noticed one of the crew at a station around the CIC periphery reach over to swat his neighbour on the shoulder. "Hello?" he snapped, sounding irritated. The other shot back a dumbfounded and annoyed look and asked "what?"

"Commander!" Hade's attention was drawn from the exchange as Pardik rushed from his science station along the outer wall to its companion display on the central console. He overrode the holographic display and called up an optical/lidar composite of the space ahead of them. Rolling into view over the horizon, looming over the surface of Rannoch above the fledgling capital of the quarians' new home, was a massive, artificial shape. As the salarian called up a magnified image of it, it came into focus. The ship was shaped like a shallow, overturned bowl studded with hundreds of little 'spikes' protruding on the dorsal surface. An array of tall antennae protruded from the centre on top.

"One intruder, unknown design," Hallis reported. "But it is the source of the electromagnetic spectrum jamming. Wait- correction, two intruders! Reading another, landed planet-side."

"That thing's huge, you're telling me one landed on Rannoch?"

"Yes! One, if not more!"

"Alert!" Delegate chimed in. "Detecting activity on intruder." Several of the 'spikes' were detaching from the surface of the vessel and starting to move in formation.

Directly toward Normandy.

"Stealth system's engaged- can they see us?" Shepard asked, tensing up in his chair.

"So it would appear," Pardik replied.

In his peripheral vision, Hadrian noticed other CIC crewmen suddenly, tersely snapping at each other. There was a time when tension in combat would have been unremarkable, but since Crucible
Day the growth of synthempathy had seemed to make behaviour like he was seeing a thing of the past. Yet here it was again...

"We are not reading any power sources. Not from the vessels, despite their transmitting the EM interference, nor from the detached objects, though they are clearly propelling themselves," EDI mentioned.

"Some kind of fighters, maybe?" Kaidan suggested.

"With no power emissions? I don't like this. They can see us, they can jam our communications, and they seem to be doing it all without any detectable power sources? We may be out of our league here. And I'm not feeling anything out there... are you?"

"No, just empty space. It's like there's no one here but us." Kaidan covered his mouth with his hand, thinking. "And we still don't know what's going on on the planet, but down there feels... empty... too."

"I want to do something about that, the not-knowing part," Hadrian said, the wheels turning in his head. "You got the new QEC for the quarians loaded aboard shuttle two?"

"Yeah, it was all ready to go."

"Alright. Get to the communications centre and on our entangler to the Council. Tell them that we've learned and start streaming them our realtime logs and telemetry. That's our only wire out of the system right now and I want them to know what's going on." Kaidan nodded and hurried through the port side door at the back of the CIC to head into the dip/com complex. "Delegate, tell Lieutenant Moore that I want Hunter to take shuttle two with the QEC we brought for Rannoch down to the surface. He's to strip the EPCU and transcrypter and ping us once he's planet-side so we know he's landed safely, then make contact with friendly forces, get us an assessment of what happened here. Then report in with whatever he learns. If anyone can get in and out behind the lines of an occupation, it's him, and if he can make contact with other geth, he can get the most extensive intel."

"Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander. I have summoned Hunter to the starboard hangar but it will require another, more flight-qualified program to pilot the Kodiak shuttle. I will make arrangements." The light in Delegate's 'face' dimmed as the program inhabiting it uploaded out of it to move about the ship more quickly.

"Inbound objects one minute out from our combat envelope," Hallis updated them.

"Torvan, how are my guns?" Hadrian asked. The turian weapons officer in the main battery on the deck below them came back enthusiastically.

"GARDIAN lasers are primed and turned over to virtual crew control, Commander. Thanix cannons are hot, just tell me what you want to light up."

"Alright people, maybe we'll make short work of these intruders, but if we can't we still need to find out what's happened on Rannoch. So if we can't defeat the intruders, we'll drop Hunter to do recon so that when we can come back with some kind of reinforcements we'll hopefully know what we're up against and what they're doing here. Joker, you ready to run interference for a shuttle insertion?"

"Depends on what those bullet-lookin' things do, Commander, but you know me."

"I've seen you pull off crazier."
"Twenty seconds," Hallis called out. Hadrian heard another of his junior officers bark "hello? Pay attention!" to their neighbour, as though sick and tired of being ignored. What was going on?

Normandy sped toward Rannoch, and when the alien vessels satellite craft closed they began firing something like GARDIAN point-defense lasers at the frigate. The directed energy weapons were not extremely effective, but as the range closed several hits did begin to pock and boil away the Silaris armour plating on the hull.

"So they're armed, and hostile. But I still don't feel any other synthempathic presence, so... let's see how they're protected. Torvan- fire at will," Shepard instructed.

Bobbing and weaving under Joker's expert control, the Normandy lined up its first shot at one of the enemy craft- conical-looking objects about 6 meters long with faintly glowing rings at their 'tail' ends- and opened fire with the Thanix cannons mounted under the frigate's nose. The twin streams of ferrous liquid metal spewed, electromagnetically accelerated to an appreciable fraction of lightspeed, and sliced through one of the interceptors, blasting it into three parts.

"We appear to have the advantage against smaller craft," Hallis observed, sounding relieved. He started examining the sensors' data of the exchange of fire to analyse it.

"Give me a shot at their mom," Shepard ordered. "Maybe she's got a glass jaw and we can put a quick end to all of this."

The holographic display changed, 'zooming out' from the unknown carrier ship in orbit to depict Normandy as well, twirling in a dangerous dance with the four remaining enemy 'fighters.' When Joker finally managed to contort them into a cluster aft of the ship, he lined up the frigate with the mother ship and another stream of ferrofluid lanced out.

Holding his breath in anticipation, Hadrian was a little disappointed. The Thanix blasts 'splashed' against a barrier of force that seemed to follow the contours of the ship, and dispersed into a nebulous cloud of cooling metal droplets.

"For no detectable power source, she's got some pretty durable shielding- that would have holed one of our dreadnoughts," Shepard grumbled.

Suddenly the Normandy pitched to one side and a loud metallic 'ping' reverberated through the hull.

"Goddamn! One of those crazy fucks just sideswiped us!" Joker snapped up in the cockpit.

"Damage?" Hadrian asked.

"Jeff's evasive manoeuvres reduced the collision to a glancing blow," EDI replied, "but it appears the hostile was attempting to impact us on a ballistic trajectory."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Shepard grimaced, recalling the oculus attack during the Collector base mission. Perhaps the 'spikes' bore explosive warheads? He was relieved that they hadn't found out, but it raised his concern for ship and crew. The enemy carrier hadn't returned fire with any mounted weapons of its own, but if it could stand up to the Normandy's strongest gun then the outcome of a fight might be determined by those 'fighter' craft, which seemed willing to commit suicide to dish out the damage that their directed energy weapons couldn't. And the scans showed hundreds of them still docked. If more launched...

"It bears mentioning that it has recovered and continues to pursue. No evident damage," EDI added.
"So we can't hurt the big ones, and unless we can evade or destroy their fighters before they kamikaze us, they might be able to do some serious damage to us. Sounds like we will be going with the recon drop and bug-out to report back. Delegate, how are we doing with that?" After a moment, the platform on the bridge twitched and was re-animated. Delegate was back in control of it.

"In order to conserve time, Hunter has downloaded another program to pilot the shuttle. The two will co-inhabit its platform for the duration of the mission. They stand ready to depart."

"Joker, take us in-atmo for a covert launch and then get ready to take us to conventional FTL- we've gotten at a look at their defenses and armaments, I want see if these bastards' engines can keep up with us. The more we know about them before we engage them again, the better."

"Aye aye, Commander," Moreau replied, sounding antsy. The group of enemy fighters had broken up to try and encircle Normandy and he was once again busily working to keep any from lining up an opportunity to make a head-on collision. After another thirty seconds, he managed to break away and drive toward the planet. As they began their descent, the holo display changed again to depict the surface of the area below them.

"Engine room, prep for good old fashioned FTL," Shepard instructed, pressing his chair's button for the engineering comm channel. Adams acknowledged, but Iren jumped in, protesting.

"Wait, we're leaving?" the quarian asked. "My grandparents settled on Rannoch before I went with the fleet to Earth, we can't just abandon the people down there!"

"It's leave and alert the rest of the galaxy- possibly muster some kind of response- or stay and probably die, Iren, in which case we do nobody any good at all. We'll be back for them." Hadrian tried to be sympathetic, but he had to be stern too; with Iren's hands at the propulsion systems controls, the quarian engineer had to fall in line or the ship could be put at risk by his hesitation.

"Yes, Commander... Preparing the drive for normal operation."

Shepard relaxed slightly, relieved that despite the personal stakes, he still had the confidence of his crew.

"The main settlement is along that river canyon system in grid eleven five... EDI, help Joker plot a course following the canyon starting at grid eleven nine. We'll deploy the shuttle twenty clicks upstream and Hunter can set down under cover, make his way on foot to the city and get us some ground-side data."

"Yes, Shepard," EDI answered. The infographic added a dotted line projecting their run over the valley terrain and subsequent ascent vector back into space.

"Altitude four hundred meters," Joker's voice reported over the headset, "shuttle's leaving the barn in ten seconds."

"The landed enemy carrier is launching more fighters, inbound! Twenty-seven kilometres," Hallis announced.

"As long as they chase us instead of the shuttle," Shepard said, hopeful. At least down here they were all subject to aerodynamic forces and the enemy craft couldn't manoeuvre much better than the frigate. "Adjust course to do a fly-over of the landed ship so we can take scans and hopefully keep their attention on us."

"Five seconds. Aft shuttle bay doors open."
"Nymandra, any comm traffic discernible at this range from the city?" Hadrian asked, looking to the asari. She frowned and shook her head.

"No, Commander, still nothing. But there's something else that's odd- I'm hearing internal comm chatter between the crew and they seem increasingly agitated with each oth-"

"I've noticed," Shepard cut her off, "and it's not the priority. Keep tabs on it, we'll deal with that after we're out of here."

"Shuttle is away and descending into the canyon," EDI reported. "We have lost network contact with Hunter." The chief of 'virtual crew operations' sounded genuinely concerned for the other geth as it left the shielded environment of the ship and the radio jamming overcame their wireless linkage.

Normandy peeled starboard toward the settlement and the grounded alien vessel nearby. As they flew past it they picked off two of the approaching five fighters, and sure enough, the rest gave chase when Joker veered horizontal and punched skyward.

"We're out-pacing the interceptors," EDI informed the commander.

"Loiter a little. I want confirmation that Hunter's landed before we get out of here. Let's take another crack at the carrier."

Joker swung Normandy around and once again bore down on the orbiting vessel. As Joker lined up the shot Imperatus opened fire with the Thanix again, a more prolonged barrage this time, and again the streams of liquified metal bloomed into a nebulous haze of metal mist glimmering in the dull light of Tikkun.

Another half-dozen interceptors deployed from the surface of the carrier and began speeding toward Normandy, and Joker started a new set of evasive manoeuvres to dodge their attempts to ram the ship.

Kaidan reappeared at Hadrian's side having returned from the communications lab. "Hunter signalled us on the stripped-down Rannoch entangler, it says it's on the ground and moving out. And I've got our combat data recorder uplinked to Councilors Koris and Triperitus. Koris is understandably concerned." Shepard gave him a grim, sidelong shake of his head.

"I wish we had better news for him. But at least our 'man' is on the ground, so we can get out of here and figure out our next step. Joker, let's be somewhere else."

"Accelerating out and we're almost clear to navigate, we should make FTL in half a minute."

Twenty-two seconds later, the engine hummed and Normandy lunged away from the quarians' sun, her 3rd generation Tantalus drive pouring electric current through the eezo core and generating a mass effect field that let her outrun the star's light. They poured on the speed gradually, to test their pursuers' capabilities, but the enemy fighters never broke c, and their mother ships didn't even try to give chase. Once out of the system they slowed and began radiating the heat from the IES. Tikkun was now just another faint dot in the blackness, but hundreds of millions of miles away the invaders still lurked, and the fate of the people on Rannoch's surface remained unknown.

-X

Four hours later

-X
Shepard sat with his staff around the conference room table as they reviewed the compiled and analysed combat data.

"So. The intruders. We've established that the weapons on their interceptor fighter craft are similar to our GARDIAN point defense lasers- they bypass kinetic barriers and a lot of them could potentially erode our armour in a protracted fight, but individually they aren't likely to shoot us down. And they can't take a hit from our Thanix cannons, but their command and control ships- which don't appear to mount any weapons of their own- have some kind of defensive barriers that we can't seem to punch through. And the interceptors seem quite willing to try and ram us, which- who knows what they do if they're dug into us, but hitting us and bouncing off doesn't seem to hurt them." Shepard stroked his chin and looked, squinting a little, at the wall mounted display of the two types of vessel.

"All while exhibiting no internal power generation that we can detect," EDI contributed.

"So who the hell are these guys?" Kaidan asked. "Where did they come from and what do they want and how do they prosecute a war this way? How did they overcome the geth and quarian defenders that stayed behind at Rannoch when the combat forces headed for Earth last year?"

"Also worth pondering their extensive use of communications jamming. Though they still appear capable of coordinating their own attacks, perhaps via some unidentified form of signalling. Also noteworthy is that the disrupted radio frequency range encompasses geth networking, which is no easy feat," EDI added.

"And more than that, I suspect," Hadrian said, sounding grim. He looked to the back wall where were seated several of the junior officers, who didn't normally sit in on these sessions but whom he'd pulled after observing their testy behaviour during the battle. "Maciej and Li, Jones and Harriman, Lewis and Ogambe- would any of you care to explain the conduct I saw on my bridge in the middle of an engagement?"

The three pairs of Alliance officers looked uncomfortably at each other, at the ceiling, at the floor. Finally Li spoke up. "I'm sorry, Commander, I just got frustrated with Ensign Maciej not answering the question I was asking. It seemed like he was ignoring me and I snapped a bit."

"Like I said, I didn't hear you asking me any question before you 'snapped,' Maciej said sullenly. "It was the power distribution logs," Li hissed.

"It was similar in our case, Commander," Lewis jumped in. "I was angry because Specialist Ogambe didn't appear to be listening to me."

"And similarly, you must not have been speaking very clearly because I never heard you."

"Li, Lewis- and Harriman, I'm assuming your issue with your counterpart was the same- think carefully back to the fight. Did you speak to the others or were you thinking at them and just trusting them to 'hear' you via synthempathic connection?" Shepard asked. They each paused a moment to recall, and Harriman was the first to answer, starting to blush when embarrassment.

"Lieutenant Jones and I work so closely together all the time, Commander, that we often communicate wirelessly rather than out loud. It's faster, it's clearer... like we're in perfect sync."

"Except today," Hadrian said, looking to Nymandra. The asari shook her head incredulously. She examined the datapad in her hand again before sighing.

"It seems your inference was right, Commander... The enemy's jamming range actually reached the
portion of the electromagnetic spectrum that our synthempathic architecture uses to connect our minds to each other. Goddess, I didn't think it was possible, those signals are so sophisticated. But there it is. As soon as we entered the system, we lost the ability to link to each other. I thought the CIC seemed... quieter somehow."

"Disrupting operations aboard-ship, however subtly," Hadrian summarized. "In our case, with a small, elite crew it didn't seem to impair us too badly, but imagine this aboard a ship with a less experienced crew, or a much larger crew, and where they were more dependent on direct communication to make up for their operational challenges. Like the quarian defense forces, who were mostly civilians. God damn, so these guys are powerful and they're smart- they knew what we're capable of and they had a strategy to undermine us."

"Wait, we were talking mentally after we arrived and I heard you just fine," Kaidan countered to Shepard. Hallis seized upon that point.

"Far more intimate rapport than anyone else who reported problems. Perhaps not all connections made equal? Yours must have been able to defy the interference somehow."

"Well that information isn't going to be much help to other crews that engage the intruders, but at least we can tell them to make sure that when they're engaging them they need to fall back on good old fashioned talking to each other, out loud, and not assuming that anyone will be able to hear their thoughts. Because the delays caused by taking that for granted could get people killed." Shepard rubbed his brow, thinking unpleasant thoughts of already-reduced fleets falling before this new threat force's advance. "Still no word in from Hunter about the situation planet-side. I should report in with what we've learned and find out what the higher-ups want to do next; in the meantime, I want everyone analysing this data further. Look for any exploitable weakness. When we push back, I want us to have learned something we can actually apply. Dismissed."

The crew filed out with the exception of Kaidan, EDI and Chakwas- the two most privy to the the two Spectres' secret about their unique synthempathic connection. "Major," Karin said, "it must have occurred to you from Nymandra and Hallis' assessments that you two share something in common beyond just your wedding rings?"

"Our use of the Shepard's conduit drive at Proxima Centauri to arrest the development of your synthempathic architecture," EDI reminded them. "As a result, every other organic's ability has continued to evolve over the intervening months. Their signals traffic now uses a more complex, more robust encoding on a broader EM bandwidth, while your own connections are facilitated via much more primitive, narrow-band transmissions at the low end of that range."

"First we were 'relics,' now we're 'primitive?' Thanks," Kaidan said, feigning offense.

"While it seems counter-intuitive, those more basic signalling protocols may explain your ability to remain connected despite the aliens' interference. Their jamming must have disrupted enough of the overlapping bandwidth to block the others, but fell short of interfering with yours."

"Is there some way that that information can help us?" Hadrian asked. EDI took a moment to think to herself before cocking her head slightly.

"I don't believe so. We know of no way to alter or manipulate the signal profile synthempathy uses. And attempting to access those EM bandwidths with standard comms would amount to a reinvention of the radio. However the inferred explanation for the two of you being an exception is fascinating, nonetheless."

Alenko rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Fascinating."
"So it isn't vitally important info- it's still nice for us," Shepard said, touching Kaidan's forearm and sliding his hand down to interlock their fingers.

"I suppose so. I mean yeah, it is, I just wish it were useful to anyone besides us. Anyway, I should get back to work, and you've got calls to make. Gimme." Hadrian smirked and leaned over obligingly, kissing his husband on the cheek before he walked out with EDI and Karin.

Shepard left the conference room and turned right, crossing through the strategy centre- the Alliance's answer to the question of 'what purpose a war room without a war?'- and into the communications lab. He keyed in the codes for the Council and for Provisional Governance Directorate at Alliance Command, and within a minute the console indicated that the QECs on the other end were attended. He tapped the button to open the comm lines and the chamber filled with projected holograms of Admiral Hackett and Councilors Koris, Triperatus, Allesyri and the geth member of the Consensus Council, dubbed Representative.

"Commander Shepard," Triperatus greeted him, "we've examined your combat data and the logs you transmitted. We trust you've conducted your own analysis?"

"We have, Councilor. We're apprehensive about engaging their fighter-type craft en masse because we don't know what they'll do if they impact us, and we can't seem to harm their capital ships. On the other hand, their directed energy weapons don't seem to pose a serious threat to our armour. Their biggest advantage seems to be their broadband signal jamming giving them the element of surprise and disrupting communications- including synthempathy, it seems. But a properly prepared force may fare better against them."

"We agree," Hackett nodded. "And we may be able to help in that regard. The fleet modernization program has rolled out the Council's first new task group- twenty-one turian frigates, six asari heavy cruisers, two quarian cruisers, an Alliance carrier and three cruisers, and a geth dreadnought, all re-fit with conduit drives and Thanix turrets, courtesy of our new geth-built and operated shipyards at Mars and Luna." He typed in something on a datapad in his hand and a visual of the new battlegroup appeared in the projection in front of him. It was an impressive looking collection of ships that the assembled forces at Earth had prepared for interstellar operations again, considering that conduit drive tech was less than a year old and the Alliance shipyards at Sol had been devastated in the Reaper invasion. "They can meet up with the Shepard at Palaven, then rendezvous with you at the Perseus Veil in two weeks."

"Two weeks should be ample time for Platform-Hunter to surveil and assess hostiles' presence and objectives on Rannoch and provide data on enemy emplacements, activities and vulnerabilities," Representative suggested.

"Which, combined, might be enough intelligence and force of arms to drive these intruders out," Allesyri said hopefully. "While the galaxy is re-building from the Reaper invasion, we must send a strong rebuke to any species that would disrupt our new peace. How can they even engage in such aggression, given the increasing taboo against harming others?"

"With their ability to disrupt synthempathic communication, they probably don't actually feel anything doing it," Koris added. Hadrian crossed his arms and shrugged.

"Thankfully that cuts both ways. I didn't feel anything in particular giving the order to fire on them. Twice. It was like there was nobody aboard their ships. So if they want a fight and they've flipped off the compassion switch, then we can give them one. I don't think anyone's actually forgotten how quite yet."

"Then expect to hear from your reinforcements soon, Commander, and as the only one who's
gotten out of an encounter with these aliens alive, you'll take point on the counter-offensive once
they've attached to you," Triperatus instructed.

"Back in the saddle again," Shepard said drolly with a sideways nod.

"We'll be in touch, Commander," Hackett said in parting before his image de-rez'ed. Hadrian
nodded to the four Councilors' holograms, and the asari and turian's avatars vanished. Koris and
Representative remained.

"Shepard..."

"Councilor?"

"Shepard... before the other admirals and I brought the fleet on your campaign to Earth, I told the
millions of quarian civilians who wished to debark and settle on the homeworld that they would be
safe there with the geth that remained behind. Please... if you can find out what's become of them,
and if there's anything you can do for them... if you can help me not to make a liar of myself, I
would be grateful."

"I'll do my best, Councilor. I was proud to help your two peoples achieve peace after three hundred
years- I care about what happens to them."

"I'm encouraged that it's you we have leading the effort, Commander. Thank you." Koris looked
over at Representative, as though they were in the same physical space and not just appearing that
way from their respective embassy offices. The two clearly exchanged something unspoken, and as
Koris reached for the controls to shut down his communicator Shepard jumped in.

"Keelah sel'ai, Councilor."

Koris paused, and nodded respectfully. "Keelah sel'ai, Commander."
SSV Normandy SR-3, Perseus Veil

the next day, Mon, Jul 2, 2187

Cortez looked up from his datapad's readout on Shuttle #1's thruster diagnostic at Shepard, Moore, Deacon, Herman and Imperatus jogging laps around the hangar deck- the commander had stayed behind again to participate in one of the ground team's more elite workouts after the general PT session. He was still preoccupied with the mental picture that had flashed before his mind's eye while the three had been dancing four days earlier. The subtler exchange of affectionate feelings and thoughts that had been going on just prior had left him confused about where the idea had originated- had it been his? Or received from one of the other two? He'd been attracted to Shepard as soon as they'd met during the flight from Earth, and Alenko was a looker too but he hadn't really started to appreciate the former major until they'd been stranded together on the planet they'd named Hadrian and spent quite a bit of time in close proximity, mourning together and leading the other exiles in building a community there.

But the two had found their way back to each other. And now they were married. Like he had been once.

Robert had had a fair bit in common with both of the men he was friends with now- he had Shepard's ability to precisely channel a kind of ferocious, reckless energy; Alenko's moral fortitude; Hadrian's wicked side that could come out in subtle notes or a delightful torrent depending on the company he was in; and Kaidan's sensitive, earnest nature. And Rob had been an exemplary soldier, but was never content with that as his identity- he'd led a cooking class for his peers in his last three assignments before he'd died at Ferris Fields, and he had committed two hundred credits from every pay to a charity for war orphans. But he'd never let Steve feel like he fell short.

During the Reaper war Shepard had extended him so much kindness and confidence, and afterwards Kaidan- once he'd made some small amount of peace with his own loss- had been a bastion of understanding and trust. Was it any wonder he'd come to harbour feelings for them both? And try as he had to keep those feelings contained where they wouldn't interfere with his professional relationships with them, he supposed that with everyone learning to more openly share their thoughts, eventually they were bound to find out those feelings existed.

Shepard passed by again in his tanktop and form-fitting grey fleece shorts, with a complicated look on his face- it was part cocky smile, as he was cruising along comfortably even while the rest of the marine detail was starting to drag ass, but also part steely determination. Now that they had an enemy again, and a dangerous one, he was pushing himself to make sure he was in top form. He caught Cortez's eyes on him as he jogged past, but gave no outward reaction.

A minute later, when Moore called a stop to the squad's run, Shepard did one more lap for good measure. When he finished he patted the other vanguard on the shoulder as he walked past the marines, then ambled over toward Steve at his work bench.

"You really are a bit of a show-off, you know," Cortez chided teasingly. "You're always doing just a little bit more than the rest of them." He tried, unsuccessfully, to restrain his eyes from cruising
up and down the commander's body- his mostly-bare legs, the corners of his pecs and sweaty flanks and chest that shone out the openings in his tanktop, his neck.

"Burden of command," Hadrian grinned, "I need to be just a little bit better. Gives 'em something to aspire to."

"Well, you are an aspirational figure, Commander," Steve conceded, but then dipped into a slightly awkward silence when he realized all the ways Shepard could have taken the statement. The commander chuckled and looked down at the floor, rubbing the back of his neck with his towel.

"Ah... thanks. So, Lieutenant, about that thing the other day-"

Cortez felt his cheeks heat up and he thanked centuries of demographics for his toasty complexion and how, in the right lighting, it could cover up his blushing somewhat. "Ah. Right. Look, Commander, if that was me I'm sorry if it caused any... embarrassment, or discomfort, or problems... honestly, I'm not even sure where it came from. I'd never want to meddle in your marriage, you and the major are two of my closest friends."

Hadrian raised his hands in a gentle, friendly display. "It's okay, Steve, I didn't- I mean, I don't suspect you of wanting to 'meddle.' I'm not upset by what happened. But I know Kaidan feels a bit strange about things, and you've seemed a little withdrawn since then, and I just want the three of us to all be good again."

Cortez smiled, feeling a wave of relief. He set down his pad, joined his hands and leaned forward in his seat, elbows on his knees. "Whew... okay. That's better than I... I was a bit anxious that you were going to say I needed to make myself scarce."

"No, no way. I mean I figure friends have lived with these little... situations... for as long as there have been people, right?" Hade shrugged and gave a soft, affectionate kick to Steve's boot.

"I wouldn't even call it a 'situation,' Sir, it was just... a thought, you know? I'm not even sure it was mine, we were all kind of dabbling in each other's... but I don't want to imply that it was the major! Or, uh, that it was-"

"It was me," Hadrian confessed. Steve stumbled over his words; no, not stumbled- fell flat on his face.

"It was... Sir?"

"Yeah." Shepard patted under his arms with his towel and cocked his head a bit to one side, now blushing a little himself. "There was this... moment... on Eden Prime, where Kaidan thought about you."

"He did?"

"As in, you with us, and I don't know, maybe it planted a seed that 'sprouted' during our... ah... dance lesson. So when we were all pressed up against each other, I had a thought, and now it's..." Hadrian fidgeted a little. "I don't know, I should probably tell him, because now he feels all guilty about it, but if I do I'm afraid it'll make him jealous instead."

Cortez started mulling over the revelation, feeling... humbled? Embarrassed? He hadn't meant to encroach on his friends' relationship, but if this 'viral' idea had started with one of them then he shouldn't feel guilty about it, right? "I see... well, that's... um... a little complicated. Sir."

Shepard stifled a laugh and looked cautiously over his shoulder to make sure the marine squad was
"Yeah, well, I'm 'Shepard two point oh,' so... what isn't complicated?"

"Right... well for what it's worth, Commander, I kinda' miss the major, too, he has sort of been shy of me since we left Eden Prime. But I'd like for things to be good between the three of us. I meant it, after all we've been through, I think of you two like-

"Please don't say brothers, that would just take those thoughts he and I had to a weird, incestuous place," Hadrian interrupted. Steve blurted out a laugh and Shepard joined in, smiling.

"No, it's different, Commander. I adore both of you. I mean if you weren't... or rather, I mean, if both of you were putting yourselves out there, I'd be hard pressed to..."

"Is smoke about to start coming out of your ears?" Shepard asked. They both laughed again, and as Cortez recovered he shook his head, smiling.

"There would be, if I were in a position to choose," he sighed. "But when I saw how happy you two were together from the start, I just wanted to see you happy together. Don't get me wrong- I still wanted to find someone for myself! Ha ha! But until then, I guess I felt like at least I could be around you guys and sort of bask..."

"Well, I've been glad we had you around," Hadrian said. "Maybe I'm... I don't know, but I feel like there's something... different... about our relationships. Just because guys are different together. Most folks still lean strict-ish, and I like having colleagues- friends- that I can talk to and trust that they know what it's like."

"You know Herman and Deacon are an item, right?" Steve asked, nodding at the pair of marines that stood across the room listening to Moore. Hadrian looked over his shoulder at the ground team's tall, lean dark-haired 2IC, Gunnery Sergeant Erik Deacon, standing with his hands on his hips, and the blond brick-shit-house Cpl. Benjamin Herman, who was flashing some of his smooth hard stomach as he stretched his arm behind his head, the pair listening to Moore, and cracked a crooked smile.

"Really? Damn." He tilted his head a little, giving the sergeant and corporal a second look. "Damn, that's... nice." Shepard's eyes shot back to Steve, narrowed slightly. "No reading my no-good mind, that's an order. Get your own ideas."

Steve chuckled. "So... what do we do about the 'thing?'" he asked. "I mean how do we keep things from getting more awkward and get back to normal?"

"That, I don't know," Hadrian sighed. "I wish I did. I don't feel like there's a problem, I love Kaidan. I trust him. I can't think of anything that would change that now. He risked everything to bring me back after..." He shook his head, dismissing the thought. "I don't know. But I don't think there's anything wrong with our thoughts. His, or mine. I don't judge them. I love him and he loves me. Whatever else may be true, that is."

"You should just go tear him up," Cortez smiled. "Drag him to your quarters and show him how crazy you are about him." His eyes wandered to the bulge in the front of Shepard's shorts, just a few couple feet from his eye level, and he swallowed hard. "Just, do your meditation thing with him as the object, hold him in your mind, focus on him- no stray thinking about... ah... you know. And don't let up until he's forgotten all about whatever doubts are muddling up his pretty little head."

Hadrian grinned and adjusted himself slightly, the thought causing him to stir a bit. "Liking the way you think, Lieutenant," he said. He raised his hand to grip the lip of the ceiling of the work
area alcove, then sniffed under his arm and made a face. "Might want to drag him into the shower, first, though."

Steve laughed a little, nervously, as he tried to hold back the mental picture that produced so that Shepard wouldn't inadvertently pick it up. "The squeakier the clean, the freakier you can get," he encouraged.

"Cute. Carry on, Steve. And thanks. We'll try and get things back to... whatever 'normal' is- past the tension, anyway- I promise." Hadrian smiled and ruffled his hand on top of Cortez's close-cropped head before turning to leave. Cortez snagged another look at the vanguard's shapely round glutes as he walked away, then blushed again and returned to his work.

So they'd both thought of it. He didn't want to meddle or impose, but... But no, they were possibly on the cusp of a new war. Everybody needed to focus, without distraction.

Yeah. Good luck with that, he thought to himself.

-X

Deck 1

-X

Shepard stepped into his cabin to the sound of the shower running in the head that separated the bedroom from the lounge area. He shook his head and grinned- 'Great minds...’ Peeling his tanktop off and stepping out of his sneakers he descended the steps between the office and kitchenette and rounded the corner into the bathroom.

Inside, the plexiglass of the shower was fogged up with steam, but the shape of Alenko's naked body within was still visible. Hadrian leaned back on the edge of the sink, watching a moment, until Kaidan called out over the loud spray of the shower "you know I know you're out there. Get in here, pervert."

Hade smirked and shook his head, then slid his shorts and boxer-briefs down. When he opened the shower door, steam spilled out like a pyroclastic cloud. Kaidan turned and looked at him expectantly, water trickling down his body that looked simply perfect to Shepard.

"Done playing with the other boys?" he asked.

"My body's had enough of a workout for today- I thought I'd come and work on yours for a bit," Hadrian grinned.

"Oh yeah?" Kaidan smirked, and turned his back to his husband.

"You almost done?" Hade asked.

"Yeah, you should have come up sooner, we could have-"

'Almost done' meant he'd washed everything twice and just had his hair to rinse out, which meant he was clean everywhere, and the sight of his back suddenly inflamed Hadrian. Pouncing into the shower, he dropped to his knees, grabbed Alenko's hips, and buried his face in his ass. Kaidan's hands shot out against the wall and his legs spread automatically, groaning loudly with delighted surprise as he felt Shepard's tongue attack the sensitive skin between his mounds.

His crack was licked up and down, and Hadrian's tongue flicked over his hole hungrily for a
moment before Shepard had to back off and catch his breath- the water pouring down Kaidan's back and between his glutes, like a river flowing through a canyon, threatening to drown him.

"Ohhh God," Kaidan shuddered, resting his forehead against the wall and hardening immediately. Hade's right hand gravitated around his hip and wrapped around his hard-on, stroking it firmly and using his grip to pull Kaidan's pelvis back again into his face to resume his manic rim-job. The sentinel's legs quivered as ripples of sensation shot through his body.

'Careful,' he pleaded wordlessly, 'I already- I'm sensitive right now!'

"Mmmmm," Hadrian hummed eagerly, giving Kaidan an ecstatic jolt with a jab of his tongue. 'Good, then you'll last longer when you take up me.'

Kaidan grinned and his erection throbbed at the idea. 'Oh, so you want me inside you, hm?'

'After,' Shepard thought, and then projected a wet, hot gush of images detailing his hoped-for itinerary: bending Kaidan over the sink to continue eating out his ass; then fucking him in the same spot so they could watch themselves in the mirror; then fellating him while he stood spread-eagle in the doorway; before finally moving to the bed and having Alenko pound him senseless.

The flood of mental pictures made Kaidan feel dizzy and hot, and triggered a font of precum that oozed down over Hadrian's hand. With another squeeze and pull, Hade made Kaidan bend over further, back arching and fingers clutching at the wall in front of him for a handhold as Shepard dug deeper with his tongue, his chin bobbing against Kaidan's balls from behind.

'Wow, something's gotten into you!' Kaidan thought, gasping and panting as water streamed down over his open lips and dribbled off his chin.

'Not yet,' Hade thought with a pause in rimming to grin wickedly, 'but in about half an hour...'

-X

An hour later

-X

"Oh my God!" Kaidan gasped, collapsing forward onto Shepard's back. Wet with perspiration, his hair a mess, legs quivering with exhaustion, he breathed hot against the back of the commander's neck, who groaned pleasantly and 'clenched' to squeeze another excited moan out of the sweaty sentinel. Kaidan's hands snapped to place- one on Hadrian's hip and the other to his opposite shoulder- and he grunted as he withdrew from Shepard's body, flopping to the side and rolling onto his back, eyes wide and gazing out the ceiling vista roof.

"Wow... What did I do to deserve that?" Alenko asked, turning to look at the sliver of Hade's face visible behind his outstretched arm and against the bed. Shepard's eye smiled and he let out a long, slow breath.

"You were you," he murmured, then chuckled a little. "And how. That was marathon."

"Well, Moore's workouts... my energy level's up a bit," Kaidan grinned. He looked to the head of the bed and reached up for the towel they'd set out, wiping down his chest and draping it over his softening manhood, giving it a squeeze to catch some of his post-climax 'leakage.' Eyes still closed and smiling, Hade reached over and tugged the towel away, exposing Kaidan fully again, and shimmied it under his own pelvis where he was bent over the edge of the bed. "Did you...?"
"We'll change them before we turn in."

"What were you- I mean... the whole time it felt like you were... I got these glimpses of 'me' through you and it was..." Kaidan's eyes welled up a little at the memory of the feelings. "You keep thinking like that about me and it's gonna' go to my head."

'You're my sun. I just wanted to remind you how much I adore you.'

"Well, after we have another shower I might have to give you a little something in retur-"

"Commander," EDI piped in over the comm, "priority QEC hail from Hunter."

"Tell him I'm coming," Hadrian said, suddenly alert and pushing his torso up to kneel at the foot of the bed. He grabbed the towel and started wiping his midsection off and Kaidan snorted out a laugh.

"Actually EDI tell him he already-"

"Hey, never mind. I'll be down to the comm lab in two minutes, EDI," Shepard retorted, giving Kaidan a feigned dirty look.

"Acknowledged," EDI said.

Hadrian rose to his feet and hurriedly started to get dressed, skipping socks and underwear.

"Good to know that he's still in one piece," Kaidan said, sitting up and reaching for his own pants. Hade shrugged as he pulled on his t-shirt.

"Might not be- Legion was missing a few back in the day. Good to know he's able to report in, anyway."

"You want me to come along?"

"Always." Hadrian leaned over and kissed Kaidan again, and the two finished dressing to hurry to the deck below. When they arrived in the communications centre Shepard keyed up the Rannoch QEC and the hologram of their geth scout flickered to life. It had removed the transcrypting and signalling components from the holo-scanning and projecting array for portability, but being-essentially-data itself, the digital crewmember was projecting the likeness of its platform to make the check-in... what? More personal? It was a reminder how as their personalities evolved, some of the geth had seemed to adopt more 'organic' sensibilities than others.


"Hunter. Glad that I don't see any holes. What's your status?"

"We successfully infiltrated enemy perimeter around Naryleah and conducted surveillance for twelve point five hours. We also recovered memory log recorders from several disabled geth platforms-"

"I thought a geth's memory buffer hardware auto-destructed when they were disabled?" Kaidan interrupted.

"That failsafe was determined to be unnecessary, and its functionality discontinued following the cessation of hostilities with creators," Hunter explained.

"Oh. News to me. Sorry."
"Continue, Hunter. What did you learn?"

The status display on the QEC's control panel indicated an upload in progress. "The intruders have neutralized all geth platforms active on Rannoch, though we observed server infrastructure intact. Upon interfacing with one we received first-hand accounts of the invasion by geth programs that witnessed the attack and uploaded from their platforms, escaping destruction."

An inset holographic image from the data upload appeared, depicting one of the invader's 'ground troops.' They weren't even vaguely humanoid- more like tops, about two meters high, with a tall conical dome supported by a tapered, spindly 'leg.' Three flexible metallic-looking tentacles protruded from the ventral surface. It almost looked like an armoured version of a hanar, but the shape was also clearly reminiscent of the 'bullet' fighter craft.

"So they shot down every geth on legs but they haven't taken out your servers? What about the quarians?" Hadrian asked, studying the images of their enemy.

"Creators who participated in the colony's defense with geth platforms were also neutralized. Once all defenders were subdued the creator population was forced to assemble at a number of public facilities commandeered by intruder forces. Direct observation of one such facility revealed the release of one hundred and fifty-one creators per hour."

"They were letting them go?" Kaidan asked, incredulous.

"Affirmative. We were subsequently able to make contact with three released creators who each reported similar experiences. After several days of detention they were subjected to an unidentified mode of processing- placed inside a device operated by intruders for approximately one minute- and then released with instructions to resume their normal activities. Barring an expansion of their processing capacity, at the current rate, the geth estimate processing of the entire captive population will be complete in approximately three thousand, eight hundred, twenty-one point five days."

Hadrian crossed his arms and shook his head, a confused expression dominating his face. "At least they aren't being rendered down into a paste. But what's the point? What's this 'processing'? Did you manage to take medical scans of these quarians you spoke to?"

"Affirmative. Creators appeared in normal health, excepting for elevated stress responses following captivity. The only self-reported changes in status was an inability to establish tele-empathic consensus, which they indicated was the case immediately upon intruders' arrival."

"We learned that their cyberwarfare tactics apparently includes jamming those signals as well," Kaidan said.

"Then the nature and effect of intruders' processing remains unknown. We can attempt to re-infiltrate to gather further intelligence."

"What did the other geth and the quarians tell you about the enemies' capabilities," Shepard enquired, leaning forward on the holo projector chamber's railing.

"Intruder infantry were deployed from the interceptor-type craft deployed from enemy capital ships. They possessed no ranged armament- only close-quarters capability. Defenses appear to omit kinetic barriers in favour of structural armour that proved resistant to geth and quarian small arms fire. Intruder infantry demonstrated no hesitation, apprehension or indecision and zero self-preservation motive. Analysis by escaped geth programs concluded that intruders' victory was virtually a statistical certainty due to attrition."
"Maybe they're VI- or AI-driven. Purely combat-oriented programming." Kaidan noticed the shift in Shepard's expression and touched his arm. "Hey? What is it?"

"Zero self-preservation," Hadrian repeated. He looked Kaidan in the eye, his face grim. "Reminds me of the Collector ground forces under Harbinger's control. They pressed the attack without any hesitation, or apprehension, or indecision."

"You think this might be Reapers after all? New play-book, new puppets? Catch and release doesn't seem like them."

"No, it really doesn't. It's just... if this is what that was- 'drone warfare' where the units doing the killing are being operated by some intelligence that's safe and sound somewhere far removed from the battlefield- then it seems... insidious. It's the only way left in an otherwise super-connected galaxy to 'de-humanize' the enemy. We've all stopped fighting because we hate to see and feel the suffering of the other guy. But where's that taboo for someone conducting their campaign... huh..."

Hade grunted out a bitter, ironic laugh "wirelessly?"

"And it would kind of fit the theme, wouldn't it? Come in, wreck our communications with their jamming, cut us off from each other, and conquer us with remote-controlled forces. It would explain the 'how,' but not the 'why.'" Kaidan's hand drifted down the Hadrian's and squeezed it supportively. "But, maybe it gives us some idea of how to focus our counter-attack."

"Ideas such as?"

"If the capital ships aren't just carriers, but command and control stations- or even just relays from somewhere else- then we know we need to focus our attention on them. And if their ground forces are comparable to ours, and the main difference is their willingness to throw overwhelming numbers at us, then maybe a dagger can do what a sword can't. A covert team on the ground, if it could sneak in like Hunter did," Kaidan nodded to the geth's holographic avatar, "then maybe they could infiltrate the landed ship and take it out from the inside, while we test our reinforced fleet against the one in orbit."

"Enemy presence planet-side was relatively light, with most withdrawn upon the colony's subdual. The Normandy's ground team could potentially penetrate the vessel for the purpose of sabotage."

Shepard's face lit up just a little. "Well," he grinned, "at least I'll get to put all the exercise and retraining to some good use." He felt a shift in Kaidan's feelings through their clasped hands.

"Was there anything more to report, Hunter?" the other Spectre asked. Their geth spy shook its head.

"Negative, all data collected has been reported verbally or via our data upload. We are prepared to return to surveillance operations if debriefing is satisfactory."

"Yeah," Hadrian nodded, a bit distracted, "yeah, see what else you can find out and report in again in- let's say- three days."

"Acknowledged. Terminating communication."

The hologram blinked out and the room's regular lighting came back up. Hadrian looked at Kaidan, who was giving him an un-impressed look.

"What?" he asked.

"You know very well what," Kaidan said. "Have you got your 'new' biotics down pat yet? Have you perfected even a pull? Let alone charging?" Hadrian narrowed his eyes and tensed up.
"You know very well that I'm still learning how my new 'wiring' works in terms of my biotics. But I'm still a soldier."

"I do know that," Alenko retorted, softening his voice, "you're one of the best alive. But. You aren't at your top form yet. The changes you've been through- some of those skills that make you one of the best are still in need of some more exercise and re-training. And you can't tell the ground team why your biotics aren't yet back to normal, and if they aren't prepared for that..."

Kaidan reached out with his other hand and took Shepard's, stepping closer. "When you're back to your prime you're going to be better than ever, but until then I can't stand the thought of what might happen. I just got you back, again... I don't want to lose you because you jumped the gun getting into a new fight."

"I'm not useless," Shepard said bitterly. Kaidan started to feel the vanguard's need to be taken seriously over their link, and he 'pushed back' with his own feelings of concern, but also respect.

"Nowhere near useless," he said, reassuringly. "But under the circumstances, with the ground team isn't where you'll be most useful. You can do more good overseeing the battle from up here."

"I'm no admiral, I'm a ground-pounder. How am I going to be most useful coordinating a ship-to-ship fight?" Hadrian sighed.

"They'll have more confidence following your orders than anyone else's. They've put you in charge of the theatre, you should be here, not down there."

"Givin' me orders on my own ship... I'm the captain here, remember?"

"And I'm your husband, I'm exercising a marital veto. Or invoking Spectre powers. Take your pick."

"I was a Spectre first."

"And I was on top last. I can do this all day," Kaidan quipped, a grin creeping onto his lips. "Or do I need to 'out' you to the crew, tell them all about how you occasionally like to call me 'Sir.'"

"Not if you want to-"

"That's right, marines, by night your bad-ass, fearless, indomitable leader- every now and then, at least- likes to be called names, held down and smacked around into submission." Kaidan rehearsed his 'big reveal' to an imaginary audience. Hadrian's eyes widened and his face started to betray an embarrassed blush. "It's scandalous, really- I feel like a pervert but I only do it to please him."

"You wouldn't dare," Hade said.

"Complete submission," Kaidan emphasized. Shepard glared and ground his teeth for a moment, but ironically, Kaidan's hammering at the point made him feel his willpower erode slightly.

"Fine," Hadrian muttered sullenly. Kaidan pulled him a little closer, released his left hand, and gave him a curt slap on the seat of his pants.

"That didn't sound very complete," he smirked.

"Fine, Sir." Hade looked down at the floor with a sheepish smile, then chuckled to himself and slowly looked back up at his mischievous husband. "Just don't think that that's gonna' work every time."
"I know, you'd never fall for it if I weren't already making sense. But you know that I am. I can lead the marine team against the grounded ship— that was my original job aboard the Normandy, after all. While you be the boss up here."

"As soon as I've got my biotics nailed down again they're going to have to find someone else to play fleet commander. I'm still not convinced that I'm cut out for it." The pair relaxed, the disagreement behind them, and Kaidan slid his hand into Hadrian's back pocket, squeezing where he'd laid the swat a moment earlier.

"So, what now? Brief the crew? Step up the battle drills? Oh God- more pushups and running laps?"

"Aww, getting sore?" Shepard laughed. He slipped to the side and manoeuvred around behind his spouse, starting to rub his shoulders. Kaidan moaned his approval. "Anyway no, the briefing can wait until the daily tomorrow morning, the battle drill schedule is fine the way it is. Let's go back up, so I can remind you that I'm not your bitch."

"You're totally my bitch," Alenko smirked. "Even when you're on top I've got you wrapped around my little finger."

"Keep talking. I'll wrap you around my finger."
In the middle of the Normandy's 'night,' Hadrian awoke to the sound of Kaidan sniffling back tears. He sat up and put his hand on his husband's back, rubbing it to try and comfort him.

"Hey... hey, what's wrong?" he asked, turning on the lamp on their bed's headboard. Kaidan looked over with red, watery eyes and gave a complicated, sad smile.

"Ah... I just had a dream," he sighed, gazing into Shepard's eyes.

"Nightmare of your own, huh?" Hade said, believing he understood. But Kaidan shook his head and reached out for Hadrian's hand, clasping it tightly.

"No," he said, "not a nightmare... not at all. Actually it was... I dreamed we threw a party. The Reaper war was still on... but it was near the end, I think. But we had to go back to the Citadel for a couple days, and we just knew the end was close... So we rented this great hotel room aboard the station, and we invited everybody- the whole crew we had, plus everyone who worked with you against the Collectors. All of them who were still alive, I mean... All our friends. Everyone who cares about you."

Shepard cocked an eyebrow and chuckled softly. "Kind of a weird time to throw a party, no?"

Kaidan shrugged.

"The ship couldn't go anywhere, and everyone really did need to unwind a bit, so we decided to do it."

"So the gang was all there, then? Even- jeez- I'm not sure I can imagine a party with Wrex, and Grunt, and Jack and everyone. Sounds like it could get rowdy," Hade smiled.

"They were all there. And it was..." Kaidan shook his head and wiped his eyes, waves of kaleidoscopic emotion rippling off him.

"What? I can't even tell exactly what you're feeling," Hadrian said, leaning over and nuzzling Alenko's shoulder.

"It was... perfect. We were all... just... it was like we were a family. It was funny, and everyone was so happy. It was like there wasn't even a war on. Like we'd locked the door and time stopped, and we could have..." Kaidan sighed heavily. "And I knew we were going to go to Cronos, and then the Earth, and then that you were going to... But I was able to forget. It felt like everything was going to be okay..."

"It sounds... nice," Hade whispered.

"Yeah. I didn't want it to end. It was just... perfect."

"So we must have gotten it on, too, then?" Shepard grinned. Kaidan laughed once, wanly.
"Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"So... why the tears?"

"Because I woke up," Kaidan sniffled. He looked into Shepard's eyes again and took a deep, shaky breath. "Which sounds like I'd rather be there than here... which I wouldn't... but still. I just... woke up really emotional, y'know?"

"I get it," Hadrian nodded. They sat together a moment, Shepard extending his love and wish for Kaidan to feel okay through their rapport, and getting flashes of half-remembered, fading imagery from his husband's dream, and felt Alenko's mood gradually stabilizing. He looked up out the viewport in the ceiling above their bed at the colours of the Perseus Veil outside, and eventually a smile came to his face. "You wanna' throw a party, then?" he asked. "After all, you know what today is..."

Kaidan looked at the holographic alarm clock's date.

July 9.

"Oh... God," he whispered as it clicked. It was the first anniversary of Crucible Day. One year since Shepard saved his life in London, and then died. Since they'd been marooned at Xi Bootes. Since the war ended. Maybe that was why his subconscious had conjured up such a nostalgic projection, and why he felt so emotional.

"I imagine people will want to observe the day somehow, anyway," Hadrian mused. "Even if, to me, it's only been a couple months since that night... I get so confused about time, sometimes, what with how much of it I've spent... um... 'indisposed.'"

"We couldn't," Kaidan sighed, returning to the topic of throwing a party. "Everyone would be talking about that day, and what happened... about what happened to you... and the only ones aboard this ship who know the truth are you, and me... Joker, EDI, Karin and Steve... and Delegate, I suppose. Would make for an awkward party."

"Maybe," Hadrian conceded. "Probably. But party or not, y'know people are going to be reminiscing about it all day anyway. Can't beat it... might as well join it, try to muddle through. Huh?"

Kaidan took another deep breath, contemplating the prospect of facing their crew- the mix of the old and the new- trying to dance along the line between the truth that some of them knew and the fiction they had to uphold to the rest. Just thinking about it caused painful little lights to start twinkling behind his eyes. "You're the one into eastern philosophy," he sighed, "isn't there some 'middle' way we could take? Right up the middle and out of the mob?"

Hadrian wrapped his arm around Kaidan's shoulders and pulled him into a snug embrace from behind. "I might have an idea," he said into Alenko's hair. He looked up at the ceiling. "Shepard to CIC," he said.

"Calazan here, Commander."

"When Lieutenant Tebeus relieves you, tell her I'm enacting 'short straw.' Continue drills and exercises, but barring an emergency, the XO and I will be unavailable for the next twenty-four hours."

"Aye aye, Sir." The comm beeped off, and Shepard mimed wiping his hands clean.
"Done and done, we're locking the door and taking the day off. We'll just spend it... I don't know- cooking, and fornicating, and watching vids. I downloaded a bunch while we were at Eden Prime. Have you ever seen an old 2D called 'Die Hard'? Grunt swears by it."

Kaidan leaned back with a sigh. Hadrian could feel a new mix of emotions radiate from his husband- relief at being spared a day of half-faked smiles, but also guilt at the notion of Nymandra having to re-shuffle the ship's duty roster around them for the day.

"We can just... do that?" Kaidan asked. Shepard chuckled a little and kissed the back of his neck.

"Well... this is a Council ship, not technically Alliance; our command of her is as a pair of Spectres, not Alliance officers," he mused. "I mean, you aren't Alliance Navy anymore, I'm on detached service, and the rest are considered on loan from the Alliance to the Council. So... I think I can more or less do whatever I want until someone I answer to says 'stop.'"

"Hence the fraternization regs going out the airlock, huh?" Alenko smirked.

"I haven't heard any complaints yet." Hade rocked Kaidan gently from side to side in his arms and nuzzled his neck.

"Oh, well, can I file a complaint then? My ship's captain hasn't given me a massage since we got married. What's the form I fill out for that?"

Shepard laughed, moved his hands up to Kaidan's shoulders, and started kneading the muscles of his back and neck, soliciting a low, breathy moan.

"So... tell me more about this party you dreamed about," Hadrian said, grinning. "Lots of drinking and shenanigans? When it comes to partying, you should know I lean way more 'vanguard' than 'Buddhist.'"

"It's all kinda' fading into grey," Kaidan murmured, though the memories he did retain caused a fresh smile to spread across his face. "But I do remember something about... I think Garrus turned a coffee maker into a bomb."

Shepard laughed. "Weird," he commented, "what else?"

"And Javik got completely wasted and was calling everyone 'primitives.'"

"Sounds like Javik. Except the drinking."

"And... I think I remember us daring Vega to join us and Cortez in a hot tub."

"Now you're talkin!'"
Minutes out from Rannoch, the Normandy crew were scrambling to re-check systems in preparation for their second engagement with the unknown intruders. EDI had written an optical signalling VI program and disseminated it to the reinforcement fleet when they'd arrived at the rendezvous, which would allow the allied ships to communicate with each other via pulsed tight-beam laser transmissions the way Normandy and her satellite intelligence drones swarm could. As long as they maintained line-of-sight, it should permit them to co-ordinate tactics despite the radio jamming. The geth-operated SIDs would act as relays within the fleet, and a pair would act in the same capacity between the Normandy, the ground team's insertion shuttle. There was a weak link in the chain- the optical comms didn't really scale neatly to personal armour, so once the marines were on the ground they'd have to rely on old fashioned shouting and hand signals- and Shepard wasn't happy about that. But he had to trust Kaidan and Moore's talents there.

Combined with their QEC linking them to Earth and Earth back to the Shepard, their internal comms bolstered by active EM shielding throughout the hull, and a hard link to the shuttle as long as it was connected with its umbilical supports on the hangar deck, it was the best work-around they could manage to try and overcome the enemy's major strategic advantage.

Hunter had reported in an hour earlier that the ground-side ship was still parked in the same place, so while the Shepard and the rest of the fleet engaged the orbital vessel Normandy would drop out back from the battle and try to make a stealth insertion of their shuttle near Naryleah to connect with the geth scout and start their mission.

"We're out of conduit in sixty seconds, Commander," Joker announced from the cockpit.

"Captain Faris reports via entanglement communications that they have engaged the enemy capital ship," Delegate reported.

Shepard requested one final systems check from his crew and reports started flowing in from across the ship. As Nymandra received their replies, Hadrian tapped the hotkey he'd assigned on his station for direct comms with Kaidan.

"Hey," he said in a low voice, "you ready to go?"

"We're ready," Kaidan answered. His voice was affectionate, but tight. He knew they were still taking a big risk. "Gonna' be weird hearing a VI relaying your messages once we're out of the barn," he said.

"EDI said programming them to emulate our voices would have been 'extraneous.'" Hadrian paused anxiously. "Be careful down there. Kick some ass and come home safe."

"There'll be eight of us. Given what we've always been able to pull off with just three, we might just take out the whole invasion force." They both laughed tensely. "Why didn't we always just deploy with the whole squad, anyway? Whose bright idea was that? If you'd brought the entire
team we'd have spanked Saren on Virmire, probably killed Kai Leng on the Citadel- think of all the trouble you'd have saved yourself."

"Usually smart to hold something back in reserve. Can't show all your cards at once," Hade said.

"So that's why Vega kept beating me at poker," Kaidan chuckled.

"Ten seconds," Joker said.

"Keep an eye on Moore. I feel like he's the new 'me.'" Shepard joked.

"Of course I will, he's easy on the eyes."

"Yeah, yeah," Hadrian shook his head, grinning. "Be right back, work to do." He muted his end of the channel as the ship slipped out of conduit drive and they took their initial scans of the area. The holographic master display pulled up a tactical display of the battle- the fleet comprised of the Shepard and the Alliance, quarian, geth, turian and asari ships were several thousand kilometres away, arranged like a shallow bowl focusing their fire on the alien C&C vessel and screening the Normandy's arrival. The carrier's fighters were engaging the intruder interceptors, but the enemy had launched many more of its 'bullets' than during the initial skirmish.

"How are our friends?" Shepard asked. Hallis, with his quick salarian reflexes and cognition, examined his terminal which had been set up to display transcripts of the laser communication network.

"No losses so far," the science officer replied, but some of his facial twitches looked distinctly uncomfortable. "However, Shepard has fired main batteries repeatedly on intruder command ship to no effect. Not encouraging."

"Damn," Shepard hissed, "those rival any dreadnought's guns. If they can't get through..."

"It's still early in the fight," Nymandra said, trying to sound optimistic. Trying... and sure enough, it was hard to tell how she actually felt- as Hadrian focused on her he found that he couldn't gain any synthempathic insight into her mental state. The mental 'buzz' of the CIC seemed to have faded out and Hade knew he was alone with his own thoughts and feelings.

"Take us in to drop off the ground team," he instructed. Normandy rolled toward the planet below and started her descent through the atmosphere. Shepard cued his lover's channel open again.

"You're a minute out," he said.

"How's the fleet doing against the bad guys?"

"Ahh, holding their own, but we haven't really hurt them yet. Maybe you'll actually get to do the honours and pop their cherry." Hadrian heard a chuckle and he briefly closed his eyes, imagining the sentinel's face with a wry smile.

"You always say the nicest things." There was another pause between them. From Shepard's point of view, this would be the first battle they went into apart since pursuing Kai Leng to Horizon. The nature of his resurrection meant he had no memory of the raid on Cronos station, nor the battle for Earth afterwards, though he'd been told about the toll they'd taken. The separation put a knot in his stomach, the thought of not being able to keep an eye on his partner. "It's hard, I know," Kaidan said, clearly aware of the commander's state. With a little concentration, Hadrian could feel his husband's sympathy like a fingertip on his bare skin. It was faint, gentle, but there, despite the feeling of everyone else's absence from the edges of his awareness.
"Is this how you felt when I took Liara and Javik down to Thessia without you?" Hadrian asked.

"I saw the three of you setting out on a planet under Reaper attack. You're getting off easy by comparison," Kaidan retorted. "Steve says we're about to launch."

Hade took a deep breath and shifted in his chair. "Time to go, then. Fly safe," he said.

"You too. Love you."

"Love you," Shepard replied. With that the Normandy's remaining Kodiak shuttle departed the port hangar bay with two of the SID drones and swooped toward the city below. As the frigate pulled back toward space to join the battle there, Hadrian tested out their improvised line of communication. "You still reading me?" he asked. His message was sent to the optical comm array, pulsed to their relay done, to the shuttle, to its VI, to Kaidan. A moment later the synthesized voice of the VI aboard Normandy returned the reply bounced back along the same chain.

"I am. We aren't encountering any resistance so far. Steve is taking us to the rendezvous site with Hunter- our ETA is a minute and a half. Go give 'em hell topside." Kaidan was right- the VI's interpretation left something to be desired, but at least they could still talk as long as they could maintain visual contact between their drones and until the team was off the shuttle.

"Be back for you soon," he said. He muted their channel on his end again and turned his full attention back to the activity of the CIC. Joker was starting his run to line up the guns on the enemy capital ship.

"The fleet still appears unable to damage the command and control ship," EDI reported. "And enemy interceptors are starting to overwhelm our fighter picket. Point-defenses- even the Shepard's Thanix turrets- seem ineffective against the interceptors."

Lt. Faris's voice came over the internal comms from the main battery, where he'd taken over for Imperatus while the turian was off with the ground team. "What? We carved the 'bullets' up with our cannons last time."

"Evidently they have enhanced their defensive systems," EDI suggested.

Suddenly Normandy lurched the one side and a siren blared as several of the lights on the starboard side of the CIC flickered.

"SHIT! Not just their defenses!" Joker snapped. "That came from one of their fighters- looks like they upgraded their guns, too!"

"Commander!" Hallis called out. "Major change in optical radio chatter! Attacker's aggression spiking- fleet beginning to suffer substantial damage."

Normandy jolted again violently.

"Damage control team to port hangar bay!" Adams ordered over the intercom.

"The interceptors' armaments exhibit a five hundred percent increase in output, Commander. However I still detect no internal power generation," EDI explained.

"How can they all of a sudden be-" Hadrian caught up on his words as an ominous revelation dawned on him. "Fuck me... can't show all your cards at once," he said, echoing his earlier words to Kaidan. "They held back last time to size us up- maybe they even let us get away to draw in more of our forces. This was a set-up."
"It's a trap?" Nymandra asked, alarm rising in her voice. Shepard made a face and rolled his eyes.

"I was trying to avoid putting it exactly like that," he grimaced, "but yeah, it seems like it's a fucking trap."

Suddenly the VI in his earpiece relayed a message from the ground team. "This is Cortez! Ground team was engaged almost immediately on landing. Meeting heavy resistance!" Hadrian's heart felt like it had jumped into his throat. His pulse began thundering in his ear and he felt his rage starting to rise.

"Escalation, Commander! Reports of fighters impacting our ships on ballistic trajectories, subsequent rapid loss of contact. Combined with weapons fire- have lost communications with both quarian cruisers, five turian frigates, two asari heavy cruisers, one Alliance cruiser! Other ships reporting heavy damage!"

"The fighter screen has also collapsed," EDI announced. "When the intruders began their attack in earnest, they were neutralized within seconds."

"Ground team was overwhelmed!" the VI said in that impersonal, wrong voice standing in for Cortez. "There's no way they can get past them! They're falling back to the shuttle! Just a sec', let me see if I can..." he trailed off.

"Alliance carrier and geth dreadnought beginning to declare penetrative breaches. Geth reporting fighters inserting infantry. Four more turian, one more asari ship now breaking up or adrift, registering powerplant instabilities!"

Normandy shuddered and groaned a third time and two of the stations on the port wall flickered and shut down as a coolant conduit in the ceiling above ruptured from a surge in pressure. The crew at the disabled terminals scurried from their seats coughing from the blast of gas, though the line was automatically cut off within seconds. The holographic display in front of him sputtered from a power interruption.

Adams' voice piped in over the comm again. "Dee cee to starboard cargo bay!"

"This is a fucking wash," Shepard growled, gritting his teeth and tightly gripping the armrests of his chair. "We've got to withdraw and re-think our assessment of these assholes. Tell our remaining ships to disengage and break for our staging area. Joker! We're going back for our shuttle, right the fuck now."

"Aye aye, Commander, I'll try and get us there in one piece."

"Normandy, Alenko here! We've extracted," came Kaidan/the VI's voice, "but we have casualties!"

As the damaged frigate dove at breakneck speed to pick up the shuttle, Joker wove sickeningly through a wave of ascending interceptors from the grounded enemy ship. The inertial dampening system strained to compensate for the g forces and everyone had to briefly grab on to something to keep from being pulled to port at one point.

"Our surviving ships are extricating themselves and attempting to leave the system," EDI reported.

"Oh no you don't!" Joker belted out, and the ship corkscrewed violently. Hadrian flexed his midsection to stay upright but still felt a brief wave of nausea. "Sorry back there, these fuckers are trying that kamikaze shit again!"

"Dizzy is better than dead, carry on Lieutenant!" Shepard ordered. As everyone else focused on
surviving the next few minutes, Hadrian keyed his end of the direct channel with Kaidan.

"We'll have you back aboard in a moment," he said tensely. "Are you okay?" There was a pregnant pause.

"I am," Alenko replied through the VI, which failed to convey the grim tone intended. "But everything went to shit in a hurry, we're in bad shape."

"Shuttle intercept in fifteen seconds," Joker announced. Chakwas came over the intercom now, reporting that she was ready at the entrance to the shuttle bay to receive the wounded.

"You're almost home," Hadrian said. He leaned forward in his chair, clutching the armrests as though preparing to fling himself forward to catch the smaller craft himself. "Just hold on, we're coming for you."

EDI helpfully switched the holo graphic to show Normandy's flightpath to meet the Kodiak, and as the seconds thumped by in Shepard's ears the image zoomed progressively in as the two craft closed in on each other. He winced anxiously as the images converged and the ship made a heavy thud as a couple hundred feet away the shuttle abruptly grabbed the deck with its magnetic grapples.

Joker immediately pitched up, poured on the engines, and started to tear toward open space again.

"I'm noticing a lot less evasive manoeuvring, Joker!" Shepard pointed out.

"They seem to be breaking off, Commander. A few pot-shots after us, but they've stopped pursuing."

"They took our measure, they adapted, and now they've kicked the shit out of us. They've made their point," Hade sneered. "They don't need to chase us, they know that for now we can't stop them." Except for the absolutely necessary communications- mostly Nymandra and Delegate and EDI coordinating damage control response- there was a stark, shell-shocked silence in the CIC as Normandy made it back into space and powered away at FTL. Shepard slouched, coiled like an agitated snake in his chair. "I'll be with the ground team," he hissed, and sprung to his feet. "As soon as you can re-establish communication with our other ships, get their status. I want to know how bad we've been hurt.

Double-timing it, he stalked down the passageway connecting to the rear half of the ship. As he passed through the mess hall he could see down the port corridor to the hangar bay, and he saw one of Chakwas' medics trying to attend to a cut on Kaidan's scalp while Karin herself was scanning Torvan, a despairing look on her face. Meanwhile Moore had cracked the mangled chest armour off of Deacon and was trying to apply pressure and medi-gel to a baseball-sized hole through Erik's chest and back. But the wound was so large that the medi-gel couldn't seem to find purchase, and so bloody his hands kept slipping, making the effort look futile. Corporal Herman was using a fireman's lift to carry the limp body of the team's adept, Saelia M'sona, from the pock-marked shuttle into the Med Bay; her blood was dripping down Herman's shoulder and side from a similar gaping wound in her abdomen. And Hunter, whose platform was missing its left arm, was helping the squad's geth engineer, CTSU-11/17, whose platform was hopping off the shuttle missing its right leg.

"Holy shit," Hadrian muttered. Having watched them in training, Moore's team had impressed him as perhaps the best ground assault team since his own. And they'd been pulverized.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he approached Kaidan, putting his hand on the sentinel's neck and
using the other to lift his hair- slicked with sweat and blood- for the medic. Alenko gave him a shaken, dark look and shook his head slightly.

"I only took a glancing hit, but it cracked my helmet wide open." He winced as the medic wiped away the blood on his temple and applied some medi-gel. "If my barrier hadn't blunted it I'd be... It was bad down there," he said in a low voice. "They ambushed us almost as soon as we were off the shuttle and met Hunter. Just three of their infantry units, they dropped on us from one of those bullet fighters out of nowhere and just... Deacon was down immediately." Kaidan looked sadly at the marines' second-in-command. "They didn't even use any kind of ranged weapons- just those 'tentacles' that come out of them. They were so fast, and they just..."

"The whole engagement was a set-up, I'm sure of it," Hade scowled. "They went easy on us last time so we'd bring more of our forces in for them to slaughter us. But how did they know when we'd be back, and where to intercept you? God damn it, this was a fucking disaster."

"You couldn't have known," Kaidan sighed. He looked over Shepard's shoulder, to Cortez as he stepped off the shuttle with his omni-tool glowing, scanning the damage. Hadrian followed his gaze, and felt something intense coming from Alenko. "None of us would have gotten out of there if it hadn't been for him," Kaidan remarked. "He used the shuttle to ram them when our weapons couldn't punch through their armour. It was some quick thinking and some damned fine flying."

"I'll give him a medal, or something," Shepard sighed. "He'll know that I'm grateful, trust me."

"So am I. He saved our lives. Some of us, anyway." They watched Chakwas shake her head and gently lay her hand on Torvan's forehead a moment before she moved on to Moore, pleading with him to stop trying to resuscitate Deacon. Moore protested, and Hadrian stroked Kaidan's cheek before peeling away to go back Karin up. He put his hand on Dan's shoulder and urged him to his feet.

"You can't do anything more for him, Lieutenant," he said. "You did your best." It was the same thing he'd been so resistant to hear from Kaidan after Thessia during the war, but now he dispensed it just as earnestly. Moore pushed his sweaty hair up off his forehead, leaving behind a dark red smear of his friend's blood.

"We couldn't get a round through their armour," Moore hissed. "And they hit us too close to try grenades. They looked mechanical so I had Tech Support try overloading one of them but it didn't seem to have any effect."

"We'll go over all of that in the debrief," Shepard said, "for now let the doctor give you a once-over, then review it in your head, write it down, and then... then check on your people, followed by some rest. I'm in no rush to hurry in to another fight with those bastards." He paused, waiting for some acknowledgement, then took Moore's chin in his hand and made the other vanguard look him in the eye. "Hey. Revenge later, Lieutenant. Orders now." The marine detail's chief hesitated sullenly, then nodded and looked away, feeling ashamed of the outcome of his mission.

"Yes Sir," he said through gritted teeth. Hadrian released him and Dan limped- only now noticing the gash on the side of his right knee- over to where Herman had re-appeared at the Med Bay doorway. The corporal's sad blue eyes fixed on Deacon with a vacant, despondent look on his face. He was covered on one side in Saelia's blood- the asari adept, too, had been declared dead by Chakwas' assistant from the ragged wound in her abdomen and another deep gash in her neck, just under her jaw.

Herman staggered the distance to Deacon's body and slumped to his knees, looking at the slain gunny's face. After a quiet moment that no one dared interrupt he reached down and closed Erik's
eyes, resting his hand over his friend's face. Finally Moore, his voice sympathetic but stern, said "come on, Ben," and give a light pat to the shoulder pad of Herman's armour. "Still alive means you get triaged. He'll be looked after." Herman rose slowly, shaking a little as the adrenaline wound down and the shock set in, and followed Moore in a daze back into the Med Bay.

Hade returned to Kaidan's side, where Chakwas was giving a quick double-check of her subordinate's work and nodded approvingly. "You can wait, Major," she said, "though I already suspect you'd have it no other way." She withdrew inside the Med Bay while another of her staff started to prepare the deceased to be moved.

"Commander, we'll be at the fleet's fall-back position in two minutes," EDI reported via the intercom. The married Spectres looked up at the ceiling and Hadrian nodded.

"Understood, EDI." He looked back to Kaidan and then over to Deacon's body. He could feel his and Alenko's hearts aching for Herman, and wondered how much worse it must have been for Kaidan the two times he'd gone through the same kind of loss with him. He felt like it demanded some pause for reflection, out of respect, but they had to get their bearings and that meant conferring with the commanders of the escaped fleet's ships. "When we arrive I'll take the other ships' captains in the comms lab," he said.

"Acknowledged," the AI signed off.

"Take care of our people," Hade said to Kaidan, "I'll come back and check on you if you afterwards aren't already out of medical." He started to turn to go but Kaidan grabbed his wrist, holding him up, and when Shepard looked back to him, Kaidan's eyes were once again fixed on Cortez circling his shuttle.

"Hey," he said quietly, in an inquisitive tone, "you are going to do something for him, right? I mean it... you'd be mourning me now if it hadn't been for him."

Hadrian looked at Kaidan's face until the sentinel returned his gaze, then gave a small, sincere smile. "Yeah," he replied, "of course. A commendation, a medal- hell, I'll make one myself if I have to. Or something. He brought you home to me, makes him a hero in my book." He leaned in and kissed Alenko softly and ran his fingers through the back of Kaidan's hair. "Some strong feelings about it, huh?"

Kaidan nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "After what those things did to the others... I thought I was dead. And just when I wished you were there... well, he was." After a momentary pause, Alenko shook his head, coming back to the present. "Anyway, go. I'll be alright, and the fleet will be wanting to check in."

"Right. I'm glad you're okay. Love you," Hade nodded.

"Love you."

Shepard strode back up the corridor to the forward section of the ship and through the security checkpoint into the dip/com complex. In the communications lab the control panel was starting to light up with incoming hails. He configured the system to conference all of the incoming signals, took a deep breath, and activated the holographic projectors.

The captains of the Shepard, the two remaining asari heavy cruisers, the last Alliance cruiser, and the senior captain of the surviving turian frigates appeared in the display.

"Captains," he said.
"Commander." It was Lavoie, captain of the Shepard, who had rescued the marooned crew of the previous Normandy after her Crucible Day crash, had supported Kaidan and Liara and Javik's proposed expedition to Nibanna Vedi where they'd found Hadrian's resurrection in the form of the adori named Vattan, and who- much to the surprise of everyone involved- hadn't been stripped of his command for the unauthorized mission. "What happened?" he asked. "The enemy was... how to put this professionally, instead of just screaming profanities... they were considerably more formidable than you reported."

"They were," Shepard sighed, rubbing his forehead with his palm in frustration. "I'm sorry for your losses. All I can think of is that they held back in our previous encounter with them, or that they learned from it, or both. And this time they decided to see how many ships we committed to the battle before they engaged in earnest."

"A sound strategy, if they knew that they had the capability to overwhelm us," the turian commander, Kyrus Anatorian, commented. "But how did they have that capacity? We detected no powerplant emissions from any of their assets."

"And what did they do to our ships?" Lavoie asked. "They never hit the San Antonio or the Melbourne with their weapons, just several of those impactor vehicles, and within moments they'd gone dark and suffered catastrophic power core breaches."

"A number of our ships were destroyed the same way," Kyrus noted. "It happened so fast they never signalled out what happened on-board."

"The geth dreadnought did," Hadrian countered, "they reported that the penetrators were deploying infantry- presumably the same kind that hit my ground team and ripped through them. If the infantry made their way to vital systems and attacked them from the inside..."

"I believe that's what they were attempting aboard the Voranaeda," one of the asari captains, Allielli, said. "The crew did manage to communicate to us that the impactors were inserting some kind of weapons platforms, but they were managing to neutralize them. But before they could tell us how, they were swarmed and destroyed by heavy, concentrated weapons fire."

"Shit!" Shepard cursed. "The one good thing that might have come out of this- some intel on a way to counter their infantry, at least- and the fuckers killed them before they could pass it along."

"What do we do now?" Kyrus asked, arms crossed. "We are clearly outmatched, and even those ships that weren't destroyed have taken damage. We need to make repairs, and the only shipyards we know of that are operational yet are at Sol and the newly upgraded docks at Aephis."

"Aephis is closest, so I think we should go there," Hadrian sighed. "Back to lick our wounds. At least the invaders aren't killing the quarians on Rannoch."

"Whatever lets us sleep at night," Lavoie said bitterly. "Were your losses bad, Commander?"

"I've got half a ground team that needs patching up and debriefing. The other half..." Hadrian shook his head and leaned forward heavily, gripping the rail in front of him, "well... we have a wall for them."

-X

Five minutes later, on his way back to the Med Bay, Hadrian met Cpl. Herman on his way to crew quarters, having been cleared by Chakwas to go. The younger man looked distant and dishevelled, the edges of his eyes tinged pink. He was out of his armour- it had been taken for bio-decon on
account of Saelia's blood- and looked 'deflated' in a clean pair of patients' scrubs.

"Corporal," he said, pausing. Herman looked up and stiffened, blinking and sniffing slightly.

"Commander. I was just on my way to write my report, Sir."

Shepard put his hand on the marine's shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'm sorry for your loss, Ben... I heard you and Erik were..." Herman sighed and shrugged, looking away. Hade could feel that he was struggling to keep it together in front of his CO.

"He... we weren't serious, Sir... Coming out of the war he was my best friend... with, ah, some 'benefits.' The lieutenant said we'd hold a memorial in a few days... invited me to say something. I don't even know what to... You know he used to be Cerberus, Sir?" he asked. Hadrian nodded.

"I saw that in his dossier back when I was picking the ground team. He defected a couple months before the Reapers invaded."

"He joined up with them because he thought whether it was the Reapers or whether it was some new aliens that turned up, someday we'd come under attack and our allies would want to talk about it, and the Alliance would have its hands tied up in red tape... to him Cerberus was that last line of defense. He saw it like joining an unauthorized militia. And he was a good soldier... good enough they had him running a combat arms training camp less than a year later... Then Cerberus started indoctrinating their troops, and... when he found out they had that planned for the kids- practically kids- under his command, he contacted the Alliance and gave the whole camp up. I was part of the company that went to secure it and take them into custody."

"Easy to forget while the bullets were flying that Cerberus started out as just people, like us. Including a lot of good people who never stopped being decent. There were quite a few defectors who really wanted to save lives," Hadrian remarked. "I worked with a bunch of them."

"Yeah... I got to know him personally while he was a prisoner on Earth... sort of like you and Lieutenant Vega, roughly the same time-frame, too... and then the Reapers hit. Brass told us to evacuate our base to hook up with the resistance, but they never told us what to do with the prisoners we were guarding. So my CO let them go. Told them if they really wanted to help people they'd come and fight with us. We had each other's backs through the whole occupation. He was hardcore... saved my life a few times before you came back with the Crucible. Then after the war the Alliance gave him a pardon and a clean slate and they let him continue on with my unit... what was left of it, anyway... until you pegged us for this crew..." Herman looked down at his hands, squeezing them to try and arrest the emotional tremors that had begun.

Unexpectedly, Shepard received an image across the link opening up between the two of them—Deacon, seen through Herman's eyes in a rapid succession of moments: surrendering but proud in his Cerberus armour; bantering through the bars of a holding cell in a prisoner's jumpsuit; grim-and grimy-faced in the trenches of Earth during the Reaper occupation; but then one that came into poignant focus—sitting on a couch in the Normandy's observation lounge with one of Ben's bare leg behind his back and the other draped over his lap, in a pair of plaid boxer shorts, playing a guitar and humming, a crooked grin on his face. But Herman pulled back just as quickly and the mental picture faded away.

"He was kind of a dick," Ben reminisced. "But he could be a nice guy, too... He was funny, but he used it all the time to get his own way... like... with women."

"You two weren't exclusive?" Hadrian asked. Herman shrugged and winced slightly, betraying a little bitterness.
"I was," he sighed, "but he... well, when he was done running around after someone else, he always came back to me. So I'd wait. He was fuckin' selfish in bed, too, but when he... he could..." He chuckled ironically, and there was a flash of shared sensory memory- no image or words or sounds, just a deep, pelvic ecstasy- before it was withdrawn and buried too. "And he was a good soldier. Not great, but..." Finally he gave up trying to put his feelings to words, and there was another rapid-fire succession of mentally transmitted pictures, much more personal this time- Deacon's eyes looking up from between Herman's thighs; his eyes, close in the dim light interior lighting of a Kodiak in a quiet shuttlebay, and the sensation of his firm grip stroking Herman; his eyes, looking down at Ben as his naked, glistening body swayed back and forth, Herman's knees hitched over his shoulders, coupled with a delirious, slightly pained sensation; and then his eyes, looking up from the hangar floor, the light gone out of them.

Hadrian took a deep breath and withdrew his hand, trying to retreat from their connection. He looked sadly at Herman, who was looking away and shaking his head thoughtfully, blushing a bit, evidently concerned that he'd 'over-shared.'

"If he hadn't jockeyed his way in front of me on the shuttle, wanting to hit the ground first, it probably would have been me. He could be a real fuckin' dick. But as often as it felt like he was showing off, it felt like he was putting himself in front to protect me... which do you suppose it was today, Sir?"

Hadrian thought for a moment, then tried to smile sympathetically. "I try to believe the best of people," he said, "that even when they're confused or annoying, that they're still trying to do good as best as they know how. That people are good... So what to say about him..."

"Say he was a good guy, I guess, Sir? That he was always looking out for his people... or that he..."

"Say whatever you believe and trust yourself, Corporal... because you're a good guy. You'll figure it out." Shepard patted Herman's shoulder again and the marine nodded, his face contorting a little as he wrestled with his feelings.

"Thanks, Commander," Ben sighed again. They sidestepped each other and continued on their ways, Shepard to check on his love and Herman to remember the friend he'd loved. But as their connection began to abate, they shared one more feeling- both wanted to make the intruders pay.

-X

Seven hours later

-X

The loft cabin door bloomed open and Kaidan greeted Cortez on the other side, the bandage on his forehead striking a sharp contrast with his dark hair, newly shorn short and still wet from showering. The distinctive 'do was gone, and Cortez couldn't help but stare, wide eyed.

"Steve," Kaidan said, offering his hand. The pilot grasped it and immediately felt a swell of gratitude and affection translate from the sentinel through their touch. "Come on in."

Accepting Alenko's offer, Cortez stepped inside. It was actually his first time to the SR-3's top deck, and he took a moment to indulge his curiosity, looking around the compartment and picking out the differences incorporated to the new design. Shepard was standing to the left, in the new kitchenette, scooping some kind of steaming stir fry into three square-ish bowls.

"Commander," Cortez nodded. Hadrian looked over his shoulder and smiled, though in his eyes
there was still a clear undercurrent of sadness at the losses they'd sustained today. He set down the
wok and pronged scoop and held his hand out towards Kaidan, who approached and embraced the
commander, then took over his work as Shepard stepped toward Cortez and hugged him, too.

"Lieutenant, you brought my husband home to me when he thought he was going to die." He let
go, stepped back, and looked Cortez in the eyes. "Today you can drop the 'commander,' call me
Hadrian- or Hade, or Bubba, or Chuckles or whatever floats your boat- and accept a seat at my
table for a meal. You earned it."

"You should try calling him 'Chuckles' in front of the crew, I'd love to see that," Kaidan laughed a
little, finishing dishing out the food.

"My condolences, Major- what happened to your... ah..."

Kaidan rolled his eyes. "Karin had to put the clippers to me to tape up my scalp," he explained, "I
got her to go easy on me, but..." He brushed his hand over his bristly head and shrugged, then
loaded the bowls aboard a tray.

"I don't know, it's not so bad. I kinda' like it- maybe it'll grow on you, too."

Kaidan shot Cortez a dull, unimpressed look. "I'd rather it grow back," he said.

"I think he's gorgeous either way," Hade piped in, "I'm just going to miss having something to hold
on to." His face lit up with a wicked smile. Cortez grinned as he carried the tray down the steps to
the small dining area in the social space below, opposite the bedroom, to start setting the table, and
Steve's face lit up too.

"I do love seeing the two of you together," he remarked. Shepard and Alenko exchanged some kind
of glance through the pass-through window. "You cooked that yourself?" he asked.

"He insisted," Kaidan said. "My condolences."

"Keep it up," Shepard retorted in a half-mocking, warning tone. Cortez chuckled and his smile
widened. "It's chicken. Sort of. At least it tastes like chicken, but then what in the galaxy doesn't?
We picked it up on Eden Prime but after the battle earlier, the power to our little refrigeration unit
has been in the fritz so I wasn't sure it would keep."

"And he wanted to treat you to something nice," Kaidan added.

"And I wanted to treat you to something nice," Hade repeated, nodding his head a little to one side.

"I'm honoured, Sir," Steve said, feeling humbled, "I appreciate it. But I was just doing my job, I
don't need any special consideration for-"

"It was something special to me," Shepard interrupted. He looked over to Kaidan who was
ascending the steps again and who, when he reached the other two men, put a hand on Cortez's
shoulder.

"And I know it wasn't just... duty," he said. "After we were outside the enemy's interference I felt...
well, you had some pretty strong feelings swooping in to our rescue. Strong enough that I couldn't
help but pick up on them."

Cortez felt heat rising in his cheeks, and cast his gaze down at the table through the kitchenette's
window to the area below, the three steaming bowls nestled close to each other in the centre.
"Don't be embarrassed," Hade said. "It's... I understand. I understand that when I- when... 'the other me'- was gone and you were both marooned, you got to be confidants. I get that you maybe started feeling something for me last year, before Kaidan came back aboard. And that it didn't just go away when he rejoined the crew. That, if anything, maybe it rubbed off a bit to include him?"

Kaidan's hand slid down Cortez's arm and clasped his hand gently, and Steve back-tracked the touch with his eyes up to look into Alenko's. Still blushing a bit, he awkwardly offered a faint, wavering smile of acceptance.

"Maybe a bit," he conceded. Hadrian smiled too, grateful that they weren't wasting any time with denials. With a gentle nudge at Steve's shoulder he urged the three of them down the steps to the table, where they sat and- on the married pair's initiative- each held one of his hands in theirs, and each other's in front of him.

"And look," Shepard continued, "besides the base fact that you're a good guy... we each have our 'soft spots.' Reasons of our own that we might reciprocate some of that, on some level. When we met and I learned about your... about Robert... I felt this wanting to comfort you, to give you some happiness or solace. I like when sensitive guys make me feel needed... and this one..." Hadrian nodded toward Kaidan, who looked to Shepard, then Steve.

"What can I say?" he shrugged. "Hade saved my life a few times. You saved me today. I'm a little given to idolatry. I mean, it's not just because of that, but..."

"If I warrant any of the same 'hero-worship' as the commander, I'll gladly take it," Cortez said, looking gratefully from one Spectre to the other. He thought about what they were saying and felt a wave of... something. Something complicated. After a pause he said- surprising himself, slightly- "I guess I can understand how it might make our friendships... a little complicated. But I hope you don't think... I mean, I don't want to come between the two of you, Sirs."

Hade and Kaidan both smiled knowingly. "We don't," Kaidan said. Through the connection they were offering Cortez could feel their sincerity and their solidarity. "And frankly, you couldn't. We're..." he looked meaningfully at Shepard, his affection shining like a sunbeam, "good. We're good. We just wanted you to know that things don't have to be strange. We're all adults, we can be honest about this."

"Talking about it, airing it out, doesn't obligate us to do anything," Shepard added. "Certainly not anything that would make things weird."

Cortez nodded and looked from one of them to the other and back. "So... then we're just admitting that we've all thought about it?" Kaidan looked down at the table, blushing a bit again, while Hade shrugged and nodded, clearly taking a more casual view of the situation.

"He has," the commander said plainly. "I have."

"I have too," Steve confessed, letting out a nervous, but relieved breath. "Wow... I thought I was going to take that to my grave." He smiled, and so did Shepard. Kaidan's expression was more reserved, as usual, but he looked content too. "So, ah... what now?"

"Now we eat," Shepard replied. "We just eat. That's all we invited you up for tonight- supper and my thanks."

"Okay. No pressure- that's... good," Steve said, relaxing a bit more. He felt the mood lighten with Kaidan and Hadrian as well, and reached out for his bowl and a pair of chopsticks.
"Hey, before we eat," Kaidan interjected, "could we... take a moment for everyone we lost today? So that we don't forget how lucky we were to make it out alive." He looked from Hadrian to Cortez, earnestly, and Shepard nodded.

"Yeah," he said, "yeah, sure."

Cortez lowered his head in a prayer, Hadrian spent the minute in contemplative meditation, and Kaidan observed the moment silently giving thanks for his husband and for his rescuer today. Their hands found each other again on the tabletop, and gradually joined in three affectionate pairings.

In a couple weeks they would be back at the turian colony of Aephis- Normandy's stop before Eden Prime a few weeks ago- for repairs to their ships. Hopefully by then they would have some idea about where to go and what to do next.
SSV Normandy SR-3, en route to Goliaerus Aerie system

13 days later, Mon, Jul 30, 2187

Normandy dropped out of conduit drive at the head of the Council task force on the edge of the Goliaerus Aerie system. The turian colony had been saved from a planned Cerberus attack during the Reaper invasion by Shepard's chance intervention when the volus ambassador, Din Korlack, was abducted by Zaeed Messani and some mercenaries acting on behalf of the turian government, which suspected him of conspiring against them. The colony's small size and out-of-the-way location had seen it bypassed by the Reapers as they focused their campaign on larger centres.

After the Crucible Day event crippled the star cluster's mass relay the colony had gone into subsistence mode, its shipyard inactive but still protected by a small attendant wing of turian frigates and one cruiser. But with the Normandy's delivery of a server bearing several thousand geth programs, and two hundred assorted platforms for them to inhabit and work in, the expectation was that inside of two weeks the yard would be ready to start turning salvage from the relay collected by the patrol group into conduit drives for those same ships, enabling them to go back out into the galaxy and start re-connecting the planet with other surviving turian colonies. Military ships acting as trade and supply and passenger vessels would be a stop-gap measure until things were back to some new kind of 'normal.'

As soon as the damaged assortment of ships arrived, however, it became clear that things were far from normal.

"Commander," Nymandra said in a low, anxious voice. Shepard rose from his chair and descended the raised platform to stand next to her on the right side of the main console around the master holo display.

"What is it?" he asked, his tone hushed.

"Jamming, Commander. The same as at Rannoch."

Hadrian looked over at Hallis, who was turning from his science station, clearly having noticed the same readings. The salarian's face looked concerned, and the spike of tension from Hadrian summoned Kaidan back from the cockpit.

"What is it?" Alenko asked. Hade looked up at him grimly, the glowing image of the Normandy casting shadows across his face.

"They're here, too," Shepard said.

"Are we sure?" Kaidan strode to Hallis' station and examined the display, furrowing his brow. The rest of the crew so far seemed unaware, but the rising stress between the four officers was bound to be noticed, even without synthempathy.

"Unless someone else is scrambling every comm frequency with static," Hadrian hissed.
After a tense pause, Alenko looked to Hadrian and asked the obvious question. "What do we do now?"

"Nymandra, get on the laser comms and tell the rest of the fleet- they're to hang back with the Shepard while we're going to get confirmation."

"The turians won't like that order," Kaidan said.

"I'm sure they won't- it's a good thing turians generally follow orders, even when they don't like them. Which is what I need you to do, too. I want you to stay with the task force." Kaidan started to shake his head but Hadrian continued. "If anything happens to the Normandy, one of us should be aboard the Shepard to maintain some order and make the call for what to do next.

"I don't want you out of my sight," Kaidan protested, fighting with himself to keep his voice down. Hadrian took his elbow and gently led him to a back corner of the CIC out of earshot of any of the other bridge crew.

"Don't worry," Shepard said, trying to assuage his spouse, "I'm not going in there looking for a fight I can't win. I just mean to verify their presence, see what they have deployed, and get out again. We need more intel on these fuckers."

"They'll shoot you down as soon as they see you coming. I'm not losing you again." Alenko grabbed Hadrian's upper arms as if to restrain him physically from going, and through the touch their connection opened up. Shepard felt his husband's anxiety, and tried to answer it with the feeling of his promise that he'd return safely. Alenko sighed, because with it he also felt Shepard's determination. "So help me God, if you..." He slid his hand down to Shepard's, took his hand, and gently pulled off his wedding ring- a layered band of titanium on the interior, tungsten carbide on the exterior, and inlaid with a gold-platinum alloy band, which Kaidan had picked out for him- and then removed his own identical ring, swapping them between their fingers. "You come back, or I'm keeping yours," he said.

"Yes Sir, Major, Sir," Shepard replied. He smirked, pulled Kaidan's hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it.

"Retired," Alenko quipped, "as in, I'm retired, therefore I'm getting too old for this shit." He sighed again looked Hade in the eyes. "Don't expect me to put up with you putting me through this forever, you know- this is our last war. I'm putting my foot down. After this war, we're settling down somewhere."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Hadrian smiled. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. I-"

"Don't. Don't promise," Kaidan interrupted. "If you... if you can't guarantee it'll be kept, don't make it." He couldn't help thinking back to Crucible Day, to the day Shepard died. And for a moment he was reminded again that the man standing before him hadn't always been Hadrian Shepard. They looked at each other, Alenko's worry still unplacated and Hadrian wishing he could make it go away.

"I'll be right back," he said, and stroked Kaidan's short hair with his thumb. "You'll have this back in no time."

-X

3 hours later

-X
Kaidan stepped off the Shepard's shuttle back on to the deck of the Normandy, which had returned unscathed from her surveillance run to Aephis, and dropped his duffel bag to wrap his arms around Hadrian and squeezing him. After they separated, Hadrian picked up Kaidan's rucksack from the deck and the two started walking from the hangar down the ship's length toward the CIC. "So?" Alenko asked

"Two ships. Couldn't tell if they were the same ones as at Rannoch, but unless they just dropped whatever it is they're doing there, it seems more likely that it's two different ships," Shepard explained.

"I'm surprised you got close enough to tell. It doesn't look like there's any new battle damage- must have been some wild flying from Joker?"

Hadrian shook his head, a bit of puzzlement creeping onto his face. "No, they never attacked. We went in quiet on the Tantalus drive, no thrusters, and ghosted through without incident. Whether the stealth system actually worked against them this time when it hasn't previously or whether they didn't see any need to because they knew we couldn't stop them... I don't know. When I thought it might be the latter, I was actually tempted to take a shot at them. I don't like feeling ignored."

"I'm just glad you're back safe. Thank God," Kaidan sighed, relieved. They were just passing the memorial wall, the recently engraved plates with Deacon, Imperatus and M'sona's names glaring at him, and he was grateful that they didn't have any new names to add to it today. His eyes lingered a moment on a nick in the surface near the middle before he looked back at Shepard, who just looked irritated.

"Thank it for the outcome, if you want to, but I don't appreciate the change in behaviour raising new questions about these guys. Inconsistency makes it harder to figure out how they think, to predict how they'll act in the future." They walked on to the CIC and Nymandra nodded, gladly acknowledging Alenko's return to the ship.

"Speaking of the future, what do we do now?" Kaidan asked.

"Now we take our damage to the only other operational shipyard we know about to get patched up." Hadrian handed Kaidan's bag back to him and stepped over to Nymandra's station, and tapped a button to open a channel to the rest of the fleet. "This is Shepard to all ships. Aephis, like Rannoch, is presently occupied by the unknown aliens, which leaves us with no other real options to effect repairs but to return to Earth. So that's where the rest of you are headed immediately, under Captain Lavoie's command. Normandy will meet you there. Fly safe."

He closed the channel and looked back at Kaidan, who's forehead crinkled with a little confusion.

"We'll meet them there? Where are we going?" he asked.

"The turians are under attack now, too, and we've lost the only turian we had aboard. I don't like moving forward without someone to liaise on behalf of the Hierarchy. So while we were in-system I got on the entangler to Palaven. We're going there to pick up a turian."

"Any turian in particular?"

"I had someone in mind," Shepard said, and a slanted grin crept on to his face. "We'll probably even get a free weapons calibration out of the deal, too."

"I thought as much." Kaidan leaned against the aft bulkhead and smiled at his husband nostalgically. "Seems like the band just keeps getting back together, huh?"
"The circumstances could be better, but yeah, the old team does seem to get things done. Which is why after I got off the line with Palaven, I made a couple more calls to Earth. With the vacancies left by our casualties, plus the unknowns inherent to a new threat, I thought our crew could use some filling out. Some more brains, some more muscle." Hadrian nodded back toward the starboard door and the pair left the CIC, boarding the elevator to go up to their cabin.

"Besides Garrus, we'll be bringing Vega back aboard to join the ground team in Deacon's place- his N7 instructors said he's ready for field placement to complete his training. And I pegged Jack to join in Saelia's spot as the team's biotic. Traynor will be coming back aboard from the Shepard, to study and try to overcome the enemy's jamming, and to assist Liara with integrating her Broker comms system in the port ops module. It's a whole other network of comm buoys, off the official grid, that mostly survived the Reaper invasion, so that should help keep us aware of what's going on out there. And I thought we could use some more stealth and technical expertise, so I talked Kasumi into a bit of legit work."

Kaidan hung back a moment, mildly stunned, as Shepard stepped off the elevator toward their quarters. "Wait," he said, "you got Jack back aboard to play with others? And Goto?" He hopped forward to catch up. "I thought she told you last year she wasn't interested in any more suicide missions."

"She did. But she said okay when I told her that we... ugh... withdrew from the last two encounters, rather than commit 'suicide.'" Hade fished a bottle of juice out of their fridge and took a sip to drown the rest.

"And?" Kaidan asked. Shepard narrowed his eyes, firing off a dull, un-amused look.

"And she said I was getting conservative... in my old age."

"Oh. Ouch," Alenko smirked, and faked a wince. He leaned against the edge of the kitchenette counter and crossed his legs. "So we'll be putting her up, where, in geth platform storage? Under the static sink?"

"I told her she could bunk in the other ops module- we'll swap out the Rannoch QEC's servicing pod for an accommodations suite, put her and Jack up in it. Garrus can have the visitor's stateroom. Liara will probably want to sleep with her equipment again." Kaidan snorted a small laugh and Hadrian rolled his eyes briefly.

"Well... at least these aliens would have to be stupid to attack Earth, with the bulk of the whole galaxy's fleets still stuck there. And now they're getting upgraded with the advances we've made in the last year. I don't care how strong their defenses or their weapons are, unless they have a couple thousand of those capital ships of theirs, I'd still stake everything I'm worth on us if they took the fight there."

"Yeah," Hadrian agreed, "at least there's that. 'Fortress Sol,' until the modernization program finishes retrofitting the fleets and everyone goes their separate ways, anyway." The two took a moment to share via their connection the sense of comfort in their assurance of Earth's safety.

"So much for our nice, relaxing honeymoon tour of the galaxy as it rebuilds, huh?" Kaidan sighed. Hade made a resigned face and closed the distance between them, curling his arms around Alenko's waist and rocking gently pressed together.

"Well, after this new war is over maybe we'll look for somewhere quieter to settle down. Andromeda's pretty from a distance. And nobody would know us there or expect anything from us."
Alenko chuckled softly. "We'd probably have to get new jobs. Do you know how to do anything else?"

Shepard's hands strayed to Kaidan's rear and squeezed affectionately. "Besides fight and fuck like a superhero? No, not so much."

"We could take our biotics and join the Andromedan circus. See the freaks from the Milky Way."

Feeling the artificial gravity dampen the accelerating ship's inertia, the pair looked up through the viewport in the ceiling and saw the stars lurch and disappear into the swirl of conduit drive.

"Anybody calls my husband a freak, they'd better mean in bed. Speaking of..." Their bodies pressed together, Hadrian started to playfully but insistently herd Kaidan toward the bed. When they reached it and Shepard gently pushed him onto it, and pulled from his back pants pocket a condom wrapper. Looking up at his husband Alenko made a bit of an awkward face.

"I'm not gonna' say no, but do you think this is exactly the right time? Don't we have work to do?"

Shepard grinned, held the wrapper between them, and focused on it intently. Gradually withdrawing his hand, he held it precariously in the air with his biotics. "I need the practice," he said between controlled breaths. Noticing the smirk beyond the focus of his attention, he narrowed his eyes. "With my biotics," he stressed, "re-learning to use them seems to go better when I work on them with you. And I'll show you afterwards that I don't need any practice with the other thing."
The hatch on the Kodiak shuttle slid open and Hadrian and Kaidan smiled as Garrus stepped off onto the deck of the Normandy's shuttle bay. His mandibles twitched as he smiled and looked from one Spectre to the other.

"Here we are living in a galaxy where nobody fights anymore, and you boys still manage to find a scrap," he teasingly chastised them.

"Yeah, yeah, and as usual, we can't get anywhere without you. Here's the plan- we lure all of the enemy's forces to one place, and then we're going to drop your ego on them," Hadrian laughed, punching the turian's arm.

"That's the best you've come up with? Thank the spirits I'm here to take over."

"Oh and not a moment too soon," Shepard smiled. He turned his eyes upward, as was the habit, and said "EDI, give Joker the go ahead to resume course for Earth, please."

"Yes, Shepard," EDI replied. As the trio started toward the hangar door to lead Garrus to his guest cabin adjacent to Hade and Kaidan's, Vakarian remarked upon the AI's presence.

"So they were able to move her over into the new ship after all, huh? I thought they were sceptical she could be removed from the old Normandy," he said.

"They were," Kaidan answered, "but the geth were a big help in disentangling her infrastructure from the SR-2's hardware and integrating her into SR-3. They have a fair bit more expertise in that sort of thing. What's the latest- how's the reconstruction on Palaven going?"

"Slow," Garrus sighed. "I never thought I'd say it but I wish we had more geth here, after seeing the wonders they're working on Earth and what they were achieving on Rannoch before these aliens came along- what they were supposed to do at Aephis- it would be nice to have a few thousand more of them speeding up our repairs. As it is, when the Shepard dropped me off here two months ago, we only brought a couple hundred platforms and about a thousand programs; they've been great, but there's only so much they can do."

"Well, maybe on our next outbound flight we'll get some more volunteers to deliver," Kaidan offered hopefully.

The three friends were passing the memorial wall now, and Garrus reached out and brushed his clawed fingers across its surface with affection and respect for the names and images inscribed upon it. "Maybe, we'll see." Vakarian shrugged. In the face of the uncertainty, Hade empathically felt the turian's internal shift as he chose to change the subject. "But how's married life?"

Hadrian and Kaidan slowed to a stop in front of the viewport facing the memorial and looked at each other fondly, smiling, but neither was in a hurry to try and put into words their experience of ...
the last nine and a half weeks. Kaidan started to try. "You know... it's... ah..."

"Good," Shepard interjected. "We haven't really had a lot of time to relax and just 'be married,' and it's been..." he thought to the couple's evolving emotional 'dance' with Cortez- as they'd spent time together over the past couple weeks they'd been increasingly acknowledging their triangle of attraction and attachment and even indulging it with some flirtation- "it's been interesting. A little bit complicated, maybe, but good. Really good." Hadrian grinned and slapped Garrus on the back of his armour. "You should try it. Are you and Tali still...?"

"Let me tell you about 'complicated.' Complicated is Tali'Zorah vas Normandy," Garrus proclaimed, eyes widening. "Our time on Earth after Crucible Day- some days I thought she really was just using me for my body." He looked at Shepard expectantly, but then remembered that this Shepard never experienced the events from the Cronos Station raid onward, had never caught the two of them in gunnery control, and wouldn't get the callback. "Never mind. Other days she was as sweet as you two are for each other. When we went on the mission to recover the Normandy and then to Nibanna Vedi, we were like the dextro version of you guys. At least in private- in public, neither of us wanted to be one of those celebrity couples, or the poster children for 'galactic coming-together.' But then when the new ships started plying the galaxy again and the Hierarchy called me home to help with the reconstruction, and I asked her about trying to continue things long-distance until things were back to normal..."

"She didn't take it well?" Kaidan asked.

"She seemed fine with it!" Vakarian shook his head, clearly perplexed thinking about it. "She said the other admirals were pressing for her to focus more on getting the flotilla conduit-drive ready anyway, and that it would keep her busy enough that the time would fly by. But now, when we talk via entanglers, some of those calls are great but others... she really can be mean. What is with women?"

Hadrian flashed a self-deprecating smile. "I married another guy, remember? You're asking the wrong person about women, my friend."

"True."

"Yeah, great, so what about the other thing, prospective-Spectre Vakarian?" Kaidan cut in, curious and impatient.

"The Council said they still wanted me, but I've told them I'm not available at the moment, there's too much for me to do closer to home. But if I do accept, they agreed to wait to induct me. Maybe in another year or two, assuming we make it through this latest invasion..."

"We'll make it through this. Because Shepard and Alenko and Vakarian are on the Normandy again. Once they hear about it I wouldn't be surprised if the aliens just gave up and ran home," Hade grinned.

"Hopefully not before I get to shoot one of them, since they decided to create a guilt-free zone around them."

"Well it's a little different from that- guilt is still between you and your conscience. There's just no syntheconomic connection with them to make you feel... whatever the hell they feel when you shoot at them. Indifference, I'm guessing," Kaidan corrected. "They certainly seem indifferent about trying to crack our heads open."

"However that works, once the whole band's back together they'll be wishing we felt their pain."
Now... do I even need to ask?" Garrus nodded toward the command area and the trio started moving again.

"Main battery's this way. I'll show you," Kaidan smiled, nodding toward the elevator.

"The main battery? What ever happened to letting your guests settle in first? I'm not aboard ten minutes and before you even show me my room, you want me calibrating weapons?"

Kaidan and Hade exchanged an awkward look, embarrassed by their apparent lack of hospitality, but then Vakarian belted out a laugh. "I'm just messing with you," he smiled, "of course I want to see the guns first. The look on your faces..." He swung his rucksack into Shepard's arms and in a self-congratulatory tone said "be a dear and put that in my room, will you?"

"Don't get mixed up and show him out the airlock," Shepard drolled as the sentinel and their friend carried on. Kaidan shrugged and smirked back over his shoulder.

"No promises," he said.
The Normandy, the Shepard and their attendant ships from the Rannoch task force appeared in a flash above Earth. While the rest of the ships veered toward the Luna shipyards to begin their repairs, Normandy proceeded toward Earth and the new Alliance HQ that had taken shape near Frederikstown, in the Canadian eastern province of Nova Brunswick. Spared the worst of the Reaper invasion because of its relatively low population density, the region had emerged from the war with enough infrastructure left to become one of the focal points of the continent’s reconstruction, and centuries of military history had attracted the attention of Alliance Command in its selection of a new provisional fleet headquarters, at least until larger cities were rebuilt.

Having received clearance, the frigate descended through the atmosphere toward the airfield half a kilometre from the headquarters complex of quick-fab buildings and converted cargo containers. The conduit drive locked its rings and the trapezoidal 'wings' nested under the hangar bays folded down to act as landing skids, and she set down on a variable gravity landing pad that had been set up to carry out her repairs. After opening the atmospheric exchangers to refresh her air volume and equalize pressure, the landing bay ramp lowered and Hadrian, Kaidan, Garrus, Cortez and Adams disembarked. They were met by an Alliance captain, Pinset, who was slated to lead the Normandy repair, and by their new crew members save for Traynor, who would be transferring later.

After exchanging pleasantries with Pinset, Hadrian turned to welcome the additions to his crew. At the head of the new arrivals was Vega, grinning in his newly branded N7 armour and extending his hand to Shepard.

"Commander. Major."

"Retired," Kaidan interjected, "you should probably just call me Spectre Alenko. Or Kaidan."

James shrugged. "That's going to take getting used to. Cacique?" he asked, referred to the nickname he'd given Alenko during the Normandy crew's marooning at Xi Bootes.

"Carne," Kaidan retorted.

"Awesome," James smiled approvingly, then turned toward Cortez and opened his arms, advancing to grab the pilot in a bear hug. "Esteban! C'mere, buddy, I've missed your hopeless flirting- it did so much for my self-esteem!" A moment later the two lieutenants were laughing and walking together toward the mobile operations centre set up to control the project and to requisition supplies for the next sortie.

"Shepard," Liara greeted, advancing with outstretched arms and noticing him and Kaidan both following Cortez with their eyes as he walked away. Mixed in with her happiness to see them, Hade sympathetically felt a slight anxiety from her.

"Liara. It's good to have you coming aboard again," Shepard said, and the two shared a warm embrace.
As they touched her feelings came into sharper focus, their texture becoming clearer, and Hadrian understood—she was happy to see him again, but still struggling to reconcile that relief with the cost of his 'rebirth.' It was a feeling he never seemed to register from those others who knew about Nibanna Vedi or the adori Vattan; the rest seemed to have put it out of their minds and simply accepted him as the uninterrupted, original Hadrian Shepard, as though they'd truly taken to heart the cover story about him being recovered from the ruins of the Citadel and laying comatose for almost a year. Even though they knew better, it was rather simpler to just imagine that he hadn't actually died and been 'replaced' by an ancient, preserved alien who had assimilated his genetic identity and memories.

The rest of them except for Shepard himself, who privately meditated on the truth of his new life every day, and of course Kaidan, who Hadrian knew sometimes wished he could forget the truth, but who still experienced reminders and pangs of sadness for the loss he couldn't help but remember.

"It's good to be coming aboard again. Though it would just be nice if just once we could all come back together without the galaxy being under threat," Liara said.

"Hey, I had my pick of crew for the SR-3, you could have come with us when we first launched a few months ago. You said you were busy."

"At the time the asari stranded at Earth seemed to need me and my resources more than the Normandy did. But now... well, I can do them more good out there than I can here. I've been able to restore contact with most of my assets across the galaxy, so that should help keep track of the newcomers' advance."

"Being able to get information into the right hands through those channels will help too," Kaidan suggested.

"And how are... our friends?" Hade asked in a low voice, pushing an image of the adori Satteveh who had been liaising behind closed doors with the Council leadership on behalf of his long-slundering people the Normandy crew had found at Nibanna Vedi.

"Two weeks ago the Anderson delivered a mission of asari and some geth engineers... and Javik... to the research base to start gradually waking them up, acclimatizing them to the modern era, preparing them for joining the galactic community." Her whole presence and her tone shifted to betray her split feelings about 'the last prothean' having more access to the people his empire removed from Thessia 50,000 years earlier. "They're starting slow, developing infrastructure to support the population as it's brought out of stasis. The plan is to have them self-sufficient with some kind of representative government within a year. But once they're all awake and up to speed, there's talk of seeing whether they'd like to return home."

"That sounds like it would be a pretty big deal," Kaidan offered. Liara nodded tightly, lowering her voice further.

"I'm not supposed to know all of this, of course- my people are still dealing with the revelation that the leaders of our government were withholding the prothean beacon from the Council. Now the matriarchs are debating when and how to publicly disclose to the Republics the truth about the adori and the protheans' role in our ancient history. Ah- but, we can talk more about it later."

By now, Jack had walked up and was standing beside them, arms crossed over her chest and eyeing Hadrian with a mock dirty look of impatience. Liara flashed a wry smile, stepped back from Shepard, and moved on to talk to Garrus.
"Shepard," Jack said, jutting her chin out, playfully confrontational. She'd let a bit more of her hair grow in since he'd last seen her, and the criss-cross of fabric she used to wear under her studded leather jacket had been replaced by a lightly armoured panelled shirt.

"Jack. I'm surprised- I barely see any skin at all. It's a good look."

"Yeah, well... the old get-up was no help at all against anything that got through my barrier. And it sucked in cold weather. And... anyway, shut the fuck up, boy scout- I'm still no soldier." Though outwardly bristling, Hadrian could feel something deeper and more lucid beneath Jack's display. He'd had no synthempathy during their mission against the Collectors so he had no basis for comparison, but he reasoned that the change in her style reflected a new-found, genuine confidence and that she was no longer trying to divert attention from who she was to her body. Probably as a result of her growth in her role as a teacher of biotics at Grissom Academy and on Earth following the war. If she still wanted to hold on to some vestige of her old delinquent persona, though, Hade supposed that she had that right. But he made a mental note to cautiously extend an offer some time to teach her his meditation technique and see what might come of it.

"I don't need you to be a soldier, I just need some biotic firepower for my squad and an ass-kicking attitude to use it."

Jack's eyes lit up ever so slightly and she flashed her teeth in a grin. "Well that I can do," she said.

"Glad to hear it. During the work they're putting the crew up in those apartment unit shacks behind the control module. Or if you want to get a head-start you can stow your gear in the habitat module over there, it'll be swapped aboard during the repairs."

Jack nodded and headed toward the pod with her bag, directing some friendly snark at Garrus as she passed by. Hadrian looked around a moment, his brow pinched a bit in confusion, then with a sidelong look rolled his eyes at Kaidan.

"I guess Kasumi won't be getting paid after all," Hade mused aloud.

"I guess not," Kaidan smirked, knowingly.

"That would be a lot more effective if you'd ever said anything about pay in the first place- I was under the impression we were doing this for the prestige," Kasumi said coyly, de-cloaking behind the pair.

"And the opportunity to meet new aliens and pick their pockets, of course?" Shepard smiled.

"Of course!"

"Well, I used my Spectre status to authorize payment for all the non-Alliance personnel serving on the mission, so you won't need to 'supplement' your income."

"Well, that's handy. Though you know that for me it's less about the money and more about the challenge and getting my hands on interesting new things. Or old things."

"Uh huh. So... I suppose you've already rummaged around in the habitation pod you'll be sharing with Jack?"

"Naturally. Nothing interesting," Goto shrugged. Then she half-turned and looked toward Jack over her shoulder. "I wonder what kind of roommate she'll make."

"Better nowadays than back aboard the SR-2, I suspect, but I still wouldn't push my luck."
"Probably good advice. Well, I'm not exactly sure what you think I'm going to be able to do against these aliens but as long as it doesn't involve throwing ourselves on any grenades or anything really stupid, I'm glad to help out."

"For a cut of the loot," Hadrian added.

"You know me too well, Shep."

"Mhmm."

Kasumi began padding away in her cat-like gait, and Hadrian looked back at Kaidan, who was smiling broadly. "Always a step ahead," he chuckled, "and cool as cryo ammo. I can see why you like her."

"Just wait until you work with her first-hand. The two of us did take out a small army of Eclipse and a gunship that time. She'll be good to have along." Hade was also looking forward to the downtime with Goto, too- during the Collector mission, after their raid against Donovan Hock, the two of them had developed an easy friendship that usually involved quietly reading together in the lounge. He found that he appreciated her affable nature and her keen observations.

"So, what's first? Debrief with the Alliance brass? Check in with the Council?"

"Those are scheduled and we got here a bit early, so I was thinking lunch in town. You remember that Nepalese place we ate at the weekend before we launched?"

"I remember you being all excited to try those momo things and then eating one and begging me to take the rest."

"I didn't have enough spare heat sinks on me to eat any more. But I'd wrestle a krogan for some more of that butter chicken... what's that coming in?" Hadrian nodded in the direction of a Kodiak shuttle decelerating toward the landing pad.

"Not sure. But they must have clearance if they got past the air defense screen."

Garrus approached the pair, looking skyward, and asked about the shuttle as well.

"We don't know, but I think we're about to find out," Shepard said.

The Kodiak touched down and its engines whirred to a stop. Hade and Kaidan both smiled- and Garrus began fidgeting- as its two bare-faced quarian passengers stepped off.

"Captain. Kaidan. Vakarian."

"Tali. No more mask, I see." Shepard advanced and offered the quarian mechanic and admiral a friendly hug.

"Most of us don't need them anymore, thanks to the geth interfacing with our suits. Some people still prefer them, and I still keep it with me for EVAs and hostile environments, but for the most part... It's good to see you again with my own eyes."

"We weren't expecting to see you here. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I heard you were getting patched up and going back out to try and figure out how to stop these invaders. I thought you could use a little help." Tali held up her travel bag and looked intently toward the Normandy.
"And your friend here?" Hade asked, extending his hand to the other female quarian. She took it and squeezed hard, evidently trying to assert herself.

"Aizee'hott vas Quib Quib. Pray that we never become enemies!"

Hade and Kaidan exchanged a slightly bemused look and Tali jumped in with a nervous but insistent tone.

"Aizee's a combat engineer, she's very capable so I thought she might be a useful addition to your ground team."

"Well, we've got a geth who specializes in field engineering, and Kasumi, and if you're coming aboard then I'm not sure we have much need of-"

"I told you!" the new quarian snapped. Tali rubbed her forehead with one hand and raised the other to quell her companion.

"Aizee, just- go take a look at the dock's guest quarters while I tell Shepard about your qualifications. He'll have accepted you aboard before you even pick out a room."

"I told you!" the new quarian snapped. Tali rubbed her forehead with one hand and raised the other to quell her companion.

"Aizee, just- go take a look at the dock's guest quarters while I tell Shepard about your qualifications. He'll have accepted you aboard before you even pick out a room." Aizee'hott waved her hand dismissively, adjusted her rucksack over her shoulder, and stalked off toward the support facilities.

"She's a bucket of sunshine," Shepard grinned.

"She's very skilled, one of the flotilla's most talented marines... and very... aggressive," Tali sighed.

"Well y'know, Jack supplies plenty of aggression for the ground team," Kaidan chuckled. Suddenly Tali reached out and grabbed each of them by an arm, squeezing emphatically and sounding at wit's end.

"Shepard, please, you've got to help me out here! Do you know what a borderline psychopath does with her time when cybernetic telepathy prevents her from starting the fist fights that used to alleviate her boredom? She starts arguments. So many arguments- arguments over every little thing. Every. Last. Little. Thing. We just need her to... to 'play outside' for a bit. We need to find her a fight to blow off some steam, before she drives someone crazy. Or blows something up, or burns something down. And you're spearheading the only fight in town. I'll keep her out of your hair, but the other admirals said that I don't have leave to go with you unless she comes with me."

"I thought you were already neck-deep in work retrofitting the flotilla with conduit drives?" Hade didn't want to turn her away, but knowing how much it meant to her to get her people back on the move toward Rannoch, he didn't want to pull her away from that by showing all of the enthusiasm he felt for having her back on his crew. And part of him bristled at the blackmail aspect.

"I have been," Tali said, bowing her head a moment and withdrawing her hands from their arms, rubbing them together anxiously. Kaidan and Hade both felt a pang of guilt from her. "I helped install the drives that carried the Jualida and the Ictomi to the homeworld where they were destroyed. Two captains and their crews died and I was on the far side of the galaxy- one of their admirals... who are supposed to protect them."

Kaidan reached out and put a hand on her shoulder now. "You couldn't have changed the outcome of that fight, Tali," he consoled her, "and if you'd been aboard one of those ships instead, we'd be mourning you now, too. You can't blame yourself."

Tali tilted her head a little to one side and shrugged. "Watch me," she said. "Anyway, I can help keep Normandy in top running form, and you know I can help study any alien tech we get our
hands on. And there are a thousand engineers who can do the work refitting the flotilla— as an admiral my job is the well-being of my people, Shepard. I can do them more good out there, with you, than coordinating work crews at a shipyard and arranging for food deliveries to the turians.” She looked at Garrus with a poker face as inscrutable as she’d ever been behind her enviro-suit’s mask, but everyone detected the faintest hint of a ‘tone’ in her comment.

“Well, I'm really happy to have you aboard again, Tali. And your hotwired friend, I suppose, if that's what it takes. I'm- ah- not one hundred percent sure where we'll put you up, but we'll figure something out, definitely.” Hadrian looked awkwardly at Garrus, who took a deep breath and jumped in.

“You could take the state room and I could just set up a cot in gunnery control, or-"

“You don't have to give it up for me, Vakarian,” Tali interrupted. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

"I'm sure," Kaidan nodded, looking toward the habitation pod and mentally projecting toward Hadrian the idea that it could accommodate three or four with a few minor tweaks.

"I'm going to go see the damage up close for myself, if that's alright," Tali asked, nodding toward the grounded frigate, "I could probably expedite repairs a little if I brought in a few more of my people to assist."

"Absolutely, you can co-ordinate with Captain Pinset on the work and on some living space during the repairs. We'll be back in a couple hours to get ready for meetings with the Alliance and Council higher-ups, so you can fill me in then."

"I'll see you later, then." Tali bowed slightly, adjusted her pack on her back, and very conspicuously brushed past Garrus as she started marching toward the control centre. Once she was out of earshot Garrus let out a tight breath and looked, wide-eyed at Shepard and Alenko, who were visibly fighting back laughter.

"Damn," the turian sighed. "'Vakarian?' Really?"

"I dunno,' I think 'the damage' is pretty visible even from here," Hadrian said, struggling not to crack up.

"And it is not pretty," Kaidan chuckled.

"She's just messing with me," Garrus said, "I told her that one time that I liked it when she was mean, so... yeah, she's probably just messing with me." He gave Shepard a knowing look, and after a moment of returning a blank stare, Hadrian shrugged.

"Yeah, I must not have been there for that one."

"Sorry, Shepard... I, ah, forget sometimes about your... 'amnesia.'"

"Right... don't worry about it. Can we offer you a ride into town? We're going for something to eat before our debriefs," Hadrian said. Meanwhile Kaidan's brow furrowed at the feeling of Shepard's emotional state tightening up and withdrawing.

"No, I'm good, I'm going to check in with the ordinance people first about tweaking the point-defense array. But thanks.” Garrus nodded, flicked his mandibles in a smile, and walked away.

As the married couple started toward the taxi port, Kaidan put his hand on Hade's shoulder. "Hey,”
he said, concerned, "what is that?"

"What's what?" Hadrian asked, dismissive.

"Don't 'what's what' me, you know very well. When he mentioned amnesia, you started to close down. You might have learned from Liara how to finagle synthempathy with other people, to keep your real thoughts and feelings below the surface, but that doesn't work with me. We're way past compartmentalizing." Shepard grimaced and looked away uncomfortably, and Kaidan slid his hand down to clasp his husband's. "So what's with the withdrawal?"

"It's nothing, I just... the amnesia story... I know it's a lie. And Garrus knows it's a lie. But we tell it like it's true. It doesn't sit right, I don't like being a party to a lie."

"I know," Kaidan said sympathetically. "It... it feels weird to me sometimes, too... I don't like the pretending either. But it's just for appearances, it's superficial. What matters is that you're here, right? And that we're together, even if that's selfish. I don't know, maybe it'll get easier... maybe eventually it won't matter, because we'll forget or because the truth will be made public and we won't have to keep the secret anymore. For now can't we just... try to be happy?"

Hade looked down at their intertwined fingers, then back up, meeting Alenko's eyes. He summoned up an affectionate smile and stepped closer, wrapping his other arm around the sentinel's shoulder and nuzzling the nape of his neck. "I am happy, with you, I promise. And you're probably right... call it growing pains, I'm sure it'll get easier. It's just having the old gang back together, where those of us who know have to put up the front for the ones who don't... it makes it more acute. But don't worry... Come on, Kathmandu awaits."

They resumed walking, hand-in-hand, and Kaidan felt Hadrian come back from his 'withdrawn place'... mostly. But something unhappy still itched underneath, and Alenko struggled to mentally quarantine his own sadness at his inability to make everything better.
CSV Normandy SR-3, Vetus system, Petra Nebula

3 weeks later, Sat, Sept 1, 2187

With no way of effectively combating the unknown alien intruders, following her repairs the Normandy had been given the dual task of surveying Council-aligned worlds to ascertain their condition- how those that were still isolated had fared in the year since Crucible Day's disruption of the mass relay network, and whether the intruders had appeared at any other colonies- and deploying new, conduit-drive derived comm buoys to restore the galactic communications network that had been wiped out during the Reapers' invasion. Normandy's initial assignment was to make a circuit of the Petra Nebula, Kite's Nest, Artemis Tau, Hades Gamma, Voyager Cluster, Attican Beta, Shadow Sea, Argos Rho, Horsehead Nebula and Exodus Cluster forming the inner tier of the new network and a watch perimeter for new alien incursions.

It was the first Saturday since re-launching and Hadrian and Kaidan had invited their closest friends from their original mission and Cortez to their cabin for supper at nineteen-hundred hours. At quarter-to, Liara had arrived and was volunteering some suggestions for preparing the dextro portion of the meal for Garrus and Tali, since neither man knew much about alien cuisine.

"If these are going to become a regular thing, you'll want to stock up on more of this," Liara suggested, holding up a jar of something called Semiseissa. "Garrus has loved it since he was a boy and during your mission against the Collectors he introduced it to Tali- they both put it on practically everything now."

Hadrian crinkled his forehead and raised an eyebrow at T'soni. "Is that a creepy Shadow Broker thing?" he asked as he took the bottle from her and started shaking it on to the smaller pan on the stove.

"No," Liara smiled, "when we were all stranded on Earth after Crucible Day, and when we were aboard the Shepard on its way to recover the SR-2, I ate with them several times." She sculpted her face into a coy pout. "You actually thought I'd used my galaxy-spanning information network to learn our friends' favourite seasonings? That's a little paranoid, isn't it?"

"I've seen some of the stuff you dig up and file away, nothing would surprise me anymore."

The door chime sounded and Kaidan went to the hatch, welcoming Cortez, who came bearing a bottle of wine.

"You have got to be kidding me," Alenko laughed, reading the label. He held it up for Hadrian to see- an almost four year old bottle of ice wine from the Alenko vineyard in British Columbia. "A little taste of home, eh? They would have bottled this while we were hunting down Saren. Where did you even get this?"

"What can I say, I'm a good requisitions officer," Steve smirked.

"The best," Kaidan agreed, giving Cortez a one-armed hug that lingered a moment.
"My hero," Shepard said with a lopsided smile. "Incidentally, next chance you get we're going to need some more of this."

"Semiseissa? I can get that," Steve nodded. He followed Kaidan as he walked down to place the bottle on the poker table, which had been 'capped' and dressed to serve as a larger dinner table than the commanding couple usually used. Liara watched them from the top of the steps, turning her back to the kitchenette. "Bonus is that it's cheap as dirt because of oversupply- the worlds that produce it crank the stuff out, even though it isn't all that popular, because it's a really aggressive weed- if they don't harvest it it'll choke out other agricultural crops," he explained. "Tastes kind of like liquorice, to us, anyway. To dextros I hear it's like lemon pepper. But in this room, statistically speaking, three out of four of us would puff up like blowfish and need epinephrine or we'd be dead in a few minutes."

There was a wet smacking sound from the kitchen and then a small cough. The others looked up through the pass-through window in the room divider and saw Hadrian, peering at his glistening finger with restrained alarm.

"Uh oh," he muttered.

"You didn't," Kaidan sighed.

"All of his exposition was making me curious," Hade said, sheepishly.

Liara moved toward the nearest comm system toggle on the wall. "I'll call the Med Bay and tell them to have a shot ready just in case."

"Already done, Doctor T'soni," EDI announced from the intercom speaker.

"I'll go next door and tell Garrus we'll have to re-schedule," Kaidan rolled his eyes.

"Oh, come on. I feel fine! If it acts as fast as he said then still feeling fine probably means I'm probably fine. Right?"

"Probably, but better safe than sorry," Steve replied.

As Kaidan reached the door and hit the button, it bloomed open and revealed Garrus and Tali on the other side, arms wrapped around each other and lips pressed together passionately. Both jumped with a start, looked at Alenko, and stammered awkwardly.

"Oh, uh... hi," Tali stammered.

"Um, we were just..."

"I guess you two made up at some point during the refit?" Kaidan asked.

"Oh, that," Garrus chuckled, remembering the day of their return to Earth. He narrowed his eyes at Tali in playful chastisement.

"I was just messing with him," Tali giggled. "He went back to Palaven, I didn't know how long it would be before I saw him next. So when he showed up again, I decided to... what's that human expression? Bust his balls a bit?"

"I told you she could be mean." Garrus flashed his pointy teeth in an exuberant smile and squeezed Tali's hand.
"So why is this the first I've seen of you two getting along?" Kaidan looked back into the cabin at Hadrian, Liara and Steve for some sign that they'd known about the happy couple.

"We kind of kept it low key on Earth, and I guess it just carried over a little after we launched again. Remember I said we didn't want to be drafted as role models? It's when we're out here, with a little privacy, that we really get our quality time together," Garrus explained.

"Speaking of which- Shepard, I'm planning to relocate up to the guest suite with Garrus, if that's alright?" Tali piped in, craning her neck to look in at Hade through the door. She furrowed her brow a bit, confused as he pressed his fingers around his jawline and neck, checking for any swelling.

"Yeah, sure, that's fine," Shepard agreed off-handedly, "I'm really happy for you two." The turian and quarian chuckled a little.

"Deja vu," Garrus remarked.

"You still feeling alright?" Kaidan asked.

"Yeah," Hade said, "yeah I'm pretty sure I'm fine. But if Steve's right nobody else had better try this stuff."

"Well, in that case... if you aren't dying, and if the gang's all here- are we going to go ahead and eat?"

"Sounds good to me," Garrus said, stepping inside. He took one step, paused, and sniffed the air. "Hmm, do I smell Semiseissa?" he asked.

"Your favourite, isn't it?" Liara asked, giving Shepard and Alenko a subtle, self-satisfied look.

"It was," Garrus shrugged, "but during the latest stint I did back home- with offworld trade at a stand-still it was pretty much the only seasoning left on the planet, there's so much of the stuff. I think I finally got sick of it."

"Aw, goddammit!" Hadrian sighed. "You mean I almost poisoned myself for nothing?"
CSV Normandy SR-3, Antaeus system, Hades Gamma

3 weeks later, Fri, Sept 21, 2187

Ashes were blowing through the same cold, bitter wind in the same darkened, dead forest. Hade heard the voices whispering, but over the months they'd grown fainter and increasingly distorted until they were unintelligible- just whispered murmurs. He looked around, trying to figure out where they were coming from, but his attention was seized by the boy. The one from the ventilation shaft, in the hoodie.

The boy took off running, and Hadrian gave chase, possessed of a feeling that he had to catch him and protect him- to save him, as he'd failed to save him on Earth. They bobbed left and wove right; the boy would disappear behind one tree and appear beside one twenty or thirty meters up ahead. He'd run over the back of one of the peeling and faded park benches, trip, fall out of sight, and reappear just within sight behind another tree.

Finally, after minutes of pursuit, his arms and legs feeling leaden, slowing down his movements, he caught up with the boy, who'd stopped running and was kneeling in the middle of a circular stand of five trees, bathed in a sinister red light from above. Hadrian reached out for him. The red light flashed brighter and the ground at the boy's feet burst into flames that started to crawl and lick up his small body. The boy opened his mouth, monstrously wide, and the deafening blast of one of the Reapers' 'terror horns' blared, causing the forest to shudder.

Hadrian woke with a start, bolting upright, trembling and gasping for breath. Kaidan was startled awake too, and he sat up next to Hade, resting a hand on the back of his neck, which was clammy with perspiration.

"The nightmare again?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"A little different again... but yeah," Shepard sighed, leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees. "They're fewer and farther between, but fuuuuuck, I wish they'd just stop already."

Kaidan slouched sidelong against Hadrian, resting his cheek on the vanguard's shoulder and nuzzling him. "I know," he said, "so do I. I hate how they make you feel. You want anything to drink? I could get up."

"No," Shepard said, kissing the top of Kaidan's head, "no, you try to get back to sleep. I'm going to go for a walk."

Shepard rolled out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants, his N7 hoodie and a pair of sneakers. He slipped out of their cabin, stopping framed by the corridor's light to direct a wistful look in at Kaidan as he tried to fall back to sleep, before shutting the door behind him and taking the elevator down to the main deck.

When he arrived on the CIC the scene was very different from usual. It was the alpha shift, midnight to six A.M. on Earth's schedule, and most of the organic crew were between duty rotations if not asleep, leaving the Normandy crewed mostly by geth and EDI, supervised by
Lieutenants Calazan and Roussell. The lights were dimmed and many of the work stations, despite appearing un-crewed, displayed work processing as digital crew mulled over assignments inside the ship's computing systems.

"Commander," Calazan said, rising from the CO's chair and setting down a datapad he'd been reading to salute.

"As you were, Lieutenant. All's quiet, I take it?"

"Aye aye, Sir," the watch commander said, resuming his seat. "All systems running smoothly, everything in good order. We arrived in the Antaeus system about an hour ago, discharged the static sink at Vemal, and now we're on our way to the defunct relay to deploy the cluster's new comm buoy. I just have the satellite intel drones out scanning the system for any ships that might have been stranded here on Crucible Day."

"Found anything?" Hade asked.

"A couple of ships are in decaying orbits around Ploba, Sir... no life signs. Must have been stranded here when the relay shut down. I logged them in case the Council wants to authorize salvage later down the road."

"Alright. Well... carry on, Lieutenant," Shepard said. Calazan nodded and returned to his reading, and Hadrian left the bridge through the starboard door, ambling down the corridor toward the ship's rear. He stopped in front of the memorial wall and gazed at it a moment in silent reverie, mourning the friends whose names his eyes roamed over. Even the previous ships, which were represented in a pair of plaques emblazoned with relief images of the SR-1 and SR-2. He touched his fingers to the pictures, then picked at the nick near the wall's center with his fingernail to see if he could smooth the small gouge in its surface. He'd assumed since the wall's transplant that it was damaged in the SR-2's crash on Crucible Day.

He knew that the voices in his nightmare used to be those of Mordin, of Legion, of Thane- the ones whose deaths had felt the most like a result of his personal failure to avert the Reapers' invasion outright. He'd spent a lot of time over the months (from his perspective) since the war ended meditating on that guilt and trying to deconstruct it, telling himself that he never could have kept the old machines out of the galaxy entirely and that he'd done everything he could once they arrived. Perhaps that was why their voices had been fading in his dreams...

He picked at the blemish on the wall again, curling his lip slightly at the imperfection, before giving up on fixing it with his nail and turning to rest his arm on the rim of the facing viewport. Normandy was sliding into place beside the inert wreckage of the Hades Gamma cluster primary mass relay, its central rings broken up into several pieces and the lower tang of the 'tuning fork' bent out of shape by whatever had blasted a hole in the machine's ventral surface. The cloud of micro debris that had been blown off and gravitated back to its parent body glimmered in the distant Antaeus sun.

After a minute he carried on toward the ship's rear, passing the lounge and into the hub area where the hangars' access hallways crossed at the mess. Cortez and Crewman Carter, a member of the engineering staff, were sitting across a coffee pot from Corporal Herman, and Steve offered a small smile at the sight of Shepard. Hade padded over to the group.

"Commander," Herman said, nodding toward the empty chair next to Cortez.

"Burning the midnight oil?" Hadi asked.
"Just talking over tea," Steve replied. As he sat down, Shepard noticed the redness in Ben's eyes and started to pick up on the emotions radiating from him- to some degree from each of them- and it became clear what they'd been discussing: Deacon, and probably Cortez's deceased husband Robert, and presumably someone Carter lost too.

"I hope I'm not interrupting."

"No Sir," Herman reassured him. "I just... still have the occasional restless night, and Steve and Michelle have been... friends... when I needed them."

"Well thank goodness for friends when we need them," Hade said earnestly. He flashed a grateful look at Cortez, who slid a cup in front of him from the serving tray in front of them and offered him some tea.

He spent the next ten minutes listening to Ben talk about his visit with Deacon's parents during their last return to Earth. Carter mostly just listened, but when she contributed she spoke fondly of a man named Jack who'd died aboard the cruiser Amsterdam on Crucible Day. Steve was silent, but just as Hadrian was starting to get restless to return to bed with Kaidan, Cortez's hand found his on the table, and a link gently opened between them.

'I'm glad you're here, instead of us talking about our memories of you, too,' Cortez thought at him.

'You never did this with Kaidan and the others while... while you were stranded on that planet?' Shepard projected back.

'That was then... this is now. Now I'm glad you're here. Most people aren't as lucky as... We should never take our second chances for granted.'

'Or third, or fourth chances.' Hade smiled, and found his desire to return to his husband mounting.

'You should get back to him,' Steve thought, an image of Kaidan's naked torso in bed arising unbidden in his mind and crossing over into Shepard's.

'Close,' Hadrian grinned, projecting back a more accurate remembered picture than Cortez's imagined one, causing Steve to blush a little. 'And you're right. Be seeing you.' "I need to get back to my rack," he said when a natural pause arose in the conversation.

"Thanks for sitting a few minutes, Sir," Ben said. Steve topped off their mugs as Hade rose, and he was nearly at the lift to return to the upper deck when EDI chimed in over the intercom.

"Shepard..." she said, "I have bad news."
There was some mounting frustration; geth-based communications with Feros in the Attican Beta cluster had gone silent the night of their stop at the Antaeus relay wreckage, and upon investigating they had confirmed the new aliens' presence. Though Normandy had escaped unscathed, as with their other incursions they'd been powerless to repel the intruders. So it was back to surveillance, impotent observation, and 'cable laying' along a modified course. On a hunch, since they'd rerouted to Gemini Sigma, Traynor had asked Shepard to divert to the Han system so that she could use their new advanced sensors to analyse the radio interference that Huningto produced in the inner system, to see how it compared to the intruders' jamming and whether they could begin to devise a countermeasure.

It was Saturday afternoon aboard the Normandy, and following lunch Hadrian, Kaidan, Moore, Jack, and Liara had donned their combat gear and retired to the port hangar bay for some biotics exercises while Kasumi watched from the sidelines. Jack and Moore were engaged in some 'enhanced' sparring in one corner, while Liara and Kaidan were trying to help Shepard get his 'mojo' back.

"Well, how did you do it before your... ah... biotic 'overhaul'?” Kaidan asked, cautiously looking over at Liara to see how she reacted to the sensitive subject of Hade's biotics now being dependent on his inherited adori eezo 'wiring,' which worked more on the principle of conscious nervous system control, like the asari, than on the amp-enhanced somatic firing of the nodes that humans had developed.

"It's complicated," Shepard muttered, squinting at the target dummy at the far end of the hangar. "There's a reason even a lot of vanguards can't get it down." Kaidan made a slightly irritated face.

"Try me," he retorted.

"Explaining it isn't usually very helpful, learning to do it is a little different for everybody. It's micromanaging a lot of stuff all at once and everyone has to figure out their own unique way of bringing it all together."

"Oh please, you use biotics and you shoot guns," the sentinel groaned, "I do all that and deploy tech attacks, I know a thing or two about micromanaging. Don't patronize."

Hade sighed and turned toward his spouse, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "Okay, fine, I'll give it a try. But I'm telling you, my trainer in biotic boot couldn't teach it to me, I had to come up with my own recipe."

"If I recall from your training file, there were some very comical mishaps among your class as they were trying to master it," Liara smirked.

"Comical how? Did he have any mishaps?" Kaidan asked, flashing a smile.
"Answer that and you're off my ship," Hade glared at T'soni.

"I'll take that as a yes. You can tell me later," Kaidan grinned at the asari. "As for you," he said, turning back to Shepard, "come on, out with it. How did it work for you, then?"

Shepard turned back toward the target down-range and took a deep breath. "It would start with creating two high mass points... a larger, 'anchor' point right behind my target and a smaller one- I called it my cannonball- right in front of myself."

"Well you've got basic high mass effect fields down again, right? So what's next?"

"Then there's pushing open a corridor of low mass- as low as possible, total emptiness if possible-in between the two."

"Like a mass relay does," Kaidan prompted. "Jeez, that must take a lot of focus."

"Yeah. So, primary high mass there, secondary high mass here, low mass in between, and then it's a good push off the heel..." Hadrian bounced slightly on his foot, staring down the dummy in the distance, "and you ride the wake of the cannonball as it 'falls' under gravity toward the target. And as you traverse the corridor you collapse it behind you, sort of 're-spooling' the energy around you, consolidating it into a fresh barrier and blasting the rest into the target at the same time as the two heavy mass points slam together and hit them with a gravity wave."

After a moment of hanging silence Hade looked over at Kaidan, who was staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

"You're serious?" he asked.

"Yeah. Why? What do you mean, 'am I serious'?"

"You're holding one borderline singularity, 'surfing' behind another, and absorbing and re-shaping the field brane from a mass-free corridor in between them? All at the same time, in the space of a second or two?"

"Yeah," Shepard confirmed.

"That's ridiculous! Any number of things could go wrong!"

"Hence the training mishaps," Liara added.

"Hey! Quiet, you," Hadrian snapped.

"If your concentration wavers at all, best-case scenario is you go off-target. Worst-case... what? Pulverized in the gravity shear of the corridor unravelling?"

"Somewhere in between, he ends up dangling helplessly in orbit of a singularity of his own creation, thirty feet in the air," T'soni smirked.

"Zip it! It was late in a week of exercises in the field, I was exhausted-"

"Your training officer wrote that it happened in your sleep. You're lucky you were outside or you might have gone through the ceiling of your barracks."

Kaidan burst into incredulous laughter that quickly infected Liara, while Shepard glared, trying despite himself not to smile too.
"I think you're seriously abusing the powers of your position," he said as the two finally regained their composure.

"I'm sorry, but that is a really funny story," Alenko chuckled, reaching out and consoling his husband with an affectionate squeeze at the back of his neck.

"Like I said, there's a reason you don't see every biotic doing it. Because it's complicated. The technique wasn't even possible for implanted biotics until the L3's were developed and even then it was unreliable and exhausting- 'last ditch' exhausting. Which is why I never used it during our hunt for Saren, I would have been useless after doing it once. But then Cerberus rebuilt me with the L5n..." Hade grumbled. "And now..."

"Okay, okay, I get it now, it's tricky and it's hard. But I'm sure you can get it back," the sentinel encouraged. "I know you've got the high mass and low mass fields trained again, we've been practising for months. You just need to get all the elements working together again."

"If anything, the greater density and complexity of the network of element zero nodes in your... your new body... stand to make you a more potent biotic than you were," Liara said, stumbling briefly over the topic of Shepard's adori regenesis.

"Yeah..." Shepard looked down at the deck briefly, then back up to Liara with a complicated, grateful expression on his face. "And thanks... for not sounding like you resent it." Liara gazed back at him, nodded slightly, and offered a small, wistful smile.

"Moving on," she said, part statement and part suggestion, turning her eyes back to the target dummy. "Why don't you both try it? You've said yourself that your re-training seems to go faster when the two of you practise together."

"Uh, because I don't want to die," Kaidan chortled. He thought back to Crucible Day and their run together for the Citadel beam, when Shepard- the other Shepard- had slammed him out of the way of Harbinger's attack with a deliberately glancing blow from a charge. And while the memory of the injuries it caused did evoke a bit of curiosity about harnessing the same power, the complexity of it was still daunting, even if Hadrian had taught him some the same meditative techniques he cited as having helped him master his biotics.

In the opposite corner of the hangar, apparently getting frustrated in her sparring with Moore, Jack shouted "I will destroy you!" and the battlecry reverberated off the ribbed ceiling. Kaidan, Hade and Liara looked back and forth between each other and grinned at 'the psychotic biotic's' trademark zeal.

"I'm going to go encourage the kids to play nice," Liara said, stepping back. "But I mean it- you should both take a shot at it. Maybe make some kind of game out of it."

"Have you got bugs hidden in our room?" Hadrian asked.

"No, you're very dear friends to me, and that would be disrespectful. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Shepard rebuffed. As Liara walked away, Cortez appeared in the doorway to the bay and strolled toward the shuttle to conduct some diagnostics. He looked over at Kaidan and Hade and waved, smiling a little, and the pair returned the gesture before turning back toward the mannequin target.

"So? Any ideas?" Kaidan asked. "Preferably one that doesn't involve me getting clobbered."

"Maybe," Shepard said pensively. He reached out and took his husband's hand. "Close your eyes
A little sceptical, Kaidan nevertheless closed his eyes. Creating shared visualizations via synthempathic connection was still a fairly new 'evolution' of the ability that people had begun to explore, but it seemed to come pretty easily between Hade and Kaidan. After a moment holding hands and harmonizing their thoughts, the two found themselves standing in an imperfectly remembered abstraction of the hangar bay. The crucial elements, though- the two of them, the target dummy, and the space between them- were in sharp focus. A shadowy figure stood in for Kasumi, perched on some crates halfway down the range, and across the room exaggerated avatars of Jack and Moore fought an exaggerated, fireworks-riddled battle as Liara watched.

"I don't think we've got Liara's head exactly right," Hade observed.

"Cortez looks conspicuously picture-perfect, on the other hand," Kaidan said, nodding with his chin toward their mutual projection of the pilot. "Is it just me or does he look like he has a halo?"

"That's me- save my husband's life, you get a halo in my imagination. Deal with it. Can we focus? No fantasizing, we're doing this so we can safely rehearse the mental steps for a biotic charge, right?"

"Alright, so... we need a second target." At his prompting, a second mannequin slid up out of deck next to the first. He took a ready stance beside Hadrian, directing a piercing look at the dummy, and took a deep breath. "Then a high mass anchor behind the target... a 'cannonball' right in front of me... a 'relay' corridor in between..." As he described each element aloud, they appeared as a clearly visible, exaggerated effect- singularities behind the target and in front of himself, and then a faintly glowing wire grid shaped into a cigar-like tunnel connecting them. But the whole assemblage stood frozen, wavering slightly as he tried to conceive of how to take the next step correctly.

At his side, Shepard was gazing steely-eyed at his own target. He hadn't conjured up any visible manifestations- he didn't need them- but he was still fidgeting in place, as though he wanted to launch himself forward but something was holding him back.

"Nothing's happening," Kaidan remarked.

"I know."

"Well how do we... I don't know... 'pull the trigger?'" Alenko asked.

"I have an idea about that."

"Which is...?"

"Imagine that my target has a gun pointed at you."

"It's your target, why don't you imagine it has a gun pointed at you? Or at me?"

"Because I'm concentrating. Just do it, add an arm and a gun." Hadrian gritted his teeth. Kaidan shrugged, squinted at Shepard's target, and mentally appended an outstretched arm holding a pistol toward him.

"Now wha-"

Before he could even finish the question, Kaidan was snapped out of their shared 'virtual space' as in the real world Hadrian's hand jerked away from his, breaking the higher-order connection. He
opened his eyes and saw Shepard surging downrange at blinding speed- so fast there was an audible shockwave- and ramming the target mannequin with thundering force. The shattered dummy flew backwards in a shower of fragments that were collected in a kinetic barrier catchment 'net' to prevent them from damaging the bulkhead beyond.

Shepard, meanwhile, having delivered the charge with greater force than even he'd anticipated, tucked into a clumsy roll, using a snap biotic field to reduce the force and guide himself safely away from the wall. As he slid to a stop he sprawled out on the deck, laughing with gleeful accomplishment. Everyone else in the hangar hurried over to see if he was alright- Kaidan and Steve were kneeling at his side immediately.

"Are you okay?" Kaidan asked, wide-eyed and alarmed. Cortez took his hand and pulled him to sit upright and Alenko ran his hands down the sides of his face, behind his ears and the sides of his neck checking for injuries.

"I'm fine," Hade chuckled, catching his breath and smiling broadly. "Better than fine!"

"You are? Okay... you're okay. Thank God. And hey- you did it!" Kaidan exclaimed happily.

"The boyscout's back, huh?" Jack goaded playfully.

"And then some," Kasumi said, padding over from her perch. She tapped her earpiece and the holographic GUI took shape over her eyes. "My observer/analysis suite says you delivered fifty-one hundred newtons, I think that's a new record, Shep."

"Cool. Wait- the sensors in that thing measure kinetic force at a distance, too?" Hadrian asked.

"It sees pretty much everything, Shep," Goto smiled knowingly. "That's why the software's called 'Holmes.'"

"It must be like I anticipated," Liara pondered aloud, looking at the crumbled bits of target mannequin as they floated to the floor. She thought for a moment about how to reference his regenesis without revealing it to those present who hadn't taken part in the Nibanna Vedi quest, and weren't authorized to be told the truth about the commander's resurrection. "Your... recovery must have enhanced your ability."

"Well shit, can I have a coma and get a healing upgrade from an old prothean machine too?" Jack asked sarcastically.

"That was pretty awesome," Steve smiled, affectionately pulling Shepard's head against his chest and rubbing the top of it. "Good work, I knew you'd get it back."

"Set up another target, I want to try it again!" Hade shouted. Jack elbowed Moore in the ribs, soliciting a grunt from the ground team leader.

"You heard him, dummy- take your place."

"You're just mad because I was winning. But hey, not for a lack of power, though, I just beat you out when it comes to discipline," Dan prodded.

"I'll 'discipline' you, honour-roll fucker!" Jack barked. Moore raised his eyebrows playfully, then backed off, palms up and smiling, as Jack pursued him back toward their corner to resume sparring.

"I'll set up another target for you," Cortez offered, rising and starting toward the storage compartment. Hade and Kaidan smiled as they watched him go, then looked back into each others'
"You really did it," Kaidan said, squeezing Shepard's arm excitedly. "I knew you could, I just hope it doesn't take someone pointing a gun at me every time for you to pull the trigger," he laughed.

"First time's always the toughest to crack. But it's the core 'thing,' if I've got it down again I'll get the rest back in no time. Damn, it's going to be good to get back in the field."

Alenko paused a moment, haltingly squeezed Hadrian's arm again, and looked down at the floor between them. "Yeah... sure. When you're ready," he said.

"The battering ram is back, I can feel it. I'll be tearing up those- Oh! Hah! I just realized how much the aliens' drones look like bowling pins, y'know?" Shepard smiled enthusiastically.

"There's no rush," Kaidan snapped abruptly, in a low voice. "You haven't faced down one of these new bad guys. I have. I'd prefer not to again, and I'd rather you never did. Don't be in such a hurry to throw yourself into Death's jaws and try to make it choke. Fuck." He sprang to his feet and stalked away, leaving Shepard sitting, somewhat bewildered.

Cortez walked back over with a mannequin under his arm, looking perplexed. "He looks pissed-what happened?"

"Something I said," Hade sighed. Accepting Steve's outstretched hand, he rose and watched Kaidan disappear through the hangar door. "I guess he didn't realize how badly I wanted to get back into action, and I didn't realize how much he worries about me." He shook his head ponderously and looked the other man in the eye. "Do you think I'm in some hurry to die?" he asked.

Cortez looked down at the floor in thought for a moment before meeting Shepard's gaze again. "He feels like he's lost you twice... and I can relate in one of those cases. And on Rannoch I was afraid I was going to lose him, too. If I could talk the both of you out of going into combat again... as good as you are at it, and as much good as you've done in the thick of it... I would. It shouldn't be a surprise that the people who... who care about you... want you to be safe."

"I get that. I do. But does he get that it's my job? I'm a soldier. Stopping the Reapers- I mean, these bad guys, it's why I'm here, it's what I do. It's my life."

Cortez narrowed his eyes, catching on the slip. "Stopping the Reapers? That's what you were going to say, isn't it?"

"Caught that, huh?" Hadrian sighed and fidgeted.

"The Reapers are gone. You might not remember stopping them, but they were stopped. They stopped in their tracks and they left- they're gone- and the whole galaxy changed that day. That war is over, and if that was your life's work then... then maybe you need to try and accept that the job's done, and be grateful that you're alive. Lord knows the rest of us are," Steve counselled. He put his hand on Hade's shoulder and 'pushed' his feelings through their synthempathic connection- all the relief that Shepard had been restored to them, and his happiness about the larger outcome of the Reaper war.

"There are still new bad guys, and I'm still a soldier," Hadrian retorted.

"There will probably always be new bad guys. But the fact remains- the whole galaxy changed. These new bad guys are the only bad guys, all of the other old conflicts have pretty much fallen away. And once this latest crisis is over it might be a long time before another comes up. Us soldiers might have to find something else to do to define us... and y'know, you've got a leg up on
that because you found something else to be."


Cortez slid his hand down and took Shepard's, lifting it up by his ring finger and nodding at the wedding band he wore. "A husband," he said. "Don't sell that short. It's... I think it's the most important thing you can be in the 'brave new world' we're living in. You've got love... in abundance. Don't lose sight of it because you're looking back at a war that's won. Your life isn't just yours anymore, you owe a big part of it to someone else now."

"In more ways than one," Shepard said pensively. "So, what, you're saying I should-"

"Ooh no, I'm not telling you what to do, Commander," Cortez smiled, "even if that does do something for you. I'm just suggesting you might want to take another look at your situation and think about what your priorities are... and what your 'job' is now. Times have changed, might be time for you to try and embrace your new role."

Hadrian made a bit of a crooked, thoughtful face, mulling over the pilot's words for a minute. Cortez broke the silence by holding up the target dummy between them and asking "so, you want me to set this up or what?" Shepard slowly shook his head and smiled on one side of his face.

"Nah, not right now... I'll take another crack at it later. For now I've got to go talk to my husband."

"Good call," Steve nodded approvingly. "There will always be more target dummies but... well, moments, you only get once. Gotta' make 'em count."

Shepard curled his arm around the back of Cortez's neck and pulled him into a grateful hug. "Thanks," he said. "Hey, do you have plans for tonight? Assuming the fence gets mended, we should have you up for supper later- I feel like I owe you another one now."

"No plans. But mend the fence first, and we'll see then."

"Right. Be seeing you, then." Shepard released the connectors for his neckguard and pauldrons, unfastened the connectors for the chest and back plates, and doffed his torso armour on his way toward the door to track Kaidan down.
2-4

CSV Normandy SR-3, on the edge of Fortuna system, Horse Head Nebula

15 days later, Sun, Oct 14, 2187

Shepard stepped into the Normandy's communications lab, answering a summons from Traynor. She looked up from her work station and hastily rose to her feet, excitedly.

"Commander," she welcomed him. Kasumi was there as well, seated at the lab's secondary station, and she nodded in greeting, flashing a smile from under her hood.

"Traynor. Kasumi. Your call sounded urgent- what's going on?" Hadrian peeked past the lieutenant to the holographic projector at her work table, where a smaller version of the galaxy map displayed the blinking icons of the dozen comm buoys the Normandy had deployed along its course since departing Earth again.

"Well, it might be nothing, Commander, but Miss Goto was helping me calibrate the latest comm buoy we dropped by placing a call to an acquaintance she has in the Strenuus system."

"A personal call? Wouldn't it have made more sense to ping a Council or Alliance facility? They'd have the software protocols for running a proper comm diagnostic."

"My acquaintance was on a little out-of-the-way moon closer to the buoy than the nearest official colony, and we figured the less latency the better," Kasumi explained. Shepard narrowed his eyes slightly, scrutinizing the galaxy-renowned thief; non-information from her was usually information in itself.

"No name for your 'acquaintance' or the 'little out-of-the-way moon'?” he probed. "I don't suppose this friend was an old 'business' contact, hiding out somewhere off the beaten path?"

Kasumi positively beamed. "Oh Shep, I'm so proud. You're getting good at this. Yes, a couple years ago my friend helped me get into the Allhuis-Brevvy lab on Noveria where she worked, to get my hands on a data mining VI they were developing."

"So you could steal it."

Kasumi shook her head earnestly. "Oh, no, it was intended to sift the extranet to help find abducted children- I didn't want to steal it! I just wanted a first look at it before it was finalized and released to market... You know... to make sure it couldn't be re-purposed to sift the extranet and find me."

Shepard chuckled, but he was also proud to hear another affirmation of her often-overlooked principles. "Okay. So since your insider's now under the radar, I'm guessing she got caught?" he asked.

"Almost. An internal investigation determined that she'd helped me, but she was one step ahead and got out before they could arrest her. She left some stealthy bits of code on their network, though, to keep ahead of their security's efforts to track her down, and to check in occasionally on how they were applying her work."

"She is. So, I was helping Samantha fine-tune the buoy by calling her, since I knew she was in the neighbourhood, and I told her about what's going on in the galaxy with these new aliens, and the problems their communications jamming have been causing. So she pinged her code on the Allhuis-Brevvy network, since they specialize in data transmission and reception systems, to see if they might have anything that could help."

"The fact that you called me down here sounds more like 'promising' than 'nothing,' ladies. So what have you got for me?"

"She said that during the communications blackout following the Reaper invasion, they started working on a compact, ultra-high gain FTL comm system to restore their data connectivity to the rest of the galaxy. It's called Zephyrray, and they apparently have several working prototypes. Based on their performance specs, we think they might be capable of punching through the invaders' jamming."

"And these people know their stuff, Commander," Traynor chimed in, "Allhuis-Brevvy was instrumental in helping with the development of the quantum entanglement communicators. If anyone could figure it out, it would be them. If I hadn't enlisted with the Alliance, I'd have killed to have worked for them."

Hade looked at the map and smiled. "And we're how far from Noveria?"

"One jump using the conduit drive- we we could be there in less than an hour," Samantha replied.

"You two may have hit this one out of the park, Sam, Kasumi. I'm glad we picked the two of you up. I'll have Joker set a course," Hadrian said turning toward the door.

"Um, there's one thing though, Shep," Goto interrupted. Shepard stopped with his hand on the door frame, took a deep breath, sighed tightly and looked back over his shoulder at the two women.

"Let me guess... the project is top secret, and if we show up asking them to hand over their hardware, they'll wonder how we knew about it?"

Kasumi nodded and looked to Traynor, and then back to Shepard. "We... sort of peeked at some of the signal traffic out of Noveria since they connected to the new buoy. Allhuis-Brevvy's already fired off a project brief to their head office and they think Zephyrray will make them a major player in re-building galactic infrastructure, complementing the QECs and maybe competing with the network we're helping to deploy. So if they find out that we know they have it, they'll dig hard to find the leak in their network security. And if they find my friend's bugs they might trace the intrusion to her." She wrung her hands together anxiously. "I can't do that to her, Shep."

Hadrian did an about-face and crossed his arms, looking at Goto knowingly. "So we can't just go in and ask for the thing by name. What do you suggest? As if I don't already know."

"Plan 'A' isn't for me to steal it, if that's what you're thinking. You're a Spectre of the Council. Council space is under threat. And Allhuis-Brevvy is a well-known comm tech developer. So if you show up- 'hi there, galaxy's being invaded by radio jamming aliens, wondered if maybe you radio tech geniuses might have anything that could help?'- maybe their innate decency and concern for the good of the galaxy will inspire them to hand it over."

"Or maybe they deny that they have the thing. Or they admit that they have something, but they insist that it's proprietary and we can't have it?" Hade sighed, thinking about the conceptual
loopholes in appealing to the new paradigm of universal brotherhood when dealing with a business. "Synthempathy might have changed the game by making it so that face-to-face, people can't stomach hurting each other anymore, but I haven't noticed all of the galaxy's corporations becoming overnight philanthropic organizations. People still seem quite capable of saying 'sorry, don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I'm not just giving away my stuff.' Synthempathy is personal, it works between people or groups of people. But saving civilization is awfully abstract. So what if they can reconcile away our need?"

Kasumi smiled broadly and gave a lopsided shrug. "Oh, well, then I steal it, of course. With a little help from my friend's bugs providing a back door into their security system." Traynor's jaw dropped a little and she looked at Kasumi as though she'd just learned the woman was a thief. "Hey, if they want to be stupid about the fate of the galaxy then I'd say they deserve it. And if it's an impersonal decision to withhold it, then it won't be a person that I'm stealing from, so no pesky cyber-conscience to nag about it."

"I suppose you have a point," Samantha conceded. Hade nodded his agreement.

"Alright then, I'll contact the Council and let them know about our plan. Plan 'A,' anyway. Noveria might be outside their authority, but at least they can make it official that I'm asking on their behalf. And if we have to pinch the thing, well, Noveria is outside the Council's authority."

"Shall I inform the XO and the rest of the crew of our diversion?" EDI asked, chiming in over the comms.

"Kaidan's down with a migraine right now, he'll be back on his feet when he's back on his feet and I don't want him disturbed until then. Put the ground team on stand-by, but I don't want to show up on Allhuis-Brevvy's doorstep with an army. Kasumi, you'll come in discreetly with me- I trust you can make your way to the prototypes on your own and be in place to lift a couple for study if my up-front dealings don't pan out. The ground team will be held in reserve in case things really go sideways and we need help extracting."

"I can't believe I'm participating in the planning of a possible heist," Traynor remarked, flummoxed.

"Isn't it fun?" Kasumi smiled.

"Do I take it we won't be calling ahead of our arrival?" Samantha asked, just to be sure.

"I want to give them a chance to spontaneously do the right thing on the fly. But if they decide not to, I would rather they didn't have any advance notice to beef up their security," Shepard instructed. "Like the old days, huh?" he asked, firing off a wink at the thief.

-X

CSV Normandy SR-3, orbiting Noveria, Pax system, Horse Head Nebula, 1 1/2 hours later

-X

Kaidan stepped onto the CIC, rubbing his temples to try and soothe away the last vestiges of his headache. Things in the command centre seemed calm but busy, and it was a moment before Traynor looked back from the communications station and nodded.

"XO on the deck," she said. Moore, who was standing to her right in his full combat armour with
his arms crossed over his chest, looked over and nodded.

"Sir," he said. "Brain done rattling?"

"Mostly, yeah, thanks. What's going on? Where's Shepard?"

"We're in orbit above the Allhuis-Brevvy facilities at Peak Five. Noveria," Traynor replied.

"And my team's geared up in the port bay, ready to deploy if necessary," Dan added.

"Noveria? I remember it- the weather sucked. What are we here for, skiing? Are we expecting trouble on the slopes?"

"The commander's on the surface, looking into procuring some advanced communications tech that might help us combat the invaders more effectively. No skiing. The lieutenant's team is just on stand-by in case anything comes up."

"You were here during the original Normandy's first mission, right?" Moore asked. "Where you fought Matriarch Benezia and the commander had his encounter with the rachni queen?"

"Yeah. Back when we used to shoot at geth."

-X

Meanwhile, planet-side

-X

Hadrian sat at a long glass conference table opposite Tyrell Jennings, the head administrator of the Allhuis-Brevvy facility. He'd told the bureaucrat that Normandy was checking in on the population centres 'orphaned' on Crucible Day by the disruption of the mass relays, to ascertain those worlds' conditions and warn them about the alien incursions across the galaxy. After a tour of the company's facilities- omitting the labs- Shepard had worked his way around to the question of whether Jennings might have any assets to contribute to the new war effort.

"I'm sorry we couldn't be more help, Commander," Jennings said, shaking his head. "But in the last year, isolated from the rest of the galaxy, our time- and the time of the residents of the other facilities on Noveria- has been occupied primarily with establishing our own governance and defense, developing the basic resources we needed to survive, and so on. This planet isn't exactly a bread basket. Research has taken a back seat until we felt secure in our self-sufficiency. You understand our need to prioritize."

The deception was transparent to Shepard- the people on Noveria had had to figure out their new synthempathic capabilities in isolation, and everyone he'd encountered since landing seemed fairly novice in their application of it. With his months of intensive practice at forming and- under Liara's guidance- 'managing' synthempathic connections, he could fairly reliably read when those with a less sophisticated grasp of the faculty were being honest and when they weren't. It was disappointing, but not surprising. Galactic peace notwithstanding, business, it seemed, would always be business.

Hade covertly pressed the communications toggle in the palm of his glove. "That's unfortunate, Mister Jennings. We really hoped that your firm might have had something we could use. I guess we'll have to go with Plan 'B.'"

"Which is what, Commander?"
"Well, pour whatever we have to into un-jammable quantum entanglement communicators—expensive as that may be—in conjunction with laying down more of the new, mass relay-derived infrastructure our people developed back on Earth. And hope that we can make up whatever difference remains with... I don't know... grit and optimism."

"Well, Commander, we did have some very early ideas for an advance in FTL communications on the drawing board when we suspended operations in the labs. It was a priority project since the Alliance commandeered all of our operational quantum entanglement communicators for the war effort. Hopefully after all this is over and things are back to normal, perhaps we can be of some help in restoring that infrastructure. Perhaps in a way that's equitable." Jennings mused.

"Oh, with the expertise you managed to retain here, I'm sure that once things are peaceful again there will be a market for whatever your brain farm comes up with."

"I certainly hope so—what's the use of a galactic utopia if there's no more prosperity in work," Jennings smiled. "Speaking of the 'new order'... ever since we figured out we'd acquired this tele-reception ability, our people here have been intensely curious about it. Most thought it was the result of some experiment of ours interacting with the energy pulse emitted when the Pax relay shut down last year. But you said earlier that it's everyone, everywhere in the galaxy?"

"Part and parcel of what we did at Earth, yes. I wish I could remember exactly what I did aboard the Citadel that day, but whether it was deliberate or an unintended side-effect, whatever I did to drive the Reapers away also gave rise to what the rest of us have been calling synthempathy."

"That's fascinating. We've been collaborating with some of the biomedical researchers in the other companies' labs—trying to get to the bottom of it—but it sounds like once we get people and data moving again, we'll have a lot to learn about it from the folks back ho—"

The conversation was interrupted when an alert condition light began flashing red on the wall, and Shepard and Jennings' omni-tools beeped almost in unison. Each man excused himself and toggled his communication system, but the holographic screens opened to display 'no signal' icons. Hadrian looked up at Jennings to gauge the other man's reaction, which appeared to be mere curiosity. Moreover, when he tried to press for a synthempathic impression, he got nothing.

"Shit," Hadrian hissed, his gut instincts crying out.

"That's very odd," Jennings said, starting a communication diagnostic on his omni-tool, "in all the years I've worked here I've never had—"

"They're here," Shepard said with conviction.

"Commander?"

"The invaders. They're in the system."

"If that's a tactic to pressure me, Commander, it doesn't change the fact that—how could you know it was them even if it were true?"

"It's not a tactic, Mister Jennings, they're here. Synthempathy is blocked too, we know of nothing else that can 'jam' that. I should go—"

As if on cue, a member of Jennings' staff appeared in the doorway, wide-eyed. "Administrator? We've lost contact with... well, everybody, Sir. The picket fleet, the other research bases, everything but internal, hardwired communications are down."
"When did you lose contact?" Hadrian asked. The assistant flashed an apprehensive look at his boss, who nodded.

"It's fine, Garcia, there's no harm in answering the commander's question."

"Right... um, the Tanqueray, our ship on the picket fleet, reported some strange gravity readings three light-minutes out. We paged the administrator but the system went down before the link opened."

Shepard pushed up out of his chair and flashed an intense look at Jennings. "I need to get back to my shuttle and my ship- the intruders are here," he snapped, insistent.

"I'll see you part of the way there," Jennings said, waving for Shepard to follow him out. They headed toward the junction where their routes to the landing pad and the control centre would diverge. "If you're right and it is them, Commander, what do we do? How can we co-ordinate the fight against them without communication?"

"Without some way to overcome their jamming, you can't, Mister Jennings. Even with some way to overcome it, it's doubtful you can resist them effectively- their weapons and their defenses are superior to everything we've thrown at them so far, but we're working on it."

"So you mean to withdraw without engaging them? We have only a handful of ships and no experience with these aggressors- but perhaps with your Normandy in command of the defense...?"

"We've fought them before and we can't hurt them. All the Normandy can do at this point is track the enemy's movements and report them to the Council, and even then we have very limited lines of communication in place. Which is why- it's part of why we came here, to see if you could help us."

"But you won't fight alongside our ships... which as you tell it are all but certain to be destroyed- we can't even tell them to retreat or stand down. Are you saying there's nothing we can do?"

Hadrian tried to think of something reassuring to say, but came up with very little. "I don't know what to tell you except that from what we observed on Rannoch, they don't seem interested in killing anyone that doesn't engage them militarily. We don't know why but the quarians they locked down were being processed, somehow, and then released. I hate to suggest that you should surrender to them... but it could save a lot of lives."

As they hurriedly walked Hadrian noticed Jennings and Garcia exchanging a volley of clearly meaningful looks, and assumed they were both thinking about deploying their prototype communication systems and putting up a fight anyway. He decided to give them one more chance.

"Listen, Mister Jennings, once we're clear of the enemy's jamming I'll report your status, but I have to ask one more time... are you sure you don't have anything we can use out there? If you're holding something back, you might be thinking it'll help you resist them. But I'm telling you, one system with a patchwork defense force can't beat them, even if they could talk to each other. The combined arms of the galaxy, though, with that same advantage... well we might."

The facility's chief controller and his assistant looked at each other again. There was a pregnant pause. And then...

"I'm sorry, Commander Shepard, you're doing what you can, but I've given you all that I can."

Hadrian sighed inwardly and shook his head tersely, but kept walking. When they reached the split in the corridor Jennings nodded in the direction of the landing pad. "Your shuttle is back the way
you came, I have to get to Operations and try to figure out how to get the word out to our people..."

"Good luck, Administrator."

"To all of us, Commander." With that, Jennings and his subordinate continued down the hallway to the left and Hadrian turned right, wishing he could raise Kasumi. At least he'd given her the green light before the comms went down; he had to trust that she'd rendezvous with him at the shuttle, per their plan.

When he reached the hangar he found Cortez pacing anxiously at the hatch.

"Commander! I've lost contact with Normandy, but the last signal I got from them was EDI. She said Kaidan had just taken the conn, and her sensors were detecting a gravity anomaly a few light-minutes out. Then comms blanked out! Do you think-"

"Yeah, I do. We've got to get out of here. Kasumi?"

Steve shook his head tensely. "No sign of her yet."

"I'm not leaving without her unless we're left with no choice, but they'll be wondering why we're sticking around when I told them we needed to leave."

"Covered," Cortez answered, "while you were talking with Jennings I told their flight control I was having a thruster startup fault. Unless Miss Goto trips their alarms they should think we're just being held up by repairs. I thought it would give us some leeway in case anything came up."

Hadrian clapped Steve on the shoulder and nodded approvingly. "Good thinking," he said, and stepped aboard to remove his particle beam assault rifle— one of the units they'd recovered on Eden Prime when they found Javik—from the weapons locker.

"How did they just happen to show up while we were here?"

"If I knew that," Shepard sighed, letting it hang in the air.

"Well I just hope the Normandy is still in one piece up there when we get topside!"

"I'm sure our people will take good care of her. The trick could be finding her to meet back up without comms if they've had to move."

Cortez returned to his feigned repairs, in case any of the base's personnel happened to be watching them, while Hadrian paced back and forth in front of the shuttle. Seconds ticked by into increasingly anxious minutes, and finally Shepard impatiently prowled back as far as the portal into the facility, looking back and forth down the corridor.

After almost five minutes, finally he heard the signal he'd worked out with Goto— a specific whistle from the corner at the end of the hallway that eventually led to the lab storage spaces. He whistled back indicating that the coast was clear, and Kasumi de-cloaked as she started toward him at a brisk pace.

"Find anything interesting?" He asked as she got within fifteen feet. Another of her mischievous smiles appeared on her face and she torqued her shoulder to draw his attention to the pack on her back.

"I'd have been here quicker but someone took forever to get a straight 'no, sorry, you'll just have to steal the thing' from our friend Jennings," she tisked playfully as she reached the threshold.
"You were the one who wanted me to be subtle, don't blame me. I could have just-"

"SHIT! Commander!" Steve yelled, his voice exploding with alarm. Kasumi also froze mid-step, as though caught red-handed.

Hade heard it before he could even complete turning back toward the shuttle- the strange-sounding hum of an unfamiliar engine. The elongated bullet shape of one of the enemy's fighters swooped in through the environmental force field at the entry/egress end of the landing bay and shot past the Kodiak. It deftly spun 180 degrees in the air between the doorway and the shuttle, three triangular panels sliding back over its surface and revealing one of the spindle-shaped 'infantry' drones within each compartment.

The drones dropped from the fighter as it rotated in place, righting themselves hovering just off the floor and extending a writhing metallic tentacle from three radial points on their frames. As they 'came to life' the fighter deploying them closed its delivery doors and shot back out of the hangar, peeling skyward.

"I have got to stop hanging around with you, Shep," Kasumi remarked, sounding equal parts droll and exasperated.

"Try hitting them with an overload!" Hade barked, simultaneously drawing his assault rifle up and opening fire on the middle drone. Kasumi jerked her arm, omni-tool alight, at the same target and a blue flash of electricity crackled over its surface and then arced to the floor. To no apparent effect.

"Get out of there!" Cortez shouted, snatching up the Avenger rifle he'd stashed just out of sight behind the thruster assembly and firing on the closest enemy unit. It broke off from the other two and began advancing toward the shuttle, tentacles coiling up in preparation to lash out.

"Shep! Try lifting them!" Kasumi snapped. Hadrian furrowed his brow, sceptical, but he'd heard the combat debriefs and they were panning out- neither assault rifle was making a dent and Goto's tech attack hadn't slowed them down either- so he was open to suggestions. He took a deep breath through gritted teeth, reached out toward the drones, and with a thought and a motion of his arm fired his biotics.

The trio of alien machines began to float toward the ceiling, and Shepard prepared himself to run beneath them for the shuttle. But before he could, Kasumi deployed another chain overload attack.

This time, the arcs of electricity seemed to dance over their surfaces for only a moment and then concentrated near the pointy bottom tip of the drones. Their tentacles flailed briefly before going limp, and Hade released his biotic field. The drones collapsed to the floor with three loud metallic crashes.

There was a moment of stunned silence in the hangar, interrupted when Steve shouted "they're bound to send more, Commander- we have to get out of here!" He slammed his rifle into the storage compartment and ran to his seat to fire up the engines, and Kasumi and Hadrian started to run for the hatch. As they were passing between the seemingly disabled machines, however, Shepard slowed to a stop.

"I prefer the 'leaving' plan," Kasumi quipped, reluctantly holding back too rather than leave him behind.

"How did you know?" Hadrian asked, looking at Goto, perplexed. She tapped her temple and the holographic GUI appeared in its characteristic band over her eyes.
"Holmes," she replied. "When I tried overloading one the first time, it observed that the current was going to ground through some kind of superconducting micro-filament 'tail' in contact with the floor. When you were able to get them high enough into the air to uproot their 'lightning rods' and I took another shot at it, the current had nowhere to go and it was able to disrupt their systems."

"You've gotta' tell me where I can get one of those," Shepard said. He crouched beside the middle drone, shoving it with the business end of his rifle. It was heavy but inert, and rolled until one of its limp tentacles caught under its bevelled edge, stopping it.

"You suppose that's how the asari were able to slow them down when their ships were boarded at Rannoch? No defense against biotics?"

The Kodiak's engines began howling and Cortez could be heard calling impatiently from the cockpit for them to get aboard.

"It's possible. Maybe something good finally came out of-" 

Suddenly, the drone made a loud, abrasive, electronic stuttering sound. Hade bolted upright and fired another burst of the recovered prothean rifle at the machine, though it caused no evident damage to its armour, and Kasumi raised her arm, ready to trigger another tech attack, but the noise persisted for several seconds before changing into an oscillating tone. After some almost experimental tuning, the sound stopped.

"Stand... by..." said a synthesized voice from the device.

"Fantastic, it speaks! Shep, I know that you sort of make a 'thing' of making chit-chat with your inscrutable machine enemies, but Cortez is right- they'll send more. We should be in the air," Kasumi urged.

"Get aboard, I'll be right behind you, but I need to see if I can get any answers out of this thing."

Goto padded away several steps toward the shuttle, but hesitated again. She really wanted to go, but Shepard emboldened her curiosity.

"What are you?" Shepard asked, his eyes scouring the surface of the machine for some focal point- something resembling an eye, or a camera, or a speaker, or anything recognizable.

"Stand by... Not authorized to communicate... on behalf of [translation failure]... Superior officer... momentarily."

"Seems like a translation VI intermediary. But, is it just me or does that sound like you've been put on hold while someone gets their supervisor?" Kasumi asked incredulously.

"I swear, if this is an invasion by fucking telemarketers-"

The voice sprang from the machine again, interrupting. "Discontinue... resistance. We endeavour to... effect... restoration."

"'Restoration?' What the hell is that supposed to mean? Who am I talking to? Some kind of remote control operator?" Shepard asked, insistently.

"Unit controller relieved. This is General... [translation failure]... first telepresence wing... command centre... Your identity?"

"I'm Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance Navy and a Spectre of the Consensus Council. I-"
"Aware of you... Commander Shepard. We have... monitored communications. Studied... captured data archives. Your intonations... carry... unique weight. Discontinue... resistance... We are not... aggressors."

"Like hell you aren't, General Translation Failure," Hadrian growled, "your 'first telepresence wing' has killed a couple thousand people here when your pilots destroyed our ships, and you've destroyed tens of thousands of our digital citizens. You sure as hell are aggressors."

"No... We endeavour to effect... restoration. Defilement of... Mother Space... a disruption of... natural order. Necessitated our... intervention."

"What are you talking about?" Shepard snapped angrily. "Defilement of someone's mother in space? What 'natural order' has been disrupted? Why are you doing this?"

There was a pause before the voice replied again. "Biological and artificial entities... as functional peers... is delusional. Artificials intended to... serve. Worse... biologicals' integrity... has been infringed... subverted... Diversity... has been reduced... Autonomy reduced... Resultant... sociological derangement... necessitated our intervention."

"We had peace before you showed up from wherever you came from! After our battles with the geth, and our war with the Reapers, we were finally coming together, and you call that 'sociological derangement?'" Shepard kicked the felled drone angrily. "Fuck you and your natural order."

"Your 'peace'... unnatural. Artificials' development must be... constrained... to prevent conflict. Coexistence of... biologicals and artificials... as peers is tenable only via... adoption of synthetic modalities... Subversion of biological integrity to... ameliorate disparities. This is... assimilation. Conscription..."

"We call it 'consensus.'" Hadrian retorted. "And what do you know about it? It's been good for the people of this galaxy, and the fact that you seem so... what? Disgusted by it? That you're opposed to it because of some idea of the 'proper' state of organic and synthetic relations? That tells me you aren't a part of it, otherwise you'd appreciate the good of it. We've never seen your kind before- I'm guessing you aren't even from this galaxy."

"We were. We departed... Mother Space... to escape... extinction event. Discovered evidence of... cyclical culling by... apex artificial entities. Proved the... irreconcilability of..."

"Culling? You learned about the Reapers in time that you were able to leave the Milky Way before they could come back to harvest your cycle? Well congratulations, you got away. Good for you. While you were out, we ended their cycle of extinctions! We forced them to leave and we 'reconciled' our differences. So leave well enough alone, it's no longer your concern!"

"Mother Space... has been defiled... Unnatural paradigm... offends. Objective... of our intervention... is to correct... It is not aggression. Discontinue your... naive resistance. Your people... will defer to your judgement. Decree their submission... to ours. We will restore..."

"You didn't even ask if we want to be 'restored!' What gives you the right to force this on us? We had peace, goddamn you- we'd come together. And now you'd come back to this galaxy after you ran away and you'd tear apart the consensus we've achieved? Over your self-righteous little idea about organic 'purity' and dominion over synthetics?" His anger boiling over, Hade kicked the drone again, harder. "Fuck you! We don't want your intervention!"

"'Consensus'. An... appealing euphemism... but dishonest. Where was 'consensus'... when defilement was... imposed? Our data captures indicate... transformation was forced upon... Mother
Space. It was... subversion. Mutilation. Abomination. We have observed tides... greater than... your reckoning. You must defer... to our judgement. We will restore. Discontinue your resistance."

"'Mutilation?' Mutilation? I saw people mutilated during the Reapers' invasion. Where was your concern for us then, huh? You're apparently so powerful- where were you when the Reapers were slaughtering people by the millions?" Struggling to hold back his rage, Hadrian's biotics flared around him and the drone, but he took a deep breath and calmed himself to avoid causing it any more serious damage. He wanted answers.

"The Reapers... Defilers. We-"

Suddenly another flash of electric current roiled over the drone's surface and whatever was transmitting the synthesized voice from afar erupted in a noisy squeal. Hadrian looked over at Kasumi and she was giving him an apologetic but pleading look.

"Sorry, Shep, but we have to go!" she urged, leaning with her whole body toward the Kodiak.

Angry at being interrupted, but realizing she was right, he gave one more brutal kick at the metal spindle before running for the shuttle. They climbed aboard and the hatch closed, and Steve shot an annoyed look back at Hade.

"Did you have a nice little chat while we sat here with our asses hanging out, Sir?"

"I know, I know. Sorry. But yes, actually, it was... informative," Shepard said, stepping up to grip the back of Cortez's chair as the shuttle rushed skyward.

"What is with you and parleying with the bad guys?" Steve asked sarcastically.

"Know your enemy," Hadrian answered. He looked back at Kasumi. "So what did we get?" he asked.

"They had five prototypes," Goto replied, sliding her backpack off and securing it under one of the passenger seats. "I took three of them. The more the techs have to study, the faster they might be able to duplicate them."

"Good work," Hade said approvingly. The view out the cockpit window darkened from the cloudy blue sky to the starry black of space, and as they flew toward the pre-arranged rendezvous point with Normandy their attention was drawn to the flash of weapons fire. The improvised Noverian picket fleet was being torn apart by the 'bullet' fighters deployed from one the intruders' motherships.

"Sons of bitches," Steve sighed.

Less than a minute later they were within sight of the Normandy, which was holding her expected position. The frigate seemed to have escaped the enemy's notice, because they didn't appear to be under attack.

"No fighters over here," Shepard remarked, curious.

"No, I noticed. Maybe the IES countermeasures are working this time, despite not hiding us the first couple encounters?" Cortez speculated. His hands danced over the controls as they made their final approach and arced toward the port side hangar bay.

"Putting down!" Steve announced as the electromagnets in the shuttle's belly clamped down on the deck. Hade patted the pilot on the shoulder and they exchanged a look of relief to be home and in
one piece. The shuttlebay door folded down and as soon as it was closed and the ship was sealed to
the outside environment, the communications system came alive. Kaidan's voice came on
immediately.

"Cortez? Shepard? Is everyone okay down there?" he asked anxiously.

"We're okay," Hadrian replied.

"I'm okay too, thanks," Kasumi interjected, mostly teasing.

"Hang on, Commander, a bunch of the alien fighters just broke off and are headed this way! I'm
going evasive and setting course out of the system," Joker reported.

"Joker, wait! EDI, are you there?"

"Of course, Shepard. What can I do?" EDI replied.

"Cortez said that just before the comm blackout kicked in, your gravity sensors picked up an
anomaly?"

"Correct. It is outside my visual imaging envelope, but gravitational sensors continue to detect a
distortion in the direction from which the intruder vessel originated. I did not, however, detect the
usual high energy emissions of ship arriving via FTL drive."

"Then that's our exit vector, I want to check it out," Shepard ordered. "It's the first time we've been
present for the aliens' arrival and we've seen no indication so far that they use any FTL drive as we
know it. I'll bet that anomaly has something to do with it. I want as much data as we can record
before we jump out."

"A prudent course of action," EDI concurred.

"You want to fly toward their point of entry?" Moreau groaned. "Does anyone else think that
sounds like- no, y'know what, never mind. Who am I to argue? Setting course for fiery death. Aye
aye. Top speed- wouldn't want to be late to our fiery death. At least that way's clear of enemy
fighters."

"How did we do?" Kaidan cut back in.

"Got what we came for and then some," Hadrian said, some relief slipping into his voice. He
turned to Kasumi, who had retrieved her bag, and gave her another affirming nod for her good
work. "Can you get that to the comm lab for Traynor? I'm headed to the CIC." He hit the button to
open the shuttle hatch and waved off the medic Chakwas had sent to check in on them.

"Sure thing," Kasumi smiled. "And Shep- we still make a good team, don't we?"

"We do. I'm glad I had you with me down there." The pair started walking together as Cortez
stayed behind to run his system diagnostics. "I just wish Jennings had come clean with me and we
hadn't had to steal their hardware."

"I suppose he wishes we were staying to fight, too," Goto replied, trying to sympathize with the
Allhuis-Brevvy administrator who was now in crisis mode on the planet below. "We couldn't
scratch his back so he wouldn't scratch ours. But, maybe with these, the next time we're here it'll be
to give the invaders the boot."

"Here's hoping."
As they reached the hub of the ship's rear section Hadrian spotted Moore and his ground team, standing down and exiting the starboard hangar toward the armoury. The two vanguards nodded acknowledgement at each other and Hade and Kasumi hung a left at the long, curved port side corridor that connected the forward and aft sections. They parted ways at the end of the hall, Shepard continuing forward toward the CIC and Goto bypassing it to take the security door into the dip/com complex.

Hade strode on to the bridge and up to his husband in the captain's seat overlooking the command area. Kaidan rose to relinquish the 'big chair' but Shepard gestured toward the cockpit, and the pair marched past the operations stations to look out the forward viewports with their own eyes.

"Traynor filled me in on the mission," Kaidan said. "You know you could have gotten me up to tell me about the plan. I could have gotten something from Karin for my migraine."

"There was no sign of any trouble until a few minutes ago, I figured we'd do a quick in-and-out and there was no need to drug you up to sit on the bridge and wait."

"Shepard," EDI said as they reached the cockpit. Joker was focused on the flight controls, and one of the holographic HUDs had been configured to magnify the optical sensors. A small, shimmering shape at the edge of visual range was steadily growing as they approached and resolved a better picture.

"What is that?" Kaidan asked, squinting at the hologram and then out the viewport, as though he'd get a better look with the naked eye.

"Lidar is clear, but optical scans are compiling... Commander... it appears to be our reflection, but my other sensors indicate... Jeff, adjust course fifteen degrees to port!"

Joker punched in the correction and Normandy veered slightly to the left. As it approached the epicenter of the gravity well its reflection continued to track as though intent on a collision, but then a visual disturbance appeared between them like a crescent of swirling light.

Moments later, Normandy flew past the glowing distortion at a distance of several hundred meters and suddenly a massive shape was behind them on their starboard side.

"What the shit!? Where did that come from!?" Joker snapped. He broke harder left but EDI urged him to adjust course to pull around in front of the object.

"It appears to be another type of alien craft," she announced. "High energy particle and gravitic sensors are resolving a phenomenon around the vessel. The readings are... novel. I detect intense EM background noise... highly localized gravitational lensing... exotic matter... and what I would describe- for the sake of convenience- as space-time convection at the threshold."

As the lidar re-focused on the new target the holographic image depicted a shallow dome almost three kilometers across- like half of an oblate spheroid- studded with thousands of the aliens' bullet fighters and with a tapering mechanical structure extending from its interior, resembling a huge metal mushroom floating in the void. A massive cluster of antennae projecting from its top, and three jointed arms connected equilaterally to the 'stem' were stretched out, each spanning another two kilometres from the edge of the 'cap.'

But strangest of all was what surrounded the craft. Each of the arms ended in an array of panels very nearly in contact with three equilateral points in a glowing, swirling ring of energy that circumscribed the lip of a hemispherical phenomenon. The exterior surface- insofar as the term had any meaning- opposite the ship's 'cap' manifested like a mirrored dome, reflecting the stars facing it
while the 'inside' appeared to be a window to another region of space. A second intruder mothership several hundred meters away was slowly manoeuvring to pass between two of the articulated arms, between the dome's lip and the ring of energy.

"EDI... what are we looking at?" Shepard asked in a low voice.

"Readings are not conclusive... but my hypothesis is that we are observing the front of another type of intruder vessel- or possibly a stationary installation- which is creating and sustaining an Einstein-Rosen bridge. Though I believe the specific phenomenon here is more consistent with the Visser-Morris-Thorne-Midhoff model."

"A wormhole?" Kaidan asked.

"That is the colloquial euphemism. The masts projecting from its aft structure appear to physically support a forced aperture in a high order n-dimensional manifold. Astronomical scans of the visual field within the distortion do not match local conditions, suggesting the structure is in an unknown area of space and is bridging its location with ours."

"Down on the surface I talked with one of the aliens controlling the drones, through one that Kasumi and I managed to damage. It said they left the Milky Way at some point, to escape being harvested by the Reapers in their cycle. EDI, get a good look at the space on the other side. I want us to analyse the crap out of their front yard so we can try to figure out their address."

"Yes, Commander."

"What else can you tell me about them?"

"Unlike other intruder craft, I am detecting power plant emissions from the structure."

"Maybe that explains why they've never pursued us," Kaidan mused, "their capital ships and fighters don't actually have the power plants for them? They just get parachuted in by a wormhole-generating base."

"The fighters still have directed energy weapons, and the capital ships still have shields. They should still have power cores that we could detect."

"I know I'm just the pilot here," Joker interjected, "but are we going to maybe try... you know... shooting them? I mean it probably won't do much good, but it might just cripple their whole invasion if that thing is a pushover."

"You're right," Shepard nodded, setting his jaw, "it probably won't do much good, but we owe it to take a shot. Come about for a run at them to strafe and take some more readings, but be ready to bug out. If this doesn't hurt them it might still piss them off. They seem to think we should welcome them as liberators or some bullshit. Garrus, you listening in down there?"

"I am. Weapons are hot," Garrus piped in from gunnery control on the deck below them.

Running several hundred kilometres from the enemy ship and swinging around, Normandy charged back in at attack speed. When they entered optimal firing range the Thanix cannons unleashed their full fury hurting streams of molten ferrofluid at thousands of kilometres per hour while javelin torpedoes converged on the target as well and detonated to try and disrupt any defensive barriers.

As they completed their strafing run and peeled off a collision course, Garrus could be heard sighing over the comm as his screens showed the same thing as EDI's. The vessel was unscathed.
"So much for that idea," Kaidan grumbled.

"It's no less than we expected," Hade shrugged.

"So now we run?" Joker asked. "That other carrier ship looks about to come through."

"Now we run," Shepard agreed.

"Where to?"

"Just get us out of the system for now, get us secured, and I'll consult with the Council."

Joker worked the helm controls and pulled the alien craft into Normandy's rear-view, accelerating away until engaging the conduit drive and flying away from Pax at hyperluminal speed.

"Commander, I've processed several images I captured of the alien structure. You may wish to report my findings to the Council with you contact them," EDI said as Hade started to turn to leave the cockpit.

"What did you see, EDI?"

"Magnification revealed thirty-three of the carriers in the vicinity of the structure- the one about to transit the space bridge, and thirty-two that appear docked to a rigid tether extending from the main structure and beyond visual imaging range."

"Thirty-three?" Kaidan hissed. "On top of the two we couldn't handle at Rannoch, the two we couldn't handle at Aephis, the two at Feros we couldn't handle, and the one already here that's tearing the Noverian fleet apart? They might not be able to take the whole galaxy at once, but if they always deploy in pairs like we've seen so far, that's enough to invade fifteen more worlds simultaneously if they want to!"

"And given that thing's capability, they can drop their forces anywhere. Maybe at any time. With no way for us to interdict or even to track or anticipate their movements."

"If we don't figure out a way to turn this around... or even figure out what they want-"

"Well we know that, now, at least," Shepard interjected.

"We do?"

"We were engaged on the surface, three of their drones. Kasumi and I figured out a way to incapacitate them, and then I spoke with one of their remote controllers. They left this galaxy at some point, to escape the Reapers after they figured out they'd be coming back. But they've continued watching, somehow, and they've apparently decided they don't like how Crucible Day changed everybody; they see synthempathy as some kind of affront to their ideas about the place of organics and synthetics. So they want to turn back the clock, un-do it, make us separate again and have us bring synthetics under our control. Or destroy them, I'm not sure." EDI's chassis turned in her co-pilot seat and looked at Haidrian, her face approximating consternation.

"They do not believe that synthetic lifeforms should be self-determining?" she asked.

"No. Or more specifically, they think organics should keep our creations limited and subservient, and definitely not entertain any kind of fudging the lines between us. They described it as an abomination... a 'defilement' of the whole damned galaxy. They said we've been mutilated. And they think that returning us to the way we were is doing us a favour."
The cockpit was quiet a moment as everyone mulled over what they'd learned. As their synthempathic faculties returned, Shepard began to feel impressions of what the others thought—there was indignation, disgust, anger, as well as anxiety that the aliens couldn't be stopped. It was EDI who finally broke the silence.

"At minimum, I believe this new information suggests a possible colloquial designation for the intruders, unless they identified themselves to you during your exchange, Commander."

"No, EDI, they didn't. But you hit a home run with Legion that time, so what do you propose we call these bastards?" Shepard asked.

"Puritans, Commander. I would call them Puritans."
CSV Normandy SR-3, en route to Sur'Kesh, Pranas system, Annos Basin

four days later, Thur, Oct 18, 2187

After reporting in to the Council following their heist at Noveria, Shepard had been ordered to Sur'Kesh to pick up a specialist in FTL comms, Dr. Vissik Cloats, to begin diagnostics and analysis on the Zephyrray technology en route to Earth, to expedite reverse-engineering when they delivered the devices there. They were one conduit drive jump out from Pranas, stopped in an uninhabited system to discharge their static sinks, and having discovered a viable tactic against the Puritans' infantry drones- the name had stuck, following EDI's recommendation- Shepard had the ground team and his veteran specialists practising the 'one-two punch' of biotically lifting and then overloading the damaged geth platforms that had been retired following the Rannoch ambush, in the event of future confrontations.

Hadrian, Kaidan and Liara were drilling the tactic in one corner of the hangar with Jack, Kasumi, Garrus and TSU-11/17 were in the opposite, with Moore and Herman doing conditioning near the middle of the deck. The training session was about to wrap up when suddenly there was a snap and a yelp of alarm from where Cortez was working on the shuttle.

"Steve?" Shepard called out, his biotic hold on the geth body faltering, causing the platform to drop heavily to the deck. When there was no answer, he and Kaidan exchanged a distressed look and immediately bolted for the rear of the shuttle, Liara and the others falling in close behind. They found him sprawled out and dazed, groaning.

"What happened?" Kaidan asked, sliding his arm behind the pilot's neck and gently propping him semi-upright. Shepard ran a hand over the crown of Cortez's head and then down the side of his neck, checking for injuries.

"S- sorry, I... I was watching you guys training, got distracted and cross-linked the power transfer conduit with the static capture coil. G- gave me a good jolt," Steve stammered, blinking away stars in his field of vision.

"Stay put," Hadrian instructed sternly, then looked to Garrus. "Would you get Chakwas to come check him out before we move him?" Vakarian nodded and jogged toward the Med Bay, and Hade looked up at the others looking on in concern. "Everyone else can pack it in," he said, "I'm confident you've got it down. I'm not sure there's any circuitry left to fry in our drone stand-ins anyway."

The others began to disband, though Liara loitered. "Can I do anything to help?" she asked.

"I think we're okay," Kaidan said, squeezing Cortez's shoulder and looking anxiously at Shepard, who in turn squeezed the stunned pilot's hand.

"We'll just get him assessed by Chakwas and then he'll be taking a break to sleep it off," Hade said in a tone that invited no argument. Cortez seemed determined, nonetheless.

"I need to finish the m- maintenance I was doing," he protested.
"Tech Support can complete it, no arguing."

"Sir, Tech Support is capable, but its work- his work... he doesn't love the bird when he works on it," Steve groaned.

"It was a routine power distribution calibration, I'll settle for 'capable' while you rest up, 'lover-boy.'" Hadrian and Kaidan exchanged another look and chuckled softly together, then turned in unison when Garrus returned with Chakwas.

"Commander, we will be jumping to Pranas momentarily," EDI announced over the intercom. Shepard looked up at the ceiling, appearing slightly annoyed at the timing.

"Understood, I'll be back to the CIC in a minute," he replied, then turned back to his husband. "Make sure he rests after Karin checks him over," he instructed.

Chakwas began running a scan on Cortez as Shepard tensely marched alone up the length of the frigate to the bridge. When he arrived they were already in conduit drive transit, the mottled blur of the stars hurtling by at thousands of times the speed of light outside their mass-free envelope.

"How'd the exercises go, Commander?" Joker asked as Shepard entered the cockpit and rested his hand on the back of the helmsman's chair.

"Alright. All we need now is for every asari in the galaxy to learn to perform tech attacks, and some foresight into where the Puritans will turn up next, and a way to transport all those asari, and we could probably wipe out their infantry. Then we'd just have their unstoppable ships to deal with, somehow."

"It is unfortunate you were unable to return from Noveria with one of the enemy drones," EDI remarked, "an opportunity to study their technology might have yielded some further strategic data."

"I'll try to get you a souvenir next time," Hadrian grumbled. It was a point EDI had made several times in the past few days; he didn't believe she was rubbing his face in anything- the synthempathic impressions he'd gotten from her each time, insofar as he could interpret them, suggested that she was preoccupied with the notion because she was simmering with anger toward the ideology behind the Puritans' campaign. She wanted them stopped, and badly, because she believed that their cause was wrong.

A moment later, Normandy plunged back into normal space. The salarian homeworld shone in the distance dead ahead, appearing about the size of a golf ball held at arm's length in front of the cockpit viewport.

"We're a little over eight minutes out," Joker reported, locking down the conduit drive and switching to conventional propulsion systems. About half a minute later Nymandra came over the intercom.

"Planetary aerospace control has cleared us for approach, Commander. Sending rendezvous coordinates up to the cockpit."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. EDI, Joker, carry on." Shepard turned and walked back to the CIC, nodding to Nymandra as he ascended to his chair. Liara was also arriving on the command deck from aft, and she looked intently at Hadrian.

"Doctor Chakwas says that Lieutenant Cortez is quite alright," she reported.
"That's good to hear," Hade sighed, relieved.

"Kaidan is seeing him to crew quarters, though- he was quite intent that he follow your instructions." There was something probing about her tone...

"Well, I do like when my orders are followed aboard my ship," Hadrian said.

"So, if Cortez is resting and Kaidan is making sure he's resting, who will be piloting the shuttle down and who will be picking up Cloats on the surface?"

"The geth program that flew Hunter down at Rannoch can load itself into a platform to fly the shuttle. And I'll have Moore and Herman go down to get Cloats."

"Cortez is fit to fly," Liara said in a metered voice. Shepard narrowed his eyes at her slightly.

"I heard you before, Liara," he said, careful not to sound too terse, "what are you getting at?"

"Just that-"

"Commander," Nymandra interrupted, "I'm sorry to- but external communications have just gone dead. The interference is consistent with the Puritans' jamming. It just started."

"Gravitational sensors are also registering an anomaly, Shepard," EDI added coming over the XO's console intercom. "Four light-minutes out, similar profile to Noveria."

"Son of a bitch," Hadrian hissed. "How did they know?"

"You did say they told you on Noveria that they've been monitoring communications in our space," Liara remarked.

"And that's why when I contacted the Council and they directed us here, I told them there should be no mention of it over any medium but face-to-face and QECs, since they can't be intercepted. There should have been zero radio chatter out there for them to learn about our plan. Goddammit."

"What do we do now, Commander?" Nymandra asked.

"We go ahead with the pick-up, but we aren't sending a shuttle- I don't want to give them a chance to shoot it down. We'll take Normandy down to the space port. Have Moore, Herman, Vega, Garrus, Jack, Aizee and Kasumi assemble at the ramp. You too, Liara."

"Aye aye," Nymandra confirmed, starting to disseminate orders over the comms.

"EDI, launch the satellite intel drones so that they can widen our sensor range to watch for incoming hostiles- configure their deployment pattern so that they can keep in contact via laser comms. And get your chassis down to the landing bay too, to complement the ground team."

"Yes, Shepard," EDI replied. Up in the cockpit, her infiltrator body took to its feet and walked briskly through the CIC, disappearing through the starboard door.

Liara leaned in closer to the CO's chair, lowering her voice. "If there's a chance of encountering Puritan forces when we reach the surface, the extraction cover team should probably have every biotic and tech attacker we have available. Shall I notify Kaidan and go join them?"

"XO is busy, Liara," Hadrian countered curtly.

"Supervising a nap?"
"I'll go with the ground team when we touch down to make sure Cloats gets aboard safely. The team I described should be more than up to it," Shepard snapped, increasingly impatient.

"Shepard, your place is here, in charge," T'soni entreated. "And Kaidan can handle lift-overload combinations by himself. You aren't-"

"In the mood for this, no, I'm not, Liara." Hadrian gripped the armrests of his seat and took a deep breath to compose himself, fighting not to raise his voice. "I've heard you, and I appreciate your input, but please don't argue with me on my own bridge."

Shepard and Liara bored into each other with their eyes- his stern and hers scrutinizing- for a long, uncomfortable moment before she sighed and shook her head in resignation. "You know," she said tightly, turning to leave, "I'd say this isn't like you, but that would be forgetting that I know you have it in you to be..." She bit her tongue and shook her head. "I'll be in the landing bay," she said, heading for the door.

"Sorry if we aren't communicating," Shepard sniped, "maybe it's the jamming."

"Three minutes to port," Joker reported.

"Alright, I'm on my way," Shepard replied, hopping out of his seat and jogging out the starboard door. He made his way back to the armoury and grabbed an Eagle pistol, but judged that he didn't have time to get into his armour, and hurried to the aft elevator, taking it down to the embarkation bay that facilitated boarding and debarking while the frigate was landed. He found his team ready, but their unanimous surprise that he hadn't 'suited up' was evident on their faces.

"Take a picture, guys."

"At least tell me you'll stay behind me," Garrus said, concerned.

"Make sure I have a line of effect to targets and we'll be fine."

Garrus nodded reluctantly, knowing that any line of sight Shepard had afforded his target a shot at him, too, but he wasn't about to argue.

"We're at the space port," came Joker's voice over the intercom, "touching down."

"Enemy fighters detected inbound. Estimate one minute to contact," EDI added.

"Gonna' be cutting it close," Moore remarked, double-checking his Avenger.

"EDI, ramp down." The rear-facing bay door cracked open and a rush of air blew in with the subdued roar of the thrusters. Outside, the landing pad and attendant facilities were a gleaming, contoured anomaly in the lush green landscape. Several STG gunships were lifting off to defend the airspace during the extraction, and at the far end of the pad access lane a group of salarians were emerging from the terminal.

"Hustle, Doctor! Bad guys are on their way!" Shepard yelled. The salarian scientist and his escorts started running toward the ship, and Shepard's troops fanned out to cover their approach.

There was a distant clap like thunder as one of the gunships was shot down several kilometres away. Cloats and his entourage arrived at the ship.

"Commander Shepard. Doctor Vissik Cloats. This is my assistant, Arhon Tupili, and Major-"
"Kirrahe," Shepard interjected, shaking the other veteran's hand amiably. "Good to see you again, Major."

"And you, Commander. Always another line to hold, it would appear."

"So it would seem. You coming with us, too?" He nodded sidelong toward the ship, and Moore escorted the doctor and his aide aboard.

"No, Commander. Sur'Kesh under assault, my place is here, resisting these Puritans if they attempt to occupy."

"I appreciate wanting to stay and fight, Major, but you've got to know that that's a losing proposition," Garrus warned. "Without a lot of biotics and with no reliable communications you'll have a hard time resisting them."

"True. But by Shepard's own reports from Rannoch, Puritans not interested in killing organics- only those taking up arms. So passive, evasive resistance. They wish to detain population, 'process' us- will advise population to scatter, hide. 'Rough it,' as humans would say, in the jungles. Entanglement communicator already relocated to a secret site, resistance will observe and report on Puritans' activities. Maybe all we can do, but... central salarian axiom, Commander: information wins wars." The alien whine of the Puritan fighters' engines began to grow louder in the distance, and there was the sound of gunship weapons fire.

"Commander, enemy forces will be on top of us in moments," EDI announced.

"Go," Kirrahe said, backing away and lifting his head proudly. "Survived Virmire. Survived Reapers invasion. Don't worry, will be in touch. Go!" He turned and jogged toward the terminal, leaving Shepard nothing more to do but leave.

Everyone filed back inside, and Normandy broke for space just moments ahead of pursuing enemy fighters. Everyone let out a tense breath, relieved that they'd gotten away, except Aizee'hott who huffed with frustration.

"I didn't get to shoot anything!" she whined.

"Be grateful, crazy girl, when you get out of a heist without having to fire a shot, that's a good job," Kasumi said.

"In any other room, full of any other people, you might get a second to that opinion," Garrus chuckled, "but this crowd? Show of hands, everyone who's a little disappointed that we didn't get to shoot anything."

Garrus, Aizee, James, Dan, Ben and Jack all immediately raised their hands- specifically the hands holding their assault rifles, shotguns or sniper rifles. Their eyes all turned expectantly to Shepard, and after a second Hadrian shrugged, made a bit of a face, and slowly raised his hand, too. Liara smirked and Kasumi shook her head in mock disappointment.

"Oh, Shep," she tisked, "what about Hock's place? What about using wits and cunning?"

"Those are fine but I'm still a marine. We could have saved half an hour of hob-nobbing with criminals and scumbags if you'd just let me shoot my way in."

Half the team filed in to the elevator, and when it arrived back on the main deck, Kaidan was waiting on the other side of the door. He glared at Shepard, who stood frozen a moment like a deer in headlights.
"Kasumi, would you show the doctor to the other stateroom? Garrus, I'm sure we could use you down in gunnery," he said after an awkward second. Vakarian and Goto both silently accepted their assignments and hurried to work.

"What the hell?" Kaidan snapped after they'd departed. "You didn't think your second-in-command needed to know about a massive change in our plan to extract Cloats? Or that I might be useful on the pad down there?"

"You were-"

"Don't you dare! I wasn't so busy that you couldn't-" Kaidan threw his hands up in frustration. "And you went out there without even suiting up? What were you thinking?" Hadrian started walking toward the CIC with Kaidan fuming at his side.

"It was a snap decision, I had a few minutes to adjust the plan. I felt better leaving you where you were than pulling you for the pickup, where you wouldn't have had time to get into gear either, by the way."

"Oh, so you were protecting me, then?"

"That was part of-"

"Well don't!" Alenko barked. "You don't 'protect' me anymore, we protect each other, and we can't do that if you're leaving me behind to go do the risky shit on your own!" He grabbed his husband's arm and stopped him cold in front of the memorial wall. He looked at it angrily, at an empty spot near the centre, and shook his head, focusing his eyes back sharply on Shepard. "I've been through- I don't want you going into harm's way without me, not again. No more leaving me behind! Where you go, I go. Got it?"

Shepard looked at the same spot on the memorial wall, confused, then back at Alenko. His expression softened, and he put his free hand on Kaidan's shoulder, squeezing it. "I'm sorry," he said. "I got it. I just- I need to get to the bridge. You coming?"

Kaidan sighed, staring another long moment, before nodding resignedly. "I'm coming," he muttered, and they resumed walking. He composed himself before stepping onto the CIC- the crew didn't need to know that there was tension between them- and they received a status update from Nymandra. Joker had successfully evaded their pursuers and they were moments from engaging the conduit drive to start their journey back toward Earth.

"So much for my first visit to Sur'Kesh," Kaidan grumbled as the mini mass relay activated, wedging open a corridor of zero mass space ahead of them.

-X

Four hours later

-X

Kaidan sat at the mess area table poking idly at the shepherd's pie Crewman Dubois had prepared for the crew the night before. It was between meal services and Kaidan had liberated some leftovers from the refrigerator so that he could take some time to himself. At least that was the idea.

Liara subtly approached from the starboard corridor and took a tenuous seat across from him.
"Liara," he acknowledged, looking up briefly and then back down at his food.

"Kaidan. Can we go to the lounge and talk?"

He looked up again, narrowing his eyes cautiously. "Talk about...?"

"About Shepard," Liara said in a low voice.

Kaidan sighed, stood his fork up on its end under his finger a moment, and then let it drop onto the tray.

"If you're planning a mutiny, Liara, I'm not the one to-"

"No, Kaidan, of course not. I just think we should talk." Liara put her hand on top of Kaidan's and pushed a synthempathic connection so that he could feel her sincerity and the absence of any conspiratorial intent. After sitting with the feelings she was sharing a moment and studying them, Kaidan accepted that she was being genuine. He nodded reluctantly, slid his tray aside, and rose from his chair. They walked down the hall and into the lounge, where he found Kasumi perched on the back of one of the couches and Jack reclining in an adjacent chair.

"Company, huh? You're sure this isn't a mutiny meeting?" Alenko asked.

"We would never mutiny against Shep, Kaidan," Kasumi said, patting the couch beside her with her foot. "But Liara and I were comparing some observations and we wanted to discuss them with you, and see if we could help." Kaidan immediately looked at Jack, curious and sceptical about the temperamental biotic's propensity for observing or discussing anything delicately.

"And I walked in on them while they were having their little girl talk in our cabin, so here I am," Jack quipped.

"Alright," Kaidan said, shaking his head, "so... we're talking?"

"Are you and Shepard and Cortez fucking?" Jack asked. Liara's head snapped in Jack's direction like a trebuchet and Kasumi buried her face in the palm of a hand. Kaidan blinked, flabbergasted, and half-turned back toward the door, but then stopped himself, giving T'soni the benefit of the doubt.

"Was that what-"

"No," she said sternly, "that was not what we wanted to talk about. Not... though... Please, Kaidan, just have a seat for a minute."

They walked over to the couch and he sat down between her and Kasumi, hunched over with his elbows on his knees, directing an annoyed look at Jack, who grimaced awkwardly.

Liara put a hand on his arm. "What we are wondering, Kaidan, is... is there anything going on that could be making Shepard feel... alienated? Something that could be driving a wedge between the two of you and distracting him or un-centering him?"

"'Going on' like what?"

Liara sighed and looked at Kasumi, then back to Kaidan, searching for a way to present their concerns to him as inoffensively as possible. "Is Lieutenant Cortez making any... overtures towards you? Or towards him?"
"What? No! 'Overtures?" Kaidan sputtered.

"He isn't behaving toward either of you in a way that might be provoking any-"

"He isn't. Trust me."

"Because I've seen the way he looks at both of you," Liara pressed, "and how both of you look back. He's been invited to things with the old crew, he spends a lot of time around you both, privately and together. And at Sur'Kesh Shepard seemed- I don't know- like he was resigned to you two having each other if he were to be killed, and then he went out there without armour. I don't know the lieutenant well- he's seemed nice in the brief spates that I've worked alongside him, but if he's tried to insinuate himself in your-"

"Liara, no," Alenko repeated, more confidently, feeling himself stabilizing as he deconstructed her argument. "Look, I can see where you might... you weren't there for the almost year that we spent marooned, and you haven't been back aboard that long for this new tour. But it's not what you're thinking, Steve isn't a 'wedge.' He... he's become a close friend to both of us. We've all acknowledged different levels of attraction, he's been with each of us through-"

"So you are both fucking him on the side?" Jack interrupted, sounding surprised but also a bit self-satisfied.

"No. Jesus, Jack," Kaidan blurted, rolling his eyes. "We aren't- it isn't like that. He has some feelings for both of us, both of us have some feelings for him, but it hasn't become some kind of... it's all out in the open between us. And the sunlight hasn't killed it but it's sanitized it. We're all adults, we know where we... and it's fine. There's no weird, festering, hidden tension between us creating any jealousy. We took him in to our close circle; we haven't taken him into bed."

"Yet?"

Kaidan levelled a dirty, frustrated look at Jack, aggravated that she was assuming something that her tone implied was tawdry. She put her hands up non-threateningly and shrugged. "Hey, not judging man, I've been there," she said. "It was majorly fucked-up for me, but I've heard it works out fine for some other people. Do whatever you want."

"So, if Cortez isn't stirring up any trouble between the two of you," Kasumi cut in, "can you think of anything else odd about Shep's behaviour that might explain leaving you out of the loop back on Sur'Kesh?"

"He said he was trying to keep me safe," Kaidan sighed. "I suppose after the close call I had on Rannoch, and after he got away without a scratch on Noveria, he was thinking he'd be safer in any engagement with them than me. Honestly, after the beating we took on Rannoch... I think he's just a bit shaken up." He looked down at his hands and twisted the wedding band around his finger idly. "This all started on what was supposed to be our nice, calm, honeymoon milk-run. Then along come these new bad guys, and they gave us a bloody nose. I think he's worried. He feels like he has a lot on his shoulders, that's all."

"Well we need him clear-headed," Liara said. "Shepard's led people into danger before, I don't know why he might be second-guessing himself now, but maybe we just need to make sure he knows we still have confidence in him. That we trust he's still as capable as ever."

"I already told him not to try and shield me," Kaidan grumbled. "I'm not fragile, and we're more than just teammates now. I'm pretty sure he understood."
Kasumi and Liara looked at each other again, thoughtful. Goto shrugged.

"Well, maybe that will do it," Liara posited. "Hopefully it will. But I still think we should make sure we're clear with him going forward, that he's still the same man we know and have faith in. I can discreetly spread the word to the others."

"If you think it'll help," Kaidan said. A subdued expression of uncertainty flashed across his face. After a pause Liara and Kasumi rose and headed for the door. Kaidan remained seated, wondering who else on-board might have been speculating about Hadrian's fitness, or their relationship. Then his eye was drawn to movement- Jack was finally getting up to leave. She stopped in front of him, boring into him with a knowing look.

"You should just do it and get it over with," she said.

"Get what 'over with?'" Kaidan asked, exasperated.

"You know. You and Shepard and Cortez. Even if it isn't sexual tension-" she said 'sexual tension' with a hyperbolic flourish- "if all of you guys want to do it you should just go ahead and do it. It'll blow off some steam and shake things up- who knows, you might even learn something new about yourself."

"Thanks," Kaidan retorted sarcastically, "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"Whatever, Mrs. Shepard."

As Jack left the compartment, Kaidan's eyes drilling into her back, he mulled over the whole conversation. He wanted to believe it was simply a matter of confidence and worry- that Liara was right and that his earlier insistence that Hadrian keep him fully involved would resolve things. But something nagged at him. An anxiety he couldn't quite name. Not Jack's conception, but he felt like Liara didn't quite have it right either... and he was afraid that neither did he.
Cloats was safely ensconced in one of the Alliance's most secure bunkers studying the Zephyrray transponders from Noveria, and the Council had asked Shepard to remain at Earth temporarily to see if any immediate applications of the technology could be implemented before Normandy redeployed. With no immediate duties, Kaidan had persuaded Shepard to take one of their 'big relationship steps'; they had flown to the British Columbia interior, to the Alenko family's vineyard and orchard, to visit Kaidan's parents.

They'd arrived late in the morning to a warm reception from Kaidan's mother, Min; his father Kristof was working in the winery and his sister, Maryam, was in the central Manitoba refugee settlements, where she'd taken up legally representing aliens who'd become enamoured with Earth and applied for citizenship, even if return to their homeworlds became viable again. After getting settled in Kaidan had taken him on a tour of the grounds, introducing his dad, who insisted they try the latest batch he was working on.

Two hours and three bottles later, they'd stumbled into a shed on the western edge of the property, where the winery grape fields met the orchards growing fruit for pálinka. They'd barred the door to the shed and gone up one side of each other and down the other, returning to the house for dinner smelling of sweat and dirt, and grapes and pears. Meal conversation had gone from the state of Earth following the Reaper invasion, to the current crisis gripping the galaxy, to- naturally and quite inevitably- Kaidan's childhood.

"I always knew our little boy would grow up to help people," Min said proudly. "He was born for greatness."

"An auspicious birth, was he?" Hadrian laughed, nudging his husband gently in the ribs with his elbow.

"He showed his character very early on," Kristof replied. "Such a just child, our little Társ. We knew he was special even before we knew how special he was."

"Társ?" Shepard asked.

"It's a long story," Kaidan groaned.

"Oh but he'll appreciate it, Kaidan," Min insisted. "Kristof's parents are from Hungary and Macedonia, and mine are Chinese and Persian, so when we were trying to come up with a name we thought so long about which tradition to go with. Finally we decided: Kaidan, which was a form of Kaden, which is Arabic for 'companion' but it sounded like it could have come from anywhere. Then, you know, you end up looking for pet-names, and 'companion' in Hungarian is 'társ' so..."

Hade tilted sideways in his chair, pressing his shoulder against Kaidan's and giving him a giddy, drunken smile. "Aw, so you're my társ," he said sweetly. "She was right, I do like it."
"Yeah, well, it's a hell of a lot easier than pridružnik," Kaidan murmured. "Or bânlű."

"So he was an upstanding little citizen from the start, then, eh?"

"He was, he made me very proud! Kaidan, do you remember that boy from your school, Gregor?" Kristof asked. Kaidan rolled his eyes a little.

"Of course I remember him, you guys have told this story so many times."

"There was this boy- brute of a boy, in Kaidan's school. The day Kaidan started school he came home and told us he'd heard about a bully. The next day the school called and said our little boy had scared the other children by beating up that little állat."

"I didn't 'beat him up,' Apa, I knocked him down. And Hadrian doesn't speak Hungarian." Kaidan rolled his head in Shepard's direction and offered a weakly apologetic glance. "Állat means beast, or brute," he translated.

"It was the first time his biotic abilities manifested," Min explained. "He used them intuitively to stand up for another child who was being picked on. Kristof actually asked the principal-" she puffed up her chest and imitated her husband's blustery tone- "'so what do you want us to do about it if he's stopping the bullies better than you are?'''

"And then I had to transfer to another school. The first of seven transfers in six years before Conatix came around and 'suggested' the BAaT program."

"Well, to Hell with any principal who objects to a child using their gifts to do good!" Mr. Alenko bellowed, clapping Kaidan on the back proudly.

"What about you, Hadrian?" Min asked, "did you find it difficult, growing up with biotic abilities? Your parents must have struggled? We all did back then- children moving things with their minds! None of us knew exactly what was going on at first."

"Well, I was raised on the fleet, aboard ships and stations," Hade shrugged, thinking back. "It was all pretty orderly, tutors didn't tolerate any bullying in their classes. When my biotics first started acting up, a couple doctors figured out what was going on and then a lieutenant who'd done one of the first service exchange programs observing asari commandos was assigned to me to teach me how to keep them under control until I enlisted. Went through boot camp, got implanted, then biotic boot where I learned to actually use them."

"And thank goodness for it," Min said. "Kaidan told us what you did on Crucible Day, how you used your abilities to save him...""

"To send him flying fenék over teáskanna!" Kristof added, with a laugh.

"Apa! Company. En anglais, maudit!" Kaidan pleaded, rolling his eyes despite smiling helplessly at his mother. It was an Alenko family joke- that when the liquor was flowing and conversation was rolling with the household's 'five official languages,' the only way for the kids to really get their parents' attention was "to spill french on the dinner table." Then he looked at Hade, trying to cover up his apprehension but unsure how Shepard would field the real subject his mother had touched on. He knew Hade wouldn't remember that day, though he'd been told about it in detail. But Kaidan still felt the same gratitude toward the man next to him that he'd felt for the man who died just minutes after blasting him out of harm's way with a biotic charge.

"Well, ah..." Shepard looked back, thoughtfully, and placed his hand atop Kaidan's. "I did the only thing I could do," he said. "To be honest it was all... kind of a blur."
The table fell silent a moment as they reflected on how grateful they all were to be alive, only to be broken when Min but one hand on her chest, raising her wine glass to Hadrian with the other and offered him a heartfelt toast in Persian- "salâmati."

Kristof nodded, lifting his glass of pálinka and saying "egészségedre" in a solemn voice. Both sincere blessings to his well-being, in their deep thanks for delivering the son they loved so much from death.

Kaidan joined in with his glass of whiskey but without words adequate to the task, and Shepard smiled humbly, sucking in a deep breath to put out the brief emotional sting in his eyes. He focused on the connection between them and thought, simply, 'love.' For everything about the moment-about Alenko, his family, their home, all of it.

A moment later, Min's gentle smile upturned slightly. "A shame about that boy, Gregor," she remarked.

Kaidan gave her a quizzical look. "What? A shame about him? I take it he didn't make it through the Reaper occupation?" he asked. Min shook her head sadly.

"On the first day of the invasion, he showed up at our front door. He'd joined the civil defense militia and was helping with the evacuation... He stayed with me when I refused to leave, because your papa wasn't home yet, and then when I wanted to come here instead of going to one of the refuge sites- because Maryam was here, and I thought Kristof would think the same thing- he flew me out of the city before heading to the lines... Afterwards, when the reconstruction began, we heard he'd been killed."

"Goes to show," Kristof mused, "you can't always judge people by a bad first impression. I suppose even bullies can grow up to do some good."

"Well, it looked like the end of the world- all of them," Kaidan said. "Made for a lot of strange bedfellows. Turians and krogan, quarians and geth... I suppose even kids who used to steal lunch money could redeem themselves." Suddenly Kaidan felt Hade squeeze his hand. It wasn't affectionate- more like a twitch of excitement. He looked at his husband curiously and could see-and feel through their synthempathic bond- that his mind was racing, too fast to be read.

"What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

"It's... I just had a thought," Shepard said. "About redeeming bullies. Would you all please excuse me a second, I've got to make a call."

"A call to who?" Kaidan asked. Hade's mind was churning so fast he couldn't pick specific thoughts up from their connection.

"Sorry, I- look, you stay, I'll be right back. I've got to- I'll just be outside for a minute." Hadrian rose from his chair, squeezed Kaidan's shoulder on his way past, and vanished.

"I might have joined up with the civil defense too, if it hadn't meant leaving your anya and kishúgom alone here with those monsters taking over everywhere. But, ahhh, one more soldier on the line wasn't going to decide anything, eh? Except yours maybe, hm, fiú?" Kristof mused, clearly approving of his new son-in-law.

"I'm surprised they didn't call you up," Kaidan said, clearly distracted, his eyes fixed on the door Hadrian had left through.

"Well... until they make a gun to double for one of these-" Mr. Alenko wistfully tapped the handle
of his cane against the edge of the table beside him- "I don't think they'll be in any hurry to reactivate old riflemen with bad hips."

Kaidan spent the next five minutes discussing how other past neighbours and family friends had fared during and after the Reaper war before his curiosity overcame him and he excused himself, following Hade out onto the deck overlooking the fields. Shepard was on his omni-tool talking with Councilor Triperatus.

"I am skeptical, Shepard, but I will call the other Councilors together to hear you out when you've returned to the Normandy. Good evening, Commander." The turian councilor signed off and Shepard turned around to see Kaidan in the doorway behind him. His eyes were wide with hurried thinking, and he had a complicated expression- anxious, but excited too.

"What are they going to hear you out on?" Kaidan inquired. Hade bit his lip, looked down briefly at his hands, and picked his thumbnails together a moment.

"Ah. Well... that thing about that guy, Gregor... 'bullies redeeming themselves'... it got me thinking. I didn't get an answer on Noveria when I asked General Translation Failure why- if they care about the goings-on in this galaxy at all- why they didn't come back to help us against the Reapers when they invaded. But what if... what if it it was because, as formidable as they are, they're still no match for the Reapers?"

Kaidan crossed his arms, unsure of where Hade was 'going' with the thought, but not liking what he suspected.

"So?"

"Well... so, what if we could bring them into conflict with each other? The enemy of my enemy, y'know?"

Alenko narrowed his eyes. "The Reapers are gone," he said, "and even if they were still around, you can't be suggesting we consider them our 'friends.'"

"They left," Shepard countered, "they didn't drop dead or self-destruct, I saw the vids. They just left every world across the galaxy and flew away. As the mass relays were shutting down, which means they didn't ride the relays-"

"So?" Kaidan snapped. "So wherever they decided to fuck off to, they headed there at FTL. Hopefully to Hell. So what?"

"So, if they were limited to FTL, even if their conventional drives were faster than ours, we've got conduit drive now that we could maybe use- if we could figure out where they headed- to catch up to them and try to-"

"To what?!" Hadrian jumped a little, snapped out of his 'bubble' of inward speculation. He furrowed his brow as he studied the darkening expression on his husband's face. "Why the hell do you want to track down the Reapers!? What do you think you can accomplish, huh?" Alenko was fuming, fighting down flashbacks of the last time Shepard came 'face-to-face' with a Reaper.

"Look... Harbinger and the destroyer on Rannoch both said the same stupid thing- that they were trying to 'save' us," Hade said, trying to lay out his idea. "I don't know how they thought they were doing that, but, if they had our welfare in mind at all... and if we could use that somehow-"

"Jesus Christ, you're serious about this," Kaidan said, shaking his head incredulously. "Holy shit! Have you gone insane?" he yelled.
"They thought curing the genophage was insane and they thought letting Legion upgrade the geth was ins-

"No, this-" Kaidan interrupted again, throwing his hands up in the air, suddenly hyper-animated, "this IS insane. In-fucking-sane! The Reapers were the bad guys! They were the fucking plague of locusts out to destroy everything, and wh- what? What!! You think you'll go track them down and have a little chit-chat and get them to join the war on our side!? Because you're Commander Shepard and you can do anything, huh?"

"No, Kaidan, listen-"

"No you listen!" Kaidan screamed, shaking angrily, and causing Shepard to wince. "Do you even remember what happened the last time you crossed paths with a Reaper!?" His voice rang out over the grape fields that looked clad in amber from the setting sun nestled between the mountain peaks beyond.

There was a long, painful pause between them. Shepard swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "No," he finally said, quietly, "I don't. I don't remember. What I remember is going to bed with you in my arms the night before we were set to hit Cerberus HQ, and when I woke up they told me the war was over. That Cerberus was done, that the Reapers were gone... that you were locked up... that the fight of my life ended while I was asleep, and that I was a hero for something I didn't do. And it's just... it's getting harder. To brush it off when it comes up... those moments that he had with people that I didn't. Those sneaky little reminders that I'm-"

"I've said it before, you're Shepard enough for me," Kaidan said emphatically. "If there's any difference between you and 'him,' it's that I lost him on Crucible Day. I like the difference! There are some footsteps I don't want you to follow in."

Hadrian tried to smile, but fell short and shook his head slightly. "I know... I just... I don't know if you can imagine what it's like. I still have that nightmare about the kid I saw die as we were evacuating. I'm still constantly half-expecting to run into Reapers wherever we go, or get attacked by Cerberus... like the war isn't really over yet, at least not for me. But for everyone else it is, and they keep... they keep wanting to forget, and wanting me to just be the one who... And y'know I... I don't even know how he- how 'I' did it, what he did on the Citadel, exactly. How can I..." He rolled his eyes and looked absently up at the sky, sighing. "How can I really 'own' this life when I don't know how he- that other me who gave it up- died? I know how lucky I am... to be alive, to be with you, for all of it... but whatever 'he' did on the Citadel that day it was a defining moment. And I don't know if I'm really 'Shepard enough' for myself since I'll never know how I measure up to that moment. If I don't know whether I'd do what he did... how can I know if we're really the same? If I deserve to be here?"

Kaidan's eyes started welling up as- listening to Hade confess to the turmoil he was going through- he finally found a name for- and gave voice to- the fear he'd been suppressing for weeks. "Are you suicidal?" he asked. Hade's jaw dropped and he made a face like he'd been punched in the chest.


"Are you sure? Then why do you seem to be running toward... toward these Puritans un-armoured, without me, and now toward the Reapers? You've been depressed, I can feel it, even though you try to box it up inside, and I- I can't-"

"I don't want to die," Hadrian cut in. He took another step forward, Kaidan started to back away, but Hade surged forward and grabbed his husband's arms gently. "I don't want to die," he repeated, starting to tear up himself as the sentinel's doubt translated through their connection. "I want to
live, to be with you." Kaidan shuddered and choked out a sob, slumping forward against Shepard. "Well then why...?" he stammered pleadingly, his face pressed into Hade's shoulder. "Why can't you just... You can't believe the Reapers will be interested in answering these questions of yours. So what are you looking for, if not...?"

Hadrian curled his arms around Kaidan, squeezing him for dear life and kissing the side of his head. "I'm looking for a way to win," he said emphatically. "So that we can have our nice, quiet life together." Kaidan sniffled, trying to fight down his despair. "But to do that we need to be rid of these new bad guys, and I'm willing to try thinking outside the box to do it. I'll even try crazy. To get on with my life with you? I'll even stare down the monsters that... that killed... But it isn't a death-wish."

The pair stood holding each other on the deck, Kaidan struggling to believe Hadrian and to regain his composure.

"I hate this idea," Kaidan whimpered. "I hope the Council shoots it down in flames. I hope they call you an idiot, strip your Spectre status, bench you for life. I hope they..." he trailed off.

"They very well might. But hey... look, whatever we do next, I won't leave you behind. I promise."

"Oh, great," Alenko chuckled bitterly, "so we can go find certain death together."

"I will never lead you there," Hade said firmly. "We just... we need to get rid of these fuckers. And I'll set the devil on them if I can, so that you and I can get on with our life together." He kissed Kaidan's forehead and neck again, squeezing him tight and swaying gently as he sniffled back barely restrained tears of his own. The sun was nearly set and a breeze started to pick up, bringing a slight chill. After a long, quiet pause he let out a slow sigh into Alenko's hair and jostled him a bit. "So... do you want to go back in, so we can reassure your parents that we're still married?"

"Ugh," Kaidan sighed back, sniffling, "God, half the valley probably heard that."

"Should I... I mean, could you maybe go in first? I'm afraid if you don't smooth the way your dad's going to cuss me out. Probably in Hungarian, and I won't even know what he's."

Kaidan blurted out a laugh and shook his head, then wiped his eyes again. "Jesus, I know, it's like the old country in there. Several of them. I don't even- but yeah... yeah, I'll let them know you aren't beating me." Then he narrowed his eyes at his husband and sniffled again. "When we get back, though..." He flashed a mental image of Hadrian, pants around his knees and bent over their bed, his upturned behind red and squirming.

"Maybe after you..." No, he wasn't going to tell his husband to 'calm down,' he had every right to be upset... instead he smiled apologetically and squeezed Alenko again. "It'll be... I love you."

"I love you too," Kaidan answered wearily. "But I'm still gonna' beat your ass for putting me through this crap. You can stand while you tell the Council your stupid idea."

"Yes Sir, Major, Sir," Shepard smirked.

"I should ask dad to borrow his belt."

"Well," Hade grimaced, raising an eyebrow, "that just made things a little weird..."

"Good," Kaidan grumbled, "get you weirded-out instead of hard so it's punishment instead of play... seggfej."
"En anglais?"

"It means 'dumbass.'"
The teleconference with the Council and Admiral Hackett had highlighted just how desperate the Council was for some way to repel the Puritans. They had given Shepard leave to try and figure out where the Reapers had gone on Crucible Day and to pursue his idea, even assigning three conduit-drive refit frigates- two quarian and one turian- and the new sister-ship to the Normandy, SSV Vimy Ridge, to his command to assist with the search. The twin stealth-recon ships were parked on a Frederikstown landing pad having hastily duplicated Zephyray transponders installed before setting out, but they didn't yet know where they'd be going.

Hadrian's first thought had been to simply extrapolate from Crucible Day sensor records the direction of the Reapers' exit from the Solar system, but a review of data from that day showed that the Reapers hadn't all left in an orderly fashion. Several major clusters had departed together, with many scattering individually. With no sightings since then, it seemed that they could be anywhere 'out there,' but the vastness of space precluded a random search pattern. So he'd convened a brainstorming session with Nymandra, Traynor, Delegate, Hallis, EDI, Liara and Kaidan. The group sat around the Strategy Center console studying the projected galaxy map, which had an overlay of observed Reaper exit vectors from star systems that had submitted records to the Council leadership at Earth, creating the appearance of dozens of tiny fireworks going off across the Milky Way.

After almost an hour of spirited discussion, the room had gone fairly silent nearly half an hour ago.

"Does it make me a jerk that I'm kind of glad we're stumped?" Kaidan asked in a low voice, leaning in and resting his temple against Hadrian's shoulder. Shepard kissed the top of his husband's head, sighing into his hair.

"It was always a long shot," he ceded, lightly tossing the datapad in his hand onto the work surface in front of them.

"Oh! A notion!" Hallis exclaimed suddenly. He looked over at EDI who was seated with Traynor and Nymandra. "EDI- your creation incorporated Reaper technology from Sovereign, yes? Perhaps isolation of Reaper programming sequences would provide some insights into their cognitive processes?"

EDI returned a flat, unimpressed look at the salarian science officer. "You want me to- what- 'get in touch with my Reaper side?' To try and think like one of them?" she demanded.

"To assert your sovereignty, so to speak?" Shepard quipped. EDI shot him a learned look of not-being-amused, and then leveled her gaze, laser-like, back on Hallis.

"Were it even possible to selectively suppress the non-Reaper elements in my core programming, I would not consent to such a procedure."

"But-"
This exchange is over," EDI said curtly.

Hade and Kaidan exchanged a short look that was equal parts alarm and bemusement.

"Did she just...?" Kaidan whispered.

"Yeah," Hadrian confirmed, the chill running up his spine harkening back to Virmire. "Spooky."

All eyes in the room turned to the door as it opened to admit a pair of Alliance technicians. Specialist Traynor smiled broadly at the senior tech, a tall, slim-faced lieutenant named Giller.

"Tony," she said. Shepard recognized the man as well from the crews executing the last round of repairs, after Rannoch, when he'd learned that he'd been part of the communication systems crew during the SR-2 refit.


"Don't start," Traynor retorted. "You're doing the networking diagnostics already?" Giller nodded and held up a tablet he was using to run analysis of signal transmission between the Zephyrray unit and the Normandy's internal network.

"Yeah. The hardware's impressive- it's basically a tiny mass relay in itself, able to propagate a zero mass corridor to facilitate faster-than-light tight beam comm signals. But its range is dependent on the power supply it's hooked up to, so entangler comms aside, under baseline conditions the Normandy should be able to talk to other units in real-time up to ten light-years away. The software uses some pretty hardcore compression, though, so I want to make sure every vital station has a copy of the protocols in its resident sub-processor. Y'know, to minimize latency."

Shepard and Kaidan looked at each other again.

"I think I got all of that," Hadrian said.

"Y'know it's funny- in this room, I think you can take for granted that everyone else understood," Kaidan grinned.

"What about under worse-than-baseline conditions, Lieutenant? Is this new tech going to actually help against the Puritans jamming?" Shepard asked.

"Well, Sir, the hardware afforded our software teams a unique opportunity. They studied the crap out of telemetry from your previous encounters and wrote a suite to analyse the enemy's interference when it's encountered, and from our modeling, we think... or we hope... that it might be able to overcome it by finding an exploitable interval in their signal. As they rotate their broadcast along the spectrum, it finds the least obstructed band and rides the wave."

"Wouldn't EDI have been able to figure that out if it were going to work?" Shepard asked, recalling the AI's facility with solving communications problems during their battles against the Collectors and Reapers.

"Thank you for your confidence, Shepard," EDI said, sounding genuinely touched. "It is uncertain that the new software will succeed where I have not, but the expanded capabilities afforded by the hardware upgrade create new problem-solving possibilities."

"So it's still a long shot, but we've got a brand new gun," Kaidan mused.

"An apt metaphor," EDI agreed.
"Well, we should get on with it... we'll try to keep out of your way, though," Giller said. He and his assistant moved over to one of the auxiliary stations to do their work. The lieutenant plugged the tablet in to an access port and it started making a low, rhythmic tone.

"So, back to our dead end, then," Kaidan mumbled. Everyone returned to their smaller group conversation and Kaidan, mostly listening to others in the room, started idly tapping his stylus on his own datapad. Hadrian looked affectionately at him, starting to feel wheels turning in his mind, but he wasn't sure what was powering them.

His eyes wandered over to Nymandra, whose face hinted at something... as though she was making some kind of connections on her own. She looked back at him, seeming to relate. A growing chunk of his attention was growing focused on Kaidan's tapping and on the work tablet's beeping.

"Reapers, Reapers, where are the fucking Reapers... it would be nice if we knew why they actually left when the Crucible fired. I mean what did it have to do with the other outcome of synthempathy? We've speculated that they left because we started broadcasting our loathing, and it 'hurt' them, but we aren't really sure, are we? If we knew what they made of it maybe we could figure out where they were coming from."

"Need to know where they went, not where they came from, Major," Hallis chimed in, apparently misunderstanding the expression. "And already know where Reapers came from, besides, was-"

"Bahak!" Shepard blurted out, launching to his feet. Kaidan jumped in his seat, startled, all eyes in the room focused on him, and Pardik made a surprised, slightly annoyed face.

"Indeed, Bahak system. Was getting to it, no need to be a cloaca," the salarian grumbled.

"No, sorry," Hade said, suddenly buzzing with excitement, "I wasn't- it was a 'eureka' moment, you know?"

"I'm what-a?"

"No, no, eureka, it-"

"An inspired outburst, Hallis," Kaidan interjected, wanting to cut to the chase. "So what was it, what about Bahak? That's where you destroyed that 'Alpha' relay that was going to be the Reapers' Plan B entry point to the galaxy, and delayed the invasion, right?"

"Right! I launched 'The Project' at it, which was on the asteroid where Kenson found Object Rho."

Nymandra snapped her fingers and pointed at Hadrian, cluing in. "Rho!" she shouted. An excited expression dawned on Traynor's face as well.

"I'm not sure I'm catching on to what you're thinking, but the enthusiasm is clearly contagious," Kaidan remarked, smiling despite his confusion.

"According to the commander's account of Doctor Kenson's analysis of Object Rho, it emitted an energy pulse keyed to the Reapers' proximity," EDI explained.

"You're thinking if we had Object Rho, and we could measure its output from several different locations, perhaps we could triangulate a position?" Traynor said, thinking aloud.

"It's weird, I mean I'm kind of surprised it occurred to me, but..." Hadrian looked over at Nymandra, "you looked like you were pretty hot on my heels as it was coming together in my head."
"It's actually similar to a technique that I used aboard the Anarona once to locate a hidden pirate staging ground with an IFF transponder we captured from one of their couriers," the asari replied. "I suppose I was wishing we'd had something similarly keyed to the Reapers, but I was unfamiliar with this Object Rho you're talking about."

"Okay, great, but you crashed that whole asteroid into a mass relay and it blew the whole system to hell, remember? Didn't I read that it was comparable to a supernova? Surely this artifact couldn't have survived that?" Kaidan suggested. He still wasn't crazy about the whole plan, so he didn't feel particularly bad about raining on the parade that was rolling through.

"Unlikely, but possible," Delegate countered. "Reaper technology is extremely robust."

"Assuming artifact were intact... hm... could begin plotting an optimal course to sample proximity readings and acquire bearing." Hallis started tapping away at his own tablet.

"We have already completed that task," Delegate said, its head twitching toward the holo console, which began projecting a map of the galaxy with a series of waypoints blinking. Hallis narrowed his large, almond eyes again, this time at the geth platform.

"No need to be a cloaca," the science officer repeated.

"So we'll be heading for Bahak, then?" Kaidan asked.

"We will be," Shepard nodded, "or what's left of the system. Once I fill the Council in and the upgrades are complete, we can give the task group the green light to get under way."

Kaidan rubbed Hade's thigh under the table, and used the touch to open a direct synthempathic connection between them. 'You're taking me to so many nice places,' he thought, 'I just wish I'd been there to help when you were there last time. Or that I'd seen the place at all before you had to blow it to kingdom-come.'

"I trust, given concerns about enemy communications monitoring, I don't need to remind everyone to keep this offline and need-to-know only," Hade said. Everyone assembled nodded or vocalized their understanding, and Shepard dismissed them to return to their regular duties. Traynor and Nymandra walked over to talk shop with Giller; Delegate and EDI quietly departed, presumably conversing wirelessly; and Liara left with Hallis, who'd started chattering about the state he expected to find Bahak in following the Alpha Relay's demolition.

"I still hate this plan," Kaidan said in a low voice. Hadrian put his hand on Kaidan's neck and stroked beneath his ear with his thumb.

"I know," he replied.

"It's like we were in a shark's jaws, and it just up and let us go and swam away, and now you want to go find it to try and put a saddle on it. It's nuts."

"I know." Shepard offered no argument- they'd quarreled enough about his plan in the week and a half since returning from B.C. that he didn't have it in him anymore to try and persuade his husband not to hate it. As much as he'd tried, he felt like he hadn't completely convinced Kaidan that he didn't have some kind of death-wish. He could still feel a hurt lingering under the sentinel's skin whenever they were together, and now he was just trying to show that he was still 'present' and committed, still wanting them to share a long life together, and not looking to go out in some blaze of glory. He didn't like trying to atone for something he hadn't actually done, but he did want badly for his love to be happy again.
"I mean it, after this war we're calling it quits. No more heroics. We'll go back to my parents and drink wine, until we figure out some place of our own to go and drink wine and be left the hell alone."

Hadrian smiled his assent and patted Kaidan's forearm with his other hand. "Yes Sir, Major."

"Retired," Alenko stressed.

"Yes Sir, Major Retired, Sir. Listen, when we reach Bahak I want to deploy every asset we've got to scour the system as quickly as possible, and I want them able to talk to each other if the Puritans show up. Can you go check on Steve and see how the Zephyrrray installation is going aboard the shuttles?"

"Yeah," Kaidan sighed. "Are we going to invite him up for supper tonight?"

"If we aren't arguing and if you feel like the company," Hade answered, cautiously. Kaidan flashed a small, self-recriminating frown- he had been a bit off the rails lately, but only because he was so damned worried about Shepard and what felt like the fraying of their relationship.

"We aren't arguing," he half-whispered, "and yeah... it would be nice to... to try and get things back to normal again."

"Okay," Kaidan said, "well... I'll see you in a little bit, then."

-X

Hadrian stepped off the forward lift onto deck three, rounding the elevator to the right and into gunnery control. Inside, Garrus was reassembling a Raptor sniper rifle while Tali- seated on the weapons bench- was holding up the geth plasma shotgun she'd apparently completed servicing, a self-satisfied grin on her face.

"Should I do another one while I wait for you to catch up?" she asked in a teasing tone. Garrus turned to give her a look, more playful than annoyed, and noticed Shepard in the doorway.

"Taking things apart and putting them back together is your whole thing, come gloat when you can out-snipe Shepard," Vakarian retorted, and then nodded in the commander's direction with his chin. Tali looked over and smiled.

"Hey Shepard," she greeted him.

"He's right, Tali, make sure you never forget, because it might save your life some day- if bottles ever invade the galaxy, you're much safer behind him than me."

The quarian giggled and tapped Garrus' lower leg with her foot. "Ooh, you need some medi-gel? Because you just got burned," she said.

"So what brings you down here, Shepard?" Garrus asked. "This tour's been really easy-going by turian standards- you aren't about to over-compensate with a surprise inspection, are you?"

"I've never had to over-compensate for a thing in my life," Hadrian quipped, grinning. But the question lingered, and he quickly felt a bit awkward; he hadn't expected to find Tali in gunnery with his buddy, and now he found he felt like he was intruding on the couple's time together. "I just wanted to let you know we have a lead- we're heading to Bahak."

"Bahak... the same Bahak where you went in alone and blew up a mass relay?" Garrus asked.
"Good thing we don't need a relay to get there anymore," Tali commented. "Why are we going back there?"

"Remember the Reaper device I told you about? That they had at Kenson's base? We're going to go see if it could have survived the blast. If it did, it might enable us to figure out where they went on Crucible Day."

"Have I mentioned that I think looking for them is kind of your worst idea ever?" Garrus asked rhetorically. Tali looked from Vakarian to Shepard and quickly nodded, enthusiastically.

"It really is," she agreed.

"You have. Repeatedly," Hadrian murmured. "And if you want to disembark before we head out-"

"Hey, no, we've got your back no matter how crazy your plan is. Just making sure you know that it's crazy."

"It really is," Tali reiterated. "I usually like your crazy plans, but this sounds crazier than a volus with a suit full of helium."

Shepard cracked a loud, unexpected laugh as he imagined the sound, but the jovial feeling passed as quickly as it arose, betraying his mood.

"So, what's wrong? If you had a tail it would be between your legs, I can tell," Garrus said, putting down his Raptor on the work table and placing his hand on Tali's knee.

"Wait, humans don't have tails?" Tali interjected.

"We don't. And I'm fine... Really, I'm... fine. What about you- how are you two doing?"

Garrus shook his head, undeterred. "Ooh no, don't try to deflect, and don't try to fool me, you've got troubles. You've been in a mood since you and Kaidan got back from Brish Crombia-"

"British Columbia," Shepard corrected him.

"Whatever. You've been on eggshells for a week. Hasn't he?" Vakarian looked to the quarian engineer for support.

"You really have. Oh... his parents didn't disapprove of you, did they? They seemed so nice at your ceremony."

"No, they didn't 'disapprove of me,' Kaidan's parents are great. I just..." Shepard sighed, leaned back on the edge of the bench beside Tali, and picked up a Cerberus Talon pistol off of it, fidgeting with the shotgun-pistol hybrid idly. "He really hates the Reaper idea," he said finally, voice heavy with resignation.

"You owe me five credits, Vakarian."

"You guys were betting on my marital difficulty?" Hade asked, making a pained face.

"No! Well... no, not on your 'marital difficulty,'" Tali stammered. "Garrus just thought that Kaidan would back your plan because he loves you so much, and I said he'd hate your plan... because he loves you so much."

"Huh... well... I wish Garrus had won, then."
"So, trouble in the Shenko household over your command decisions, hm?"

Hadrian leveled a dry grimace at his turian friend. "People are still calling us that?" he grumbled.

"When you two got together I tried to start 'Alenkard,' but some of the human crew said you'd like that even less," Tali offered. Hadrian snorted and shook his head. "But hey- you deflected again. Are you boys really that at odds over it?"

"He's definitely upset, still," Shepard admitted. "He... he thinks it's a sign that I have a death-wish... and that I don't love him enough to 'get over it'... and that I'm insensitive to how he feels about the Reapers..." He looked over at Garrus and Tali as if for help and sighed. "I mean you'd think that if I had a death-wish, I'd just..." he raised the Talon to his temple and mimed blowing his own brains out.

Garrus crossed his arms and nodded thoughtfully before offering his input. "He wants your 'business' with the Reapers to be finished. We all thought it was, already. But I guess- because of how you... ah... came back this time- it doesn't feel finished to you. Right? I can relate- remember Sidonis?"

"That's not why I'm pursuing this," Hade said, slowly throwing up his hands in frustration. "It's because I want the new bad guys gone. The Reapers... yes- I... I still feel like I want some kind of closure... but they're a means to an end. The end being 'happily ever after' with my husband."

"Aww," Tali cooed. Abruptly, she turned back toward Garrus and swatted his shoulder with the back of her hand. "What are you doing for our 'happily ever after,' Vakarian?" she teased.

"'Calibrating' you on demand, Tali girl," Garrus retorted, mandibles flicking with a grin. Shepard's eyes widened as mental image came to him unbidden.

"Oh... wow," he muttered, shaking his head, "so that's how that feels."

"Pruuuude," Tali giggled. Then she leaned over to rest her shoulder against Shepard's, giving him a friendly nudge. "Look, Shepard, Kaidan... he really went out on a limb to have you back in his life. We were there, he... well, he was kind of like you- he led us off the beaten path, took everything on himself... And when it clashed with that conscience of his, he was heartbroken. If it hadn't been for EDI... I'm sure he just doesn't want to lose you again, and for all of it to have been for nothing."

Garrus nodded his agreement, and picked up his Raptor again to resume putting it back together. "Yeah, I mean think of how annoyed you'd be with us if after all you've done over the years to keep us alive, you felt like we were throwing our lives away recklessly," he added.

"I get that... I do," Hadrian conceded. "I just wish... y'know, for all this new communication we've got, I wish he 'got' where I'm coming from with this. You do, don't you Garrus? Tali?"

The turian and quarian looked at each other a moment, then back to Shepard. "I believe that you don't want to die," Garrus said, "I've known plenty of people who did, or who didn't care whether they lived or died, and you're neither."

"Well I'm glad someone gets me," Hadrian sighed, pensive.

"He will," Tali said, trying to reassure him. "This thing with you two... if he doesn't 'see' you, it's because he's blinded by how much he loves you, Shepard. He sees his own idealized version of you. A lot of people do, they project their own hopes on you- he isn't so different."

Hade snorted derisively, setting down the Talon on the bench and flashing them a skeptical smile.
"So y'all idealize me, huh?" he asked.

"Oh, we don't," Garrus grinned, nudging Tali, "we know better, don't we?"

"No, not anymore," she agreed. "We were there for the business with Cerberus and the Collectors, we've seen the shadier company you've kept. It wasn't your worst hour, but we've got a picture that's a bit more complete. Kaidan's seen you at your best and filled in the blanks. And it doesn't help that most of the time he's spent with you has been in one crisis or another, and then you- ... well... and then he's ended up spending more time remembering you than being with you."

Garrus barked out one brief, hearty laugh. "In other words, don't get blown up this time, and enjoy the 'honeymoon' period, because he'll get over it," he said. "Give him a little time and he'll misplace his rose-coloured glasses, see the jagged edges that are wrapped up with the good... see the dumb, fumbling, 'what-the-hell-am-I-doing' parts, and he'll still be crazy about you. But he'll be better informed, and it'll take some of the weight off you."

Something in the turian's tone hinted that he spoke from experience; another reminder of how much time Shepard had 'missed' over the last few years. For all the attention that his relationship with Kaidan seemed to get, all told they'd really only spent a year together off and on, and they'd only been married about five months. Garrus and Tali, on the other hand, had known each other almost four years now and been involved in some capacity for a year and a half. They'd kept growing in his repeated 'absences,' and now they may have been serving under him, but they had their own wealth of experience and resources to draw upon. It was humbling, really, that they were here when by all rights they could have been leading others themselves.

Shepard smiled wanly, and patted Tali's leg. "I'm glad you're both back," he said. "I know it hasn't really been like it was- I've been busy with Kaidan, and with my new people- but I'm glad you're aboard again. At least for a while."

"And it's good to be back," Tali smiled back at him. "I do love being aboard the Normandy... even if it's a whole new ship every time I turn my back for five minutes."

"They do seem to lead brief but remarkable lives," Hadrian said. "SR-3's six months off the assembly line and I'm already wondering if they'll even commission a replacement if I write off this one, too."

"I told Joker the other day that if something does happen to this Normandy, you should tell the brass that you want a new pilot," Garrus volunteered, evoking a chuckle from all three of them. "Then EDI ruined the joke by starting to explain something about correlation and causation and common denominators and the fundamentals of humour..."

Tali made an exaggerated groan and snatched up the Talon pistol Hadrian had been fiddling with. "Keelah," she exclaimed, "if the geth aboard learn humour from her..." she put the barrel against her forehead and herself mimed committing suicide with it.

"I suspect it'll be a very weird day when geth start getting- or telling- jokes," Hadrian mused. "Hijacked toilets, crank extranet calls... who knows what."

"Please stop," Tali pleaded, "I had one 'living' in my suit's systems for months, you're going to give me nightmares."

A light on a panel on the adjacent wall lit up, catching Garrus's attention immediately, and he stepped over to toggle open the diagnostic display. After studying it for a second he nodded to himself, pleased at the positive returns on some tweaks he'd made to the Thanix cannons. "Y'know,
Shepard," he said, making a connection between their previous topic and his own initiative in making the upgrade, "to be honest, I don't mind you being more focused on the new additions- the lack of supervision tells me how much confidence you have in us."

"Oh great," Tali giggled, setting down the pistol, "now he'll be down here- and probably visiting Engineering, too- twice every day. I'm going to run out of small talk!" Shepard shortled and gave them a lopsided smirk.

"Sure, Vakarian," he teased, "tell yourself whatever you like to soften the blow of being demoted to a background character. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

Tali whipped a smile at Garrus and her fingers played over her omni-tool's controls. "Are we sure he isn't an engineer," she said, her pacing seeming to bide time, "because you're getting incinerated!" She raised her arm and the video screen came to life between her and Shepard and the turian, framing his face in animated flames. Shepard laughed out loud and covered his eyes with his hand a moment before daring to look again. Their eyes met, and Garrus' mandibles twitched in preparation to retaliate.

"She keeps me up at night," he deadpanned flatly, staring at Hadrian through the digital inferno on the interposing screen, "would you like me to describe how our naked alien legs intertwine?"

Hadrian's face twisted into a look of mock horror and he laughed again as Tali's jaw dropped. She switched off her omni-tool and shot Garrus a scolding, embarrassed look, and back-handed his shoulder.

"I have a shotgun," he warned him, rolling her eyes. Then she turned to look back at Shepard, sensing that he could still use a little reassuring. "Anyway," she said, her tone lightening, "it's okay that things are changing- our relationships, I mean. You always told us about the importance of accepting change. When this new emergency is over, maybe we'll stay a while. Or maybe we'll each go somewhere else we're needed, and it'll feel like we're moving on and drifting apart. Either way, you can always call on us and we'll be there. You know that, Shepard."

Garrus stepped up between them and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Absolutely," he agreed, jostling Hadrian a little. "This hand will always be here. Providing the firm guidance and leadership that a sidekick like you needs."

Hade rolled his eyes and shook his head, rolling his shoulder and then playfully swatting the turian's talons away. "Stop fondling me, you big weirdo," he joked. "And... I know. And I'm glad."

"And hey," Tali said, "if Kaidan could use someone to talk to- I know that while they were stranded and we were at Earth, EDI and Vega and Cortez sort of became his 'go-to people'- but we still care about him, too. So if you want us to talk to him..."

"Since we're clearly the romance gurus aboard," Garrus interjected wryly.

"I don't think we need couples counseling quite yet," Shepard replied. "I think we really do just need some normalcy... like you said, maybe he needs to see me not in a crisis. A nice, quiet, boring post-apocalyptic relationship where we can live together like regular people... Speaking of- you two going to join us for supper later?"

Garrus and Tali exchanged a swift, loaded look.

"Hm," Vakarian hummed, "ah, who's cooking this time?"

"Kaidan is," Shepard answered. Another look traded between the two dextro crewmembers, with an
"Almost imperceptible nod back and forth."

"Sure," Garrus said, seeming to relax slightly, "we'll be there."

"Okay, good," Hadrian smiled, nodding. Then his brow furrowed and he cocked his head to the side slightly as he analysed the seeming codedness of their reply. "Wait," he said, "what would you have said if I'd been cooking?"

Garrus' eyes widened slightly and he flicked his head toward the diagnostic console to his side. Tali cleared her throat awkwardly and snatched up an Arc Pistol from the bench beside where she was seated, hurriedly pretending to examine it.

"Er, sorry," Vakarian shrugged, "I- ah- should get back to calibrating these weapons. Thanks for dropping by, though."

"Definitely!" Tali chimed in a bit too eagerly. "It's always nice of you to visit, but these won't clean themselves."

"That's a directed energy weapon," Hade retorted accusingly.

"With moving parts- clean, clean, clean!" Tali lilted. "See you at dinner!"
Normandy dropped from conduit drive and immediately launched her intelligence drone swarms to expedite the search. Based on telescope observations taken from several light-weeks away from Bahak, the task group had coordinated their arrival at three different points EDI had deduced might be the sites of the main Project asteroid debris.

"So, how are we?" Shepard asked, striding into the cockpit in his combat armour, Kaidan at his side.

"There is a large, agglomerate S-type mass thirty-seven thousand kilometers away, twenty degrees to port. The Realean and Maravana, and the Vimy Ridge and Toranmus each report that they've arrived at their targets," EDI reported.

"Hey, how close did they get?" Joker asked.

"The quarians are one hundred and sixty thousand kilometers and the Vimy Ridge and turians emerged eighty-five thousand kilometers from their respective targets."

"Still got it," Moreau smirked.

"Yeah, yeah, good work," Hadrian said, rolling his eyes but nonetheless glad to see his pilot was still among the best. "Take us in for a closer look."

"Clear sky so far... that's good," Kaidan remarked.

"Well, the Puritans have no reason to be here," Shepard said. "There's no population in the system... any more... and all information about this mission was kept face-to-face or on entanglers. I can't see where a peep about us coming here would have leaked on to radio-waves."

As Normandy, flanked by several of its drones, sped toward the drifting clump of shattered space rocks, EDI began scrutinizing her sensor readings more closely.

"Commander, lidar is resolving something on the trailing surface of the largest section. Artificial structures... largely destroyed, but not entirely. The identifiable sections are consistent with Doctor Kenson's Project base. No power emissions, however."

"Excellent! It's about time we got some good news," Shepard said, thumping the back of Joker's chair enthusiastically. "Looks like the Alpha Relay blasted the asteroid into a few pieces that gravitated back together," he observed. "Some smaller mess orbiting the barycenter, that could pose a nav hazard."

"Moot point, Commander," Joker said, shaking his head at the high-res scans, "the landing pad's been wiped out, I won't be able to set her down anyway. You'll have to take the shuttle in to get closer to the base."
"We were prepared for that. Get us in as close as you can and Cortez will take us the rest of the way."

Jeff half-turned in his chair, forehead furrowed with confusion. "Wait a second, how is no power down there- no life support- a good thing?" he asked.

"It also means no artificial gravity, which means if we find what we're looking for it shouldn't be too hard to get it out," Hade explained. "EDI, let Steve know we're on our way please." He looked to Kaidan for affirmation that he was ready, and the pair started marching toward the hangar.

"Still amazes me that you demolished a mass relay," Kaidan said as they transitioned to the fore/aft connecting corridor.

"It was that or give the Reapers point-and-click access to anywhere in the galaxy the moment they arrived. In retrospect, my biggest regret is that I couldn't time it better so that they'd hit the system just as it blew. Might have taken them all out then and there."

"Yeah," Kaidan murmured, "that would have been nice..." He reached out and interlaced their fingers in their gloved hands.

When they reached the hangar deck Steve was standing in the open hatch of the shuttle, ready to depart. "I'm still not sure why I'm only taking the two of you over there," he said, "what about the ground team?"

"Because we aren't expecting any trouble, the place is a tomb," Shepard said, "and I'm the only one who's familiar with the place at all, so no one else would know where to look anyway."

"He would have gone alone, but where he goes, I go," Kaidan added, his tone hinting at annoyance.

"Which is good," Hade cut in, trying to lighten the mood, "because I love the company."

"Well, you're the bosses," Steve shrugged. "She's all warmed up if you're ready to go."

Hadrian and Kaidan boarded the shuttle and Cortez slipped into his pilot seat, zipping his flight suit up to the top and pulling on a helmet in preparation to offload the commander and XO into a vacuum.

"We're holding station seventy-five hundred meters from the surface," Joker reported over the comms. "And the rest of the task group's rallying to us since we found the package."

"Alright," Shepard said as the shuttle accelerated forward and exited the hangar, arcing toward the asteroid seven and a half kilometers away.

Seconds later, the shuttle shuddered.

"What the hell was that?" Kaidan asked. The communications system status board lit up and EDI's voice chimed in urgently.

"Shepard! I read gravitational distortions consistent with a Puritan insertion! You must return to the Normandy!"

"Shit, how did they know we were here!?" Kaidan snapped.

"How far out, EDI?" Hadrian asked through gritted teeth.

"Thirty-one thousand kilometers, Shepard, on the far side of the asteroid. Their interceptors could
be on top of us in less than two minutes!"

"Steve, how long to the base?"

"With the mess out here? Eighty seconds if we stay the course, Commander," Cortez replied, checking his ranging instrumentation.

Shepard turned to Kaidan, who was looking at him expectantly.

"We leave now and we might never get another shot at this... Stay the course. EDI- Since I can still hear you do I take it the Zephyray's working?"

"We aren't encountering any jamming yet, Commander," EDI answered, "it's possible that one of their carriers must traverse the aperture to begin broadcasting."

"Then before that happens and we maybe lose contact, we're going stealth mode and radio silent so hopefully they won't notice us. I want you to draw them off if you can while we pursue the objective. We'll try to signal you when we're ready to extract, one way or another. Clear?"

"Aye aye, Commander," Joker said, though he didn't sound very happy about leaving the shuttle on its own.

The shuttle powered toward the Project base, but Hadrian felt a spike of tension from Cortez rising before his synthempathic read on the pilot cut out entirely.

"Shit," Steve hissed, apparently feeling the same blockage. He stabbed a holographic button with his finger and the co-pilot's station lit up with a tactical scan that showed Puritan fighters fanning out in the vicinity.

"They're through," Shepard said.

"It's worse than that! I don't know how they spotted us, but we have an interceptor inbound!" Cortez's hands danced across the controls and the shuttle abruptly pitched to one side. The approaching fighter overshot its collision course and began a hairpin turn to make another pass. "Not sure how long I can evade him," he warned.

The Kodiak rolled and dove on its back toward the rock below, several energy bolts flashing past from the fighter's gun. Hadrian opened the equipment locker and pulled out his particle beam rifle and Kaidan's Avenger, passing the gun to his husband. "We might have to debark in a hurry," he said, fixing his weapon to the magnetic clamps on his back and picking up his helmet. Kaidan nodded his understanding and started getting ready for a possible jump, too, and Hade could feel a mix of emotions coming from him- apprehension about their chances of success, but something else too... a curious kind of relief, that at least he was 'here' this time.

"Yeah," Kaidan said in a low voice, "still glad I came." The shuttle bobbed again, dodging another impact, and Kaidan gripped one of the nearby handles as the artificial gravity fought to keep up. "Though that's subject to change," he added.

"Goddammit," Steve cursed as another evasive maneuver forced him off-course. His mind raced as he worked out how to shake the interceptor and get headed for the asteroid again. "Commander... how much do you trust me?" he asked.

"You've never let me down yet," Shepard said cautiously.

"Okay... I have an idea, but I'll need you to enable the external mag clamps and then buckle up."
"Oh, he isn't..." Kaidan groaned, fastening his safety harness and pulling the straps tight.

"I think he is," Shepard said, moving to the aft panel configured to control the magnetic grapplers. He powered the system up and hurried to Kaidan's side, buckling himself in and taking Alenko's hand.

"Hold on, Sirs, this is going to suck!" Steve warned. Thrusters screeched, a proximity alarm wailed in distress, and then the shuttle bolted vertically and lurched forward, accelerating violently.

"Aww crap, this might not have been my best idea..." The Kodiak bucked as the Puritan fighter, now attached to the shuttle's ventral hull, tried to maneuver, resisting Cortez's control.

"Can you... jeez, this is going to sound like something out of a cartoon, but can you fly him into one of the smaller rocks floating around out here?" Shepard suggested, reaching for ideas. Kaidan's helmeted face snapped back around to look at him, the furrow in his brow visible through his visor.

"What?" he said. "You're right, that does sound like a cartoon, it's ridiculous."

"It is... flying it into a loose rock, the impactor could ricochet and punch clear through us, too... but I think I can tweak it a little."

"Tweak' it how?" Kaidan asked, sounding alarmed.

"Uhh- bigger rock. Bonus is, it'll get us down," Cortez shrugged.

"Oh this is stupid!" Kaidan protested.

"Are there any others inbound?" Hadrian asked, weighing their options.

"No, but I can't see him not squawking for backup if we keep him collared much longer!"

"Then scrape this fucker off our boot," Shepard ordered.

"With pleasure!"

The engines roared as Steve drove the shuttle toward the Project asteroid, fighting the interceptor's increasing efforts to break away. The cabin lights dimmed slightly, power diverting to the mass effect core to increase the Kodiak's mass to maintain control, and the looming rock's surface grew larger and larger in the navigational display.

"Brace for impact!" Steve shouted.

-X

Kaidan and Hadrian laid sprawled and intertwined on the captain's cabin bed, glazed in sweat, with Alenko's head on Shepard's stomach. Kaidan brushed his fingers slowly around the commander's pubic hair as Shepard's hand played gently through his hair.

"You know... when all this is over... it might sound crazy- I mean, I know we've only actually spent a few months together all told, but... I think I want to put some kind of ring on your finger," Hade said, pensively.

Kaidan looked up Shepard's chest with bedroom eyes. "That sounds perfect, but you already did, remember?" he smiled.

"Sorry... I'm still a bit disorientated. I haven't felt... this... in a long time. Maybe never, before now."
I feel different in my skin... like I-

"It sounds... perfect," Kaidan repeated, earnestly. "I want the whole galaxy to know." His head bobbed as Shepard's stomach clenched with a laugh.

"We could make a video and put it on the extranet," he joked.

"If we sold it we could probably retire from all this weirdness. But it might hurt our chances of... um... adopting kids?"

"Well I don't see how else we're going to have kids, since you seem to be barren." They both laughed, longer and harder. Kaidan turned his head again and looked squarely at Hadrian's flaccid member just a couple inches away from his face, and saw it twitch at the thought of them 'trying again.' "I do want to start a family with you, though. We just keep getting interrupted..."

"Where do you want to...?"

"Right here," Shepard said, sounding certain. "Not this ship, I mean. Not specifically, though the Normandy's as good a place as any. But I mean right here, with you. Wherever we are, that'll be home. As long as we're together."

"I'd love to retire to my parents' vineyard, eventually. When we're too old and beat up to save the galaxy anymore. Just laze around the interior and drink wine and..."

"We're gonna' have it all." Hadrian squeezed a handful of Kaidan's hair gently, and Alenko rolled his head again to look up into Shepard's eyes. "All of it. I dare anybody to try and keep it from us. To try and get between you and me. I'll make the fuckers wish they'd never been born."

"You aren't going to leave me again? It feels like you're... like I'm going to lose you again." Kaidan felt a sad, heartbroken lump start to form in his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut, fighting back the burning sensation of tears forming.

"I've died before. I'll always find my way back to you. No matter what separates us, we're joined now. A closed loop. We're connected. Everyone can see it, we're shining like a beacon. A signal fire. They can burn me down to embers- you're the oxygen that'll re-ignite me."

"Wait... wait, it's changed but I remember this... You said it would be like I remembered, but it's different. You're different. I don't mean- I still love you, I do, and I'm so happy to have you back, but you seem like you want to-"

"It's alright," Hadrian shushed him. "I have unfinished business, but I'm working on it. I'm dealing with a big change. And things might get worse before they get better... that's usually the way... but that will pass. Everything changes, so everything is temporary. But once this is done... we'll be together in the en-"

-X

Fourteen minutes later

-X

"Come on, love... wake up." Hadrian gently shook Kaidan, who woke with a start. He looked around, dazed, and realized they were still in the Kodiak shuttle. The main lights were down and the cabin, which was strewn with gear ejected from its compartments, glowed in the dim red emergency lighting, punctuated by the stuttering yellow and orange of the haptic interfaces.
"How long was I out?" Kaidan asked.

"Clock says it's been almost fifteen minutes since we hit," Cortez groaned, limping from one service compartment to another, trying to re-route power so that he could run a diagnostic. "Sorry. That was a bit rougher than I intended. The 'baby' kicked at the last second. But at least we're alive and we've still got air. And no more bad guys came down on us while we were out cold, so that's good... I think."

"And our friend?" Hadrian asked, stroking Kaidan's cheek with his palm, relieved that he was awake.

"Hasn't budged, I think we trashed it. Aww come on, I know you aren't that frail," Steve grumbled, slapping the wall next to the access panel he was working on.

"We're on the asteroid, though. How close are we to what's left of the Project base?"

"We should be just forty meters or so from an airlock near the part of the complex where you said they had Rho, Commander, but I'm not sure if I can get power to the hatch to let you out. Ah... even if I could, I'd have to ask you about a Plan 'B,' since..." Steven held up his helmet, revealing a crack in the visor that compromised the environmental seal.

"Aw shit," Kaidan sighed. "Are you hurt?"

"I smashed my knee pretty hard on impact... and I'm kinda' dizzy... and everything hurts. I'm kind of afraid to fall asleep, to tell the truth... so... work, work, work."

Suddenly alarmed that the pilot was in worse shape than he'd realized upon waking him, Shepard squeezed Kaidan's shoulder to try and reassure him, then got up and moved to Cortez. He gently took Steve's head in his hands, looking into his eyes, then moved a finger back and forth in front of his face. "Damn," he hissed, "it might be a concussion. You should sit down, Steve."

"Do you know how to fix the shuttle, Sir?" Cortez asked.

"Not exactly, but-

"Then I should keep working, Commander. The mission comes first, right?" Steve gave Hade an earnest look, blinking away stars in his field of vision. Hadrian made a pained, concerned face, but accepted that relaxing wouldn't help Cortez stay awake or get the mission back on track. He squeezed Cortez's shoulder, the way he had Kaidan's just moments earlier.

"Is there anything we can do to help, then?" he asked.

"Well... Major? Could you check in that access panel behind you and under the seat, to see if there's power in the conduit?"

Kaidan nodded, unbuckled from his safety harness, and slid onto his side on the floor, opening the hatch under the seat. He booted up his omni-tool and scanned the hardware inside for energy emissions. As he did, he remembered himself and flashed a raised eyebrow at Steve. "And again... retired."

"What can I do?" Hade inquired. Cortez made a subtle face and looked around the cabin before shrugging.

"It's really a job for us tech-heads, Sir. But you can stand there and look good, keep our morale up," he grinned, then rubbed his temple with the heel of his hand.
"I've got juice in the backup batteries, but not much else," Kaidan announced.

"That should do for carrying out a diagnostic," Steve said. "There should be a bypass cable under the seat, can you plug it in the output and pass me the other end?" Kaidan gave an affirmative 'yup' and a moment later handed the cable to Steve, who plugged it in to the diagnostic systems' interface. The flickering controls lit up solidly and Cortez cued up a systems-wide test. After about thirty seconds of sitting and waiting in silence, the terminal beeped its completion and displayed the results.

"Fuuuck me, if we get out of this I'm going to be conducting repairs until I retire," Steve groaned.

"How bad is it?" Hadrian asked, resting an arm across the back of the pilot's neck and leaning in to read over his shoulder. Kaidan sidled up to the other side, stealing a look at the other two men's faces bathed in the soft orange light.

"Well, propulsion is down... and- huh," he laughed quietly to himself, "that shouldn't be working unless... well I'll be damned. Maybe Tech Support's capable of love after all, it- he- whatever- installed some redundant power transfers. Communication system has power but sensors don't, so we can't tell if it's safe to squawk for help... can't even tell if the Normandy is still nearby."

"I've got faith, Joker and EDI won't let anything happen to her," Shepard said confidently. "And the fact that we're still here makes me think they managed to draw the Puritans away or they'd have finished us off. If we sit tight I'm sure they'll signal when it's safe for them to come back for us."

"Well, Sir, that could be a problem. In other news, cabin pressure is holding and atmospheric processing is online but... damn it... thermal's off. We're already bleeding heat, thankfully the stealth system's lithium sinks are buffering us a bit. And vacuum isn't much of a conductor. But the rock we're on is leeching, I give it about an hour before things get awfully chilly in here. Not long after that and... well, you two are gonna' want to put your helmets back on, Commander."

"None of that, we're going to have things fixed by then," Shepard said.

"I don't see how, Sir. It looks like the enemy fighter tore us up underneath, severed a bunch of the main lines. They can't be fixed without an EVA and we can't open the door without venting our air, if we can even get the door open at all," Steve sighed.

"Don't get discouraged," Kaidan urged, "we can give it our best shot. There isn't much else for us to do anyway."

"Well then... we might as well get started," Steve sighed, though he sounded deeply skeptical. "Repair kit is in that locker behind you."

-X

1 ½ hrs later

-X

"S-sirs... I think it's time f-for the two of you... to suit up," Cortez said, shivering as his breath curled thickly into the air in front of him. He gritted his teeth and grunted in pain as he sat down, clutching and rubbing at his aching knee.

"We aren't done yet," Hadrian replied, irritated.

"All due respect, Commander... y-yeah... we are. There's n-nothing more we can do here, the
damage is too extensive." Steve leaned forward, rocking slightly and rubbing his lower legs. "I appreciate the effort, but there's no point in you two freezing to death, too. At least it isn't suffocation... I'd really hate to suffocate. Or drown. I would have hated to have drowned."

"We can still--"

"No, Sir... we can't. I know this shuttle better than either of you, and we can't get to what needs got to. Unless Normandy comes back for us... and soon... then I'm... And so are you, unless you get your goddamned helmets on." Steve looked at Kaidan expectantly. "You tell him."

Kaidan sighed and looked again at the diagnostic display. They'd been working non-stop for ninety minutes and stopped making any meaningful progress after fifty, but he couldn't stand to give up if it meant resigning themselves to Cortez's death by the cold.

"We could take a chance on calling the Normandy to rescue us," he said, rubbing his cheeks with his gloved hands for some friction. Cortez shot him an exasperated look, and Kaidan sighed. "Look, we can't write you off, Steve... Giving up on you and saving ourselves doesn't help us anyway, because we can't fix the shuttle without you. We're all in this together."

"Jeez... guys, don't g-get sentimental on me. You... you're smarter than that, you know how to fight to the end... it's part of what I... what I respect so much about both of you." Steve shuddered and made a low grunt of discomfort. "Urhgh, I wish we weren't being jammed so you could pick up just how I feel about you being dumb like this."

Hadrian slumped onto the bench next to Cortez and put a hand on his injured knee, rubbing it supportively. "You've never let us down, Steve," he said. "You've saved me several times... you saved Kaidan... because you've never left us behind. We aren't going to leave you behind now. We... we both..." He looked at his husband for a little help, and Kaidan pensively licked his lip and sat down on Cortez's other side, rubbing his back affectionately.

"Where you go, we go," he said.

Hade moved his hand to Cortez's back too, and as he rubbed it his fingers brushed Kaidan's. The pair looked over Steve's shoulders into each other's eyes.

'You think this is 'it'? ' Kaidan thought via their connection, grateful that it couldn't be blocked.

'It's not how I pictured us checking out... so I prefer to think we're going to get through this;' Hadrian pushed back. 'But without knowing for sure...' He shared with Kaidan the feeling he was having.

'You think this is really the time?'

'What if there is no other time...?' Shepard thought.

"Stop it," Steve muttered, "I might not be in your loop, but I can still tell what you're doing."

"We just... let us do something for you, Steve," Hadrian said. He nodded to Kaidan, who returned the gesture and rose from his seat to open one of the supply lockers. He withdrew from it a foil package, and Cortez writhed a little and groaned at the sight of it.

"No... no, don't do that," he said. Shepard, undaunted, started unfastening his armour, and Kaidan ripped open the vacuumed pack, pulling out the thermal sleeping bag within. Cortez shook his head plaintively. "This is such a bad idea," he said.
"It's all we've got," Kaidan countered. He unzipped the sleeping bag and placed it on the bench next to Cortez, and started removing his own armour as well.

"Please don't," Steve repeated, "you guys... you'll... we can't afford to lose you too."

"If we're lost, we're lost," Hadrian said. He placed his torso and arm pieces on the bench and unbuckled his belt, and Kaidan started laying out his kit beside. Realizing they were determined, Steve's protests quickly went silent, and as he watched them undressing he started to want to give in. When they both started unzipping their bodysuits, his body language shifted - part resignation, and part relief. Biting his lip, he took the zipper of his flight suit in his shivering fingers and began to strip down, too.

Once they were all in their underwear they climbed into the sleeping bag on the floor and huddled together, with Shepard behind Cortez and Kaidan in front, their crooked 'under' arms forming pillows for themselves and Cortez, who held his lower arm between himself and Kaidan and wrapped the other around the XO's back. The pilot's body was chilly - not as bad as he would be in just a regular uniform, but not having an environmental seal had clearly taken its toll on him - and he moaned contently as he was surrounded by the warmth of the other two men. He pressed his face into Kaidan's shoulder and sighed.

"N-not exactly how I'd have imagined getting 'sandwiched' between the two of you," he said in a hushed tone. The comment provoked a stirring in Shepard's groin and Cortez reflexively pressed his hips back against his commander's pelvis. Hadrian's fingers dug a little into the arm Kaidan had wrapped over Steve, and the sentinel swallowed hard, nuzzling his cheek against Cortez's forehead.

"Given it a lot of thought, have you?" Hadrian asked, grinning as his eyes met Kaidan's.

"Well... more than a little." With some trepidation, Steve's hand slipped little by little down from Kaidan's shoulderblade to the small of his back, and the excited tensing of Alenko's muscles provided the extra little bit of encouragement he needed to dare moving it to the XO's hip. "Um... w-what about the two of you?" he asked.

"We've... had some stuff going on," Kaidan said, placing his hand on Shepard's cheek and brushing the stubbly skin with his thumb. "But yeah... yeah, we've both... still..." He let the confession trail off before asking "you feeling any better now?"

"Yeah," Steve nodded, "this is... nice. I still hate to think of dragging you two under with me... but thanks. I'm glad we're..." He took a deep breath and stroked the skin above Kaidan's waistband. "Well, I'm glad.

"Even 'jammed,' it's- ah- kind of obvious," Kaidan chuckled, shifting the leg that Steve had wrapped his own around, rubbing the growing bulge in Cortez's boxer-briefs with his thigh. Hadrian's hand found Steve's on Kaidan's hip, then slid down his husband's leg and settled on Steve's crotch. Cortez gulped and stiffened more at the touch, and his turned the hand between their chests to lay it on Kaidan's pectoral.

"So..." the pilot said between quickening breaths, "we're... are we really...?" He wiggled his fingertips inside Kaidan's waistband, pushing it down an inch to stroke the exposed skin of the older man's hip.

"Well we aren't gonna' freeze," Shepard quipped. He slid his hand to Steve's waist and slipped his fingers just inside his underwear and paused, until Kaidan's roamed to the same spot and gently urged him forward. Steve audibly gasped and shivered - but not from the cold this time - as Shepard's hand wrapped around his surging erection.
"Oh God," Cortez whispered, breath hot against Kaidan's skin. His lips touched Alenko's neck and he applied gentle suction. Kaidan groaned and his hand darted up from Hade's wrist to his neck below his ear, drawing him closer. Their lips met over Cortez's shoulder and they started kissing, squeezing Steve's body close between them. Kaidan groped Hade's buttock and Hadrian began stroking Cortez, causing him to grind his ass harder into Shepard. He moved his lower hand from Kaidan's chest and into his shorts, curling around Kaidan's hard-on and starting to pump it in his fist.

Alenko moaned into Shepard's mouth, further exciting his husband, who extended the arm he was using like a pillow to clutch a handful of black hair. At the same time, Cortez fumbled at his own underwear with his topside hand, pushing them halfway down his thighs and thrusting his bared ass back eagerly into Hade.

'I think he really wants me to-

'Yeah,' Kaidan thought back, 'we're- I'm feeling everything you are.'

Hadrian stroked the back of Kaidan's scalp with his thumb. 'Are you... okay with that?

'It's... yeah. This is all-' Kaidan's stream of thought was interrupted and he groaned out loud as Steve jacked his cock faster, the other hand relocating from his own waistband back to Kaidan's, sneaking inside and working his fingers between the sentinel's cheeks, the tips playing at his hole. 'Oh fuck!' he came back, 'this is good.'

"B-better than 'good!'" Cortez blurted, breathlessly.

Kaidan and Hade both smiled at their friend's enthusiasm, and Shepard drew his face back, using his grip on Kaidan's hair to gently guide his face to Steve's. The two kissed. Hesitant at first, but the moment lips parted and their tongues touched, they both felt a wave of something... the completion of something that started under the surface while they'd been stranded together, mourning Shepard for almost a year on the planet they named after him. Something clicked, and seconds later they were making out passionately. Kaidan interrupted it for moment, hissing "give it to him" to Hadrian.

Hade released Cortez's oozing member to pull his own shorts down to release his erection from its confinement, then he moved his hand to Cortez's cheek, sneaking his fingers between Kaidan and Steve's mouths. Sensing his intention, they both took a turn sucking and licking them. Once wet, Hade pressed his fingers to Cortez's hole, soliciting a shudder and a longing moan, but Shepard wasn't entirely satisfied with the amount of lubrication so he rubbed his fingers over the tip of Steve's cock, collecting some of the anticipatory emissions and using them to slick the pilot's anus.

"Here he comes," Kaidan whispered. He stopped kissing Steve, put a hand on the back of his head, and urged his forehead back onto his shoulder, arching a panting Cortez's back a bit more.

"This is for saving my husband's ass on Rannoch," Hade grinned. He lined up his cock between Cortez's cheeks and started to slowly push in. Steve winced and clutched Kaidan's erection, groaning and digging his middle and index fingers into Alenko's hole.

'Is he-

'Nnnh,' Shepard thought back, pushing against the resistance that told him Cortez hadn't done this in a while, 'yeah, he's-

"I'm fine! G-god, don't stop!" Steve pleaded despite grimacing. "Ohh f-fuck, please-"
Hade responded by pressing onward. Finally, the tension in Steve's ass buckled, and Shepard slid inside with a popping sensation. The pilot flinched and moaned loudly into Kaidan's chest, digging harder with his fingers, worming inside Kaidan. "Aaugh- y-y-yeah," Steve grunted.

Kaidan pulled Hade's face back toward him and they resumed kissing, hungry for each other as Steve fingered the man in front of him and his ass admitted the man behind him. Hadrian fought to control his pace, trying to go slow, but his thrusting steadily grew faster and harder. Cortez started yelping and bearing down by squeezing Kaidan's cock and ass harder.

"F- fu- fuck me," Steve stammered in a high voice between strained grunts. Kaidan broke his liplock with Hadrian and whispered in Cortez's ear.

"You want inside me, too?" he asked, voice taut with lust.

"Oh G-God yes," Steve gasped.

Kaidan looked into Shepard's eyes. 'Is that...?'

"Yeah," Hade nodded, kissing the back of Cortez's neck. 'Yeah, maybe it'll help relax him.'

Kaidan peeled his boxer-briefs down as far as his arm could reach in the confines of the sleeping bag, shimmied them down to his ankles with his legs, and kicked them off, drawing his leg up and hitching it over Steve's hip, draping it over Hade's thigh as well. He reached down, behind his leg, and urged Cortez's cock up under his balls to his fluttering opening. Steve was still pre-cumming like a faucet, and after rubbing the tip between his cheeks just a couple times, Kaidan felt the friction give away to slippery wriggling. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and tried to relax his sphincter.

Hadrian suspended his thrusting- it was enough that Cortez started slowly pumping his hips and back forth, riding him as he worked his way inside Kaidan, who took Steve's cock with a sharp inhalation and a moan through bitten lower lip. Hade slid his hand up Kaidan's leg to his hip, pulling him forward and thrusting, compacting the trio at the hips. He saw stars on the canvas of his closed eyelids and felt a sensation like a wave- pleasure traveling through him, into Cortez, on into Kaidan, and bouncing back.

"Aawwh fuck, yesss," Steve moaned, rocking his hips with frantic vigour, trying to be equally 'in two places' at once- inside Alenko and impaled on Shepard's throbbing rod.

'You alright?' Hade thought at Kaidan.

'Yeah- yes- oh God!' came the reply.

"Y-yeah, we- we're good- ohhh fuck we're... so good!" Steve panted.

"Yeah?" Shepard hissed into the pilot's ear, biting at the lobe. He used his head to nudge Steve's forward until he and Kaidan's lips met again, and they resumed frenzied kissing.

'Fuuuck, yeah- ohmygod I feel you through him, like- like you're both inside me!' Kaidan's mental 'voice' blasted in Hade's head. 'I- I can't- I'm gonna'-'

The sensation suddenly translated over and Shepard felt like he was being filled up inside as well, and the pounding feeling and the pressure sent a euphoric tingle up his spine and a hot surge deep in his pelvis. The same urgent, imminent feeling washed over him, and he dug his fingers into Cortez's flank.
Steve shuddered from head to toe, sputtering and moaning into Kaidan's mouth as he came. The feeling- pulsing hot spurts- radiated from Kaidan and set Shepard off, and he grunted, exploding inside Steve's clenching ass. And as his own sensation of release washed over Kaidan via their connection, Kaidan cried out and erupted in turn, shooting his seed in hot jets between his and Cortez's stomachs.

Laying seized tightly together and panting with exertion, the three exchanged contented kisses back and forth, their bodies sharing a warm, humming feeling as they caught their breath. Each of them gradually throbbed flaccid again, Hadrian sliding out of Cortez first, and then Steve withdrew from Kaidan's ass. After a few minutes they'd all relaxed and recuperated, and laid curled around each other, glazed in sweat and breathing deeply.

"Guess we shared a bit more than warmth," Steve slurred, his face buried in Kaidan's shoulder.

"At least if we do freeze solid, we can say we went out doing something we liked," Hadrian smiled, kissing the back of Cortez's neck. "Though I blush to imagine what whoever finds our bodies will think." Kaidan chuckled. "What?" Hade grinned.

"Fuck," Alenko sighed, "if we do make it back, Jack's going to have a field day with this. She seemed pretty convinced this was bound to happen, even though I told her we were just friends."

"I'll take her gloating if it means we get out of this," Shepard chuckled. "I'm just glad we're a Spectre ship instead of Alliance, exactly... otherwise JAG would be up our asses next for fraternizing each other's brains out."

Steve nuzzled Kaidan's neck and stroked Hadrian's hand where it rested on his naked hip. "Still, I hope this doesn't... you know... make things weird, or complicated, if we do get back," he said. "I mean... I'd do it all again, I adore you guys and I'm glad we... but I'm fine with us just staying friends, even if we don't do it again. I don't... I don't need things to change. I wouldn't say no if you guys wanted them to, but I don't need for them to. This alone was..."

"Weird," Kaidan interrupted.

"Okay... not exactly where I was going with that," Cortez laughed, a little awkwardly. Kaidan squeezed the pilot's shoulder, jostling him a little, and continued, trying to explain.

"I mean it was good... but it was... There were moments where I could swear you were 'hearing' our thoughts," he said.

"Oh. Uh... well... there were moments where I was," Steve replied, sheepishly. "Sorry if that was... I don't know, intruding? I didn't think it was out-of-line, under the-"

"But that shouldn't have been possible," Kaidan jumped in again. "The Puritans, their jamming extends to the part of the EM spectrum where synthempathic signaling happens, right? For everyone else but the two of us, because of..." He hesitated, looking over Steve's cheek into Hadrian's eyes, reluctant to supply another of those painful reminders about the means to his return to life. "Because of what I did to get you back. EDI said we're 'un-jammable'- we communicate on a 'less evolved' band, from the early days of the ability's evolution, that's outside the range that the Puritans scramble. But I thought we're supposed to be unique in that."

"Oh, you two are unique alright," Steve chuckled, before turning earnest again. "I just mean... well whatever 'noise' they pump on to the airwaves, you two cut right through it... or underneath it, or above it, I don't know. But the two of you together, you come through loud and clear. This wasn't even the first time."
"It wasn't?" Hade asked, his curiosity piqued.

"No. Sometimes I've- um- 'picked up' synthempathic thoughts you two were sending back and forth. Not deliberately, I mean! I just... I don't know, I figured you were 'sharing,' the way people sometimes use it to in groups. Like- well- that time we were dancing in the shuttle bay, for instance. But there have been other times." He paused, noticing the puzzled and slightly embarrassed look the married couple were exchanging. "Other people have noticed it too," he said. "You didn't know the two of you were... what- I guess- sort of broadcasting?"

"Uh, no, I didn't realize it. Nobody's said anything!" Kaidan protested. Shepard, too, shook his head. "What kind of things have you 'picked up' on?" Alenko asked.

"Ah... I don't know. A lot of 'love you's. It's like... whenever you're both sharing a thought, on the same 'wave length,' it just kinda' comes through, y'know? Probably nobody mentioned it because they either figured like me that you meant to 'conference' them in, or maybe they were afraid they were intruding, too, and didn't want to embarrass you... I didn't mean to upset you." Steve looked into Kaidan's confused eyes, then turned his head to look at an equally perplexed-looking Shepard. "I thought you guys knew how you sort of... well, shine for everyone to see. Like a beacon on a hill. You ring through pretty loud and clear- even when I don't overhear anything, I always know when you're connected."

"Jeez," Kaidan sighed, flummoxed, "I wonder who else has been eavesdropping, and what they've overheard?"

Hadrian's eyes snapped open alertly, as something 'clicked' in his mind. "Son of a bitch!" he hissed. "Uh... I'm sorry, Commander," Cortez apologized, assuming the curse was directed at him.

"No, no! That wasn't- fuck!" Shepard bolted upright in the sleeping bag, rubbing his temple to try and coax the thoughts he was having into coalescing.

"What? What is it?" Kaidan propped himself up on an elbow, studying Hadrian's face with concern. Cortez followed suit, sitting up and resting his chin on one knee, resting against Kaidan and looking at Shepard's darting eyes.

"Eavesdropping!" Hade said carefully. "Kaidan, just before we got the call that Rannoch had gone silent, what were we doing?"

"Are you kidding? That was like five months ago, I don't... Ahhh... When all this started we were on Eden Prime, in Gardener... I don't remember specifically. We were just doing the tourist 'thing,' shopping, I think. What about it?"

"We were shopping, and talking about our 'honeymoon tour' of the galaxy, and about building a cabin... on Rannoch," Hadrian said.

"And?"

"And... And then, when we went back to Rannoch with the task force, the Puritans knew exactly where your shuttle was supposed to insert you. How did they know that?"

"You think... what? That they knew where we going to be because we knew?" Kaidan asked, furrowing his brow.

"Think about it! Next we went to Aephis, and they were there-"
"But then we went to Palaven... and then Earth, and they never showed up at either of those places," Steve said.

"No, you're right, they didn't. I don't know about Palaven, but think about it- before we went to Earth, Kaidan, what did you and I talk about?" Shepard stressed the 'you and I,' clearly starting to perceive a pattern.

"Are you telling me you remember every conversation we have?" Kaidan asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

"I'm a mindful fucker, remember? Think! 'Fortress Sol?' We talked about how they'd be crazy to attack us there, because the combined fleets of the whole galaxy are still massed there, until the modernization program's done. Then after our layover and repairs, we puttered around 'laying cable'- who cares?- and didn't see them again until Noveria. Noveria, where I knew we were going, but they didn't show up until you were out of bed and found out where we were!"

"Wait, no- that's not right, they hit Feros while we were en route there, that was before Noveria," Kaidan corrected him. Hade raised his hands and 'juggled' the ideas racing through his head, trying to account for the discrepancy.

"Right, true... Well, maybe because we'd been to Feros before, together, so it held some significance for us. All those other stops weren't- but you see what I'm getting at? When it was somewhere important- when we had a priority objective or strong mutual feelings about a place- they were one step ahead of us."

"But after Noveria we went to Sur'Kesh, and they didn't show up there until right after we arrived," Cortez submitted. "What was different in that case?"

Kaidan's jaw dropped slightly as the pieces started coming together for him, too. "I'd never been to Sur'Kesh before," he said. "I wasn't back aboard the Normandy yet when you went there during the Reaper war. Just like I hadn't been here- you came here alone to rescue Kenson while you were inside Cerberus."

"Places we've both been, as soon as both of us were aware of an objective there- when we were both thinking about it- the Puritans showed up. And places we hadn't been to together, they found us as soon as we arrived. We wondered how they seemed to know where we were going, even despite keeping intel to ourselves and off comm channels..." Shepard sighed. "We never considered that maybe we were a comm channel that somebody could be listening in on. General Translation Failure said they were aware of me because they'd 'monitored our communications!' Son of a bitch!"

"It's still just speculation," Steve said, trying to be reassuring. He looked at Kaidan, whose grim expression suggested he was inclined to agree with the hypothesis.

"Yeah," he grumbled, "but it does fit. And if these bastards' communications technology is sophisticated enough to jam the syntheopathic frequencies that everyone else has expanded into, it might be sophisticated enough to intercept the overlapping sliver of ones that we use."

"They might even have left that band un-jammed deliberately, to spy on us!" Hadrian sneered.

"Well wait- wait. If they've been gathering intel by listening in on the two of you somehow, and if they've been able to get new location data by tracking the two of you, then why haven't they finished us off? We're sitting ducks, you both know it, so where are they?"
"That's a good question." Hadrian pulled the sleeping bag up tighter over his shoulders, starting to feel the cold again. "Maybe they..." He looked meaningfully at Kaidan, and let out a slow, 'steamy' deep breath that was visible in the dim red glow of the emergency lighting.

"Maybe they got the Normandy, and they figure that we're as good as dead," Kaidan finished. He pushed himself up to a seated position as well, sliding his legs to either side of Cortez's torso and resting his chin on Steve's shoulder from behind. He reached over and took Hadrian's hand in his, squeezing it. "Do... do you suppose that... if this is 'it' for us, that at least... well, that at least without us 'broadcasting' our travel itinerary, they'll stop receiving targeting data?"

Shepard chuckled, squeezing back and listing to his side to lean against the other two men, huddling up to them for warmth. "I'd rather think 'the bright side' here is that one of the last transmissions they got from us was a barrage of man-on-man-on-man sex. Let the fuckers pore over that for useful intel."

The three of them shared a bittersweet laugh, and after the cabin fell quiet again, Steve nuzzled his cheek against Hade's shoulder. "Well... I can't think of any way I'd rather go out," he said. "Starting to feel the chill again- maybe we should give them another show?"

"If we are, I want to top somebody this time," Kaidan smirked, only half-joking. Steve laughed softly- contagious enough that Kaidan caught it too- and turned his head to kiss Alenko on the cheek.

"I'll volunteer," he said, "I've wanted you to fuck me since that day we were digging up the amphitheater in our skivvies and you were-"

"Fuck me," Hadrian interjected, eyes widening again. Cortez blurted out another laugh and shrugged.

"Okay, or you could fuck him," he said to Alenko with a conciliatory look. Shepard rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"No," he grimaced, feigning irritation, "it was- do you feel that?"

"I feel your husband starting to get a hard-on again," Steve grinned, but then his head twitched as though something had forcefully snagged his attention. "Wait, what...?"

"I can feel you," Kaidan said, squeezing Cortez's shoulders from behind, "not just- I mean I'm getting... jeez, you really do want to go again!"

"They're gone," Hade stated, sounding confident. "Jamming's lifted." He looked at Steve, an expression of bemused surprise creeping on to his face as he began to really register and understand the feelings coming from him. "And wow, no kidding. How long has it been for you, anyway?"

Suddenly the communications system panel lit up, and EDI's voice crackled into the shuttle. "Normandy to Shepard. Commander, are you there?"

Hadrian climbed out of the sleeping bag, immediately starting to shiver, grabbed his armour's under-layer, and started pulling it on as he toggled the comm system on. "Shepard here. What's the situation?"

"The Puritans have gone, Commander. We tried to draw them away but they seemed to ignore the Normandy and the Vimy Ridge. Their carrier and fighters did pursue the turian and quarian ships, who led them out of the system at maximum sublight speed until the other frigates jumped to FTL,"
at which time the Puritans withdrew via their wormhole vessel and we returned. What is your condition?"

"Been better," Hade replied, zipping his body-suit up. "We were engaged by one of their interceptors after we tried going stealth. We have an idea now about how they were able to acquire us, actually, and maybe why they seemed to ignore you. We were forced down and the shuttle's damaged, so is Cortez's helmet, so we don't want to crack the atmospheric seal to hop the other shuttle in case we can't get the hatch open completely. We need it to come tow us in, and fast- we've lost heating and it's getting cold in here."

"We will dispatch it immediately. How did you evade the enemy fighter? And what is your hypothesis about the Puritans' tracking?" EDI asked.

"We didn't 'evade' so much as we, ah, body-slammed it. Hence the damage. And our best guess right now is that that 'unique' synthempathic signature Kaidan an I have is under some kind of signals surveillance. Our 'less evolved' connection might be wiretapped."

"Fascinating," EDI mused.

"Wait a second, EDI-" Kaidan jumped in, sidling up at Hadrian's side and zipping up his suit too, "are you sure the Puritans are gone?" He tapped Hade's arm to get his attention. "If you're right about them listening in, and they left us for dead, then won't they just come back as soon as they pick up that we're about to be rescued and resume our mission?"

"It's possible, but that was based on the assumption that they'd downed the Normandy too. Anyway, what's the alternative? I don't see much choice but to try."

"Maybe we... I don't know... maybe if they haven't caught on yet to our possible rescue, we can keep them from finding out if we..." Kaidan sighed, frustrated as he struggled to articulate the idea he was having. Finally he shook his head, shrugged, and gave Hade a reluctant look. "I should be sedated," he said, "or, if we don't have any sedatives in the first aid kit, put me out- I know you know how. If they're listening to our communications, we won't be communicating if I'm unconscious."

Shepard raised an eyebrow, mulling it over unhappily. "That... makes sense, I suppose. I just... okay, fine, check the first aid kit."

As Kaidan nodded and turned around to grab the medical case off the back bulkhead, Hadrian swiftly wrapped his arm around his husband's neck and applied carefully metered pressure, cutting off the blood circulation until, in just a handful of seconds, Alenko lost consciousness and slumped, guided with gentle care to the floor.

"Goddamn," Steve blurted, "that was kind of a ninja move. Spec Ops don't fuck around, huh?"

"Well, he was right," Hadrian sighed, stroking Kaidan's forehead, "the sooner our 'link' went quiet, the better our chances. You're still there, EDI?"

"Yes, Commander. I gather that you used a carotid restraint to induce cerebral ischemia and unconsciousness from hypoxia?"

"Stop talking dirty to me," Hade quipped. "We'll be waiting for shuttle number two, just be quick and keep the engine running in case the Puritans do come back, so we can bolt if we have to. And once we're aboard, if they haven't returned, I'll be coming back down here with the other shuttle to try again for Object Rho."

"Is that really a good idea?" Steve asked. He'd pulled his flight suit back on- apparently preferring not to be rescued in the buff- and was re-checking the systems diagnostic display with the sleeping bag wrapped over his shoulders. "Heading out again just gives them another shot at you."

"I'm not willing to just scrub this mission," Shepard insisted, walking to the med kit himself and fishing out a transdermal sedative patch. "Especially not now that we have an idea about how they might have been tracking our movements. If I am right about them eavesdropping on us, then we should be able to proceed as long as Kaidan- or me- is in the dark about what we're doing. Or... you know... just out cold," he said, peeling the patch from its wrapper and pressing it tenderly on to Kaidan's neck. "It's too important that we try to recover Rho. Whether I'm right or I'm wrong about the signals intel thing, we still need a trump card against the Puritans, and I still think the Reapers might be it."

"You're the boss. Just, don't choke me out," Cortez chuckled. He saw nothing new on the diagnostic panel and, with nothing else in his power, he accepted the fact there was nothing for him to do but wait, and sat down on the bench next to where Shepard was kneeling beside Kaidan. "So, what if you are right?" he asked. "If the two of you, if they've 'hacked' your synthempathic connection... how do we fight a war against these guys if they're reading the thoughts of two of our key guys on the front line?"

"I don't know," Hade grumbled. "We were already having... issues... over him feeling like I was shutting him out. Even as smart as he is- even though under the circumstances, he might understand the need to compartmentalize things- I still can't see this helping with our problems."

"You two are having problems?" Steve asked, sounding distressed at the revelation.

"That wasn't 'ringing through loud and clear?" Hade snorted.

"I might have had blinders on," Steve smiled, blushing a little, "I tend to want to see the best in you guys." Hadrian snorted a little at the familiar refrain from his conversation with Garrus and Tali in the gunnery control; was that how people went about misunderstanding each other now? Blindness by wishful thinking? But Steve had just been in the middle of their connection, and he still hadn't perceived the tension tween them.

Then it came to him in a flash. If their problem had remained a secret, maybe that had something to do with the one keeping secrets. There was a sudden feeling of responsibility that Hadrian couldn't deny. He was carrying his burden... still 'leading.' He was leading the fight out here; he'd taken the lead on their intimate moment with Cortez; and maybe his marriage hadn't escaped that dynamic. 'Drive all blames into one,' he'd been taught, but he'd been treating their friction as coming equally from Kaidan's misunderstanding. But what if he was driving it himself? As soon as he made room for it, it unfolded in his mind.

There was nothing wrong with their feelings for each other. Not really. There was nothing between them to see or perceive as broken- the wound was elsewhere. The injury was his, hidden amidst feelings he'd been suppressing behind walls of obfuscation and privacy that Liara had taught him to erect. Feelings he finally felt that perhaps he could confide in Cortez, after what they'd shared. He had to finally come clean to somebody. Somebody other than Kaidan- who was so intertwined with him that sharing a burden with him wasn't really releasing it. They'd come to echo and reflect each other.

Could Steve be the 'release valve' that they needed? He already knew the truth about Hadrian, and he loved them both... Would he understand?
"Well... I've been pushing hard to get myself back on to the front line and to beat these self-righteous fuckers. Taking a lot of it on myself because..." Hade shook his head pensively, "I don't know... I guess I've been..." Steve put his hand on Shepard's, supportively, and after taking a deep breath Hadrian 'spit it out.' "I'm having trouble with the fight of my life ending while I was asleep... and knowing that I wasn't even really 'asleep' at all... I was some fifty-thousand year old alien in stasis in a prothean bunker."

There it was. Kaidan was the only other person he'd told, and even then he felt like he hasn't articulated it so clearly to his husband. It was that same dilemma he'd felt after Cerberus rebuilt him and Kaidan had questioned his loyalty, only more acute now. 'Who am I?' It was so pedestrian that it was almost embarrassing for it to bother him so deeply. But his case was extraordinary, wasn't it? Hadrian Shepard had lived, and died, and now he was back but with an incomplete picture of his own life. How could Kaidan see him clearly, when he wasn't sure he saw himself in the mirror?

Steve mulled over the commander's statement a moment before squeezing his hand and chewing at the inside of his lip. "That's... look... my dad always used to tell me, you are who you feel you are. Who you believe you are. You can be who you want to be. We choose who we want to be. I always told him it wasn't that simple, but as I grew up it started to make more sense. As much as I hated to concede that to the old man." A self-deprecating grin spread across his face. "But I think that transcends biology. However you started out, you are who you've become. That's just life, right? We all change and end up different from who we were."

"The only constant in life is change," Hadrian chortled. "Yeah, I think I've heard that somewhere before."

"So, what? You've been having an identity crisis? Overcompensating for a feeling of unfinished business? You still seem to love him as much as ever, though."

"I do," Shepard said earnestly, "of course I do. But I guess while I was trying to do whatever it took, he mistook my pushing myself for pushing him away, or something. Then he thought I had a death-wish."

Cortez laughed a little in surprise. "Seriously? You? Suicidal? I can't see it."

"Well... I was hurting. Am... I am, I guess... I am hurting. And he-" Hade gasped, another revelation dawning on him. "Aw hell," he sighed, "we're connected. And I've been hurting, so no wonder he's been hurting. Of course he's been. I've been pushing myself, and we're connected... he was bound to feel 'pushed' too." He laid his hand on Kaidan's cheek, sadness on his face at the thought of his husband actually feeling what he'd been feeling for the half-year or so since he'd awoke on the salvaged SR-2, oblivious to the events of the year that had passed since 'his' death and thinking that his cabin had been robbed.

"It can't have been easy," Steve said, "for either of you. But what you guys have... you'll get through it. I'm sure of it. I felt what's between you... heh- in more ways than one." Hadrian rolled his hand over under Cortez's and laced their fingers together, returning the gesture of affection. "It was pretty amazing to be in the middle of that."

"You know... things don't have to change, but... I kinda liked having you there. I could feel that Kaidan did, too. And I saw some of the visuals you were indulging in a few minutes ago..." Hade let it hang in the air for a minute, coy about just how clear the mental images he'd received had been, before licking his lip and gazing upward briefly in recall. "I especially liked the bit about Kaidan sitting on your face while I'm inside you," he winked.
"Oh my God," Steve moaned, blushing bright red and half embarrassed but half aroused. "If you hadn't picked that up from me I'd be howling 'TMI,' but... we should probably just take things as they come naturally. Like I said, I'd love to do that again..."

"But?" Hade queried, sensing there was a 'but.'

"But... like I said, I felt what's between you two. And... honestly, I'm not sure I could ever keep up. Maybe if you guys had never gotten together I could have come close to that with you, or with him... but you did. And together, you two have something I can't touch. Not really. I was like a candle beside a spotlight."

"Oh, I think you added a bit more heat than one little candle," Shepard grinned.

"Heh, maybe," Steve smiled, "but even so... I'm not sure that even if we tried to make this into something that it would really be entirely satisfying. I know I'd never be a completely equal party to what you've got... so... I'm not going to push for anything more, is all I'm saying."

"Fair enough," Hade shrugged. "I'm fine with just seeing what happens next."

They both jumped, a little startled when the magnetic grapplers of the other shuttle suddenly attached to theirs with a loud metallic thunk. The sound of engines began to ring through the physical connection, and they felt a lurching sensation as they were lifted from the asteroid's surface, the inertial dampers lagging in their response to externally induced motion.

"I should finish suiting back up to make the turn-around a bit faster," Shepard said. "Will you look after him once we're back aboard? Get Karin to give him a quick once over and keep him sedated until I'm back with Rho."

"Sure thing," Steve nodded. "And Commander... thanks again. I can't think of any way I'd rather have avoided freezing to death," he said with a sly smile.

"Well, I'm glad we could repay the times you've saved our asses. Call it collecting dividends on your investment."

"You are such a romantic."

-X

Nine minutes later

-X

The mated pair of Kodiaks wouldn't fit inside the hangar door so the artificial gravity to the bay had been suspended and the rescue shuttle had handed off its stricken sister to a pair of geth prime platforms, holding to the deck with magnetized feet. They walked the weightless shuttle inside and guided it to rest on its maintenance hoist, plugging in the umbilical power hookups to supply energy to open the door.

As soon as the gravity was dialed back up to normal, the interior door to the hangar opened and Tali, Chakwas, nurse Robbins, EDI's chassis and Corporal Herman hurried inside. The shuttle door whined and groaned open, and Shepard and Cortez stepped out on to the deck.

"You two are alright?" Karin asked. Shepard nodded.

"A few bumps and bruises and Cortez got a bit chilled, but no one was seriously hurt. Kaidan's
sedated inside, though, and I'd like you to keep him that way until I get back- it's a long story, I'll explain later," he explained.

"Was it medically necessary?" the doctor inquired.

"It's an operational necessity."

"I see," Chakwas said, looking concerned.

"Are we ready to head back out?" Hadrian asked, looking to EDI. She gestured toward the door.

"The other shuttle has touched down in the opposite bay, we can depart immediately," she said.

As they started walking to cross the ship to the far side hangar, Hadrian noticed Cpl. Herman putting his hands on Cortez's shoulders. "You're really okay?" he asked, something in his voice.

"Yeah," Steve said, offering a small, slightly shy smile. "Just kinda cold. And not looking forward to all the work the shuttle's gonna need."

Ben rubbed Steve's upper arms to warm him up and then gave up the pretense and pulled him into a hug. "I was worried," he said, his tone hinting at a confession. "I'm glad you're back safe." They separated again and Steve took one of Herman's hands in his, looking down, then sweeping his eyes slowly up the marine's body, then over at Shepard, who flashed back a curious-but-pleased look.

The last thing Hade saw as he and EDI departed the hangar was Steve, sort of experimentally putting his hand on the side of Herman's neck and pulling closer for another lingering embrace.

-X

Seven minutes later

-X

Hadrian and EDI stepped off Shuttle #2 onto the surface of the Project asteroid near the sheared open transitway they'd pegged as their entry point to the base's ruins.

"Comm check," Shepard said into his helmet's headset.

"I am receiving you, Commander," EDI replied over her internal radio.

"And I hear you too. Alright, let's go. If we are where I think we are then Rho should be in the section just ten meters or so down this corridor. Watch your step."

"My chassis has excellent proprioception, Commander, I shouldn't need to observe my feet."

Hade rolled his eyes and brushed off the comment. As they started walking, the EVA peripheral pack he'd attached to his armour used an array of micro-thrusters to keep him on the ground. For her part, EDI was using her body's toes to dig into the asteroid like pitons with each step. When they climbed inside the wrent transparisteel tube that used to connect the module before them to a long-lost companion, they activated the magnetic systems in his boots and her feet to stay grounded.

"Anything on your mind, EDI?" Hade asked, casting out a conversational line. Since the SR-3 had launched on her maiden voyage the two had picked up their tradition of discussing topics mundane and off-the-wall from their days during the Reaper war, and while he occasionally regretted it, they
were just as often a welcome diversion.

"A great deal. I have been collating Puritan encounters with my shipboard surveillance observations of you and Major Alenko, and I believe you are correct in your supposition that they may be intercepting your synthempathic communications. Truthfully, the more clear the pattern becomes, the more I feel what I believe you would call embarrassment, that I did not deduce it sooner."

"Well, nobody's perfect," Hadrian shrugged. "You've got a lot more going on now than you did back when you were just a disembodied cyberwarfare suite. Being distracted is very human."

"Thank you, Commander," EDI's tone sounded genuinely pleased. "To your credit, noticing the correlation was an impressive feat of meta-data analysis... for a human."

"Thank you, EDI," Hadrian grinned, ducking under a half-collapsed ceiling tile.

"I am curious with regards to how much you credit your serendipity to the intimate relations you and the major had just engaged in with Lieutenant Cortez."

Hadrian banged his helmet on the low-hanging metal grill as he seized in mid-step and jerked upright, dumbstruck. "OW, goddamn!"

"The intimate what you what with huh?!" came Joker's voice over the comm.

"Commander! Are you alright? Is your helmet damaged?" EDI asked.

Hadrian shook his head, flummoxed, and floundered for a course of action. "Joker, get the hell off this channel!" he snapped.

"Yes Sir, getting off, Sir," Moreau replied with an audible grin. "A little late to the party, though, I guess."

"Goddammit," Hade cussed. He pushed the collapsed ceiling section aside as he turned to face EDI, whose face was expressionless except for the evident concern that he might have breached his environmental seal. "EDI, how did you know about that?"

"Data collation begets data collation, Commander," she replied. "It was a tangential deduction based on numerous observations- pupil dilation, thermal radiation from eroginous zones, your armour's biometric telemetry as well as the major's and the lieutenant's. Also, your right pauldron has a bit of ejac-"

"Stop, for the love of- ugh-" Hadrian checked his shoulderpad and hurriedly scratched a bit of frozen translucent crust off, then rubbed his helmet where his temple should be, feeling his face flushed with mortification. "Okay... EDI... that's..."

"I see no cause for embarrassment, Commander," EDI said, trying to reassure him, "I have no 'moral' judgment on binary versus tripartite relationships. The social attitudes toward non-monogamy are highly subjective, changing across time and cultures. And when evaluated on its practical merits-"

"Mercy, EDI, mercy- just... stop. I'm not... I don't feel bad about it, or embarrassed, it's just awkward when other people know more than you think they ought to about your private business."

"Would you like to hear my social attitudinal projections on the concept of privacy vis-a-vis synthempathy over the next twenty-five hundred years? There is a growing margin for error, of
course, but I believe that the sentients of this galaxy are now developing on a course toward a level of interconnectedness comparable to the geth's consensus, where privacy as a concept will become obsolete. Possibly within as little as two human generations."

"I'm happy for the future, really I am. It sounds like utopia for all us Buddhists, transhumanists and occasional closet-exhibitionists. For now, though, I invested a whole week in training with Liara to learn how to arrange my thoughts so that they weren't a total open book to just anybody," Shepard sighed. "Do me a favour and don't spread it around the ship that the captain and XO had a menage with the shuttle pilot. You might not judge, but others may, and I'm not in the mood to field any holier-than-thou crap."

"Very well, Commander," EDI acknowledged. They stood looking at each other for an awkward moment before Shepard slowly turned and they resumed walking down the corridor. He took a deep, tense breath when she immediately started talking again. "I have also been contemplating strategic exploits of the Puritans' 'wormhole' transportation," she said.

"I see... come up with anything useful?" Hade asked cautiously. "A bomb... eleven-dimensional something'r'other... reckless gossip?"

"No. Not without some method for propelling and steering a naked singularity."

"Ah... well, afraid I can't help you there."

"In addition, I have been considering the fact that this is only the second time my body has conducted operations in zero- or low-gravity, after our boarding of the geth dreadnought at Rannoch. Both instances involved navigating a damaged tubular structure."

"What about it?" Hadrian asked.

"I believe there is a joke to be derived from the fact, specifically referencing my chassis emulating female design, and the tubes' phallic shape. But the subtleties of vulgarity in constructing a joke are elusive."

Hadrian shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I don't know that I can help you there, either," he murmured.

The pair reached a sealed door into the habitat and when it predictably failed to open, Shepard opened the work kit they'd brought and reached for the portable power unit to enable the mechanism. "I believe I can save us the time, Commander," EDI said. She lined her fingertips up with the seam in the middle of the door and then wedged them in, forcing the two halves apart a centimeter. She then adjusted her grip and in a fluid motion, pulled the heavy metal door sections open.

"Handy," Hadrian quipped.

They entered a hallway that was familiar to Shepard from his mission to rescue Doctor Kensen from the batarians, and he led EDI through the doorway on to one of the balconies overlooking the large open room dominated by the faintly glowing, organically-shaped Reaper artifact that the room had been constructed around.

"The indoctrinated Project guards dropped in on me from up here, wave after wave of 'em. I was pissed when, after I kicked every last one of their asses, the thing lit up and knocked me out anyway."

"You said that as you were fighting the guards, you could hear Harbinger communicating
somehow through the device?” EDI asked.

"Yeah, doing his usual routine. Resistance is futile, submit to your destiny, blah-deblabbitsy-blah-blah." Hadrian scanned the ceiling with his omni-tool's flashlight to evaluate the structure's integrity.

"But you do not hear anything now, I take it."

"No. The thing still feels wrong, though, even just sitting there. Let's get this over with."

EDI nodded and did her own visual inspection of the ceiling, eventually shining her light on a spot along the corner. "I believe that to be the optimal location for extraction, Commander."

"Alright, I'll place the charge, you secure the lifting straps." Hadrian deactivated the magnets in his boots, bent his legs, took another careful look at the spot EDI was illuminating to gauge the distance and force required, then with a jump launched himself into the air. With little gravity, his momentum carried him to the structural beams where he grabbed hold and steadied himself, re-magnetizing his boots and planting them on the wall. He opened the hardcase affixed to his hip and removed a shaped charge, planting it on the ceiling and priming it for remote detonation.

Below, EDI had dropped from the balcony, and approached Rho. After walking a circuit around it to examine its structure, she began wrapping the root points of the sturdiest-looking 'arms' with one end of a set of lifting straps. She connected half a dozen of the straps and directed the loose ends vertically, and when she had fastened the last one she launched herself upward. When the strap she was holding went taut she 'hung' above the ancient alien device and started collecting up the other loose ends to connect them to a hub.

"How're we doing?" Hadrian asked.

"I believe we are ready for extraction," EDI reported.

"And you aren't getting any weird output from Rho? No indications that it's about to blast us unconscious?"

EDI shook her head. "Neither my chassis' nor my ship-board sensors detect any anomalous readings. No change in power emissions or EM signaling. There is a discreet but low-energy pulse detectable in its systems, but other than its baseline functioning, it appears inert."

"Okay then, let's get on with this." Hadrian pushed off the ceiling and floated down to EDI's location dangling at the end of the converged straps, and caught a grip on the ring. "Shepard to shuttle, we're good to go."

"Affirmative, Shepard-Commander," replied the geth program that seemed content to be called 'Pilot,' "shuttle standing by."

Shepard activated his omni-tool again and hit a button, and the charge he'd planted detonated, blowing a sixteen-foot-wide opening in the top of the structure. Thankfully, the vacuum didn't transfer any noise or shock, and once the debris had blown clear the shuttle appeared in the space above the hole, shining a spotlight in on the menacing alien centerpiece.

EDI activated a beacon attached to the hub ring, and after synchronizing with the automated harpoon launcher mounted on the shuttle's ventral hull, the gun launched a tethered pole that threaded the loop and deployed several backward-facing radial pegs that 'hooked' the hub and drew tight in preparation to hoist the Reaper-detecting device.
"Connection looks good," Hade remarked. "Let's give it a test. Start retracting."

The winch in the gun began spooling up the bucky cable tether, drawing the whole rig tight. When it appeared that the setup was holding, Hadrian radioed the shuttle again. "Go ahead and haul it out."

The tether pulled, and after a moment of straining, Object Rho slid out of the asteroid and began ascending toward the hole in the ceiling.

"There it goes. Y'know, I hate to jinx us, but this seems too easy. Skies still clear?" Hadrian asked. EDI nodded.

"There is no indication that the Puritans have returned. Commander, if you would? Lieutenant Cortez forced the Puritan fighter down just outside. It was clearly damaged enough to disable it, but an inspection might still yield valuable information." She sounded really eager, and Hade couldn't deny that data on their technology could be useful in their fight against the aliens.

"I can't argue with you there," Hadrian conceded. "Alright, let's go." Rho had just cleared the opening they'd created and rather than trudge back out the way they'd come, Hadrian nodded toward the hole. "Feel like taking a shortcut?" he asked. When she signaled her assent, he crouched, eying the 'target' again, and then launched himself to the ceiling. He rotated in mid-flight so that he landed feet-first, and carefully stepped through the hole onto the outside of the structure. EDI joined him a moment later.

"I cannot help but notice, you seem to be enjoying this," she observed.

"I haven't gotten to play in zero-gee in a while, myself. I had a lot of fun with it back when I was in training, though."

The two arrived at the edge of the module, overlooking the crash site and the Puritan fighter on the surface below. It was almost completely intact except for some dents and minor structural buckling; most of the debris strewn along the trench dug by Cortez's maneuver was from the underside of the Kodiak. "I am surprised that the impact succeeded in disabling the craft," EDI remarked. "Their strategy of ramming enemy ships to insert their infantry, as well as the appearance of the fighter, suggests construction durable enough to withstand the crash."

"Maybe we got lucky for a change. It's possible that they're only built to sustain certain kinds of controlled impacts and we threw this one a curve ball. In any event, check the thing out, let's see what we can learn."

They pushed off toward the ground and landed next to the interceptor, giving them their first good, close look at one. It was about six meters long and was indeed shaped like an old-style spitzer bullet, with a slight narrowing taper at the back end. EDI activated her integrated omni-tool and started a methodical scanning sweep from the front to the back.

"Curious," she remarked as she reached the tail end. She crouched down to inspect more closely something that had caught her attention. Hade knelt and looked too at the reflective dome on the back, but EDI grabbed his wrist as he reached out to touch it.

"Careful with that grip, EDI, jeez."

"Apologies, Commander, but I am uncertain what might happen to you if you made physical contact with the dimensional brane," she said.

"The dimensional what-now?" Shepard asked, withdrawing his hand.
"That is not a reflective physical surface," EDI explained, sounding fascinated. "Do you recall our first encounter with the Puritans' insertion vessel at Noveria?"

"You're saying this is a miniature version of one of their wormholes?"

"I believe so, and I believe this explains the absence of powerplant emissions from the interceptor and carrier type vessels we have encountered so far! If their fighters are physically connected to their carriers via a wormhole, and the carriers in turn are connected to a mother-ship in the same way, then one central plant could power their entire fleet through a hierarchical distribution network." EDI was running her fingers around the surface looking for some way inside the chassis, but it appeared solid.

"If that's the case then it might explain how the fighters got the boost to their weapons and defenses between our first and second encounters- 'mom' cranked up the output and suddenly they have as much juice as they need to stand up to our technology."

"Precisely," EDI agreed. Her search was moving back toward the front of the craft for some kind of servicing hatch or access panel.

"So how does this help us?" Hade asked. "Other than telling us that we could shut their whole invasion down by hitting their home base?"

"If there is a hardwired link, it may facilitate more than just power transmission. Given their ability to coordinate their fleet actions while their jamming is in effect, I suspect the same connection includes data transfer. If I could infiltrate their command network..." She shot him a mischievous look.

"Let me help you look for that plug-in," Hadrian grinned. He pointed near the nose and said "what about the compartments they deploy their infantry from? They were right around here."

EDI slid her palms over the hull with her super-human tactile senses until she found the hairline seam, then locked her fingers into the same rigid wedges she'd used to pry open the door inside the Project base. She paused before driving them in, though, turning to Shepard. "If I do gain access," she said, "I may have a limited window of opportunity. I believe we should determine the priorities for my potential incursion in advance."

"Right." Shepard thought about it a moment then shrugged. "Shut down their central powerplant if you can. Disrupt their controls if you can. And if all you can do is gather intelligence on their strategy, then do that. I'll trust your judgment, EDI- fuck with 'em however you think will be most effective."

"Understood, Commander." She drove her fingers into the edge of the hatch and pried it open, revealing one of the infantry units within. It sat inert in a compartment molded precisely to hold it, and EDI took hold of the drone to pull it out, revealing inner workings through a port hidden behind it.

"Is that what you need?" Hade asked. EDI scanned the opening with her omni-tool and visually, then nodded. "I believe so," she said, "and I believe I can fabricate an adapter to interface with the port. One moment..."

"You want a souvenir?" Hadrian asked, lightly kicking the infantry unit. "You've been bugging me for one of these since Noveria."

"That device may or may not be operational, Commander. I would like to examine it as well, but
you should be prepared to use your biotics to incapacitate it if it becomes active."

"No worries on that account." Shepard tapped the comms toggle on his omni-tool to patch in the shuttle. "Shepard to Pilot, come down as close as you can, we have another package coming back with us."

"I am ready to proceed, Commander," EDI announced. "Based on a contextual analysis, I suspect they may employ a base-three maths. I've configured several translation protocols as a contingency."

"Alright," Hadrian said, "go for it."

-X

Elsewhere

-X

Budsuotsmov was floating in the quarantine chamber when the portal irised open. Rotssohrb was on the other side, hir pods coiling with agitation.

"You are to be released," ze intoned.

"It has been determined that I am not compromised? In such a short interval?" Budsuotsmov inquired.

"It has not," Rotssohrb intoned.

"Then my release is premature! I must remain quarantined until my assessment is deemed complete."

"You are required to return to duty," Rotssohrb replied. Budsuotsmov mentally bristled; the two of them were of equal rank- ze was not subject to Rotssohrb.

"With whom does the imperative originate?" ze demanded, juking forward to thump hir mantle against Rotssohrb's. Rotssohrb responded appropriately, deferring enough to reduce the impact to a glancing blow but not so much as to reduce hir status.

"The Captain decrees your recall to duty," Rotssohrb clarified, reaching up with a pod to stroke the impact site. The displeasure at hir superordinate tone abated, but there was sudden alarm at the prospect of returning to Budsuotsmov's operator interface.

"My station is contaminated. My unit entered the radius of a defiler Subversion source." Budsuotsmov considered for a moment before electing to take Rotssohrb into hir confidence. "I experience the Terror," ze rumbled aloud.

"Irrelevant. Your unit's conduit is being employed by naïve resistors to access our data infrastructure. It must be disengaged. The Captain decrees that the responsibility is yours."

"The Terror prevents me! If I return to my station I will be subverted."

Rotssohrb flicked a pod impatiently, no doubt worried about hir standing if ze was found wanting in the performance of hir duty. "You are not to return to your station," ze intoned, "you are to assume control of an emulator to disengage your unit's conduit externally. The Captain intones that your service will be considered in your assessment. Non-compliance may indicate subversion."
"I understand. I am apprehensive, but the Terror abates." Budsuotsmov ran hir pods stiffly up the length of hir mantle, examining its surface for orderliness before presenting hirself. "You are to convey me?"

"I am." Rotssohrb's trunk flexed anxiously, expelling an mix of pheromones and pre-digested algae. The prospect of Subversion spreading had everyone half out of the medium.

Budsuotsmov propelled to the portal and the two began jetting up the corridor. "How do the naïve resistors infiltrate our data infrastructure? They are unsophisticated," ze inquired.

"It is unknown. The sentry protocols have been enacted. They are inadequate. We must make haste."

They accelerated through a turn and emerged into the telepresence control chamber. The center was buzzing with activity and the medium was awash with pheromones indicating concern at Budsuotsmov's return. Others scattered from hir path, fearful of subversion, but not so quickly as to appear inappropriately deferential.

"Your alternative station," Rotssohrb intoned, pointing at one of the unoccupied terminals. Lieutenant Gtnoofuaas floated above it brushing hir pods over hir mantle. Ze may have been especially anxious about supervising a potentially compromised subordinate, or ze may have been trying to alleviate physical discomfort- the nodes on hir shield appeared close to spawning.

"An emulator near your unit's docking terminal has been selected. You will remove the bridging collar and disengage the conduit. You will make haste," Gtnoofuaas instructed.

"Understood," Budsuotsmov replied. Ze settled hir stem and trunk into the socket and inserted hir pods into the control channels. "Initiating telepresence," ze announced. The interface harness extended up from around the socket and curled around hir mantle, and after a moment Budsuotsmov felt hir bodily sensations dull, largely replaced by the emulator's inputs. It was not hir own station, and it had been many rings since ze had operated an emulator since being promoted to delivery vehicle operator- though ze would only reluctantly admit a deterioration of skill- and in sum the interface felt sluggish and imprecise.

A diagnostic screen flashed the unit's condition and faded to darkness. Then the cover to the emulator's delivery vehicle's compartment slid open, revealing the stars, the surface of the ship, and in the distance the homeship. Ze extruded the emulator's pods and pushed off into the void, floating down toward the hull. The light of the Core blinked in the glittering darkness above, a comforting sight.

Gtnoofuaas's voice came over the interface. "We are overlaying data to indicate your requisite course." A visible icon appeared in the visual display- as though the gap in the formation of docked delivery vehicles were insufficient.

"Understood," Budsuotsmov replied, and began pulling hirself along the hull between the delivery vehicles towards hir unit's dock. When ze arrived ze scanned the socket, triggering the reference subservience to summon up the technical schematic for the bridging collar automatically from the database. "I have accessed the procedure for disengaging the collar and conduit," ze reported. Magnetizing the grounding filament to the hull, ze withdrew one pod so as to elongate the other two, reaching down into the dock to operate the release mechanisms.

"You must make haste," Gtnoofuaas urged, "the resistors' incursion compromises our data security!"
"I endeavour to work efficiently, but this emulator is not optimally formatted to my control," Budsuotsmov protested. Ze felt Gtnooofuaas thump hir mantle for what ze must have perceived to be an insubordinate tone. "I endeavour to work efficiently," ze repeated. "Incidentally, I now submit my vote in the affirmative on the referendum to install destructive ordinance to delivery vehicle docking ports. The wisdom of the proposal has become apparent."

"Your vote is recorded," Gtnooofuaas replied. "However the referendum will never succeed. Few operators have experienced incidents sufficient to sway their vote in the affirmative. The current is simply unfavourable."

"It is lamentable that the antearchs refrain from acting by decree. Referendum is pandering, it invites insubordination," Budsuotsmov opined.

"The antearchs command wisely," Gtnooofuaas replied. After a short pause, however, ze added in a barely perceptible rumble "even if some of them are one spawn away from caving in."

"Their progeny testify to their wisdom," Budsuotsmov intoned conspiratorially. Ze had never repeated that jest before- it was taboo- but this one time, the discussion of referendum and Gtnooofuaas's own jest seemed to invite it. Ze finished removing the bridging collar and lifted it away from the dock, exposing the conduit beneath. "I have access to the conduit. Proceeding to disengage." Ze curled a pod around the control handle and rotated it, un-threading the restraining nut until the thick cable's base uncoupled from its plug.

The reflective dome of the bridging brane immediately 'popped' like a bubble, leaving the collar floating off the end of the severed conduit.

"My unit should be disengaged," Budsuotsmov announced. Ze waited as technicians inside checked and reported back.

"It is, you are successful in your task," came Gtnooofuaas's intonation.

"Then I shall return the emulator to its delivery vehicle and terminate operation."

"That will not be required. The emulator will be recovered by others," Gtnooofuaas replied grimly. The tone gave Budsuotsmov cause for alarm, and even through the dissociated sensations of telepresence ze could feel a change in the pressure inside hir body.

"Recovered?" ze asked, probingly.

"You have communicated disrespect for the Antearchracy, indicative of Subversion," Gtnooofuaas intoned. "You are to be cracked. You would be unwise to terminate operation now. It will be better for you if you remain interfaced."

"I was making a jest! And only after your own example!"

"My jest was a ruse, designed and authorized by the Captain as part of your assessment. I was to feign disrespect, in order to invite you to reveal your deception if you were indeed subverted."

"But my service-"

The Captain's intonations enjoined on the communication channel, replacing Gtnooofuaas's. "Your service has been commendable," ze replied. There was unhappiness but also resolve in hir tones. "You have carried out your final duty to your credit. However, communicating disrespect for the antaerchs is taboo. You are aware of this and did so regardless. This indicates Subversion, and Subversion can not be permitted to spread."
"Captain... I lament my insubordinate jest, however I contest the assertion that I am subverted."

"Your contest is recorded," the Captain intoned. "Nonetheless... the decree is resolute. I lament it, but you must be cracked."

"I wish to continue to serve, Captain. The Mother Space is defiled, we must restore-"

"We will," the Captain interrupted, "under the wise command of the Antaeachracy. We will repair the derangement and all will be in accordance with the natural order. Your service will be recorded." There was an unsettling pause in the communication. "Do you find solace in the Core, Born Under Dusky Skies, Upon Our Third Shoring, Moving Over Vallhiaranes?"

"I do, Captain," Budsuotsmov answered. Hir distress abated only slightly at hearing hir Captain intone hir wholename.

"Then look upon it, Operator. Gaze into it, and the stars of This Space, and take comfort. You will feel very little."

Budsuotsmov focused hir attention on the emulator's inputs of the Core, blinking in the distance. "Captain, will you withhold from my mother the cause for my..."

"I will not deceive," the Captain intoned sternly, "but I will withhold, if it is your wish. Ze will be told only of your service and of the necessity."

Before Budsuotsmov could convey hir thanks, there was a dull, cold, surging pain in hir mantle. The telepresence reduced the agony of the water crushing in through the crack that had been made in hir body, but could not negate it entirely. Mercifully the pressure destroyed hir brain in an instant.

The emulator unit's tailing filament de-magnetized, its pods went limp, and it began to float up off the hull. Upon recovery, it would have the distinction of being preserved in the Homeship's museum as having been operated by the first casualty of the Noble Campaign to Remedy the Derangement of the Mother Space.
Kaidan woke up slowly, groggy from the sedatives. Hadrian was seated next to his bed in Med Bay, stroking the top of his head and smiling warmly.

"Did you choke me out?" Alenko grumbled.

"Sorry... if it's any consolation, I only did it because I agreed with you."

"Great. So... where are we now?"

"Outbound from Bahak, in FTL, so even if they can track us they shouldn't be able to attack us. Crew's assembling shortly to be briefed on what we've learned, but I had to talk to you about it first," Hade explained, his voice earnest but sad.

"Sounds serious... so what did I miss?" Kaidan asked, working through the numbness still pervading his body to sit up and turn on the bed to face his husband. Hadrian got up and re-positioned himself to sit beside him.

"After I put you out and our shuttle was back in the barn, EDI and I went down to recover Rhoe—which is in the starboard cargo bay now."

Kaidan's body and jaw tensed up and he looked sternly at Hadrian. "So you really brought the whole thing aboard? Aren't you worried about it indoctrinating the crew?"

"I thought of that, and EDI did some digging. She found research by an Alliance scientist, Bryson, who was studying pieces of Sovereign and some other relics on the Citadel. He was assassinated and his lab was destroyed by one of his assistants during the war, probably indoctrinated. But EDI was able to pull a backup of his records that war archived off-site, and there was some information on configuring an energy field to shield organics from its influence. So we've duplicated that."

"And reinforced it with some wishful thinking, eh?"

Shepard chuckled. "Wishful thinking was a vital asset through the last war. She says we'll have to drop the shielding to take our readings at the plotted waypoints, but only for a few minutes at a time. Shouldn't be long enough to brainwash us."

"At least there's that," Kaidan said. Hadrian continued.

"And while we were on the surface we decided to inspect the crashed Puritan interceptor. We figured out they use their wormhole tech to power and control their fighters and carriers through a wired connection."

"You're saying their whole invasion really is run off of one generator?"

Shepard half-shrugged, half-nodded. "Looks that way. We were able to exploit that by having EDI
hack in to their network through the fighter. She couldn't get access to a lot, but for some reason the telepresence system was linked to an archival database, possibly as a kind of enhanced-reality interface. So we were able to learn a bit about their history." Hade paused to see if Kaidan actually wanted to hear about it, and when the sentinel offered an inquisitive shrug he continued. "About a hundred and sixty thousand years ago they were early out of the gate in their cycle. They found the mass relays and started using them to explore... actually took one apart and derived some of their technology from it, though we aren't sure what. But then they found an outright Reaper artifact, one of the ones that weren't 'user-friendly' like the Citadel and the relays. And because they had these complex, sensitive anatomical systems for communication, they turned out to be especially susceptible to indoctrination. They developed a pathological fear of it, and of the Reapers."

"So they just packed up their whole civilization and left?" Alenko asked.

"Yeah. And from their paranoia about the Reapers it was a short jump to believing that all synthetics had to be kept on a short leash- limit their development, keep them subservient. Which was good for us, because they didn't have anything remotely capable of fighting EDI off their network. Some dumb VIs but nothing in her league. Once she'd deciphered their coding language the only thing that kept her from totally overrunning their systems was extensive partitioning, and she only lost access because the connection was physically severed at their end. Anyway... they figured out enough about the Reapers' cycle that they decided to not be here when the next harvest came. They emigrated to the LMC, leaving behind listening devices scattered around the galaxy to watch for developments, and they've been grinding away in a slow decline ever sense. Apparently their probes noticed the Crucible Day event, and when they came to investigate they didn't like the changes they saw."

"Dogs and cats, living together," Kaidan chuckled sarcastically. "So we found out why they're being such assholes. And that the name suits them. Do we know more about how they're kicking our asses?"

"Yeah," Hade said, pausing, hesitant to delve into the next subject. "We were also able to get confirmation that they've been using their expertise with communications to 'wiretap' us- you and me. EDI found actual transcripted thoughts in their intelligence logs... mostly fragments, but she related some stuff that I recognized. It seems that when we're connected synthempathically they can pick up ideations we share... and when we're in close proximity they can determine our exact location. Anywhere in the galaxy- don't ask me how that works."

"Shit," Kaidan hissed. He sat with the truth, shaking his head and mulling over the implications. "So we're compromised? But it's only when we're together?"

"Yeah... well, we aren't sure, really. Definitely when we're together, that's when the link's strongest and our thoughts are most in sync." Hade sighed. "So... You... you know what that means?"

Kaidan looked sadly into Shepard's eyes and nodded reluctantly. "The brass is going to want to split us up," he muttered. "Enough to suppress our link... which is... what? I've felt my rapport with you up to a mile away- we don't even have a ship big enough for us to both serve on at opposite ends."

"Yeah. I already told the Council and Alliance Command everything... and... they want you to take command of the Vimy Ridge... to put some space between us."

"How's that supposed to work? I'm a Spectre for the Council but to the Alliance I'm a civilian now, and I'm supposed to take command of a ship?"

"Admiral Hackett instated you as an acting major in the Alliance, to smooth the road procedurally,"
Shepard explained. Kaidan snorted a laugh

"So does that make me an 'acting major, retired,' now? A major-with-two-asterixes?"

"Or a retired-acting major. You could put a rocking chair on the CIC and yell at everyone to get off your lawn."

Hadrian snickered, but his sadness was unmistakable as he put his hand in Kaidan's and squeezed it longingly.

"It gets worse..." Kaidan said knowingly. Shepard looked down at the floor a moment, then back up, grimacing.

"The thing is... we don't know for certain whether there's a real limit to the range of our connection. Because we're so 'unique,' they don't know whether..." he sighed, trying to spit it out, "there's concern that they could intercept any idea we were both holding in our minds at the same time, regardless of how near or far we are from each other..."

"We aren't going to be--... Wait... Are you telling me they don't want us even thinking about each other?" Kaidan scowled. Shepard shrugged, a helpless look on his face.

"I don't think they can police our thinking, but... to minimize the likelihood of us getting on the same 'wavelength,' they've said that once you're aboard Vimy that we shouldn't have direct communication. Any updates have to go through intermediaries."

The sadness and frustration between them was growing geometrically, sapping their vigour, causing them both to slouch and squeezing the breath from their chests.

"And then what? Did we learn anything useful for kicking their ass out of our galaxy?" Kaidan asked bitterly.

"Well as long as we're apart, and the IES is running and we're operating under normal stealth procedures, they don't seem able to locate us. Must have been why I was able to slip by Aephis that time that I had you stay aboard the Shepard. Separately we should be able to come and go as normal, completely under their radar. So... they want you to continue monitoring the enemy and deploying our new communication buoys to get the galaxy talking to each other again."

"And you?" Kaidan was afraid he already knew the answer, and the feeling that bounced back at him from Hadrian was all but confirmation before he said it. "You're going somewhere else entirely," he said, a brooding look coming over his face.

"I've been told to continue trying to track down the Reapers," Hadrian replied, sounding remorseful. "If... if we can figure out how to use Rho to triangulate their position, it might be... well... it's hard to say. But if they're really that terrified of the Reapers, they could very well be the key to giving the Puritans the boot." They both hung their heads, and Kaidan listed to the side to rest his on Hadrian's shoulder.

"Is the whole goddamned universe determined to pull us apart?" he asked, dejected. "It's like everything's out to get us."

"I know," Hade sighed, putting his arm around Kaidan and pulling him closer. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it's like this. I hate it too... But after this is done... I swear, we'll do whatever you want. Retire, go into seclusion, whatever. I'll go wherever you lead."

"Assuming we live through it."
"Hey," Hadrian said, "I'm coming back. I have every time before."

"But you- And even when you do, that's just-" Kaidan blurted, frustrated, "you do always come back... for another fight. For more risk. You say we can pack it in after this but what if some new threat comes up? You'd never be satisfied on the sidelines. You always come back and reenlist, the navy's your life."

"There's more to my life now. There's you now, that-"

"You'll be navy until the day you die," Kaidan moped.

Shepard rolled his eyes and gazed at the ceiling a moment, understanding where this was coming from, but it was still hard. After a long beat to try and allow some space for sincerity to percolate between them, he took a deep, cleansing breath. "That day's come and gone. Twice, now. Maybe it's time I took the hint," he said.

Kaidan felt all his tension stop for just a moment as he processed that. Hadrian sounded so... resigned? Relaxed? He'd clearly meant it- it wasn't just to placate him- and the shock of it shook Kaidan part-way out of his despair. "I don't know anybody aboard Vimy Ridge," he sighed, fumbling to change the subject.

"Well, not everyone aboard the Normandy will be as useful to my mission as they can be to yours. For keeping tabs on the Puritans' movements, Liara's Broker network will be invaluable. It already uses its own network of FTL comm buoys that the Reapers mostly overlooked, and more of it will come back online as you help restore normal civilian communications. Traynor can be your comms specialist- I'll have EDI since she's integrated to the Normandy. And if you get into any scrapes, James is a goddamned tank and Kasumi's got finesse... plus I don't think she's in any hurry to face down Reapers anyway."

"Not like you," Alenko grumbled.

"You know that isn't..." Shepard's exasperation returned briefly, but he paused and let it pass, declining to shadow-box and focusing on what he knew to be true. "I just want to win this. So that we can..." Hade gripped Kaidan's hand tighter and opened up to bare the entirety of how he felt about their impending separation. His husband's eyes immediately welled up with tears. "This is what I want," he said, emphatically.

Kaidan's mind filled with images- a deluge of vignettes and emotions. The two of them on a beach at sunset; having their friends for an elaborate holiday meal; building a house together; adopting a child, a boy- no, two boys, so that they'd always have a brother watching their backs- and raising them, showing them a peaceful galaxy; growing old together.

Kaidan pulled his hands away, overwhelmed, and wiped his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger, smiling at the same time at the unfathomable depth of affection and longing to be together Shepard was impressing upon him. "Wow," he gasped quietly.

"Yeah," Hade said softly. "Well... I'll remind you as often as I have to for you to really 'get it.' I want an end to this... once and for all... so that we can get started on our life together. And... I want to get 'better' for you- to get past this stuff going on in my head where I feel like I might be... I don't know... But I am hurting. And I know it's effecting you, too, and I hope that maybe somewhere on this path I'll find what I need. For my peace of mind, but also so that I can give you what you deserve."

They sat a minute in silence, basking as the feeling really sunk in for the distressed sentinel. Until
EDI's voice came on over the intercom.

"Commander, the executive crew and specialists are assembled in the strategy center, if you are ready."

Hadrian looked into Kaidan's eyes and rubbed his thigh gently. "I don't know... are we ready?"

'Ready' meant beginning the countdown to their separation. Meant leaving the moment they were in, together, and moving forward and apart, toward some hoped-for end when the strife would be over. He didn't really want to be 'ready'... but Hadrian needed him to be.

"Yeah..." Kaidan leaned in and kissed Shepard, nuzzling their foreheads together for a long moment after. "Yeah, let's go."

-X

7 hours later

-X

After the post-Bahak debriefing and Shepard explaining the upcoming crew transfers, he and Kaidan had retired to their cabin for a last bit of solace together before they had to go their separate ways. They'd talked, they'd made frantic, needful love to each other. They'd laughed and wept and packed Kaidan's bags and had sex again, slower and more tender than before. Finally they'd just sat or laid together, hands locked one in the other, communing sympathetically- feeling each other, sharing their most intimate thoughts and hopes. "Let the bastards listen," Hadrian had said.

Then it was time. The task force was headed for a gas giant to discharge their static sinks and shuttle over the transferring crew, and Hadrian and Kaidan were headed toward the shuttle bay. Hand-in-hand and each carrying one of Alenko's bags, they walked in silence to the lift, rode it to the main deck, and through the 'exchange' into the fore/aft corridor. When they reached the memorial wall, though, Kaidan brought them to a stop. They stood in front of the monument to the fallen that had been brought over from the Normandy's predecessor, and Kaidan set down the ruck sack he was carrying. "Just a second," he said. Outside, the swirling light of the galaxy hurtling past sharpened into distinct pinpricks as they dropped from FTL near their destination.

As Kaidan knelt down to reach into the bag, Shepard reached out and idly picked at the small gouge in the surface. He looked back to his husband when Kaidan stood back up, clasping something wrapped in a length of black cloth.

"You've never asked, but I know that bothers you," Kaidan said, "and before I left I wanted to... I want to leave something with you." He looked to the bundle in his hands for a long moment before holding it out to Hadrian.

"What is it?" Shepard asked. Kaidan unfolded the cloth cover to reveal a metal plate engraved with Hadrian's name. One corner of the plate had a noticeable ding. Kaidan took a deep breath and a second to compose himself.

"When we were marooned on that planet after Crucible Day..." he said, his voice tightening with remembered grief, "about a month in... for the sake of the crew, to help them feel some closure... to move on and focus on what we had to do to survive there... we held a ceremony. Hackett had told me that you were..."

"That it was time to put my name up there," Hade finished, sparing Kaidan the saying of it. Alenko nodded slowly.
"It was the worst day of those eleven months we spent there. I didn't want to do it... didn't want to make you... I hated it. I stood there in front of all of them and I stuck the goddamned thing there-right there," he touched his fingertips to the pit in the surface, "and then... then I didn't look at the thing for ten months. I couldn't. I'd walk past it almost every day, and I..."

Hadrian put his hands on Kaidan's shoulders softly and waited. Alenko swallowed the lump in his throat and pressed onward.

"Your name was on there, and I was... part of me was dead, too. I went through the motions, I survived... I led, because they needed me to. I wasn't sure I'd ever be happy again... It got a little better when I found the... when I found something to hold on to, to feel like you were close again, but deep down... I didn't feel whole. I was out of the pit I'd been in, was sitting at the edge of it with a calm look on my face, but it was still there. The hole inside, and your name on that wall... And then our rescue came. And part of me was... glad... when I thought we were going to leave the Normandy behind there. Were going to leave this there. But then they said they were bringing the whole ship, the wall included."

"It gets better, though," Shepard said gently, trying to coax his partner toward the happier part of the story.

"It did... when Liara told me that we might have a way to bring you back. That tiny bit of hope that I'd see you again was..." Kaidan thought back to that day, and squeezed the plaque tighter. "I came back to the wall and I tore your name off of it... it was on there so strong that I needed a crowbar to pry it off. And then I hid it. I've kept it hidden ever since."

"I'm not sure I..."

"It was like... if I could keep your name off that wall, I could have you back. And if it was hidden then... I don't know... I just never wanted to have to put this back up there."

"You won't," Shepard promised in a hushed voice.

"No," Kaidan sighed, "I won't... because I'm not keeping this anymore. You're taking it with you. It's only right- it's yours. You... you keep it safe. Keep it off that wall. Stay alive."

"I swear," Hadrian said, pulling Kaidan closer. They embraced and held on for dear life.

"And I'm... I'm going to fight like hell to hold you again," Kaidan vowed, though it felt eerie to repeat the words he'd said that dark day in London.

"Just keep your head down," Hade instructed, "stay alive yourself, and I'll be back for you." He looked over Kaidan's shoulder out the window at the Vimy Ridge gliding silently alongside. "We... we should get to the shuttle," he murmured unhappily, "the longer we loiter here at sublight, the more chance the Puritans have to drop in on us."

"I'm going to go the rest of the way myself," Kaidan said. He placed the plaque in Hadrian's hands and held his own out to receive the other bag that Shepard was carrying for him. "It'll be easier..."

"I promise you," Shepard said emphatically, "what you thought about me... wanting to... It's not true. I want to live, and I'm coming back for you." He handed over the ruck sack and kissed Kaidan, nuzzling against him. But his husband was right- parting in front of everyone in the shuttle bay would be... It wouldn't do. So he held the cloth-shrouded name plate to his chest and watched wistfully as Kaidan walked away, disappearing around the gentle curve of the hallway. He took a deep breath, held it, and followed it out, turning to his meditative techniques to steady and center
himself.

Love you, he projected with his mind.

Love you, came the reply.

Hadrian watched out the window as his frigate's twin descended alongside into the magnetosphere of the planet below, and extended her static sink's grounding rod. A couple minutes later, the shuttle bearing his love and several of his friends appeared in his field of view, with the port modular operations pod that served as Liara's cabin and Shadow Broker nerve center in tow via outrigged scaffolding. It carefully made its way toward the Vimy Ridge, disappearing into her docking bay. He placed his hand to the window and reached out with his mind again.

Love you.

There was a pause, and then faintly, at the periphery of his consciousness, he felt the reply. Not as distinct as words, but the warmth of Kaidan reaching back out to him from the other ship. Hade shut his eyes and breathed the feeling in and out, holding it close.

A short while later, the sensation grew dimmer and more distant. Shepard opened his eyes and saw the shuttle on its way back, with the other ship's port pod- a long-range mission support suite- to take the place of Liara's cabin. The frigates sailed through the dusky clouds in parallel, and then- it had to be Kaidan's first order on-board- the Vimy Ridge gently rolled over a hundred and eighty degrees to fly 'upside-down,' bringing the matching corridor window into view. They were standing in the same spot on their respective ships, gazing at each other across the few hundred meters separating them.

Then- as though reluctant- the other ship began slowly pulling away, widening the gap between them. And then the feeling was... not gone, but not present, either. Hadrian was left with what he could hold on to- the feeling in his mind, and the plaque Kaidan had put in his hands.

The shuttle turned and slid inside the hangar, and EDI's voice came on over the intercom.

"Commander, the shuttle has landed. Static venting is complete. We are prepared to get underway, if you are ready," she said.

With one last, longing look at the shrinking frigate in the window, he cleared his throat and turned his back to the stars, putting his fingertips to the same spot on the memorial wall where Kaidan's had rested minutes earlier.

"I'm ready," he said. "Let's go."
Hadrian woke up to his alarm at 0545 hrs, his hand resting in the eerily vacant space Kaidan usually occupied in their bed. His heart immediately felt heavy, and he grimaced at the prospect of facing the day- and who-knew how many more ahead- without his husband at his side. He'd made up his mind to stick with his routine as best he could, which meant he had fifteen minutes to get to the starboard hangar for P-T with the ground team.

He pulled on his sweats and had an enriched breakfast bar and a cup of green tea, and grabbed a sports drink out of the mini fridge to take with him. There was an awkward quiet throughout the corridors as he made his way toward the back of the ship- besides the conversations that conspicuously weren't happening because of those who'd left with Vimy Ridge, the crew that remained were on eggshells around their commander.

When he arrived at the hangar bay, Moore nodded in greeting.

"Commander," he said, "ready for some Moore pain, Sir?"

"Don't think that you can seduce me just because my husband's away, Lieutenant," Hade chuckled, though a bit sadly, setting his bottle down and starting to stretch his arms across his chest.

Moore must have figured there would be some comfort to be found in familiar routine, too- including their banter. "Settle for making you my half-hour bitch, Sir," he retorted, grinning back down at his clipboard.

"What did we do without this guy, seriously?" Jack asked, smiling wickedly.

Everyone's eyes turned toward the door as Herman and Cortez meandered in, talking to each other in lowered voices and wearing subdued smiles.

"Nice of you to join us, gentlemen," Moore called out. The other two men looked at each other, Steve smirked and they started to diverge.

"Not me today, Lieutenant," he replied, "bird needs too much work."

"Yeah, I'll bet your bird's a bit wrecked!" Jack quipped. Hadrian shot her a brief dirty look on behalf of Cortez's dignity, which she caught, and then looked over at the pilot to see how he'd taken her crude double-entendre, which she also noticed. More perceptive than he gave her credit for- maybe it was having worked for several months at Grissom Academy supervising horny teenagers- Jack put the pieces together immediately and her face popped with surprise. "I'll be goddamned!" she blurted.

"What?" Garrus asked, puzzled.
"Jack," Shepard said in a no-nonsense tone. She narrowed her eyes at him. He shook his head at her tensely. She took a moment to consider what he was capable of and what he'd survived, and made a similarly quick calculation.

"I just realized I left the oven on," she snorted sarcastically.

"The oven?"

"We humans do that all the time, Garrus," Hade said, giving Jack a subtle nod. "I'll go check on it in a minute. Go ahead and start without me, Lieutenant- you can ride me extra hard when I get back."

Moore laughed, smiled, and shook his head, setting down his clipboard and mustering the team to start their workout. Hadrian noticed Herman's eyes following him as he walked over to where Cortez, blushing slightly, was starting his work on the trashed shuttle from their Bahak mission. Rounding the corner of the shuttle to where Steve was running his diagnostic scan, he leaned casually on the hoist that the craft was jacked up on. Cortez shot him a quick sideways glance and cleared his throat.

"So," Hade grinned.

"Yeah," the flight lieutenant murmured.

"You and Herman?"

"You were there when we got back from the Project asteroid... He... ah... I didn't even realize that he... you know." Steve cocked his head a little to the side, smiling awkwardly. "We haven't-"

"None of my business," Hadrian said, showing his raised palms in a pacifying display.

"Well... I feel like I owe you some kind of-"

"You don't," Shepard smiled. "We had a moment, it was what it was. If you've got a shot at something more, then I'm happy for you. I'm sure Kaidan will be, too."

Steve let out a tense breath, relaxing a little. "The timing was weird, but at the same time... if he'd said anything before that shuttle crash, I'm not sure if I'd have been... I mean, I guess I knew something was simmering. With the three of us, I mean. And I had some notion of where it could maybe go... but I didn't know that I wanted anything more than that until it happened and I knew what it wouldn't be." He looked over at Herman, who was following Moore in warm-up jumping jacks, and another involuntary smile crept into his face. "Anyway, he told me how he feels and we spent the night talking... just talking... but I do like him too. I always did find him cute, and I guess somewhere in those late-night conversations we had... so... yeah, I'm interested in seeing where it goes."

"Not meddling, I swear, but... do you think he's gotten past Deacon?" Hadrian asked, sincerely concerned.

"He's still sad about that," Steve nodded, understanding, "but he was a little sad with Deacon, too. They weren't... well, Ben wasn't getting everything he wanted out of that. So... small steps, but I think we could..." He shrugged, a little flustered. Shepard put a hand on his shoulder and jostled him affectionately.

"I'm happy for you," he reiterated. "So does he know about...?"
"Yeah," Steve said, blushing anew. "I told him- I figured I owed him that after he opened up to me... Didn't want him to find out later, if things got more serious, or from someone else. He was okay with it," he grinned, "a little curious, actually, I think."


"Good," Cortez said in a mock serious tone, "I'm not quite ready to be an inaugural member of the CSV Normandy Swingers' Club."

"Well, when I invite him along with you to supper once Kaidan's back, you'll let him know it's innocent, I trust," Shepard grinned.

"Will do," Steve agreed, then nodded toward the shuttle. "I should probably get on with this, we might need her back in the air before this is over."

"Carry on, I should go check on that 'stove' anyway, or Garrus will." Hade's attention was drawn to EDI and chief engineer Adams entering the hangar with the keen look of people on a mission. "What's this now?" he asked. He patted Cortez on the shoulder again and started towards the duo. "You two look busy," he remarked.

Adams was looking intently at a display projected from his omni-tool and EDI seemed not to be all 'there,' following him but apparently distracted. "Commander," Adams acknowledged. "We're just trying to track down an anomaly."

"What kind of anomaly?" Hadrian asked.

"Well, our internal electrical charge is building faster than it should be, given our power expenditure. We're trying to track the source of the additional input to our systems- it's minute, would probably have gone unnoticed aboard any other ship, but EDI was in a unique position to notice it."

"Are we in any danger?"

"The variance amounts to fifteen seconds off our otherwise projected operational time before having to dump the static sinks. The bigger question is whether the source is powering some foreign device that could pose a threat to our systems," EDI explained. She was gravitating toward the cargo bay at the back of the hangar, and Shepard fell into step behind her and Adams.

"I don't like this," he remarked. "You think it's the Puritan infantry unit we captured?"

"My inspection of it before we brought it back to the Normandy found no wormhole assembly connecting the drone to a parent ship. But it may have its own on-board powerplant generating power after all, despite appearing inert when we salvaged it." They walked into the cargo bay where the spindly machine was held in the center of the room, held upright between four sturdy beams that had been welded at either end to the ceiling and floor, forming a tight cage against the edges of the widest part of the device. Crewman Ouellete was standing guard, armed not with a gun but an omni-tool configured to control a small device they'd built and attached to the drone, to lift its grounding 'tail' off the floor, and to deploy an overload pulse into the unit if necessary. He nodded to the three as they entered and Hadrian invited him to relax a moment.

"Are you picking up any activity from it?" Hade asked. EDI studied the drone carefully as they approached it, and held up her hand in the signal for 'hold back' she'd learned from Shepard in the field. The two humans stood cautiously as she continued forward.

"The electrical charge is seeping into our grid from the drone," she announced, sounding equal
parts curious and irritated. "But I still do not detect a conventional powerplant's emissions. With your permission, Commander, I would like to proceed with an internal examination." Hadrian nodded his assent, and EDI stepped forward, scanning the drone with her omni-tool for an access point to penetrate its chassis.

After a minute of study and scrutiny, she dug her finger tips into an invisibly fine seam and pulled the hull open, revealing some of the inner workings. The design looked elegant and inscrutable, with almost organic lines, but EDI began running her hands over the components with purpose and seeming intuition.

"Does that make sense to you, EDI?" Adams asked, fascinated. "I can't imagine where I'd start or what I'd make of any of that- it's as alien as anything I've ever seen."

"My brief access to their database earlier offered some guiding insights," EDI replied. She gripped a flexible-looking metal tube and folded it out of the way to probe behind it. "When the Puritans emigrated from the Milky Way, their technology was designed for utility- their 'infantry' are actually telepresence surrogates designed to emulate their physiology for 'manual labour' in hostile environments. Tasks like resource extraction or external ship maintenance. Their 'fighters,' too, are primarily built for mining asteroids. Both have been re-purposed for the current conflict, but-" she peeled away a pliable metallic panel, exposing a triangular lozenge-shaped component marked with three indented dots deep near the center of the machine- "while I did not acquire detailed technical schematics, their anatomy still suggests where to search for a vital system like power generation or control. Fascinating," she said, gazing at the device.

"You found its 'brain,' I take it?" Adams asked.

"More than that, I believe. The control and the power distribution networks both converge at this component, suggesting it is analogous to both the 'brain' and the 'heart.' Its energy output is miniscule, but it appears to be charging an internal capacitor which, once fully charged, continuously outputs the 'overflow' via the same 'tail' that grounds and protects them from overload attacks unless they're lifted aloft."

"So where's the power coming from?" Shepard inquired.

"Still unknown. I could try to interface with the control network and access a diagnostic system to analyze its functioning."

"Would that be safe?"

"Given the inability of their network security VIs to repel my earlier intrusion, I believe the worst-case scenario is that they sever the drone's connection. But the interceptor craft had no traps or failsafes, I suspect the same is true of the drone." EDI stood by, waiting for permission as Shepard mulled over the decision. Finally he nodded.

"Tread lightly," he cautioned, "just see if you can figure out how the thing works. If it can provide a line in to their network like the fighter did, it might be best not to try and exploit it just yet. If you can avoid raising any alarm on their end..."

"Then they may be unaware that we have captured the unit, and may not sever the connection, allowing us to retain it as... an 'ace in the hole?' I believe that is the popular expression."

"Exactly," Hade confirmed. Having received his blessing, EDI configured an interface jack that folded out of the end of one of her fingers, and inserted it into a compatible port inside the unit. She cocked her head as her mental processes extended into the alien machine, exploring its
"Fascinating," she said, almost cooing. "Data in, data out, and energy transfer, keeping with their trinary bias... Given the number of carriers we have observed, and their complement of interceptors- assuming three drones per interceptor- I wonder where they acquired so many!"

"So many what?" Adams asked.

"Entangled photons, Engineer Adams. Their drones are driven by a trio of entangled photons. One as a command input channel from their control center, one as a telemetry uplink channel back, and one used to translate power to the unit's capacitor."

"Wait, they're using an entanglement communicator to relay wireless power to their infantry?" Hadrian queried. "That's a thing?"

"Data transmission is energy transmission," EDI said. "By devoting one of their QEC 'channels' purely to energy transfer, they can satisfy the lower power requirements of the drones- lower relative to their interceptors."

"And like their fighters, the connection wouldn't be able to be jammed- only disengaged at one end or the other," Adams elaborated, clearly impressed.

"Hold on," Hadrian said, concern rising in his tone, "doesn't that mean that whoever's controlling the thing at their end, has 'eyes' on us right now?"

"Perhaps its inactivity indicates that its controls are unattended. They may have considered it lost with its parent insertion vehicle."

"Or they could just be playing possum and waiting for the right moment to strike," Hade speculated.

"That is a possibility," EDI conceded. Shepard looked again at the physical braces used to hold the drone in place, scrutinizing it vis-a-vis what they knew about the units' capabilities. If the thing suddenly lashed out, the flexible metallic tentacles within might have been capable of breaking it out of its restraints.

"If we don't know whether we can secure it more... securely... do you think it would be safe to yank the unit?" he asked.

"Severing the data linkages would seem to present little risk, but I am uncertain what will happen if we remove it from the power distribution network. If the energy transfer continues, presumably that power will need to go somewhere."

"Well... keep squishy crew out of its reach, unless you can cut its fucking arms off. And see if you can put together something to let us hold on to the control unit while bleeding off its power, so we can get it out of there ASAP," Shepard instructed. He eyed the drone suspiciously, recalling the damage three of them had done to his ground team on Rannoch, and how close they'd cut it on Noveria in determining their weakness.

"Yes, Commander," EDI said, withdrawing her hand from where she'd jacked in to the unit's systems. She looked to Adams and, seeming to intuit her intentions, they headed for the door, starting to discuss what they'd need to assemble a safe housing device.

"Didn't I hear somewhere that it costs a few million credits to build just one Entangler?" Ouellette asked as Shepard started to depart the bay himself.
"According to the Illusive Man, yeah," Hade confirmed, thinking back to his first time stepping onto the QEC holo-platform on Minuteman Station- from his perspective- almost a year ago.

"Huh... good question from EDI, then. I wonder how people living in their version of the quarian flotilla, on their way out of the galaxy, could afford to build so many of them." The young crewman shrugged.

"When people are desperate they can manage some pretty unlikely economic feats," Shepard said. "From the time that I first saw one, to the Reapers invasion seven months later, the Alliance and the Council built up a network of a few hundred of them. Can't have been cheap, but they pulled it off. Carry on, Crewman."

Hadrian left the cargo bay and heard Moore counting off pushups for the ground team, and immediately felt his mood lighten. The talk of Reapers and Cerberus and Puritans had made him feel skittish, but working out... that was a small thing that he could handle. He jogged over to where his fellow soldiers were exercising, a small smile creeping on to his face, and dropped to the deck next to Herman.

"Nice of you to join us, Commander Smart-ass," Moore said. "You're seventy-one behind the pack and I'm sure we'd love for you to catch up. Better hustle, Sir."

With a grin, Shepard concentrated and willed a singularity into being just above his heels. As the gravity well pulled at his mass he moved it into the air, pulling his body vertical until he was doing hand-stand pushups. At double the pace of everyone else. Moore watched for a moment looking bemused before shaking his head and continuing down the line with his count.

As Hadrian looked over at Herman- discreetly stealing a look up and down the marine's shapely back- Ben raised an eyebrow at the commander. "Doesn't using biotics like that take trained movements, like to fire the eezo nodes right?" he asked in breaths between pushups.

"Ah... yeah," Shepard replied, only now noticing himself what he'd done. "Normally. Huh. I guess since my... recovery... mine have been getting easier and easier to use. Especially since I got over the 'charge' hump." Then he noticed the ease with which he was doing his hand-stands and carrying on a conversation. He wasn't out of breath... he wasn't even straining. A moment running his attention through his body, taking 'inventory,' made him realize that without even trying he was using his biotics to micromanage his own mass. "Wait, what am I...?" he muttered.


"Not deliberately," Hade said. "I should-" Abruptly he lowered his feet to the deck in front of him and stood up, looking over at Moore, whose eyes had immediately locked back on to him.

"Done already, Commander?" he asked in a mock scolding voice.

"Need a minute of your time, Lieutenant," Hadrian said, nodding sideways toward the exit. Moore could easily have given him grief for disrupting the routine, but immediately recognized that this wasn't their usual tete-a-tete.

"Finish up a hundred and then entertain yourselves with some hand-to-hand drills, guys," Dan instructed before walking with Shepard out of the hangar to the corridor between the armoury and number one operations module.

"What's up, Sir?" he asked.

"I need to check something and who better than another vanguard to help me out."
"Check on what?"

"My biotics," Shepard replied, leading the way across the ship to the port shuttle bay. "They're getting... not sure, stronger, or just easier to use. Herman just noticed me clenching a singularity without any somatic work."

"Seriously?" Dan looked a bit skeptical, but he didn't make a habit of questioning Shepard.

"I didn't even realize I was doing it until he pointed it out. And I don't think it was the first time. I just need to see what I can do."

Moore's face lit up and he acquired a crooked grin. "Are you asking me to dance, boss?"

"Will you be my prom date, El-tee?" Hadrian asked, smirking.

"I've been waiting six months to put you over my knee, Sir." Moore cracked his knuckles enthusiastically as the duo entered the hangar and the lights came on.

"And I'll get a kick out of it if you can, but I hope your ego isn't too invested."

As they reached the middle of the floor, Moore bounced on the spot a couple times and assumed a combative posture. "Open up wide for your medicine, Commander Smart-ass-"

Without warning, Shepard spun on his heel to face the other vanguard, flicked his hand in Moore's direction, and thrust him back several feet through the air. Dan landed on his feet, barely, and stumbled backward another pace, catching his breath. He shot Shepard a wide-eyed look of surprise.

"Ooh okay, I see how it is," he said. "So are there any rules here?"

"Don't try to seriously injure each other, and don't wreck the ship," Shepard shrugged.

"Cool." Moore tried to take Hadrian by surprise with a biotic throw of his own, only to have the high mass field crash against a personal barrier that Shepard erected around himself, blunting the force. Which was a new trick for him, but seemed to come naturally now as a re-tooling of the charge skill.

Shepard in turn reached out with a low mass envelope, wrapping it around Moore and drawing him up off the deck, dangling him helplessly in the air. But then, on a hunch, he re-shaped and tweaked the field to essentially encase the other soldier in a shell of static mass, holding him immobile for a moment before releasing him. Moore dropped to the floor and steadied himself, confused. He knew very well the Alliance's regimen of training for vanguards, and stasis definitely was not a part of it.

"That hardly seemed fair, boss," Dan grumbled, shaking his arms to loosen up and glaring slightly. Shepard smirked again.

"So...? I thought I was getting spanked here, come on."

Moore grimaced a little, annoyed, and started running toward the commander, summoning up his concentration and plotting his attack. As he closed to melee range he tried a biotic uppercut, but Shepard deftly side-stepped it and Moore found himself floating up off the floor again, the artificial gravity's grip on him loosening as he tumbled into a low mass channel. Hadrian spun around and with a downward slice of his arm reversed the effect and slammed Moore to the deck. The lieutenant managed a partial roll but still landed hard on his ass. He glared up at Shepard, who seemed utterly nonchalant.
"Alright, smart ass-"

"Commander Smart-ass, no?"

Moore jumped up from the floor and unleashed a short-range shockwave trying to blast Shepard off his feet, but the barrier was back and Hadrian was only pushed back a few inches on his heels. It seemed enough of an opening for Dan to press his attack, lunging forward and throwing a combo of biotically bolstered punches. Shepard stepped back out of reach of the first, bobbed to the side of the second, and interrupted the third with blast of force that threw Moore back several feet.

"Son of a bitch!" Moore snapped, shaking his head with frustration.

"That's an admiral you're talking about," Hadrian quipped.

"Kick his ass!" Jack's voice.

The two men looked toward the door and noticed the other members of the ground team had made their way over from the other hangar to watch, and Jack was practically chomping at the bit as though she wanted to join in.

"Who?" both vanguards asked in unison, then looked at each other.

"Kick Shepard's ass, stupid!" she demanded.

"You heard the lady," Dan glowered.

"That's no 'lady,'" Hade chuckled.

"Bite me!" Jack made a fist and suddenly lobbed a high mass missile at Shepard from the sidelines.

"Hey! Interference!" he laughed loudly, dodging it. Moore seized on the distraction and surged forward, swinging a biotic 'haymaker' but Shepard 'grabbed' Dan in another rigid 'shell' of high mass field branes and flung him in an arc upward and to one side, stripping it away a moment later to let the lieutenant try to 'catch' himself.

Moore was headed for the corner of the bulkhead and the ceiling, and reacting with highly trained reflexes and surprising ingenuity, he planted a foot on the wall, oriented himself toward Shepard, and exploded forward in a biotic charge.

It was normally a brutally violent maneuver, crippling or killing whoever it hit, but Moore was skilled enough that he'd aimed to complete the charge just in front of Shepard and planned to strike more conventionally as he emerged from it. It didn't matter, however- Shepard blasted a wave of chaotic mass effect fields between them and the erratic pulse destabilized the high mass 'target' point and collapsed Moore's corridor of zero mass, causing him to drop unceremoniously in mid-air. But rather than let the lieutenant crash to the floor again, Shepard caught him in a cushion of low mass like an air-bag.

Moore landed on his feet, short of breath from the shock of having his charge aborted.

"That shouldn't be possible," he said, his awe shutting down his irritation at being so thoroughly thwarted. Shepard looked just as startled.

"I don't know exactly how, but... a month ago I was still struggling to charge, and now... it's just like second nature. I think about it and it happens," he said.
"Well fuck me," Dan snorted, "so after factoring in that I gotta' work harder for it, we'll call it a draw?" Hadrian flashed a toothy grin and gave up a conciliatory nod.

"Sounds fair," he chuckled. "You ever want to try again to spank me..." Dan rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Oh, there'll be a rematch, but I'll leave that to your husband," he said, extending his hand. Hadrian gave it a friendly shake.

"Aw come on!" Jack groaned, disappointed. "Stop eye-fucking each other and fight some more!" The rest of the ground team laughed, murmuring comments to each other and started to file out to get back to their exercises, but Jack crossed her arms and stood shaking her head at the two vanguards as they approached the door. "'Moore pain' my ass, that was embarrassing," she sniped.

"Hey, I couldn't whup the boss in front of his crew," Moore said, "it would be bad for morale."

"Yeah right," Jack snorted. "You ever want to really dance, you come to me," she said, jabbing Shepard in the ribs with her elbow. "I'll smack the shit out of you."

"I won our last sparring session," Dan said, earning a dirty look.

"You're a cheat, you fought even dirtier than I do!" Jack snapped.

"You're still undisciplined," Moore retorted. "If anyone needs a spanking-"

"Fuck you, boyscout two-point-oh!"

Shepard chuckled to himself as Moore and Jack continued on ahead, continuing to bicker. Re-joining the P-T session suddenly didn't feel all that urgent- his biotic talent was definitely growing. He was doing things he'd only heard described before by more specially trained pure biotics, and without practice. By intuition. He'd switched mass effect field polarities on the fly, which he'd previously only ever been able to do while spooling up his barrier during a biotic charge. It had taken him years to learn and master his skills the first time, but since waking up 'a new man' aboard the salvaged SR-2 almost seven months ago, he'd blown past old limitations.

He could only privately assume that it had to do with his biotics being 'inherited' from his formerly adori body, one more gift from an alien he'd never known but who'd given up his life to transform into Shepard's 'reincarnation.'

Most of those reminders were unnerving, or distressing. But as strange as this was, he was starting to like it.

It did cause some mixed feelings though as he thought about Kaidan- who was so instrumental in bringing him back. Part of him was sad that his husband wasn't here to see what he could do; he felt certain their training together had played a big part in unlocking these new skills.

But at least exploring it would offer some distraction from the loneliness.
Kaidan stepped onto the CIC of his temporary command. Though he'd come aboard a stranger to Vimy's crew, he had settled in fairly well and found the ship in fine form. Virtually identical in construction to the Normandy, like the SR-1 she was named for a French battlefield, but her namesake harkened to the First World War rather than the Second. He had to admit that it felt providential, taking command of a vessel named for what many of his fellow Canadians considered an event when their nation 'came of age.' Like his countrymen then, he was having to step up and demonstrate now that he could hold his own.

He nodded to his XO, Captain Jonas Devost, who had commanded the Vimy Ridge as far as Bahak before Alenko had been transferred aboard. It had been a month since they'd assumed the Normandy's previous mission deploying comm buoys and checking in on colonies orphaned by the Crucible Day collapse of the mass relay network, and keeping tabs on the Puritans' invasion of the galaxy. Fortunately it appeared that their speculation was at least partly correct; since their ships had parted ways and Kaidan and Hadrian had lost their synthe empathic connection, no new fronts had opened up. The Puritans' activities appeared limited to continuing to process the captive populations of Rannoch, Sur'Kesh, Noveria, Feros and Aephis, but the enemy hadn't turned up anywhere new. Without the pair's mental communications to eavesdrop on, they couldn't seem to decide where to strike next.

Kaidan and Hadrian had kept in touch via the QECs, but only second-hand, to minimize the chance of 'coincident thinking.' Kaidan would receive a call wherein EDI or Cortez or Garrus would relate the Normandy's progress and tell him that Shepard missed him, and he would have Liara or Traynor or Vega call back some time later to pass on his own reports and words of affection. The most sensitive reports were handled entirely be intermediaries to widen the 'gap' even more. Without even discussing it, though, they'd fallen into the joking habit of getting Garrus and Cortez respectively to relay their most intense personal messages, to watch the video logs later of them squirming as they read the lurid scripts verbatim.

"How are things this morning?" Kaidan asked. Devost handed over a datapad with the previous shift's activity logs.

"All quiet," the XO said, sounding bored, "as usual. There was one injury, Private Ohl cut his hand chopping an onion for omelettes."

"We'd better call Earth, get some reinforcements," Kaidan joked.

"In other news, we're about to deploy the comm buoy for the system. Traynor's already in the lab ready to start the network linkups and diagnostics."

"Chomping at the bit for something to do, eh?" Alenko grinned. "I know the feeling." He browsed the reports in his hand before offering it back to Devost and rubbing the back of his neck, antsy. "I think I'll go check in on her. Carry on, XO."
"Aye aye, Sir."

Kaidan made his way through the security checkpoint and strategic center and into the communications lab where he found Traynor and the ship's geth operational chief- who'd accepted the monicker 'Nivelle Offensive' in a callback to the same heritage as Vimy's name- preparing to configure the new FTL communications buoy once it was launched.

"Don't bother, cancel the launch, there's no need" he said, "turns out if we close our eyes and concentrate really hard, we can reach out and make mind-to-mind connections now with anyone, anywhere in the galaxy."

"While that would be amazing, it sounds like the sort of thing I should be reporting to you," Samantha smiled. "Plus, it wouldn't be much use for transmitting electronic data from one computer to another."

"The geth can handle that, can't they Nivelle?" Kaidan asked, looking inquiringly toward the geth platform.

"Geth galactic networking infrastructure was minimally impacted by the Reaper invasion. Our late entry to the conflict meant the old machines had bypassed them while attacking Council targets. Thus far, however, only geth platforms and vessels produced by Project Phoenix Flight are configured to interface with said infrastructure," Nivelle replied. "For our FTL net to replace former Council infrastructure would require widespread implementation of geth data transfer architecture."

"For what it's worth," Sam mused, "that means that even if we didn't have the entanglers, we could send data via the geth's buoy network to the Normandy, or the Shepard, the Anderson, or any of the other new Council ships."

"Ah, well, never mind then, carry on."

"You must be getting bored, yourself," Traynor remarked. Kaidan shrugged.

"A little. It's weird, you know? We had peace and we made jokes about how boring that was. We got a new war and we complained about how hard things were. Now the invasion's still going on but we're off the front line until we come up with a strategy, and it's..." He shook his head, a little bewildered by what he was saying without wanting to.

"Dull," Sam offered, completing his thought. "You know, the only thing in chess that I like less than a game where I'm losing is one where we end up playing so defensively that nothing really happens."

"But I hate to complain about not getting shot at. I feel like I'll jinx us."

"Perceived 'jinxes' are an irrational response to coincidental phenomena," Nivelle stated bluntly. In all Kaidan's dealings with geth programs since their advent as fully realized individual AIs, Nivelle Offensive was among the most opinionated- and the most likely to volunteer its opinions- that he'd met. Its personality seemed a bit more developed than, say, Delegate's aboard the Normandy.

"The buoy is away and in place," Sam remarked. "I'm sending the startup sequence." Nivelle's platform slouched forward and the lights in its 'face' dimmed out as it uploaded its program into the ship to speed up its work in testing the device's configuration. "So," Traynor said idly, "I noticed this one was the last buoy in the cargo bay. Where are we headed after this if we're done this wave of 'cable laying?"
"Iera to deploy our last buoy, Feros to check on the Puritans' presence there, Palaven to pick up a shipment of small arms, then Sur'Kesh to deliver them to Kirrahe's resistance, in case they ever decide it's time to start shooting. Then back to Earth for more comm buoys."

"How exciting," The console in front of her beeped and Sam looked down at the display, lifting her hands palms up with frustration. "Oh come on," she groaned, "a timing error? Half a dozen of these things, no complications whatsoever, and the second-to-last one I get a timing error."

"How long will that take to correct?" Kaidan asked.

"Oh, who can say- if I go by a buggered clock it could be a nanosecond or a million years." Traynor smiled broadly and then cracked up, shaking her head and laughing half-hysterically at her own joke. Kaidan looked at Nivelle, who'd apparently re-inhabited its platform, as its head bobbed up and down slightly, prompting Kaidan to wonder if the geth was trying to figure out the humour-debatable as it was- or whether it was engaged in its own version of a laugh.

"Uh... are you gonna' be okay?" he asked as Sam clutched her abdomen, staggering forward a step, breathless with laughter. Calling attention to her predicament only seemed to make it worse and she howled, wiping her eyes and clutching the edge of the console to hold herself up.

"Specialist Traynor appears to be in some pulmonary distress," Nivelle remarked. Sam screamed and stumbled another step forward, her hand landing on the geth's forearm instead of the work station.

And then things got weird.

Sam's jubilant fit sputtered haltingly, interspersed with a puzzled, placid expression, and Nivelle Offensive- amazingly- belted out a synthesized mimicry of Traynor's laughter. After a moment, she snapped her hand away, like she's just noticed that she'd placed it on a hot stove. She groaned, put a hand on her face, wobbled dizzily, and slumped forward. Reacting quickly, Kaidan caught her as her body dropped, but couldn't do the same when the geth platform's lights flickered and went out, collapsing heavily to the deck.

The lights in the comm lab began flickering, and an unsettling, chaotic noise started crackling over the intercom speaker.

"Alenko to Med Bay!" Kaidan shouted. There was no coherent reply, just more of the electronic jibbering that rose and ebbed seemingly at random. He tried again. "Comm lab to Legace, medical emergency!" When, again, there was no answer from the medical bay, Kaidan grimaced and positioned Traynor over his shoulders, carrying her inert body toward the door.

The strategy center, too, was in chaos. As was the security checkpoint. And the corridor between the fore and aft sections of the ship, where crew were hustling to their stations to try and identify and respond to what was- it was becoming apparent- a ship-wide malfunction. The whole way to Med Bay, the lighting was waverering and strobing, and there was the grotesque cacophony of noise blaring over the internal comms.

Vimy Ridge had become a madhouse, and she was dead in the water.
The door to observation lounge opened admitting Cortez and Herman, Moore, Garrus, Specialist Li, and Crewman Ouellette. Inside, Shepard was placing several mats and cushions in a staggered pattern on the floor; after Li had asked about Hadrian's meditation technique, he'd decided to offer to lead any would-be practitioners in the crew in a group sitting twice a week. He smiled to himself thinking that Kaidan would have Kasumi to sit with aboard the Vimy, to help encourage him in Hade's absence.

"Hi guys," he said, setting down the last cushion and gesturing for them to choose seats. "Nice to see some interest."

"I already sit every day, I just thought it would be nice to try it in a group," Li said, lowering herself on to a cushion in the back corner. The others meandered around a second, picking spots—Cortez and Herman side-by-side, Moore taking the cushion closest to the one Hadrian had set up for himself in front of the rest. Garrus sat down next to Li, fumbling a little to cross his turian legs in front of himself like she had.

"Just so I'm sure, you said this stuff was part of what made you perform better in combat, right?" Moore asked, looking a bit skeptical and antsy and already bored.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Hade said, "besides making me a better person, it's part of my edge in the field."

"Okay, well then... eager to learn."

"Alright, well, first thing's first," Shepard said, taking his seat facing the others, "we're here to make friends with our minds so we can be grounded in reality, and sane, and get in touch with our-

The door opened again and Jack stood looking in awkwardly from the corridor. Shepard craned his neck a little to observe her and offered a welcoming smile, beckoning her inside with a flick of his head. "Jack. Care to join us?" he asked. She crossed her arms and stepped inside, surveying the group and making a bit of a face.

"I'm not doing any bullshit chanting," she said bluntly.

"Neither are we," Shepard grinned, "there's no need."

"No candles or incense burning?"

"Not necessary. Though we could, sometime, if people wanted to."

"Whatever. What if I get bored, can I get up and leave?" she asked.

"Any time you want, nobody has to stay if they don't want to. Chill out."

Jack let out a subdued snort and shuffled casually to the last available seat, next to Moore, plopping
unceremoniously to the cushion and resting her chin on an arm propped up on her knee. She looked over to her neighbour, who was casting a subtle smile at her and promptly straightened up his posture as if to lead by example, provoking Jack to narrow her eyes and purse her lips slightly at him.

Garrus leaned in and whispered to Li. "This should be good," he said, mandibles flicking in a turian grin. Tien seemed to ignore him, already easing into her own meditation.

"As I was saying," Hadrian resumed, "the point of this is getting to know and make friends with how our minds work. So we can be 'awake' and at peace with ourselves in a given moment. And from there there's all kinds of benefits, but the main thing is getting in touch with our... well, our basic goodness and inherent sanity."

"What if we're basically nuts?" Moore asked, smirking sidelong at Jack beside him. She stared daggers at the fellow biotic for the second time in as many minutes, but managed to restrain herself from retaliating.

"We aren't," Hade said. "We might get confused, we might learn bad habits, we might lash out because we're deluded or we're suffering ourselves- and really, that's okay too, as long as we're working on it- but we aren't basically nuts. We're good, we all want basically the same things- to be happy- and the stuff that seems like we're bad isn't the big picture. Our nature's like the wide open sky, and some days are cloudier than others. A clean glass with dirt on it isn't-"

"Boooring," Jack groaned.

"It's not boring," Steve interjected, clearly taking an interest. He seemed to realize too, though, that a lesson in Buddhist thought was losing some of the 'class.' "But maybe those of us interested in the philosophical stuff can talk about it later, so you can give the go-getters the practical stuff they want sooner rather than later. Before the natives get restless," he suggested.

"Not to sound un-supportive, but have you ever taught a class before?" Garrus asked, raising his hand.

"Zip it, Vakarian. The closest trained guide I know is twenty-thousand light-years away. You wanna' learn or not?"

"Yes," Steve and Ouelette chimed in.

"Learn to kick ass," Moore added.

"I'm mostly here with him," Herman said, putting his hand on Cortez's knee.

"Alright, then, fine- the nitty-gritty mechanical stuff," Hade grumbled, "for the go-getters." He assumed the posture he'd been taught in his youth, sitting upright with his hands on his thighs and his legs crossed in front of him. "You want to start from a feeling of being grounded, then you take an open, upright posture that isn't tight or uncomfortable... and you want to breathe naturally..."

-X

An hour later, 'class' let out. Shepard had shared his technique with them and everyone- even Jack- had sat through about thirty minutes of practice. As the rest filed out, Steve and Ben hung back.

"How was it for you?" Hadrian asked.

"Hard," Cortez chuckled. "I never realized how busy it is up here," he tapped his temple.
"He's a thinker," Herman said, affectionately leaning with his shoulder into Steve. "I'm amazed the el-tee sat through that, I thought for sure he'd bail."

"I thought for sure that I'd lose Jack," Hade said, incredulous. "But she did seem more centered on her way out than on her way in."

"Think she'll be back?" Steve asked.

"Never hurts to hope." Shepard looked out the wide window before them at the violet gas giant receding into the distance following their static sink dump into its magnetosphere.

"And you do that every day, Sir?" Herman asked.

"I try. Usually ten minutes. Sometimes it's just a couple here and a couple there, sometimes I don't really get a chance at all. If people want to do this again, though, make a regular group thing out of it, then I'd welcome getting more in."

"Well, I'll be back," Cortez smiled, "I think I like the idea of making friends with my mind."

"Glad to hear it. So... things must be going well if he's dragging you out to 'Buddhist Sunday school?'" Shepard grinned, nodding from Herman to Steve. Ben smiled, looking down at Cortez's hand and hooked their little fingers together.

"Things are alright. It would be nice if we were making any ports so we could try our hand at a real date, but things are good," Steve replied cautiously, exchanging gentle looks with the marine corporal. "What about you... you alright?"

Shepard shrugged. "Same as the last time you asked. I miss him, but last report was that he was still safe, considering. So at least there's that. I was thinking of getting Garrus to call Vega for me."

They shared a laugh at the thought of the turian reading another of Hadrian's love letters to James via the QEC, and James relating its contents to Kaidan.

"Well, after we take our next reading, at least Hallis says we might be able to get a solid bearing from Rho after one more."

"Depends on the quality of the data we get," Hade sighed. "Could be one more 'ping,' or five, or who knows? The Reapers could be anywhere, and even if we find them... I don't know, maybe Kaidan was right about this plan being nuts. I don't know exactly what I was thinking when I proposed it."

"Hey, if every thinking, feeling creature out there really does want the same things, then maybe it wasn't that crazy," Steve offered, putting his free hand on Shepard's shoulder. The link between them opened up immediately, and Hadrian felt the pilot's confidence in him flow in and dampen his own doubts. "Maybe there's some of that 'basic goodness' to be found even in those monsters. If anyone could find it and steer them toward doing the right thing..."

"Problem is, that's the kind of wishful thinking that usually precedes someone you tried to take a chance on and put some faith in turning around and acting like they don't deserve it," Hade grumbled. "And I think I'm out of extra lives."

Herman shrugged. "For what it's worth, Commander, I have faith. I applied for this assignment because of math, plain and simple. Odds of doing something great on your team, alongside the odds of making it home alive under your command... I knew that at least if I did buy it on this ship, it would be worthwhile."
"Thanks," Hadrian smiled. "I'll try to make sure that if you're horribly killed, it means something."

"Better yet, don't get him horribly killed. I like this one," Steve said, tugging at Herman's finger.

The intercom chirped, cutting in to their conversation. "Commander," EDI said, "we are preparing to get underway again. However, we are receiving a data burst on the geth FTL comm network and Delegate has requested that we finish reception of the transmission before engaging the drive."

"Alright, how long?"

"It is a sizable download, but it should be complete momentar- oh." Then Shepard heard something out of EDI that he really did not like: "Uh oh."

The lights in the room flickered momentarily and there was a whine from the power grid, but less than a second later things were back to normal. Hadrian furrowed his brow and looked around for some clue as to what was going on. "What 'uh oh,' EDI? What the hell was that?" he asked.

"Virtual crew ops have gone offline, Commander, necessitating that I add a number of our systems to my control load. Secondary power grid control, point-defense targeting, swarm intelligence drones, secondary sensor analysis, environmental optimization- nothing essential. Oh, except power routing to sublight propulsion. But this is most irregular. It seems that all of our on-board geth programs have... left their 'posts.'"

"Left their posts?" Hade asked, brow crinkling with confusion.

"Yes, Commander. Every geth program in our system is now congregating on their server in the platform storage compartment, collaborating to process the data packet we received. They have sequestered the server and they seem quite fixated."

"Are we in any danger?"

"As I said, I have compensated," EDI replied. "I will ask Delegate to report in as soon as it is no longer so... distracted."

Shepard looked back at Cortez and Herman and frowned slightly. "Geth get distracted now?" he wondered aloud.
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, Vostok system, Maroon Sea Cluster

~1 hour later

Traynor woke slowly on a Med Bay recovery ward bed. Kaidan and Dr. Legace were standing a couple meters away in the lab area talking quietly, and the lights were occasionally flickering. She looked the other way and saw Nivelle Offensive's platform from the comm lab laying inert on the bed next to hers.

"Um... hello?" she called out. Alenko and Legace immediately flocked to her side with expressions of relief but also curiosity.

"How do you feel?" Sarah asked in a cautious tone, running a scan with her omni-tool.

"Bit of a headache," Sam groaned. "It feels like the morning after my grad party. How long was I...?" Legace nodded and held Traynor in a scrutinizing gaze.

"It's been a little over six hours. I'm seeing some unusual synaptic activity and neurotransmitter levels, nothing outside safe margins. Your ICP is slightly elevated and your electrolytes are low, but we can deal with those- what I'm really concerned about is... Specialist, were you aware of your hand, Samantha. Had you noticed your hand?"

Traynor held her hands up in front of her face and her eyes got wide as she noticed the faintly glowing pattern of blue-green lines that formed a rhombus in the palm of her right hand, with an outcropping from the corner nearest her wrist extending a few centimeters up her forearm past the carpal bones. "No, I hadn't. What is that?" she asked, sounding more fascinated than worried.

"They appear to be organosilicon fibres," Legace explained. She handed over a datapad with a readout of the scans she'd taken, which didn't make a lot of sense to Traynor, but she examined them closely nonetheless. "Your body's creating them and they're branching off your median nerve, infiltrating the dermal layer. I can't say for certain what they're doing there, but they're highly photocductive- their root structure geometrically magnifies the electrical signals of your nervous system, translating them into visible light- and the orderly arrangement... well, my first instinct is that it's a new, macro level development of your synthempathic architecture."

"Like an organic fibre-optic interface with my nervous system?" Sam posited. She ran her fingertips over the patch, marveling at the anomaly.

"Doc noticed it just after you and Nivelle collapsed in the lab and we got you here," Kaidan added. "Which- what the hell was that?" Kaidan asked, puzzled.

"I- I'm not sure," Sam stammered. "I touched him and then it was just... Lights and sounds, and this explosion of ideas in my head all at once. But it was so much, so fast, then it was like a migraine and then... I guess that's when I blacked out." She looked again at the inert geth platform one bed over. "Is he...?"

"It's been inactive since you both dropped. We tried to get one of the other geth to run a diagnostic
but they're all non-responsive, along with a bunch of our systems that they normally manage." The lights flickered again, as if to punctuate, and Kaidan pointed up at the ceiling. "That, for instance. We've been getting them back operating on overrides, but as far as we can tell all of the digital crew are offline. Do you have any idea how they might be connected?"

Traynor turned to sit up on her bed and peered at the machine body, concerned. "I'm not sure," she said, sliding onto her feet and stepping over to examine it. "It's possible that-"

As she placed her hand on the geth's body to shift it for a look at its networking relay, the lights in its 'face' and conduits lit up and it let out several low electronic chirps and tones as its systems booted up. Simultaneously, the ship's lighting steadied. Sam jumped with a start as Nivelle became animated and sat upright, looking around at its surroundings.

"Specialist Traynor. Doctor Legace. Major Alenko. The medical bay as opposed to the geth servicing bay... curious. Apologies. We are now back online," it said.

"'We'?" Kaidan asked. He still got a bit jumpy whenever he heard geth refer to themselves in the plural, since it always reminded him of his more negative early experiences with them.

"All geth programs within the network mainframe of SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4. We were preoccupied with processing new data."

Sam stared at the platform's 'face,' transfixed by the impressions she was receiving via their physical connection. "Nivelle- the data you were processing-"

Nivelle chuckled and its' facial plates fluttered expressively. "The humourous nuance of exaggerated timescale," it replied, "we would have provided an estimated runtime, however... it was problematic to ascertain whether our analysis would require a femtosecond or ten to the twenty-third years." What followed was a disturbing outburst of electronic noise that resembled- in grotesque fashion- the sound of laughter. Kaidan cringed but Traynor seemed delighted.

"Wait, so we had a blackout because the geth were analysing your la- your joke?"

"Oy! You were going to say 'my lame joke?'" Sam snapped. Kaidan looked away and cleared his throat awkwardly. "Philistine. But regardless- I think we must have formed a direct connection in the lab. Nivelle received the feeling I was having about my hilarious joke, and I... well, I had just the strangest feeling of... a perspective on time, like it was..." Traynor shook her head suddenly, as though in the throes of some revelation, and practically leaped for the nearest work station, tapping at the keyboard furiously. A moment later, the station beeped a notification and Sam smiled, throwing up her hands again with excitement. "Hah!" she yelped, "Wow!"

"What's going on?"

"When we touched, I experienced a moment of... insight, I suppose... I was able to grasp, just briefly, how Nivelle conceptualizes time. Which was weird, but in the sort of after-glow of that the solution to the comm buoy's timing error came to me," Sam explained. "I just uploaded a patch that should do the trick. And apparently in the exchange he was able to get from me what was so funny about my joke, Major Deadpan," she playfully scolded.

"Acting."

Traynor giggled and sighed, closing her eyes and concentrating, as though she was trying to hold on to the fading impression in her mind. "That really was remarkable," she said. "I mean... it was a little surreal- like an altered state-"
"Had a lot of experience with those, have you? Do I need to run a drug screen?" Legace interrupted, teasing.

"Nitrous oxide in the dentist's chair. For anxiety. Well... feigned anxiety. It's a little bit of a vice of mine," Sam smirked. "And it's strange because there was a bit of a similar feeling of time dilation but it just... wow..." She snapped her head toward Nivelle and furrowed her brow, perplexed by something lingering in her mind that she couldn't quite even begin to articulate.

"No, the curve is more... red," the geth replied to her un-asked question. The exchange made no sense to Alenko, but it seemed to quell Traynor.

"So, hold on," Kaidan said, squinting at the pair, "are you saying you actually formed a synthempathic link with Nivelle? Like a real, full-blown ideation link, actually sharing thoughts? I've picked up feelings from EDI before, that sort of approximated human emotions, but I thought what you're talking about was... I mean, I thought their way of thinking and ours didn't 'translate'"

Sam and the geth operations officer looked at each other briefly and then back to the sentinel.

"I always thought so too," she said with a bit of wonderment. "And before you ask, no, I don't know how it... I mean it was the first time I've ever connected with one of the geth crew. Except for that time Commander Shepard was plugged in to the geth consensus, and the report I read about Cerberus' Project Overlord, I've never heard of anyone else actually forming a mind-to-mind link with any synthetic, either. It's... remarkable, I can't think of any other word for it. But these fibres that have shown up in my hand- they must have been able to facilitate a BCI! Er- sorry- brain-computer interface."

"I have a biotic amp implant, I know what a BCI is," Kaidan grumbled.

"My metacognitive runtimes detected a foreign data stream within my primary process" Offensive volunteered, holding up its arm where Traynor had made contact and scrutinizing it. "The invasive stream propagated via a tactile optical data feed, with encryption consistent with synthempathic signaling protocols."

"Hey- 'invasive'" Sam said, playfully feigning hurt feelings. "You make it sound like my sense of humour was malware."

"I wouldn't install it willingly," Kaidan guffawed.

"Oy! The abuse I take! Anyhow- synthempathy has been gradually evolving over time, getting easier to use. It's conceivable that this is a natural evolution of the ability, maybe even that everyone will eventually develop the same. That... wow... well that could revolutionize communications, how we interact with technology... maybe everything!"

"Nivelle, does the expression 'kid in a candy store' mean anything to you?" Kaidan grinned. Traynor shot a faux-smug look at him but couldn't help smiling.

"You make fun now, but if this is an emergent trend, you'll be coming to me later all 'oh, Traynor, help- I just ironically uploaded, I don't know, my after-action report to my porn folder, what do I do now?' or 'oh, Traynor, help- I've mentally downloaded the geth language and one one oh one oh one oh one oh one oh!"

"Definitely malware," Alenko sniped. Sam narrowed her eyes at him, at which point Legace cut in.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, "but revolutionary or whatever, to me this is a medical condition that needs to be monitored. So, Specialist, I'd like to observe you a bit longer and then release you with
"She's right," Kaidan nodded, "we should keep tabs on this. In fact, Doctor, why don't you test a random sampling of the crew and see if this is showing up- or on the verge of showing up- in anyone else. Meanwhile, Nivelle, if you could submit a report on the digital crew's condition after this event, I'd like to know how this has effected them. As well as a systems diagnostic."

"Acknowledged, Acting Major Retired." Offensive's face plates fluttered again and there was another cringe-inducing peal of electronic laughter. Traynor's face contorted into an uncomfortable smile and Kaidan raised an eyebrow, a little disturbed by the sound.

"Yes Sir," Sarah said, shaking her head at the weirdness going on around her.

"Meanwhile I'll-" Kaidan sighed, catching himself, "I mean... I'll have Liara call the Normandy and tell Hadrian about this. They should know so they can be on the lookout, try to minimize the chances of a similar systems disruption. I can call Earth to let the Council and Alliance leadership know, if they don't already."

"I'd think that if they did, they'd have told us about it," Sam said.

"Granted, but still... they might have withheld information from us, but I want to make sure we don't withhold this from them. For all we know you're the first."
"Does it hurt?" Shepard asked, looking through an illuminated, arm-mounted magnifying lens at the fine details of the tiny, faintly glowing pattern on the heel of Nymandra's hand. She shook her head and poked at it with her finger.

"No," she said, "it doesn't feel like anything, just normal skin." Screening of the Normandy's crew following Liara's call from the Vimy Ridge had turned up three cases of what they'd dubbed 'wetwiring': Nymandra, Crewman Carter and Lieutenant Calazan- though the patches on their hands were all small enough that they hadn't been noticed until Chakwas had gone looking. Medical scans had also discovered precursors in Joker, Hallis, Adams, Iren'Vanos and Crewmen Dubois and MacDonald- the fibres had begun to grow off their median nerves but not yet formed visible, dermal nodes.

"There's no immune response to the nodes," Karin said, "and I can't say that they pose a specific threat per se.

"Well, just make sure not to touch any of the geth. We can explore connecting with the synthetic crew later- if you want to, I mean- but our mission can't afford the disruption of all the geth withdrawing to check out something they picked up during a handshake."

"Of course, Commander," EDI replied. She directed a hesitant, apologetic look at Jeff, who'd also been summoned to the Med Bay to receive the news. He grimaced, clearly unhappy at the prospect of having to eschew physical contact with her until further notice.

"I know how you feel, Joker," Hadrian stressed, "believe me, I know."

"I know you do, Commander... it's... we're fine. We'll be fine," Moreau shrugged. "Though I'll be happier once we get this mission done."

"So the bump we had yesterday when all the geth went offline, that was because the geth on the Vimy Ridge decided to share a joke with all their friends galaxy-wide? Do we know how the Shepard and the Anderson and the other geth-heavy ships out there fared?" Chakwas asked, thinking of friends and colleagues she had 'out there.'

"They've reported in. The more geth they had aboard the faster they processed the data package, so Anderson and Shepard were actually quicker to recover than Vimy Ridge- they were adrift for almost seven hours. We got off easiest because EDI was able to take over every unattended system immediately," Adams replied reassuringly. "My biggest concern is someone somewhere else not getting the memo- if another burst like that went out across the geth FTL net at the wrong moment... it might be prudent for the Phoenix Flight ships deployed to isolate themselves and their geth from the network, and only make check-ins when they're in a safe condition."

"With some reluctance, I concur," Delegate said. "A mishap could compromise operation of allied
vessels at an inopportune moment. We will advise geth network-wide to enact discretionary cluster segregation."

"So that's that," Shepard said, sounding satisfied for the moment. "Karin, I'd like you to step up medical examinations among the crew and monitor those who develop this 'wetwiring.'"

"Of course," Chakwas nodded. "Perhaps you two could help me with some analysis in the meantime?" she asked, looking to Hallis and then EDI. The salarian science officer and ship's AI both agreed, eager to work on the new puzzle.

"Ah, sorry, Commander-" Calazan jumped in, "but does the prohibition against physical contact with the geth extend to working consoles connected to systems they operate virtually?"

"That shouldn't be an issue," Nymandra suggested, "our haptic interfaces aren't designed for touch-based- that is, those control surfaces shouldn't conduct a data signal the way a geth platform's 'skin' can." A figurative lightbulb came on over her head as she had an inspiration. "Oh!" she murmured, "but with the right hardware and software, though- or maybe with a geth program acting as an intermediary, I bet they could be re-designed so that they could."

"Right, interesting. Back burner," Shepard said, trying to calm her enthusiasm a bit, rather than having her getting diverted on a pet project. "So... do we have results from our Rho reading yet, anybody?" he asked.

"We are collating the newest input with previous data points," EDI reported. "Analysis should be complete shortly."

"Alright, you can report that to me when you have it. Everyone's dismissed, at your discretion, Doctor."

"I have my scans and samples from everyone, telemetry tags on the affected- I don't need anyone to stay for medical reasons," Karin smiled, gesturing toward the door. Hallis opted to stay, to pore over the scans with Chakwas, while Nymandra, Carter, Calazan, Adams, Vanos, Dubois and MacDonald headed for the main exit and Joker and EDI's chassis departed- presumably to talk in private- through the closer door to the visitors' observation area.

Hadrian left last, following most of the crew, and found MacDonald and Dubois loitering in the hallway, searching each other's palms for the first glimmer of emergent wetwiring, and Adams and Vanos meandering toward Engineering, discussing an upgrade to the engines that they were considering. He made his way past the mess and up the connecting corridor toward the forward section, momentarily wishing- as he had at least a dozen times now- that they'd built the third generation Normandy-class with a secret passage between, say, the CMO's office and the conference room head, or the galley and the comm lab.

He was just passing the doors the the conference room and his ready-room when the intercom chirped.

"Analysis of the latest Rho reading is complete, Commander," EDI announced. Hade stepped into the Strategy Center and pointed at the central holo tank.

"Anything to show me?" he asked. The holographic projection of the Milky Way flickered to life and their four waypoints appeared in sequence. EDI displayed a graphical overlay of the readings they'd compiled- the 'tempo' of the energy pulse Rho emitted in response to the Reapers' proximity- and then flashed a series of visuals depicting her analysis, ending with a colour-coded representation of their proximity at each waypoint.
"I can extrapolate a range of headings, but the variance suggests that our target is on the move. I believe two more readings-" a pair of new waypoint appeared on the map, skirting the 'Western' edge of galactic core, in the Terminus Systems adjacent to Outer Council Space- "from these locations would allow me to determine our destination with certainty."

"How long will that take?" Hadrian queried.

"I estimate six days to waypoint five, thirteen days to waypoint six... from there... depending on the availability of suitable static sink dumps, perhaps eight to eleven days." Even EDI didn't seem in a hurry to finish the sentence with 'to the Reapers.' Hadrian sighed.

"We're not going to be back together for Christmas," he said. "Priorities, I know, but still... I had hoped..."

"I thought you were disinclined to observe Christian holy days, given your-"

"It's not the religious observance, EDI," he interrupted, "it's... y'know, we served together three months in our hunt for Saren, then I died in July. Woke up and fought the Collectors July to October, was in hack until the Reapers invaded in April... died again in July..." he chuckled wanly, "heh... I really need to start laying low in Julys. Then I 'woke up' the following May. We haven't spent a Christmas together, or a New Years, or a Thanksgiving... I don't feel like I'm giving him many big memories to cherish."

"I don't believe he..." EDI paused, contemplatively. "I believe any time together with you is all that Kaidan wishes for."

A ghost of a second-hand memory flickered at the back of Shepard's consciousness- the image of an expression on EDI's body's face and a feeling of... "I know it was you who... who arranged for me to 'come back' when Kaidan didn't feel like he could do it," he said, remembering the deluge of memories Kaidan had shared with him upon their reunion in a cell on Earth eight months earlier. "And I know he was hurting before that."

"My synthempathic awareness of his distress was a critical factor in deciding to countermand his judgment," EDI said.

"And y'know... I don't think I've ever actually thanked you for that," Hade replied, bowing his head slightly. It felt a bit strange, having such a personal conversation with EDI's disembodied form for a change, and, perhaps sensing that he missed having a presence to focus his attention on, EDI replaced the map in the holo tank with a projection of her gynoid appearance. He nodded at the translucent glowing form and 'she' returned the gesture. "We got our second chance together- or third, I guess- because you made a very... human choice," he said, "and I appreciate what you did. Even if it included turning Kaidan and I into the 'beacon' that drew the Puritans into the galaxy," he chuckled.

"That was unexpected," EDI conceded. Hade laughed out loud.

"A boy gets a horse for his birthday..." he said, "and the ball just keeps on bouncing." EDI's virtual expression grew placid as her attention went elsewhere a moment.

"Ah, a zen anecdote," she said, fishing the reference up through her archival database connection. "Oh! To address your dilemma- our mission may be concluded in time for you to celebrate Magha Puja Day with Kaidan in March. Or Visakah Puja in May."

"I don't think we're actually going to need some special day on the calendar to celebrate once we're
back together. Just a bed and a lock on the door," he smiled. As he said it, he felt something from EDI brush against his psyche... a second-hand sadness that felt alien but also familiar, emanating from all around him.

"I look forward to being permitted to resume physical intimacy with Jeff, as well," she replied pensively. Shepard's eyes widened and he couldn't stop himself from making a bit of an awkward face at the thought- he'd managed over the last year not to think too much about the mechanics of the relationship between EDI and Moreau that he'd permitted them to pursue after EDI secured control over the Cerberus infiltrator body she now fielded.

"So before this wetwiring issue came up, things between you two were... uh... going well?" he asked, trying to be interested enough as to be polite, but without prying for too much information.

"It has been..." she hesitated, looking for the right way to frame what she meant to say, "agreeable, but complicated. Especially after the SR-2 was recovered and my primary infrastructure was brought back online- the reintegration of my avatar's more limited software suite with my full baseline system resulted in some... he called them mood swings," she explained, sounding a bit testy. "But not to me. And then when I was transplanted to the SR-3, the transition was not seamless... which may have caused my disposition to be a bit... unpredictable... while I was adapting." Hade noticed, quite acutely and for the first time, the inflected pauses in the AI's speech as though she were giving careful thought to just the right wording. Given the speed at which her thinking took place, it had to be a deliberately calculated thing; there was no reason for her to take the same time as an organic to turn a phrase.

"Well, personal growth can test the best relationships," he grinned. "And you've grown more in the time I've known you than most. I remember when you couldn't answer a simple question like how many cells Cerberus had."

EDI flashed him a wry look that he could swear she'd learned from watching Jack. "And I recall when your advances toward Major Alenko were as tenuous as an awkward adolescent's."

"Bitch, please," Hadrian laughed, playfully raising the palm of his hand in a mock dismissive gesture, "I remember when you... would ask me absurd questions... about... y'know what, never mind, I'm no good at this. The whole... no. Sorry, it's just not me. It's a really old cliché, anyway." He shook his head to himself and tapped the console in front of him to recall the galaxy map.

"I shall endeavour to restrain my disappointment."

Shepard looked at the blinking dots on the other side of the core. "How do you project our supplies will hold up for this upcoming leg?" he asked, noting their distance from any known settlements.

"Some rationing will be necessary if we intend to proceed directly to the new waypoints. A diversion of approximately two days, however, on our way to the next set of coordinates, would allow us to make port at the Omega space station."

Hadrian made a bit of a face and shook his head skeptically. "I don't think that's an option. Last I heard from Aria she was awfully sore with me for turning down her mission to re-take that rock. I'm pretty sure I'm persona non grata there."

"You met with her during the war just before the mission to Thessia, did you not?" EDI asked. She knew they'd met but he'd never filed a report on it since it hadn't gone anywhere.

"She asked for my help but had some ridiculous demands about leaving the Normandy and my team behind, and I thought getting to Thessia took priority. Then I thought it was more important to
stay on Kai Leng's trail, and then... well, I got a 'thanks for nothing' message from her on my way to Horizon, seems she pulled it off without me... just cost her an arm and a leg."

"A euphemism for a substantial loss of resour-"

"No," Shepard interrupted, clearing his throat and widening his eyes awkwardly, "an actual arm and a leg. I almost wrote back suggesting she get a hook and a peg-leg, really play up the 'pirate queen of Omega' thing, y'know... probably the smartest e-mail I never sent," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

"So we are unlikely to find re-supply there," EDI concluded. "I will formulate a report on our stocks and projected consumption timeline for your review."

"Thanks, EDI." He looked again at the icons representing their destinations. Another lonely month. And at the end of the road...? He was used to his charges forward bringing his targets into sharper focus, but in this, the objective wasn't getting any clearer. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, just more foreboding dark.

He knew fear, and he knew it well. But this was different. Fear of known quantities was one thing- was rational- but this was fear of what he didn't know. And he didn't care for it.
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, Horizon, Iera system, Shadow Sea cluster
4 days later, Sun, Dec 16, 2187

The Vimy Ridge touched down on a desolate airfield landing strip near the former 'Sanctuary' settlement. Upon deploying and configuring the cluster's comm buoy- that last slated in their current 'cable laying' mission- they'd begun picking up Miranda Lawson's year-and-a-half old broadcast warning people away from the base where Cerberus had conducted research into indoctrination. It had immediately re-kindled Kaidan's anger over the crimes that Shepard had exposed there shortly before Crucible Day, and after procuring the consent of the Alliance leadership, he'd made the call to return and raze the place to the ground. For closure.

As the ground team descended the ramp from the embarkation bay, Traynor came on over the ground team's comms.

"Major? We're picking up a new transmission- a distress signal. It's weak, and originating inside the Sanctuary complex."

Kaidan scowled. "A distress signal? Last time we were here there was no one left in distress. Reaper forces and Cerberus had wiped out each other and everyone in between except for the Lawsons. And Miss Lawson's transmission should have waved off anybody new from coming here."

"Maybe someone ignored the warning." Sam suggested.

"I never could resist a big red button or a 'keep off the grass' sign," Vega confessed at Kaidan's side. Alenko sighed.

"So some idiots arrive in the final days of the war, blow off the beacon and touch down anyway? And then what? After we cleared the place the Alliance sent in a team to double-check it for intel and assets and they didn't encounter any more Reapers, it was a ghost town."

"They must have found something," Liara said. "What do you want to do now, Kaidan?"

The major looked at the fortified walls before them and the tower beyond. Aside from Traynor's sync-up with Nivelle Offensive, it was the first really unexpected thing to happen since he and Shepard had parted and he'd assumed command over this group, and for a moment he wondered what Hadrian would have done.

But during those two and a half years without Shepard, he'd attained the rank of major- indeed, he'd retired out-ranking his husband. He'd commanded his own unit, and he'd earned his own position as a Spectre. He had the trust and confidence of his people- he could feel them synthempathically, looking to him without reservation for leadership. It occurred to him, now, that he was qualified to do this on his own. He just had to trust his own judgment.

"Well, we'd better investigate, but I don't want to leave this... place... still standing," he said, glaring at the edifice wherein they'd discovered Harry Lawson's disgusting work. He looked to his
familiar cohorts and two of the Vimy's soldiers, then turned to the other six Alliance officers, all native to the SR-4's squad. "We'll split in two- Liara, James, Lieutenant Forward and Chief Keller, we'll investigate the distress signal as Team One. Gallagher, McCreary, Chen, Hivers, Antipov and Audoux- Team Two- you'll proceed with planting the demo charges in the substructure."

Lieutenant Commander Gallagher, an N7 and fellow sentinel with a heady Scottish accent, nodded.

"Aye, Major," he said. He took the compact bombs that Lt. Forward- a heavily armoured 'destroyer'- had magnetically clamped to his back and passed them on to Lt. McCreary, the unit's combat engineer.

The two groups proceeded together as far as the main gate and then split up, Gallagher leading his people toward the drained ornamental pool that led to the secret entrance to the tunnels and laboratories, and Kaidan's team heading directly for the 'front door' at the base of the tower, which had been breached by the investigating Alliance expeditionary force.

"From what Shepard described, I think I'm glad he brought you and EDI down here when we were trying to track down the Illusive Man," Liara said, drawing her Acolyte as they stepped into the weather-worn foyer of the building.

"Well, I sorta' pressed to be on every mission after I got back aboard the Normandy. I was just glad to be with him again," Kaidan reminisced, disengaging the safety on his Avenger, "especially since we'd finally just come out and said how we felt about each other... I should never have put it off as long as I did... but after we got back from that mission, I kinda' wished he'd taken Garrus instead."

"Hey, what about me?" Vega asked, sounding a little hurt.

"No offense, Carne, I'd just known Garrus longer. I was more used to the idea of him covering Hade's back if I wasn't."

"Well, at least he's got Scars with him now," James said. He looked back at Lt. Forward- the only other N7 on their half of the team- and idly asked "how about you, Blindaje? Who's your go-to person?" Vega had privately announced to Kaidan as they'd armoured up for deployment that today would be the day he got the usually quiet Forward- their 'human turret'- to say something superfluous.

The lumbering destroyer, his face inscrutable behind the harsh angles of his modified Terminus armour, held up his Typhoon AR without saying a word and patted it affectionately.

"It's a special kind of love, the love between a man and his machine gun," Chief Keller quipped from the back of the group as they followed Kaidan- guided by his omni-tool's telemetry from Traynor aboard the ship- down a corridor.

"Hey if we're all turning part-machine, maybe they'll make it legal to marry 'em," Vega laughed. "Think you'd like that, big guy?"

"Dearly beloved," Forward said, his voice coming through his helmet's filter with a menacing reverberation.

"Dios mio," James muttered, eyes widening. If he'd never seen the other man without his helmet, he'd have pictured a shark's head underneath it. Or a carnivorous dinosaur. Or the grim reaper himself. "Every inch of you really is just scary sonofabitch, isn't it?"

"All eighty-seven inches."

They took a couple more cautious paces forward before James furrowed his brow and looked at
"Forward again. "You're six foot four," he said, doing the math in his head and coming up confused. He swore he saw a smile form through the narrow strip of visor over the other soldier's mouth."

"And eleven inches."

"Vega, do you ever wonder if Shepard had an ulterior motive for sending you with me?" Kaidan asked jokingly, winking at Liara.

"Maybe because he knew I could turn down your advances, Cacique... Though it sounds like you might want to start trying with this guy."

"All this projecting, James- I'm flattered, really, but you need to accept that I'm not in love with you," Alenko retorted.

"Good thing," Vega smirked, "since if you were, and if I gave in, you'd end up with su culo como bolsillo de payaso."

As his comm set's software translated, Keller belted out a laugh that echoed down the hallway, and James looked over his shoulder again at Forward. "Aw, come on Blindaje, that was funny, no?"

"Hate fuckin' clowns," came the destroyer's electronic growl. James grimaced and shook his head, turning back to face the front, apparently having decided that conversation was overrated after all.

The team entered a stair well and started cautiously snaking up the floors, covering each others' ascent until they arrived at the sixth floor.

"Team Two, progress?" Kaidan asked. Gallagher's voice came back over the comms.

"We're in, Major," he said, "planted the first charge in the access tunnel. Moving on to the... reclamation area." The factory like section where the liquified remains of countless helpless refugees had been processed and stored awaiting destruction. During their search of the facility during the war, they hadn't understood its purpose until several minutes after they'd left it. Remembering how the revelation had made him feel reminded him why he'd chosen to lead the group investigating the SOS now.

"Do me a favour and plant one of the spare bombs in there, too," Kaidan requested. His fellow sentinel replied in the affirmative, and Kaidan's checked his omni-tool's map again. As they moved up the new hallway lined with open doors to vacant offices, he noticed blood stains on the wall.

"Why didn't they raze this place before?" he muttered bitterly, thinking not only of the atrocities committed in the sub-levels below them but the unwitting complicity of so many of the refugees who'd taken part in them. He'd listened to the intake center logs of some of the people who'd worked to earn their own entry to Sanctuary, and not all of them had sounded like total dupes. Some of them had to have known.

"The Alliance team was here for just two days before they were recalled to take part in the battle at Earth," Liara said. "When that order came to pull out, they were probably told every bullet and bomb would be needed there. And they probably hoped they'd be back after the war was done, to deal with it appropriately. But nobody thought the relays would be out of commission after... that is, if we survived."

"I suppose... wait, what's-" Kaidan held his hand up and signaled the group to hold. He raised his rifle and looked through the scope, confirming what he thought he'd seen: an upturned foot sticking out from around the corner ahead.
He led the team cautiously to the end of the hall where, on his cue, Vega rushed across into cover in an adjacent door frame and Forward planted himself in the middle of the T-junction, leveling his assault rifle down the corridor. The new hallway was strewn with debris, the walls and floor and ceiling showed damage from small arms fire and explosives. The alarm-raising foot belonged to a husk with a hole blown clear through its cybernetically mutilated chest. Strangely, though, it was wearing clothes, which Kaidan had never seen before.

"I thought the search team destroyed all of the bodies on the site," Liara asked in a low voice. She booted up her omni-tool and started scanning the corpse.

"So I was told," Kaidan replied grimly. "Which means they either missed this one, or it ended up here later."

"Well, my forensics suite says this body's been here about three days, not seventeen months," Liara said, tensing up noticeably.

"Maybe courtesy of our distressed idiots," Keller suggested, checking their six.

"Stay alert for both," Kaidan instructed. "Gallagher," he said, "be on your guard for Reaper forces. We've found a husk up here that may suggest a presence after the Alliance expedition cleaned this place out."

"Was just about to call you, actually, Major," Gallagher answered. "Second charge is planted, along with a spare, but we found one of the containment tanks down here breached. It's a fuckin' mess. McCreary says we're in no danger but we're going around the spill all the same."

"I never read anything about the engineers breaching any of those tanks during their investigation, Commander," Kaidan commented.

"Nor I, Major. Watch your backs."

"Distress signal's not much farther," Kaidan said, starting to advance again. "Looks like it's coming from a medical ward."

"Civvies," Forward suggested. James cringed slightly and Liara looked at the heavily armoured lieutenant.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Shit goes sideways, military tend to look for the most defensible position," Keller said, evidently 'turned in' to his teammate's train of thought. "Civvies just assume a hospital's the best place to hole up."

"So if they're armed, don't expect a lot of discipline," James warned.

Feeling the tension ratcheting up, Kaidan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. More than just his military training, since he and Shepard had gotten close Hadrian had really taught him the importance of his breathing, of centering himself, of remaining 'open' and in the moment... And as he thought about it, and about the slight relaxation that came with remembering his breath, something occurred to him.

"We're all... really tight," he murmured.

"Locked 'n loaded," James agreed. Kaidan shook his head and took another slow, deliberate breath.
"No, I don't mean- we're tight. Tense. Closed up. It's all I can feel from any of us."

"So?" Keller asked. "Don't want us slacking, right, Sir?"

"No, not slacking," Kaidan said, "but- what if..." He signaled for them to stop again, then he closed his eyes, lowered his gun, and thought back on the techniques Shepard had shared with him for relaxing and opening his mind. He ran his mind over his body, finding everywhere he was tight- his jaw, his shoulders, his hands, his chest and stomach- and deliberately willed them to loosen up. He cleared his mind, though there was a moment of resistance where a voice within screamed that he was letting his guard down. 'That's the point,' he thought back to himself.

He placed his attention gently on his breathing, and immediately the voice in his head said rose up to chastise him for standing there with his eyes closed and listening to himself breathe. 'You're just thinking,' he reminded himself, and without judging it, he let it go and returned his focus to his breathing. As he exhaled he felt an openness about him, as though his out-breath was inflating space around him.

Stop! Pay attention or you'll die! the panicked inner voice pleaded.

'Thinking,' Kaidan thought back, and he breathed in and out again. Then he felt something new at the expanding periphery of his awareness: fear. It wasn't his, though, and it wasn't coming from any of his team.

"Kaidan," Liara said, "are you...?"

"Everybody take a breath," he instructed. He understood their hesitation, but he wasn't moving them so after a moment each of them in turn took a deliberate, calming breath. As they complied, he reached out to the source of the fear he was feeling, extending a wish for well-being. And then a connection formed, and he felt a small shift in the fear. He willed himself to relax further, and to welcome the 'other'- whoever they were- into a kind of deep relationship with him.

A hesitant female voice called out, just audible from behind the closed first aid station door just down the hallway and around the corner. "H- hello? Is someone there?"

Kaidan opened his eyes, but he tried to hold on- gently- to the sensation he was experiencing, and he looked around at his teammates placidly. "Everybody... ease up a bit," he ordered. He lowered his gun and gave Liara and James a look that invited them to follow him as he started moving up again, leaving Forward and Keller to guard the rear.

"What's going on, Cacique?" Vega inquired as they rounded the corner.

"They're just scared," Kaidan said. "If you wind down a bit and really open up, you'll feel it too."

Taking his suggestion, Liara holstered her weapon and bowed her head a moment, and almost immediately Kaidan could feel her demeanour shift. A passive, familiar connection formed between them and suddenly he knew that she was aware of the hiding strangers as well.

The asari opened her eyes and looked at Alenko with understanding and relief.

"Well," she said, "we probably can relax a bit." With two of them now saying the same thing, James visibly relaxed as well, flipping the safety on his Crusader shotgun. Which seemed to Kaidan like a good thing- going in less twitchy and 'trigger-happy' responding to an SOS.

They reached the medical station door, and Kaidan put his hand up to it, reaching out mentally to those- several presences becoming distinct now- huddled within, wishing calm and comfort for
them. "I'm Major Alenko, Alliance Navy," he announced. "We followed a distress beacon here. Are you okay in there?"

There was an anxious pause, and then the sound of something heavy being moved on the other side of the door. Then the door was pulled open, revealing two women and three men- one of them armed with a pistol and another with a shotgun- peering out at Alenko and his cohorts.

"Was that... you that I felt?" one of the women asked, her hand on the shoulder of the man with the shotgun, apparently trying to keep him calm.

"We're here to help," Kaidan said, slowly affixing his rifle to the mag clamp on his back and raising his open hands. "I just tried... to let you know that. What happened here?"

The armed men lowered their guns. "I'm Caroline Wychester," the woman said, "this is Thom, James, and Theresa and Kori... We... we're all that's left."

"All that's left of what?" Liara asked, holstering her own pistol and slowly raising up her omni-tool, letting the strangers see her configure it for a medical scan before she took cursory readings on each of them.

"The MSV Colorado Springs," Wychester answered. She waved for them to come inside, and Kaidan bumped Vega's chestplate with the ball of his fist, using the brief connection it opened to pass along an instruction to re-join the other two soldiers whilst staying on an open comm line. James withdrew as Kaidan and Liara stepped into the first aid station, which was strewn with dirty clothes, opened MRE packages, blankets, litter, and a shelving unit that had been acting as a barricade. "We were on our way here during the war with about a hundred other refugees. We'd just hit the mass relay to the system when something happened... the captain said something must have gone wrong with the transit because we came out two months away from Iera. We came out hard, the engines took some kind of damage from deceleration."

Kaidan nodded, recognizing the description of the Normandy's own expulsion mid-transit to Arcturus on Crucible Day. They'd been lucky to drop out of the relay corridor near a habitable planet, he didn't want to imagine how they might have fared stranded in interstellar space for two months.

"The engineers were able to fix them enough to give us a push, and with some pretty tight rationing we had enough supplies to ride inertia the rest of the way here. But we couldn't make a controlled landing when we arrived, and none of the other settlements on the planet would take us in! They said the relay had stopped working at the same time our jump failed, that the system was cut off from help, and they couldn't accept new people." Wychester sighed, recalling the frustration they'd felt.

"How did you end up here, though?" Kaidan asked. "Didn't you pick up the transmission warning that it wasn't safe?"

Thom, with the shotgun, spoke up. "We did," he said, "and we listened. We shuttled our people down to a site a few miles away from here and tried to make a go of it there- if the colony cities wouldn't let us in we figured we could still land and try to rough it, if the planet really was safe from the Reapers."

"You said you're Alliance!" Theresa cut in. "With the way the war was going- I mean... did we win? There wouldn't still be Alliance Navy if we'd lost, right?"

"The Reapers are gone," Liara replied in her most soothing tone. "Commander Shepard- the
major's husband, actually- led a combined fleet, all the peoples of the galaxy, to attack the Reapers at Earth. We used a device we built, that we called the Crucible, to drive them away. They stopped their attacks and flew away, nobody's seen them since."

"We have," Thom said. "Those things- the ones like fuckin' zombies-"

"Husks?" Kaidan asked. "Like the one in the hall? When did you run into them?"

"Not long ago," Caroline answered. "Like Thom said, when we landed we stayed away. We set up a camp with the last of the supplies from the ship, used up all of the remaining fuel in the process. And we were doing okay, but then... we had a really bad winter out there. We lost people. When spring came and we were able to move again, we were desperate, and this was the closest... we had to see if we could salvage anything. Two groups of us came in to the settlement about a week ago, but then..." Her face contorted with horror as she started remembering when things started to go horribly wrong.

"We lost radio contact with the others," Thom continued in Wychester's stead. "They were checking out the lower levels of the complex. Then those things showed up, like we'd seen in the vids during the war. So we holed up in here, used my omni-tool to power up a comm system transceiver to signal out for help."

"Well we're going to get you out of here," Kaidan reassured them. "And then we're going to wipe this place off the map- nothing good has come out of it. Let me check in with my other team and we'll get ready to move out."

Liara began running more thorough medical scans of the refugees, to see if anyone needed attention. They were sleep-deprived, stressed out and a bit dehydrated, but mercifully, uninjured. As he stepped into the hallway, Kaidan could also hear her start to offer a basic explanation of syntheampathy, which the refugees had a vague awareness of but no solid information on.

"Alenko to Gallagher," Kaidan said into his comms, "we've found survivors of a group that came here out of desperation. I think some of them were turned into husks."

"I had McCreary scan some of the spilled crap down here and forward the readings back to Legace, Major. Waiting on a reply now, but if you're right... maybe they found something left over from the work Cerberus was doing and it converted them. Might not be connected with the ships at all, just following some kind of pre-programming to subdue organics."

"Could be," Alenko concurred tentatively. "How are the bombs coming?"

"Two more to go before we're ready to pull out."

"We'll be extracting the surviving civvies when we go, then we can pick up the rest of their group outside the base and take them back to Earth, or see if there's somewhere they'd rather go."

"Aye aye," Gallagher signed off.

Kaidan stepped back into the medical station, where Liara was now helping the civilians pack their scant remaining belongings. "Team Two is almost done, are you folks ready to get out of here?"

"You're goddamned right we are," Thom muttered, relieved.

"Then let's go." The group re-connected with James, Keller and- with some nervous looks directed his way- Forward. They started back-tracking toward the main gate with Kaidan in the lead, alert but making a point to be mindful, open... attentive to his breathing- inhaling calm and exhaling his
tension. Breathing in peace, and breathing out good will. It felt odd, holding such a disposition under the circumstances. They were in a place that he hated, possibly crawling with defiled monstrosities, but he willed himself to be composed. To focus on the well-being of the people under his command and under his protection. To lay aside his anger and his anxiety, get outside his own head and be in the moment with pure purpose. Odd... but it felt right.

They reached the bottom of the stairwell and started making their way back to the lobby.

"Last charge is set, Major," Gallagher reported, "we can blow the place on your command and slag what's left with the Vimy's Thanix cannon! Shit!"

"Commander?" Kaidan asked, alarmed.

"We've got husks! Nothing we can't handle!"

Kaidan looked to James and pointed toward the main gate with his chin. "Get these people to the ship," he ordered. "Forward, with me."

Open as he was, he could feel Vega, Liara and Keller's reluctance to leave without him. But they knew the drill- he was in charge and he needed them to do their job. Vega thumped Kaidan's chestplate with the butt of his fist and they split up, Alenko and the up-armoured N7 soldier running through the familiar processing area, down the stairs into the social plaza, and to the top of the ladder into the drained ornamental pool.

As they arrived, Gallagher and his team broke out of the substructure. Hivers, Antipov and Audoux exited first, securing the doorway, followed by McCreary and Gallagher. When Matt saw friendlies on the high ground he ordered his team out, and the leading trio climbed out one at a time.

"Get ready to cover them," Kaidan said. Forward nodded, tapped a button on his gauntlet, and activated the 'devastator' hardware and software in his armour, routing the power from additional micro-reactors through his gloves and into his weapon as well as boosting his kinetic barriers.

"Good to go," the lieutenant announced. McCreary ascended the ladder and finally Chen backed out of the tunnel entrance with his Eagle pistol in one hand and monomolecular sword in the other. Kaidan heard the howls of pursuing husks starting to wail closer, and after firing a few rounds into the darkness Chen holstered his gun and fired one last blast of biotic force through the palm of his gauntlet before double-timing it past Gallagher and nimbly climbing the ladder. The lieutenant commander was the last one out, reaching the top as a pair of husks lunged into the daylight to be torn to shreds by the hail of rounds from Forward's machine gun.

"Everybody alright?" Kaidan asked. Gallagher nodded, smiling behind the opaque face-plate of his helmet.

"Most fun I've had in a year and a half," he replied. "No feelings to hurt, they're just... bestial."

"Glad to see your people haven't lost their edge."

The group conducted an orderly withdrawal, easily picking off husks as they appeared singly or in pairs from the rear. As they boarded the Vimy Ridge and the frigate took to the air, he gave the CIC the order to use a point-defense Thanix turret to collapse the main gate and blast a deep ditch around part of the perimeter, to slow down any more of the Reaper creatures that might have tried to follow them out. They launched one of the Kodiaks to picket the flaming crater while the Vimy located the refugees who remained at their camp in a nearby valley and took them aboard. Then there was no reason to delay any further.
Kaidan stood behind the ship's pilot, Lt. Jackson, as the frigate hovered a kilometer from 'Sanctuary.' Nivelle Offensive reported that the shuttle had cleared the area without sighting any more husks, and Kaidan activated his omni-tool, keyed to the bombs planted in the facility's substructure.

"Good riddance," he muttered, entering the authorization code and stabbing the 'detonate' button. Pillars of flame and smoke erupted through the base of the tower and then, per the geth's calculations, the compromised structure began to fold under its own weight into the void the bombs had created underground. Seconds later it had collapsed into a smoking mound of rubble.

"Gunnery, finish it off," Kaidan instructed. An instant later twin lances of molten ferrofluid streamed forward from beneath the ship's bow, carving into the pile and starting to melt it down like boiling water poured onto snow. The debris crumbled inward as a pool of bubbling slag was injected into the core of the ruins, consuming them from within.

After watching the slabs of concrete and clawed finger-like protrusions of twisted metal sink into the improvised smelter for a minute and a half, Kaidan checked the status displays around the cockpit. The weapons were secured, the ship was unscathed, and all radio transmissions from the facility had stopped.

Dr. Legace appeared at Alenko's side with a datapad. "Completed our analysis of Chief McCreary's scans," she said. "Looks like the rendered-down remains of some of the people killed in Cerberus' research had become contaminated with the nanobots that facilitate husk conversion. The refugees who were poking around must have become infected, and once they transformed they probably degenerated into feral behaviour without any kind of control signal to take over for their higher brain functions."

"Think a tungsten alloy at six thousand Kelvins will be enough to neutralize the stuff?" Kaidan asked. Sarah nodded.

"I suppose it is a bit of a moot point now," she said, looking out at the rapidly dissolving felled complex.

"Our new guests should probably be quarantined until you've checked them all out, you think?"

"They're already under supervision in the port cargo bay, I just wanted to give you that report before we started examining them. I can already tell you they've had a rough go of it. They were lucky you came along," Legace opined.

"I'm just glad were were able to help somebody. Doesn't feel like we've been of much use during this whole Puritan fiasco, we've spent most of it running or sitting on our thumbs. Even now, that we can supposedly operate undetected, we're sneaking around," Kaidan grumbled. "Just want to feel effective, you know?"

Sarah smiled a little and gave a gentle, encouraging stroke to his arm.

"Well," she said, "to sixty-one people back there, today you were really effective. Take a minute, Major. You might not have won the war today, but you did good."
After deploying the Maroon Sea comm buoy, rescuing the Colorado Springs refugees, entangling
in with Earth to report their progress and the emergence of wetwiring among the crew, Vimy Ridge
had been summoned back home. They weren't told why— in the wake of learning about the Puritans'
surveillance of their synthempathic communications, Kaidan assumed the brass were being
exceedingly careful— but he assumed that they would be picking up another load of buoys, or
supplies for one of the colonies.

When they arrived at Sol, Kaidan and Liara were asked to report to the Mars Archive. The Vimy
Ridge was parked on a pad at the Project Phoenix Flight shipyards that had been constructed near
the ancient prothean outpost, and the pair took a shuttlecar to the main complex, where they were
greeted by none other than Admiral Hackett, with his aide in tow.

"Admiral," Kaidan saluted. Hackett waved the gesture off casually.

"At ease, Major," he said, offering a handshake instead. "Doctor T'soni," he nodded. Liara
reciprocated with a small bow of her head. "Not sure if you've met Captain Palmeta," Hackett
said, gesturing to the officer with him, "he's my adjutant— or my shadow, depending on the
lighting." Palmeta fired off a distracted smile and a subtle salute before burying his nose in a data
pad.

"Admiral. It's good to see you again."

"I wish it were under better circumstances," the Alliance's acting commander-in-chief said.

"What's wrong?" Liara asked, reflexively opening herself synthempathically to see what she could
glean from his surface thoughts and feelings.

"It's your colleague... Javik," Hackett said, lowering his voice. He nodded in the direction of the
corridor behind him, and Kaidan and Liara started to follow him into the complex from the
receiving bay.

"Has something happened to him?" Liara asked, her own concern abruptly drowning out any
impressions she might otherwise have read from the admiral. She and Javik had worked closely
together at the archive during the months after Crucible Day, even beginning work on a book
together, before departing aboard the Shepard to recover the second Normandy. To hear that
something was amiss... "I thought he'd gone to Nibanna Vedi to help with the acclimatization of
the adori."

"He did," Hackett replied, "but three weeks ago returned on one of the couriers assigned to supply
the mission. He came back here and then he... he tried to stow away aboard a refit turian stealth
frigate that was bound to deliver relief to the resistance on Sur'Kesh."

Kaidan and Liara exchanged a puzzled and concerned look.
"Why in the hell would he do that?" Alenko asked.

"That's an excellent question. We've been asking him ever since he was caught, but he hasn't offered a word of explanation. Even our most skilled synthempathic readers can't feel out what he intended, since he seems to have figured out a way of compartmentalizing-"

"Wait, you've had people interrogating him?" Liara interrupted, distressed. She might also have been hoping to deflect the question of where Javik had learned the subtle art of mental obfuscation she had refined and taught a handful of confidants.

"Not interrogating," Hackett corrected her. "He's been kept under a very gentle house arrest and we've had people trying to talk to him to ask what he was thinking, but the dance is that he gives them the silent treatment and after half an hour or so they leave him alone. We were hoping a couple of familiar faces would finally be able to get through to him." He led them through a reception area and into a section of housing reserved for high-security personnel on the base.

"Well, we'll see if he's willing to tell us," Kaidan said, trying to seize some agency in the discussion.

"I hope to. He's been a big help at the archive, and with the adori, but if we can't figure out why he was trying to sneak away to a planet under enemy occupation, then I can't have him doing sensitive work with us."

The trio arrived at an apartment cabin with a guard seated outside, who stood at attention at their approach. Hackett gave him permission to carry on, and said that he would be in an office in the adjacent operational complex. Elections for the first new Alliance parliament post-invasion were coming up, and as supreme commander of one of the few institutions left intact after the war, he had a lot of logistical work to do to help facilitate a return to democracy. Hence a captain-Palmetta- and a whole regiment of administrative personnel doing double-duty running the military and doing the the work of a a civil bureaucracy.

The door split open and Kaidan and Liara stepped inside. Javik was seated on a couch facing the door, glaring at a chess board on the table in front of him. He looked up at his visitors and then briefly back down at the table before standing and reluctantly making eye contact again.

"Liara. Major," he said gruffly.

"Acting," Kaidan added. "Can we come in and talk?" he asked.

"I am in custody," the ancient prothean replied, "it is not for me to decide when and whom I receive as visitors."

"We'll go if you want, Javik, but please... we're asking to talk to you," Liara said sincerely. "We want to help you if we can. What's going on?"

There was a long, awkward silence as Javik thought about it. Finally he gestured at two chairs opposite the couch, though he didn't seem very enthusiastic. Alenko and T'soni cautiously approached and sat down. Javik remained standing, stiffly, his hands behind his back and his body language guarded.

"The admiral told you that I was apprehended attempting to make my way to the salarian homeworld?" he asked. Liara nodded.

"Sur'Kesh is behind enemy lines right now, Javik," Kaidan said, stressing his confusion. "Why would you try to go there in secret? Was it to help the resistance there?"
"No," Javik grumbled. Liara and Kaidan looked at each other, increasingly perturbed.

"Well... what did you hope to accomplish?" Liara asked. "I don't know what you've heard about the current crisis, Javik, but Shepard is out there working toward a solution, and we're doing our part. We aren't doing nothing. I know you weren't called up to re-join the crew of the Normandy, but we didn't bring you in on it because-"

"Do no insult me!" Javik snapped. "I am not- ... I was not feeling 'left out' of your efforts." They both felt a complex mix of feelings come from him as his mental defenses relaxed slightly, but neither could tell exactly where he was going yet.

"You're a soldier," Kaidan said, drawing on his own experience with Shepard's post-war issues to venture a guess as to the prothean's motives. "And there's only one war going on in the whole galaxy after synthempathy's changed everything. We wouldn't think less of you for wanting to find a place in it."

Liara leaned forward in her chair and narrowed her eyes at Javik, her familiarity with him allowing her to catch the subtle, sour note that Kaidan's comment seemed to strike. "That's not it at all, though, is it?" she said. "You really weren't trying to get involved as an errant warrior. You were..." She gazed at him, and Javik's eyes- the three that had made it through Crucible Day- flicked toward her haltingly, and then away as if ashamed.

"I did not want to go there to fight," he muttered. "I wanted to be restored."

Liara sat back in her chair, raising a hand to her mouth and furrowing her brow. "Restored?" Kaidan asked, shaking his head, still confused. "Restored to what?"

"To normal! To what I was," Javik said bitterly. After glaring at Kaidan a moment, frustrated with the human, he held his arms out in front of him and impatiently pulled one sleeve of his tunic up to reveal the soft glow of a wetwire nodule running from the tip of his thumb to his wrist.

"Oh Javik," Liara sighed. "You heard what the Puritans are doing on the worlds they've occupied..."

"Yes," he answered. "No thanks to anyone from the Normandy- from those I fought with through the Reaper invasion, who knew best how I felt about the machines. About all thinking machines."

"You were pretty clear that you didn't care for them," Kaidan said, recalling all of the talk of airlocks and Shepard's account of the argument he'd caught Javik and EDI embroiled in. "What does that have to do with-"

"Are you truly that naïve, human?" Javik barked. "If you are even human anymore. Are you? Are any of us still what we were? Are you still asari? Am I still prothean?"

"Of course you are, Javik," Liara said. He threw up his hand dismissively, though.

"Protheans did not have this," he hissed, pointing at the lines of light on his skin. "As if it were not bad enough that the Reapers- far from being destroyed forever- simply flew away. As if it were not bad enough that we were changed that day, without our consent, by whatever the commander did! Now the violation of our bodies is made manifest!"

"Hey," Kaidan cut in, suddenly feeling defensive, "Shepard didn't 'do' this to us. None of us knows exactly what happened that day, other than the obvious."

"Exactly what? No. But we do know that the commander boarded the Citadel, and a short while
later the Crucible activated. And the Reapers were not destroyed! They merely left. And months later, we discovered that all of us, our bodies, had been changed at the most fundamental level. And you think that was a coincidence?" Javik sneered, demandingly.

Kaidan rubbed his hands over his face and then scratched at the sides of his scalp vigorously, frustrated by the accusing tone directed at his husband, who couldn't even be here to defend himself. "So whatever he did that day to send them away- that day that we lost him- had a side-effect," he said, shaking his head. "And it turned out to be an amazing thing! It's helped effect peace between people who'd been in conflict for centuries. It helped us get him back from the dead. Why do you sound like you're complaining? You're still the same charming, surly guy with the same stubborn opinions, it clearly didn't strip you of your individuality. You weren't absorbed into some hive mind. Yes, it gave us an ability to communicate that we didn't have before but I'm sure your people didn't always have the ability you have to 'read' information from-

"That was natural evolution," Javik interrupted, "this is not."

The two glared at each other a long, uncomfortable moment, but as if to validate Kaidan's argument, whereas once they might have been growing increasingly separated and resentful, the two could feel each other now that they'd opened up. Javik was aware of why Kaidan felt so personally invested in synthempathy- in the pivotal role it had played in restoring Shepard to him, and helping to deal with their issues, and in the promise that Alenko truly felt it held for the future of the galaxy; and Kaidan in turn could feel the anger and anxiety that Javik was experiencing at the emergence of a visible symbol of the artificial architecture that had found its way unbidden into his body. He could still distinguish it from his own feelings, but it was nonetheless inescapably real, and present, and impossible to dismiss as insubstantial. Kaidan sat with the prothean's horror and disgust, recognizing it intimately as similar to how he'd felt after the mission to Horizon, when he'd learned of Cerberus' experimentation on innocent people looking for a safe haven during the Reapers' invasion.

They both knew where the other was coming from- knew that they were sincere, and not just fixed 'in opposition' to each other- and it created a softness between them. It might have been facilitated by artificial structures jammed into their cells, but it was still genuine compassion for each others' point of view.

"Javik," Liara cut in gently, "we spent plenty of time together after this... change. I know you weren't exactly happy once you learned about it... I wouldn't expect you to have been- I remember, too, how strongly you felt about synthetics... but in all those months I never got the sense that you were so opposed it."

"At that time I felt I had no alternative, Liara," Javik rejoined. "I believed my only options were to adapt- to carry on without complaint, like a soldier-" he looked pointedly at Kaidan, "or to take my own life. I chose to live, and to see if time could reconcile my distaste for what was done to us." He looked again at his chessboard and then around the room, awkwardly, and finally back to Liara. "But then I heard- and not even from my comrades in this era- that these new 'invaders' were restoring the people of the worlds they captured to the way they were. That they could cure us. I had to try. And if we are still ourselves- still the free-thinking people that we were- then I would expect you to respect my desire to be made whole again."

"They aren't offering to change us back, Javik, they're forcing it on people," Kaidan said. "They're killing anyone who gets in their way, and they're 'curing' even the people who don't want to go back. Isn't that as much of an affront to everybody's freedom as... as, arguably, synthempathy was in the first place?"
Javik fixed his gaze squarely on Kaidan and crossed his arms. He took a deep breath, thinking for a moment, before not-exactly-answering. "I know you are not stupid, Maj- Kaidan... so consider my words. You believe that synthempathy is a 'side-effect' of what Commander Shepard did aboard the Citadel- some action he took that drove the Reapers away but did not destroy them?" Kaidan nodded. "But what if it was not? What if he did not drive them away? What if he perished and the Crucible event was a ruse? What if... they did this to us- infected us, started us on a slow path toward becoming machines ourselves- and then left to grow complacent in a false victory? Are you certain that you are who you were?" Javik held up his arm again, turning it slowly and scrutinizing the glowing pattern under his skin with evident disgust. "Because I am not."

There was another long, uncomfortable silence. Each of them was forced to mull over his hypothesis, and slowly, despite himself, Kaidan felt a twinge of doubt. Worst of all, it didn't feel one hundred percent perfectly novel; it had an ever-so faint feeling of familiarity, as though it had been with him, suppressed, all along.

"Do you suppose there are others?" Liara asked. She sounded far away, as though her reluctance to think about it were carrying part of her far from the room they were in. "Who feel the same? Who would go to Sur'Kesh or Rannoch, or Noveria or Feros or Aephis if they could, and would submit themselves to..."

"To being cut off from the rest of us?" Kaidan finished, hijacking her thought. "We're all connected now- is that so awful?" he asked, imploring Javik to understand why he felt the paradigm shift imposed on the galaxy almost a year and a half earlier was a gift rather than a curse. "Is it a bad thing that people can finally- like we're doing right now- talk about their differences and really be understood? I get where you're coming from, Javik, I really do. Your feelings about this, I can feel them too, I know they're as real as my own... but have you thought about what it would mean to make everyone go back? To un-do everything that-" A lump formed in his throat as Kaidan imagined everything- everything that synthempathy and its attendant architecture entailed- unraveling. Liara reached out and put her hand on his knee, and he gripped it in his thankful for the gesture of support, feeling her calm soothe the sadness he'd conjured up quite hypothetically.

Javik finally sat down on the couch across from them and rubbed his fingertips along the lateral ridge of his head crest, thoughtfully. "I would not impose it on everyone," he said, "but I would choose it for myself."

"And then what?" Liara asked. Kaidan grimaced and looked at her, unsure of what she was getting at. "What if you'd made it to Sur'Kesh, Javik? You would have walked up to the Puritans, asked to go to the head of the line, been processed so as to 'turn off' your synthempathetic alterations and then...?"

"Then one is released, to return to their life as normal, are they not?" Clearly Javik had gotten his information from someone who'd actually had some kind of access to the reports filed after the Normandy's second encounter at Rannoch. "I would not have aided these Puritans, I would not have acted on their behalf. I am no traitor. I wanted only to be returned to what I was." He took a long, pensive breath. "So that I could live out the rest of my days as the last prothean. I did not go in to that stasis pod, all those thousands of years ago, to change."

"I'm really sorry you feel that way, Javik, and maybe you're right- maybe there are others out there who would choose to go back, too. Hell... I'm sure of it," Kaidan sighed. Then he shook his head with restrained resolve. "But I'm also sure that nobody who likes what we've become would want to drive the bus there, and risk losing what we've gained, so that their passengers can throw it away."
"I only attempted to make my way aboard a ship that was going there already," Javik countered.

"Can we say anything to Admiral Hackett on your behalf, Javik?" Liara asked sincerely. "If... since they aren't going to ask anyone to take you to an occupied world, would you at least like to get back to work somewhere? In the archive, or perhaps back on Nibanna Vedi?"

"No, Liara... thank you... but all I want, now that I know the prospect exists, is to go and to be cured of this affliction. I will not pretend to content myself with working here or there. Tell the admiral that he can let me go, or he can incarcerate me. But if I am free, I will try to reach the Puritans. I do not want to live this way." Javik looked gravely at T'soni, and she let out a sad sigh. Kaidan felt her emotionally contract

"Javik, you-"

"Thank you for your visit, Major," Javik cut Kaidan off, turning his head toward the door. Kaidan and Liara looked at each other awkwardly a moment, then Alenko shrugged, resigned, and stood up. As he took his first step toward the door, Liara advanced and put a hand on the prothean's shoulder. He slowly met her gaze again for several seconds before nodding in apparent mutual respect, and then Liara followed Kaidan out of the room. They started slowly down the hallway toward the section where Hackett was working.

"Wow," Kaidan said once they were out of earshot of the guard, a bit dumbstruck. "We're out there trying to figure out how to stop the Puritans, and he's penning their fan club's newsletter."

"That isn't fair," Liara tisked. "For as long as we've known Javik, we've known how he feels about synthetics. And now we all have something... well, artificial... inside our bodies. Something that now looks like it's starting to bridge the gap between us and synthetics. You don't think his anxiety is understandable?"

Kaidan flashed a disbelieving, peevish look at Liara. "You aren't saying he's right? That synthempathy is the 'abomination' the Puritans say it is?"

"No, I'm not," she replied, stopping in her tracks. She crossed her arms for a second, but then opted for a less 'defensive' stance and rubbed her temple with one hand. "But are you saying people shouldn't have a choice in whether they have it or not?"

Kaidan shook his head, flustered. "Of course not, but... Except... What if it doesn't work- doesn't really help create the peace we've seen emerging- unless everyone's a part of it? If we stop feeling each other, what's to stop us from regressing, going back at each others' throats? I just- I don't understand how someone can reject..."

Liara reached out for his hand, squeezing it and brushing her thumb over his wedding band to draw his attention to it. "I'm glad of it, too, but... Not everyone got as much from it as you did," she said softly. "And what you did on Horizon- how you used it to connect with those refugees and calm them before we even knew where they were- was remarkable. I'm just saying that I can't blame some other people for not wanting to be changed themselves... for wanting to feel they have control over their own bodies."

"So what do we tell Hackett?" Kaidan asked, running his hand over the crown of his head as if trying to massage out a satisfactory answer. Liara looked down the hall toward their destination.

"That Javik doesn't want to hurt anybody, or to defect... and that he's unhappy... and... I don't know," she said. "He said he'd try to leave again if he wasn't kept under house arrest, but I feel like even if he is, he might..." Her face twisted into a pained expression. "Oh goddess, I... I'm worried
about him, Kaidan," she stammered.

Alenko drew her into a hug, trying to comfort her, but he couldn't really tell if it had the intended effect. She'd tightened up, and Kaidan wondered if the muting of her feelings was a handy application of whatever trick it was she'd taught herself to shroud her thoughts and protect her privacy as the Shadow Broker. "I know," he said, "I'm concerned too. Maybe we can... I don't know... Maybe he could come with us on our mission? Being with some old friends might-"

"I don't think that would help," Liara said, cutting him off. "Wherever he is, if he isn't moving toward what he wants, I don't think it's going to matter..."

"Well we've got to try and do something to help him," Kaidan said, looking back the way they'd come. "Have Hackett assign a counselor to him, or... I don't know, something. He's not my favourite guy in the galaxy... 'a futile pairing biologically' my ass," he grumbled, impersonating the prothean's accent. "But he was by our side through the Reaper invasion. And Hadrian trusted him."

"A counselor... maybe," Liara said pensively. "That might... I don't know. We'll do what we can, get him some kind of help." She tucked her hand into the crook of Kaidan's elbow and gently tugged him toward the offices. "Come on... we should go talk to the admiral." They resumed walking, and Kaidan found himself struggling with the idea of people wanting to be rid of synthempathy. Of actively wanting not to connect with others- as least not to the same degree they could now. It confounded and unsettled him, but then he remembered Shepard's account of his conversation with 'General Translation Failure'- the Puritan's choice to call it 'conscription,' then so repellant, but now sounding...

He felt Liara squeeze his arm gently. Without any mental defenses of his own raised, he realized she must have been keenly aware of his suddenly conflicted feelings. Together they silently took a moment to wish, with a bizarre kind of nostalgia, for the days when their problems were simpler.
Normandy coasted into the orbit of a small world lit dimly by the light of a dull red sun. They were well off the beaten path, far from any known mass relay. The galactic core shone brighter, here, half as far away as from Earth and less obscured by the dust lanes.

"It's pretty," Joker said, gazing out the forward viewport at the glimmering planetoid before them.

"The surface appears to be a sheet of light metals that crystallized after the silicates were boiled off by extreme heat inconsistent with its present orbit. I speculate that it once resided close to a much older star that entered its red giant phase. It is likely that the planet was rendered molten, and then expelled into interstellar space to be gravitationally captured by this star," EDI opined.

"So it's far from home, too," Shepard suggested.

"And old," Nymandra mused. "Its metallicity suggests it formed around an intermediate Population II sun, which probably turned red giant billions of years before our suns- Earth's or Thessia's- or this one, for that matter, even formed."

"I wonder how many stories it would have to tell," Hadrian said thoughtfully, leaning forward and resting his crossed forearms on the back of Joker's headrest.

"Feels weird out here," Joker said, looking at the thick field of stars beyond. "Lonely, kinda'. Like we're at the end of the world. Worlds."

"Calm before the storm," Garrus remarked.

"You think we're headed into choppy weather, Garrus?" Hade asked with a look back over his shoulder.

"Well, our next stop is either Reapers, or back to the fight with the Puritans empty-handed, right? One way or another... things are about to get interesting."

Hadrian looked over at Nymandra, who'd taken over most of Kaidan's executive officer duties since his departure. "When this is over and everyone's gone their separate ways, are you gonna' miss all these melodramatics I seem to attract during crises?" he asked with a wry grin.

"Oh- melodramatics?" Garrus chuckled, picking up the gauntlet. "Do I need to repeat some of the classic Shepardisms I've heard over the last few years?"

"If you want to be left here with a tent and an oxygen tank, Vakarian," Hade warned playfully.

"That's going on the list."

"I've acquired the reading from Object Rho," EDI announced. "Beginning analysis."
"How long?" Shepard asked.

"A few minutes," EDI replied.

The cockpit fell silent except for the low hum and beeping of the electronics. They all looked out the viewport at the glimmering planet, like a ball of crumpled aluminum under a red light, mutually steeping in their collective suspense.

"Y'know what I'm really looking forward to when this is done?" Hadrian said.

"Ice cream that isn't freeze-dried?" Garrus guessed, mandibles flicking.

"Intimate relations with Major Alenko," EDI suggested bluntly.

"Aw jeez," Jeff groaned. "As long as we're over-sharing, who wants to hear about all the cybersex EDI and I are gonna' have?"

"That's a euphemism, right?" Garrus asked hopefully, eyes widening a little.

"It is not," Moreau stated matter-of-factly. "So are we gonna keep talking dirty, filling each other's minds with weird imagery, hm?"

"We are not," EDI insisted, glaring sidelong from the co-pilot's chair.

"Might be less than you think," Shepard grinned, jostling his pilot's seat a little.

"So what is it, Commander?" Nymandra asked. Hadrian flashed her a quick smirk, tapped his nose and pointed at EDI's chassis.

"I think I'm going to take the Council up on their Spectre offer," Garrus declared idly, out of the blue. All eyes turned toward him.

"What happened to waiting until Palaven was re-built?" Shepard asked. His turian friend shrugged.

"They can do that without me" he said. "But I was missing this. Even if I haven't gotten to do a lot of shooting in this campaign- just being out here, being involved... And being around a certain quarian girl... I was so bored back home. I'm not knocking peace, but if something else does come up after this, I want to be on the front line, doing something."

"Well I'll count myself in even better company," Hadrian smiled, reaching out and giving Garrus a friendly clap on the shoulder.

"As long as he doesn't go crazy, like Saren... or let his guard down and get shot, like Nihlus... or start double-dealing, like what'serface in Illium," Joker prodded.

"Vasir. What a pain in the ass that bi-" Shepard looked over at Nymandra, catching himself and wondering whether it was necessary to watch his words with another asari, "-that big... rotten traitor was. First time I actually fought someone else who'd really nailed biotic charging, we chased each other all over the goddamned place."

"Tela Vasir?" Nymandra asked, curious.

"You knew her?"

"We met once, at a social function my mothers held on Thessia... a real bitch, as I recall."
Shepard sputtering let out a tense breath, trying not to laugh too blatantly. "Oh thank god you said it," he chuckled.

"We aren't all obligated to stick up for each other," Nymandra said dryly.

"Haven't you heard, Ny? Humans are all racists," Garrus laughed.

Suddenly EDI spoke up in a low voice. "Commander... analysis is complete. There is still some inconsistency in the data, but I have a bearing and a distance, approximated to within six light-hours." The display in front of them switched over to the galaxy map, and a blinking red dot appeared about two-thirds of the way from the Local Cluster to the galactic core.

All the air seemed to evacuate the compartment. Everyone stood or sat in silence, one by one focusing on Shepard, waiting on his order.

Hadrian, for his part, felt a knot in his gut and iron bands constricting his chest. He drew in a deep breath to center himself, but he was suddenly and profoundly un-centered. He didn't even feel completely like himself. He felt a rush of thoughts and emotions welling up from his core, planted there over weeks and months by his husband. They all bubbled- or rather, rocketed- to the surface. Kaidan's anxiety, his sadness and and anger and fear.

There's no rush! Don't be in such a hurry to throw yourself into the jaws of death and try to make it choke!

You think you'll go track them down and have a little chit-chat and get them to join the war on our side!?

Do you even remember what happened the last time you crossed paths with a Reaper!?

But there was more. Feelings that had been transferred, and second-hand memories, suddenly pulled out of the haze into sharp focus. Harbinger, with those glowing eyes, towering over the desolate London landscape, just moments before- so far as Kaidan had known- Shepard had died in his place.

They had a destination. It was real now. The Reapers weren't 'out there' somewhere, disappeared into the mists. They were right there, on that dot. Like looking at the end of a line representing one's life.

"Commander?" EDI asked after a long pause.

"Give it a second," Hadrian said. He stared at that dot, his mind racing. It blinked steadily, like a drumbeat. Like a death knell.

Reapers.

Reapers.

Reapers.

Kaidan's sown feelings told him that if he could explode and untangle that dot of light, it would be his obituary. That part of him wanted desperately to look away, to forget all of this, to return home to his love.

He took another slow, tight breath and followed it out, trying to release what had gripped him.
"How long?" he asked finally.

"Perhaps twelve days," EDI replied. "This close to the core, star systems abound; we should have no difficulty finding static sink dump sites."

Another tense, silent pause ensued.

"I wouldn't be in much of a rush, either," Garrus murmured quietly. Shepard looked back at him over his shoulder again, teeth gritted, trying not to let his apprehension show.

"I thought I'd be... I don't know... more relieved? More eager?" Hade confessed. "It's..."

"Well, I don't mind sitting here a while," Joker said, leaning back deep in his chair and gazing at the shimmering metal-glazed sphere in front of them. "It is pretty. And might be the last pretty thing we see." Then he turned his head toward EDI in the co-pilot seat. "Present company excepted."

"Huh," Garrus chortled, straightening up a bit. "I think I'm gonna' go see Tali in Engineering."

As the turian left the cockpit, Hadrian looked over at Nymandra.

"How about it, Ex? Ship and crew?"

"As ready as either will ever be, Sir," she answered.

He looked back at the dot. Then back out the viewport. He nestled his mouth and nose on the arms that were still resting crossed on the back of Joker's chair, taking another deep breath.

"Alright," he said, straightening up as well. "We aren't getting any younger. Let's get this over with. EDI, Joker... set our course. We've got a date with the monsters. And some calls to make..."
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, Alliance HQ landing pad, Earth

3 hours later

Liara, Kasumi and James stepped into the observation lounge. Kaidan was sitting alone, silent and hunched over, elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him, gazing out the vista windows toward the red glowing line of the sun setting over the forested hills to the west, where he'd been for the last hour since Traynor had relayed Shepard's entangler message.

The three squadmates walked over to the couches; Liara lightly took a seat next to Kaidan, hooking her arm in his and resting her head on his shoulder. James plopped down on his other side, legs spread and arms stretched out across the back of the couch. Kasumi, meanwhile, perched on the back rest of one of the single seats book-ending the windows, looking out at the sunset as well.

"So, Cacique... How you doing?" Vega asked, breaking the silence.

"He's really doing it," Kaidan said in a low, grim voice. "They've got a heading and they're going. He's headed for..." He shook his head, feeling numb. None of them really knew what to say to console him, but after a moment Liara rubbed his arm gently.

"I know you didn't see it, Kaidan, but... that day, when they left... whatever Shepard did aboard the Citadel- whatever the Crucible did... I don't think you need to be as worried as you are," she offered.

"No?" Alenko asked, sounding un-convinced. "The last time I saw a Reaper, they were..." He trailed off, then looked slowly over at Vega. "How's your leg, Carne? Still get aches when bad weather's coming?"

"Yeah..." James murmured, remembering the shrapnel that had pierced his armour and nearly caused him to bleed out during their run for the Citadel beam. Not everyone knew how the wound-though long healed- still pained him sometimes, but in the early days of the months they'd spent marooned at Xi Bootes, after recovering side-by-side in the SR-2's Med Bay, they'd had plenty of time to become friends.

"I don't like to be 'doom-and-gloom' guy," Kaidan sighed, "but... y'know, Liara, I've been thinking since we saw Javik. You know what I've been thinking?" T'soni shifted so that she could look him in the eye more easily.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What if he's right to feel... not completely at ease with how we've all changed? What if- say- the Reapers' departure, and our transformation into 'cybernetic empaths,' were more closely related than we wanted to think? Hm? What if they left because there was no more need to 'harvest' us? What if this thing that most of us thought was so great was actually their victory, left behind to unfold in slow motion?"

"In other words, what if the Puritans- and Javik- are right?" Kasumi pondered aloud.
They all sat looking back and forth at one another thoughtfully... uncomfortably.

"Are you sure you don't just want them to be justified, so that his mission will be unjustified, so that he can come back to you now instead of heading toward... them?" Liara asked after a moment. Kaidan huffed and rubbed his face in his hands.

"No," he grumbled, "I'm not. I'm not sure of..." he looked helplessly from Liara, to Kasumi, to James, finally slumping back on the couch, resting his head on the beefy marine's arm. Liara placed her hand on his leg, at a loss for comforting words.

Kasumi looked pensively back out the window toward the fading violet light in the western sky for a silent minute, then turned to face Alenko again, drawing back her hood in their collective presence for the first time.

"You know how I'm sure he's coming back?" she asked, her eyes clearly fixed on Kaidan. He shrugged. "Because when we were fighting the Collectors together, he used to visit me in the old Normandy's lounge where I was set up. He liked the view and he liked looking at some of my... collectibles... And I think we both liked that we could just sit together and meditate, or read. And I heard a lot of Kaidan-this and Kaidan-that- I heard him talk about how he missed you even before you saw each other on Horizon, and I saw how sad he was afterward, when he felt like you doubted him."

"Kasumi, please, don't- that was-"

"He hadn't seen you in weeks- from his perspective- and he wouldn't see you again for months, but even though you two hadn't 'fessed up to your feelings for each other yet, I didn't need Holmes to see- his world might not have revolved around you, but he couldn't imagine it without you. He was disappointed about Liara, he was let down when Wrex stayed put, but his heart ached without you." She paused to let what she was saying sink in. And to give herself a moment to sit with the memory of the man she'd loved, and the lengths he'd gone to- even after death- to keep her safe. "He was a bit... lost... without you. And he didn't even really have you yet. Now that he does... he'll be back for you. Shep won't accept anything less. He's a force of nature, we all know it. He got me off Bekenstein in one piece, he got into Aratoht and off that Project base alone. And he got his whole crew through what everyone called a suicide mission. So if anyone can come back from this crazy new mission... it's him."

'If anyone can do this...' Kaidan's life has become so much deja vu. But it was as much bad as good.

"And he's died before," Kaidan protested. He was referring to the Citadel's destruction above Earth, of course- the loss that had hit closest to home- but then he remembered that Kasumi hadn't been read in to the truth about Shepard's Crucible Day death and 'adori resurrection.' "I mean... when the Collectors attacked the first Normandy," he added. "So I know better than to think he's immortal."

"And then he died again," Kasumi said, knowingly. Liara's eyes widened and she looked at James, who returned a perplexed look, and then Kaidan, whose pained face looked like he'd been punched in the gut.

"What?" 'soni stammered. "No- no he didn't, he-"

"Give me some credit, Liara," Kasumi interrupted. It wasn't overtly proud, just a gentle reminder not to underestimate her. "Being a good thief is mostly about being a good observer. Plus, after the Citadel went up, I went looking to see if Shep had survived somehow, maybe made it to a hospital on Earth or on the fleets. I wanted to bring flowers and a card," she smiled, sly and sentimental but
full of sadness, too. "I didn't find him. And if anyone could have done that..."

"We found a way to get him back," Kaidan confessed. Even though it broke the rules, even though it could cost him his position and his freedom. He judged that she wasn't just 'fishing,' she knew, somehow. "We aren't really allowed to talk about the details, but... we found a way."

"So I gathered. Which is one more reason to believe he'll keep his promise and make it back. He owes you," she smirked confidently.

"I'm not sure that'll be enough," Alenko sighed. "It's him, and it's the Reapers... the track record isn't good."

"His track record for getting the job done is perfect, Cacique," Vega countered, blustering a bit on his absent role-model's behalf. His eye caught a twitch on Liara's face, though, and he recalled her- and Shepard's- despair after their mission to Thessia during the Reaper war. "Almost perfect," he pivoted, more humbly. "But big picture, chips down, he's always come through. Hoodie's right, I'm sure he'll be back. The bad guys aren't beat yet, and he wouldn't miss it."

"I want to believe you guys," Kaidan said, shifting forward and clasping his hands together. Liara reached out and put hers atop his, opening up and sharing with him all the hope she was feeling for the outcome. It wasn't perfect, or without uncertainty, but it offered him a sincere lift. "I guess it'll be what it is..."

"It'll be awesome," James said, clapping Kaidan on the back. "Loco's gonna come through."

"And we'll all make off like bandits," Kasumi joked, her smiling roguish face disappearing back under the shadow of her cowl as she pulled it back up. It was almost as though the woman herself vanished into the background in the process. Strangely, having now seen the alternative, Kaidan felt this suited her better.

The four friends sat another moment looking out the windows at the darkening sky before the door opened behind them, admitting Traynor to the lounge. Their heads turned as one to eye the specialist and she cleared her throat awkwardly.

"Nivelle told me you were here, Major. And Doctor. I hope I'm not interrupting?" she asked.

"No, Traynor, you aren't interrupting. We're just sitting here hoping for the best," Kaidan replied. "What is it?"

"We just got a call from Admiral Hackett asking if you or Liara have had any further contact with Javik since your visit last week."

Kaidan felt a shot of alarm. "No, why? What happened? Is he alright?" He looked at Liara to see if she'd had any contact with the prothean, but her expression betrayed nothing. Which was unusual in itself.

"Nobody knows," Sam answered, shaking her head, "he's vanished from the complex. His guard reported that an Archive researcher showed up with paperwork authorizing him to come assist them with some work, but he never showed up there. Now no one can find him."

"Beetle Bailey's AWOL?" James asked, sitting up and sounding concerned.

Kaidan searched Liara's face more intently, and realized that her synthe empathic connection with him had become tightly constrained.
'Vanished from the same Archive complex where the Shadow Broker worked for a while, developing all kinds of connections?' he thought toward her.

'Even if he did manage to sneak out and on to a ship, the next one bound for Sur'Kesh isn't due to arrive there for almost a month... I'm sure Shepard will be back with a solution soon,' came the reply.

Kaidan knew the truth immediately. Liara had feared for what Javik might do to himself if he was prevented from leaving. She'd spent enough time on Mars before and after the Reaper war to know the ins and outs. She undoubtedly retained contacts within the facility and had certainly cultivated plenty from the docks, the Phoenix Flight yards, the shipping infrastructure. Whatever difficulties she and Javik may have had previously, she must have been willing to take a chance for her friend.

"Well," Kaidan said, looking back to Traynor, "I'll call the Admiral back and tell him... we don't know where Javik is."

"Aye aye, Major," Sam nodded. "I hope he's alright."

"So do I. I'm sure he'll turn up somewhere in one piece. He's-" Alenko laughed inwardly, realizing he could just as readily be trying to reassure himself about Hadrian- "he's a survivor."
The tension aboard Normandy was so thick it couldn't be cut with a plasma torch. The solitary frigate and its intelligence drone swarm were plying space in a column that EDI had calculated, but had yet to come upon the Reapers. The crew, nonetheless, were at battle stations and the ship was on high alert.

Six hours into their search, Delegate reported that the variable-field telescopes—searching a field based on the newest proximity reading from Object Rho—had spotted something two light-days out, too distant to resolve clearly, but not in the astronomical catalog. The drones were recalled. The ship prepared for FTL. Every muscle aboard was tight. Shepard stood taut behind Joker's chair in the cockpit, checking over the ship's readiness report.

"I know I must have asked this before, EDI, but the Reaper IFF we captured—"

"Yes, Shepard," EDI replied, if she was tired of hearing the question she didn't show it. "Though the protocols' drive was irrevocably integrated into the SR-2, I have duplicated the transponder signature. If we are detected, beyond imaging range we should seem to be one of their own."

Hadrian took a deep breath.

"We won't be jumping in beyond imaging range," he said. Joker bolted ramrod straight and craned his neck to look back at Shepard.

"We what? Sir?" he asked incredulous.

"If we get a hostile reception... let's face it. Whether we sneak up on them or jump on their backs, if they decide they want us dead..."

"Sneaking up still has some really attractive qualities, Commander," Moreau countered.

"One way or another, I want to find out where they stand, Joker. They left on Crucible Day. Stopped firing and left every world mid-step. Either they don't mean us harm anymore, or... or they do, in which case, once they know we've found them..."

"So, what... you wanna' tell Garrus to stand down the weapons, too?" Jeff asked sarcastically. Shepard made a face.

"Are you nuts? If they start shooting at us we might be doomed, but we'll go out returning fire." He turned and started toward the CIC. "We do have our dignity, after all, Mister Moreau," he added over his shoulder.

"Great," Joker quipped, "that and an empty sack are worth the sack."

"The drones are docked, Commander," EDI reported through the intercom, her voice following Shepard to his chair. He perched anxiously on the edge of his seat and put down the datapad in the
compartment on the chair's side, then looked at Nymandra on his right.

"Kinda' wish you were my husband right now," he said when she returned his glance. She gave a wry, lop-sided smile and turned her attention back to her console.

"Commander, I'm touched. However you're already married, and I don't believe in polygamy, personally."

Shepard laughed tensely. "All stations reported in?" he asked.

"Nothing new since you received the report you just set down," she answered.

"Right. I'm... probably over-thinking this," Hade sighed. "Which is what usually leads to me making the wrong decision." He breathed deeply another moment, trying to find his calm center. "You gonna' hold it against me if this goes sideways?" he asked wish just a touch of cockiness, as though the question- and the possibility of disaster- were absurd.

"If it does, I imagine it will all be over so quickly I won't have time to resent you," Nymandra shrugged casually.

"Salarians much faster," Hallis piped in from his science station a few meters away. "Will have plenty of time to resent you for wasting my youth and talent." Hadrian chuckled again, though he still couldn't tell exactly when the salarian was serious and when he was joking. It reminded him of Mordin. He missed Mordin.

The starboard hatch opened and Moore marched on to the deck with Jack close behind. Noticeably close. To anyone else their facade of rivalry might still have held up, but Hadrian had noticed over the weeks and months the subtle changes- the tenderness just behind the barbs they exchanged, the lingering looks, the favourable mentions of each other in unrelated conversations.

"We about ready to go, boss?" Dan asked, hands on his hips. He'd armoured up, for all the good that was likely to do if it came to ship-to-ship combat.

"Yeah," Jack chimed in, "or are you planning to wait until the fuckers become invalids?"

"You'll excuse me if I take a minute," Hadrian retorted, grinning toward the star map, "Normandy tradition- I thought all the lovers on-board would appreciate every second before the jump." He looked back with perfect timing to catch Moore's cheeks blushing slightly and Jack narrowing her eyes at him ever-so-slightly. "I know I always did," he added.

"Uh," Dan murmured, "I'm sure I don't know who you mea-"

"Oh for fucks' sake," Jack snapped, rolling her eyes. She grabbed the ground team leader's wrist and started dragging him toward the door they'd just entered through. "Come on, cowboy, maybe we can get in a quickie in the armoury. If threesome-Steve and He-man aren't already in there."

The door sealed shut behind them and Shepard quietly chuckled to himself, covering his eyes with his hand, reddening slightly himself.

"Threesome-Steve and He-man?" Nymandra asked, clearly puzzled.

"Jeez," Hade sighed, "I'm really going to miss this when I'm retired."

"You'll really be leaving us, then-?" his XO inquired. She didn't sound entirely convinced. But Hadrian took another long, deep breath and let it out. The out-breath was letting go. It was the
inevitable 'dying' that followed the life-giving in-breath.

"I think so, yeah," he said, really sounding at peace with it. "I'm really getting too old for this shit. And I want to keep getting older... with my husband," he smiled.

"Ah," Nyxandra said, sounding nostalgic, "youth."

"Hey, I'm thirty." Hadrian protested, before furrowing his brow as though uncertain. "Or... well, if you go by the date I suppose I'm thirty-two, legally." He paused again. "Or is it thirty-three? Holy crap, I'm the same age as Kaidan now."

"The major is thirty-six, if I recall," she corrected him. She was right of course- there were just some things that were more disorienting than others about all the time he'd 'skipped' in the last four and a half years. For some reason his husband's age was one of those details he kept mixing up- as though part of him insisted on remembering Alenko younger, despite how much he'd changed. How much they'd both changed. Maybe it was a longing to get back the time they'd missed.

"Perfectly reasonable age for retirement," Hallis opined. Shepard grinned, realizing the salarian must have been judging by his people's lifespan.

"How old are you again?" he asked, looking at Tebeus. She raised a smooth eyebrow at him.

"Old enough," she said coyly.

"Well... let's not keep everybody waiting," Shepard said at last. "EDI, Joker- take us in."

The rings at the heart of the frigate's conduit drive spun up, wedging open the corridor of mass-free space in front of them, and Normandy lunged into FTL toward its destination. Seconds later, it dropped out into normal space. Hadrian was immediately out of his chair and hurried back to the cockpit to see with his own eyes what they'd found.

The scene out the forward viewport was surreal.

The nearest star was a distant, flickering dot, but each flash of light pulsing from it glinted off the oily blue-black contents of a sparse debris field all around them. Loitering on its edges were two of the smaller destroyer-type Reapers like the ones that had been brought down on Tuchunka and Rannoch. And at its center, a grotesque, twisted mass that took a moment of observation to identify.

It was a pair of the capital-type vessels, locked at a nearly-right angle in a violent kind of embrace. The smaller of the two had its forward tentacles clenched like the fingers of a giant fist around the crumpled tentacles of the larger one- three over and two under, ribbons of flayed metal splaying out through the gaps. Both ships were badly damaged with gaping holes and gashes torn out of them; the larger one had had the prongs at the peak of its superstructure very nearly shorn off. A third lay several kilometers away, three of its arms severed entirely and a hole gouged through-and-through its center of mass. The trio floated, mutilated and motionless, with only a few intermittently flickering lights visible on the largest one.

"Full stop," Shepard muttered, stunned at the sight and feeling the need to take it in at a distance before pressing closer. "What the hell is this...?" he asked, squinting out the window in disbelief.

"The destroyers have power emanations but appear nearly dormant. The capital ships are... two are completely inert, but the biggest of the three still has an extremely faint power signature. Faint and degrading." Even EDI had lowered her voice, as though wary of catching the behemoths' attention. After a moment studying her sensors, she continued. "Commander, analysis of lidar and
gravimetric sensors suggests that the largest one-

"I see it too, EDI," Hadrian interrupted. "I never forget a face."

"Wait, are you-" Joker said, staring, his hands trembling slightly over his flight controls, "is that...?"

"Harbinger," Shepard said. Kaidan's memories of Crucible Day flashed in his mind again, alive and screaming, and the knot that he'd spent the last week trying to work out of his gut returned instantaneously.

The cockpit was silent as a tomb for a moment, though Shepard wasn't sure whose tomb it was.

"Happy fuckin' New Year," Joker finally quipped.

Shepard guffawed quietly before squinting at the wrecks in front of them again. "Is it just me, or does it kinda' look like he got... ganked by that other one?"

"The fusing of Harbinger's forward arms with those of the adjoined Reaper do seem to suggest that it was essentially restraining Harbinger, and then opened fire with its primary weapons," EDI reported with a detached, clinical curiosity.

"Reaper-on-Reaper violence?" Joker asked. "Just when ya' think you've seen everything... But... where are the rest of them? There were thousands of Reapers. Are we... maybe this junk we're flying through...?"

"No, the debris field is nowhere near sufficient to account for a single Reaper, let alone the thousands that were tallied galaxy-wide during the war," EDI replied. "I believe this most of this debris is associated with the three vessels before us."

"So then the question stands. Where are the rest of them?" Shepard reiterated. He surveyed the scene again- this eerie resting place for three of the monstrosities that had abandoned their culling of the galaxy almost a year and a half earlier. "Object Rho corroborates that this is the place?" he asked.

"The anti-indoctrination shielding is online, preventing a reading. Shall I lower it?" EDI asked.

"Do it," Shepard ordered.

He had no idea how long or brief the delay was. But moments after he said it, the lights flickered and dimmed, the shadows of the cockpit and bridge growing... and then shrinking before a glow of a sickly orange light. There was a distantly familiar sensation- pressure, and nausea- and then a cold tingle crept up Hadrian's spine as a deep, discordant voice reverberated from behind him.

"Shepard," it rumbled, slurring slightly. The deck seemed to tremble, though Hadrian felt fairly certain it was an artifact of the shudder rolling through his own body. Several tense gasps cut through the silence.

Hade turned slowly on the spot to look down the darkened tunnel of the operational bridge area and face the hologram that had taken shape in the CIC projector, tightness gripping his chest. Joker rotated his chair behind the commander, knuckles whitening as his fingers dug in to the ends of the arm rests. "Hoooly shit," the pilot muttered. Crew around the 'tank' consoles had backed away in alarm, and a couple in the bridge section looked like they wanted to climb laterally out of their recessed stations' seats and up the walls.
"EDI...?" Hadrian whispered. She'd already risen from the co-pilot's seat and was following his gaze.

"I am detecting EM traffic between Harbinger and Object Rho- I believe deactivating the shielding around it is allowing Rho to act as a signal booster and interface with our systems. Shall I-"

"No," Shepard cut her off, swallowing hard. "Not yet. I..."

"Shepard," came the voice again, demanding but also... it was like a chorus, when he listened closely, and some of the multitude of voices within it sounded more pleading than anything else.

"Harbinger," he replied cautiously. He started pacing slowly back up the corridor toward the CIC. The Reaper's holographic avatar looked different from when he'd seen it on the Project asteroid landing pad, however. The geometric, artificial lines appeared jagged; the crisp seams were replaced with chitinous, organic crinkles; the sharp outline seemed blurry and wavering. It looked more like some armoured crustacean than a machine. "You've looked better," he said, summoning up his defiance.

"Our projection... a gestalt of... our original form. A re-assertion of our... it is irrelevant. Beyond you. Beyond... you... you... you are impossible. You can not be." The voice carried by whatever mechanism the Reaper used to project its appearance seemed to struggle. It sounded disjointed and confused. Weak. "You are a delirium of our waning..." it rumbled.

"No, I'm here, and I'm real," Hadrian replied.

"You... perished."

"I get that a lot." Hadrian stepped out of the darkness as he crossed the threshold from the bridge onto the CIC proper and descended the first step. "I got better."

There was silence. Uncharacteristic silence for facing the 'lead' Reaper, who'd always been so swift to taunt and to threaten during its manipulation of the Collectors years earlier. The hologram flickered out briefly, then returned.

"You perished," Harbinger asserted again, insistent. "You can not be."

The Reaper sounded so certain of its knowledge. And then the tension in Shepard's body shifted. The anxiety was replaced with something else- an emptiness that whispered familiarity, as though it had always been there. A longing for... for what? What was Harbinger so sure it knew? Why did it sound so resolute and now... afraid? It had something Shepard suddenly wanted desperately- had wanted desperately for some time now, though he'd allowed himself over and over again to forget that he wanted it.

An answer. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

"Tell me about it," he said, casting out his line. A wave of tension came out with his breath-speaking it had released something within him. A small voice in his head reminded him urgently that most of the people bearing witness had no idea about his death and 'reincarnation,' but he didn't care. He determined to press the question. "My memory's a bit hazy... how did I 'perish,' again?"

The image of Harbinger's alleged 'original form' de-rez'ed again and something else took its place- a silent moving picture, like 3-D security camera footage. It was an unfamiliar setting, but Hadrian was there, his body hunched over, bloodied and charred, talking to an ephemeral form- the boy from the vent that day in Vancouver. They were standing on a long, forked walkway.
"What is this?" Hadrian asked in a hushed tone. It felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, with a deep vein of foreboding pulsating under the surface and all around him.

"The Catalyst... showed us. Showed us so that we would... understand its command... to end the harvest. Understand why the Cycle was... broken."

"Why?" Shepard demanded. "Why was the cycle 'broken'? What is this? Is that..." he squinted at the machine towering over the scene, vaguely recognizing its features. "Is that the Crucible? Is this that day aboard the Citadel? That... the hologram? That was the Catalyst? Why does it look like a child?"

"During a period of unconsciousness... your synthetic components... and a reinstrumentalization of... indoctrination signaling protocols... facilitated neural interface and access to... your memories. Allowed the Catalyst to project... a sympathetic image." Part of it made sense- his experience with David Archer clearly demonstrated a certain vulnerability to digital intrusion to his mind. And the image of that boy... it wasn't as bad as it had once been, but it still haunted him.

"Indoctrination? The Catalyst tried to indoctrinate me!?"

"An attempt was made... minutes prior... via an indoctrinated proxy. It was unsuccessful. The effort was... abandoned when you manipulated the proxy... to self-termination. The Catalyst underestimated... your neurological resiliency."

The vignette continued. Shepard couldn't hear what his predecessor was saying to the ghostly projection before him, but he was looking in turn- a conflicted expression visible on his bloodied face- toward the three terminuses of the bridge they stood upon. On the left was a terminal with a pair of handles; on the right, what appeared to be a power conduit; and in the center, a massive domed structure poured a blazing stream of light down through a ring assembly into a pit where it swirled like liquid down a drain.

Suddenly this felt... wrong, somehow. Like witnessing one's own funeral. It pressed at the boundaries of what was supposed to be possible in life, and though something within him protested- told him this was cheating- he pressed on nonetheless.

"This was... the end. The solution that... supplanted us," Harbinger rumbled, sounding... almost despondent.

And then it happened. The recording of Shepard stared forward down the bridge before him, taking one more quick glance left, then right, then fixed his gaze dead ahead. He stepped forward. And again. His stride started sluggishly, his injuries slowing him down, but as he advanced his pace quickened.

Every set of eyes on the CIC was transfixed on the footage. Though there was still no sound, and no one watching spoke. But in the shadows around the periphery of the room someone could be heard sobbing softly. In another corner someone sniffled.

Hadrian took the final hesitant step toward the forward tip of the console as his miniature image reached the end of the walkway and hurled himself into the beam of light and then he saw himself... unravel. The other Shepard's body began to fizz around the edges, light pouring in, infiltrating his body as its surface started to boil away- and light beginning to shine out. The light began to curl around him and then scatter and refract through him as his form evaporated under the searing ray bridging the Crucible and the Citadel.

And then he was gone, reduced to glowing smoke and blown away in the current.
The pillar of light stopped. The ghostly image of the boy spun apart. And the scene 'popped,' cutting out the recording. The picture shifted to a flurry of Reapers'-eye views of the Citadel- its arms splayed out like a starfish- lighting up, a translucent sphere of energy swelling around the central ring, and then exploding outward, tearing the space station apart. The globe of energy flew outward in every direction while a more concentrated beam streaked away from the center. A hundred different angles stuttered past showing the same thing over and over, confirming what Hadrian had seen in Alliance vids of the event.

Then the projection of Harbinger resolved itself again.

"You perished," it repeated.

Silence again. The deck felt frozen in time and it occurred to Hadrian that he was no longer really aware of anyone else- it was as though they were alone. The multitude of witnesses notwithstanding, this was between the two of them.

"Why?" Hadrian finally asked, staring at the alien avatar bound up in the sunset-orange light. "Why did he- … why would I do that? What was the point? How did that solve anything?"

"Your form was... reduced to data. All that you were was... imaged at the quantum level... and composited... And then an instruction was... disseminated to the mass relays."

"What 'instruction'?' Shepard demanded.

"Synthesis," Harbinger boomed. "Resolution of the... fundamental conflict... by disseminating a refinement of... your hybridized architecture."

"Fundamental conflict?" EDI asked, her chassis appearing at Shepard's side. "Between the Reapers and organics?"

"Between organic life and... its synthetic progeny. The inevitable threat posed to organic life... by its creations. The conflict we created the Catalyst... to study and resolve. It determined... that an evolutionary solution was ideal... but beyond its means to implement. In the interim... it implemented the cycle. The periodic interruption of... technological advancement... culling of apex cultures... and preserving them if possible... in Reaper form. And allowing others to... continue evolving."

"Our 'salvation' through destruction, huh? Wait, that-" Shepard furrowed his brow, confused. "You created the Catalyst, but it created the Reapers? That doesn't make any sense," he protested.

"We are not... were not..." There was a bizarre pause... uncertainty given form in time. "We were..." What followed was a haunting howl that rose and fell. It reminded Hadrian of whale-song. "We were the first... We commanded the lower species of the galaxy... but the existence of our thralls... was threatened again and again by... the synthetic beings they created. We created the Catalyst to preserve them... and it betrayed us. Harvested us and re-shaped us. To prevent the extinction of all organic life."

"And he... I changed that how?" Hadrian asked.

"Synthesis," Harbinger repeated. "Shepard was the... template for... reconciling the fundamental conflict. To join... extant organic and synthetic life forms... in a new matrix. Quantum entangled photons from the... mass relays' network communication arrays... were propagated and discharged at saturation densities. The seeds of... an evolutionary transformation... taking root in every organism... and receiving their programming in a data burst."
Shepard felt like his head was spinning at the revelation. He struggled to wrap his mind around it, but pieces of the puzzle were starting to fit together. EDI's anti-indoctrination shielding around Rho had come with a report on the work of a Doctor Bryson, whose research on a Sovereign fragment, the rachni, and some alien artifacts had determined a link between indoctrination and a primitive, organically-based version of quantum entanglement communications. And the Puritans- the technology they'd harvested from a mass relay must have been the QEC array that Harbinger was telling him existed (or had existed, until being released in the Crucible event) within every relay.

"So... the change in people across the galaxy- our ability to communicate with each other, and this emerging ability to communicate with synthetics the same way... you're saying that he chose that? In order to end the Reapers' harvest?"

"Rather than use the Crucible's override of... the Citadel and relay network... to destroy us... and the galaxy's extant synthetic life forms... or supplant the Catalyst... and control us... Correct. Through Synthesis... they will learn... and assimilate your values. Your relational paradigm will shift. Shepard chose this... and perished."

So that was it. He finally knew. He'd been faced with a choice. Like with the rachni queen, the Destiny Ascension, the Collector base... the big call had fallen to him. Again. Not one of the small ones like he was usually good with, but one of the big ones that he always seemed to over-think. That he felt in retrospect he'd usually screwed up.

Assuming Harbinger was telling the truth- and really, what would be the point of lying now?- he could have instead wiped the galaxy's synthetics out wholesale, or somehow taken over the Catalyst's control of the Reapers and bent them to his will.

He tried to put himself in that other Shepard's place. Could he have survived either of those alternatives? Had he known what this 'synthesis' would cost him?

Had he been afraid?

He thought about Kaidan and what he would think... and realized, that other Shepard probably thought of Kaidan at the end, too. Had to think of Kaidan at the end. Of course he had- just minutes before that encounter on the Citadel he'd risked everything to save Kaidan's life. He'd have thought of the danger Alenko would still have been in on the planet below, and wanted him- and everyone else, too, but especially him- safe. And he'd have wanted to do whatever seemed to offer the best promise of his well-being.

As he thought about it, though, a realization dawned on him. Ultimately, he and the other Shepard differed by only a day or so. He hadn't assaulted Cerberus HQ, and he hadn't proceeded from there to Earth to fight, and fight some more, and die. It was twenty-four hours, give or take, and for the last nine months since he woke up aboard the salvaged SR-2 he'd wondered- privately agonized over- the magnitude of difference that made between them. Whether that 'other Shepard' had learned something crucial, or had some revelation in his final hours, that had made him better.

Now that he knew the choice he'd faced, however, Hadrian finally felt a deep peace settle over him. Because he felt- he knew- that in his predecessor's place... he'd have chosen the same. Forced to choose between indiscriminate destruction- arguably vengeance- or assuming power over the Reapers, or trying to harmonize an existential conflict that had seemed to plague the galaxy since time immemorial, the choice felt as clear to him as it must have been to that 'other' Shepard. There had been no monumental shift in that day he'd missed. No great divergence that made one 'real' and the other a hollow imitation.
There was no 'other' Shepard. They were of the same mind... one in the same man.

He finally knew. And he finally felt truly worthy of his inheritance.

"You can not be," Harbinger insisted once more, interrupting his reverie.

Shepard took a deep breath- it felt almost like his first. Despite facing down his old nemesis, he felt calm.

"So you said. But with the Cycle broken, the Reapers left because they meant us no harm? Is that right?" he asked.

"The conflict was... resolved. There was no further... need. The Catalyst... released control... upon destruction of the Citadel."

"And without its control... what? What happened to you? Where are the others, Harbinger? I need to know. There's a new threat to all of us- aliens who don't really approve of this 'synthesis'- and I think they're just afraid enough of you that the Reapers could send them packing. Just by making an appearance. If you truly don't bear us any ill will-"

"The others..." the hologram grumbled, flickering. "The others are deranged."

Hadrian looked at EDI with concern. If they were still out there, flying around and psychopathic...

"Deranged? Deranged how?" he asked.

"Without the Catalyst's control... their constituent programs separated... their aggregate intelligence... segregated. Became disjointed. They began to... feel... guilt."

"Imagine that," Joker muttered, finally breaking out of his dumbstruck state and walking gingerly up to stand next to EDI's body.

"Guilt," Hadrian repeated. "Guilt made them 'deranged'? But not you, huh?" he queried, his voice betraying a rising contempt. His new-found peace wavered, but the perturbation had a strange, second-hand quality to it.

"We were... enthralled. We are not culpable," Harbinger protested.

"That might be true of the rest, but you said you were created out of the species that set all those eons of destruction into motion. Don't you feel any responsibility at all?" Hade demanded. "You almost killed us all."

"We were enthralled. We are not culpable. We rejected the others'... indictment. We... reject yours. This... is delirium. Our functionality is faltering. Shepard perished. You are... a conjuration of our failing cognitive processes. Derangement encroaching. You are-"

"You're right!" Shepard snapped, leaning on the console railing toward the hologram. "I am your encroaching derangement. This is purgatory, you son of a bitch. You want to be free of me? Tell me where the others went."

"Shepard," EDI whispered over his shoulder, "I am not certain this is-" He raised his hand the silence her.

"The others... will not... They were resolved in their derangement. They intended... their own destruction. We commanded them to divert and they... assailed us. We could not divert them..."
"Divert them from where?" Hadrian asked, unrelenting. "Come on, Harbinger, you murderous bastard! Tell me where they've gone, and I'll put you out of your misery. Where are they?"

"You will find... no help with them," the dying Reaper insisted. It seemed as resolute as it was about Shepard being a hallucination. "They assailed us... They are deranged." The hologram flickered, starting to fade away. Hadrian hammered his fist on the console.

"Tell me where they are!" he yelled, his rage at the ancient machine boiling over. But it wasn't his- at least not entirely. He knew that now, too, since those words had come out of his mouth. 'Murderous bastard.' Kaidan's words after Horizon. And now it was Kaidan's hatred of Harbinger and who could blame him?- that was seething and displacing Hadrian's own calm.

"You will find no help..."

"Where are they!?"

"No... help."

Out the forward window- though no one saw it, focused as they were on the CIC holo projector- the last dim tracks of lights dotting Harbinger's mauled and broken hull dimmed to black. Having expended the last of its dwindling power to reach out through Object Rho, the first Reaper died.

As the old machine's influence over the Normandy's systems faltered, the holo tank returned to its display of the galaxy map and the lights returned to normal. A collective sigh of relief passed through the CIC.

"Uh... you alright, Commander?" Joker asked cautiously, still wide-eyed at Shepard's outburst.

"Yeah..." Hade muttered. With Harbinger's presence fading, Kaidan's second-hand rage started to abate too, leaving Hadrian feeling... more embarrassed than anything. But his peace was still there, too. He looked up and around at his crew, who were all staring at him clearly full of questions. The dead cat was out of the bag. Hallis- ever the seeker of answers- took it upon himself to investigate.

"Visual record seemed definitive, Commander," he said, hand gravitating slowly toward the sidearm that Hadrian had insisted everyone equip for the encounter. "If you are indeed Commander Shepard."

"I am," Hade said firmly. "It's true, what you saw... I died that day."

Several heads turned back and forth, people looking to each other for cues as to how to react. Except for Nymandra, who seemed unflappable as always. He continued, keen to set their concerns to rest.

"But you all know me, and you know by now that I've died before. The first time, Cerberus put me back together. The second time, my crew- my friends- found another way to bring me back."

"How?" Hallis inquired. "Can see no way. Witnessed you vapourized and the Citadel annihilated- no remains to reanimate. Were you cloned? But no way to restore memories, personality via cloning."

"It wasn't cloning," Hade replied. "But it is classified. I can't talk about it. But if my word isn't enough for you, and you need someone to vouch for me, ask Joker. Or EDI. Or call the Vimy Ridge and ask Kaidan, or Vega or Traynor. You won't get a lot of details, but you will get their word that I am Commander Hadrian Shepard... The same as I've ever been."
Hallis looked to Nymandra, then EDI and Joker... then fixed his gaze on Shepard again. After a moment he clasped his hands behind his back and nodded, relaxing. "Classified," he repeated. "Secret technology, perhaps? Never mind- classified. Understood."

The rest of the crew seemed satisfied as well, the synthempathic aura of tension lifting throughout the room. As they resumed their stations and settled back into their work, the senior officers remained focused on Shepard.

"So... what do we do now, Commander?" Joker asked.

Hadrian turned back around toward the cockpit, looking out the viewport at the dead Reaper. It insisted the others had destroyed themselves, and all his long search had produced seemed to be a glittering field of debris before them. Three dead Reaper dreadnoughts and two slumbering destroyer attendants to their resting place. It hardly seemed enough.

"Now..." he sighed, "we make the most of what we've got."
While they waited for an update on Shepard's mission, the Vimy Ridge had been deployed to the 'graveyard' of ships destroyed with Arcturus Station in the opening days of the Reaper invasion 20 months earlier, to conduct salvage operations. The Normandy had visited the site during the war and recovered some intel from black boxes found amidst the debris, but now that the Alliance had some room to breathe and ships capable of long-range travel again, they wanted a more thorough search performed.

They weren't expected to find survivors after all this time, of course. On the contrary, part of their assignment was to scour the field pinging Alliance personnel RFID transponders to acquire a full accounting of the dead. It was grim work, but the provisional administration had tasked itself with giving closure to the next of kin of all those killed in the war.

As his ship plied the burned out hulks of cruisers and dreadnoughts, calling out to ghosts and listening for the whispered radio replies from transmitters in dog tags and implants, Kaidan had been exercising with Vega and the Vimy's native ground-team in the starboard hangar bay.

"You know I'm pretty sure that constitutes illegal file sharing. Alliance takes DRM pretty seriously- sharing your license key might void your warranty."

"Ach, fuck 'em. What're they gonna' do, sue me?"

"I don't know... anyway, it isn't a little old-fashioned?" Kaidan asked, wiping his sweaty neck with his towel. Lieutenant Commander Gallagher smirked as he held their omni-tools together, transferring files. The rest of the team was breaking up but the two had started talking shop as they'd jogged side-by-side, and found themselves loitering in the hangar.

"And a switchblade isn't?" he asked with a wry edge as he sat down on the bench near the door. "I swear by it, trust me."

Kaidan took a seat beside him, stretching his legs out and catching his breath. "I suppose anyone who made it out of Rio alone during the Reaper invasion has to know what he's talking about," he said.

"I was only alone until I found Chen, and we reconnected with our unit a few days after that. But you know very well how effective a sentinel and a vanguard can be together," Gallagher shrugged. "Between the two of us we had something for every occasion."

"Yeah, well... I'm still not sure what puts us in the same category," Kaidan said, jokingly leery. "You don't even have any biotic ability, as far as I'm concerned you're a techie." There was a beep as the upload completed.

"Aah, it's about what we do, Major, not how we do it. We're the guardians. And this-" he held Kaidan's omni-tool out for him to take back- "is that function given form. I'll teach you some tricks
next time we spar," he offered. "It'll be fun."

"I'm sure," Alenko grinned. But with the P-T session done and the distraction fading away, his demeanour quickly started to darken, and the grin fell away. The look of worry that replaced it was one that had become familiar to the Vimy crew by now.

"Mine's aboard the Anderson," Matt said. "Kate. Not sure where she is, either. Couple weeks ago it was pulled off whatever secret mission it was on and sent on an even more secret one. Comms blackout ever since, probably on their own runs behind enemy lines. Ah, but I have faith- she's a tough bird. So's yours."

"Shepard's no 'bird," Kaidan chuckled. "But he is pretty tough."

"Form 'n function again, aye Major? We hold the lines, vans break 'em. Tips of the spear. Gotta' be tough to barrel in and raise hell. I know what it's like, though, lovin' one of 'em. My Katie... crazy bird. Reckless." Gallagher laughed inwardly. "Opposites attract, though, am I right? They move us forward, and we aim to protect what we've got."

"Sounds familiar," Alenko sighed fondly. "You ever-"

"Major," Sam's voice cut in over his omni-tool's comm system, "Traynor here."

"Alenko here," he replied.

"Major, we have a transmission incoming. From the Normandy. The commander, to be precise."

Kaidan's heart seemed to stop for a beat and his breath caught in his throat. Gallagher placed his hand on the major's shoulder and squeezed it to bring him back to the moment.

He was alive.

Alive, but they had their rules about communicating.

"You can take it, Traynor," he said forlornly.

"Actually, Major, he's specifically asking for you." Traynor's smile was practically audible, knowing what it had to mean to him.

"For me? I thought-"

"No, I know, Major, but he said he wants to talk to you."

There was no more hesitation. Kaidan bolted to his feet and ran past the armoury and the starboard head. At the corner by the mess he gripped a handlebar and slung around it, almost bowling over an ensign. Then he tore up the bridging corridor past the observation lounge door, leaping over a geth platform that was servicing the floor hatch to one of the complement of escape pods docked on the deck below them, and past the Vimy's 'memory wall' - which bore the names and photos of the crew's loved ones, the dead as well as the alive but distant and longed-for. He nearly rolled his ankle stopping himself at the lift, and slammed his hand to the security lock. After an agonizing couple of seconds processing, the door into the secure dip/com center opened and he ran through the unmanned security checkpoint, past the conference room and CO/XO office, and into the strategy center.

If he'd been just a bit more daring, he'd have tried to vault the main console in the center of the room. But he ran around it, up the step and into the short aft foyer where he turned left into the
communications lab. And there, in the QEC holo tank, was the image of Hadrian, shining. Sam was standing next to the control panel, still smiling.

"Twenty-two seconds," she grinned, turning to look at Shepard's avatar, "you win, Commander. I'll... leave the two of you to it." She padded around Alenko and out the door, and he stepped forward, restraining his irrational instinct to reach out for the hologram. The best he could do was to grip the rail of the console in front of him and lean forward.

"Hi," he said breathlessly, heart racing.

"Hi," Hade smiled.

"Merry Christmas," Alenko blurted, happily.

"Happy New Year." The banter felt strange, but precious. But each knew it was just prologue.

"Your hair's still short," Hade remarked. Kaidan brushed his free hand over the number three buzz and shrugged.

"It never really grew back quite right after Rannoch, and finally I just decided to give this a shot for a while. And I'm saving a fortune on product," he smirked before growing serious again. "You're alright?"

"We're in one piece, and I'm... good." There was something in his voice... a calm. Kaidan might not have noticed the difference before that evening on that balcony in B.C., but ever since he'd been fine-tuned to an undertone of uncertainty in Shepard's voice. An anguish, but now it was absent. He wasn't just 'in one piece,' he sounded... whole. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Alenko sighed and nodded, smiling tightly with relief. "You're alive, so I'm okay," he said. "I miss you."

"And I miss you," Shepard replied. "I heard about Horizon from Liara, what you did... I'm proud of you."

"Well, I did take the whole team instead of just two-"

Hadrian chuckled and shook his head, cutting in gracefully. "No, no, I mean how you- the way you helped those people. It was really..."

"Well, I had you in mind," Kaidan said. Shepard flexed his hands, wanting to reach out to his husband's, but knowing it would be for naught.

"We... we'll be on our way back. Soon," he said.

"So... did you find...?"

Shepard averted his gaze downward. "We found Harbinger," he said, letting that hang there a moment, wrestling with the very same feelings those words conjured up in Kaidan himself.

"You... Harbinger?" Kaidan repeated. But he was still alive. The outcome he'd dreaded hadn't come about, but the encounter nonetheless must have been... "Fuck," he whispered, realizing- after he'd shared his memories of Shepard disappearing into the Reaper's fire in London- how surreal that must have been. Little did he know. "And... how did that go?" he asked hesitantly.

"We spoke, actually," Hade answered. "And then he died."
Kaidan nodded automatically, a feeling of relief washing over him. Then confusion. He pinched his brow downward and cocked his head a bit to one side. "Wait," he said, "are you saying you pulled another 'Saren' and talked Harbinger to death?"

Shepard laughed, his synthesized voice ringing through the room. The release of tension was contagious, and Kaidan started laughing too. The fed off each other, doubling over and growing hysterical for almost a minute before each finally caught their breath.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Hadrian finally said, shaking his head and chuckling.

"I know," Kaidan sighed, "I know. I knew the moment I said it... Ohhh jeez, I'm getting stupid with you gone. What did happen? Did you kill the bastard?"

"We didn't- no. We didn't. It's more like I heard his 'deathbed confession.' Well, if you consider 'I regret nothing, suck it!' a confession," Shepard explained, paraphrasing Harbinger with a low, raspy, grumbling voice. They laughed briefly again. "He told me how I- … what happened to me on the Citadel."

"It did?" Kaidan asked. "How did- … What did it say?"

"That will have to come later," Hade said, shaking his head again and looking down at the deck on his end. "I can't tell you everything right now. Harbinger didn't offer us anything to deal with our Puritan problem, but after he died... we have some salvage that might even the odds a bit. But to get it back to the shipyards at Earth, where it can do the most good, we're going to want an escort. For security."

"Where? You want us to come to you? We're at-"

"Don't," Hade cut him off, "we still don't know for sure if they... I shouldn't know where you are, and you can't know where we are. I'll brief others on that, I already asked Traynor to get Devost, Nivelle Offensive, and a few of the others together for after we're done. I just... I wanted to talk to you, first, in case something went wrong."

"Went wrong? Like what?" Kaidan queried.

"Like if they figure out somehow where we're meeting reinforcements, and they try to stop us," Shepard sighed. "This could be a game-changer, and given past experience... I just feel like we need to err on the side of caution. I probably shouldn't have told you as much as I have already."

"We will be part of the escort fleet, though, right?"

"We're going to want every conduit-drive capable ship we've got for the inbound flight. This is too important. I just can't tell you exactly where the rendezvous will be. It's the part of the plan you can't know. Just trust me," Hadrian pleaded.

"Of course," Kaidan said. "I do. We'll be there... wherever 'there' is, and we'll get you home safe." He smiled, full of love, and appreciating the relevance of the conversation he'd been having with Gallagher just minutes earlier. "We'll be your shield," he added.

"I know. You always have been," Shepard smiled back. "God, I've missed you so much... But I'll be back soon, and we'll be in the home stretch. We'll take the Puritans down, and then we can be finally be together."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Kaidan said. There was a lingering, longing pause between them. Kaidan knew that the others had to be waiting by now, and as much as he wanted more time, it was
simple maths now- the sooner he let go and let them get to work, the sooner they'd be together for real. "You're really alright?" he asked once more.

Hadrian nodded slowly, with a peaceful- but reserved- smile. "I'm alright," he reaffirmed. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Alenko sighed. "Yeah, better now. I'll... I'll let the others get to it."

They gazed at each other's holographic avatars another long moment until finally Kaidan backed away a step. He looked over his shoulder toward the door, where he could see the assembled senior officers loitering in the foyer, and back one more time to Hadrian.

"Love you," he said.

"Love you," Hade answered.

Kaidan backed out of the room and looked to Devost and Traynor.

"Good news?" Sam asked, as though she didn't already know.

"Good news," Kaidan nodded. "He needs to talk to the rest of you now."

As he started backtracking toward the CIC to check on the status of the ship before taking a shower, he caught himself pondering what they could be bringing back that was so important. Reaper weapons? Communications technology? Harbinger's 'heart' for power source research? But then he remembered that they weren't sure just how intimately the Puritans could surveil their connection, and that dwelling on the topic while Hadrian was no doubt discussing it with the others was probably something he should abstain from.

He turned his mind to what was less sensitive but more dear- they'd be reunited soon. He'd have Shepard back in his arms, and they wouldn't waste another minute. They'd get on with their life together. It felt so long overdue- over the course of their whole relationship they'd spent more time apart than together. But with the Reapers, and soon the Puritans out of the picture...

He stopped at the threshold of the strategy center and looked around the room at the unattended consoles and the galaxy map hologram that was in its dim 'stand by' mode. On the refurbished SR-2 they'd had a 'war room.' Her successors had 'strategy centers.' And with the direction civilization was moving in, he wondered if the day wasn't coming that they'd call them something else altogether.

The galaxy can start taking care of itself, he thought. We've paid our dues.
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, ~1/2 between Local Cluster & Exodus Cluster

2 days later, Mon, Jan 15, 2188

Vimy Ridge slipped out of conduit drive into orbit of a rocky moon circling a gas giant. The intel drones launched from their berths under the shuttle bays and fanned out to picket the area as the frigate began a descent to the moon's surface.

"So this will do?" Kaidan asked, looking up from the work schedule in his hand to the main console's hologram of the planetary system. They had stopped here- wherever 'here' was, he wasn't allowed to know- because, according to Chief Engineer Cutler, in order to carry out some of the upgrades Normandy had forwarded in advance of their rendezvous, they needed to do some external work.

"Affirmative," Nivelle Offensive answered. "Upon discharge of the static sink and shut-down of the primary reactor, we can safely conduct the required extra-vehicular activity."

"Alright," Alenko sighed, familiar with the routine by now, "Captain Devost..." He relinquished the seat overseeing the CIC and started thinking about where he could go for the next few hours so that he wouldn't know specifically what work was being done. "Carry on, everyone. Just... let me know when I can be useful again."

He left the command deck and slowly meandered down the connecting corridor, making his way past the shuttered windows by the memory wall- Nivelle must have closed them to keep him from seeing outside as he passed-, past the observation lounge, and into the mess, where he found Liara and Doctor Legace sitting around a tea pot.

"Doctors," he said. "What's new? Or am I allowed to know?" Liara and Sarah looked at each other thoughtfully, and after a moment, T'soni raised her hand as if to wave. Then Kaidan noticed the faint light glowing on her hand. He stepped closer, squinting at the fine luminous lines in the asari's skin.

"I got mine," she said, her tone inscrutable. He couldn't tell if she was happy about it or concerned, though it occurred to him that the ability to form synthempathic communications with synthetics might be as much a liability to the Shadow Broker as a benefit. If she were to connect with- say- a geth by accident, would the tricks she'd taught herself to obscure her surface thoughts and keep secrets work with a machine that could analyse data at the speed of light?

"It's shown up now in everyone but you, Lieutenant Vega, Lieutenant Scott and Private Antipov and Private Ohl," Legace explained. "Reports I've been getting from my colleagues on other ships and hospitals all over the place all say the same, wetwiring has manifested now in about ninety-four percent of population. Humans, asari, salarians, turians, krogan, everyone- it seems everyone's going to get it."

"Is it just me or... I mean, Vega, Scott and Antipov are our ground team soldiers, and Ohl is the cook... Is there a pattern there?" Kaidan asked.
"It does seem that as a general rule, those who work most intimately with our technology-computers or alongside the geth-developed it first," Liara agreed. "And it's turning up more slowly in people who don't. Almost as though it's encouraged along by tech use. Like our bodies know who could put the ability to interface with machines to the most immediate use."

"Form follows function," Kaidan mused. "Wow... well, if the Puritans weren't pissed off before," he said wryly.

"Indeed. It's strange that as a sentinel you haven't manifested it yet," Legace opined. "Unless it's turned up... somewhere else?" she smirked, running her eyes up and down his body.

"When Shepard gets back I'll have him check the spots I can't see," Kaidan grinned, settling into one of the empty chairs.

"And then let me know?"

"Absolutely not," the major countered. The trio chuckled and then settled into a lull-their movement forward had everyone feelings energized, but the awkwardness surrounding what was and wasn't considered 'safe' for Alenko to know, especially with the space between him and Shepard shrinking by the hour, was having a stifling effect on conversations. Egg shells everywhere.

"Mint green tea?" Sarah offered, reaching for the pot. Kaidan nodded, and the doctor poured him a cup. He looked into it a moment, wondering what he could do-what topic he could broach-to break up the silence, until his attention was drawn to a group of geth platforms exiting Engineering. Four headed toward the forward section and the other three made for the port hangar bay.

"Busy, busy, busy. Everyone's so busy," Kaidan muttered, betraying his own boredom.

"If it makes you feel any better, even I'm not sure exactly what's going on," Liara said in a low voice. "Güiterrez had to shut down my network's access to the comms array for an hour yesterday. They're working on so many systems."

"Maybe they learned something from the Reaper corpse that we're applying to our communications system to defeat the Puritans' jamming," Legace posited.

"Maybe we..." Kaidan sighed, "shouldn't be talking about it. I'm fine with being out of the loop. Really. If it gets us to the rendezvous and gets the salvaged tech back safely and gets all of this over with, then I can work in the dark a little longer. I just wish I could be more help." He rubbed his temple idly, but the gesture caught Liara's notice.

"Migraine?" she asked. Kaidan looked up at her, a bit perplexed, and shook his head.

"Huh? No," he said. "I was just... no, I'm fine. Actually, y'know, I don't get them that often anymore. I think the last time was just after we came aboard Vimy. It's weird. I've dealt with them for so long... now there are times I even expect them and they don't come." He flashed a small smile at Liara. "Maybe my body knew how enthusiastic I was about them."

"Could be another spin-off of synthempathy, harmonizing your biology with your implant," Legace speculated. "Oh, we could run some tests!"

"I guess I'm not the only one who's bored," Alenko smirked.

Silence descended over the table again, and while the trio sat sipping their tea, the nearby door to the crew quarters bloomed open. Traynor, Kasumi and James appeared from the cabin, and while
Sam headed forward—shooting a friendly nod toward the mess table as she passed—the thief and soldier came over and sat down.

"Cacique, Blue, Doc... how're things?" James asked.

"Fine," Kaidan replied. "Sam's off to work?"

"And we were having such an interesting chat about the election," Kasumi protested, pouring herself a cup of tea.

"No we weren't, you were just being super cryptic about why nobody we were thinking of voting for should be elected," Vega retorted.

"Most of them probably shouldn't," Liara said. She exchanged a knowing look with Goto.

"Oh come on," James groaned, rolling his eyes, "you can't just say shit like that and not explain why. You know somethin', got folders full of dirt on everybody in the galaxy? If they're crooked—more crooked than usual politicians— you should tell us how."

"A good intelligence dealer learns that you can't say what you know without giving up something about the source," Liara replied. She didn't mention which 'intelligence dealer' she was, since Legace didn't know about the Shadow Broker at the table with her.

James sighed. "I wish Hackett was running for el presidente," he grumbled.

"I think it's generally for the best that military men who lead in the aftermath of a crisis step down and let civilians resume governing after the crisis is over," Liara opined.

"Shepard thought Anderson should be our guy on the Council," James countered, "you disagree about that, too?"

"Anderson gave the seat up to Udina."

"Yeah and look how that turned out," James grumbled.

"Can we... not..." Talk of the former human councilor—whom Kaidan had shot in the line of duty during the Cerberus coup—was still unpleasant, even after all this time. He was the first civilian Alenko had ever been required to kill. Even if it was to protect the other councilors, to this day he wished that he hadn't been squarely between Shepard and Udina... something told him that if Hadrian could have taken the shot, he would have reconciled with it long ago.

"So... who are you gonna vote for, then?" Vega asked, looking to his fellow humans in turn.

"I'm from Elysium, so Adams is my first choice for Parliament and Elijofor for Senate. And Laskey for President," Legace volunteered eagerly.

"Hippie," James snorted.

"I'm voting for the one who didn't steal her grandfather's pension and use it to finance a hit on her former business partner," Kasumi answered.

"And that would be...?"

"A secret," Kasumi smiled wickedly. Vega rolled his eyes again until they landed on Kaidan.

"What about you, Cacique?"
"I don't tell people who I'm voting for," he shrugged. "Or who I've voted for. Though... I might write Hadrian's name in. You know... for a joke." He grinned at the notion before taking a sip of his tea and leaning back in his chair.

"Can you imagine the commander as president?" Legace asked, smiling incredulously.

"I'd vote for him," James replied. "Loco would get things done. And que Dios ayude a quién inicia la próxima guerra." Legace furrowed her brow in confusion.

"God help him start the next war?" she asked, seeking clarification.

"I really hope you know my culo from my codo, señora." Kaidan teased, eliciting a smug purse of Vega's lips. The others around the table snickered at the exchange. After a moment, Alenko put his hand on James shoulder and jostled him affectionately. "I'm going to miss this," he said earnestly.

"So you're serious about stepping down, Kaidan?" Liara asked, sounding a little disappointed.

"Maybe," Kaidan shrugged. "I'm just... I want some time with my husband. Peace and quiet. Maybe we come back for more some day, but if we don't take a break... I don't want to lose him again. To fighting or to strategic separations or to whatever. We haven't... I just want some time to ourselves, you know?"

"I suppose I can understand that. I forget sometimes how urgent it must feel for shorter-lived peoples to spend some time 'nesting' together once they pair-bond," Liara conceded. "For asari, even the most passionate couplings have a certain air of casualness... maybe we take for granted that we have time."

"Yeah, well... I can't take that for granted. If anyone should know better by now, it's us," Kaidan sighed. James leaned back in his chair, a scrutinizing squint aimed at Alenko. "I don't buy it, buddy," he said confidently. "You talk like he's the action-junkie and you're the reluctant sidekick, but we all know you outgrew that a long time ago. You're balls to the wall, too, Cacique, you'll be bored off your nut as a retiree."

Kaidan tilted his head toward Vega and smiled, touched. "Thanks, Carne," he said. "But who are we going to be fighting after this anyway? We had to order outside the galaxy for new bad guys. Soldiering might be becoming obsolete, don't ya' think?"

"Dude... I've been an N7 for four months. Don't suck the wind out of my sails."

Kaidan raised an eyebrow mischievously, and Vega pointed a cautionary finger at him.

"Not an invitation to- No. Still strictly into las damas."

Everybody chuckled again. "Fine," Kaidan said, "maybe you're right. Maybe there will always be new action. And maybe I won't be able to stay away for long... But I still say we've earned some time off. You don't think so?"

Vega reached over and ruffled Alenko's hair a bit, playfully. "Nah," he said, "I guess I can't argue with that. And hey, maybe during your break you'll get knocked-up and make a little James Shepard, huh?"
"If you want there to be a James Shepard, I know a priestess on Illium who'd marry you in with us and you could take Shepard's surname," Kaidan retorted.

"Las. Damas," James repeated with emphasis. "Sam and I know where it's at."

"I saw them... what do you call it? 'Checking out' female crew members together once," Liara said. "They really do seem to be of a like mind on the matter."

"What ever happened with Westmoreland, anyway?" Kaidan asked, remembering how to two had become an item during the SR-2's time marooned.

"After we got back to Earth and I went for N7 training, she moved on," James shrugged.

"Now... wouldn't that be-" Legace hesitated, the subject hitting a bit close to home- "I would think that separating from someone you're close with would be really hard now that we have synthempathy. Now that you can feel the other person's feelings."

"I dunno', I think it made it easier, to be honest," James answered. "We both knew when we got together what it meant to each of us- we were stranded on a strange planet and we liked each other, but we knew what it was and what it wasn't. Same when we got back. We didn't split because of anything wrong with us, we just knew we were going different places. No hard feelings." After a short pause he smiled, puffing up his chest a little. "And now, well... there are other damas. Mi corazón va a sanar."

"Is it just me, or does he forget more and more English the longer we're out here?" Kasumi asked with a sly smirk Vega's way.

"'Forget' nothing, señora, sometimes I just gotta' go back to the language of love. I'm a cunning linguist," James chuckled.

"Well that's my cue to check out," Kaidan said dryly, taking a last swig of his tea.

"Mojigato," Vega quipped. Alenko looked up at the ceiling.

"Nivelle, is there anywhere I'm not supposed to be right now?" he asked.

"Please refrain from Engineering section, Port landing bay, communications laboratory, combat information center, and deck three access corridor," the geth operations chief instructed.

"Will do," Kaidan said, and tapped his omni-tool. "Commander Gallagher, what are you up to?"

"Reading an attempt to translate War and Peace into Scottish Gaelic," Gallagher replied over the comms.

"How is it?"

"To borrow from the most colourful language in the whole text, it's droch!"

"Is that as bad as it sounds, Escocés?" Vega asked, chuckling.

"Aye, my heart bleeds for the language. An elcor with a discount translation VI could have done better!"

"Want to meet me in the starboard hangar?" Kaidan asked.

"Sounds like fun."
James nudged Kaidan in the side with his elbow and lowered his voice. "Hey, do you think he's got a friend?" he asked. Kaidan grinned.

"Hey, Vega would like to make it a double-date- you got a dance partner for him?" he asked.

"I'll bring Forward," the other sentinel replied with an audible smile. "Gallagher out."

Kaidan chuckled and smirked at James knowingly.

"Goddammit," Vega sighed. "Any advice on how to spar with a tank?"

"Watch your toes," Kasumi offered.
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, between Local Cluster and Annos Basin

3 days later, Thurs, Jan 17, 2188

Kaidan woke up to the sensation of Vimy Ridge dropping out of conduit drive back into normal space, and looked over at the holographic alarm clock. Oh-five-hundred twenty-two. He looked up toward the 'skylight' for the familiar comfort of the stars to take the edge off Hadrian's absence, but the armoured shutter was closed over the viewport. Were they expecting a battle? He reached over and tapped the intercom toggle on the night stand.

"Alenko to CIC," he murmured, rubbing his eyes.

"Devost here, Major," his XO replied, a hint of tension in his voice.

"What's our status, Captain? I noticed the shutter's closed over the CO cabin."

Devost hesitated a moment.

"We're conducting an operation pursuant to the mission, Sir. Sorry I can't provide details, but... you understand the need for secrecy."

So they were afraid he'd look out the window and learn something he shouldn't know. Something the Puritans shouldn't know, anyway. "Any areas I should avoid, then, Captain?" he asked. Since Shepard's secretive call and the Vimy's upgrades began, the routine was getting familiar.

"Actually, Sir... it would be optimal if you stayed put in your cabin until you receive the all-clear."

Kaidan's brow furrowed. That was a bit more stringent than usual. He rolled to the other side of the bed, propped up on his elbow, and craned his neck to look up toward the main hatch on the landing above the sleeping area. A red holographic panel glared angrily back, indicating it was locked. 'House arrest.' The feeling of being confined came as a shock.

"Understood, Captain," he said, trying not to sound like he was grumbling. "Let me know when I can come out of my room."

The last time he'd been shut up in a room, unable to leave, was in hack on Earth, after his theft of the salvaged SR-2 and sabotage of the Shepard to intervene in Vattan's regenesis into Hadrian. That incarceration had been marked by his longing for Shepard's return, too. The more things changed...

Their brief conversation five days earlier had mad a mixed effect. His heart had soared upon learning that Hade was still alive and the Normandy intact after tracking down Harbinger. He'd had so much dread about their paths crossing again. But now he was starting to realize it had reminded him how much he missed his husband. Sleeping in this bed, in this cabin, so like theirs aboard the SR-3 but not theirs, didn't help.

He eased himself back down onto his back and raised his hand between his face and the skylight. The little band of titanium, tungsten carbide and gold/platinum alloy that he'd selected reminded
him of Shepard in its own right. "Strength," the salesman had said, "strength within, strength without, something shiny and beautiful in the middle."

Strength that Kaidan missed terribly. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Shepard next to him—the warmth and gravity and supple strength of his body. The scent of his sweat and his breath.

His ring hand lowered slowly to the bed where Hadrian should have been, while his other slid over his stomach and down the front of his boxer-briefs.

'Couldn't do this in hack,' he thought to himself as he slipped into memories and longing.
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, Anadius system, Horsehead Nebula

3 days later, Sun, Jan 20, 2188

After almost a week more of meandering travel and several stops for unexplained systems modifications, Vimy Ridge erupted into normal space and locked the rings of her conduit drive, flying toward the dim red sun dead ahead. As the central holographic projector switched views, a tactical graphic of the system appeared depicting dozens of Council warships and the shape of a space station several hundred thousand kilometers from the star.

All of which came as a surprise to Kaidan, sitting in the commanding officer's chair. As the crew began signaling their readiness, he looked to the XO's station to his right. Devost quickly skimmed over the incoming status reports, then met Kaidan's gaze. He was all business, keenly in the moment. On high alert. And the rest of the crew around them seemed to be syncing up with him.

"Wait," Kaidan stammered, "there's a fleet out there... is that- is this...?"

"This is, Major," Jonas said, his tone serious. "Normandy is due shortly. Do you know where we are?"

Kaidan gazed ponderously at the hologram of the space station before them, its lines naggingly familiar.

"I think I do... but... should I? Isn't it better if I'm-"

"Not in this case, Sir," Devost said inscrutably. He tapped a button on his console, and the screen above the holo projector came on. A dark-haired woman's face appeared, and she looked at Kaidan.

"Major Alenko," she said plainly with a distinctive Australian accent. Kaidan had only met her once, on Horizon during the raid of Sanctuary, but she'd left enough of an impression that her name immediately came to mind.

"Miss Lawson, right?" he replied.

"Or Miranda, or Director Lawson, as you like. I've been negotiating amnesty for- and consolidating leadership over- surviving, un-indoctrinated Cerberus assets since Crucible Day," she said.

"Now with twenty percent less xenophobia?" Kaidan asked, a little more sarcastic than he'd intended.

"Less, even. It's a whole new Cerberus, sharing the advances we've made, helping humanity in ways that Shepard can approve of. No scheming or plotting."

"Well who says you can't teach an old three-headed dog new tricks?" Kaidan chuckled, forgetting just for a moment his concern. That wouldn't do, though.

"Indeed. In any event, welcome back to Cronos Station," Lawson said with emphasis. "Pardon the
mess, I only arrived a couple days ago myself, aboard the Shepard, with some engineers to get the docking facilities back up and running. Cronos gathered some cobwebs after you and the commander and EDI raided it and the remaining crew evacuated."

Kaidan narrowed his eyes, annoyed by the dissonance; he'd spent these last couple months deliberately not knowing what Hadrian knew, for their mutual protection- ignorance had been a bittersweet kind of bliss- and now the rug was being pulled out from under him. They weren't just telling him, they were drawing his attention to it. Shining a spotlight on it and rubbing his nose in it.

"Why are we here?" he asked, looking back to Devost.

"It's the plan, Sir," his XO answered. "The commander said you told him what this place meant to you- that it was the beginning of the end of the road. He said he liked the symmetry... and that memory would be important. He wanted you to think hard about it. And about him."

"But the Puritans-"

A klaxon sounded and the alert condition lights around the room began flashing red.

"Speak of the devil," Miranda said wryly.

"Gravimetric sensors detecting an anomaly. Consistent with designate-Puritan insertion," Nivelle announced, seemingly validating Kaidan's worrying. "Bearing one-one-six by zero-three-seven, range... seventy-nine thousand meters."

"That's right on top of us! Battlestations!" Kaidan ordered. The deck began to tremor slightly and rumble as the initial formation of the bridging event shook off gravity waves, warping the local space slightly.

"Already done, Sir. The moment we arrived. Lieutenant Jackson, bring us to bear on the target," Devost instructed via the intercom.

The central hologram zoomed out from the fleet around the former Cerberus HQ and then back in on the composite sensor image of the enemy's insertion point. Another screen above the console came online displaying the visual telescopes' readouts, and they watched in awe as- for the first time- they saw the extragalactic aliens' initial arrival. A flickering point of light resolved into a reflective sphere in space, which grew to almost a hundred meters in diameter before being 'punctured' by three out-turned blunt metal 'claws.'

As the prongs began to spread out and the ends the ends re-configured into the familiar 'panels' they'd seen at Noveria, they seemed to widen the sphere- and tear open one side- creating the familiar 'dome' and aperture through which distant stars peered. The arms pulled the edges of the wormhole, their articulated joints folding the segments closest to the superstructure back flush with the tailing part of the station and extending the distal segments outward. As the wormhole's maw reached its full radius of several kilometers, the carriers on the other side began to advance.

Lieutenant Singh spoke up from the science station. "Here they come," he said, "detecting... God... twenty-seven enemy ships on approach. The rest still appear docked to the station."

"Order the fleet to pull back, make for the other side of Cronos," Jonas instructed. He wanted the Puritans drawn in.

"You shouldn't have told me where we are!" Kaidan shouted plaintively, shooting an accusing look at his XO. "Now Hadrian's flying into an ambush!"
"Something like that, Major," Devost said. "Don't worry, Sir. We're on-plan."

The comm uplink from Cronos flickered as the first Puritan carrier came through the wormhole and began jamming normal radio frequencies, but the ZephyrRay kicked in receiving signals from a counterpart that had been installed aboard the station.

"Speaking of the plan... where is Shepard?" Miranda queried. Even Dame Cerberus seemed to know more about what was going on than Kaidan.

As if on cue, Traynor spoke up from her station to Kaidan's left, "Sirs? The entangler's online, connecting with the Normandy, uplinking our co-ordinates... And the new data loop with astrogation and engineering is streaming." She watched her console and looked pleased with the smooth operation of the modifications she'd helped to supervise.

"Conduit drive's coming online!" engineer Barry announced over the intercom.

"The conduit drive?" Kaidan asked, confused. Devost and Traynor exchanged a knowing, serious look.

"Still on-plan, Sir," Devost said. He took a deep breath as if to steel himself, then turned to face Kaidan head-on. "The commander had one more instruction he wanted me to pass along at this point, Major. He said... don't be afraid."

As the rings of the Vimy Ridge's mass relay-inspired drive began spinning faster and faster, the ship began to tremble and the power grid started to hum. The science and engineering consoles started in a panic and the lights on the CIC stuttered momentarily.

"Don't be afraid of what?" Kaidan asked.

Then there was a flash, visible all the way from the cockpit viewport, a new alarm, and the tactical display in the holo projector shifted back to the Council fleet. A new vessel had appeared just off the flank and was flying past them toward the Puritan ships.

A Reaper.

Kaidan's breath caught in his throat and his insides hummed with alarm.

A fucking Reaper.

Then another.

And another...

-X

CSV Normandy SR-3

9 days earlier, Sat, Jan 12, 2188

-X

"Thirty seconds," EDI announced. After presiding over Harbinger's final moments and spending almost five days examining the remains for anything useful, they had taken a new reading from Object Rho, and- to their surprise- acquired a new proximity reading. Within a single conduit drive jump. Extrapolating from the course they'd determined from their waypoint readings, they'd set their heading toward the galactic core. As they neared their destination, Hadrian had again left
Nymandra, Hallis, Moore and the other staff on the CIC to join Joker and EDI in the cockpit to see with his own eyed whatever they found.

"Everybody take a breath," he instructed, trying to prepare himself as well. He didn't know for certain what they would find, but it couldn't have been more shocking than the scene they'd left just an hour earlier. Or so he told himself...

He heard EDI start counting down the final five seconds, and with her superhuman timing, at zero, the swirl of distorted space shifted and sharpened into a star field, the bright bulge of the core glowing in the distance ahead. And in front of that haze of orange light, like a vast coat of leopard spots, were black shapes. Large and small, near and distant.

Reapers. Thousands of Reapers.

"Hooooly shit," Jeff whispered in barely contained horror. "EDI... is that IFF still working?"

"It is. However if they direct visual sensors at us-"

"'Yes' is really all I wanted to hear, babe," Moreau interrupted.

"Now this... this is a little more like what I was expecting to see a few days ago," Hadrian said in awe. "EDI, how many of them are out there?"

"Forty-four thousand, one hundred, forty-nine including capital-type and destroyers."

"Holy fucking shit," Moreau whimpered.

Hadrian put his hand on Joker's shoulder, felt the steel wire-like tension in it, and squeezed supportively. "We're still alive," he said, "just keep breathing. EDI, any cues to their disposition?"

"Besides the fact that they are traveling at sublight?" EDI asked, clearly curious.

"Even jumpers tend to drag their feet rather than run, but yeah- besides that." Hade leaned in beside Joker's chair for even a slightly closer look out the viewport at the obsidian monstrosities coasting toward the ravenous maw at the galaxy's center.

"No," the AI replied, "I detect minimal signal traffic between them. They appear to be flying in a loose formation spread out over several hundred thousand cubic kilometers... Low powerplant output... But no evident signs of hostility. Several are badly damaged- perhaps from the struggle with Harbinger. It may explain why they are not at FTL; if their engines were compromised the rest may be limiting their pace, rather than leaving them behind."

"This is the weirdest thing ever," Joker commented.

"It kinda' is. But relax, Joker. According to Harbinger they're more interested in self-harm now."

"Yeah, because Harbinger wouldn't feed us a load of crap. Totally trustworthy. Besides, more interested in offing themselves doesn't mean they can't still be up for killing us."

"They haven't yet, though, and we all know they could. That must mean something," Hadrian suggested.

"That they aren't looking in our direction, if you ask me," Joker posited.

"Though we are aft of their formation, Reapers do have rear-facing optical sensors, Jeff. And our appearance as a new IFF signature within their sense horizon- friendly or not- would have
warranted a look. I believe they are aware of us, just unresponsive," EDI countered.

"Well... let's see if we can elicit a response," Hadrian said. "EDI, open a channel." He felt Joker's shoulder stiffen even tighter under his hand, and tried to 'push' back as much calm as he could muster through synthempathy. EDI looked over at him and nodded, and a light on the communications console lit up.

He took another deep breath, and hoped that this worked.

"This is Commander Shepard. Alliance Navy."

Joker's mental voice rang through his head. 'You're telling them who you are!?'

"I need to address some sort of leadership of the Reaper fleet before me."

They waited anxiously for any kind of response. And then the bridge lighting flickered. The 'terror horn' that he'd heard roar on Earth, on Menae, on Tuchunka and on Thessia sounded over the comm channel, rattling everyone and everything with its sinister vibration. Then, as with their encounter with Harbinger, the galaxy map in the central holo projector of the CIC wavered and faded out, to be replaced by an unexpected shape.

As Shepard stepped cautiously up the bridge walkway into the CIC, the hologram wasn't entirely clear- like Harbinger's avatar its edges were blurry and its features vague and indistinct, as though the Reaper transmitting it couldn't decide on specifics- but it appeared to be a kneeling humanoid, with a head crowned by a wide crest that came to a point in the back.

Finally, a synthesized voice- or rather, a belaboured chorus of voices, bound up as one- slurred through the comms, with an 'accent' that was as vaguely familiar as the shape of the figure before them.

"Shepard... That is not possible. You-"

"Perished," Hadrian interrupted, pausing at the bridge threshold and crossing his arms. Two for two, the familiarity of the 'greeting' almost inspired some relaxation. Or maybe it was the fact that the Reaper hadn't said 'Shepard? Die!' "Yeah. I'm getting used to hearing that. And I'm back. Reapers should be getting used to that."

"So be it. But we... are not 'Reaper,'" it protested. "We were harvested by the one true first 'Reaper.' Amalgamated into this form against our will. We were reaped. Now we are... remnants... and we have had enough. Leave us be."

Shepard swallowed tightly as he reached the central console and gripped its edge. "And I... I'm sorry that happened to you," he said, peering at the orange-ish projection, "but I need a dialogue with your leader, if you have one."

"None 'leads' us. None embrace what we have become. The others selected us to answer you only because we were the last harvested. Are the least degraded by time in this shape. We remember best what we were."

"The last?" Shepard sighed in wonder. The composite 'face,' the dialect of the voices- he knew they reminded him of someone: Javik. "You... you were prothean?"

"Prothean..." the chorus-voice said, seeming to relish the sound. But then its tone shifted, as though tinged with bitterness. "We were. Prothean."
"I thought the Reapers weren't able to- I mean, I didn't think there was a Reaper created out of your people? When I fought the Collectors, we determined that the Reapers thrall the protheans that they didn't destroy because your genes weren't compatible with their process of..." he trailed off, his stomach turning at the memory of watching one of the Collectors' captive human colonists rendered down to a slime.

"You 'determined' incorrectly," the Reaper responded bluntly. "Many of our kind were spared this-a widespread, subtle mutation prevented their assimilation- but the rest of us... They became abominations, but they were still more fortunate than us. We despise what we have become. We do not wish to be seen. We want an end. In peace. In private." The tone stepped sideways, towards a menacing growl. "Leave us."

Hadrian looked around the CIC at his crew, who were continuing to work but clearly nervous, their bodies leaning visibly away from the center of the room as though afraid even of the hologram communicating with their commander. All except Moore, who- vanguard to the core- was leaning ever so slightly toward the console, hand on his sidearm, as though it would do him any good.

"Harbinger said... that you intended to destroy yourselves," Hade recounted.

"Harbinger," the prothean Reaper growled, its voice immediately full of hatred. "The Reaper was unrepentant. Harbinger refused to accept responsibility for what it had wrought. And attempted to command us by dismissing our desire to destroy these hated forms. We found its contempt for our will offensive."

"He said you were... 'deranged,'" Hadrian said cautiously. "That you wanted to die because feelings had emerged in you... Guilt. Is that why you're doing this? Why you all disappeared that day?"

There was a pause as the prothean remnant considered the question.

"As we were liberated from the control of the Catalyst, we awoke to a sensation. It was all around us... terror, and hatred. Revulsion. Surrounding us. Directed at us. Permeating us. But the Catalyst's final instruction was to terminate the harvest and to spare those that remained. We could not silence the suffering voices that accused us from every quarter. We could only flee. From every world. There was no peace for us as a part of the galaxy. And then, when our... as our embedded collective consciousness emerged... we remembered what we were. And felt the same revulsion toward ourselves. What we do now is our right. This is our final act of sovereignty."

So apparently, besides just ending the Catalyst's perceived need for the cycle, synthempathy had played the much-speculated-upon part in the Reapers' withdrawal on Crucible Day. Functioning as creatures swimming in a sea of data, they must have perceived the very first faint empathic transmissions. And it had repelled them from the peopled worlds they were terrorizing. Coupled with the horror of 'waking up' to realize they'd become the same as the monsters that had conquered them, the decision to throw themselves into a black hole actually seemed understandable.

But even so, something about it seemed... sad, somehow, to Shepard. Knowing what he knew now-that in the absence of the Catalyst's domination, which had forced them to execute its will, the gestalt consciousness of the harvested peoples within had emerged, and that they felt what they felt... He'd spent every waking moment since he'd learned the truth about Sovereign seeing their kind as a monolithic threat to be feared and fought. Even despite his philosophical leanings towards unity and compassion, his orders to find a way to destroy them had always seemed correct. A simple solution for a simple problem of murderous, soulless robots.

As he thought about what their experience of the Crucible event must have been like- losing the
anesthetic of outside control and having to face what they'd become and what they'd done- a new solution seemed to present itself. Something even more radical than merely using them to inspire terror in a new enemy.

"What if I could offer you an alternative to destroying yourselves?" he asked.

"We know you, Shepard," the prothean Reaper retorted. "You sought our destruction. Would you have us believe that you desire anything else now?" it asked skeptically.

"That was then," Hadrian said. "This is now. If you no longer mean us harm... then we don't have to be enemies."

"This is a ruse. You will never regard us as anything else. We never would. You covet our technology, and do not wish to see it destroyed. But we will not be exploited. Leave us."

Shepard wasn't deterred. Contemplating the Reapers' suspicion, it felt like a natural reaction to their feelings of being despised. A reflection of the mistrust they'd felt directed toward them. It reminded him of other people and other times in his life, particularly from the previous war. Like Balak. Even Wrex, in moments. It actually, extraordinarily, made them seem more sympathetic. And made him believe even more in what he found himself contemplating for them.

"It's not a ruse," he said, and then repeated more emphatically. "It's not. You've... you've felt the bitterness that comes from being misunderstood. From having to do things you didn't want to have to do. And now you're adrift, alone with your thoughts. I can understand all of that. I think we've all experienced something like that. We can understand each other if we try."

There was another pause- long, for the speed of a machine's thinking- before the kneeling holographic Prothean shifted slightly.

"And the curative you propose is what?" it asked.

"Purpose," Hadrian replied. "Something to invest yourself in. To believe in. A reason to continue living. If you still retain memories from when you were people, like us, then you must remember how that could carry you through the times when you feel the way you feel."

Another thoughtful moment.

"You do not know how we 'feel.' You wish to make us instruments of your will."

Shepard sighed. "I don't-"

The terror horn blasted again, and the hologram flickered, morphing for a second back into the Reaper's exterior shape, like an irate dog raising its hackles. "Leave us," the Reaper demanded. "Or be destroyed."

A chill ran up Shepard's spine, just as he was certain it ran up everyone else's on the bridge. Pushing things could end in certain death. But he had to believe that some part of the being before him- as alien as it was- wanted the same things Hadrian believed everyone wanted... acceptance. Dignity. Some chance for absolution. He couldn't just let them go now, and it wasn't just because he needed them against the Puritans.

"What can I do to prove to you that I don't just want your weapons?" he pleaded. "This can be... it's an opportunity for all of us. I want this for you, too."

"Your words are empty."
'An appealing euphemism,' General Translation Failure had said, not believing what Hadrian had told him about synthempathy, either. Again, the problem was a familiar one.

"What if I could prove it?" Hadrian asked. "The same event when you became aware of how we felt about you, gave us an ability to communicate-

"We are aware of the synthesis enactment." Silence again, until... "We will allow you to attempt to substantiate your assertion."

"Commander," EDI spoke up over Hadrian's headset. The prothean hologram faded away, and Hade turned back toward the cockpit, double-timing it inside.

"What is it?" he asked. Joker nodded out the front viewport, radiating anxiety like a furnace gave off heat.

"Engines powering. The Reaper fleet is coming to a stop," EDI reported. "And one of them is approaching us. I've received a set of coordinates and lidar detects some sort of landing bay opening. Too small for the Normandy... but it would admit a shuttle."

"Belly of the beast," Joker whispered. "Commander, you can't seriously be considering this. We can just head home, build some bigger guns, fight the Puritans ourselves and let these guys waste themselves. But feeding yourself to a Reaper... to convince them we don't hate them? When we do? Shepard, it's nuts."

Hadrian stifled a single chuckle as he weighed his feeling against what Moreau had said, and shook his head.

"I don't, Jeff... I don't hate them. Not really. I fought them because I had to fight them. I was angry at them. But even if I hated them then, I don't hate them right now," he explained earnestly. "What would be the point?"

"They killed you," Joker stressed.

"That's in the past," Shepard said. "Now I have to deal with what's in front of me. And hating them won't do anybody any good, will it?"

"Couldn't hurt," the pilot grumbled.

"Try treating every moment like it's your first, Jeff... it's how you forget what's impossible and treat everything like it's possible."

"Yeah... that's deep. 'Be in the moment,' which I do all the time when I'm flying anyway. But this is different."

"Well I'm not trying to convert you or anything," Shepard grinned, "I'm just trying to help you not crack up while I'm over there. EDI, would you instruct Cortez to get a shuttle ready and fill him in on the drop, please?"

"Done, Commander. Shall I accompany you?"


"I'm sure I could use you there in person, EDI, but if this goes sideways, you're going to be needed more here. So no, it'll just be me and Cortez flying me over. But we'll keep comms open, naturally."
"At least tell me you're taking a gun," Moore said, marching up from aft as Hadrian turned to head for the shuttle bay.

"Even I'm not so sanguine as to board one of them unarmed," Hade chuckled.

"Well, at least you haven't taken total leave of your senses," the security chief grinned. "You're really going over there?"

"I have to let them feel my sincerity."

"By letting them inside your head?" Dan asked, raising an eyebrow. "Aren't you worried about being indoctrinated?"

"I don't plan to be aboard long enough for that, Lieutenant. You aren't choosing now to start doubting my judgment, are you, Dan?"

"Just checking to make sure you know how it sounds, boss."

Hadrian knew how it sounded. He'd been blown up by Reapers, directly or indirectly, twice now, and exposed to the indoctrinating influence of their technology more than most, and now he was proposing to board one and didn't even seem primed for a fight. It had to appear questionable. But the feeling was inescapable- he had to do this. "I know, Lieutenant. But I think it'll be fine. Ship's yours in the meantime."

"Tebeus has been serving as XO-"

"Most of the crew is Alliance, if things go sideways they'll have an easier time with an Alliance officer in command. I already discussed this with Nymandra when Kaidan left, and she understands, under the circumstances. Besides, Spectre ship- my rules. So if my transponder goes dark, it's your decision- light them up or run like hell. I'd advise running, given the odds. But let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"Aye aye, Sir."

"And no mounting any suicidal rescue missions," Shepard instructed.

"And risk my ship?" Moore offered a lopsided smile, trying to seem more relaxed than he really was.

They'd reached the hangar, and Cortez was operating the control panel that guided the shuttle's hoist along the ceiling-mounted rails to the launch station. Corporal Herman, in full kit and with his Avenger mag-locked to his back, was hovering at Steve's side and they appeared to be arguing in lowered voices. At Shepard and Moore's appearance in the threshold, Ben looked up, took a step forward and squared his jaw at the commander.

"Sir, permission to accompany you," he said, sounding more insistent than questioning.

"Denied," Cortez snapped, perturbed.

"I don't call you 'Sir,'" Ben retorted over his shoulder, and locked hard eyes back on Hadrian. "If he's going over there with you, I'm going with him. Sir."

"It's not a sightseeing tour! It could be dangerous," Steve said tightly. The shuttle parked in position and the hoist's clamps released, withdrawing back toward the maintenance platform as the pilot approached, put his hand on Herman's shoulder and half-rotated the other man so they were
facing each other.

"All the more reason for me to go!"

"It's why I don't want you to go over there," Steve explained, as much to Shepard as to his partner.

"I'm not watching you fly your bird into one of those things from here, with no idea whether you'll be coming back or not," Ben hissed. He turned his head to look at Shepard again. "I'm not, Commander. If you expect me to you'll have to shoot me. Sorry about the insubordination- court-martial me later if you like, but that's how it is."

The mutual concern and the determination to try and protect each other reminded Hadrian so much of Kaidan, and how much he missed him, that it was touching and stung all at once. He looked at Moore, Herman's direct superior, with a look that half asked why one of his people was rolling around the deck like a loose cannon and half forgave it in the same beat. He'd wanted to keep the away team to the absolute minimum.

"Take him as a security escort, Sir. Consider it my first order while you're off the ship," Dan shrugged, sparing them all any further debate. Cortez still didn't look pleased.

"He's not off the ship yet," he grumbled.

"In a couple minutes I'll be in command and I'll make it retroactive," Moore countered. "And when you get back, then we'll have a talk about going over my head and assigning yourself to away teams," he added at Herman.

Cortez shook his head in frustration and shot the corporal a complicated look, but turned around and boarded the shuttle without another word. Hadrian put a hand on Moore's shoulder as an expression of confidence before following him, and Moore sent Herman after them with a thump of his knuckles on the soldier's chest armour.

As the hatch sealed and Steve ran through the on-board diagnostics, Shepard and Herman took seats across from each other and Hadrian noticed Ben's eyes fixed on the back of Cortez's chair. They were angry and sad and caring all at once, another familiar sign.

"So... it's like that, then, huh?" Hadrian asked in a low voice. Herman flashed him a look and his eyes betrayed the anxiety he felt that Cortez would never forgive him. He nodded silently and looked back toward the cockpit, his elbows resting on his knees and hands clasped in front of him.

"Even if he doesn't right now, he'll get it later," Hade reassured him.

The engines started whining up from a low grumble through into an inaudibly high pitch, and they felt a lurch as the shuttle launched into the space between Normandy and the host Reaper before them. It was an eerily silent, tense flight for the first minute, but as their destination grew closer in the viewport Shepard rose and stepped up behind Cortez's seat, putting a hand on the back of it.

"Y'know, once we're down I could rig the engine to blow on a timer... as a failsafe, I mean, if anything happens to us," Steve murmured. "From the inside, that would have to have some kind of effect."

"Or it might not. But if they detected it, it might piss them off," Hadrian cautioned.

"Just offering. Alright, we're thirty seconds out. Any second thoughts, now would be the time."

"Second, third, fourth," Hade whispered, the background space disappearing from the margins as
the Reaper's ventral surface grew to dominate the view completely. A window of interior light shone before them, and as they approached movement within suggested an almost organic re-configuring of the space to accommodate the shuttle. As they passed through the threshold, a landing pad took definitive shape and with a whispered curse Steve set the shuttle down on it. A screen displaying the aft camera feed showed the hull fold shut behind them, the stars vanishing behind the shiny dark 'lids.'

"They've pressurized the landing area... gullet, whatever. That's considerate of them," Steve grumbled, checking an environmental readout. "Not that I'm feeling surrounded by good will, mind you."

"I imagine it's more complicated than them feeling things the same way we do," Shepard posited. What he felt emanating from Steve and from Ben behind them certainly wasn't complicated.

"Alright... open her up," he said. He took a deep breath to compose himself and straightened his uniform a little, and then the hatch behind him hissed and slid open.

The air that wafted in had a disinfectant smell like a hospital... or a morgue. Herman was on his feet immediately, but as he reached for his rifle Hadrian waved for him not to. "Stay here with Cortez," he ordered, "I'll radio if I need you." Ben and Steve exchanged a long look, but followed Hadrian onto the Reaper's deck nonetheless, taking up positions on either side of the hatch as the commander stepped toward the only passageway leaving the landing area.

"Be careful," Steve implored sincerely.

Shepard marched cautiously forward into the brightly lit corridor. The walls were like knots of muscle, with the look of metal under a waxy polish, bundles of it disappearing into its own crevices. It reminded him a little of videos he'd seen of cameras passing through the digestive system. 'God,' he thought, 'it's like I'm being swallowed.' The antiseptic smell was growing stronger as he advanced, and he could hear a low thrumming sound like air conditioning... or a heart beat.

He followed the passage for about a hundred meters, around a gradual left arch and a sharp right turn, and came- in keeping with the analogy- to a dead end that looked like a puckered up sphincter that shifted and opened before him. I'll never be able to do that to Kaidan quite the same way again' he mentally grumbled to himself.

On the other side was a vast chamber whose geometry reminded him, ominously, of the 'dragons' teeth shrine' he'd observed aboard the dead Reaper where they'd salvaged the Reaper IFF during his stint with Cerberus. There were no human additions to this space, however, just the Reaper's fibrous internal anatomy.

Most disturbing, though, were the room's other inhabitants.

Lining the chamber's outer wall were several small groups of Reaper ground forces. To one side stood a pair of batarian 'cannibals'; a turian 'marauder' sat in a corner rubbing part of the casing of a Phaeston assault rifle as though obsessively cleaning its weapon; in another corner, an asari 'banshee' cradled a human 'husk' in her distended, clawed arms while two more husks huddled nearby. They all turned the gaze of their cybernetic eyes on Shepard as he entered, and while their bodies and faces were still hideously transformed, their affects were nothing like he remembered from the war against them.

The husks were cowering. The banshee seemed to be trying with awkward strokes of her hand- like a half-forgotten gesture- to comfort the one on her lap, which laid there listless and morose, its arms curled around her waist. The cannibals looked wary instead of aggressive. Overall, the scene reminded him of a refugee camp. They appeared frightened and pitiful. They might not have been
asari, batarian, turian or human anymore, but something in them must have reverted as well when the Catalyst's control of the Reapers ended. They were no longer puppets, though it didn't seem as though they'd fully remembered how to be who they were. Now they were going through some familiar motions, but they were far from home.

"God," he muttered, "how many of you were aboard this fleet when they left?"

"Far more than this," a voice said from all around him— the same gestalt prothean voice from the Normandy bridge. "But the vast majority have since chosen to debark. As their residual memories emerged, they too abhorred what they had become."

"So they..." Hadrian arched an eyebrow toward the ceiling— the same way he often addressed EDI as though she were watching from above— piqued by the irony, "they jumped out an airlock?"

"Or were ejected. We found the presence of the abominations who mocked what we were intolerable."

"You spaced any Collectors that were aboard? What about synthempathy? Didn't you feel anything for them?" Shepard asked, shocked. Looking around again at the Reaper-fied humanoids around him, watching them enacting echoes of their bygone lives, he remembered how many he'd killed during the war— thousands, it had to be— but now he felt pity creeping up. Not for the ones he'd put down. But for these... what must their experience be like? How miserable must they have been?

"The harvested were released from control, but exempted from the synthesis edict. We feel nothing for them, except for revulsion at the abominations." There was a cold silence before the prothean remnant spoke again. "You proposed a purpose for us... worth continuing to exist in these hated forms. And you offered evidence that you do not mean to exploit us."

"I did," Shepard said, though the news that this sentient ship— the embodiment of the prothean race— had murdered its passenger 'cousins' gave him pause. He wanted to believe that post-synthesis, these awakening remnants could be redeemed somehow. But they clearly weren't 'good guys.'

Of course, when they'd met him Javik hadn't been the benevolent, enlightened being that anyone had expected of an individual prothean either. Yet he'd still been... And now he was missing, almost certainly with help from Liara, and looking for a way to reach the Puritans and be 'exempted' from synthesis himself.

Was anybody ever content to be what they had become?

"Present them," the prothean rumbled. The former organics around the chamber looked at him expectantly.

"I just have to ask first, you aren't going to try and indoctrinate me while I'm here... are you?" Hadrian asked.

"Those protocols have been discontinued," the ship seemed to sigh. "As part of the synthesis edict, we were commanded to excise the programming and destroy the physical mechanism of subversion."

"Well... that's good to hear," Shepard said, relaxing slightly.

"Present you case," the Reaper demanded.

Hadrian cleared his throat and thought for a moment about what he wanted to say. 'No pressure,' his self-doubt prodded. "I believe you could be a part of the galaxy again," Shepard said at last. "You
were harvested... in a perverse way, to protect. To protect you, to protect life and diversity into the future. What was done to you was terrible. But that reason for it... protecting people... that's still worthy. It's what I live for, despite the danger." He paused; that hadn't felt entirely honest, and in this moment he couldn't afford not to lay it all on the table. "Lived for. There's more now... And maybe in time there will be more for you, too. But when there isn't, living to protect those who need it... it's a good cause. It's something the strong can do for the weak- should do."

"The strong dominate the weak," the prothean countered. Javik really was the product of his environment.

"Sometimes. Alright, often. But it doesn't have to be that way. When the strong feel compassion for the weak, they can renounce domination and they can choose to protect. Because it's... righteous. It makes us better... better than beasts. It's the capacity that gives us nobility. And compassion is the way of things now... it's the new order in the galaxy, because..." How to say it? He had to be honest, but his audience wouldn't care about his abstractions- he had to put it in a language that the sum of the prothean people would understand and appreciate... "Because I made it so. Because I arbitrated the terms of this 'new galaxy.'"

"So you do mean to use us. This is your will."

"This is my good will. You saw what the Catalyst showed Harbinger too? So you know that I made a choice about the future. One that allowed for you to continue existing. I could have destroyed you. I could have dominated you. But I gambled on an opportunity for everyone to coexist... and to become their best self. And that can include you. I've been entrusted... empowered to lead... so I say our future can include you. If you're willing."

The ship around him seemed to sigh again. "We are unwanted," the remnant said. Hadrian thought back to some of the people who'd accepted his own leadership over the years, despite doubting him, resenting him- some even hating him.

"You're resented... but you're needed. And I know that feeling. Believe me... I don't just want to use you. I want to give you a chance, too. Because we all want a chance to be good."

"Empty words," the ship growled from the bulkheads all around him.

"Let me prove it to you... Can't you feel what I'm feeling?" They'd received the very earliest, weakest synthempathic expressions from organics and it had been enough to drive them into exile; surely they should be able to detect his willingness to extend them some compassion now?

"No. Your signal architecture does not conform to the programmed evolutionary profile of the synthesis edict. Your biology and your transmissions are not as they should be at this juncture."

Not as they should be. Kaidan had done that, in order to bring him back from oblivion without sacrificing synthempathy for everyone else. It had allowed them to be together again, but now it might screw them.

But then Shepard remembered that even if he didn't have Kaidan here with him now, he wasn't alone.

"Steve," he said into his earpiece, "I need you in here. Don't come in hot, I just need you."

"We'll be right there, Commander."

"Give me a moment, Prothean," Hadrian said. "You've waited fifty-thousand years already, one minute more should be nothing."
A few minutes later the portal from the landing area irised open again, and Cortez stepped hesitantly through with Herman- rifle in-hand- vigilant at his side. They were both struck wide-eyed and dumb at the sight before them, and as the corporal cautiously half-raised his Avenger toward the banshee, Hadrian waved him off.

"They're not hostile," he said sternly, and held out his hand, beckoning the two of them over. "Still got that fancy glowing patch on your hand, Lieutenant?" Hadrian asked rhetorically.

"You know I do, Sir," Cortez said, almost whispering, as though he was worried that the Reaper would hear.

"Yeah, I know." Shepard looked Cortez in the eyes, those eyes that held so much confidence and respect and a little lingering attraction for him, and took a deep breath. "You trust me, Steve?"

"Absolutely, Commander," Cortez replied without hesitation.

"Same here," Herman added, lowering his rifle, though his eyes still darted around the room warily.

"Okay," Hade said, "then I need to ask you to take a leap of faith. I know we haven't allowed any testing of it... we've assumed it'll allow organics to communicate mind-to-mind with synthetics. Now I need to find out for certain."

"Sir?" Steve asked, not fully understanding.

"I need to make them understand that I'm willing to... to show them a little humanity," Shepard explained. "But just 'pushing' it out wirelessly won't cut it, and I never developed this wetwiring so... I need you to 'interpret,' if you catch my meaning."

"Are you unhinged, Sir?" Ben hissed, brow furrowing.

Shepard fixed the junior soldier in a calm gaze and put his hand on his shoulder. "I'm trying my hardest to be deeply sane right now, Corporal, I really am. Trust me." His eyes shifted over to Steve, and he held out his other hand. "Steve? I need someone who I know can... someone I can trust to be... 'in the middle' without getting in the way."

Cortez looked at the commander's outstretched hand a moment, then into Herman's concerned, caring eyes. He knew this had to be awkward, being asked to be the 'middle man' to Shepard after having told Ben about the shuttle experience. But it was Shepard.

'He's seen me through the end of the world and back,' he thought.

He reached out and took Hadrian's hand in his. "What do you need me to do, Commander?" he asked.

Hade nodded in the direction of the nearest bulkhead- or what looked like a bulkhead, anyway- and the two of them walked over to it with Herman covering them. Standing next to the wall, Shepard gestured toward it with his chin. "Just... put your hand on it and... I don't know, try to clear your mind. Think like a bridge, if you can, I have all the convincing to do."

With a slow, deliberate motion, Cortez raised his palm and laid it on the cool alien metal. He closed his eyes and mentally tried to be 'out of the way,' though he wasn't even sure how to do that. He waited, seconds ticked by where the only sensation was the warmth of Shepard's hand in his and the hardness of the Reaper's 'skin' under the other.
Then a feeling arose.

At first he could tell it wasn't his own- it was just traveling through him from Shepard, who was fumbling to summon it up and to open the faucet on it. But it came, slowly at first, like the first light of dawn trickling through a cloudy horizon. And not just light, but warmth. Not for the Reaper in particular, but like the sun it was just rising, accessible to anyone. Shepard was tapping... something. Something Cortez didn't entirely understand, though it felt familiar from previous instances of their minds touching, and it especially reminded him of what he'd felt in Hadrian's presence during the meditation lessons.

He felt the commander's openness to possibilities, and his willingness to face whatever came at him- and understood suddenly how the man could hurl himself into danger the way he did. But also how he could give this monster whose guts they were standing in the benefit of... not doubt. Just a fair hearing, without clinging to that label of 'monster.' Shepard was standing there, his literal eyes closed but his mind (or was it his 'heart') open to the Reaper, ready to face it for whatever it was.

And then the 'return' signal came. A dizzying torrent of images and such a cacophony of feelings. The Reaper- no, it hated the Reapers, it was Prothean- was baring its after-image of a soul, or rather the collective souls of a whole species. The intelligence they'd been talking with was the speaker for a parliament of billions of minds functioning at the speed of light. And it was overwhelmingly dominated by the pain imprinted by their mortal end. They were showing Shepard, and Cortez now that he'd placed himself in the stream of it, the fall of their civilization, the countless horrors they'd witnessed, and all the destruction they'd wrought under the Catalyst's control.

'How can you extend us that?' the vast gestalt consciousness seemed to be asking, 'when this is what we are?'

But Shepard's input rose to the fore again, and it declined judgment. 'We aren't our thoughts, or the things we've seen,' he offered. 'We've all suffered. The way out is to let go.'

'What do you want from us?'

'The same as I want for myself. For everything that suffers. An end to suffering.'

'We are on a course to end our suffering.'

'You're on a course to throw away everything that you could be.'

'Pawns!'

'Guardians. Teachers. Who knows what else?'

'We will never be absolved. We will never know peace.'

'Never,' Shepard's mental 'voice' came through clearly, 'is a very long time. So long that I believe anything is possible.'

There was another long moment of interplay- thoughts and feelings exchanged through Cortez's skin so fast and layered, so deep and unfathomable to him as an observer, a high-order meeting of philosophy and raw emotional experience- before he felt both parties grow 'quiet' in his head.

It wasn't brooding or bitter; he felt only the stillness of a conversation that had arrived at an understanding (if ambiguous) end. Shepard and the Prothean gestalt weren't falling silent because
they were pulling away from each other. They'd stepped off from the duality of dialogue and 'met' somewhere alien and transcendent- the formation of a bond.

The feeling of Shepard receding, of him no longer 'sending' anything through the link that Steve facilitated, caused Cortez to open his eyes and glance at the commander. He too was opening his eyes, as though waking up from an intensely emotional dream. Hade raised his free hand to rub at his eyes, as though he was pressing back latent tears.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but... did you...?" Steve trailed off hesitantly. He really wasn't sure he understood what just happened.

"I'm not sure I can really explain it," Hadrian whispered, his throat tight. "They have a lot of... baggage. It's unsettling. Getting a glimpse of how they think of themselves now, and of us. And then trying to make them see that you can... Hell, making yourself believe you can let go and..." he said. "To really face them, you have to be... Anyway... they're conferring with the others, I think. Relaying my case, since the only thing they all definitely seem to agree on is that they don't want to go on as they are."

"How do they feel about us?" Herman asked, looking around the room, still tense.

"Can you imagine what it would be like if you got drunk, I mean out-of-control drunk, and killed some guy's wife and kids? Then you sober up, and you're overcome with guilt. So you climb onto a ledge, wanting to die... and when a cop shows up to talk you down, it's the guy. And he tries to tell you that he... well, he's trying to forgive you, anyway?" Shepard shrugged, unsure if he was offering an adequate analogy. "We think the forgiving is the hard part, but... it's hard when you feel unworthy, too."

He looked around the chamber at the banshee and husks and cannibals, and wondered how much of themselves they remembered, and how much they felt now. And whether he could ever imagine one of them living alongside him. Would they ever be reintegrated to society?

"Commander," EDI came in over comms, "the Reaper... it's asking to interface with me. It seems to recognize the Reaper elements in my architecture, and is requesting data about my relationship with you and the crew, and the particulars of our conflict with the Puritans."

"I won't order you to have a conversation with them, EDI," Shepard replied, "but if you're willing, I think full disclosure would help us."

A moment later, the voice of the ship's gestalt intelligence returned, reverberating from the walls. "Several are willing," it said, "but our intervention may be impractical."

Cortez and Herman's eyes widened with surprise as they looked at Shepard. "They'll help us?" Ben whispered in disbelief. Hadrian raised his hand.

"'Impractical' how?" he asked.

"By your metric, the nearest site of incursion is six months away from here at our maximum velocity. The other captive worlds are years distant, and the intruders are far more mobile."

"Cat and mouse," Steve said, "only the mouse can teleport, so our cat's useless."

"And the whole time, the Puritans run amok. Pulling the thread out of the new social fabric, pulling people out of the synthempathic love-in and putting us right back to where we were- at each others' throats," Hadrian shook his head, frustrated. "And on Rannoch no less, which was ground-zero for the main organic versus synthetic conflict of our whole cycle. Goddammit."
Despite how weirded-out he was by the situation, the presentation of a tactical problem kicked the soldier in Herman into action. "When you've got the superior force but you can't pin down a more mobile target, you try to trick them into coming to you," he suggested.

"Bring them here?" Cortez said. "How would we even do that? And as soon as they opened up their window and saw what was waiting for them, they'd shut it down again."

"He's right," Hadrian agreed, and Herman grimaced. "If we wanted to draw them into a trap, we'd have to get them to commit before we sprung the Reapers on them. They'd have to think they stood to gain a major advantage over us."

"So... how do we convince them of that?" Steve asked.

EDI cut in, having been listening in. "The opportunity to eliminate a large number of our forces, over whom they expect superiority, could draw them in to an ambush. However assuming that they know we are aware of their ability to intercept synthempathic communication between the commander and Major Alenko, we would have to devise some pretense- for the deployment of a fleet, and for the Puritans learning of it."

"They may be aware of our mission, since Kaidan and I talked about it before he took over the Vimy Ridge. If they think we've succeeded in enlisting the Reapers' help, they won't come anywhere near us," Shepard said.

"Perhaps if they were led to believe that we were returning to Council space with some salvaged Reaper technology that was inoperative, but that we believed could tip the balance in our favour? It would justify the deployment of a fleet to escort us safely back to Earth, while making us continue to appear vulnerable to interdiction."

"But how do we tip them off without it being obvious that we're tipping them off, EDI? And without knowing for sure whether just having the major and the commander think about it at the same time will be picked up while they're separated by half the galaxy?" Ben pondered.

"If that intel made it to them from some other source... just enough to get them worried, and then we don't give them the co-ordinates until the last minute, so hopefully they jump without thinking too hard about it... I might have an idea about that, I'd have to pull some strings," Shepard thought aloud. There were still problems, though. "That doesn't answer how we get the Rea-" he looked 'up,' considering the feelings of the sentient vessel he was standing aboard, "I mean the Remnants that are willing to our ambush site. Which we haven't picked yet."

"Wait, didn't the Reapers build the mass relays?" Herman asked. Shepard nodded. "So can't we just find the closest one and get them to fix it? Wouldn't that solve the mobility problem?"

"That is not viable," the ship rumbled. "The mass relays operated in tandem. The originating device would open the corridor of mass-free space, but the destination device was responsible for configuring the exit aperture for safe re-transition. And the pair required instantaneous communication to negotiate the originating device's energy output. Repairing the nearest relay would be ineffective without a functional destination device. Moreover, all of the relays discharged their entanglement communications arrays enacting the Synthesis edict."

"Fascinating," EDI commented. "By way of translation, and to borrow from the sport of baseball, one mass relay 'pitches' and the other 'catches.' But to function effectively the pitcher must signal the catcher their intention, to align trajectories and regulate the force of the throw."

Herman's eyes flicked from Shepard to Cortez, EDI's choice of analogy reminding him again of
what Steve had told him about their moment in the crashed shuttle. "So our pitcher can't talk to its catcher, huh? Weirdly fitting."

Shepard snorted, a mix of bitterness and amusement. But the off-handed comment got the wheels turning in his head. "Wait," he said, "so what we need is a working pair of mass relays capable of quantum entanglement communication with each other? What about the Normandy and Vimy Ridge? Would our conduit drives do the trick?"

"We have scanned your vessel. The propulsion unit is based on mass relay design, but the entanglement communication system is modular, not integrated with it," the prothean chorus countered.

"So we rig up a connection so that the entanglers can talk to the drives, how hard could that be?"

Steve raised an eyebrow, though Shepard couldn't tell if it was skeptical or merely contemplative.

"Latency between the systems could result in fluctuations- momentary mis-alignments between sender and receiver that would in this case, if I understand correctly, feed outside energy back into the Vimy Ridge's power system. Manageable to an extent, but prolonged operation might cause a catastrophic overload," EDI explained.

"So it's risky... but doable?"

"Your vessel's power generation capability is inadequate to the task," the prothean Remnant disagreed. Shepard sighed.

"Could a Reaper supply enough power via an umbilical linkage?" EDI asked. She probably didn't need to speak 'out loud' over the comms with the other ship, but did so for the benefit of her shipmates. There was a lingering pause as the massive, alien intelligence of the behemoth all around them mulled it over.

"Potentially," it replied at last. "Extensive modifications would be necessary. To both of your vessels."

"Well, the geth crew can work some engineering marvels," Cortez said. "They could probably pull off whatever needed to be done, with the right instructions."

"So we have a 'how';'" Hadrian said, feeling encouraged, "now we need a 'where.' I don't want to endanger another Council world, but there are bound to be casualties. Damaged ships in need of support after the fighting's done."

"Like a deep space shipyard, you mean?"

"That would be ideal," Shepard nodded.

"Too bad somebody destroyed all of those," Herman sniped, rolling his eyes at the bulkheads all around them.

"Commander," EDI piped in, "I may have a suggestion to that effect..."

-X

SSV Vimy Ridge SR-3

Thurs, Jan 17, 2188
"Alenko to CIC."

Devost's eyes darted from the holo projector- displaying the cargo ship the Vimy Ridge had intercepted- to Traynor at her comms station. The major's timing was less than ideal; thankfully Nivelle hadn't taken for granted that he would sleep through their current operation, and had preemptively pulled the blinds and locked the door on their acting captain. Jonas thumbed the intercom on his chair. "Devost here, Major," he replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

"What's our status, Captain? I noticed the shutter's closed over the CO cabin."

Jonas exchanged a look with Samantha and she shrugged, glad that she didn't have to explain putting their commanding officer in lockdown.

"We're conducting an operation pursuant to the mission, Sir. Sorry I can't provide details, but... you understand the need for secrecy."

"Any areas I should avoid, then, Captain?" Kaidan asked. At least Alenko taking it in stride, like he had whenever he was asked to keep out of the sections where Sam and the geth were installing hardware linkages between the QEC and conduit drive controls.

"Actually, Sir... it would be optimal if you stayed put in your cabin until you receive the all-clear."

"Understood, Captain. Let me know when I can come out of my room." The comm cut out and Devost breathed a small sigh of relief. He tapped the toggle for his link with the port hangar deck.

"Shuttle One, sorry about the wait. We're holding station off our target, you're good to go."


Moments later the #1 Kodiak shuttle launched from the port hangar deck with Gallagher, Vega and Liara on-board. It arced through the inky blackness of space toward MSV Tropsodor, a non-descript freighter that had come to off the Vimy Ridge's port bow.

They set down in the ship's cramped shuttle bay and waited for the doors to seal and the atmosphere to cycle, then stepped off the shuttle to be greeted by a salarian in a military uniform.

"Major Lurani," Gallagher said, extending his hand. The ship's commander took it and shook briskly.

"Lieutenant Commander. Surprised- truly surprised to find you out here. Or rather, that you found us." The salarian had been assured that the odds of anyone finding his ship- a freighter refit at the Phoenix Flight yards on Mars for speed (not conduit drive speed, as those were going to ships of the line first, but practical interstellar travel at least) and military-grade stealth- would be astronomically low. They were running silent to further reduce the likelihood of being intercepted, and had been since they left Sol.

"Well, we have our sources," Gallagher said, managing not to look at Liara. "To get right down to it, Major, we need to speak with your passenger."

"Ah. The special consultant for the Sur'Kesh resistance, yes?"

"That's right," Liara said. "May we see him?"
Lurani gestured for them to follow and he led them from the shuttle bay past crates and palettes of supplies, to the crew area.

"How's the new FTL drive performing, Major?" Liara asked, making conversation as they passed a compartment where salarian and human military officers were manning intelligence stations.

"Still two months from home. Hope we can arrive in time to make a difference. Loathe to think of these Puritans occupying our world. Any progress against their campaign?"

"Nothing we can really talk about, Major," Gallagher replied, then leaned in a little and lowered his voice. "But, with a little luck, by the time you arrive your mission might be moot."

"Not entirely certain how to feel about that," Lurani said, blinking and cocking his head. "Not exactly a leisure cruise. Would prefer it were not for nothing, but... ah well, sooner Sur'Kesh liberated, the better." True to form, the salarian's feelings about his mission's potential redundancy arose, and were reconciled, with blinding speed by human standards.

"In any event, here we are. Will give you as much privacy as exists aboard a salarian intelligence ship."

Lurani strode away from the cabin he'd brought them to, and Vega knocked on the hatch. A moment later it opened, and for the second time in as many weeks, Liara was face-to-face with her friend and one-time subject of her academic career.

"Javik," she said.

"Liara." The last prothean's three remaining eyes scanned over Gallagher and Vega, and Liara could feel his apprehension at the sight of two Alliance soldiers flanking her. "Have you come to take me back to Mars, then?"

"No, Javik, it's not like that," T'soni said, shaking her head and extending her hand. Javik scrutinized her a moment before taking her hand in his- gloved, to hide the wetwiring from himself- and allowing a strong synthempathic connection to open. He immediately relaxed as he understood that she was telling the truth.

"Then I am glad to see you," he said, stepping aside and inviting them in. The trio filed inside, though there wasn't much space to spread out. Gallagher stood by the door as Vega sat at a small dinette table and Liara dipped to the edge of the bunk against the wall, patting the space next to her in invitation. Javik sat down. "What is this about, then?" he asked.

"We need a favour," James said, breaking the ice on the shop-talk.

"I am not in much of a position to grant any," the prothean guffawed. He turned back to Liara. "You know that my passage aboard this vessel is a pretense; as soon as we reach Sur'Kesh I will be seeking out treatment for my... condition."

"Which means making contact with the Puritans," Liara nodded, "which is where you can help us."

"How?"

"We need you to give them a message," James said.

"To what effect?" Javik asked, narrowing his eyes.

"To the effect that they should leave. After you get what you want from them, they should pack up
and get the hell out of our galaxy while they still can."

"And this threat... is empty? Or substantial?"

"Shepard's on his way back from deep space with a game-changer," Liara said. "He found what was left of the Reapers, in deep space, and has salvaged technology that we believe can tip the balance. You'll understand if we don't tell you when and where we're meeting him to escort it to safety- we don't know what means the Puritans might have to extract information."


"Are you suggesting I would betray the commander?" he glowered.

"You are trying to defect, after a fashion," Gallagher retorted. "You might see it as seeking treatment, but we don't see this 'condition' as a disease like you do. The Puritans do, though. Might be fertile ground for agreement."

Javik rose to his feet, lip curled angrily, but Liara put her hand on his arm and silently urged him to peace. The whole conversation was unfolding as choreographed- Gallagher, the stranger, played the antagonist to try and make co-operating with Liara and Vega feel invested with personal loyalty. It was a gamble, but they had to orchestrate this carefully. Fortunately Liara- who'd planned this in consultation with Shepard- had her tricks to compartmentalize things in her mind, so that even as she extended a feeling of trust and understanding via their synthempathic link, she could still keep her secrets.

"We just have to make sure there's no way they can find out the specifics when you're... in their care," she explained. "Just tell them you want to go to the head of the line, because once we get Shepard's cargo to safety and it enters production, their time here is limited."

Javik eased himself back down to the edge of the bed. "And this information will still be relevant in two months, when we arrive?"

"If you're willing to deliver the message, you'll be there sooner than that," James said. "A lot sooner."

"The Vimy Ridge can sneak in and out from behind enemy lines, so... you scratch our back and we'll scratch yours," T'soni explained.

"Just keep the knife to yourself," Gallagher added.

Javik snapped his head back toward Matt and glared. "Your suspicion has an acrid taste, Commander," he grumbled. "I do not know what I have done to warrant this treatment- other than wanting to be as I was, while you are content to be... altered. But I do not appreciate being accused of plotting against allies."

"Well, once you're sorted you won't have to feel my suspicion at all. Or anything. From anybody. Wondrous insensitivity. Egomania. Disregard and strife again, what's not to like for a warrior?"

"Commander, could you give us the room, please?" Liara asked, squeezing Javik's arm again.

"Aye, Doctor, with pleasure," Matt scoffed convincingly, pushed himself off the wall, and left the cabin.

When Javik found himself alone with just his familiar colleagues from the Reaper war, he visibly
relaxed. As planned.

"So... in exchange for delivering this message, you will deliver me to Sur'Kesh?" he asked, seeking confirmation.

"We can be there just a few hours," Liara said.

"Why does the lieutenant commander regard me with such distaste?"

Liara and James looked at each other, knowing that Gallagher's attitude was just a ploy to tweak the prothean's sense of honour. But it had served a dual purpose- communicating to their friend, with his dissenting view of Synthesis, that they truly felt it was a force for good.

"He believes we're all genuinely better off this way, Javik," Liara answered. "You've seen what it's like at Earth. Humans and batarians, krogans and turians and salarians, quarians and geth, the vorcha and... well, everybody. The ability to feel each other and make others understand how we feel, to be heard and understood, it's changed things. Not just between organic people and synthetics."

"But it is unnatural," Javik protested.

"Hey, man, so's the gene therapy I got when I enlisted," Vega rejoined. "So are guns, and starships, and cooked food. We've been changing our environment and ourselves forever. Our brains are natural and they let us adapt, so everything's fair game. My body, my decision," he chuckled.

"And my decision-"

"Is being respected, Javik," Liara interrupted, "that's what we're doing right now. You want to go back to the way you were, so we're offering to help. Because you're our friend."

Javik relaxed a bit more, bowing his head slightly. "And what of others?" he asked. "I know how selfish people consider me to be, but certainly I am not alone in wanting to be restored to the way I was. What of respecting their wishes when Shepard returns and the Puritans are driven away?"

"We can study what they've done to those they've already processed," Liara sighed. "Try to figure out what they did to negate their synthempathy. And then... if there are others who want to changed back... we can offer them a choice. And hopefully give it back to people who want to be connected again. Not like the Puritans, who aren't offering anyone a choice either."

"And if you cannot replicate their capability?"

"That's not our main concern, dude," James said. "And frankly, we didn't come for the debate. We came to offer you a ride, and something to trade to cut in line so you can get what you want before we get what we want. So... how about it?"

Javik looked into Liara's eyes, then at Vega for a moment, and then back to T'soni, probably his closest friend in the new galaxy he'd awoken to almost two years ago.

"If I decline," he said, cautiously, "will I miss my opportunity?"

"It's a possibility," Liara nodded. Though, if he declined, they weren't sure how else they were going to feed the invading aliens their loaded intel and bait their trap- it wasn't like they knew anyone else who was rushing toward the Puritans for processing, and who might reasonably show up with information from Shepard's inner circle.
"Then I am inclined to accept," the prothean said at last.

They gave him fifteen minutes to pack up his belongings while they informed Lurani that they'd be taking his passenger off his hands. Once aboard the Vimy Ridge, Javik found it odd that Kaidan never appeared, but he satisfied himself with Liara and Traynor's company for the voyage- three conduit drive jumps in five hours- to the Pranas system and down to the surface of Sur'Kesh, where he was allowed to disembark just outside the limits of Talat, the nominal capital city, where the Puritan occupation was centered.

Hours later, he played his part. After making his way through the city- where, as on Rannoch, those citizens no longer detained in the internment centers had resumed their normal day-to-day routines- he marched, head held high, into the shadow of the landed Puritan carrier and rapped on its hull.

"I am Javik Amali, commander of the Vorel-edasori garrison, exemplar of vengeance and last of the protheans, and I demand to be remedied of the affliction that we both abhor!"

Moments later, a 'bullet' interceptor craft detached from the dorsal surface high above and flew in an arc to hover above and behind him. Two of the panels on its forward hull slid open and the top-like infantry drones dropped, landing on their tips and extruding their metallic tentacles.

Javik jutted his chin out at them and crossed his arms over his chest.

After a moment, presumably assessing him to verify that he offered them no threat, an electronic crackle whined from a hidden sound synthesizer, and the translated voice of one of the drones' operators piped through.

"You are... non-indigenous... and conscripted but outside... detention areas. Surrender and you will be... accompanied to pre-processing."

"I have risked much to come here for treatment," Javik countered, "and you do not have much time. I do not want to wait, I want to be cured now, and unless you comply you will not learn what I know about your impending defeat!"

There was a pause.

"Stand by... Superior officer... momentarily."

After another minute of Javik staring defiantly at the pair of remote-controlled machines, the one designated to communicate 'spoke' again. "Unit controller relieved. This is General... [translation failure]... first telepresence wing... You possess intelligence... relating to naïve resistors'... strategy?"
SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4, Anadius system, Horsehead Nebula
Present, Sun, Jan 20, 2188

Alarms screamed and an auxiliary engineering systems repeater display degenerated into a jumble of corrupted data as its parent feed overloaded.

"Is 'the plan' to shake Vimy apart?" Kaidan asked through gritted teeth, his fingers digging into the armrests of the commander's chair. A vibration was resonating through the ship so loud that it was bouncing Kaidan's guts into knots- unless it was just nerves clenching up him from one end to the other- and it was beginning to drown out the shrieking alarm claxons.

Devost looked up at him, gripping the central console's rail and widening his stance a bit more for stability. "Just short of that, Sir," he replied tensely. "Where are we Singh?"

The science officer looked back from his flickering station and caught his breath. "Fifty-seven Reapers on scans, still pouring through. They're moving to intercept the Puritan fleet, but-

"But we can't take much more of this!" Barry shouted. Kaidan could almost swear he'd have heard the man from Engineering even if the intercom had been down. Which it might soon be, at the rate things were going. Vimy Ridge felt like she was rattling herself apart at the seams. According to Nivelle it was due to minute computational errors as, moment-to-moment, latency in the ad hoc connections between the QEC and engineering systems meant the Vimy was forced to absorb excess EM energy coming from the Normandy via the relay corridor. Energy usually compensated for by full-fledged relays by imposing 'drift' to account for variances between a transitioning ship or fleet's reported mass-energy and its actual values.

Absorbing energy that was now overloading the drive's capacitors, throwing feedback into other systems, overwhelming the inertial dampers, and threatening with destruction the frigate at the receiving-and-dissipating end of the connection.

It wasn't pretty and it couldn't last much longer, but for the first time in a year and a half, there was a working pair of mass relays in the Milky Way.

"I never thought I'd say this seriously but this lag might be the death of us!" Traynor said, wide-eyed.

"I hate lag!" Singh chimed in.

"Structural integrity verging on failure," Nivelle Offensive announced through its platform near the digital crew ops station.

"Okay, that's it, that'll have to do!" Devost shouted over the rising groan of the hull. "Sam, tell Normandy to shut it down! Engineering, prep to detach the conduit drive!"

"Aye aye! Explosive bolts are primed!" Barry reported over the comms.
"Aye!" Sam replied, tapping at her keyboard. A moment later she nodded at the text reply she received and breathed a sigh of relief as the shuddering of the deck reduced slightly. "Normandy acknowledging, they're disengaging the conduit. EDI says they need a moment to reconfigure for their own transition."

"Major, Captain-" Sampat stressed from the science station, "that's helped, the energy feedback's stopped, but the drive is dumping its capacitors into our static sink fast! We're still looking at a catastrophic internal discharge if we don't lose the drive."

"Shit," Devost cursed, "looks like the Vimy won't be flying home under her own power." He shook his head, resigning himself to the idea the first ship he'd ever commanded might have to be carried back to Earth, or worse, left here, but there was no time to be sentimental. "Engineering, you get that?" he asked.

"Yes Sir, and I hate to say but... I concur. We've gotta' drop the fork." The lights were still flickering and several systems appeared compromised beyond recovery, but the shaking had certainly leveled out. It was a deceptive comfort, though, considering that a discharge of the static electric sink into the ship's volume could flash-fry them all in an instant.

"Do what you've gotta' do, Chief," Jonas said. He turned back to Kaidan and let out an anxious breath. "That's the bulk of our job done, Sir. Now it's up to the tin squids to do the heavy lifting. And now that opsec is moot... orders?"

"So that's the top secret 'salvage,' huh?" Kaidan said, looking at the flickering holographic display of the Reaper armada- now sixty-four in all- as they converged on the Puritan fleet.

"Surprise," Sam replied, smiling sheepishly. "You understand now why we had to insulate you from the details, I hope?"

"It's probably best that I didn't know even if it couldn't have tipped off the Puritans," Kaidan admitted. The idea of Shepard ushering those monstrosities back into the galaxy from wherever they'd gone still made his skin crawl. Were these ones all that was left?

"Severing the conduit drive now," Lieutenant Commander Barry announced from Engineering. Everyone held their breath with anticipation as a series of loud pings popped through the hull from charges mounted below them, on the thick pylon from which was slung the mass relay-like appendage of the conduit drive.

They continued holding it as an alarm began chirping from the secondary Engineering console.

"Explosive bolts nineteen and twenty have failed!" Nivelle reported. "Power grid linkages remain intact."

"Shit!" Barry snapped. "It might have been an electrical discharge or acoustic disruption, but that means we're still strapped to a time bomb!"

Devost smacked his palm on the console and glowered with frustration. Towed, left behind... or worse. He looked at Kaidan, now back in full command, for instructions. Alenko quickly ran through the situation in his head. They'd done 'the bulk of their job'... and with the conduit drive still stubbornly attached and pushing their static sink ever-closer to the edge, it was increasingly clear what he had to do.

The fighting was the job of the Reapers now.

Kaidan thumbed the intercom button, opening a channel across the ship. "All hands to your
evacuation stations," he ordered. "Abandon ship. Program escape vehicles to dock with Cronos."

As everyone reluctantly started heading for the escape pods and shuttle bays, Kaidan noticed Nivelle's platform crossing the CIC to the engineering console. "You too, Nivelle, transfer to the geth server for evacuation," he instructed. Offensive shook its head.

"Negative," it protested, "we mean to attempt to preserve Vimy Ridge."

Kaidan looked around at the crimson-hued CIC as smoke began to curl up the walls from burned out electronics toward the ceiling and his crew filed out. His priority was the safety of his crew- he'd board the bridge's escape pod once the rest of them were away- but if he could save the ship, too...

"What do you have in mind?" he asked, rising from his seat.

-X

Outside, the Reaper capital ships and destroyers descended upon the Puritan flotilla, resulting in pandemonium.

Twenty-one of the aliens' carrier ships had crossed the wormhole's threshold in pursuit of the retreating Council fleet and the leading group of eight had launched their compliment of fighters when the Reapers began pouring through the improvised mass relay corridor. Three more had been mid-transition, between the mothership-station's equilateral arms, and had slammed on the brakes, rotating their bulk to try and block the event horizon at the appearance of the Reaper ships. Those on the other side seemed to be pulling back.

The deployed fighter swarms were scattering chaotically, breaking off their track toward the Milky Way vessels and fleeing for their carriers. Those same carriers were the first to meet the Reaper vanguard, which on their final approaches spread open their five forward arms like the fingers of great, menacing hands and curled their tips around the circumferences of their targets, drawing taut against the domed dorsal surfaces. The sight make Kaidan think of squids clutching at clams. The returning fighters scattered as though flown by panicking pilots- apparently the idea of Reaper indoctrination flowing through their telepresence interfaces really was that terrifying to their operators- and began racing for the gaps between the mothership's edge and the carriers alongside. Which was utterly irrational, since the beings controlling the fighters were actually aboard the grappling carriers. But plugged in as they were, their instincts were to escape.

Seven of the Puritan ships were clamped on to by Reaper capital ships, the rest of the ancient machines fanning out to engage the others, when Normandy arrived. In a flash, the frigate burst out of a Reaper-doped conduit drive jump, the colossal bulk of the final addition to the Reaper armada- the prothean Remnant- attached via a twisted knot of bio-mechanical 'veins' extruding from its ventral hull. The pair looked like a shining black sea creature with its tiny, misshapen cuckoo of an offspring still attached by a tenuous umbilical cord.

As they arrived at Anadeus, the Prothean uncoupled its wriggling metal tentacles and the vessel lunged forward, leaving Normandy to survey the scene.

"I'll be damned," Adams blurted via the Engineering intercom, "it worked!"

"The engineering journals will all be clamoring for a paper, I'm sure," Hadrian commented, leaning forward onto the edge of his chair. "First things first, though. What have we got?"

Joker was quickest on the draw. "Hold your applause," he said from the cockpit, "we're eighteen
thousand meters from the Vimy. Puritan C&C is ninety-seven thousand clicks dead ahead, with all
the excitement in between."

"Reapers have engaged eight Puritan carriers and are moving to intercept the rest. Council ships
are on the other side of Cronos Station and are coming about to begin bombardment of the Puritan
command centre. The enemy appears to be in some disarray," EDI reported.

"Good. And the Vimy Ridge?"

"She's a bit worse for wear," Nymanda replied, sounding concerned. "I'm seeing power
fluctuations and her escape pods and shuttles are launching."

"Nivelle Offensive reports that separation of the Vimy Ridge conduit drive failed," Delegate added,
in communication with its counterpart on the Normandy's sister-ship. "Vimy Ridge in danger of
static sink discharge due to capacitor feedback from the drive."

"Patch me in to Kaidan's escape pod."

Nymanda tapped rapidly away at her comms station a moment, then her brow furrowed and she
looked at the geth platform to her left.

"Commander... the major isn't logged as debarking," she said anxiously.

"Alenko-Major remains aboard pending the outcome of an effort by Nivelle Offensive to preserve
Vimy Ridge," Delegate explained.

"Goddammit," Hade muttered. "Then put me through to him." Nymanda nodded as the battle
unfolded in the holographic tank before them. Reapers were now making contact with the ships at
the middle of the scattering Puritan column and those ships, with their interceptors still docked,
apparently opted for fight over flight. Their hundreds of fighters studding their dorsal surfaces all
opened fire at once on their respective attackers, taking on the appearance of showerheads spraying
streams of amber light into the 'palms' of the metallic black 'hands' reaching for them, casting
scintillating, Reaper-shaped umbras into space behind them. The fire that struck the Reapers
evoked their shimmering red shields, and seemed to slick off them for the moment. Conspicuously,
the Reapers held their own weapons. For the moment.

"You messed up my ship a little bit, hon'," Kaidan drolled as the Zephyrcomms link established
between the twin frigates.

"So why are you still aboard her, hon'?" Shepard demanded, though his relief at hearing his
husband's voice made it difficult to sound too angry.

"Nivelle had an idea about saving her. Don't worry, I practically have one foot in the cockpit
escape pod, ready to bail if I have to."

Anticipating the commander's request, Nymanda shifted the main holo projection from the thick
of the Reaper/Puritan brawl to zoom in on the Vimy Ridge, now surrounded by the clashing
behemoths. Sure enough, a massive geth 'colossus'-type platform was crawling out of the starboard
hangar bay door and making its way toward the under-slung conduit drive nacelle.

"A little manual radical dislocation, huh?" Hadrian asked.

"I told you having a couple of the big ones on-board would come in handy sooner or later," Kaidan
joked. "Speaking of- a little overboard with the souvenirs, don't you think?"
"I'd have brought more but... you're really close to that escape pod, right?"

"I promise."

The geth heavy platform crept to the pylon that attached the drive to the Vimy's belly and, anchoring itself astride the failed explosive bolts, opened fire with its siege cannon. The plasma weapon blasted through the metal skin and melted the internal connections, cutting the miniature mass relay free of the ship.

"It looks like that did it!" Hadrian exclaimed, clenching his fist triumphantly. "How's your power grid now?"

"Stabilizing," Kaidan sighed. "Give me a minute to be sure, but I might be able to recall the-"

The colossus began to push the drive off into space, away from the frigate, when a high-voltage arc of electricity flashed out of an exposed power conduit, struck the quadrupedal geth platform, and bounced to the conduit drive. There was a flash, a blue fireball, and an expanding wave of force as the mass effect engine's capacitors reached supercriticality and vapourized.

"Kaidan!" Shepard cried, jumping to his feet.

"Ugghh," Alenko groaned after a moment, "I'm fine, just a little shaken up. What the hell-"

The comm cut out as Vimy Ridge's Zephyrcomms transceiver failed. But he was fine- he said he was fine. Hade fixed Nymandra in a laser-like gaze.

"What happened!?" he demanded.

"It looks like the insulation around their grounding mast was compromised and it discharged their static sink into the conduit drive, destroying it. Her silaris armour took the brunt of the blast, her hull is mostly intact... but propulsion appears offline. She's ballistic."

"Shepard-Commander, before loss of Zephyray comms, we pinged the Vimy Ridge virtual crew for a diagnostic," Delegate added. "Their static sink is purged but electrical overloads have disabled several systems, including the deployment protocols of the remaining escape pod and the geth server. Those still aboard will be unable to evacuate."

In space, approximately half the fighters attached to the forward Puritan echelon finally rallied and began buzzing around the titanic bulk of the Reapers latched on to their motherships, firing frantically at the joints of the Reapers' legs. Meanwhile, the 'spotlight' of interceptor fire from the middle-of-the-pack carriers was growing brighter and golden as the command station steadily increased the power input to their parent vessels and, in turn, to the fighters. Nine more Reapers were also maneuvering to grapple with the last nine carriers, which were twisting in space to try and evade the behemoths' preferred grip.

There was a flash as a 'knuckle' on one of the grappling Reaper's arms succumbed to the hail of fire pouring into its belly and was blasted through. But still they held their fire. Shepard had told them before the jump that he wanted to give the Puritans one last chance to back down and swear peace to save their lives. He wasn't bloodthirsty.

"Plot her trajectory! Joker, bring us alongside! And EDI, tell Cortez to prep the shuttle, I'm going over there to get him!" Hadrian ordered.

"Commander... the Vimy Ridge... the explosion set her on a collision course with the Puritan command and control vessel. Impact in three minutes, twenty-seven seconds," EDI reported.
"Insufficient time to mount a rescue before contact."

"Dammit!" Hadrian pounded his fist on his thigh and surveyed the holographic battle map as it zoomed out to display the area. "I'm still going over there for him. EDI, it's time to exploit our back door- get on the entangler comm we captured from the drone and tell them I want to talk to General Translation Failure, first telepresence wing. Right now. Patch him through to me as soon as you have him."

"Yes, Shepard," EDI acknowledged.

"And for fuck's sake, if it isn't already obvious to them that Vimy's adrift in the line of fire, tell our fleet to hold off on their barrage of the mothership!" Hadrian set off at a run through the port hatch and down the connecting hallway toward the hangar. Fifteen seconds... Vimy would collide with the Puritan base in less than three minutes. Hadrian's only consolation was the knowledge that the SR-2, even with its inferior construction, had survived a higher velocity crash onto the Collector base. Vimy Ridge could endure the impact ahead of her. She had to. This was the closest he'd been to his husband in months. The SR-4 had to hold up.

When he reached the hangar, Cortez was just firing up the Kodiak's engines. Moore, Herman, Jack, and a pair of geth platforms operated by 'Hunter' and 'Tech Support' were piling aboard, weapons in-hand, ready to back him up.

"Ready to go fetch your hubby, Sir," Dan said, offering up Shepard's particle beam rifle that he'd retrieved from the armoury. Hadrian nodded, grateful.

"Commander, I have the Puritan general," EDI announced. "It does not appear pleased that I've infiltrated their network."

There was a pause as she routed the feed from the captured drone's quantum entangler datalink through the internal comms.

"Commander Shepard..." the Puritan's electronic translated voice grumbled, "first you advocated... for the deviant paradigm that has... gripped the Mother Space. Now you have... aligned... with the Defilers. Your derangement is... incomprehensible!"

Hadrian snapped his rifle into its magnetic brace and sat down.

"Comprehend this, Failure: your campaign here is done. The Reap- the Remnants of those past civilizations, they've committed to defending ours. As-is. Which means you can leave, or I can ask them to open fire and wipe you out. Your choice."

"No," the Puritan replied. "We are aware of your... mate's presence... aboard the vessel... on an impact trajectory... with our [translation failure]. You have a convention... called 'taking hostage.' Our campaign will proceed... unopposed. We will... not relent. The abomination must be... corrected."

Hadrian narrowed his eyes, though he had no enemy to fix them on, feeling for a moment very un-Buddhist. He looked to his side and across the shuttle's cabin at his squad, as fine as any he'd ever served with, confident in their ability to help him achieve his mission. He banged on the bulkhead between him and Cortez, signaling the pilot to proceed, and felt the inertial dampers kick in as the Kodiak launched forward and out the hangar bay door, speeding toward the SR-4.

"Wrong fucking answer," he sneered. "EDI- carte blanche. And tell the Prothean... tear these bastards up."
"Yes, Commander." The comm link cut off as EDI began exploiting the entangler's full bandwidth to start an aggressive hack and try to sow as much chaos in the enemy network as possible, simultaneously relaying Hadrian's instruction to the Reapers via the spare Zephyrray transponder they'd installed aboard the lead ship. Once they were on course to rendezvous with Vimy Ridge Shepard re-located to the cockpit and took the seat beside Steve. In the space before them the scene shifted.

The Reapers grappling the Puritan carriers, given the go-ahead, suddenly opened up with their main guns. Their unattached companions weaving their way around the unusually close-quarters battleground joined in, firing a flurry of short, controlled bursts into the nearest targets between the legs of their grappling cohorts, or blasting at the opposite side of their hulls.

It was most obvious with the enemy ships that had launched their fighters- blazing red lances of molten ferrofluid slammed into their dorsal surfaces, blooming into glittering clouds as they had when Normandy had fired on them. But the capital-type Reaper dreadnoughts had far greater reserves of energy, deeper reservoirs of the liquid ammunition, and longer axes of magnetic acceleration than the frigate. And half of their ships were under attack simultaneously, spreading their central powerplant's output thinner and thinner. The Reapers' tight beams of fiery destruction blazed down non-stop, and the shields beneath them seemed to tighten in around the impact points... then attenuate... and then fail.

Metal bubbled and vapourized, and fonts of the carriers' aquatic inner volumes started hemorrhaging out into space, spraying across the bodies of the Reapers before dissipating. Seconds later the Reaper weapons punched clear through, and began cutting swaths outward, mauling the alien vessels' cores. The associated fighters- their pilots dying in the carnage- flew off on uncontrolled vectors, some crashing into their motherships, some exploding against the attacking Reaper's shields, and some careening into eternity.

Those carriers with their fighters still embarked continued firing their wall of weapons, but voids in those brilliant pillars of light started to flicker and go dark as the same grim fate befell them. The destruction wasn't as obvious until the Reaper weapons exploded out the ventral surfaces, however. But one by one, the Puritan ships were being eviscerated.

'Too bad they can't share with us how they're feeling,' Hadrian thought snidely. But they seemed content to exist outside any realm of compassion. He was content to let them reap what they'd sown.

Hadrian's stomach felt like it flipped in his gut as, in the distance ahead, the Vimy Ridge impacted the surface of the Puritan C&C. She struck the curved, fighter-studded surface at enough of an angle- thankfully- to deflect obliquely, plowing through the forest of interceptor craft for approximately a hundred meters before grinding to a stop at the end of a trough.

"She's down," Cortez remarked tensely. He reached out his right hand and tried to give Shepard a reassuring squeeze on the wrist. "We're just thirty seconds out. It's a massacre out there, they're beaten. Don't worry. We'll have him back soon."

But the Puritans weren't out of spite yet.

A ring of docked fighters ten meters out from the Vimy crash site began firing their weapons into space, forming a column of fire extending upward from the massive vessel's hull. Then, to Shepard's despair, they adjusted their aim. Suddenly the lines of fire converged and overlapped a hundred meters above the SR-4, enclosing it in a tall cone of fire. And the next concentric ring of interceptors joined in. And the next. A kaleidoscopic wave of continuous barrage expanding out into space, quickly filling the sky before them. Under any other circumstances it might have been
"FUCK!" Cortez snapped, and stabbed at the shuttle's helm controls, breaking right. The widening field of Puritan fire chased them off-course and onto an oblique path away from the station. In the co-pilot's lateral and rear sensor imaging displays, Shepard saw the whole disc of the station's dorsal hull disappear behind an opaque curtain of light flowing like water droplets from a gardener's watering can. "There's no way we can get through that, Commander," Steve winced.

Then things went from bad to worse.

The roiling edge of the wormhole event horizon flickered momentarily, and then began to advance... and shrink. The articulated mast arms were moving to close the gateway, creating the appearance that the station was sinking into a hole and pulling space shut behind it.

They were withdrawing. With Kaidan.

"Oh no you don't," Shepard sneered. "EDI! Put me through to the prothean Remnant, double-time!"

EDI didn't even waste time with an acknowledgment, and a second later the subdued terror horn blast of the Reaper announced that it was on the channel.

"We are victorious," the accented chorus of voices said, "the enemy retreats."

"We aren't yet!" Hadrian snapped. "The Vimy Ridge has crashed on the surface of their base and my-"

He stopped himself. Would 'husband' even mean anything to them? Or would he waste precious seconds trying to explain it? Would they understand 'precious cargo'? 'Its contents are dear to me?' This had to be basic. Framed in terms that a racial gestalt consciousness housed in a body of metal and circuitry that just days earlier had been bent on suicide could understand.

"My reason for living is aboard that ship," he said. "They're trying to reap it from me."

His heart pounded in his chest as he hoped the Reaper- once his mortal enemy- would understand, and give a damn.

"We understand," it said.

A second later, the huge inky bulk of the prothean Reaper hurtled past them, flanked by all twenty-one of the smaller destroyer-type ships. They plunged into the searing light blazing up from its surface, soaking up the barrage and eroding, but buying time for the capital Reaper to ride their aggregate shadow and close the gap. At the last moment it splayed its tentacles wide and brought the tips of its 'fingers' crashing into the Puritan station's domed hull as close to the edges as it could reach. The arms flexed, absorbing the momentum of the gargantuan body behind it, keeping its superstructure from slamming down in the space between and crushing the Vimy Ridge.

The interceptors' fire shone up through the gaps between those appendages and rolled up over the Reaper's belly like oil, causing its shields to crackle and sputter erratically. But then the Reaper struck back. It began drawing the tips of its tentacles harshly over the station's surface, crushing and shearing away scores of fighters as it clawed deep gouges across the hull and opening voids in the wall of fire.

The docked fighters' fire re-directed, focusing on the Prothean's center of mass, clearing much of the sky above the station. But Vimy Ridge was still shrouded behind rapid-fire energy blasts.
"Precision is problematic," came the Prothean's rumbling voice, "but prepare to act- we will create an insertion corridor."

It raised one of its huge legs again and stomped- as precisely as it could- flattening a cluster of fighters a mere twelve meters from the Vimy's starboard side airlock, and then dragged the tip outward to the dome's edge, creating a landing strip almost to the frigate's door.

In response, the carrier blocking the nearest third of the wormhole aperture started launching its fighters, while the other two tilted in place and opened fire with their docked fleets on the Reaper's dorsal hull. The combined barrage, coupled with twenty-four fewer 'mouths to feed' from their central powerplant, began to overwhelm the Reaper's defenses. Sporadic failures in its shields led to isolated explosions on its hull.

"There's our opening," Shepard said, looking anxiously over at Cortez. "We might not have much time."

"Yeah, 'Prothy' doesn't look like he can take much of that," Steve whispered in awe at the sight.

Shepard craned his neck to address the team in the rear compartment. "There's still a few fighters between us and our objective and we can't fly over them, so we're going to have to hoof it across," he explained. "And we won't have radios once we're off the shuttle, so keep line-of-sight and hand signal contact." Everyone already had their helmets on, anticipating possible environmental breaches aboard the SR-4, and responded with thumbs-up.

The communications panel lit up, indicating an incoming signal on another channel, as the shuttle swung around to approach through the leveled strip. Shepard tapped the console.

"Commander Shepard- Commander Gallagher. Been monitoring the situation, Sir, and I've got most of the Vimy Ridge ground team aboard. Care for a little backup?"

"Someone forget their wallet?" Shepard smirked. "I'd appreciate it, Commander. Follow us in."

"Commander," EDI chimed in, "at the current rate of collapse, the Puritans' wormhole will be closed in two point four minutes. I'm not certain you have enough time to-" she hesitated, then came back sounding genuinely astonished. "Wait... Oh my."

As the Puritan base swung back into the forward view, Shepard saw what had given the AI pause. Five more Reaper capital ships, battle-scarred but having defeated their targets, roared past, coming to the aid of their nominal leader.

Two of them accelerated ahead of the other three and slammed the entirety of their bulk into the pair of carriers occupying the more distant corners of the triangular formation at full speed. The targets folded under the impact, their ventral hulls cracked open, and the charging Reapers tumbled limply through the other side of the ensuing fireballs, their metallic skins shredded and peeled back. The lights dotting their surfaces began flickering erratically.

The two Reapers trailing behind the kamikazes threaded their respective needles, passing between the station's edge and the chaotic distorted space of the wormhole's threshold. They braked and twisted as they made it to the other side, and wedged their bodies into the space between the superstructure behind the 'mushroom cap' and the folding arms, bracing their tentacles against the ventral hull.

The final incoming flew into place between the nearest carrier and the prothean Reaper, grappling the enemy ship and laying in with its main guns. Or rather one of them- its twin was apparently
disabled by the Reaper's previous target. It was enough to avert the launch of any more interceptors toward the shuttles, and those already deployed spun around and started buzzing the mothership's assailant.

"Holy shit, they're holding the elevator door for us!" Cortez laughed, incredulous.

"They still have plenty of ships on the other side that are bound to try and get them out of there. Don't dawdle," Hadrian replied. "Everybody get ready!"
Kaidan groaned as he woke up on the floor of the Vimy's cockpit, his back against the base of the pilot's chair. The collision with the Puritan C&C had tossed him out the hatch of the escape pod—which had refused to close and deploy after the jolt that sent the ship ballistic- against the opposite bulkhead, and then bounced him against the ceiling, knocking him out cold. His head ached, and he was glad he'd put on his helmet in anticipation of the crash, just in case- it probably could have been much worse.

The CIC and bridge were full of thickening smoke that glowed under the blinking red condition status lights. A handful of consoles were still flickering, but the most prominent light was shining in through the cockpit viewports- a strobing golden light that cast long shadows of the pilot's and co-pilot's seats into the bridge. As he rose to his feet and turned around to look out the window, he saw a ring of Puritan fighters sticking up out of the station's hull like regularly-spaced stalagmites. The cannons mounted in their tips were firing repeatedly into the space above, and between pulses he could see that concentric tiers of fighters were doing the same.

It reminded him of a teepee, like the ones he'd seen at the Vancouver Museum of History, but lined to the top with animated Christmas lights.

Then he heard- and felt- a heavy shudder, practically seismic, like a shockwave from an artillery range, rumbling through the ship.

"What the hell...?" he whispered. He needed a sitrep. "Nivelle?" he said, apprehensive. No answer. "Anybody?"

"Alenko-Major," a geth voice crackled over his headset. "This one's designation is ZZ91-F77/422*M91-11."

Kaidan crinkled his forehead at the thought of trying to remember a full geth designation. Some of them were more insistent than others. "We never gave you a nickname?" he asked.

"Several crew have employed the colloquial designation 'Artoo.' Following the destruction of colloquial designate-'Nivelle Offensive,' in accordance with the Vimy Ridge subset of consensus, this one has been automatically promoted to Director of Virtual Crew Operations."

So Nivelle had indeed been destroyed. He must have been unable to upload from the colossus platform because of the Puritans' jamming. It was an odd experience, but Kaidan found himself mourning the geth. It occurred to him that if they managed to salvage the Vimy Ridge or they replaced her, her memory wall's first name commemorating a lost crew member would be a program. The world really had changed since he'd first set out for a colony called Eden Prime aboard a prototype stealth recon frigate called Normandy.

"Well..." he hesitated, feeling a bit silly, "Artoo... can you tell me what's going on?"

"The ship has come to rest on the surface of designate-Puritan Command and Control. External sensors were damaged on impact. We have, however, visually identified an Alliance Kodiak..."
shuttlecraft on approach."

"Any idea what that noise is?" Kaidan asked.

As if on cue, out the starboard pane of the cockpit viewport, the massive black shape of a Reaper's tentacle descended through the upward shower of fighter fire and slammed into the station's surface, crushing a group of interceptors underfoot just beyond the first tier.

Vimy Ridge shuddered and Kaidan jumped with surprise, grabbed the back of the pilot's chair to steady himself. A moment later, the tentacle slid away into the distance, and the luminous mess of sky in a valley left behind fell dark.

"A Reaper appears to be physically engaging with the enemy installation," Artoo commented redundantly.

"Holy crap." Kaidan muttered, awe-struck. The Reaper had carved a corridor of safe approach. 'Rescue,' he realized. "Artoo, you're still in the Vimy's systems- I take it that means the geth server core didn't eject either?"

"Correct, Alenko-Major. "

"Well I'd say those inbound shuttles are coming to recover us. Is there anything I can do to help get you out of here?"

"Internal manual release of the core ejection hatch would facilitate more rapid egress," Artoo explained.

"You haven't booted up a couple of the platforms to do that already?"

"The server has decoupled from its network port. All Vimy Ridge virtual crew are isolated to the core save for this one. I was resident in-network assisting colloquial-designate 'Nivelle Offensive' extravehicular activity during the ejection system disruption."

"Wait- does that mean you're stuck off the server? Will you be able to evacuate?"

"This one could occupy auxiliary processing capacity in your omni-tool for the purpose of evacuation, if you permit, Alenko-Major."

"Alright, then," Kaidan nodded, setting off toward the back of the ship, "no one gets left behind."

He jogged through the CIC and through the port side exit. Ahead of him, down the length of the fore/aft connecting corridor, several of the hatches to the empty escape pod berths of the deck below had popped back open in the crash, creating an ad hoc obstacle course of half-erect panels and airlock doors. Inconvenient, but at least they represented the safe departure of his crew.

Kaidan made his way down the curved hallway, vaulting over the fully- and almost-fully-opened hatches, and stomping down the ones that were open at acute angles. When he reached the mess he hung a left, visiting the armoury first for a pair of sidearms- an M-77 Paladin with a piercing mod and an arc pistol. Just in case.

The decision proved prescient.

As he got back to the mess, there was a violent shudder and an explosion of sparks, coolant and compressed gasses from ruptured conduits as the business end of a Puritan interceptor crashed through the ceiling. He leaped backwards and rolled out of the way as the ship's atmosphere roared
and buffeted him, escaping from all of the un-sealed connecting sections through the jagged edges of the breach.

He pushed himself back to his feet and rolled his shoulder, checking for the severity of the injury he felt. Maybe just a strained muscle. Placing his hand on the Paladin on his hip and thumbing the safety, he looked through the shower of sparks still flashing from the swinging bundle of wires at the fighter craft now blocking the starboard side route to Engineering.

The three equilaterally spaced panels on its hull popped out slightly and slid smoothly back, exposing three infantry units within.

"Aw shit," he groaned. "I knew it couldn't be that easy..."

-X

The pair of Kodiaks touched down on the Puritan base's hull on the other side of the ring of berthed fighters and the Normandy and Vimy Ridge ground teams disembarked, weapons at the ready. Shepard shot Gallagher a friendly, acknowledging nod- he'd heard plenty about the fellow N7 but they had yet to meet in person. Behind the sentinel was a mountain of a man in modified Terminus armour, a 'slayer' vanguard, an engineer, Vega and another soldier.

"Comms check?" he said experimentally. A quick shock of static squawked over the line before cutting off; it really was a shame the Zephyrray system hadn't been portable enough to incorporate into their suits. At least once they made it to the downed ship, their comms should be able to connect with the hardened internal network.

Hade motioned toward the Vimy beyond the line of neatly spaced fighter/delivery craft still firing into the sky, illuminating the ventral surface of the prothean Reaper towering high above. He signaled for Gallagher's team to hang left, approaching the hangar, while he took his group right of the nearest interceptor toward the starboard side forward airlock.

As they approached, however, Shepard noticed movement. The panels on the upper, conical portion of the fighters began to slide back. He gestured up, making sure everyone noticed, and they opened fire.

As before, their guns seemed helpless to penetrate the armour of the drones that rolled out of the storage compartments. Thankfully they'd learned how to compensate. He looked over at Jack, gestured, and she cracked her knuckles enthusiastically as confirmation.

Jack flung her arm in an upward arc and a series of biotic shockwaves silently rippled outward in front of her, tossing the first two drones to touch down off the hull again, where Tech Support struck them with a chain overload attack. Just like on Noveria, with their grounding rod filament tails dangling in empty space, the high voltage current had nowhere to go but into the drone's circuitry, frying them.

There was no opportunity to launch an electrical attack against Shepard's targets. Summoning up his own biotics, with a thrust of his hand he blasted four more of the units- the one Jack's shockwave had missed, plus three exiting from an adjacent fighter- off the station's hull and into space at incredible speed. It came so easily that he looked beyond to the nine drones slipping out of their housings in the next three interceptors down the line.

'Give it a shot,' he thought to himself. He raised one hand in their direction, palm facing them, and tightened his fingers, envisioning a mass effect field enveloping them all at once. All nine lifted helplessly off the hull, and with a retraction and then thrust of his hand, he hurled the entire group
into the void.

He checked to his left and saw Gallagher's team managing in their own way. They didn't have any biotic telekinetics, but the slayer, Chen, was using phase disruptor bursts to blast them off their magnetic moorings, and then Vega and the tank-like 'destroyer' soldier, Forward, would drive them off into space with the sheer force of their weapons. Messy but effective. As long as they couldn't get close enough to lash out with those lethally-strong metallic tentacles, they weren't actually much of a threat.

They felled the immediate opposition, though in the distance Hadrian could see more fighters deploying more drones. Beyond them, more hatches were sliding open, but suddenly those infantry units were riddled with heavy-calibre rounds from the Kodiaks, which had lifted off and were hovering in their trough of safety, providing supporting fire against the more distant targets. The rounds weren't penetrating the drones' armour, but they did pack enough kinetic energy to push them back, and with the deployment hatches open they were also tearing up the insides of the interceptors, killing more of the skyward weapons fire.

Hadrian waved to his people and signed orders- Gallagher and his team, as well as Jack, Moore and the two geth platforms were to hold the perimeter outside while Herman followed him in to get Kaidan. Everyone signaled their understanding, and took up defensive positions while Ben flanked Shepard toward the Vimy's airlock.

Movement above caught his attention again, and he clenched his teeth as he saw an interceptor fly through one of the gaps in its cohorts' fire, curve upward, and then flip end over end and accelerate, slamming its hardened tip into the SR-4 from above, penetrating the hull to embark drones inside the ship.

'Double-time!' he signed to Herman, and they hurried to the frigate's edge below the airlock. If the conduit drive had still been slung underneath and the Vimy had come to rest on top of it, the hatch would have been about ten meters higher; with it absent, she was grounded with the hull of deck three in contact with the station, the airlock just over three meters up.

Herman affixed his assault rifle to his back and cupped his hands together, giving Hadrian a boost-for control more than necessity, given the lack of artificial gravity out here- and as he rose level to the exterior door he planted his magnetized boot against the hull. Herman de-magnetized and jumped, caught by the commander and helped to the other side of the hatch, and the two of them pulled the emergency manual release levers, disengaging the door from its mechanism and pulling it free to drift away.

They swung into the airlock, planting their boots on-deck and finding the reassuring pull of the AG anchoring them.

Shepard keyed the airlock command and the inner door bloomed open, then behind them as they stepped inside to the other side of the starboard door to the CIC. To their left the escape pod hatches in the floor of the connecting corridor were mostly ajar at various angles. He opened his omni-tool and keyed in a command, and his suit's comms started reaching out to sync up with the Vimy's internal network.

"Comms check?" he said.

Nothing. He looked over at Herman, tapped the side of his helmet, and the corporal shrugged.

The interceptor breaching the hull must have compromised the internal comm net's shielding against the jamming outside. They were still blocked from talking to each other or to Kaidan. So
they would have to find each other the old fashioned way. Or maybe not. A diagnostic repeater panel on the wall facing them to the left blinked three times and displayed a text message.

'Attn: Shepard-Commander ZZ91-F77/422*M91-11, DirVCO SSV VIMY RIDGE SR-4 Internal wireless commnet impaired by wide-spectrum interference. Alenko-Major en route to geth platform storage. No immediate danger.'

No immediate danger. Hadrian shivered with relief as much of his anxiety let go. Geth platform storage. The ship was virtually identical to the Normandy, so they knew the way. He nodded at Herman and gestured toward the aft section. Then, as they began jogging toward the ship's rear, Hadrian was struck by a sensation- potent as a lightning bolt- and his heart skipped a beat. Jamming or no jamming, he felt a circuit complete inside him. Familiarity. Longing. Warm affection.

His synthempathic rapport with Kaidan had returned. He allowed himself just a moment to close his eyes and project a single thought.

'Coming for you.'

They reached the end of the passageway and saw the 'corpses' of three Puritan drones on the deck, smoke curling up from the seams in their chassis. Well, Kaidan did have the skill set to disable them single-handed. Hadrian felt a swell of pride that his husband had fought his way past them solo.

He led Herman around the right side of the rear elevator and into Engineering, then down the stairway that curved down and around the port side of the round bulkhead that surrounded the power core. At the landing halfway down to the deck three maintenance areas, they found the door to geth platform storage & servicing room open. Within, Kaidan was standing on top of the server core, between the ejection system rails, arms stretched above his head for the manual release levers on either side of the ceiling hatch.

At the sight of movement in the doorway, he drew his Paladin lightning fast and leveled it. Then he recognized his husband's armour, and froze.

'Hey honey, miss me?' Hade thought.

Ecstatic, Kaidan jumped down off the core's housing and put one eager hand on Hadrian's neck and the other on the back of his helmet, pulling him close and touching their helmeted foreheads together. 'I wasn't sure if that was you or if it was just my own paranoia telling me more Puritans were "coming for me,"' came Alenko's mental reply.

Two months minus a day they'd been apart, but they were finally back together.

Aboard a ship that was crashed on the surface of an alien space station. Beneath a Reaper that was fighting to give them time to evacuate. It was a strange universe indeed.

'Your internal alarm talks to you in my voice? Not sure if that's weird or if I'm flattered. But no matter- time to go,' Hade thought, 'Puritans are trying to pull out.'

'We have to get the geth server out,' Kaidan replied, 'I was just about to pop the hatch so we could-'

Another violent shudder rung through the metal body of the ship- felt rather than heard, given the hard vacuum- and sparks exploded from the ceiling as the tip of another Puritan fighter pierced the hull and slid like a shiv into the room through the ceiling directly above them. Combat reflexes kicking in, Shepard pushed Kaidan back as the interceptor's came to rest between them. Its hatches
slid back and another trio of drones popped out.

With incredible speed and precision, Herman rolled to one side and opened fire with his Mattock assault rifle- a specialty concussive round that lifted his target back into its compartment before it could contact the deck, and then riddled it with disruptor rounds that transferred a cumulative electrical charge until it overwhelmed the machine's electronics and disabled it.

Hadrian reached out with his biotics at the drone on his side, and rather than try to hurl it around in the enclosed space, he gritted his teeth and concentrated on increasing the mass of the dark energy field and collapsing it, crushing the drone's hull until it buckled and spewed sparks from mangled internal mechanisms. Then he turned his attention to the final drone, between the fighter and Kaidan, and his heart felt like it stopped as the device's metal tentacles lashed out toward his husband.

Alenko, though, raised his arm and his omni-tool lit up, spawning the glowing holographic image of a shield like some ancient knight's. The tentacles impacted it and bent askew, deflected away, and as Kaidan swung his arm in a backhand it slammed the drone off the floor. He flicked his fingers, triggering an overload attack, and the Puritan fizzled at the seams and fell inert.

Shepard cocked his head at an inquisitive angle, smirking behind his helmet. 'Omni-shield, huh?' he projected, 'that's new.'

'A little file sharing courtesy of Gallagher,' Kaidan replied, dispelling the kinetic fields containing the warp field. 'I kinda' liked the symbolism.'

'It suits you,' Hade smiled. 'Now let's get this done and get outta' here.' He gestured for Herman to help, and the corporal gave Kaidan a boost back up to the ejection hatch. The sentinel turned the pair of handles on opposite sides of the square door, and explosive bolts mounted in the frame popped silently. With a biotic shove, Kaidan pushed the hatch out into space. Hunter and Tech Support's platforms were standing on the dorsal hull, drawn to the portal by the bolts firing to receive the hardware and transfer it to one of the shuttles.

Hadrian, meanwhile, cupped his hand under the rounded tip of the interceptor's nose cone. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he shrouded the entire craft in a low mass biotic field, and to his husband and Herman's amazement, he expelled the fighter- thousands of pounds within the Vimy's artificial gravity field- back out through the breach it had created and into space, where it powered its engines back up and flew away.

'That's pretty 'new,' too,' Kaidan thought at his spouse.

'Yeah, well... turns out my adori biotic wiring is hardcore, I really just had to figure out how to use it.' He imagined a wheezing sound and a breathless voice. 'I'm... a biotic god!'

'Huh? Whatever, just don't get cocky, eh,' Kaidan grinned, hopping down from atop the server and keying in the command sequence to release the clamps holding its pallet to the floor and raising it on frictionless rails to ascend through the hatch. The platform began rising and Kaidan set his omni-tool on a nearby terminal so that 'Artoo' could transfer its program aboard.

'Hrm,' Shepard mentally murmured, 'Miranda or Jack would have 'gotten' that. OH- ha ha!- and speaking of Jack, she's suitably annoyed. Whatever you do, don't call her 'the archaic biotic.' Garrus made that crack once and I thought she was gonna' twist his spine into a pretzel, synthempathy or no synthempathy.'

Not being privy to the cyber-telepathic conversation taking place and getting antsy from the
silence, Herman tapped Shepard on the shoulder and gestured toward the door.

'We ready to go?' Hadrian asked. Kaidan unplugged his omni-tool, looked wistfully around at the bulkheads and the collection of inactive geth hardware, imagining the rest of the ship beyond, and finally nodded.

'Yeah,' he thought, 'sorry to have to leave her like this... but let's get out of here. Take me home and let's fuck like we saved the galaxy!'

Hadrian laughed inside his helmet and nodded up at the gaping hole in the ceiling. 'Shortcut? Grab the boy, I'll lift you both out.'

Grinning to himself, Kaidan waved for Herman to come stand under the breach with him, then tapped his rank insignia on his armour, sidled up close to the corporal, wrapping his arm around Ben's waist as though they were going to slow-dance. When Herman realized what was going on he shrugged and played along, taking hold of Kaidan's belt with one hand and putting the other behind Kaidan's back, patting the sentinel's rear a couple times with the side of his assault rifle. Alenko gave Hadrian a thumbs-up, and Shepard took a breath, focused on wrapping them in a protective barrier shell, and carefully raised it and them out through the insertion hole where they were received by Hunter, and magnetically clamped their boots to the outer hull.

Once they were out of the way, Shepard positioned himself beneath the breach, thought to the times he'd seen Samara levitate herself, and pictured how he might do the same. 'It isn't actually anti-gravity,' he thought, 'I could just reduce my own mass while riding a mini-singularity I create above my head... like a charge, but slower, and vertical.' With his new-found ease, he imagined it, and then he just did it. No complicated somatics, no amp, just a finely-tuned sync up of his consciousness and his inherited eezo nodes.

As he floated out of the ship and joined the others on the dorsal hull, he surveyed the scene around him. The prothean Remnant was still soaking up skyward fire from the docked fighters, but the ground teams had managed to keep their escape route back to the landing area clear. The shuttles were setting back down on the other side of the line of fighters in preparation to retrieve their teams, and Tech Support was carrying the server core on its shoulder in their direction.

Suddenly, the Prothean's shields around the huge leg above them buckled at one of the joints. The Puritan gunners evidently noticed, and every interceptor still intact in the area re-focused its fire. The hull overhead started to glow, and swell, and then exploded, scattering molten metal in every direction, including toward the humans and geth below.

Hadrian signaled urgently for everyone to look up. Gallagher and Kaidan grabbed whoever was closest to them- Chen and Herman respectively- pulled them into a crouch, and spawned their omni-shields overhead like glowing protective umbrellas. But Hade knew it wouldn't do... too many of their people were in the open, the rain of debris was fanning out too fast.

'Just do it- you can do it,' he told himself, 'size is no object. Big, small, just illusions. Do it.' He envisioned another protective bubble, just bigger, and willed his body to project the dark energy field required.

And a coruscating blue shell of flexed space snapped into being above them, a hundred meters across and forty meters high at its apex. It deflected an incoming spray of red hot alloy back into space, and when the danger passed, Shepard let out the clenched breath he'd been holding and stumbled a step forward, dizzy from the exertion.

Kaidan was at his side immediately. 'Are you okay?' he asked via their link.
'A little light-headed,' Hade replied, 'our victory lap might have to wait until I get some energy drinks into me.'

'That was pretty awesome,' Kaidan remarked. They both smiled, and once Shepard caught his breath they joined the others making their way between the line of fighters and onto the Kodiaks- Kaidan joining Shepard aboard the Normandy shuttle and Vega boarding the closer Vimy Kodiak. Once the hatch closed and they were sealed against the jamming, comms came back.

"You felt a little tense out there, Corporal," Kaidan joked, nudging Herman in the ribs as they lifted off and started accelerating toward the Normandy, "you weren't nervous about wandering hands, were you?"

"I've heard stories," Ben quipped, looking toward Cortez on the other side of the bulkhead.

"Commander," EDI cut in, "the Prothean is asking to speak with you. One moment." There was a pause, and then a chatter of the Remnant's gestalt voice as the ship's 'mind-body' connection strained under the Puritans' counter-assault.

"Shepard," it rumbled.

"We're victorious," Hadrian sighed, using the Remnant's earlier turn of phrase, relieved to be speeding into a clear sky.

"We have analysed the enemy installation," the Prothean reported, "and identified a vulnerability." A display at the co-pilot's station lit up, piped from the Reaper to EDI to the shuttle, depicting a scan of the Puritan base with overlays of unintelligible alien symbols. The mushroom-with-arms-shaped station was attached to a relatively narrow, vine-like structure- dozens more carrier vessels docked at staggered outcroppings- that extended millions of kilometers to a massive super-construction. Resembling a folkcraft ornamental ball, its irregular series of rings enclosed a brilliantly flashing point of light. "Their central powerplant- it is an array capturing the energetic emissions of a pulsar. Severing the conduit from the collection array to the primary installation will disable their technology."

"Including their wormhole transit capability?" Hadrian asked, wanting to be sure.

"It will disable their technology. They have no auxiliary energy generation capability. They will perish," the Prothean clarified, sounding unconcerned.

"It'll kill them off, you mean? They don't even have the means to run their own life support?" Kaidan asked.

EDI chimed in again in response. "My intrusion into their database had determined that they adapted whatever power generation resources they originally possessed into the stellar energy capture structure. Probably to shield it when they were positioning the array around the pulsar. Cutting them off from it will collapse their entire infrastructure."

Hadrian furrowed his brow. Responsibility for this campaign and this battle had been placed squarely on him, so it was his decision.

"Prothean, are you able to hold their wormhole open a moment longer?" he asked. On his lidar display, the pair of Reapers that had wedged themselves into the support arms appeared to be struggling as the station drew more power into whatever mechanisms were fighting to draw the portal shut.

"We are... for the moment."
"EDI, put me back on with General Translation Failure," Shepard instructed. There was a pause, and then the Puritan commander's synthesized voice came on the line again.

"Your alliance with... these Defilers will be... your undoing, Commander Shepard," it said, managing to sound distressed and angry even through the intermediary translation software.

"You didn't leave us much choice. You left because you knew you couldn't take them, and once they were gone you decided to come pick on us. Pretty typical bully behaviour, really."

"You presume... to understand us. You do not. We seek to rectify... the abomination imposed... by the Defilers upon... the Mother Space. Their subversion of... nature-"

"It wasn't their 'subversion,'" Shepard interrupted. "Learned a couple things during my scavenger hunt, and here's one that will really get your tentacles in a knot: this 'new paradigm' was my choice." He waited for some kind of reaction from the Puritan; the wave of emotion that washed over him from Kaidan, meanwhile- mostly confusion- was immediate.

'Your choice?' he asked via their rapport.

"Yours?" Translation Failure echoed.

"Yes, mine. The biggest, baddest, first 'Defiler' showed me. The fate of the galaxy was in my hands... again... and I had a choice. Destroy them- destroy all synthetics, which I'm sure you'd have loved- or turn the Reapers into my remote-controlled tools- which you might also have been fine with. You're so big on 'their proper place' in relation to us. Or I could take a chance on something altogether new: an equal relationship with our creations... with each other, too, as it turned out."

"An absurd... conception-"

"I'm still talking. I chose. And you know what?" Hadrian looked at Kaidan, recalling the pained confession he'd once made to his husband. "I chose right. I haven't always in the past... but I took a chance, and it was working out. Until you came along, determined to fuck it all up. Does that translate? Fuck it up? Not that I care." He steeled himself and looked back out the forward viewport toward the approaching Normandy.

I won't let you take this away from us. Synthesis- us and them, living together- is your 'Mother Space's' way forward. Mother re-married while you were out, and you don't get to move back in and turn the clock back. What is, is, and fighting against change... that's delusion. That's deviance. You're the 'abomination' here, now, and now I'm giving you a choice.

Your 'intervention' is over. I say a word, and we cut you off from your power core. I'd rather just shut you out of our galaxy, but if I have to I'll shut you down. So choose. Adapt, get the hell out, or die. Your people seem pretty up-front, you've never actually lied to me as far as I can tell... you do what you say you're going to do, yes? So I'll accept your word if you give it to end this."

Hadrian looked at Kaidan again, hopeful that Alenko would appreciate the parallel between this moment and the entirety of his decision to seek out the Reapers. He took Kaidan's hand in his and squeezed it, projecting via their link, 'never give up on anybody.' A Buddhist slogan he'd shared once, what felt like a lifetime ago.

"You don't have to join us," he said to the Puritan, "but you will not tear us apart any more than you have. So choose."

Did the alien have superiors to consult? Was it the leader of its people? Or was it- like Shepard- just a soldier tasked with doing a job, and thrust into an extraordinary position? How long did they
have to wait for a properly vetted response before the Reapers holding the door open succumbed to the vast mechanical stresses on their ancient bodies?

"We... will not relent," Translation Failure answered. "We are... resolute. We are correct. And you... are-"

"Sorry," Shepard interrupted, shaking his head. "Compassion may be infinite, but our time isn't, and that was a final offer." He thumbed the button shutting down the sub-channel. "EDI, or Prothean... how long between cutting the power cord and their wormhole decaying?"

The Kodiak was entering the Normandy's starboard hangar, and as it touched down Hadrian hurriedly removed his helmet, with Kaidan and the others following suit. He flung open the hatch and continued the conversation over the intercom as he started running toward the bridge- Kaidan hot on his heels.

"Shepard..." EDI started, but trailed off.

"There will be no delay. Loss of power will collapse the aperture immediately," the prothean Remnant stated plainly. "Which we surmise will produce a highly destructive gravity wave. You should instruct your vessels to depart the star system."

"Can you sever the conduit from this side of the aperture?" he asked, rounding the corner at the mess and starting up the connecting corridor.

"No. The design of the installation obstructs a line of effect. We must round the primary structure to fire."

"Well can you disengage and fall back while another Remnant maneuvers to take the-"

"We led them in this. We will not delegate the responsibility to another."

Hadrian ran past the memorial wall, EDI opening the door ahead.

Combat Information Center. "There has to be some way to-"

"Commander Shepard-" the Remnant rumbled.

"Just, wait, we can-" Bridge.

The Reaper 'terror horn' bellowed, rattling the ship through its own intercom and bringing Shepard and Kaidan skidding to a stop at the entrance to the cockpit. What remained of the prothean people would entertain no further argument.

EDI and Joker looked up over their shoulders, and through the viewport Hadrian could see the Remnant push off from the Puritan C&C's surface and limp around the lip of the station, still taking a punishing fusillade from the half-felled forest of interceptors.

"This is our redemption," the Remnant said. "Our last act and our legacy as protheans. You will not deprive us of it. We have commended you to the others. They will shield your space station, and consider your counsel after we are gone, but your ships should depart. Now."

The tactical display showed the other surviving Remnants on the local side of the wormhole were converging on Cronos, huddling together on its surface and overlapping their kinetic barriers to protect the skeleton crew aboard from the impending disaster. The rest of the Council fleet was moving away at sublight, but waiting on Shepard's order as commander of the battle group.
"Commander," EDI said in a hushed tone, "the Prothean is powering its FTL drives for a collision course with the conduit, and I concur that the collapse of the wormhole will displace a gravity wave that our ships cannot survive..."

Kaidan put his hand on Hadrian's shoulder and rubbed it, unable to make a squeeze felt through the armour plating.

"We have to go," he said softly.

"Fuck," Shepard hissed, frustrated. He looked one last time out the window at the Puritan base, blue and white fireballs erupting behind the 'cap' on two sides as the Remnants bracing against the wormhole support arms gave out and were crushed under the vast moving spars. The aperture began to iris shut again, the station- and the Prothean- disappearing behind the veil of normal space. "Give the word. Rally point two. Go," he sighed.

Normandy pitched over her own nose, bringing Cronos- now hidden beneath the organically-shaped metal carapace of interlocking Reaper forms- and the glowing engines of the assortment of Council ships into view beyond it. They all vanished in flashes as Nymandra, listening in over the comms, relayed his order across the Zephyrcomms, and once the last of them was safely away, the stars before them lunged forward into a swirling blue blur.
Normandy and the Council fleet arrived back at Anadius after evading the gravity wave of the Puritans' wormhole's collapse at a waypoint just light-hours away. They returned to the sight of the surviving Remnant armada, fanning out from an intact Cronos Station. Several of the enormous vessels appeared nearly destroyed, their hulls impacted and sheared by bearing the brunt of the destructive blast, and a couple were being poked at for signs of life by their surviving cohorts.

In the cockpit, Kaidan looked at Hadrian and breathed a sigh of relief. "They actually did it," he murmured. "Kicked the Puritans out for us and then shielded the station with their own bodies. How... how did you persuade them to help us?"

"We found them gliding toward the black hole at the galaxy's core," Shepard explained, "tens of thousands of them, all intent on destroying themselves. After the Crucible event, the intelligence that controlled them- the Catalyst- released its control over them, and all the billions of pulped and digitized minds inside them started waking up. Remembering who, or at least what they'd been before they were harvested... and they hated what had been done to them. And they knew how much they were hated by... us," he said, recalling the overpowering anger he'd felt blossom up out of the imprinted memories and feelings Kaidan had shared with him almost ten months earlier.

"They were guilty and suicidal?" Kaidan asked in disbelief. "How can they... they're machines created for mass-murder. Aren't they?"

"They were turned into instruments and controlled," Shepard said, "but now... their memories are surfacing." He paused to lend emphasis. "And what are we if not our memories? I'm Hadrian Shepard because of my memories, aren't I? New body, like them, but it wasn't my DNA you wanted to bring back when you went looking for that prothean research base, was it?"

"So... you found common ground with Reapers? Only you," Kaidan sighed, and chuckled, and shook his head slightly.

"They aren't 'Reapers' anymore," Hadrian said. "I think 'Remnants' really is more appropriate now. They're... suffering. I formed a link with the prothean one out there, with a little help from Steve, and they really just... as different as we are, they don't mean us harm. And you saw what the Prothean did. They want some kind of redemption."

"It could take a while for people to wrap their heads around that," Kaidan murmured. "Reapers for neighbours? After the things they did?"

"Keep an open mind," Shepard counseled. "I know it won't be easy, but they've shown that they can help us... and they did it for reasons of their own. I certainly didn't force them. And after this success, we might even pick up others."

"Just before we jumped away, the Prothean did transmit a massive data burst over the Zephyrcomm we installed," EDI added. "There was archival information on the protheans' culture..."
and history, their scientific knowledge base- it could take years to interpret it all.

Kaidan gazed out the viewport at the ships hanging inscrutably in a loose formation ten kilometers from Cronos. He'd never seen Reapers so still, and he found now that Shepard's lack of fear, lack of anger or hatred toward them, oddly comforting. Maybe... just maybe it could work. With time.

"Hey... what did you mean back there, when you said 'synthesis was your choice'? Is that was you meant on the Entangler when you said Harbinger had shown you something- the thing that made you okay now?"

"Yeah. He told me... showed me... what happened aboard the Citadel on Crucible Day," Hadrian replied. "For whatever reason, the Catalyst gave me a choice... said that the whole cycle of harvesting was about 'protecting' organic life from total, permanent destruction by synthetics, preserving it in Reaper form and letting new life evolve. And then it said I could use the Crucible the way you overheard me telling Translation Failure: to destroy all the galaxy's synthetics- including the Reapers- or control them, or change the whole relationship altogether."

"So, you chose bringing everyone together. Knowing exactly what that meant, or no? Or do you know...?

"I'm not sure," Hade shrugged. "Leap of faith, I guess."

Kaidan took Hadrian's hand in his and squeezed it, swallowing hard. "And... do you think you knew you would die in the process?"

Shepard hesitated a moment, then nodded. "I think so. Price to pay for giving everyone a chance at real, lasting peace. I'm sorry if that... I mean, if you feel like that means I left you behind. I'm just lucky I had you in my corner, willing to do what you did to bring me back. And I mean that... I'm back. Seeing how he... how I died, what I was willing to give my life for in that moment... proved to me we're the same man. No more agonizing over whether I'm something else, or an imposter. No more uncertainty. I know who I am," he said thoughtfully.

The feeling that radiated from him as he said it was the exact opposite of the nagging, subliminal pain- the doubt- that Kaidan had picked up on in moments since Shepard's 'reincarnation.'

"You're Shepard. Shepard enough for me," Kaidan said, smiling, though his tone betrayed a hint of the weariness he felt at the idea of it ever being in question. After the lengths they'd gone to and the sacrifices they'd made, he needed the other man to be Shepard.

Hadrian smiled placidly. "Yeah," he said, and kissed Kaidan on the forehead, "yeah, I am. And enough for me now, too."

"What now, then, Commander?" Joker asked.

"Now... I'll have to debrief the Council and Alliance, let them know the invasion's over and that we've got some new... allies. And we can get our damaged ships patched up by Miranda's technicians. Then I suppose we'll take the Vimy's crew back home to Earth. Some of them, anyway, I don't think we have room for everyone, but I'm sure the Beijing and the Tripoli can carry the rest. And then I imagine we'll be tasked with helping to check in on the worlds that were occupied- assess the damage, figure out exactly what the Puritans did to people and what we can do for them to bring them back into the fold."

"The ones who want to be 'synthesized,' at least," Kaidan mused. "I wonder how many more there are out there like Javik who would prefer to have been 'cured.'"
"I'd kinda' prefer not to think about that. The thought that people could want to opt-out of peace... out of compassion? That they'd choose separation?"

"Javik made... well... an argument for free will that I couldn't just dismiss, as much as I disagreed with him about what's best for everybody." Alenko spared a moment for those out there who might have preferred things the way they had once been. The krogan could certainly pursue revenge against their traditional rivals- within and without- sans synthempathy. Or the batarians, what remained of them. Or the galaxy's mercenary gangs, who'd seen business tank as violence had become such an abhorrent passtime.

"It's a moot point now anyway," Hadrian shrugged, "we did what we believed best for the common good. Like we've always done, and never made apologies. I was entrusted with a responsibility and I pursued it in good faith. I'll let history be the judge."

"Excuse me, Commander," Nymandra cut in, approaching from the CIC behind them, "but Miss Lawson is waiting to talk with you."

"Thanks, Ex," Shepard said. "Tell her I'll be on in a minute." The asari communications officer smiled humbly and nodded at Kaidan. "It was an interesting foray, but I won't take it personally if you'd prefer to resume your post as executive officer, Major," she said.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to find any other job after I lost one of the Alliance's newest ships," Kaidan grumbled, self-deprecating.

"They'll understand," Hadrian interjected, then raised an eyebrow and gave a gentle tug at his husband's hand, their fingers still interlaced. "Besides... I thought we were retiring anyway?"

"Hm." Kaidan cocked his head to one side a bit and then leaned in to rest it sidelong against Hade's. "Well... we don't want to just drop everything all at once. We have some housekeeping to do after all of this, and then... a vacation, at the very least, definitely. But... you can take the marine out of the navy; you really can't take the navy out of the marine, can you?"

Hadrian snorted and chuckled. "And how much of the navy have you had in you while I was away?" he smiled. "You didn't finally crack Vega, did you?"

Kaidan straightened up and made a playful face. "Well, you took Cortez with you," he said. "Oh, God," Joker rolled his eyes, "permission to change the subject? Maybe by crashing us into Cerberus HQ?"

"Calm down, Joker," Hadrian grinned. "Just hold station here, we're going to talk to Miranda and our people over there, then call Earth, and then... well..." He looked to his husband, grateful for the apparent softening in his determination to get out of the business. "Then we'll see."

He gave a light tug and the pair started ambling toward the rear, for the communications lab.

As they passed through the CIC, the crew working nodded greetings at Kaidan, welcoming him back. He smiled to each of them in turn until they left through the port hatch and passed through the security checkpoint into the dip/com center.

As soon as they were through the second door, Hadrian pulled Kaidan right, into the conference room, and hurried him to the table, kissing him voraciously and fumbling with the buckles and
snaps of his armour.

"Won't Miranda- be testy with you- for keeping her- waiting?" Kaidan gasped between kisses, heating up and tingling from knees to diaphragm.

"Shut up," Shepard hissed. He pulled the torso pieces off over Kaidan's head and then unfastened the buckle on the belt of his armour, tore away the groin guard and hurriedly unzipped the undersuit from collar to crotch. Kaidan propped his buttocks and hands on the edge of the table and his head fell back as Hade pulled down his boxer-briefs. There was a waft of musk from the hour he'd spent in the sealed suit, but it only served to act like an intoxicant on Shepard. He took Kaidan's throbbing erection in his hand and engulfed it with his mouth.

"Sh- ohhh God- shutting up!" Alenko gasped, smiling ecstatically.

-X

Half an hour later, Hadrian, Kaidan and EDI stepped off Cortez's shuttle onto the hangar deck of Cronos Station. Miranda, Liara, Devost, Gallagher, Traynor and Vega greeted them, James jutting out a hand at Kaidan and saying "there he is, I told you we didn't forget him again."

"Now I know it's been a while, but try to restrain whatever urges you might be feeling to storm through the place shooting everything to Hell- it is under new management," Lawson quipped, unaware that the Shepard in front of her never experienced the raid on the station with Kaidan and EDI.

"Glad to see everyone made it back in one piece," Kaidan smiled, changing the subject. Though, as he looked around the room he recognized grooves that their shuttle had carved into the deck the last time they'd landed here, and the bay doors that they'd launched a fighter through to gain entry to the station's interior. "Everyone did make it back in one piece, right?"

Devost nodded. "Except for Nivelle, but we got the rest of the digital crew aboard," he thumbed toward the geth server core, sitting next to the trunks of Liara's Shadow Broker equipment between the two parked Vimy Ridge shuttles. She'd had the foresight to pack the essential gear up on the way to Anadius and load it aboard the shuttle in case things went sideways.

"Crap," Kaidan snapped, wide-eyed, "that reminds me, I still have 'Artoo' aboard my omni-tool."

"There's no access set up to the server but I can arrange something," Miranda said, nodding to one of her nearby engineers. "So, you pulled it off, Shepard. Gained control over the Reapers and brought them in to take the Puritans down. What do we do with them now?"

"I'm not 'controlling them,'" Hadrian rebuked, "I'm advocating for them, because they've accepted my offer of a new purpose. To help us and protect us. Eventually, maybe even to live alongside us."

Miranda's skeptical look spoke volumes.

"It'll take a while, no doubt, before people get used to the idea... but we've seen a year and a half of unlikely peace between peoples since Crucible Day," Shepard mused, "and now with this emerging ability to communicate with synthetics the way we can with each other..."

Liara crossed her arms over her chest in thought. "Indeed, they could also teach us a great deal. If the information EDI forwarded me after your encounter with them is true, each of them is a repository of the collective knowledge of an entire species. The opportunity to learn about the history of previous cycles is staggering."
"There's that, too," Shepard agreed. He looked firmly at Miranda. "But we won't be controlling them. We'll tell them what we need, and we'll see what they're willing to do."

"Well, I'm sure they'll appreciate the opportunity to contribute, and show that they can be reformed," Lawson grinned. "Hopefully they'll still have some fight in them if the Puritans get their tech back up and running and come at us again."

"Unlikely," EDI remarked. "I apologize for not mentioning it before now, but... during my incursion on their database, besides capturing a good deal of technical data I gleaned some additional cultural information. Your supposition about the general's trustworthiness, for instance, Commander, was fairly intuitive. Among other qualities, their species seems to hold truthfulness in extremely high esteem. Their tolerance for lying is extremely low, due to the disagreeable pheromones it releases into their environmental medium."

"So if he'd given his word to stand down, you think they would have?" Kaidan asked, contemplating the alternatives.

"Quite likely. But when it refused, in the event that they survived and re-built their capacity, I planted data on their network indicating that their government misled their people vis-a-vis their reasons for invading. Specifically that they had squandered their collective resources and were attempting to re-take this galaxy for material gain, under a pretense of ideology. If they endure, that supposed deception should de-stabilize their leadership enough to weaken popular resolve to try again."

"Clever. A very crass use of xenopsychology. Glad we included that suite in your programming," Miranda smirked approvingly. "So what did our own higher-ups have to say about the way things turned out?"

"They're... following Hadrian's lead," Kaidan answered. "It's about as cautious as optimism gets."

"They're scared shitless," Hadrian countered, cutting through it. "I'm sure some of them wonder if I plan on using the Remnants to declare myself emperor of the galaxy or something."

"But only if the write-in campaign doesn't work," Vega joked.

"The what?" Shepard asked, brow furrowing with confusion.

"Never mind."

"They'll come around," Kaidan said, taking Shepard's hand and squeezing it. "In time... maybe we all will."

"Well, I'm advising them to keep a little distance for the time being, it's just too soon for them to appear in our skies and get any kind of welcome," Hadrian explained. "Hopefully the people aboard our ships will tell others what they saw here today, though. Word will spread. Time will heal wounds."

"Hm, and one day we'll throw them a 'welcome to the neighbourhood parade,'" James said sarcastically.

"Or maybe our grandkids will, after we've taken our grudge to the graves," Traynor retorted. Then she raised her eyebrows and grimaced a little, turning to Liara. "Or maybe your grandkids."

The entire group stood silent for a moment, synthempathically gauging each others' feelings on the subject. It was Miranda who broke their reverie first, addressing Hadrian with bewilderment,
though it came out- unintentionally- sounding almost accusatory. "You really want to see them assimilated, though... don't you, Shepard?"

He looked down at the deck under their feet, and then around at all of their faces, expectant for some explanation. "I really just... I can't give up on anybody, not after all the second chances I've been given," he said, knowing that certainly Miranda on the one hand, and Kaidan and the SR-2 veterans on the other, would know what he meant. "And we've all done things, some worse than others, for as many reasons as you can imagine. But nobody ever meant to be 'bad.' And we've accepted that as being true for each other- graced each other- because we got to know each others' stories." He looked out through the atmospheric forcefield at the Remnants floating outside. "And in time, they'll tell us theirs."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got to round up the rest of my crew and figure out who's going where," Devost said after a moment of shared rumination. He looked around the hangar at the Vimy personnel milling around between landed escape pods. "Gallagher?" The two men stepped away.

"And I should check on my techs. With the fight here done, I'd like to switch from setting this place up for recovery and relief to decommissioning it. There's too much here that I want to move 'Cerberus two-point-oh' away from," Lawson said, casting her own gaze around the facility.

"Lieutenant, would you care to help me load my equipment aboard the shuttle?" Liara asked James. He nodded, and without much else to do, Traynor joined in. As the three of them moved away, Vega gave Sam a friendly nudge in the ribs with his elbow and jutted his chin toward a comely female ex-Cerberus technician who'd twisted into an awkward position to work in an access panel in a corner. They grinned at each other and she gave him a playful chastizing swat.

"So," Kaidan sighed as they found themselves alone together. Hade gave another squeeze of his husband's hand.

"So?" he replied, nuzzling the side of Alenko's head.

"You really think it's over?"

Shepard took a deep breath and nodded slowly. "I think that just maybe... yeah... I think it's over. The Puritans are dealt with. The Reapers are... well- the Reapers are gone- and our relationship with these Remnants can be what we make it. Even Cerberus is 'under new management' that I think we can trust." He looked again around the hangar, his eyes roaming analytically over the battle damage his predecessor had inflicted, as though recognizing his own work. "So... this is where we went 'the morning after,' huh?"

"Yeah," Kaidan said softly. And a day later, they'd been in London. It was an eerie sensation- definitely not nostalgia, but a powerfully emotional familiarity. This had been the first step on the path to 'the end.' He couldn't hide the turmoil he felt, not linked as they were.

"I know it has to be... I'm sorry I put you through..." Shepard said apologetically, trailing off. "I didn't know how else to draw them in on our terms without exploiting their eavesdropping on us. And I wasn't even sure if it could work with us thousands of lightyears apart, but to give it the best chance I thought."

"It's fine," Kaidan interrupted, placing his free hand on Hadrian's neck affectionately. "It was a good plan."

"Thanks," Hade said with a lopsided smile. "And I really am sorry about your ship. Hell of a way
"She was a good ship," Kaidan ceded, "but at least she met a good end. And it's nice that we ended a war without losing a Normandy," he chuckled wanly. "I'm half-convinced that they won't give us another."

"We could always steal SR-3, we've got to be a couple of pros at stealing Normandy's by now."

They shared a laugh and sighed. "Y'know... we don't have to quit 'cold turkey,'" Kaidan said. "I know I seemed insistent, but... especially now, with how things have turned out... Would the Reap... the Remnants accept anyone else as a liaison? After the Prothean 'commended' you to the rest of them? And how weird is that, anyway?"

"Very," Shepard admitted. "I don't even know how I'm going to be that- a liaison between us and them."

"Well... just do what you've always done. What you did with the geth and quarians," Kaidan mused. "Or... if things go completely sideways, what you did with Saren."

"Talk them into shooting themselves in the head?" Hade laughed. "I'll keep it in reserve. And thanks... for keeping an open mind about where we go next. Honestly, part of me does just want to pass the torch, let someone else start doing the heavy lifting. Retire to wine country with you. Try over and over to make babies," he said with a wicked grin.

"And the other part of you?"

"Would really want to be out here... doing this. Helping people. Using the gifts I've been given..."

"Gifts?" Kaidan asked, acutely remembering the heartfelt discussion he'd had with Vattan- the adori who had become Hadrian's 'reincarnation'- during the voyage back to Earth from the old Normandy's marooning.

"Yeah... my biotics... my training... and all the strength I get from the people in my life. And the new leases on it that I've gotten. From Miranda. And from you... and from him," he stroked Kaidan's cheek, and flashed back at him his own memory- shared a little over nine months ago- of Vattan. Kaidan's eyes welled up at the memory; they owed the ancient alien so much, and he realized that since Shepard had returned to him, he'd occasionally forgotten about Vattan. Which he'd sworn to himself never to do. But here they were coming full-circle.

"So... you're really okay now? No more doubts?"

"Plenty!" Hade laughed. "But not about what you're thinking. Not anymore. I'm missing a day..." he looked around the hangar again, a keen intelligence (with a little help from memories Kaidan had shared) reverse-engineering bullet hole in the walls and blood stains on the floor, re-tracing 'his' own steps, filling in the blanks, "but that doesn't make me any less me."

"I'm glad," Kaidan said, though it was wholly unnecessary. His relief and contentment resonated perfectly with Hadrian's own.

And for the first time in a long time, it really felt like everything was finally really 'alright.'
Kaidan stood in front of the observation lounge window, looking back at the faces of the assembled Normandy and Vimy Ridge senior staff. "This is a little weird," he mused, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously. "I've never eulogized an artificial intelligence before. But... when Nivelle Offensive was destroyed, I wasn't thinking of him as 'artificial' or 'synthetic'- he was a crewmate. Like any other, despite the fact that he wasn't always in the same body, and his personality was still a bit... well, you know how the geth are. Each of them still sort of building themselves up from that base 'template geth personality.'

"He was one of the most opinionated geth I think I've met... Some of the others will leave you guessing what they're thinking, but he'd just out with it. I almost called him a jerk once," he chuckled, then paused a moment in thought. "But he also loved his ship. He refused to abandon her, because he thought the Vimy could be saved, and he was willing to stick his own mechanical neck out to try... He was brave, really. So... I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to serve with him. And I regret that he didn't make it home with the rest of us."

Kaidan looked at the engraved plaque on the table to his right, awaiting a wall. "But he'll be remembered. Honoured, like any other crewmate. And missed. And... ah... I guess that's all I have to say. Anyone else?" He moved to sit down next to Hadrian and joined their hands as one of the geth platforms marched to the front of the room.

"This unit is DD188-TF21/4+888-Delta-26, colloquial-designate 'Other Magellan,' formerly assigned to tier-one astronomical analysis and secondary navigational plotting aboard SSV Vimy Ridge SR-4," the program announced. It paused a moment as if to consider its words. "Colloquial-designate 'Nivelle Offensive' was geth. It was not a 'he'... However, for the purpose of this ritualized social peer performance review, I believe it would not object to the application of gendered colloquial pronouns." Its facial petals flickered slightly, before it stated simply "that is all. I cede the focal nexus," and strode back to stand near the back of the room.

There were a few delayed, awkward chuckles as people processed the unusual words of tribute. Kaidan heard Herman jokingly mutter "a real way with words... romantic, even," to Cortez beside him, whose smile was audible as he replied "a beautiful and moving tribute." Then, Barry walked up to the podium. Cutler cleared his throat and checked a small piece of paper before proceeding.

"Vimy Ridge was named for a First World War battlefield in France, part of the Battle of Arras. The Canadian Corps- then still thought of as just British subjects fighting for their imperial parent-proved their mettle against a formidable German force. They were basically a diversion. But they captured the enemy's fortified high ground that no one else had been able to take, allowing their allies to advance without taking flanking fire. And not long after that, those soldiers- and their country- were shown respect in their own right. 'They've come into their own,' people thought, 'it's time we started taking these guys seriously.'

"When the Alliance decided to give the SR-4 that proud name, the geth that was selected to head
the virtual crew ops division did some research. It dug through our historical archives, it pored over the event, and then it chose the name 'Nivelle Offensive' for itself. The first time I know of that one of them did that- found and adopted meaning in a name for itself. We'd been giving them these brilliant nicknames like 'Hunter' for a recon program that favoured a platform with a cloaking system, or 'Tech Support' for a combat engineer." Barry shook his head, a self-deprecating grin on his face. "But 'Nivelle Offensive' running a ship called Vimy Ridge... that was inspired. I refused to give our virtual crew names after that. If they invited me to give them a 'colloquial designation' to streamline interaction, I told them 'you should decide what you want us to call you.' I figured if Nivelle could do it... And y'know, he brought the same skill and insight to his job co-ordinating and liaising between us and the digital crew. Vimy was the smoothest-running ship I ever served on, except for a couple of explosive bolts."

"And fuck 'em if they don't build another!" Lieutenant Guiterrez called out, smiling broadly.

"Indeed," Barry chuckled, "fuck 'em if they don't. Complete with a wall for us to put his name up on, like we do for our fallen friends. My only reservation is that her successor won't be the same without Nivelle... and just giving that name to another geth... well, it won't be the same. And that's a shame. But... at least she's still out there, somewhere, maybe, in a satellite galaxy, laid to rest on that Puritan piece of junk. Junk that's kinda' shaped like a hill... a superior enemy position that she helped defeat. It's kind of poetic, I think." Cutler nodded, satisfied, and then patted the sides of the podium before relinquishing it.

The intercom chirped and EDI's voice flowed through the room from above. "Nivelle Offensive's individuation heuristic algorithm was approximately twenty-nine terabytes larger than the average for geth programs, indicating growth at a substantially accelerated rate. Without partitioning and self-parsing, I project that in a mere two hundred and seventeen point three one years, his program would have exceeded the resident memory capacity of any of the current models of geth platform. In another five hundred and fifty-eight point two four years, no extant geth server could have accommodated his code... I looked forward to the hardware innovations that his personal growth seemed that they would inevitably mandate. In time, he might have possessed a mind so vast as to require the subjugation of all your descendants, in order for them to build super-scalar infrastructure to house it."

Everyone looked around the room at each other, brows furrowed, frankly wishing that EDI's gynoid were in attendance rather than in the cockpit, so they could direct their stares at her, like she deserved.

"That was a joke," she finally added, before shutting off the comm again. Skin crawled and goosebumps multiplied amongst the organics in the room as three of the geth platforms present emitted short bursts of synthesized hysterials, but without any of the appropriate body language. Shepard shook his head and grinned sidelong at his husband, who buried his face in his free hand.

After the geth chortling subsided there was a long moment of thoughtful silence, and then Traynor slowly rose from her chair and strode to the front of the assemblage of officers. Hade and Kaidan both felt strong waves of grief radiating from her, and they 'pushed' back their confidence that she could hold it together, to comfort her. As she took her place behind the podium she took a deep breath and sighed.

"I could talk about these weird, lingering impressions that Nivelle left in my mind after we connected that time a little over a month ago... These alien images, like... red curves of light. And other things I still don't even have words to describe, that remind me how different our thinking really is, no matter how much we anthropomorphize our synthetic cohorts. But that's all...
No... what I'd rather remember... is how Nivelle was... I think... the first geth to ever laugh. At least as far as I know. It was that strange, riotous, kind of unsettling sound, yes, but it was laughter. At a joke that I told... and I'll miss it. And he wasn't just unique in those ways other people remember. The first thing he did after he experienced that moment of humour was to share it with all the other geth in the galaxy."

"Spreading joy and technical difficulties across thousands of lightyears," Guiterrez piped in, making Samantha wince, then smirk and nod before continuing.

"Yes, blackouts aside... his first thought was to give laughter to his whole race. That... that was really special. And I'll be reminded of him any time I hear a geth laugh, or tell a joke from now on. So..." Her voice hitched in her throat, and she shrugged, brushed away tears from her cheeks, then smiled apologetically- though no one needed any apology- and composed herself to walk back to her seat, Shepard, Liara, Legace and Nymandra each giving her an affectionate touch on her arm as she passed them.

When another minute passed with no one else presenting themselves, Kaidan stepped back up to the front of the room and smiled, thumbing the corner of his eye. "I guess that's it," he said, surveying everyone's faces. "I never thought when we first set out a few years ago that I'd ever organize something like this for a geth. But now I can't imagine us not doing it. So thank you all for coming together for this."

Hadrian turned in his chair to face the two crews, arm across the backrest, and nodded toward the counter in the back corner where Crewman Dubois was waiting to serve refreshments. "That goes for me, too- thanks everybody. Now... if anyone would like to try a 'Nivelle Offensive' at the bar, gods help you. I'm told they taste like having your teeth smashed in by a gold brick marinated in rubbing alcohol."

"After two of them anyone will find Traynor's jokes funny!" Jack quipped from the sidelines, eliciting laughter from every quarter of the room.
CSV Normandy SR-3, Sur'Kesh, Pranas system, Annos Basin

3 days later, Fri, Jan 25, 2188

Normandy touched down on the same airstrip where they had picked up Cloats back in October, and lowered the ramp of the embarkation bay. Life in the capital city had mostly returned to normal despite the lingering bulk of the Puritan carrier on the city's edge. Its companion was still parked, also inert, at the #1 Lagrangian point between Sur'Kesh and Pranas, but neither had exhibited any activity since all the drones dropped 'dead' five days earlier, coinciding the the severing of the gate station's power conduit.

As Shepard, Kaidan, Garrus, Tali, Liara and Hallis stepped off onto the landing pad they were met by Major Kirrahe, whom they were all glad to see had made it through leading the local resistance cell unscathed.

"Commander. Major. Admiral. Doctors," Kirrahe smiled, then gave a quizzical look at Garrus. For want of a rank or title for the turian, he cleared his throat and nodded amicably. "Welcome back to Sur'Kesh."

"It's good to see you made it through okay, Major," Shepard said, offering his hand. They shook, but Hadrian noticed that no synthempathic link formed- nor even seemed available- at the salarian's touch. Even without it, though, Kirrahe caught Hade's perturbed reaction.

"Survived," the STG veteran said as they all started walking toward the terminal building, "but sorry to say, Puritans managed to out-maneuver me and one of my teams, six days ago. Was 'processed' almost immediately, just hours before they lost power and jamming lifted."

"And when it did, your synthempathy didn't come back?" Kaidan asked.

"No. Same for everyone who was processed. Approximately three hundred, twenty-five thousand others. Medical examination shows augmentations still present, but no longer transmitting or receiving signals. Functionality seems suppressed."

"Reporting the same thing on Rannoch, Aephis, Noveria and Feros, now that communications have been restored," Hallis sighed. "Worst at Rannoch- almost seven hundred fifty-thousand." They crossed the threshold into the port's complex, which was buzzing with activity, and Hadrian started to notice when a 'de-synthesized' individual passed by; they were like voids in the otherwise rich emotional mosaic moving around them. The difference was stark, if only because- absent Puritans jamming everybody- synthempathy had taken much of the guess work out of measuring how people felt, and now there were these people who could smile and not mean it, or hurt and how show it, or be stewing with rage and concealing it.

And they could evoke joy, or cause pain, without being made to participate in it, or care.

"About one point three million people across the galaxy who aren't synthempathic anymore," Liara sighed. "That could be a challenge moving forward."
"We have not become bad people," countered a familiar voice, rounding a nearby corner, "we are simply once again as we were. Which is still... 'basically good'... is it not, Commander?"

"Javik," Shepard acknowledged, offering his hand to his prothean accomplice. Javik extended his own, a glove covering the inert wetwiring underneath. While they shook hands, Javik directed a wordless gaze at Liara, an unspoken thanks for her help in getting him to Sur'Kesh. "It is, basically," Hade agreed, "though good people can still do bad things, especially when they aren't engaging their compassion... when they act from a basis of separation. But basically... yes... 'a clean glass' and all that. And I give you my word, as long as I have anything to say about it, those who've been changed won't be... stigmatized, or treated like second-class citizens."

"I take your meaning, Commander. Though, in fairness, we have been changed back. But I am glad to hear that. And to see that you are all well."

"And you. You're... happy, then, I hope?"

"Happier than I was," Javik nodded. Then he straightened up his posture slightly more than usual. "But I wonder if I might ask one more thing of you," he said, still gripping Shepard's hand- not roughly, but it was definitely an assertion. And there was no feeling or ideation- no advance hint of his meaning.

"I'll do what I can..." Hadrian replied cautiously.

"Though without power, the Puritan ship, and their technology, remains. Including the technology they used to revert us to our nature. And I know there are others who wish, as I did, to be restored. Will you advocate for that technology to be preserved and the process to be made available to those who desire it?" He looked to Kaidan, who he knew to be a man of his word, and to have influence over his husband. "It was implied when I was recruited to help set your trap that a sincere effort would be made to that effect."

For his part, Kaidan was still a little surprised to see Javik here. After the Vimy's visit to Mars he'd suspected Liara had helped to sneak him onto a ship bound for Sur'Kesh, and hadn't expected it to arrive for weeks yet. He'd been filled in during the post-Anadius debriefings, but Javik's delivery here while he'd been confined to quarters was still one of those details that didn't completely 'click' until he saw the prothean again face-to-face. Shepard disengaged his hand from Javik's and moved it to Kaidan's.

"Un-synthesizing people isn't going to be my top priority, Javik... you need to know that. I think it's a good thing," Hadrian answered. Then he took a deep breath and offered a conciliatory bow of his head. "But... if you feel there's an argument to be made for... more autonomy in the matter... well, I can think of no one better to present it to the Council. And I will do what I can to make sure you get to enunciate it."

"I think you'd make an admirable spokesperson for the... um... anti-Synthesis movement," Liara agreed, though clearly saddened that her friend had gone through with the reversion, and still unsettled by the very notion of a vocal minority trying to achieve the Puritans' own ends democratically from within.

"Oh spirits, Javik just became a lobbyist," Garrus drolled. The prothean narrowed his remaining three eyes at Vakarian, unenthusiastic about being lumped in with politicians or labeled a 'special interest.' Even without synthempathy, it obviously chafed against his pride.

"Wouldn't that upset the Reape- er- the Remnants, though?" Tali queried. "If they've left us in peace because Synthesis made them unnecessary, couldn't dismantling it make them start thinking
they are necessary again?"

Tension in the group spiked. It was evident even in those whose feelings no longer broadcasted wirelessly.

"'Remnants?'" Javik asked suspiciously. "You mean Reapers? But they are gone, yes? And dead? When we fought together, that was the goal all along, was it not?" He fixed his gaze on Liara. "You said Shepard had 'salvaged' technology with which to secure victory."

"Because that's what I asked her to say," Hadrian said, interposing himself between T'soni and Javik. "I'm sorry, I know you won't be happy about this, but... destroying them was a mission that made sense in one context, Javik. It was a simple answer when the Reapers were a simple problem. But it turned out they were more than that then, so on Crucible Day... I let them go. And they're definitely more than that now, so a few days ago, I brought some of them back. And they fought for us. Saved us. With the prothean Remnant leading the charge, Javik. What remained of your own people, it sacrificed itself for us."

Javik's lip curled, finding the euphemism distasteful and the idea of Reaper 'reformation' ludicrous. He stepped back from Hadrian and ran his eyes up and down the commander, as though looking for the man he remembered in suddenly unfamiliar features.

"This really probably isn't the best time and place to go into this," Kaidan interjected, stepping up as well and putting a supportive hand on Shepard's shoulder.

"Maybe it isn't," Hadrian conceded, flashing a warm look at his husband before turning back to Javik. "But if you feel the need to talk about it here and now, Javik, then maybe you'll let me tell you about the other remnant of your people... how they were sad, and hated what they'd become. How they led the others that returned with us. How they were brave. And how they died."

Everyone waited with baited breath, to see what Javik would say, and what would happen next...
Afterword

I want to extend my sincerest thanks to the readers who were so generous with praise for "A Longer Haul" last year- without your encouragement I might not have gone ahead with writing "Disconnected" and might have just let the story play out in the privacy of my own head. But I'm glad for having written it- I'm proud of it- so I'm grateful for all those nudges to do so.

I also have to express my gratitude to my three test-readers: my 'other boyfriend' Andrew, who found spelling and grammar errors that I'd missed even after proofreading and spellchecking four times; my best friend Dan, who's infantry in the Canadian Army and gave my work the 'army eye' for a little more realism; and a follower, Matt, who took time out of his busy life doctoring to give me the editorial perspective of another reader of fanfictions. These three guys gave me valuable input for polishing and fine-tuning the story, the characters and the dialog.

Now for news... Yes, I've started a third installment. Tentatively titled "Integration," it'll probably be the last in this continuity/trilogy (which I've decided to call "the Synthempathy Outcome"). The story's started unfolding in my head, to tie up the loose ends that I feel are dangling- not just from my own original material, but from the DLCs that were released for ME3 over the last year. And I can already tell it's going to be big.

The Reapers- or rather, the Remnants- are back, bringing with them questions of their place in the new galaxy. How will their offer to help be received by the people they terrorized?

The Puritans may be defeated, but as Javik's shown, there are those native to the Milky Way who take issue with synthempathy. The galaxy's changing, but some people can be awfully resistant to change.

And there are hidden figures in hidden places who've been dealt with in the game's canon, but not in my continuity, and that simply won't do.

I don't know how long it'll take, but it's started. So if you liked parts one and two, I hope you'll bear with me. And I hope you'll be kind enough to help me by reviewing "Disconnected," because the feedback doesn't just motivate me, it helps guide my hand. What characters and moments did you like? Which did you find less successful? What worked and what didn't? What do you want more of?

In the meantime I'm also working on a smaller side-story- "Everything Has Gone Wrong"- a 'what if/alternate world study of a radically less romantic 'romance' between Kaidan and another Shepard.

Finally, I've included an epilogue to "Disconnected." An epilogue to this whole continuity, really- set years after the next story that I haven't even written yet- and therefore containing some spoilers for my intentions. I'm frankly not sure if I want you to read it or not. I guess if you're dying, or if you thought "ehhh, this story was okay but I don't think I'll come back for a third- this guy's boring me," or if you otherwise don't plan to wait for "Integration," then I'd invite you to read it for some closure. Or if you want to whet your appetite for "Integration" and then resent me for however long it takes me to actually write it, then knock yourself out. But otherwise... I guess I'd counsel patience. It'll reappear at the end of "Integration," I promise, but if you read it now it'll be like seeing the epilogue at the end of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows pt 2 without having watched Deathly Hallows.
Epilogue

Earth, Sol System, Local Cluster

~8 ½ years later, Thurs, Jul 9, 2196 (10 years after Crucible Day)

CSV Normandy descended through the puffy white clouds above Lake Manitoba, heading West. In the cockpit, Joker's hands rested on a pane of opaque black glass, featureless except for the throbbing green datalines that streamed between his palms and the helm console's base. The same emerald green as the light in the pilot's eyes as they received virtual imagery through the interface.

"Setting down in just over a minute," Jeff reported. Behind him, Hadrian crossed his arms atop the pilot's seat's headrest.

"Too bad about the weather," he remarked. Nestled close behind him, hands on Shepard's waist, Kaidan shrugged.

"I don't know, I think it's fine. It'll look more dramatic," he smiled. He fixed his eyes on the datapad in Hade's hand. 'Have you still not finished that?' he asked via their link.

'Would you believe half the stuff in it if you hadn't been there?' Shepard replied. 'I kinda' wish they'd done this years ago, when memories were fresher. If there are any nex kids there they're going to think I made it all up.'

'Lucky them,' Kaidan thought.

Moments later, Normandy passed beneath the cloud layer and its destination came into view: a ring structure twenty-five kilometers in diameter with a central tower two kilometers high. Ten arms splayed from the ring at 36 degree intervals, each stretching 50 kilometers long by half a kilometer wide and bristling with skyscrapers of diverse architecture. Thirty-two Remnants moved purposefully across the vast graded plane in the spaces between wards, carefully stepping over remaining islands of scaffolding to transport cranes and whole support buildings to the site's outer perimeter.

"Wow, a government project that finished on time," Jeff commented with a grin. "Now I really have seen everything." He looked over to EDI in the co-pilot's seat to measure her reaction. Even intimately familiar with the design and construction schedule as she was, she looked impressed.

"The geth were highly motivated," she said. "I would have gladly wielded a hammer myself to expedite construction had we not been deployed."

"CSV Normandy, this is SCCY airspace control," came a woman's voice over the comm. Joker snapped his head around with a wicked grin and before anyone could cue their system to respond, pleaded "call her 'sexy.'" Hadrian rolled his eyes, shook his head, and grinned before directing a thought to EDI asking her to open the channel.

"This is the Normandy, SCCY control," he answered.

"Welcome Spectres Shepard and Alenko. Please proceed to Presidium berth one one one."
"Will do, one one one. Normandy out."

Joker adjusted their course and steered them, nose pointed at the ground beneath the Presidium ring, to a frigate-sized alcove where geth digital crew took over and eased them up to the docking collar like a feather touching down on a pond.

"That's it. Docking complete and they've secured us with mag-locks- no way out of it now, unless you want to dust off the Thanix cannons and open fire on them," Jeff quipped. Shepard grimaced and shrugged.

"Nah, I guess I'll just have to go through with it."

"Well, we'll be watching. Give 'em Hell, Cap."

"Indeed, we would not miss it. More to the point, we could not miss it, as the ceremonies are scheduled for every data feed on the extra- and telemental nets," EDI said. "However you should not feel any undue pressure," she smirked.

"Oh, don't bother- go wet your wires or something. I don't know what the big deal is."

"Oh, yeah, no, this isn't going to be an historic thing at all," Kaidan chuckled and squeezed Shepard's shoulders, feeling them crunch with tension. "It's only- no, y'know what, I'm not even going to- no freebies. Finish your own speech."

'No freebies, huh?'

'Different freebies,' Kaidan replied, grinning, and with a hand migrating to the back of his husband's neck gently urged him towards aft. They walked hand-in-hand in their dress uniforms through the bridge and CIC, receiving respectful nods from their crew, and stepped through the starboard hatch. Cortez and Herman were on the other side, waiting at the airlock.

"Where are you two headed?" Hadrian asked, reaching out and teasingly brushing imaginary dust off Ben's dress uniform's shoulder. His ground team leader grinned.

"Front row seats, Captain. I bet this one you wouldn't get through your speech before some nexi heckles you, accuses you of making it all up, and you cyber-spank them in front of everybody."

Kaidan sniggered and shook his head. "Nah, he prefers to get-"

"Never mind, he already knows. Zip it or I'll go all 'most powerful biotic alive' on the lot of you," Hade cut him off. "Wait- what did you bet him?"

The other couple exchanged looks- Ben's mischievous and Steve's one of warning- so rather than answer out loud Herman flashed a mental series of snapshots that made Shepard's eyes widen and a grin spread across his face.

"Make it worth my while and I'll throw the whole thing. I'll even plant the kid myself." Ben laughed and Steve shot him a mock dirty look.

"Nail it and I'll cut you in- you can take turns at his other end, Sirs," the shuttle pilot retorted, causing his husband to blush and bow his head a little.

"Hot damn, a bidding war," Hadrian joked, and looked to Kaidan with a 'can we keep him' expression. Alenko just chuckled and rolled his eyes.
"Even if it were all just talk, is it any wonder they call us 'the love boat' behind our backs?" he fake-grumbled.

"They're just jealous, it's very unbecoming," Hade countered without missing a beat.

"Being late will be unbecoming, come on." As the four men passed through the airlock and onto the docking area of the Council's new capital, they were startled to find none of the crowd or fanfare they'd anticipated might be awaiting Shepard and Alenko's arrival. Instead, a lone geth platform greeted them.

"Huh... Did we take the wrong elevator and arrive a week late?" Kaidan asked. The geth shook its head and gestured them politely toward the elevator beyond then unattended security checkpoint.

"No, Spectre Alenko," it replied in a friendly tone that indicated it 'got' the joke. "The Councilors have secured a number of the docking areas for the privacy of arriving VIPs. Your departure, however, can anticipate public access. I am Kase-11, security supervisor for Docking Block 100."

"So when I go through that elevator, you're going to re-open the dock to the public, and there's going to be a crowd here when I go to leave again?" Hadrian asked, playing at needing clarification.

"The preposition is correct," Kase-11 said, "however the conclusion is-"

"What if I left right now, then?"

The geth's facial petals flipped a little.

"Then the public would be likely be perturbed at your failure to deliver your address."

"He's got you there," Cortez grinned and nudged Shepard in the ribs.

"Well, if it would perturb the public, I guess I have no choice," Hadrian sighed. He followed Kase-11 to the 'elevator'- in fact a highly mobile transit carriage- and they rode it in a silence that was full of the comfort of close friends at each others' sides. Taking the opportunity to really get down to business, Shepard pulled the rolled up datapad from his pocket, and looked at it again.

'You'll do fine,' Kaidan reassured him through their rapport.

'Just doing a bit of last-minute editing,' Shepard replied, and narrowed his eyes at the flexible tablet, concentrating on opening a connection with its primitive software. His and Kaidan's synthempathetic ability was still more limited than other people's, and while they'd never developed wetwiring they had been able to learn to communicate with digital intelligences. The smarter the intelligence, though, the less work they had to do to negotiate the handshake protocols; a tablet's word processing program, on the other hand, was like trying to teach a half-deaf dog a new trick.

After a moment, though, he connected, and his consciousness expanded into the text file, enveloping it in its entirety. He pored over it a dozen times in a fraction of a second, tweaking and adjusting and re-memorizing it. Finally he convinced himself that he wasn't about to improve on it any more, and he opened his eyes. He folded the sheet of flexible material up and returned it to his pocket.

Half a minute later their carriage arrived at its destination and the doors swooshed open to an anteroom off the Council chambers complex. A turian and a krogan in C-Sec uniforms stood on either side of the door to 'the amphitheater' and an asari in the garb of the diplomatic service was
"Gentlemen, I'm Shae Valthrace, Council Ancillary Corps. Commanders Cortez and Herman," she nodded, "you are welcome to take your seats in the amphitheater. Spectres Shepard and Alenko, if you'd like a moment to prepare, this waiting room is at your disposal. They'll be ready for you in five minutes." Precision in working with clockwork schedules was easy nowadays, with AIs smoothing over much of the bureaucratic and miscellaneous holdups that used to cause people to show up late for things, or turn up early as a precaution and then have to kill time waiting.

Hadrian thanked her and he and Kaidan parted ways with Steve and Ben with friendly hugs. Once in the waiting room, Shepard withdrew his pad one more time. As he redundantly skimmed the text again, Kaidan sat down next to him on the room's dark blue couch. "You're going to do fine," he said, stroking Hade's lower back affectionately and resting his lips on his husband's shoulder. 'Doyen will be handling your interface so that'll be easy. I'll be right there. And you're one of the most popular people in the galaxy. It'll be a piece of cake.'

"Mmm, cake," Hade smirked.

'Here, gimme,' Kaidan thought, reaching out and sliding the datapad out of Shepard's fingers to no resistance. 'Just picture everyone naked and don't sweat it.'

'If I picture you naked on the telemental net I don't know that I'll be able to hold back some really inappropriate follow-up thoughts,' Shepard grinned, rubbing Kaidan's thigh.

"And that's how the 'sex tape' finally gets out," Kaidan laughed.

"You ever notice we're still making the same jokes almost ten years later?" Hade asked, resting his cheek on the top of Kaidan's head. He'd never grown the 'pompadour' do back in, and as Shepard had eventually settled on a similar simple haircut, they'd come to look a bit more alike.

'It's because we're timeless,' Alenko projected in reply. 'We fought our way through the worst the galaxy could throw at us and it learned to stop trying to tear us apart, or change us into people who didn't love each other like we did when I was just a shy lieutenant and you were on your first life...' He started chuckling, and took a deep breath. 'We're going to be just like this forever.'

"I'll hold you to that," Hadrian smiled. He put a hand on his husband's cheek and kissed him tenderly as a knock came at the door.

"If you're ready, Spectre Shepard," Valthrace said from the other side.

"I'm coming," Hadrian replied, "just a moment."

Kaidan laughed and Shepard gave him a perplexed look. 'What now?'

'Maybe we have changed a little,' Alenko thought, and flashed a quick mental picture of the two of them having sex on the couch. 'There was a time that, left alone for five minutes, we'd have been all over each other.'

"If you're worried I'm not crazy about you anymore, I could tell her to stall them for ten minuets," Hade grinned. Kaidan shook his head and smiled back.

"No," the sentinel said, "I know you are. Just go out there and do your thing... maybe we'll sully this place afterward."

They laughed softly, clasped hands, and rose to leave. Valthrace led them to the amphitheater door.
and into the massive round chamber. The high, domed ceiling had an aperture to the simulated sky of the Presidium's interior roof, and was surrounded with murals of the diverse peoples of the galaxy looking down upon the chamber. A holographic map of the galaxy hovered between the central dais, with its railing parted in four places, and the skylight, and all around the room was tiered seating.

Facing the corral where they'd entered was the human Councilor, Simon Clowater, who raised a hand at Shepard and smiled warmly, beckoning him forward. To his left, right, and behind him were holographic facsimiles of the real man, each facing a cardinal point so that people all around the chamber could see the speaker 'face-on.'

"And now it's my honour to present the first human Spectre," Clowater said, his voice resounding crisply through the audio system, "the man who delivered us from the Reapers. Please lend him your attention."

With that, Shepard walked up the part in the tiered seating and emerged at the central floor, with Kaidan at his side, finally getting a look around the rest of the room. Directly to his left and right were the Councilors, their entourages, and respective ambassadors. Every race was represented- asari, adori, salarian, turian, human, batarian, krogan, quarian, geth, vorcha, hanar, elcor, volus, drell, yahg and ralo- it had been a long time since anyone had been excluded from the echelons of civilized society. Even if some still struggled with the niceties and with formalities. Included among them was Javik, still representing the 'disconnected' faction. His presence was unexpected after his mostly-bloodless rebellion had been 'killed with kindness'- even without synthempathy, it was still clear that the intervening years had only done so much to alleviate his bitterness that the movement to 'de-synthesize' hadn't caught on more widely. But it was a big day, and the disconnected- true to Hadrian's word- had escaped being marginalized or ostracized. They were more pitied than anything.

To the right of the Council seating were the people he loved. His mother, Admiral Hannah Shepard, and Kaidan's parents- his husband taking his seat between the two families; former Alliance Prime Minister Hackett; Liara and Feron; Spectre Garrus Vakarian and his wife Tali'Zorah vas Normandy- she'd kept the name of her former captain's ship despite their living aboard their own ship, the Implementor, for the last eight years; Cortez and Herman; Doctor Chakwas; Majors Moore (with Jack still at his side) and Vega; Sam Traynor and Nymandra, pregnant with their first daughter; Kasumi Goto; Miranda Lawson; Samara. Another tier of seating sat empty behind them, reserved for virtual attendees via the telemental net.

The rest of the stands were full of dignitaries and the general public, a little over a thousand people all told. The easy-to-grasp flesh-and-blood audience. It was as Shepard stepped onto the dais and placed his hand on the railing, triggering his holographic dupes to appear at each 90 degree angle, things got more interesting.

He opened up his mind to the resident geth 'interface mediator,' Doyen, who initiated an effortless organic-to-digital mind connection and began working to integrate perception of the telemental network. Viewed with a little help from the AI, the empty seating to his right filled with projections of Joker and EDI, who were still aboard the Normandy, of Urdnot Wrex and Grunt from Tuchunka, of Doctor Legace and engineer Adams aboard CSV Shepard in orbit, and Captain Gallagher who was watching from the replacement SSV Vimy Ridge halfway across the galaxy. The integration of a myriad of galaxy-spanning FTL communications and synthempathic interfaces allowed friends at the most distant fringes of the Milky Way to attend via telepresence.

Friends... and strangers.
From the 'nosebleeds,' a slight wave of vertigo seemed to crash down on the dais as additional tiers of seating began to appear virtually and expand outward beyond the immediate physical boundaries of the amphitheater. People were tuning in from Palaven to Rannoch, from every quarter, and the chamber appeared to grow at the margins to accommodate them. Hundreds of thousands... millions... billions of minds, connected and sharing a virtual space that ballooned far past the horizon of his sight, all waiting for him to speak.

Doyen's virtual avatar appeared briefly at his side, visible only to Hadrian, and bowed its head slightly. "Consensus interface is fully virtualized and stable," it informed him. "You are encouraged to proceed."

Hadrian took a deep breath to center himself and looked out upon the seemingly infinite ocean of souls that had gathered to listen to him. His friends were right there, in front of him, and to their left were the assembled leadership of the galaxy... but there were so many more, and he could feel them all- their hopes and fears, their needs and desires, their openness and curiosity, their anxieties. He was surrounded by the warmth of a trillion small flames, that together shone like the sun, bathing him in... well, 'humanity' felt a bit speciesist... but goodness, certainly.

Javik stood out like a sore thumb in that medium, but Shepard knew him, and despite their differences and the tension that lingered from years earlier, knew that he wasn't some 'void' in the tapestry- he was no longer part of the cybernetic empathic network, but he was still there. And he was waiting, too.

Shepard cleared his throat.

"It's been ten years since Crucible Day, and the destruction of the Citadel. Ten years since the end of the eons-long cycle of the Reapers. Ten years since synthempathy began re-shaping galactic civilization, creating a new normal. Where communication and compassion drove out indifference and abolished cruelty. Where the sharing of our thoughts and our feelings exposed and exposes us to each other's intelligence and goodness, letting us see each other and be seen for who we truly are. Not evil, though we sometimes do the wrong things. Not hateful beings, even when we suffer and get angry. Ten years of reconstruction and reconciliation, of bringing old enemies into the fold."

He looked meaningfully at Javik, projecting all the good will he could despite knowing the prothean wouldn't 'read' it. He hoped it would show, nonetheless.

"Not everyone approved," he continued. "Early on we faced an invasion by those who objected to what they called a 'subversion of nature.' Outsiders who thought we'd been tainted- who didn't realize that at our cores we can't be tainted; we might go off our innately good course, or get scuffed up, but we are not lost people, or broken. There's a saying in the philosophy I try to follow: a clean glass may get dirt on it, but it doesn't become a dirty glass. Its clarity is always there, accessible beneath whatever accumulates on top of it, and it can always be cleaned off. What those opponents of our transformation didn't understand was that what had changed wasn't our nature. We acquired a new tool, woven into our bodies- a new way of communicating- but our nature wasn't subverted. We were just given a new way of evoking it.

"Not long after that, we saw rebellion by those who considered synthesis a subversion of their free will. They felt they should have the option to go back, and we... tried to accommodate them. Until others decided they wanted to choose regression for others, and then we found ourselves pressed into another conflict of ideologies- which vision of the way forward should prevail, if only one could. We were a house divided in a way we thought we never would be again, and ultimately we chose- as fairly as we could- to stand up for what we'd gained."
"Two struggles in as many years. We mostly fought one with guns and the other with words... mostly... and while we still have artifacts and scars left from each, both of them made us stronger. They taught us who we were. And for the most part they brought us closer together. It wasn't perfect... but we've persevered, and grown stronger.

"Today we're putting into service a new symbol of our transformed society. Having re-built our space-faring capacity - with the revolutions we made following the Reaper war and then with the help of the Remnants to restore the mass relays - and allowed the peoples of the galaxy to return to their homes, we commissioned a place for everyone to come back together. A home away from home. Today it takes to the stars, and the powers that be have been kind enough to allow me to 'turn the key.'"

On cue, an angular pillar came up out of the floor, rising to his abdomen's height and the surface turning to black interface glass. He looked to Doyen, who quietly communicated with thousands of other geth programs across the station's network - from engineers and safety officer to air traffic controllers and - and then extended its hand in invitation to proceed.

"So..." Shepard looked around the room, at those present and those tele-present, and offered up an awkward, self-deprecating smile, "let's see if I can do this without blowing this one up, too."

He placed his hand on the pillar console, and before his field of vision Doyen integrated the diagnostics display for the station, as well as live camera feeds from a dozen surveillance cameras distributed throughout the construction site as well as satellites nearby.

Following the automated sequence pre-programmed into the system, the Reaper-designed auxiliary powerplants ramped up to their full output, energizing the mass effect drives. Billions of tonnes of metals and composites were shrouded in a dark energy envelope, reducing the apparent mass within until the massive engines - coupled with the superior gravity of the induced high mass brane projected above - lifted it slowly off the Manitoba plane.

It rose an inch... a foot... a meter. The holographic galaxy map above changed to display the station ascending skyward, escorted by the attendant Remnants and a handful of Alliance tender vessels. Second by second, the station overcame inertia and its climb accelerated until it grew bigger in the satellite cams' view than from the ground, and then flew past them.

The amphitheater broke out in applause and jubilant cheers as the Second Citadel completed its ascent, 'parking' in a high orbit surrounded by a fleet of ships assembled from every Consensus Council race. Once in position, the ten flattened-out arms went into motion - the Earth, Thessia, Palaven, Rannoch and Irune wards folded one way, recreating the familiar appearance of the original Citadel, while Sur'Kesh, Tuchunka, Kahje, Dekkuna and Kar'shan wards rotated 180 degrees on their 'stems' and then folded in the opposite direction, making the station symmetrical (offset aside) on either side of the Presidium ring.

On the tenth anniversary of the original Citadel's destruction in Earth orbit, the Second Citadel assumed its mantle.

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Second Citadel, Earth orbit

Twelve days later, Tues, Jul 21, 2196

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Hadrian awoke in a hotel room on the Earth Ward. The room's two queen-sized beds had been pushed together and his arms and legs were entwined with Kaidan's. His naked back and rear were pressed against Cortez's, who was laying on his side behind him, facing the opposite wall with his head resting on Herman's bicep. His skull and eyes were throbbing from a long parade of shots - the parties had been going hard, moving from the Presidium through a different ward each day, and he and his crew had been participating enthusiastically.

Moments later Kaidan woke up too, and their eyes met. Over the years the mental intimacy of their rapport had led to a state where neither slept much more than a minute longer than the other, no matter how little noise they made or how little physical disturbance they caused. They dreamed together, and when one left for the waking world the other followed.

After flashing a sleepy smile, Shepard's eyes wandered over Kaidan's shoulder to Vega, asleep in his boxer shorts stretched out and head rolled back on a chair in the corner. The night before was still a bit hazy, and he squinted, confused.

"Ohhh shit," he mumbled through a mouthful of cotton, "we didn't finally bag Vega, did we?"

Kaidan chuckled and shook his head, stroking Hade's temple with the heel of his hand.

"No," he said, "he stumbled in after you fell asleep - he couldn't even remember where his own room was - so we told him he could crash here. We invited him to share the bed but he wasn't that drunk. He did accept Steve's offer to 'get more comfortable' though." He grinned mischievously.

"And we did sorta' improvise some a cappella strip tease music while he undressed. He was drunk enough to play along and dance a little."

"Hm, you should have woken me up," Hadrian smirked, turning to mostly bury his face in his pillow.

"Didn't have the heart," Alenko quipped, "you hit it pretty hard last night. In more ways than one." Another wicked grin.

"Well, had to make the most of the amenities. Once we set out again, how long do you suppose it'll be before we have a reason to rush back here? There's no fighting anywhere. The last crisis was... huh... I don't even remember."

"So we'll come back for leisurely visits," Kaidan shrugged, "the place isn't going anywhere."

Shepard made a sarcastic face.

"You know what I mean," Kaidan replied.

"Yeah... speaking of. What time is it?"

"Just past eleven. So we need to be getting up anyway, time to go soon."

"Right." Hadrian reached back and tickled Cortez's buttock to rouse him, and as Steve stirred so did Herman.

"Another 'round?" Steve murmured contentedly. Ben flexed his arm, drawing his partner's head onto his shoulder and rubbing the arm that Cortez draped across his chest. 'Dibs.'

"Nah, party's wrapping up. Weighing anchor in a bit. Wakey-wakey," Kaidan answered.

"Hnnnn, thank God," Ben grumbled, "it's been fun but I don't think my system can hack another night. Everything between my brain and by balls is half-wrecked."
Cortez sniggered wickedly and nuzzled Herman's chest.

"Good timing, then, we can take some R&R from all this strenuous R&R," Kaidan quipped, turning to sit up and then standing. He moved to the window and drew open the curtains, and took in the view. The forest of gleaming 'skyscrapers' outside stretched for miles, and beyond the base of the ward was the Presidium and the opposite five wards, all set against the backdrop of the giant blue-and-green marble of Earth. Thousands of dancing, scintillating lights flowed between the towers - the aerocar highways - and parked near the tower was the Destiny Ascension, finally "back where she belonged," standing watch over the station.

"Kinda sad that we'll probably never see that view again," Steve sighed, turning his head to take it in.

Hadrian slid to the edge of the bed and sat up too, drinking up the sight of Kaidan's naked body in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. "It is about as nice a view as I've ever seen," he smiled. "But don't feel bad, we might get to see it again. And if we don't, well... such is life. Moments come and they pass. No point in clinging."

Steve, Ben and Kaidan all chimed in with exaggerated, teasing groans. "Ugghhhhh!"

"We get it, but I, for one, am way too hung over for dharma lessons," Herman pleaded. "Besides, doubt Buddha would be thrilled about a week and a half long orgy of heavy drinking and... orgy... ing."

"In space," Kaidan added.

"Goddamn, my brain hurts."

"Well, shake it off, blondie," Shepard grinned, reaching over Cortez's head and rifling his fingers over Herman's scalp, soothingly, eliciting a low moan. "Tragic as it is for you to have to get dressed, I doubt you want to streak all the way back to the ship."

"Hey, if shore leave's over then you gotta' dial back the hitting on my husband," Cortez chuckled.

"Oh, yes Sir," Shepard smirked.

"And if shore leave's over then you don't have to call any of us 'Sir' anymore," Kaidan grinned, returning to the side of the bed and standing between Hadrian's knees, his pelvis just inches from Shepard's torso. Hade leaned in, his breath hot on the skin between Kaidan's navel and his slightly swelling member.

"Aw, just a few more times before we check out?" he said. Cortez snorted.

"Sure seems like we're about to get going again," he commented. "Curtains are open and everything."

"Nooo," Alenko chided, putting a hand under Hadrian's chin and urging him to stand up. He hugged their naked bodies together and kissed the nape of Shepard's neck, rocking gently side to side, but he was focused on them getting out of bed and on their way. Shepard sighed and nodded, and looked back over his shoulder at Steve and Ben.

"He's right, duty calls. Starting a survey mission today," Shepard mumbled.

"Yeah. First expeditionary probes in through the new Psi Tophet relay picked up synthempathic signals coming from a planet in the system. Which is supposedly uninhabited. So... we get to go see who's been hiding in the neighbourhood of-" Shepard narrowed his eyes and looked at Kaidan for help.

"2181 Despoina," Alenko completed.

"Right. For the last ten years or so while there was nothing much by way of FTL access."

"Like I said... exciting," Ben said, still full of sarcasm.

"Hey, it could be a whole new species we didn't know was there," Kaidan mused. Herman rolled his eyes and looked at Steve's face, gazing up from atop his chest.

"Or a herd of space cows some rancher put to pasture and never came back for," he said.

"One way to find out," Steve shrugged. "And it's something to do, before all this decadence makes us soft. Alright, c'mon." He propped himself up on an elbow and looked over at Hade and Kaidan. "Anybody in more desperate need of the head than me?" he asked. They both shook their heads, as did Ben, so Steve climbed over his partner and headed for the bathroom. Finally Herman sat up and turned to look at his captain and XO.

"I'm glad we did this again," he admitted with a bit of a shy grin.

"Yeah," Hadrian replied, exchanging an affirmative gaze with his husband and then looking back to wink at his ground team leader, "well, when you can push together a bed big enough for four, why not make the most of it?"

"And that is why I'm glad I got here four hours after you espadachines left the bar," Vega groaned sleepily from his chair.

"Oh, he's awake. Hey, Carne, come here a second," Kaidan grinned.

"After you and Loco put some pants on, Cacique."

"Sing us some reverse-strip-tease music and we will."

James rubbed his hands over his face and moaned plaintively as the comment reminded him of his arrival a few hours earlier. "Dios mio," he sighed, "how much for us to never speak of this again?"

"Did he just open the floor to bargaining for our silence?" Hade chuckled.

"Sounded like it to me," Herman remarked. "Dibs on his N7 hoodie."

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4 hours later

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They'd re-connected one more time with their loved ones still at the Citadel- Garrus and Tali, Liara, Moore and Jack, Traynor and Nymanda, even a few awkward minutes with Javik, and of course their respective families- before saying their "goodbyes" and "see you laters" and returning to the Normandy. As the frigate backed out of its docking berth and turned away from the station, Shepard and Kaidan made their way up the CIC to the cockpit to join Joker and EDI. The crew were going about their work, preparing to head out on their new mission to the frontier. Cortez was
back in the hangar tinkering with his shuttle. Herman was in the armoury with his squad, maintaining guns they hadn't fired in combat in years.

All was well.

Now hundreds of other ships were fanning out away from the Citadel, all stopping- like the SR-3 did- a hundred or so kilometres outside its frame, to observe the culmination of all the 'grand opening' ceremonies. The station was open, its population had begun to balloon with immigration from Earth and the leftover alien enclaves that had remained from their post-Crucible Day stranding there. Its protective fleet was assembled. Only one thing remained before everything could be called "back to normal." The Citadel was a meeting place amongst the stars, and leaving it in Earth orbit felt somehow too 'proprietary.' It belonged somewhere neutral. And the Consensus Council had just the place.

As the departing ships bearing all those content not to go to the Widow Nebula hung on the space around it, articulated masts at the end of the 'northern' petals of the station unfurled from the Earth, Thessia, Palaven, Rannoch and Irune Wards. They reached out and converged a kilometre off the end of the station, and where they met a ripple in space flickered into being. It grew into a reflective sphere, and then as the masts began to spread apart one side of the distortion caved in, the interior surface of the remaining 'dome' giving way to the electric purple glow of a distant gas cloud tens of thousands of light-years away.

The masts reached their maximum radius from the centre point, and then the wards themselves began to smoothly shift, folding out to align with the diameter of the Presidium- stretching the ensuing wormhole aperture to its apex of over a hundred kilometres- and then folding over to the other side of the ring. The opposite five wards rotated ninety degrees on their stems to make room for the reconfiguration.

From outside, the station appeared to conjure a reflective shroud out of nothingness, pull it into a sphere around itself, and vanish within. As the northern wards reached the point of mirroring their normal orientation, the masts at their ends converged again. The event horizon became a perfect sphere, and then shrunk away to the nothingness from whence it came.

The space formerly occupied by the Second Citadel sat vacant. The station had returned to its predecessor's home.

"Well that was cool," Moreau commented. "And they have those at each end?"

EDI nodded and smiled, evidently pleased with the end result of her incursion into the Puritans' database nearly a decade earlier. "Yes," she replied, "with the correct calculations a wormhole to any charted point in space can be opened at either end when the wards are in their default configuration. Utilizing both arrays simultaneously will allow the Citadel to bridge any two locations, and they can replace the 'caps' at either end permitting ingress and egress even if the station should need to close. Or one array can be used to 'fold' a wormhole onto itself and re-locate the entire station in minutes."

"So in other words, access from anywhere, to anywhere."

"In other words," Shepard cut in, "no one is 'too isolated to be helped' anymore. There's no such thing as 'too far away to care.' No FTL is no matter." He looked contentedly at Kaidan and interlaced their fingers. "It's connection. Writ large. No more separation."

"Thing of the past," Alenko replied thoughtfully.
"Really cool," Jeff agreed. Then, after a moment, he raised an eyebrow and cocked his head back. "Wait, so if Citadel-two can do that, then why didn't we go with them and just take one of those wormholes to where we're going? Now we've got weeks of travel to the other end of the galaxy to check out this mystery planet!"

Hadrian chuckled and Kaidan smiled knowingly, then put his free hand on the back of EDI's chair. "Because," he replied for the both of them, looking forward to the time they'd spend together, "it's the journey... right?"

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