Summary

FemShep/Liara romance. Edgy, very dark themes, character/relationship focused with plenty of sexystuff. Original characters. political intrigue and action. Shepard struggles with the pressure, her anxiety and fear; Liara struggles with the fallout from Shepard's death and return. Left of cannon, not always sticking to linear storyline, or in game timelines. Includes major storyline with Aria and a lot of time on Thessia. This is the first of two 'books' that will span the whole of the Mass Effect Trilogy. This first book will take us to the end of ME2 (but we don't follow all in game timings). You will see, hopefully, my writing transforming and growing stronger as the work progresses. I find my own voice at some point and your feedback on the overarching progress of the writing is also welcome on top of the story itself.

Notes

If you are familiar with the ME trilogy fear not, despite appearances we do not start at the end. You may need some understanding of the Mass Effect universe and watching some playthroughs on Youtube will do. Or you can still read this but know that I am a bad writer and leaned on knowledge of the game for explanations of some locations, history and the physics of the game. If you're willing to go with the flow I think its worth the effort anyway and I'll certainly
appreciate the feedback.
Chapter 1

Unknown location - Unknown date and time

'Shit, shit, shit' pain welcomed her back to consciousness, the kind of pain that snatches your breath away.

She tested breathing, thinking about the mechanics of it. The sharp stabbing pain burned more intensely in her lungs as she inhaled. Shepard knew in that moment that every breath would be shallow and hard fought for.

'No, no, no don't move... still... stay still'

'Did I say that out loud or just in my head,' she couldn't hear anything, well that wasn't strictly true; there was noise, of sorts.

Shepard tried to analyse what she was hearing, 'Like being underwater or a silence so complete you can feel the pressure of it in your head.'

That thought brought back the edge of a memory but as fast as it entered into her conscious mind it drifted away again.

Shepard tried to move an arm but when she did it sent waves of burning, searing, crushing pain to her brain. She was completely immobilised but right now she couldn't tell whether it was from the weight of whatever it was pressing on her or her own broken body.

And it was dark, was it impenetrable dark, the black of space, the dark of shut eyes, the black of being buried.

'Are my eyes open', she thought, just as she felt herself drifting, the brutal awareness of her physical situation beginning to fade, like she was falling up and away from it.

"No, no, no don't pass out, stay awake, focus, what just happened, where the fuck am I... shit what the fuck happened''.

This time she heard something, but the noise escaping her lips was more of a low, growling moan, the sound of a trapped, dying animal holding fast to life through sheer will.

Was this it then, would her life flash through her mind, well if it was Shepard was going to make damn sure she choose the highlights.

Reaching out in her mind to the one part of it that wasn't screaming with fear and pain and confusion, the one part of her mind that felt like an anchor to existence, warm and safe.

But as she was reaching for that place she heard a seductive voice that whispered she could let go now, she'd done enough, and she was so very tired. But there was something she needed to do; just one more thing and she knew who would tell her what it was.

Shepard was drifting up and away and she grabbed the most powerful memory she could to take with her, those blue eyes, the sound of her voice, the touch of her mind... Liara.

Therum, Knossos System - Systems Alliance space
Shepard looked up at the sky, it was really hot, and her armours micro climate was struggling to maintain comfort levels having, as usual, taken her helmet off. Given the choice she would always rather have her head in the environment groundside, and her shields gave a decent level of protection outside of a full on firefight.

It had been a hard fight getting this far. Meeting resistance from Geth snipers and troopers and also few heavies capable of blowing through the armour of the Mako ground vehicle there were in.

A rock fall further back had forced them onto foot but they were covering the ground quickly in a typical attack formation with Shepard as usual out front.

"Not much further now Commander" Kaiden was checking the map on his OT "Just the top of this drive, we should see the buildings soon."

"Skipper if you don't mind me saying, you really stink at driving the Mako, I don't think I caught so many bruises on a ride along since my troop transport took a wrong turn and we drove off a 50 foot cliff," Ashley was smiling and knew she was only repeating what was a commonly held opinion of their Commanders driving style.

'Well Ash I'm a marine and more used to operating bigger vehicles in space," Shepard said with a smile, "I don't do so well in two dimensions, but I haven't found a Mako or a crew that I could break so far, you gonna be the exception?'

"Hell no skip, just thinking we could take it in turns is al," Ash responded in good humour.

As they approached the final bend Shepard held up a fist as some instinct told her they had company waiting for them and a few seconds later the digital bleeps and chirps typical of Geth communication drifted across the hot dry air.

Hard hats back on and weapons at the ready they moved forward from cover to cover and were rewarded by getting the drop on a small group of Geth troopers.

The squad agreed silently how they would carve up the kills. They took up their positions and at the end of a finger count down opened fire taking down all targets within fifteen seconds.

Shepard walked towards the Geth position and poked one of the smashed up AI's body's with the toe of her boot.

"I'd still like to know what the hell the Geth are up to and what the hell they're doing this side of the veil," she pushed her sun visor onto the top of her head and knelt down to have a closer look, "let's take one of these memory drives even though they fry them if they get popped."

"Will do Commander," Kaiden said and she heard the sound of metal from where her LT was standing.

She looked up the wide drive that would lead them to the mine entrance where they were expecting to find the only daughter of Saren's co-conspirator Benezia T'Soni.

Shepard pulled her glasses back down to protect her eyes from the dazzling sun, "is it getting even hotter," she said rhetorically.

"All done Commander," Kaiden's voice rang out behind her. They formed up and continued on their way. Shepard occasionally lifted the Mattocks’ sight to her eye and scanning the top of the rise as she walked but it looked dead.
Reaching the top of the track they could see the walkway up to the entrance of the mine. To the left the storage area was congested with various containers and pieces of machinery rusting and abandoned.

In their path lay two large freight containers and as they began to skirt them Shepard noticed a shadow overtake them on the ground as she turned to look behind them the ground began to rumble.

The instant she saw the Geth drop ship she shouted to her squad to find cover. From behind one of the huge containers she watched as the ship disgorged a Geth Colossus which hit the ground with a mighty slam.

It was followed by two rocket troopers and a couple of very fast moving sniper units that seemed able to run up walls and hang upside down from surfaces.

The Colossus fired its plasma cannon on their position and the first round smashed into the container so hard it buckled a corner and Shepard felt the container bump her with the force of the blow.

The position they were in was a bad one and easily flanked by the rocket troopers.

"Fall back the trench", She knew they needed a minute to sort out a tactical response to the new threat and the trench they had used previously was about fifteen metres behind them, "Shield boost and run for it" She added.

Shepard was aware her team mates had begun the run to the trench as she began trotting backwards laying down covering fire and provide a focus of fire drawing it from Kaiden and Ash.

Seconds later Kaiden called through the comms that they were in the trench and laying down cover fire for her, she turned and ran for it.

Shepard called the gameplay she had worked out as she was pulling back from their first position.

"Ash, take out those Rocket troopers first once that's done focus fire on that Colossus," she turned to face Kaiden

"You use your biotics to catch that hopper and any friends he brought and take them out. Before we start I want us all to focus full AI jamming on that Colossus and keep re-jamming or use damping if they manage to override our tech.

I'm going to move forward and make a run up the left through the cover of all that junk is to flank the big guy, I figure by the time I get there you will be ready to focus fire on it so I won't have my ass hanging out," she finished with a grin.

After a very noisy five or six minutes and a couple of near misses from the plasma cannon all targets were down and they stood over the crumpled, hissing and sparking body of the huge Geth mobile gun.

"Nice work," Shepard said exchanging hand slaps with her team mates who seemed to be shaping up really well and both were certainly very handy in a fight.

"It's gonna be even hotter in this damn hole in the ground", Ash grumbled as they began heading towards the walkway.

"Hot as hell marine… just another glorious day in the Corps," Shepard said with a huge grin securing her glasses ready for the darkness that awaited them.
Working their way down through the levels of the mine they took out a couple of groups of Geth troopers but nothing bigger. A decidedly old, and badly maintained, looking lift offered them respite from the exertion of walking down the final four levels into the heart of the mine.

Stepping off at the bottom everything seemed eerily quiet and still, a feeling added to by the shimmering blue tinted light coming from their left which Shepard decided needed investigation.

Standing in front of the stasis field she lowered her weapon and couldn't help allowing a broad grin to form as the sight before her was not only amusing but entirely beautiful.

"Doctor T'Soni I presume?" Shepard was sure the reference to an old Earth history story would be lost on all present, especially the Asari, but she noticed Ash smile out of the corner of her eye.

"Thank the Goddess I did not think anyone would come looking for me, but you are human, I…, well anyway this thing I am in is a Prothean security device so I need you to get me out of it. Hello?" The young Asari floating in the stasis field spoke quickly.

"So how did you manage to get stuck in there?" Shepard asked not able to keep the smile out of her voice.

"I was exploring the ruins when the Geth showed up; can you believe that, Geth beyond the Veil? So I hid in here… I activated the towers defences I knew the barrier curtains would keep them out… but, but when I turned it on I must have hit something I was not supposed to. I was trapped. You must get me out. Please…,"

Her voice trailed away and this time there were longer pauses and the effort of speaking began to show. "How long have you been in there?" Kaiden asked concern showing on his face "Almost two Galactic Mean Time cycles and the barrier itself seems to be having an effect on me. I feel very weak and a little light headed."

"So that's about 36 Alliance standard hours" Ash chipped in.

"Ok Doctor T'Soni just stay calm a little longer we will get you out" Shepard nodded all trace of amusement now gone.

"There is a control in here that should de-activate the thing. You will have to find some way past the barrier curtain. That's the tricky part the barrier curtains cannot be shut off from outside. I do not know how you will get in here. Be careful there is a Krogan with the Geth and they have been trying different way to get past the barrier."

Concern and fear clearly showed on the young Asari's face.

"Well you're lucky it was a team of Alliance Marines who came to your rescue Doctor we'll get you out, just sit tight" Shepard gave the Asari what she hoped was more of a reassuring smile than an amused one.

After dealing with a couple of Geth troopers that walked in on their recce of the area they used a mining laser to break under the space that the unfortunate Asari was trapped in then rode the lift up a floor.

"How did you get in here, I did not think there was any way past the barrier," Liara T'Soni said trying to look over her shoulder to where Shepard and the others were now standing.

"We need to get you out of there and off this planet as quickly as we can Doc before more Geth arrive" Shepard said walking over to the edge of the stasis curtain.
"Yes your right I have seen enough of them to last a lifetime and I really do feel very tired. There is a control on the console behind you which should shut down the containment field."

"Hang on skipper her mother is working for Saren are we sure she can be trusted outside that field?"

Ash spoke but Shepard could see the same concern on Kaiden's face. Before Shepard could answer Liara T'Soni spoke with a venom and hardness that hadn't been present in their previous exchanges.

"I am not my mother! I do not even… I do not know what my mother is doing with Saren and I do not want anything to do with that Turian bastard."

"If she was with Saren the Geth wouldn't be trying to kill her or capture her and she wouldn't have trapped herself in that barrier. Kaiden use the console and get this barrier down."

"Aye aye Commander."

As Kaiden moved towards the console Shepard moved close in behind the trapped Asari to catch her as the barrier came down.

The instant the barrier disappeared Dr T'Soni fell but Shepard caught her and lowered her so that that her feet were on the ground. Although able to stand she was very unstable on her feet and Shepard stayed close an acted as a support for her.

"So how do we get out from here," Kaiden asked

"I believe the platform in the centre of the tower is a lift that will take us up to the top level," Liara said and as they walked to the platform and activated the lift she said
"I still cannot believe this, why would the Geth come after me? Do you think Benezia is involved?"

"Saren is looking for something called the Conduit, a Prothean device, you're a Prothean expert so he probably thinks you can help him to find it," Kaiden replied.

"The Conduit… I do not know…” but the Doctors comment was interrupted as the sound of cracking and falling rocks filled their ears and the platform shuddered.

"What the hell was that," Ash's voice was steady but she looked edgy.

"These ruins are unstable I believe the mining laser may have triggered a seismic event," Liara replied now leaning quite heavily on Shepard's arm.

"Well we, I, do like blowing stuff up… though we usually like to be at a safe distance when we hear the bang," Shepard said smiling trying to relieve the obvious tension that was present in the lift.

"That you do ma'am," Kaiden smiled at her.

"Joker! Get the Normandy airborne and lock in on my signal, at the double mister we are coming out hot." "'Aye aye Commander, secure and aweigh. ETA eight minutes." Joker's voice crackled over the comms.

"Prepare for a quick and dirty evac people," Shepard pulled her assault rifle to ready position trying not to disturb the Asari on her arm. She pulled her helmet on, and waited for the lift to complete its journey to the surface.

"Not much margin for error from the sounds of things," Kaiden voiced what they were all thinking. As the lift reached the final level they were confronted with the Krogan battle master that the Doctor
had warned them about who had a rocket trooper and a couple of ordinary troopers with him.

"Surrender or fight, choose fight I am looking forward to ripping you apart," the Krogan smiled showing his sharp teeth.

Like the well-oiled machine they were, the three marines instantly took positions and started to take down the Geth troopers then turning their combined firepower on the Krogan.

Shepard placed herself in front of the Asari pushing her down behind the console in the centre of the lift. It was over in less than a minute. The combination of tech, biotics and firepower gave the marines the edge against higher troop strength and higher numbers. It was the combination that made the Alliance military a force to be reckoned with even if their overall numbers were not as high as other military forces.

Shepard turned to the Asari and helped her up and they moved forward from the lift onto the metal walkway, as they emerged and began to run for the exit huge chunks of rock began cascading from higher up and surrounding walls, some hitting the walkway sending shudders up through their boots. Shepard also noticed the Asari was having trouble keeping up in her weakened state.

"Come on Doc let me help," Shepard turned to the Asari, lifted her easily and put her over her shoulders and began running for the exit with Kaiden and Ash in front.

She could only vaguely hear, because of the noise from the rock falls and quakes, what sounded like apologetic protestations from over her shoulder but Shepard also felt the Asari holding tightly onto her.

They emerged from the mouth of this higher level of the mine followed by rushing air carrying dust and the sounds of the destruction they had left behind. The Normandy was waiting with flight deck ramp dropped and it was only when they were safely inside did Shepard put Liara T'Soni back on her feet.

"Straight to the med bay for you Doctor T'Soni, let me escort you. Kaiden, Ash debriefing with the rest of the team in thirty." Shepard removed her helmet and looked for the first time properly into the eyes of the woman in front of her.

"I need to tell you how grateful I am Commander for saving me and trusting me, I…. I… am not used to… I have never met… oh Goddess I think I am just feeling overwhelmed by my experience. Please Commander call me Liara, if you feel that is appropriate of course," Liara's hand went to her forehead and she looked somewhere above Shepard's head.

"Yes we really didn't have time for proper introductions did we? Please call me Shepard, only my mother gets to call me by my first name which I hate," she smiled at Liara and her smile was returned.

Something happened in that moment, something between them connected, Shepard didn't quite know what it was… but it felt right… natural… like coming home…
"Mmmgh… Lee… so… love..." another breath… and the pain… the flight deck, Liara all fading away and she was back in this place, this dark place filled with pain and fear.

'Think dammit… think… what's the last thing…' and again a vision of Liara came into her mind this time this time they were about to kiss and the image again faded pushed away with the pain of the next breath she had to take.

'Saren… chasing Saren… fought him… Citadel… Sovereign crashing down… is that it… buried on the Citadel… great… even when I kill one I end up half dead...' she thought but another voice whispered in a colder voice 'only half dead I think that's reaching.'

Then another image came floating into her mind. Green eyes right in front of her saying something about pain.

"Feel into the pain, don't try to block or avoid it," that's right a familiar male voice said, "concentrate on it and then you can take control, try now Lidie.'

Her father's voice, and then his face came into focus. Shepard had been on the ship's climbing wall in the recreation bay. Pushing too hard and ignoring her father's suggestions to take it slower.

She'd banged herself hard when she hit the floor and was close to tears, but she fought them back. Even at seven she wanted to be tough.

Shepard felt herself drifting away again and she tried to be brave and kept looking into the eyes of her father, her brave, thoughtful loving father.

Shepard looked up into the face of her father, his green eyes a mirror of her own, and was reassured and comforted despite the piercing pain in her shoulder.

"That's it Liddie, feel into the pain and now turn down the volume, like we practised… though you know the real trick is not to get hurt in the first place," he smiled and helped her up continuing "I think that's probably enough for today your mother will have my guts if we're late to the mess deck for dinner."

Her father was a marine, a lieutenant commander, though he started off heading for an academic life as a history scholar.

That's how she got one of her Christian names, Lydia, for some Greek or Minoan state which was the home of the double headed axe, Labrys. That was actually what he first suggested but her but her mother had put the brakes on it feeling that it was a bit too much history to lumber a child with.

From him Shepard learned her love of history, books, reading and also of weapons. She was stripping down and putting back together rifles, pistol and shotguns by the time she was six.

She would ask endless questions and sit in on training session about all things technical and combat related, even though she didn't always understand everything she tried hard to.
Her father would always share a blow by blow account of his missions, he didn't glorify it, told her the hard stuff as well as the exciting adrenaline rush moments.

He sometimes lost marines on missions and those were the times she saw how much responsibility came with command.

Shepard's mother was a navy officer and from her she learned a love of ships and space itself. The dark art of mass effect fields, quantum mechanics, FTL drives, navigation… all things space vehicle related.

One of her earliest memories was sitting on her mother's lap in the co-pilot seat of a frigate and having a front seat view of a mass relay jump.

From both of them she learned her iron sense of duty and honour, that you protect the weak, that to remain true to yourself and your moral compass was the only way to know right from wrong and the only way to make decisions when to do what was right would not be easy, that life was complicated and messy and the greatest gift the universe could give.

She wasn't unique in this 'educational' experience. It wasn't unusual for alliance 'spacer' kids to spend most of their time on board ship with their parents, the alliance would ensure that parents were posted together and on larger ships that had facilities for babies and children.

Shepard did have to spend some time at alliance boarding schools when either she reached a critical point in her education or her parent's ship was assigned to a mission unsuited to having children on board.

But for the most part she grew up on board her mother's ship's in the company of her father's marines and there was never any doubt what she would do when she was old enough.

The darkest day of her life came when she was fifteen years old. The ship had answered the distress call from Mindoir and her father was leading one of the teams of marines fighting on the ground.

He was killed in action and the effect on Shepard was brutal, she found it hard ever to say anything other than 'fucking Batarian's' if they ever came up in conversation after that day.

Later she would work with and be civil to Batarian's when the situation required it or duty commanded it, but there was no love lost between Human and Batarian on the whole and she was fine with that state of affairs.

The memories flashing in and out of view were of her time growing up on board those beautiful ships with her brilliant, loving and honourable parents. Of shore leave and trips to ruins or development labs; playing arguing learning laughing.

One memory stayed in her mind for longer and was tinged with sadness.

Shepard could hear the music through the open windows. The Alliance navy still used a marching band, such an old, old tradition.

But tradition was one of the things she really valued in the Service, that feeling of history, continuity; it reinforced the feeling of being part of something much bigger than her.

Looking in the mirror she did a final check of her dress blues. Completing her preparations she put on her dress cap and pulled its black peak down over her eyebrows so she could only just see straight ahead. She looked into her face, into her eyes, her father's eyes and missed him deeply. He would
have been so proud of her.

There had always been friendly rivalry between her parents about which arm of the service she would enter when she was eighteen, but in honesty no one had any doubt that she would join the marines.

And here she was at her passing out parade; her mother, now the executive officer on the newest dreadnought the alliance had, sitting proudly in the stands waiting for her daughter to march past at the head of a troop of marines who were also moving from recruit to fully-fledged member of the Marine Corps.

It seemed to be over to soon, she wanted to relish the moment, to overlay it onto her father's recollection of his passing out parade. After the ceremony she was able to meet again some of her father's old squad and his commanding officer who had attended as a mark of the respect he had for her father.

She walked much taller than her five foot ten not only because of her own achievement but because she knew she was standing here thanks to both her parents and what they had given her; those character lessons that would steel her enough to face what was in her path and survive experiences that would have broken most people.

Elysium, Skyllian Verge, 2176

"Well I may be on shore leave but it doesn't mean I can't do things I enjoy just because they are sort of work related now does it" she smiled at the young woman standing next to her "I mean would it be so bad if we just took an hour or two to check out the weapons mods this market has to offer. I'll make it up to you later, promise," she reached out and pulled the woman close and kissed her gently but firmly.

"Aw Shep when you put it like that how can I refuse," Anna was a little shorter than Shepard and was a local Elysium girl with black hair and blue eyes and a truly devilish smile.

But before they got much further air raid sirens started to wail out and loud speakers that Shepard hadn't even noticed before began to repeat two messages:

"All civilians to fortified shelters immediately. All military personnel report to the garrison office at the main gate"

Shepard looked at Anna and could see the fear in her eyes, they had heard the news of mercenary and Batarian raids on human colonies but this was Earth's "capital" in the Traverse and the population here had never contemplated any kind of attack.

"Hey it's ok, it may even just be a drill, but I need you to go to the shelter and stay there till I come find you, promise me?"

"Ok but I should go home and check to make sure the rest of the family is ok," Anna's response was exactly the reply Shepard didn't want to hear, if this was for real then wandering around looking for relatives was not the safe thing to do, and she cared for this woman.

"No Anna promise me you go straight to the shelter and wait for them, you could end up missing each other if you try to find them, and take this, just in case," Shepard handed Anna her hand cannon.
She pulled Anna to her and gave her a long kiss and a held her firmly in her arms.

"Now go and I'll see you on the other side." Shepard watched for a few moments as Anna hurried away in the direction of the nearest shelter.

Shepard turned to head toward the garrison office calculating on the way how many troops were likely to be stationed here, how many may be on shore leave like herself and what kind of notice they had received about the incoming attack.

The news was bad. They had less than thirty minutes, the incoming force looked like it could be overwhelming given the size and number of ships entering orbit, the focus of the attack would be Elysium itself and from the signatures of the ships they were Batarian.

The "garrison" was little more than local MP/Security levels and by far the largest number of troops where those who were on shore leave.

They had enough time to grab armour, thankfully there was enough to go around, and the armoury was well stocked. The ranking officer was a Captain but he had no combat experience and she was told to take command even though she was only a first lieutenant.

The settlement itself was fairly well fortified but there were to many entry points to be able to defend it completely. She asked that a message be sent to all the shelters that doors were locked on her command

Shepard would leave it as long as possible but they had no way of protecting all the safety shelters with troops they just had to hold till reinforcements came and stop the Batarians getting heavy weapons or vehicles into the settlement.

The only way to do that was to hold the main gate offering the only road access. The rest of the settlement would have to be on lock down. And once the attackers got through the "holes" in the settlement defences by foot the defenders at the gates would be surrounded.

They were receiving telemetry from satellites which the Batarians hadn't bothered taking down, a tactical mistake that may have stemmed from their arrogance.

They had to think they could walk in with the numbers they had against a lightly defended civilian settlement. With that information available and their own local beacons which would start tracking the activity once the Batarians hit the ground they had a pretty good idea to within minutes of when they would be hit.

She stationed two small teams to man the two turrets on the walls either side of the gate with orders to spike the guns if they were in any danger of being taken by the enemy; and positioned both the grenade and rocket launchers with fire support on the walls as well.

Deploying the only other heavy turrets on top of two cargo containers they had hauled in and dumped for cover in the area behind the main gates. They would be more exposed up there but would have a devastating effect and provide a killing zone both to the front and rear of their position. That is until the ammo ran out.

The rest of the troops dug in and found cover as best they could back to back ready for the attack from inside the settlement when the Batarians broke through; and the main attack force that would be heading for the gates.

Ammo, including grenades, were distributed evenly and by the time they had finished their preparations the intel officer
warned that troops would be at the gate in under five minutes. She gave the order to lock the shelters. They had had slightly more time than first estimated, it had been forty one minutes since she kissed Anna goodbye. Shortly after that thought all hell broke loose.

Shepard tried to be everywhere supporting all the ground positions as they came under increased fire or attack. They had some luck early on, the Batarian's decided to lead with their heavy weapons and carefully placed rockets and turret fire took out the two lead vehicles in the first exchange of fire.

The mistake the enemy made then was for the next couple of vehicles to just go around the two that were disabled and they too were taken out thus blocking any further access to vehicles until the first line was clear. But that would be difficult and the vehicles were on fire and exploding, their magazines full of unused ordinance.

There was nothing more luck could do for them. They were completely outnumbered. Only the preparations they had made, their Alliance training and discipline and Shepard's active and ongoing leadership and tactical adjustments kept their heads above water. But they steadily lost troops, one after another, sometime two or three at a time, men and women were killed or severely wounded.

Time had no meaning, Shepard had no idea how long they had been fighting. The Batarian's had taken three or four breaks to try to regroup. Shepard used that time to move ammo around reposition remaining troops to fill gaps and rally confidence.

She told them there would be no surrender, she told them they were all that stood between these Batarian slavers and what they would do to the innocent men women and children they were protecting.

She told them there was no choice; they held on till help came, they were the last and only line of defence.

Shepard could feel the blood from a head wound sustained in hand to hand combat when a wave of Batarian's had overwhelmed their left flank and she and a couple of others had gone to reinforce and repel the attackers.

Her left arm hung useless at her side a bullet wound in her shoulder. And a slice of shrapnel from a grenade blast had lodged itself in her side. But anger, adrenaline, force of will kept her rallying her troops and killing the wave after wave of the enemy that seemed to be never-ending.

And then it stopped. All the noise of gunfire and shouting and screaming and explosions, just stopped. The silence was almost painful on her ears. She sank to her knees.

"Sit rep, sound out, status and ammo," she shouted but very few shouts came back. They had lost the turrets and troops on the wall…. when… a long time ago, she thought.

"Intel do you have Alliance contact yet," she shouted over to her comms station. They had sent out all the distress calls required and for as long as they were able to transmit they sent out situation updates including Batarian troop numbers and their losses.

"Lieutenant we have Alliance ships in fleet numbers in orbit," a very weak and faint voice came to her from what was left of their comms station further along the cargo container they were using for cover.

"Ok, stay sharp people, not safe till… reinforcements… need to just keep…” Shepard was losing the fight to stay conscious, but only finally let go when she heard and then saw alliance gunships overhead and she knew they would put boots on the ground in seconds.
She felt herself fading, heat, the smell of death on the air fading away to darkness.

'Medic…over here' she thought or possibly tried to shout.

Why hadn't they got to her yet, they were here reinforcements, 'they… no…not Elysium… not Elysium' she thought.

'Dammit Anna, why didn't you go to the shelter like I told you.' The image of Anna’s body, shot through the chest and the head crashed into her mind.

She had been one of the few, significant few, who had not made it to the shelter before they were locked down. The brass had said if that order hadn't been given the Batarian's would have overran the shelters and the civilian casualties would have been horrendous.

But she still had to live with the knowledge she locked out people from a place of safety because she couldn't find a way to protect them. She failed to protect Anna, did she protect Liara

'You have to get it together Shepard where the fuck are you,’ but the pain in her body and in her head crowded out her attempts at focused thought.

Images kept rattling through her mind jumping in time, her father, her mother and of course Liara.

'So do you want dad to help you into whatever passes for the afterlife or do you want mum to miraculously come find you the way she always could when you needed her before you got to big accept help even when it was offered…huh… which one Shepard…'

And there it was again the almost overwhelming need to let go, to stop fighting, to be done. She had done enough; seen enough, been through enough…she wanted to rest… she wanted it to stop.

'One last thing, just one last thing to do… if only I could remember what it is…’ Her head hurt, everything hurt and she was getting pretty fucking fed up of it and not knowing where she was and now she was wondering why nobody had come looking for her.

And this fucking itch that she couldn't reach to scratch… what the hell was it she still had to do… for fucks sake give me peace… let me find peace…

'Find peace in the arms of the Goddess' she thought and then with a jolt she heard Liara whisper "Embrace eternity"… but she was alone so that had to be in her head.

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Elysium, Skyllian Verge, 2176

"Well I may be on shore leave but it doesn't mean I can't do things I enjoy just because they are sort of work related now does it" she smiled at the young woman standing next to her "I mean would it be so bad if we just took an hour or two to check out the weapons mods this market has to offer. I'll make it up to you later, promise," she reached out and pulled the woman close and kissed her gently but firmly.

"Aw Shep when you put it like that how can I refuse," Anna was a little shorter than Shepard and was a local Elysium girl with black hair and blue eyes and a truly devilish smile.

But before they got much further air raid sirens started to wail out and loud speakers that Shepard hadn't even noticed before began to repeat two messages:
"All civilians to fortified shelters immediately. All military personnel report to the garrison office at the main gate"

Shepard looked at Anna and could see the fear in her eyes, they had heard the news of mercenary and Batarian raids on human colonies but this was Earth's "capital" in the Traverse and the population here had never contemplated any kind of attack.

"Hey it's ok, it may even just be a drill, but I need you to go to the shelter and stay there till I come find you, promise me?"

"Ok but I should go home and check to make sure the rest of the family is ok," Anna's response was exactly the reply Shepard didn't want to hear, if this was for real then wandering around looking for relatives was not the safe thing to do, and she cared for this woman.

"No Anna promise me you go straight to the shelter and wait for them, you could end up missing each other if you try to find them, and take this, just in case," Shepard handed Anna her hand cannon.

She pulled Anna to her and gave her a long kiss and a held her firmly in her arms.

"Now go and I'll see you on the other side." Shepard watched for a few moments as Anna hurried away in the direction of the nearest shelter.

Shepard turned to head toward the garrison office calculating on the way how many troops were likely to be stationed here, how many may be on shore leave like herself and what kind of notice they had received about the incoming attack.

The news was bad. They had less than thirty minutes, the incoming force looked like it could be overwhelming given the size and number of ships entering orbit, the focus of the attack would be Elysium itself and from the signatures of the ships they were Batarian.

The "garrison" was little more than local MP/Security levels and by far the largest number of troops where those who were on shore leave.

They had enough time to grab armour, thankfully there was enough to go around, and the armoury was well stocked. The ranking officer was a Captain but he had no combat experience and she was told to take command even though she was only a first lieutenant.

The settlement itself was fairly well fortified but there were to many entry points to be able to defend it completely. She asked that a message be sent to all the shelters that doors were locked on her command.

Shepard would leave it as long as possible but they had no way of protecting all the safety shelters with troops they just had to hold till reinforcements came and stop the Batarians getting heavy weapons or vehicles into the settlement.

The only way to do that was to hold the main gate offering the only road access. The rest of the settlement would have to be on lock down. And once the attackers got through the "holes" in the settlement defences by foot the defenders at the gates would be surrounded.

They were receiving telemetry from satellites which the Batarian's hadn't bothered taking down, a tactical mistake that may have stemmed from their arrogance.

They had to think they could walk in with the numbers they had against a lightly defended civilian settlement. With that information available and their own local beacons which would start tracking
the activity once the Batarian's hit the ground they had a pretty good idea to within minutes of when they would be hit.

She stationed two small teams to man the two turrets on the walls either side of the gate with orders to spike the guns if they were in any danger of being taken by the enemy; and positioned both the grenade and rocket launchers with fire support on the walls as well.

Deploying the only other heavy turrets on top of two cargo containers they had hauled in and dumped for cover in the area behind the main gates. They would be more exposed up there but would have a devastating effect and provide a killing zone both to the front and rear of their position. That is until the ammo ran out.

The rest of the troops dug in and found cover as best they could back to back ready for the attack from inside the settlement when the Batarian's broke through; and the main attack force that would be heading for the gates.

Ammo, including grenades, were distributed evenly and by the time they had finished their preparations the intel officer warned that troops would be at the gate in under five minutes. She gave the order to lock the shelters. They had had slightly more time than first estimated, it had been forty one minutes since she kissed Anna goodbye. Shortly after that thought all hell broke loose.

Shepard tried to be everywhere supporting all the ground positions as they came under increased fire or attack. They had some luck early on, the Batarian's decided to lead with their heavy weapons and carefully placed rockets and turret fire took out the two lead vehicles in the first exchange of fire.

The mistake the enemy made then was for the next couple of vehicles to just go around the two that were disabled and they too were taken out thus blocking any further access to vehicles until the first line was clear. But that would be difficult and the vehicles were on fire and exploding, their magazines full of unused ordinance.

There was nothing more luck could do for them. They were completely outnumbered. Only the preparations they had made, their Alliance training and discipline and Shepard's active and ongoing leadership and tactical adjustments kept their heads above water. But they steadily lost troops, one after another, sometime two or three at a time, men and women were killed or severely wounded.

Time had no meaning, Shepard had no idea how long they had been fighting. The Batarian's had taken three or four breaks to try to regroup. Shepard used that time to move ammo around reposition remaining troops to fill gaps and rally confidence.

She told them there would be no surrender, she told them they were all that stood between these Batarian slavers and what they would do to the innocent men women and children they were protecting.

She told them there was no choice; they held on till help came, they were the last and only line of defence.

Shepard could feel the blood from a head wound sustained in hand to hand combat when a wave of Batarian's had overwhelmed their left flank and she and a couple of others had gone to reinforce and repel the attackers.

Her left arm hung useless at her side a bullet wound in her shoulder. And a slice of shrapnel from a grenade blast had lodged itself in her side. But anger, adrenaline, force of will kept her rallying her troops and killing the wave after wave of the enemy that seemed to be never-ending.
And then it stopped. All the noise of gunfire and shouting and screaming and explosions, just stopped. The silence was almost painful on her ears. She sank to her knees.

"Sit rep, sound out, status and ammo," she shouted but very few shouts came back. They had lost the turrets and troops on the wall… when… a long time ago, she thought.

"Intel do you have Alliance contact yet," she shouted over to her comms station. They had sent out all the distress calls required and for as long as they were able to transmit they sent out situation updates including Batarian troop numbers and their losses.

"Lieutenant we have Alliance ships in fleet numbers in orbit," a very weak and faint voice came to her from what was left of their comms station further along the cargo container they were using for cover.

"Ok, stay sharp people, not safe till… reinforcements… need to just keep…” Shepard was losing the fight to stay conscious, but only finally let go when she heard and then saw alliance gunships overhead and she knew they would put boots on the ground in seconds.

She felt herself fading, heat, the smell of death on the air fading away to darkness.

'Medic… over here' she thought or possibly tried to shout.

Why hadn't they got to her yet, they were here reinforcements, 'they… no… not Elysium… not Elysium' she thought.

'Dammit Anna, why didn't you go to the shelter like I told you.' The image of Anna's body, shot through the chest and the head crashed into her mind.

She had been one of the few, significant few, who had not made it to the shelter before they were locked down. The brass had said if that order hadn't been given the Batarian's would have overrun the shelters and the civilian casualties would have been horrendous.

But she still had to live with the knowledge she locked out people from a place of safety because she couldn't find a way to protect them. She failed to protect Anna, did she protect Liara 'You have to get it together Shepard where the fuck are you,’ but the pain in her body and in her head crowded out her attempts at focused thought.

Images kept rattling through her mind jumping in time, her father, her mother and of course Liara.

'So do you want dad to help you into whatever passes for the afterlife or do you want mum to miraculously come find you the way she always could when you needed her before you got to big accept help even when it was offered… huh… which one Shepard…'

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Chapter 3

E1 Dock, Port Hanshan, Noveria Development Company Planet

"Not gonna happen soldier," Shepard growled. Shepard, Kaiden, Ash, Liara and Garrus had weapons drawn and were facing down a squad of eight private security troopers who had met them as they disembarked the Normandy dockside.

"For one," Shepard said her voice dangerously calm and quiet.

"I am a Council Spectre and I will enter this port and question who I damn well please," and as she spoke again she leaned forward a little and pointed her Pinnacle pistol directly between the eyes of the Captain of the guard saying,

"And second, you will not take our weapons and I can guarantee you that I will drop your entire squad before you finish giving them the order to try, you I will leave for last so that you know I am a woman of my word".

Silence… Shepard's team rock steady and all taking a bead on their chosen targets… Shepard saw in the eyes of the guards that they were not getting paid enough to die… Shepard was not bluffing and everyone on that dock knew it.

"Yeah well…. Spectre, that's different… you… you need to see they suits in the office… this is above my pay grade…" The Captain didn't exactly stammer but all her bluff and bravado was gone as she holstered her pistol and indicated her team do the same.

All the corporate garbage and double talk and… well… just crap, she had to work through to get the information about Benezia and Saren and to get them access to a vehicle to take them to Peak 15 had left her feeling murderous.

Peak 15… it sounded like a really difficult climb she had thought to herself, remembering her intensive climbing phase.

It was after her father died and she felt close to him when she was climbing, it was something he had taught her and that they had done together.

She did the usual Earth high peaks and although challenging, with her now very enhanced physique and musculature due to her genetic enhancements and synthetic implants (preparation for her career in the military), they didn't offer the same dangers or achievement as they did when her ancestors had started to climb them centuries earlier.

Shepard found climbs on new world and moons. She visited recommended mountain ranges so most had been climbed as they were "on the climbing circuit". But others she had conquered for the first time. She got to name them, well number, there were too many open to humanity now to name every mountain and ridge they wanted to scale.

She sometimes wondered what it must have been like to only have Earth before her ancestors took to the stars. She wondered if she would have felt claustrophobic.

Shepard had given the driving honours to Garrus, much to everyone's relief, as the mountain road was treacherous with the snow, ice and a blizzard with occasional bouts of deadly Geth heavies and rocket troopers in the way. Given the choice between driving and shooting at things she would always choose to "blow shit up".
But she was apprehensive, not of the fight, but that they were fighting their way to confront Liara's mother. They had spent quite a few late nights in the mess talking about everything and nothing and Shepard felt they were getting close.

But she had no idea what would happen, how Liara would feel confronted with her mother who would end up in a fire fight with Shepard… the outcome would be inevitable… Benezia was going to die, and Liara would be there to see it.

She had almost ordered the Asari to return to the Normandy when they found out Benezia was still on Noveria and within reach. But Liara needed to be there and knew how the confrontation would play out. Shepard wished she could shield Liara from all of it… but what was coming would come… it would happen if Liara was in attendance or not.

"You have got to be kidding me" Ash's voice at a yell over the gunfire as they were attacked by what looked like Rachni. Shepard could sympathise with Ash, this was… unexpected and didn't bode well for the rest of their journey through the facility.

It was hard and messy and at times tedious. Particularly when they were killing the Rachni who appeared not even to have "the sense they were born with!" It was an old Earth saying that she remembered from somewhere, but it seemed to describe the Rachni behaviour perfectly.

They just kept coming at them almost in a straight line, the only tactic they had was numbers, if they had worked together more they would have caused many more problems for Shepard's team, but it wasn't without its danger and lack of concentration at any point would have left anyone of them vulnerable and the Rachni were "poisonous little bastards" as Garrus put it more than once.

At one point she was really annoyed at herself for leaving Wrex on the Normandy, he would have loved this… the old enemy.

They got to the AI core and had to do some fancy re-booting and while Ash and Kaiden worked on it Shepard and Garrus kept watch shooting the odd Rachni that wandered in through a side corridor and chatted in their usual easy bantering way.

Shepard was aware of Liara trying to look interested and involved with what Ash and Kaiden were working on, but Shepard knew her well enough already to notice the signs of distraction and worry. The tilt of her head the way she touched her forehead or her throat. But there was nothing to be done, not yet, not until… after. Shepard was pulled back from her train of thought by the question Garrus was asking.

"So with all your fancy upgrades and tech why do you still have those scars on your face Shepard, you know you need all the help you can get with women given you don't have such a sunny disposition," he smiled at her waiting for her to rise to the bait.

"Hell Garrus some women find battle scars… hum what's the word… exciting… and my disposition is just fine thank you very much. You trying to pump me for tips coz I'd be happy to give you some, noticed you're not getting so many calls from that nice Doctor Michel as you used to."

She finished and flashed him a big grin. Garrus was a little touchy on the subject of Doctor Michel who seemed to have pursued him quite persistently after he had saved her from a gang of thugs in her clinic. Shepard had helped a little but she was happy for Garrus to take all the glory in the good Doctors eyes.

"Did you ever get around to…?" Garrus cut off her question with a forced clearing of his throat and
a question to Kaiden along the lines of "would it be much longer".

With key systems now back online they were able to travel to the labs and when they made their way up in the elevator they were confronted with a security team who asked for help to purge the breeding labs which was where all the Rachni were escaping from; although they got zero "help" from the security team.

Shepard and her team headed down and had to fight their way through high numbers of the hairy poisonous beasts and she was glad to have Kaiden and Liara's biotics to help with the sheer numbers.

They made it to the control station and found the console they needed. Setting the plasma pulse that would purge the main breeding lab and the rearing areas which were on the same floor. The console was damaged which meant they couldn't adjust the delay to the pulse and it was going to be pretty tight to get out of its way as it would kill any organic it hit.

They were double timing it back to the elevator carving a path once again through the Rachni that seeping out of the breeding and rearing rooms. They were only two floors up when they heard the pulse explode, but it was far enough to keep them out of danger.

The lift door opened and immediately Shepard sensed trouble, "Break and cover" she shouted and dragged Liara, who had proven handy in a fight but was still no soldier, sideways to cover on the left.

Ash and Kaiden took up positions left and right of the elevator entrance and Garrus moved forward and took cover behind some benches.

"Do we have a problem Captain" Shepard shouted at the security guards leader "seems you were planning on giving us a hot welcome this time"

She could see now why her instinct had cut in, as where before there had been a clear area in front of the lift it now held a set of barriers forming a defensive position in an arc around fifteen feet away. She could see some of the guards nervously aiming weapons, but they had left it too late, they should have fired as soon as the lift door opened.

Inexperience and nerves she thought.

"I don't suppose there's any chance you would just leave and go back to the main facility is there, I would rather not fight you Commander," came the reply from behind the barrier, "I'm sorry but we received orders from Benezia to kill you all… and… well… she's the boss" he finished.

"Why does everyone want to point guns at me today" Shepard asked to no one in particular "Must be your sunny disposition" Garrus answered with a smile.

Shepard whispered into her comms so that only her team could hear and they agreed a fight plan. This would involve the two biotics, simultaneously, throwing a huge biotic hit at the barrier followed by some lifts. Ash, Garrus and Shepard would kill anything they could see, carving the defence line in front of them into three zones. If necessary the biotics would provide defensive shields against grenades or heavier weapons.

Shepard counted them in and didn't even bother replying to the question the guards captain had asked; this would be her reply, this was almost always her reply to people threatening her or her team or her crew. As usual when the fighting started she dropped into that zone that was almost automatic but at the same time hyper aware of everything that was going on. It was over in less than two minutes.

"That's the lab door at the end of this corridor Commander" Kaiden said after checking the internal schematics of the complex on his OT.
"Ok final check everyone," Shepard said and pulled Liara gently aside so they were standing a little away from the group. Shepard looked down into the Asari's blue eyes and began to feel herself sink into them and shook off the feeling remembering where they were and what was about to happen.

"Liara are you absolutely sure you want to come in with us?" Shepard asked gently "I will do everything I can to take your mother alive but you know if I have to kill her I will."

"Thank you Shepard I know you are trying to protect me, but I must be there to confront her, to see for myself what has happened to her…. I can not believe she would be doing this unless… if there is a way we can help her I know you will try"

Liara was returning Shepard's gaze and a small sad smile flickered across her lips as she said "you can not always protect people from the things that will hurt them Shepard no matter how hard you try, I must do this"

Shepard gave a small nod and said "Ok then, be careful in there". Shepard walked back to the team and they moved towards the door and whatever fate lay behind it both for Liara and Shepard.

They entered the room which was dimly lit, it had at its centre a huge tank containing a creature that looked similar in some ways to the Rachni they had seen but was clearly not the same. They saw Benezia almost immediately. She was standing on a platform and looked foreboding, forbidding would have put fear in the hearts of less seasoned soldiers.

Instinctively, smoothly, almost imperceptibly Ash, Kaiden and Garrus moved away from the door into better combat positions while Shepard and Liara moved forward and stopped at the bottom of the steps that lead to Benezias platform.

"You do not know the privilege of being a mother, there is power in creation" Benezia spoke in a matter of fact tone and turned away from Shepard and Liara and looking into the tank containing the creature continued "to shape a life, turn it towards happiness or despair. Her children were to be ours raised to hunt and slay Saren's enemies." Benezia walked back towards the top of the steps.

"So that's the Rachni queen" Kaiden said quietly from where he was standing a little off to the right

"I would have thought a good mother would always try to point their children towards happiness, let them make their own path and be proud of who they became?" Shepard asked wondering how much the "real" Benezia was actually speaking.

"I will not be swayed by sentiment no matter who you bring into this confrontation" Benezia stared straight at Shepard as she spoke and her tone had a harsher edge and just for a moment Shepard thought she saw something behind Benezias eyes.

"Liara is here because she wants to be not because I asked her, but she is also a member of my team and my crew in her own right and not just because she is your daughter" Shepard jabbed a finger in Benezias direction to emphasise the point

"Indeed, what have you told her about me Liara" Benezia was now staring at her daughter.

"What could I say mother that you have gone mad, that I don't understand who you have become… how to kill you… what could I say" Liara's voice was steady but Shepard could hear the emotion. "Have you ever faced an Asari commando unit, few humans have" Benezia said speaking to Shepard again in the mechanical voice her eyes "hard" once more.

"I can't believe you would try to kill your own daughter" Shepard could see they were going to have to fight; they were not making any kind of connection with Benezia.
"I now realise I should have been stricter" Benezia said as she also moved to through a biotic pulse at Shepard which hit her and caught her in a stasis field.

Liara put a protective barrier around Shepard until the field had faded and on release Shepard and Liara moved out of Benezias’ eye line and ran to the other end of the room where Ash, Kaiden and Garrus had already created a defensive position on the platform at the other end of the room. They were protected on that platform from Benezia by the tank containing the Rachni queen.

With Liara and Garrus at one end of the platform, Ash and Kaiden at the other Shepard supported whichever side was dealing with the most incoming at any time they fought off and killed the four Asari commandos and three waves of Geth troopers.

Ash was wounded in her side, Garrus had been taken hits to his leg as a Geth trooper got in to close and Shepard had be banged pretty hard into the wall, a biotic smash from one of the Asari commandos, and was bleeding from the side of her head.

Seamlessly with hand gestures Shepard split the team and moved down the aisles to confront Benezia. She sent Kaiden and Garrus down the left side while Ash and Liara joined her moving down the right aisle. Liara was to provide protective barriers and not take any part in actually attacking her mother herself.

Benezia was a powerful and skilled biotic but they had the force and the tactics and she seemed to have been already weakened by the fighting that had already taken place. After five minutes of an intensive fire and biotic fight Benezia slumped to the ground obviously hurt badly. Shepard ordered a halt to the attack and Liara rushed forward to kneel by her mother, Shepard joined her.

"This is not over Saren is unstoppable, my mind is full of his light" Benezia got to her feet and Shepard watched her warily but she moved towards a console and appeared to be retrieving a data on an OSD.

"Mother what happened?" Liara asked sounding as if she would break into tears at any moment.

"I thought I could fight it Liara, I thought if I could work with Saren I could temper his plans… but… you must listen Saren still whispers in my ear, I cannot fight him for long"

"Why are you able to fight him now" Shepard asked, Liara had moved next to her mother but Shepard kept a little distance away.

"I kept a small part of my mind locked away from him so that I could use it when the chance to finish him off came… the indoctrination is strong… it is his ship Sovereign, it is not like other ships that I have ever seen it is more advanced than anything in the galaxy and the Geth did not build it." Benezia said looking at her daughter but speaking to Shepard.

"Goddess where did it come from mother."

"I don't know and there is little time, I will not be able to fight him for long, listen Shepard I was sent here to get the information about the Mu relay from the Rachni queen, I was not gentle with her.

Here I made a copy of the information take it she handed it to Liara and continued "you must move away now Liara I am losing control, you have to stop me, I can feel Saren teeth at my ears" Benezia turned around to face the console.

"You must find him and destroy him Shepard he did not give me access to his plans or where he is going but he believes the Mu relay will help him find the Conduit"
Shepard moved forward quickly and pulled Liara back and behind her and gestured for Garrus and Ash to move next to her weapons drawn.

"Let us help you Benezia" Shepard said but knowing there was really little they could do. "Mother… don't leave… fight it… please" Liara's pleading voice came from behind her.
"You always made me proud Liara, I am sorry" Benezia said, and then turned around her biotics sparking up as a blue haze around her body "you must die" she said in the same mechanical voice she had used during the fighting.

They opened fire and Benezia slumped to the floor this time fading fast, Liara rushed forward and knelt by her dying mother.

"Please do not leave me mother" Liara pleaded with her.

"It is too late, my mind is gone, you have to let me go… goodnight little wing I will see you in the dawn…" Benezia's eyes closed and she murmured "where is the light, there should be…"

Liara fell onto her mother's shoulders and began sobbing quietly. Shepard indicated to Ash to sit with her while she left the platform to talk to Garrus and Kaiden.

"Kaiden get comms up with the Normandy, and get them to pick us up from here, and tell them we need to transport a body to Thessia" Shepard then moved a little further away to talk to Garrus when one of the "dead" Asari commandos stood up, walked over to the side of the Rachni queens tank and started talking for the queen.

At the end of their conversation Shepard let the Rachni queen go knowing she was taking a huge risk, but she wouldn't be responsible for the extinction of an entire species especially if they had been under the same kind of influence that Benezia was talking about.

"Can I sell tickets for when you tell Wrex you just let a fertile Rachni queen lose" Garrus almost chuckled.

"Hell Garrus I'll just convince him he should have a chance to fight them just like his ancestors did, if it all goes south that is" she smiled but knew it would be an interesting conversation with Wrex.

The Normandy was heading for Thessia with Benezia's body in the storage hold. Shepard didn't know what to say or do and wondered whether Liara would hate her so much for killing her mother that she wouldn't even want her anywhere near.

Liara was standing next to the container bearing her mother's body with one hand on it and staring into space, unfocussed, tears running slowly down her face. As Shepard approached her she couldn't help thinking how beautiful Liara looked and even as the thought entered her head, she pushed it away and braced herself for the young Asari's reaction which she fully expected to be negative in the extreme.

"Liara" Shepard said softly when she had stopped next to her "I think you should come and rest, I want you to use my cabin. I… understand if you don't want to see me or speak to me right now (or ever she thought to herself) but I am here for you and if you need anything I will make sure you get it" Shepard stopped talking and for a moment wondered if Liara had heard her.

In one movement Liara turned and leaned into Shepard holding on to her and sobbing quietly "Shepard… please… I do not blame you… I need… would you stay with me… until…” Liara broke off unable to continue as her body shuddered with her silent sobs.
"Shssss Liara, its ok, everything will be ok. I'm here, come on let's get you somewhere more comfortable" and Sheppard drew Liara next to her and with her arm around her shoulders led her to the elevator and on to her cabin.

Sheppard stayed with Liara all through that first terrible night, holding her as they both lay on the bed, rocking her gently at times. At one point Liara drifted into a fitful sleep but then woke up with a start clinging even more firmly to Sheppard as if she was the only thing keeping her afloat in a terrible storm.

"There there…. It's all going to be ok… you'll see… your strong Liara and you have all of us on the Normandy… and you have me… we'll get you through this…” Sheppard was stroking the Asari's face as she spoke and holding her close.

Sheppard could feel the warmth of Liara's body next to her, could smell the scent from her neck she could almost feel Liara's breathe on her neck…

As Sheppard began to move her head to look down at her lover the pain came crashing into her consciousness. She dropped back into that black, crushing, pain ridden place of fear which demanded she fight for every breath.

"Fuck no don't… not cough… no.." but she had to, it was a reflex that once it started it was as painful hovering on the edge as it was to let it happen.

It was a shallow cough, barely moving her chest but the pain was unendurable…yet she endured it… then she tasted blood in her mouth and felt it trickle out of the side of her lips. Perhaps that was it…she passed out…or did that drifting away thing in between every breath…so she may not have been here all that long… or she could have been there an eternity…she couldn't tell and she didn't care.

It was so hard here, she tried to focus, to focus on Liara, on the pain, on how she got here…but it was impossible to hold a thought let alone strong them together into "thinking"…she was just existing…her only relief when she passed out.

"Shit…what the fuck was that" she seemed to feel movement, a shudder perhaps, or a vibration of some sort passing through whatever was encasing her.

She tried to concentrate forming words and saying them out loud… she wasn't sure if she managed it or how loud it was… or even if anyone was there making the vibrations she could feel… maybe whatever it was she was lying on was about to collapse completely…
Chapter 4

Cerberus base 3, Binthu

The ground shook under her feet and she felt the shockwave pulse through her body. They had just blow out the front doors of the Cerberus facility and at the same time blown access through the rear wall.

Shepard had answered a request from Admiral Hackett and a call from her mother to try to find Admiral Kahoku who had fallen off the radar after getting information from the Shadow Broker as to the whereabouts of the Cerberus team that had lured his marines to their death in an ambush with a Thresher Maw.

She had found Admiral Kahoka's tortured body at a science facility which they then destroyed but not before Shepard had "extracted" the whereabouts of the main Cerberus headquarters responsible for both the marine's deaths and the torture and death of someone who she had always called uncle. That was ten hours ago and Shepard's rage had only intensified on the journey here. Her team and her crew had left her to her thoughts as she stood white knuckled and stony faced in the CIC.

Uncle Udale and his wife were very old friends of Shepard's parents and his three children were like cousins to her. Shepard was not looking forward to breaking the news to her mother but she would at least be able to tell her that everyone that had anything to do with his death have been killed or captured and all the Cerberus facilities that they could find had been destroyed.

"Access acquired" shouted Kaiden over the comms, he was leading the second team into the rear of the building. Shepard had split her team and her marine squad in two putting Kaiden in command of one with Garrus, Tali and Wrex while she led the other in the front door with Ash, Liara and her marines.

Cerberus was ready and waiting as the strike team had already taken out heavy guns and troops protecting the building itself. But the double entry had caused a lot of confusion and Cerberus had set up their defences for a direct assault through the front doors. Caught in the crossfire the defenders were soon so reduced in numbers that the remaining ten or so made a break for it and headed for the elevator to the lower level. Shepard's team set after them but took the stairs.

Kaiden's team took a second elevator down with the exception of two of the marines, Garrus and Tali whose job it was to get into the information systems and pull out all the intel they could find. They would move down through the building at a slower pace than the fire team and search all available data sources as they went.

In the end there were three underground levels and they killed the remaining troops from the first Cerberus platoon shortly after they exited the elevator and a further platoon strength of troops who were trying to defend the lower floors. When Shepard was finally at the heart of the facility in its main command centre they had managed to take what looked like a high ranking officer, and probably the commanding officer, and a handful of Cerberus scientist's alive.

"Tali what is the status of intel gathering?" she asked as Tali and Garrus joined them in the command area.

"We did well Commander, they had tried to wipe their hard drives but don't appear to have used the proper protocols and I was able to recover most of the data including the locations of two other Cerberus facilities in this system" Tali replied checking her OT as she answered Shepard.
"Good," Shepard answered but she never took her eyes of the Cerberus officer who despite the situation and the wound to his arm had a sneer on his face. Shepard was leaning against the edge of a desk and was tossing her pistol the short distance between her left and right hands; it was almost hypnotic; her eyes were cold as steel.

"Kaiden would you take the… scientists" she spat out the word conveying as much contempt for them as possible. The disgusting and terrible experimentation that they had seen when fighting through the science facility, where they found the Admiral, had appalled the whole team, "up top to await the shuttle… take the marine squad with you, and Kaiden" she paused

"Yes commander"

"If they attempt to escape or cause you any kind of trouble at all I want you to use lethal force" Shepard flicked her eyes over the prisoners and then to Kaiden who gave a short nod.

"If you think I will tell you anything you can forget it" the Cerberus officer snarled "and I know the Alliance wouldn't use anything so… unsavoury as torture" he gave a greasy smirk "so why don't you just take me upstairs so that I can be taken to a nice comfortable Alliance prison. Where I won't stay for long… Cerberus takes care of its own and will have me out before you finish your current mission" again the greasy smile.

Shepard heard Wrex give what was best described as a low growl, Garrus and the rest of the team stiffened and the tension in the room went through the ceiling.

"Yes I think that's a pretty good and accurate description of what would happen if I put you on a shuttle back to the Alliance" Shepard spoke in a calm, emotionless tone but at the same time the menace in her voice was apparent to those in the room who knew her. "Tell me" she continued "Why torture him?" she asked almost matter of factly.

"Why not," he gave a shrug of his shoulders as he answered and then continued "how can we get a move on this wound is uncomfortable and I require treatment" he stood up as if to move things along.

"You were correct when you said that the Alliance does not condone torture, neither do I, but I am also a Council Spectre" Shepard said, "everyone up top and ready for shuttle evac," still not taking her eyes from the Cerberus officer but now the pistol was firmly in her right hand.

They all looked first at Shepard and then at her prisoner, Wrex smiled and began leaving the room, the others followed him, only Garrus hung back for a moment and looked at Shepard.

"Are you sure about this" he asked quietly.

"You heard him Garrus, this piece of shit didn't even have the decency to die with his men, and he gets to live when a decent man and a fine soldier is tortured to death on his orders" she looked at Garrus and he saw the pain as well as the rage in her eyes.

Garrus put a hand on her shoulder for a moment and said "I'll be waiting for you by the elevator" then he walked out of the room.

"You don't scare me, Alliance; with this little charade" the Cerberus officer sneered "I have no intention of answering your questions" he finished.

"I know you don't" she said as she raised the pistol and fired. The shot hit him in the centre of his forehead and he fell to the floor as if he had been a puppet and someone had cut his strings. "And that is exactly what I will do to your boss when I hunt him down" she said as she left the room.
Once back on the Normandy she went straight to the comms room and made her call to Admiral Hackett updating him on the situation, letting him know that she had destroyed the command centre setting explosives within the facility and striking it from the Normandy.

She also asked if he wanted her to take out the other Cerberus facilities they had found out about, but the Admiral said he would send teams to take care of them as she had a new priority mission to go and help a Salarian reconnaissance team on Virmire who had a strong lead on Saren. Although the Council had little other information as communication with the team had stopped it sounded as if they were in trouble.

With arrangements made to rendezvous with an Alliance vessel to transfer her prisoners the only thing that remained was for her to tell him that she had executed the Cerberus officer responsible for Admiral Kahoka's death. If Hackett was surprised he didn't show it.

"You are in a slightly different position Commander being both an Alliance officer and a Council Spectre and we understand that you may need to do things a little differently. Shall we agree that he died under interrogation?"

"I know what I did Admiral" Shepard replied standing to attention the whole time she gave her report. "I know you do Commander and that is why I trust your judgement and your actions," Hackett out.

She saluted and receive one in return before the connection closed.

"Joker set a course for Virmire" she said over the internal comm to her pilot.

"Aye aye Commander", Joker replied and continued after a few moments "ETA twenty hours".

She put in a call for her team to join her in the comm room immediately and while she was waiting booked a personal call to the SSV Kilimanjaro which she scheduled for one hours' time. She would take it in her cabin.

When the team assembled she updated them on their new mission to Virmire, with little information to go on she advised them they needed to be ready for anything. Her orders were food, sleep and weapons prep.

Everyone was quiet not least because they had spent the last thirty six hours fighting two Cerberus bases to a standstill but they also didn't quite know whether they should say anything about what had happened at the end of the mission. Shepard dismissed the briefing and left the room straight away to allow her team to have time to talk amongst themselves.

She went to the CIC briefed Pressley on the new mission and asked that he brief the crew. Then she went to her cabin. She had enough time to have a shower and change into her sweats before the call came in.

"It's ok Lydia I have already spoken to Admiral Hackett" her mother said when the connection was made. Hannah Shepard looked upset and saddened but there was also concern for her daughter, she continued "he also told me that you…. killed the Cerberus officer responsible for Udale's death."

I need you to know that your father would have done the same thing. I also know you, and this will play on your thoughts but you have to move on from it."

"Did Admiral Hackett tell you what they did to him?" Shepard asked her mother.

"Yes he did, we won't be telling Effie it will be enough that she has lost her husband" Hannah
Shepard replied and continued "you look tired you need to get some rest".

They chatted for a short while longer and then finished the call with a promise to meet up as soon as Shepard's mission was over and her mother could get leave from her duties.

She thought about how tough and strong her mother was, a real Alliance officer to the core, she thought about how her father had named her Lydia to honour the past and her mother had given her middle name of Vega to point her towards the stars and the future.

Personally Shepard wasn't keen on either of her first names and had trained family, with the exception of her mother, and friends alike to call her LV.

Shepard sat on the edge of the bed only now feeling the events of the past thirty six hours, accentuated by the adrenaline that was still coursing through her system. Uncle Udale had been part of the same mission that her father had been on when he was killed and somehow all that had happened to her Uncle had brought up the memories of losing her father and her emotions felt like they were in FTL drive.

She heard a soft knock on her cabin door and although feeling like she would rather not see anyone she called out for whoever it was to come in.

"Liara" Shepard was surprised but not. They had been spending more time together since Liara came back from Thessia where she had buried her mother. Shepard felt they were getting closer and was convinced the Asari felt the same although they hadn't yet spoken about how they felt.

"Shepard I just wanted to see if you were alright… if you would rather be left alone I will leave". Liara was still standing just inside the closed door and looked unsure of herself.

Shepard stood "well to be honest a minute ago I thought I did want to be left alone but now you're standing there I can't imagine wanting to be on my own although if I'm honest it's more that I don't want you to leave" she smiled at Liara and gestured for her to sit in the chair at the desk and Shepard was intending to sit on the edge of the bed.

In one fluid movement Liara almost ran across the room, put her arms around Shepard and pulled her into an embrace, Shepard took a moment to realise what was happening and just got her arms around Liara as the Asari began to let Shepard go probably thinking that her embrace was not going to be reciprocated.

They stood for what seemed like a long time, just holding each other, Liara's cheek against Shepard's neck. She felt a fire burn inside her an intense longing to kiss this woman whose body felt so right against her and whose scent was filling her senses.

Shepard looked down at Liara and at the same time put her fingers under Liara's chin and gently lifted her face so that they were looking into each other's eyes. Those beautiful, deep, fascinating blue eyes, Shepard was lost in them, lost in this moment and she moved closer to Liara so close she could feel her breath on her own face.

But in the final instant it was Liara who brought her lips to meet Shepard's. The kiss was at first gentle full of tenderness but then it was as if the fires of desire took hold of them both at the same time and they kissed intensely, passionately, longingly. Shepard wanted to rip Liara's clothes off her and throw her onto the bed but she would not do anything to jeopardise what was already happening.
They did fall back onto the bed and carried on kissing, arms holding and then hands exploring and all the time both their breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps. Shepard felt that she could explode with the need to be with Liara, she wanted to fuck her to be inside her, take her, and be taken.

With a struggle Shepard stopped kissing Liara and looked into her eyes.

"I want you" Shepard said "this isn't a casual thing Liara, I feel so drawn to you, there is something between us isn't there?"

"Yes Shepard I feel it too" Liara looked hesitant and went on "I do want to be with you, but I am not sure I am ready…. I have not… this is… oh Goddess… I do not know…” Liara broke off and focused on something just over Shepard's right shoulder.

"Hey Liara its ok we can take this at your pace" Shepard smiled at her drawing her face back so that they were looking at each other again "are you saying what I think your saying… um… you haven't been with anyone in this way… before."

Shepard trailed off realising that having read stuff on the extranet had probably not prepared her to properly understand Asari personal or sexual relationships and that she probably ought to wait and have that conversation with Liara.

"No Shepard I have not melded with anyone before. I have not even been interested in anyone. I lived my life away from people, I am not good in groups I am never sure what to do or what to say, my stay on the Normandy with you and the others has been very different to how I have spent most of my time." Liara was on her side supporting her head with a hand and resting on her elbow.

"You are so beautiful" Shepard was laying on her back looking up at the Asari and actually didn't mean to say anything out loud but Liara smiled and Shepard felt the tension lighten and felt it lighten even more as Liara leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I do feel we have a strong connection Shepard and I want to be with you but I think I need a little more time before taking the next step" Liara looked serious "although there are rumors about Asari promiscuity they are not true and I would not want you to think that I was not serious about this… you" she finished still looking both serious and worried.

"Really I get it Liara we can take it slow… make sure your ready… but… we can carry on kissing and stuff huh?” Shepard gave Liara a huge grin and realised for the first time in a long time she actually felt happy despite also feeling the loss and pain associated with the past couple of day's events.

Liara smiled down at Shepard and leaned in for another kiss "Oh yes Shepard I think we should definitely carry on with the kissing but you will have to explain the "stuff" part to me as I am not sure I understand”.

"Ah well I think it might be easier if I demonstrate the "stuff" bit, but don't worry it's what we humans used to call heavy petting... yeah don't ask I have no idea why… but let's try some and then make our own name up for it".

Through the laughter forming on both their lips they began kissing again this time more slowly and Shepard felt Liara's hands on the back of her head and felt the Asari pull her into a tighter kiss, felt Liara's hands rubbing gently against Shepard's short hair. They eventually fell asleep in each other's arms exhausted by the last mission and the giant step they had taken towards each other.
Chapter 5

Unknown place, unknown time

Shepard felt consciousness closing in on her and the, now, familiar feeling of helplessness and constraint brought her back to 'the darkness'. She strained to hear if there were any noises of approaching rescue, but she still couldn't make anything out and having her helmet on was not helping with the sensation of being under water. It was cracked, however, she could tell from the way it felt on the back of her head, and the visor had come right off as she could feel her face exposed to wherever she was; that told her what level of force had hit her. It was heavy armour.

She began to notice something else… she felt the edge being taken off the pain she was feeling. It had to be medi gel from the micro infusers inside her suit; well at least her life signs were still strong enough to trigger her suits system. Again she thought briefly that she couldn't have been laying here that long as medi gel infusers kick in almost immediately on any sign of injury.

"Tell me about these scars Shepard" Liara's voice, soft, gentle, close. Shepard was somehow both here and laying on the bed in her cabin feeling Liara's fingers trace first the deep scar that ran from her forehead down across her eye and continuing halfway down the right side of her face; then to the cluster of scars that ran along her jawline and across the bottom of her left cheek which looked as if she had been mauled by a varren's paw.

"I have more you could be tracing on other parts of my body" Shepard smiled up lazily at Liara and pulled her down into a kiss.

"What the fuck happened Liara… where am I… why can't I remember" Shepard was pretty sure she managed to say that out loud and she noticed she was drifting off in a different way this time and it made her want to hold on tight to this reality, even if it was only full of pain and confusion.

'Dammit… don't lose it now… stay with me marine' she was taking full advantage of that drill sergeant in her head to try to keep conscious.

"You have another concussion Commander, you know although you are enhanced you are not immune to injury and you are most definitely not a Krogan" Dr Chakwas was smiling at her from across the other side of the medbay.

"Doc is that you… is that what this is… where are you… fuck, fuck, stay in one place Shepard". But the combination of the medi gel, her stress, injuries and exhaustion were sending her into a deeper unconscious state.

"Don't make me go back there… not back there" she mumbled as she felt herself drifting away, but somewhere in her mind she knew that she had already condemned herself to exactly that memory.

Shepard led her team from the Mako and walked up the beach towards what looked like a command post where a group of Salarian's were standing watching them. They heard a very familiar sound and turned to look out across a truly beautiful bay in time to see the Normandy touching down in the shallows. She could feel the sun on her head and face, the water was azure blue and she was about to bring death and destruction to this paradise; although she knew that Saren was responsible for the coming fight, she still felt the weight of always being the 'destroyer of worlds' as she was beginning
to think of herself in her darker moments.

They had established proper communication with the STG team when they had destroyed the defence communication and jamming tower. Once fully apprised of the situation Shepard agreed with the Salarian Captain that it was critical to destroy what was a Krogan breeding facility designed to supply Saren with an army of controllable Krogan warriors.

Despite Shepard and her team having taken out the heavy AAguns, radar and communications array outside the complex they still had AAguns to take down inside the complex if they were going to use the Normandy in the attack.

The leader of the Salarian commandos, Captain Kirrahe, outlined the situation and plan but at the point he talked about destroying the whole facility, including the Krogan breeding facility and its manufactured genophage cure, Wrex absolutely blew his stack and stormed out onto the beach. Shepard followed him out, Wrex was a friend, she was strangely fond of the big Krogan and she was not going to lose him over Saren and his torture based bad science.

"You all want to destroy the future of my people, this is a chance for us to undo the punishment of the genophage and even you who I thought I could count as a friend, you want to destroy the Krogan future" Wrex was more angry than she had ever seen him outside battle "I will not walk away from this even if you all turn on me. I don't want to fight you Shepard but I won't just walk away" he brought his shotgun up and pointed it directly at Shepard "tell me you won't let them do this, tell me you won't let them destroy my future or are you now my enemy".

His eyes were locked with Shepard's and she did not flinch or waver, she didn't reach for a weapon, in fact she walked forward and pushed her chest against the business end of the shotgun.

"Wrex, you've seen how Saren works, how he experiments, how he makes monsters of the beings he wants to use for his own purpose. Tell me, from all you know of what Saren wants to do and all we've seen him do tell me Wrex if you think he will create Krogan with their own minds and will.

Tell me if you really trust that however he has managed to work around the genophage that it is a true cure that frees the Krogan people and doesn't damn them to slavery and who knows what kind of physical or mental side effects. And answer me this Wrex… do you believe that I am not only your friend but also a friend to the Krogan people… and that I will not just do everything I can to help you find a cure for the genophage but I won't rest until I have.

If you can't call me friend Wrex pull the trigger because I won't raise a weapon against you". She was calm and steady and had no idea why she felt so certain that Wrex would not shoot her. She was also aware out of the corner of her eye that they were being watched and she suspected nervously watched by the rest of her team.

"Aw hell Shepard you know I trust you and what you say makes sense…. It just feels like again the Krogan have to lose more than anyone else” as he spoke he lowered his shotgun and looked across at the small group who were still studying them from the other end of the beach 'I knew I liked you Shepard you have quads' he finished with a bark of laughter.

Shepard gave him a broad grin and they walked back towards the meeting to resume planning. "I meant what I said Wrex, I will help you find a cure for the genophage", Wrex nodded in reply.

Once back inside the command tent they stood once again around the large table across which were spread the schematics of the compound. It wasn't a full picture and the information had been gathered at the cost of over twenty members of the STG reconnaissance team.
"As I said Commander" Kirrahe spoke in that quick fashion that marked Salarian speech "we will need to get the explosive device into the heart of the complex, here", he pointed at the plan and also showed a vid clip of the proposed site. It was surrounded by low buildings on two sides and a taller block on the third. It appeared to be some form of large open water run-off and it was at its lowest point where the buildings intersected that they would plant the drive core from the Salarian ship that would be rigged to melt down and cause a nuclear blast.

"We will need to carry out a frontal attack to achieve two objectives. First, will be to take out the heavy AAguns so that Normandy can drop off the bomb. Second… to fight our way into the complex to try to secure the bomb site. I will split my remaining forces into three teams, one of which will make for the bomb site to secure it" he finished and fixed her with a meaningful stare as he had just described a near suicide mission for the frontal assault fire team.

Shepard stared down at the schematics and knew that this plan was their best option and she also knew that she would need to help out the now depleted Salarian special forces team in order for them to achieve their shared objectives.

"We need to have time to find wherever Saren may be storing information and pick up information from the research labs on our way through" she stood up straight and moved her eyes from the schematics to address the whole room but particularly Kaidan and Ash.

"Kaidan you will lead half of our marine squad and support the STG team taking out the AAguns, Ash you take the other half of the squad, with Garrus, and fight your way to the bomb site. Secure and hold the bomb site, await Normandy drop." Shepard's directions were met with nods and sounds of agreement.

"Tali you go back to the Normandy and work with the Salarian engineer to rig the bomb. I will lead a stealth team in through this weak point that should take us almost straight into the labs and access to the main tower which is the most likely location of any information that might be useful. My team will then work down to the bomb site and support that position until we are ready to leave."

"Liara and Wrex you are with me" she looked now at the Salarian Captain "we will synchronise timing and maintain comms through our omni tools on a secure channel."

"Agreed Commander, and thank you for the support at the front door, I will go and prepared my team." He left the tent and Shepard's team was left to begin doing some detailed planning. There was a little discussion about just taking out the complex with the Normandy but this had already been dismissed because of the nature of the buildings and defences.

Shepard, Ash and Kaidan assembled the marine squad who formed two ranks, she told them to stand easy. Shepard outlined the mission and was blunt about the fight they were walking into.

"What is the deadliest weapon in the galaxy?"she shouted in her best gunny voice.

"Amarine and his rifle" around two thirds of the squad shouted back with the rest shouting "Amarine and her rifle" in one loud voice and a smile on most faces.

"Who's like us…" she shouted as she paced up and down in front of the ranks. "Dammed few and they're all dead" came the loud reply.

"Make me proud… Semper Fi" Shepard finished and she saluted her marines. "Ooorah" and the squad stood as one to attention her salute returned.

Shepard dismissed them and the two fire teams formed up, with Garrus joining Ash, and they began final preparations. The Salarian Captain was still giving his 'pep' talk so Shepard, Wrex and Liara
moved off to the edge of the beach which was closest to their route towards the complex.

"Nice speech Shepard but we tend to get more blood boiling started before battle," Wrex smiled as he spoke and slapped her on the back, she smiled back.

"How long have you been with your squad, or perhaps I mean how well do you know them?" Liara asked.

"Only since we all started serving on the Normandy, but I brought five of them with me from my last posting and I've served with them for around two years. But how long doesn't make a difference Liara, they are all marines, my marines, so I know them as well as I know myself." She smiled at Liara but knew that the Asari wouldn't understand what she was trying to say. Shepard thought about the last time she had ordered marines into a battle with such bad odds against them.

"You are proud of them Shepard, are you not?" Liara spoke softly moving slightly closer to Shepard so that their shoulders touched as they walked slowly up the beach.

Shepard looked at Liara and smiled, 'yes I am very proud of them and I know they will do everything that's is asked and needed of them', maybe Liara understood a little she thought.

Shepard and her team reached their entry point after hacking though some serious jungle growth. They had to disable security alarms once they reached clear ground and had the warehouse buildings in sight. Unfortunately they had to cross a single walkway which had no cover and on the other side were around ten Geth troopers. The attack on the front of the facility would be triggered once Shepard was inside or immediately if her team were discovered.

They positioned themselves as close as they could and agreed that Liara would lift and hold in stasis as large a group as she could on the right while Wrex used his biotics to blast as big a group as he could on the left, whatever was left in the middle Shepard would take out as quickly as possible with her sniper. They would all finish of the group Liara had in stasis. The team would not leave any 'wounded' Geth behind them.

It worked like a charm and they were running over the walkway and approaching the entrance without the Geth even getting one shot off.

Shepard hacked the entrance door and once inside found access to the security system and disabled all internal alarms and sensors. The Geth would know they were being attacked once the frontal assault started but they had an advantage once inside the complex. She hoped the Geth would be too busy to spend too much time trying to undo the virus she had used to kill the security systems.

"We're in, and internal alarms and sensors disabled but I don't know for how long" Shepard's message would trigger the attack on the complex and she received affirmatives from Kirrahe, Ash and Kaidan.

As Shepard and her team worked their way through the facility they saw the horrors, one again, of Sarens laboratory work. By the time they had cleared through two areas with Krogan 'drones' being 'created' alongside husks by indoctrinated Salarian scientists Wrex was in no doubt it all had to be destroyed.

They had some fighting to do but from the updates they were receiving from the fire teams that was where the action was and it was at its most intense fighting to secure and then destroy the AAGuns.

Shepard couldn't help the feeling of guilt for not being with her team but she also knew that they
were also carrying out an extremely important and dangerous element of the mission; they could be over run at any moment and they were on their own.

They managed to release a couple of the captured Salarian’s who hadn't already been indoctrinated who hurried off to join the fight but they also had to kill a few who when released just went crazy and tried to kill them. Shepard made a decision in that moment that she would never let any of her team or crew be taken prisoner by Saren and if she had to she would kill them herself. It was an unlikely scenario as she knew that everyone she served with would fight to the death unless ordered otherwise and they would never get that order from Shepard, not with this enemy.

Shepard finally found what had to be Sarens 'office', but when they hacked their way in they found another Prothean beacon.

Shepard knew she would have to engage with it to find out what Saren knew, but the prospect of yet again having her mind overloaded with not only images but emotions that were a blur at best but nevertheless managed to imprint the impact of an entire civilisation being wiped out by these 'Reapers' was something she could happily live without.

She moved close enough to be caught in its field and felt the now familiar jolt as she was captured, the feeling that her head was on fire and the sensation of having information, events, memories 'uploaded' to her mind.

When the beacon had done with her she felt her feet hit the floor and felt woozy but was glad that unlike the first time she did not pass out. Liara and Wrex moved to her side to help steady her.

"Was there anything different Shepard" Liara asked with concern but also interest showing on her face and in her voice.

"Not sure, all the usual nightmare stuff but it did feel towards the end as if… hard to describe… but almost like a different 'story' maybe… that's the only way to describe it" Shepard replied.

"When we get back to the Normandy I can help you with another meld…” Liara's words were but off as a huge hologram appeared at the top of the stairs they had just come down.

Shepard led the others to stand in front of the projection that looked exactly like the Reapers in the Prothean visions she now contained within her mind.

"Shepard is that... from the beacon… it's a Reaper" Liara sounded almost awe struck but her fear was clear in her voice and Shepard made sure she and Wrex were standing a little in front of her just in case.

"You are not Saren" the voice was deep, rumbling with an edge of echo and it sounded digitally created 'rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh you touch my mind fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding'.

"Did that thing just call us dumb Shepard" Wrex growled.

"There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own you cannot imagine it, I am beyond your comprehension, I am Sovereign".

"I think it just did it again Wrex," Shepard said with a no trace of amusement "so Saren didn't just find a Reaper ship you are an actual Reaper" it was a statement not a question and Shepard felt some pieces of information slip into place in her mind.
"Reaper is a name given to us by the Prothean's to give voice to their destruction, in the end what they choose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are."

"The Prothean's vanished fifty thousand years ago and how come we don't know anything about you" Wrex seemed itching to hit the thing and all his frustration sounded in his voice.

"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation. Your lives are measured in decades and centuries, you wither and die. We are eternal the pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us you are nothing your extinction is inevitable, we are the end of everything."

"You certainly are a buzz kill and this is no way to get a second date…. Listen big fucking machine voice whatever plans you got, they're going to fail, you have my word on that" Shepard leaned forward and emphasised her last words by jabbing her finger at the centre of the Reapers 'head'.

Shepard just caught Liara standing up a little taller out the corner of her eye and Wrex rumbled a low growl echoing Shepard's defiance.

"Confidence born of ignorance, the cycle cannot be broken." "What cycle" Liara asked. "The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilisations rise, evolve, advance and at the apex of the glory they are extinguished. The Prothean's were not the first they did not build the citadel they did not forge the mass relays. They were created by my kind."

"So you want us to develop and you give us a head start then destroy us" Shepard looked briefly at Wrex and Liara and continued "anyone else seeing this as more than a little fucked up…"

"By using our technology your society develops along paths that we desire, we impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it and you will end because we demand it."

"Oh Goddess they are harvesting us" Liara sounded shocked and fearful.

"Yeah well you and your little almighty god complex is getting kinda old motor mouth, what do you want?" Shepard's tone was hard and she let none of the knowledge that was now bleeding into her conscious mind show in her demeanor, but she didn't need the Reaper to answer her question, she had the answer in her head from the Prothean's.

"My kind transcends your very understanding, we are each a nation, free of weakness, you cannot even grasp the nature of our existence. We have no beginning we have no end, millions of years after your race has been eradicated and forgotten we will endure."

"So have you got your friends with you or are they giving you a wide berth due to your sparkling personality?" but Shepard knew if the full Reaper forces were here they would be left in no doubt, she had seen them, in the sky's and she saw what they were capable of.

"We are legion, the time of our return draws near, our numbers will darken the sky above every world, you cannot escape your doom."

"You're not really alive, you're just a machine and machines can be broken…" Shepard's words were cut off by the Reaper.

"Your words are as empty as your future, I am the vanguard of your destruction, this exchange is over."

The holographic interface seemed to break into shards and disappear shaking the room and rocking the platform they were standing on.
"Yeah fuck you" Shepard said to the empty space. She turned around and saw how shaken Liara was but before she could do anything to try to comfort her Joker broke in over her comms.

"Commander we got trouble,"

"Hell Joker hit me with it… not sure we have enough going on down here already" Shepard's reply was accompanied with a few small shakes of the head and she started back towards the exit.

"I don't know what you did down there Commander but that ship Sovereign just pulled a turn that would sheer any of our ships in two… its coming right at you and its coming hard… you maybe want to wrap things up down there."

"Joker we're headed for the bomb site meet us there, time to blow this place the hell up." "Aye, aye Commander."

"Give me a progress report Ash we are headed your way and so is the Normandy with the device" Shepard, Wrex and Liara were moving fast and now heading for the main breeding facility where the bomb was to be set.

"This is Garrus Shepard we have secured the bomb site and are awaiting your arrival, we have taken heavy casualties, Ash and a couple of the other marines are very badly wounded" Garrus continued "I am pulling in any members of the Salarian fire teams that are still operational to our position to hold while the bomb is set and for extraction."

"Good, Garrus remain in command of that position and secure our objective if anything happens to me" Shepard was effectively giving command of the mission to Garrus and the authority to blow up the facility whether she was going to make it out or not… just in case… but she had no intention of dying here… she had a bigger enemy to fight.

When they got to the bomb site the Normandy was in situ and the bomb had been off loaded, Garrus had defensive positions set further up the run using both marine and Salarian forces. Shepard went to Garrus's side and asked for an update.

"Loaded the wounded onto the Normandy, Ash was protesting like hell but she passed out as the Normandy arrived so that made it easier, Kirrahe and the remains of his team are due here in the next minute they are cleaning out Geth and Krogan on their way. As you can see we still have a lively fire fight going on here, but…" Garrus looked straight at Shepard "the fire team that took out the AAguns are completely cut off and facing heavy numbers we just couldn't get to them."

Shepard nodded and spoke into her comms "Kaidan sit rep".

There was the sound of gunfire and explosions through the comms, "Commander we will hold her for as long as we can but there is no way we can get back for extraction' Kaidan's voice was firm and steady, Shepard would expect nothing less.

"Hold on I am going to come up and break you out" Shepard started to look around to see who she could take with her, Garrus was still looking at her and he was shaking his head slowly..

"Shepard we need all the help we can get to hold this position while they prepare the bomb… and… it's too late for them…" he spoke quietly concern clear in in eyes.

"Negative Commander' Kaidan's voice came through the noise and the static 'we can't hold for longer than a few minutes and you need to make sure that bomb does its job… been an honour serving with you Commander…"
"Semper fi marine" Shepard said into her comms just before the static told her she had lost the link and the whole team, her shoulders sagged a little, then her attention was drawn back to the situation with a shout from Tali that the bomb was ready.

"Fall back to the Normandy" Shepard shouted "Garrus, Wrex your with me, we'll lay down covering fire until everyone in on-board… get a couple of heavy weapons set up on the edge of the ramp…" Shepard shouted to the marines now moving back to the Normandy.

Liara came to join them but Shepard told her to evac now, there was just a slight hesitation before Liara moved off firing biotic slams over her shoulder at the advancing Geth as she went.

When everyone else was on board they began moving back to the ramp, over their heads the sound of heavy canon and machine gun started to rip the air and rip up the advancing Geth.

"Get us out of her Joker… fast… and try to avoid that big fucking Reaper ship on the way" Shepard called over her comms to her pilot the minute they were on board.

They cleared the blast zone quickly and with only a minute to spare, they had to set the shortest delay so that they would give the Geth no chance of neutralising the bomb.

She made sure the wounded were being taken care of and the rest of her team and the Salarian's had access to whatever they needed including access to the bar in the observation lounge. Then scheduled calls to Admiral Hackett and the Citadel, to update the Council.

Shepard would need Liara's help to 'decode' any useful information about the conduit that had come from the last beacon. But first she went to her cabin and would have an hour to herself; she dropped onto the bed still in full armour and stared at the ceiling.

Now she would have time to count the cost, now she would have to let the meaning of all the horrors in her head wash over her, now she knew the nightmares she had been having were not nightmares at all but a forewarning of what was crashing down on them all from dark space at the hands of monsters.
Captain’s cabin, Normandy

Shepard felt her back aching or was it pain, what was she lying on… an edge of that tormented trapped place and then she was staring up at the ceiling of her cabin.

There was a soft knock on her door and she hauled herself into a sitting position 'come in' she said and her voice sounded weary.

'I really do not mean to disturb you Shepard but I have some idea of what you may be dealing with… and 'Liara was hesitant and looked uncertain but determined 'well if we are to be more to each other then perhaps you could be more unguarded with me and let me support you...' she trailed off a little still not having moved far from the doorway.

Shepard smiled and a little of what she had been feeling overwhelmed by lifted 'I think you meant that I could 'let my guard down'… you are a sight for sore eyes Liara and you'll just have to look that one up on the extranet if you aren't aware of its meaning' Shepard stood up and began taking off her armour.

Liara smiled and looked less apprehensive than she had done. The Commander's reputation for privacy, being professional but also not showing anything she was feeling that would have a negative affect on her team or her crew was well known; and Liara wasn't sure yet how far she could cross those boundaries.

'Please let me help you with that' and she began to help unbuckle Shepard's shoulder guards. In the process their cheeks brushed together and without a word they turned into each other and kissed, it was long slow and tender. Shepard began to explore Liara's lips with her tongue and met the tip of Asari's as they mirrored each others actions.

The kiss became more passionate and their desire for each other was clear in the response of their bodies… breath coming in shorter gasps, quickened hearts beating with excitement, the throbbing need that started between Shepard's legs and radiated out until every inch of her needed release, needed Liara.

She heard Liara's breathless words in her ear 'Shepard I need you… I want to join with you…'

'Liara are you sure' Shepard spoke in between kissing the Asari's neck and trying to rid herself of the armour that felt like it was keeping them apart 'this has not been an ordinary day… you know I want you… to be with you…' she broke of and brought Liara's face up so that they were looking into each other's eyes.

'I have never been so sure of anything in my life Shepard' Liara had tears and desire in her eyes, and there was something else that Shepard didn't want to dare to hope that she had seen.

'Fucking armour… shit… sorry Liara just let me get out of this…' Shepard smiled but quickly started to rip at the fastenings to shed the remaining barrier between her and her desire.

'Commander' Joker's voice came over the comm.

'What' Shepard shouted and all her frustration and exhaustion fired the word like a bullet into the air.

'Sorry ma'am… but… your call to Admiral Hackett is coming in early' Joker sounded wary and
apologetic and Shepard immediately felt guilty for yelling at him.

'All right thank you Joker' she said sounding more like her usual calm, in control self.

'Sorry Liara… for yelling… I… I have to take this in the comm room' Shepard's shoulders sagged as she sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on a pair of work boots.

'You have no need to apologise Shepard' Liara was picking up Shepard's hoodie and as she handed it to the human she cupped Shepard's face in her hand and continued 'I will wait for you here and when you have completed all your duties we can pick up where we left off…. If you still want to' Liara had been confident until the last moment but then her old nervous shyness reasserted itself.

Shepard reached out and pulled Liara into a hug 'I'll find it difficult to think about anything else, thank you' and with a final brief kiss Shepard left the room.

Shepard had just signed off from her call with Admiral Hackett. She took her position as a Spectre seriously and her loyalty to the Council as representatives of the Galaxy would never be in doubt. But she was an Alliance marine to her very bones and she saw no conflict with that and her duties as a Spectre, what was good for the Galaxy was also protection for the Human Systems Alliance. To protect was a cornerstone of her service within the Alliance.

She had lost marines and some were still seriously wounded, but they got the job done and they had gathered vital intel on Saren's intentions, his research and the plans of the bigger threat, the Reapers.

They were heading for the Citadel so that their wounded could be taken care of properly but it was almost a three day run as they were on the other side of the Galaxy.

She was waiting for the call to come in from the Council when Joker came on the comm.

'Commander you're not going to believe this but I have a hail from that bastard Saren, he wants to talk to you' Joker sounded angry and worried.

'Are our comms systems secure, get Tali up there with you to check it out, this could be a trick to hack the ship or find our location' Shepard replied.

'On it Commander, I can stall him for a few until Tali has had a chance to check things out, she's here now' Joker said. 'Do that, Tali can you try to find out where he is and also what ship he is travelling in?'

'I will do my best commander' Tali's voice was steady despite the huge responsibility that had just been put on her shoulders.

Shepard called up Liara on her comms 'Liara, can you come and join me in the comms room please, Saren apparently wants a chat' Shepard said and then in a lighter tone 'you are still decent aren't you?'

'Of course Commander I will be with you in a few minutes.' Shepard could hear the smile in her voice and she sighed to herself knowing this night was shaping up to be a long one and probably not in a good way.

Tali had made all the preparations she could and was ready for Joker to accept the call from Saren; both Liara and Garrus had joined her in the comms room and were sitting out of sight.

'Let's see what the murdering bastard wants then shall we' Shepard almost growled into the comms to Joker.

Saren's holographic image came up almost immediately and even though Shepard knew he was light
years away she still had to hold herself back from punching him in the face.'

'Commander Shepard for a human you have proved to be very troublesome' Saren managed to make he entire sentence an insult whilst at the same time making her sound like some insignificant irritant.

'I had a nice chat with your boss on Virmire, now he knows how to put a species down, your going to have to do a lot better than that if you want to insult me you lying, traitorous son of a bitch' Shepard made sure the disgust and hatred she felt towards the ex-Spectre was present in every word.

'Don't you hold back now Shepard' Garrus said quietly from where he was sitting to her left and she could hear the smile in his voice.

'This is exactly why I never went to the Council with this, you don't understand, I'm doing this to save lives, I could save millions of lives by working with the Reapers.'

'Just how the fuck do you manage to make yourself believe that Saren, please, explain this should be good' Shepard leaned back a little and crossed her arms in front of her chest and kept her eyes fixed on him.

'You've seen the same as I have, the warnings on from the beacons, you know what the Reapers are capable of, we can't defeat them, the only way some of us can survive is by working with them. If we are useful to them, as I am to Sovereign, it needs me to find the conduit and when I find it I will be rewarded, my people, the Turian's will be rewarded and so can yours if you join me now before its too late.'

As Saren was talking Shepard could feel Garrus bristle and guessed that he was disgusted that Saren would think the Turian people would ever make a deal and become slaves to the Reapers just to survive.

'I think if you were in your right mind you'd know that neither the Turian or the Human race… hell none of the races in the Galaxy (except perhaps the Batarian's she thought) would choose slavery over fighting for their freedom… even you Saren' she changed tack quickly to try to catch him off guard 'I've seen some of the research that you were carrying out on Virmire. It wasn't all Krogan army breeding. You're afraid of being indoctrinated and your trying to find something to protect you… but you can't fight it Saren can you, you saw what it did the Benezia as powerful as she was' Shepard left the question hanging.

'No, Sovereign needs me… all I have to do is find the conduit… the more indoctrinated the subject becomes the less they are useful and… I am useful to Sovereign, but I must find the conduit Shepard and you are interfering with my task' Saren didn't sound as confident as Shepard had heard him in the past.

'Where is it Saren, we could find it together, if we could work together we could defeat them?' She would try this once but in her heart she knew he was already to far gone to listen to reason.

'You cannot fight them, you are damming us all to the same fate, I am trying to save millions and you want us all to die.'

'You took an oath Saren, an oath as a Spectre to protect the Council and the Galaxy and here you are helping the Reapers just to save your own skin, your pathetic, a scared pathetic piece of shit coward' she just wanted to get her hands on him to tear him apart for helping to bring the darkness to the Galaxy and for the lives he had already taken.

'You will never understand Shepard and that is why you must die, the next time we meet I will kill
you, and the next time I stand on the Citadel it will not be to answer to the Council' he finished as he had started with a sneer in his voice; the hologram disappeared and for a moment it was as if a blanket of silence had fallen over the room.

'Joker, Tali did we get anything?' Shepard asked.

'Only a rough indication of where he is Shepard, in the Terminus System, and he is on a Geth ship, that is why I was able to hack his comms feed' Tali said 'I am sorry I could not get a more exact position.'

'That's good enough Tali thank you, Joker did they try to hack us?'

'No Commander or if they tried they didn't get far enough to trigger any alerts.'

Shepard turned to Garrus and Liara 'I'm going to call Tali, Wrex and Kirrahe down for a meeting; we need to review the situation before I speak to the Council.

Once they were all gathered Shepard told them all of the conversation with Saren.

'Liara, Tali how is your work progressing on plotting the new position of the Mu relay from the information we had from Benezia' Shepard hoped the second mention of her mothers name would be a little less painful as it highlighted the fact that despite being highly indoctrinated Liara's mother had fought back enough to share all the information she had.

'The algorithms I am using to calculate its position still have some time to run, but we could expect an answer within the next thirty six hours' Liara replied, she had been working on a computer model that would plot the most likely position of the relay.

'I am using a slightly different set of computer simulations which are more likely to be along the same lines that Saren's Geth are using for their calculations, so we have it covered Commander, we just have to wait for the answer to spit out' Tali finished with a smile.

'Ok, but I hate just waiting, is there no way we can speed this up' Shepard was impatient but she knew Saren had to carry out the same process.

'We will find the Mu relay Commander and as quickly as Saren does,' Liara looked at Shepard and continued 'but it is as important to know where to head for once we find the relay and for that you will need to work on what the beacon told you, I can help with that later if you wish.'

'Yes your right Liara, but we have one other problem' Shepard stood up and looked around them all.

'I believe that whatever else Saren is planning or whatever the conduit is, I'm sure they plan to attack the Citadel. I don't think Saren realised just how much he let slip with his final dig at the Council.'

'I agree Shepard,' said Garrus 'you know the whole time he was talking it was as if… oh well we all know he's as mad as a box of space hamsters… but it was as if he was drifting in and out of being in control of himself. And whenever you got him pissed he seemed to lose control and let things slip. It's how we know he hasn't found the coordinates to the Mu relay yet' Garrus finished.

Kirrahe spoke for the first time 'It will not be easy convincing the Council of any of this, they have a tendency to minimise risk, they are politicians after all.'

Shepard had taken to the Salarian as they were planning the assault on the complex, he was a soldier and despite having taken several bullets to various parts of his body he had insisted in getting out of the med bay as soon as he could stand and was keen to offer any further assistance he could to Shepard's mission.
'Yeah Shepard it's a pity we couldn't take a piece of that Reaper to show them what we're up against' Wrex added 'they won't believe it until one of them drops out of the sky on their heads' he finished with a dry bark of a laugh.

'Ok well I think we all need to rest up on the journey back to the Citadel, pray to whatever works that the calculations we are using pay off and we can pinpoint the Mu relay; work out where to go once we find the relay and convince the Council that the Citadel is in danger; and that we need to hunt Sovereign down as Saren is just its tool' she knew what an impossible set of problems she had set out.

'Well that takes care of the next few days, what shall we plan for next week… ending poverty, slavery and bringing the Terminus System under Council control' Garrus spoke with a glint in his eyes, his mandibles twitching and huge smile on his face.

'Sounds good to me' laughed Shepard and taking advantage of the mood having been lightened she dismissed the team and waited alone for her last call, the one from the Council.

The call came in not long after and it was bad tempered, mainly between her and the Turian Councillor who always spoke down to her and was condescending in the extreme. Without proof they were not willing to accept the Reaper threat believing instead it was a ploy of Saren's to distract Shepard and the rest of the Galaxy from his real plans, whatever they were. But they did seem to take the threat to the Citadel seriously and the Asari Councillor told Shepard that although the Council races could not act directly that is what the Spectres were for, so perhaps Shepard could continue to gather evidence. They agreed that Shepard would meet with the Council on her return to the Citadel and that defences and a fleet would be pulled together to thwart Saren.

As Shepard emerged from the elevator and began to head towards her cabin Doctor Chakwas appeared at the MedBay door and began to walk towards her.

'What's the matter Doc?' Shepard asked in concern worried that perhaps one of the wounded had taken a turn for the worse.

'I thought you may want to know Commander that Chief Williams is awake and I thought you would want to tell her about Alenko yourself.

She did but would have preferred to do it after a night's sleep, but she said 'yes of course I'll come now. Is she completely alert?'

'Yes but she won't be awake long and she is having high infusions of medi-gel for the pain' Dr Chakwas sat back down at her desk as they entered the MedBay and Shepard walked up to the bed that was bathed in a soft light further up the room.

'Commander I'm sorry I didn't want to be evacuated till we had finished the mission, I feel like I let you down and I know I lost half my squad at least' Ash's face was deathly pale and she had tubes in both her arms. She had taken a couple of hits but by far the worse was a bullet wound to her side which did some internal damage and cost her a lot of blood.

'That's enough Ash, its ok; its ok; it was a hell of a mission… I got a full report from Garrus on your actions and I will be recommending you for a commendation and medal for bravery' Shepard had heard how Williams had showed extreme courage in leading her squad into overwhelming odds and had also gone back for a wounded marine and carried him to cover under fire.
'I… not sure… I just did my job ma'am… and we lost…' Ash was having trouble with the concept of being acknowledged as a hero and perhaps wiping the family slate clean.

'You did more than your job a couple of times so I hear it.'

'How did the lieutenant do, they were under a lot of fire taking those guns out' she asked and Shepard could avoid it no longer. 'He didn't make it, he and his squad were overrun and I couldn't spare any troops to go and help, we had to leave them behind' there it was, her own personal nightmare, not only dead troops but they left them behind. Her only consolation, if it could ever be a consolation, was that even if they were captured they would have been killed in the blast.

'But… that should have been me… I didn't understand at the time why you choose me to cut a path to the bomb site and you send Alenko to the…. to…' she didn't finish but they both knew what taking the AA guns as an objective had been. 'Complete a suicide mission, yes' Shepard said. It had been clear from the beginning that whichever team headed for the AA guns they were not getting out unless they could be reinforced or actively extracted, neither of which was a real possibility.

'You knew… you knew when you sent Kaidan… why did I get to live…' she was upset but also angry. 'We all know that there may be a mission or a fight that we won't come back from… I didn't pick you to live and I didn't pick Kaidan to die… I had to choose on the basis of which objective would play to strengths…' Shepard was cut off as Ash almost leapt up from the bed. 'You didn't trust me to take the guns and hold them to the last marine… you thought I was a coward…' Shepard cut across her as she saw Dr Chakwas stand up from her desk. ‘That's enough Williams, I told you I made my decision based on experience and skills… there was a real chance that the whole mission would be a bust and none of us would get out… but yes I choose Kaidan knowing that neither he nor his team would be coming back and I did it cold… that's what command is' Shepard realised she had raised her voice and was feeling the edge of anger, but it wasn't that Ash had challenged her but more that Ash had force her to face what Shepard had been dodging until she had enough strength to deal with it.

Shepard once again had had to choose who would have a fighting chance and who would go to their certain death; she had to choose a friend and fellow marines and order them to fight to their death.

Dr Chakwas was now standing by the bed and said 'I think that's enough for tonight Commander, Chief Williams you need to get some rest I am going to give you a light sedative to help you relax. But Ash hadn't quite finished twisting the knife Shepard had plunged into her own gut. 'You didn't need to volunteer us for that part of the mission we could have left it to the Salarian's… we could have stuck together… not lost as many…' this time it was the Doctor who cut off the end of Ash's comments. 'That is quite enough Williams you have no right to question your commanding officers decisions, now get some sleep.'

Shepard turned and walked away from the bed without another word and headed straight for her cabin, Ash could go to hell, they could all go to hell, none of them were living with the nightmares she had in her head… they were all going to hell if she couldn't convince the Council the threat was
real. Like to see you deal with that command decision Williams she thought bitterly.

Liara was as good as her word and was waiting for her, working at Shepard's console.

'I hope you don't mind Shepard I thought I would do some more work on tracking the Mu relay until you got here,' she looked around as she finished speaking and only then saw Shepard who was still standing just inside the door 'Goddess Shepard you look terrible what has happened' Liara moved immediately to Shepard's side and guided her to sit down on the bed.

'Ah it's ok Liara… I just need to sit down… bit of a difficult day…' Shepard tried to pull off a grin but she knew she wasn't fooling Liara. Shepard usually didn't let anyone see her with her 'guard down', exhausted, feeling the emotional impact of her decisions, her doubt, and after meeting Sovereign she could add dread to that list.

'You need more than a sit down... I am torn Shepard I think you need to get a good night's sleep, but I would also like to remain with you…' Liara once again showing her shyness and uncertainty but she also kept her arm around Shepard's shoulder.

'Please…yes Liara… I… I would like you to stay, for us to share sleep together… I know we wanted more but with everything…' it was Shepard's turn to let her words trail off.

'Hush now, it's my turn to look after you and I suspect this will be a new and difficult experience for you' Liara smiled as she began to help Shepard out of her uniform.

By the time Liara joined Shepard in bed after getting undressed her human was already fading fast into exhaustion. Liara put her arms around Shepard and held her while they both drifted into sleep marking another step change in their relationship.
Chapter 7

Normandy enroute Citadel

Shepard blinked her eyes open as consciousness began to reassert itself. She was not alone and the memories of the previous day and night caused her to close her eyes and take a slightly deeper measured breath before turning to the still sleeping Asari next to her.

Shepard propped herself on an elbow, rested her face in her hand and took the opportunity to study Liara's face, neck and the sweep of her shoulders. They hadn't stripped naked and both remained clad in underwear but she could feel the warmth of her companions' skin and when she could resist it no more Shepard reached out her hand and let her fingers brush lightly across the Liara's cheek and then traced the line of her neck to her shoulder.

Before Shepard's fingers had even drifted down to her Asari's neck Liara's eyes flickered open and a soft smile traced itself on those full blue lips.

'Sorry but I always wake up ridiculously early, even when I'm on leave… you are more beautiful than the omega nebula viewed through a multispectral window' Shepard finished her words by leaning down and gently kissing the Asari's lips.

'Mmm,' Liara responded to the kiss, 'you will never need to say sorry whatever time you awaken me if it is accompanied by such actions and words Commander' she said with another smile.

'So tell me Doctor, would you like to get up and join me on my usual early inspection tour around the ship with a mug of mess coffee… or perhaps…' Shepard leaned down and this time kissed the top of Liara's shoulder and continued tracing kisses until she reached the Asari's neck where Shepard's kiss was altogether harder allowing her teeth to make contact.

Liara's response was immediate and physical as she sought out and met Shepard's mouth with a fury of kisses that sent shockwaves through both their bodies arousing the desire, need and excitement of the previous evening.

Shepard began removing Liara's loose fitting undershirt as Liara was trying to pull off Shepard's tee… still kissing and running hands across skin and breasts they then removed the rest of their clothing, finally no physical barriers separated their two bodies.

Shepard looked down at the Asari's body and her breath caught in her throat at the sight of such perfection, she began to trace the lines of the prominent collar bones that were never exposed by Liara's conservative choice of dressing.

Leaning on her elbow Shepard allowed her fingers to run around the edge of Liara's breasts and then lifted her hand so that it lay a hair's breadth above one of the Asari's breasts, she could feel the heat, as she lowered her hand she felt the hard nipple contact her palm.

Their physical need and desire for each other took them over completely and Shepard gave herself up to exploring and pleasing this amazing, sexy, sensual and irresistible woman who had captured her from practically the first moment they had properly laid eyes on each other.

They fitted together, their bodies were a perfect match, they found many different ways to ensure they kept as much of each other in physical contact, there was no awkwardness.

There were moments when Shepard thought her head would actually explode… like the first time
she felt the heat and wetness as her fingers responded to Liara's need to feel Shepard inside her… teasing the Asari by delaying the moment until both their bodies were shaking with the pent up tension… when Shepard finally pushed her fingers into Liara they both moaned out loud experiencing even higher levels of passion coursing through their bodies… the lovemaking was not one sided as Liara surprised herself by knowing instinctively how to meet Shepard's needs.

But it was the joining that made this a very, very different experience from any Shepard had had before.

There was the physical dimension that seemed to enhance and amplify all their lovemaking and particularly orgasm. But the joining was more, much more than just physically enhancing. Shepard tried to explain to Liara later how different it was yet how it met a deep need that must sit within all human's and perhaps all sentient beings.

Shepard explained of fleeting moments when, during intensely emotional love making, two people are so close, so connected, so focused and attuned they briefly achieve a form of one ness. The pinnacle some would say of human connection, complete immersion in each other, where the rest of the universe fades away and they are truly one… but it lasts so briefly.

This was a powerful strand of the joining, that immersion in each other, the connection, achieving a state of complete unity, truly no longer being able to tell where one ended and the other began was effortless and once established the echo of it remained.

To somehow be in each other's mind's to be each other's bodies had to be experienced rather than spoken of.

And through that connection the ability to share emotions… instead of having to use words they were able to experience the others feelings, share them, reflect them back. Anew door had been created in Shepard's consciousness that could be accessed easily and smoothly and that would take her back to that place of completeness whenever she and Liara joined.

The deepest aspect of the full joining was something that Shepard had no experience of and no language that could really convey how it felt. The only way she could come close to explaining was by saying it was as if they met each others souls, it was as Liara had said it would be, a spiritual joining.

With their passion and desire sated, at least for now, and the meld fading away, they sat close to each other in bed as Shepard carefully sipped at her hot coffee and Liara nursed her Asari tea while she explained to Shepard that what they had just shared was not an ordinary Asari sexual joining or meld, that they had experienced a deep joining that usually only bondmates achieved.

'I… well… we… um… oh Goddess, this is not going to come out right' Liara had lost a little of the confidence and assurance she had found in herself during their lovemaking.

Shepard turned and looked at Liara with an amused smile on her face 'spit it out T'Soni it can't be that bad', Shepard reached out her hand and gave Liara's cheek a reassuring stroke.

'Well as I was trying to explain, we seem to have bypassed all preambles and our first joining is one that usually only comes when the couple… I mean the two… well after they have been with each other for some time and made a… some… commitment…' she trailed off and began to study her hands though she continued 'and this state can not be achieved through only one of the partners, it must be a joint…' Liara came to a full stop, still studying her hands which were clasped around the mug containing her now cold tea.
Shepard put down her own mug and took Liara's off her; she then took hold of the Asari's hands and looked steadily at Liara until the other raised her eyes to meet Shepard's.

'So if I understand you right… we skipped the whole courtship thing… the finding out whether we really liked each other… the deciding to take things to the next stage and skipped straight for… making a big connection… falling for each other? Was that about the gist of it?' Shepard's voice held more than a hint of amusement and a smile played around the edges of her mouth as she waited for Liara to respond.

'I… well I would agree with your analysis… I mean… I can not deny I have strong feelings for you Shepard, nothing was hidden during our… when we were joined' Liara was searching Shepard's face so intently Shepard could almost feel it physically.

'Ok, well the thing is… I have never had a serious relationship before Liara… I'm a soldier, I've never had the time and it didn't seem fair when I might not be a good long term bet given my line of work… but you just got right in, straight through my defences… we have something between us we both know it and we both felt it… feel it.

'Maybe its mad to even be thinking about relationships with what we are facing, we could all be killed trying to take down Saren and you've seen the warnings from the Prothean Beacons as I have… but maybe that's what is also helping us to cut to the chase… all I know is I have never felt like this before and it's both amazing and awesome and as frightening as hell' Shepard finished by kissing Liara's hands which she was still holding.

'Oh Shepard you are truly wonderful' Liara reached out for her human and pulled them together into a hug that placed their hearts together, they stayed in that embrace for what seemed like an eternity.

The Normandy made good time on its trip to the Citadel, but it was far from uneventful.

After Shepard and Liara had joined the team for breakfast the discussion turned to what next, what would their role be in the ongoing fight against Saren. The whole team agreed with Shepard that they, and the Normandy, were best placed to chase Saren down in the Terminus System to try to stop him claiming the conduit.

They moved their discussion to the comm room and Liara carried out a meld with Shepard to try to help decipher the information from the Beacon on Virmire. The vision contained more of the same nightmare but this time Shepard had already been able to understand and experience the memories in much more detail. So that individual acts of destruction and killing were etched into her own memories along with the feelings that accompanied them. Fear, loss, terror, disbelief and grief… or at least the Prothean equivalent that she could only understand in her own terms.

Shepard had been right when she identified the final part of the message to be different and with Liara's mind helping it became clear that it was an address, well a memory of a planet set within a solar system which was as good as the same thing. When Liara broke the connection she once again appeared to be dizzy both Shepard and Garrus moved to guide her to her seat.

'Are you OK Liara, I thought it would have been easier this time?' Shepard asked anxiously believing that as they had now joined these information melds would not have affected her.

'I'm afraid it is the nature of the memories… the imprint from the Beacon that is draining and overwhelming Commander. You really do have a remarkably strong mind to carry them as you do… and you mind seems clearer since receiving the cipher, it felt more natural than it did the last time… as if you were assimilating them… the memories no longer feel… well… alien to your mind' Liara was recovering but she still looked pale, pale for an Asari.
'You mean the imprint is taking over my mind?' Shepard said sounding worried and glancing quickly around to see if the others were looking at her differently.

'No, no that is not what I meant. I am sorry Shepard I put it badly, no it is as if your mind was taming the memories, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that your mind feels even more strong and powerful than it did the first time I melded with you.' Liara continued, 'but Commander I know where Saren is heading, I recognised the planet that was at the end of your vision. It is Ilos, I recognised it immediately from my study of Prothean literature.'

Shepard looked relieved that nothing was trying to control her mind and change it from the inside; she loved sharing her mind with Liara but two's company she thought.

'So how quickly do you think Saren will recognise where he needs to go' Garrus asked what was on all their lips. 'It really will depend on how much information he already possesses about the Protheans,' Liara answered.

'Yeah or how much information his big friend has from when they were here last time and wiped out the Protheans' Shepard's words were laced with disgust and anger, 'but even if we have beaten him to the punch Saren will know very shortly after I tell the Council where we are headed,' Shepard walked over to the edge of the room and leaned against the comm console and crossed her arms across her chest, a pose that everyone in the room recognised.

'Do you believe one of the Council members is working with Saren,' Tali asked the shock sounding in her voice.

'No,' it was Garrus who spoke and he looked troubled 'Shepard knows that even highly classified intelligence is available to a Spectre's, even an ex-Spectre, and I suspect that Saren has already strategically placed spies throughout Council space and particularly on the Citadel.'

Shepard nodded as Garrus spoke and said 'exactly and let's not forget Sovereigns ability to indoctrinate that Saren may well also be using to his advantage.'

'Do we need to tell them where Saren is headed, where we are going?' This time Liara voiced what some in the room were thinking.

'I'm afraid we do as we are going to need Council authority to put together a small task force of ships because we will be confronting Saren and his Geth fleet, or at least part of it. And it'll be a balancing act as we'll also need to increase the fleet defending the Citadel. No, we have no choice, but we can leave it until the very last minute when I am face to face with the Council' Shepard finished.

They carried out some further planning mainly around getting the Normandy reequipped and ready to set off after Saren as quickly as possible once they had gotten their wounded to the hospital and Shepard had met with the Council.

Before the day was finished they had the last piece of the puzzle, the location of the Mu Relay, they were ready and it only remained for Shepard to brief the Council and begin the end game of the mission.

'What the fuck do you mean, no!' Shepard was standing in front of the Council with Udina and Anderson on either side and was completely astounded at the orders she had just received.

'I don't think it is helpful to take that tone with us Shepard' the Turian councillor's sneer reminded her too keenly of Saren in that moment and she was about to say something that even she would regret when Captain Anderson spoke out.
'But if we know where Saren is headed why won't you let Shepard complete her mission?' he asked, his anger was clear in both voice and body language.

'It is not your place to question the Council Anderson' Udina barked and in that moment Shepard would cheerfully have smacked the man in the mouth.

'I believe we will get more accomplished if we remain calm and civil,' it was Councillor Tevos who spoke, 'Shepard we cannot send Council vessels into the Terminus System as it would probably cause war which we can ill afford if your predictions about Saren's attack on the Citadel are correct. We have set ships to guard the relay and have increased the number protecting the Citadel itself. We believe that Saren is now a spent force and that chasing him around the Terminus System will only cause more trouble, if what you say is true he will come to us and we will defeat his attack,' she finished.

'But Saren isn't the real threat, its Sovereign and the Reapers, we can't let Saren get whatever the conduit is and it may well be sitting on Ilos so…' Shepard was cut off by the Turian Councillor once again.

'I have heard enough of these tales of Reapers designed to frighten children and the weak willed; you have no proof other than your dreams and your willingness to accept all that Saren tells you as truth.'

Shepard was actually too angry to form words and before she could deliver the string of Turian insults and swear words that Garrus had taught her the Salarian Councillor cut in.

'Commander Shepard no one here doubts that you are sincere in your belief but Salarian intelligence have not uncovered anything to support the information that Saren is feeding you.'

'Well if you won't give me any help I'll just have to go it alone and stop Saren on Ilos with my team and the Normandy' she said.

'This is precisely why you, your crew and the Normandy are grounded. I have initiated a lock down on the Normandy until you see fit to respect the will of the Council' Udina couldn't hide his delight at finally getting the better of Shepard and it took all the willpower and self-restraint she had not to head butt him in his stupid face.

'I take it I am dismissed?' she said curtly to the Council realising that there was no point in continuing the argument and she really needed to get away from Udina before her self-control snapped.

'Yes Commander and perhaps we will have a more satisfactory discussion in a few days once we have more information' Councillor Tevos was being her usual diplomatic self.

Bad news travels fast and the news that the Normandy was grounded seemed to have reached the ship even before Shepard arrived.

Shepard went straight to her cabin and decided she felt to low even to sit on the bed so slumped onto the floor, elbows resting on her knees and head firmly in her hands.. the very picture of dejection.

Liara no longer knocked to enter the cabin which had become their shared space and when she entered she only paused a moment before sitting next to Shepard on the floor and leaning sideways so that their shoulders touched.

'I can not believe they did that to you Shepard, after all you have proved to them' Liara spoke quietly but Shepard could here anger, perhaps even fury in her voice.
'Well to be fair we haven't exactly given them any concrete proof... but what the hell do they think Saren is doing, how they hell do they think he has managed to get Geth to follow him... I don't know if they are just incredibly stupid or if they have their heads buried in the sand for a reason I can't work out' Shepard was angry but she was also tired and was at a complete loss as to how to work around this roadblock.

'You are not going to allow them to stop you; you are not going to give up are you?' Liara's tone was now challenging.

"No Liara I am not going to just sit here on my arse feeling sorry for myself although I reckon I should be allowed a little pissed off time... but what would you like me to do?"
Shepard was angrier than she had intended and continued turning her head to face Liara, "I'm sorry I don't mean to be angry at you, your right to ask. We need a plan but we also need to be ready, the plan bit is feeling kinda hard at the moment so lets go with making sure we are ready to go if... when we can get away." She smiled and was pleased to receive a smile in return.

Liara got to her feet and offered her hand to Shepard who took it and in one movement rose to her feet and pulled Liara into an embrace and as they moved slowly but deliberately together for what Shepard hoped would be a long and passionate kiss. After a few moments Joker's voice broke the quiet of the room.

'Um sorry Commander but I have a message from Captain Anderson' Joker sounded a little wary but continued 'he would like to meet you in Flux in 30 minutes.'

"Thank you Joker," Shepard responded never once moving her eyes from her Asari's face, "do you think he has cameras in her or does he just have lousy timing." She smiled and they carried on where they had been interrupted, the kiss was indeed all that Shepard had hoped for.

Before leaving for Flux Shepard gave out a flurry of orders.
All crew to return to the Normandy for some dockside drills and cleaning duties.
All supplies and particularly armaments to be re-stocked ready to help with the defence of the Citadel if called upon, well that was the cover story anyway.
Her team were to work on how to get them out from under lockdown and through the relay without any damage to Alliance, Citadel or Council forces.
Joker was to be ready with a direct route to the Mu Relay and then on to Ilos but one that would not bring them into contact with Council or Alliance forces while still in Council space.

When she arrived at Flux with Liara she found Anderson easily and sat down next to him as the noise would make having a conversation at any bigger distance impossible.

"Shepard this all stinks and I'm sorry you have been caught up in the politics, particularly between me and Udina. I'm pretty sure his dislike of you is because you remind him of me a little," Anderson was clearly still angry.

'Well I take that as a compliment sir, but I really need to find a way of getting after Saren, the clock is ticking on the head start he has' she was worried about Anderson and hoped he hadn't called her here to drown their joint sorrows.

"I have a plan, but, you will be acting against direct orders from the Ambassador and against the wishes of the Council. If this doesn't come out right you could end up in front of a courts martial, and
you crew, we would effectively be stealing the Normandy," he watched her face and she knew he was giving her a chance to back away from what was a huge decision for an Alliance officer.

"Sir, I will give my crew the opportunity to step off the Normandy if it doesn't sit well with them, but my duty to protect the Alliance, the Council and the Galaxy all press me to take whatever action I can to try to stop Saren and Sovereign who are a clear and present danger," she sat up straight in her chair and continued, "besides if this thing goes sideways we wont be coming back for a parade or a courts martial," she grinned and the plan was set.

Walking back to the Normandy Shepard asked Liara how she would feel about being with a disgraced Alliance officer and a rogue Spectre, Liara's answer came immediately.

"I will feel exactly as I do now Shepard, honoured and blessed," and with that the Asari reached out for Shepard's hand and that is how they entered the Normandy docking bay.

The countdown to Anderson breaking into Udina's office and releasing the Normandy was T minus 15.
Shepard had already told her team which included the two able bodied marines she had left from her squad. They all understood the decision they were making, and Shepard made it clear particularly to her marines that this was not an order, but they were solidly with her.

Unfortunately and much to both her and Kirrahe's disappointment he had been called back to the STG to give a full report and receive further medical attention, she could have used him.

Shepard had decided to speak to the crew before they broke free of their shackles and headed for Saren, disgrace and quite possibly death.

“Attention Normandy crew the Commander has an announcement to make” Joker set up the comms and turned to look at Shepard who was standing next to him in the cockpit. She had already told her pilot the plan and he was staying.

“You are all aware that Ambassador Udina has grounded the Normandy and her crew. I need to tell you that with Captain Anderson's help I will be taking the Normandy to complete our mission to stop Saren, Sovereign and the Geth.

“You all need to know that we may well be classed as Alliance deserters and pirates.

“I trust and respect each and every one of you and as such I must give you the choice to stay with me and embark on a mission against an enemy of overwhelming strength and risk your careers and reputations or leave the ship now.

“Know that I will think no less of you if that is your choice and I will be honoured to serve with any of you in the future.

“We have not completed our mission and we owe Saren and little friends some payback, make no mistake we are in this on our own and we will not stop until we prevail.” Shepard checked her watch it was now T minus 10 minutes.

“Nice Commander, especially the part where we were all screwed and not likely to get a hero's welcome even if we make I,”’ Joker smirked as he spoke.

“Just wanted to say Joker that despite your backchat, bad jokes, lack of respect and did I mention really bad jokes… oh and your really, really bad timing,” Shepard put a hand on his shoulder briefly.
and continued, “you’re a hell of a pilot and I’m proud to have you on my crew.”

They waited in silence as the minutes clicked away, and she wondered how many crew she had lost, if it would affect the handling of the ship, and what the hell her mother would think of her… shit this was the first moment she had given her mother a thought. This would be really hard for a Captain in the Alliance, the XO on a ship of the line… ’shit Shepard you have to either win and make this all good or die in the attempt coz there is no way I am facing my mother from inside the brig’ she thought to herself.

There it was a green light, they were clear to leave.

“Take her away Joker get us through the relay ASA’” Shepard said. She waited next to her pilot until they had indeed jumped through the relay and they were free and clear.

She made her way to the CIC to get a status report and was surprised to see Pressley still at his post, she didn't know why but she thought he would have taken the opportunity to leave, they hadn't always seen eye to eye.

“Commander,” he said as she approached, “all crew members at their posts and ready to do their dut,y” he snapped a salute that was echoed by all crew members who were in the CIC.

She returned it and told him to carry on; she had to admit she was touched by this obvious show of support for her and her command.

It was the same throughout the ship; every crew member she passed snapped to attention and gave her a salute.

She gave orders for the crew to get as much rest as they could on the journey to the Mu Relay, which would take around 16 hours, and she ordered her fire team to rest up as she anticipated they would have a long hard fight in front of them.

There was nothing left to do but wait.
Chapter 8

Unknown place, unknown time

Her teeth were chattering, as if she had just been dropped into an ice bath, her jaw was clenched and she wondered if you could grind your teeth and have them chatter at the same time.

Shepard felt the reflex to cough begin to gain traction in her lungs, not her chest this time, the attempt to clear whatever was flooding her lungs was going to require a much deeper cough... it was going to hurt.

Bright side she seemed to be able to think for a little longer at a time... hold the thoughts running through her mind and begin to string them together, down side all her thoughts were about dying, being trapped and the many different varieties of pain she was feeling across her body.

Nothing that she was thinking was good. She had no idea how long she had been 'out' or 'dreaming', so no idea how long she could reasonably expect to wait until rescue... but she still couldn't remember where she was or what had happened before.

She thought maybe she was re-building her memory, she knew that her head had taken a beating, not just the crack in her helmet but the continuing searing pain... more likely her life was 'flashing before her eyes' though it didn't seem to be running through on fast forward and her eyes were not seeing anything in their current state.

'Shock' she thought 'this shivering its shock setting in... dammit on top of everything else... that's just fuckin dandy.'

Shepard was indeed shivering although she had no sensation of cold; not really, there was numbness and hot shards of agony flowing through every inch of her nervous system... but the sensation of cold was not present.

'Nngah no no..' the reflex she couldn't stop gained momentum and as her lungs tried in vain to clear themselves the pain brought tears to her eyes, but they weren't only tears of pain, they were tears of frustration, loss, grief.

When the cough came it felt as if she was breathing and coughing glass, she felt warm liquid in her mouth, bubbles forming on her lips as a small rivulet found escape at the corners of her mouth.

'Not long now Shepard... not long' she thought and as she began to settle her mind to stop fighting for each breath, but that call... a siren's call, welled up from deep within her... she had to hold on, she hadn't finished... one more thing to do... but how could she do it here... how would she finish whatever it was she had started... and why was she still alone.

Despair and loneliness threatened to dislodge even the primacy of the pain that filled her consciousness... but as she began drifting down into the abyss she felt the touch of something in her mind. It was almost imperceptible, like a small breath of warm scented air on a still day... but it was there and it just gave her a moment's relief... and in that moment she felt herself drift up and away again; away from her prison and her torture.

Shepard had been surprised to see Chief Williams waiting to speak to her outside her cabin after the Normandy was set on course for the Mu Relay.
'Commander I really need to speak with you' Williams was doing her best to stand ramrod straight to attention but Shepard could see the physical strain.

'What the hell are you doing here Ash did you get stranded on board, I thought you went to Huerta with the others,' Shepard stared to guide the marine towards the MedBay.

'No ma'am, well yes… I mean I did go to the hospital but I wanted to get back ASAP and once I heard that bastard Udina had put us on lockdown I just knew you would find a way out of it and I wanted to be here' by the time Ash had finished talking they were at the MedBay and Shepard called over Dr Chakwas.

'Doc what the hell is Ash doing her?' Shepard asked with more concern than anger.
'She is a marine and as stubborn as her Commander and there was absolutely nothing I could do, she is on the mend and I can allow her to do light duties but combat in any form is out. Do you hear me Chief?' Dr Chakwas address her final comments to Chief Williams who appeared to grudgingly nod.

'Commander I had to speak to you, to apologise… I was so out of order when I spoke to you after Virmire… in my defence I was pretty high and not really myself…' she broke off as Dr Chakwas chimed in from her desk.

'I can vouch for that Commander, I had to treat her for an infection which also caused some fever and slight delirium.'

'Skipper I was upset of course I was… and I stand by saying you probably got the rough end of the deal losing the LT and keeping me… but ma'am I would, will follow you into hell itself and I just want the chance to prove to you how much I regret… well everything,' she stopped and stood up once more.

'Ash, you choose to come back to the Normandy even though you were still not well enough for duty. When you found out that I was going to risk being declared a deserter and a pirate by the Alliance and the Council you stayed on board, despite what that may do to your family and your attempts to re-instate your family's good name. I think I can forgive a wounded soldier some feverish back chat,' Shepard finished and a huge wave of relief seemed to flow through the Chief and settle on her face, 'but if you ever speak to your commanding officer in those terms again you won't find me so accommodating, are we clear,' Shepard gave Ash a withering look and the Chief snapped a salute and gave a full throated aye, aye ma'am.

Shepard spent a couple of hours with Liara in her cabin, talking, laughing, even allowing themselves to do a little 'after Saren' planning and, as Shepard put it a little 'fooling around'.

But Shepard insisted that Liara get some sleep.

'I have a couple of things to sort out then I'll come back and slip quietly in next to you, I promise' she kissed Liara and left the room before her lover could mount an argument.

Shepard called Lt Pressley and Chief Williams to the comm room and when they both arrived she got straight to the point.

'Pressley you're an outstanding navigator and good administrative officer but you're not made for combat command' it wasn't a question but she gave space for Pressley to respond.

'Thank you Commander and I agree completely.'
'Good, I will be making another officer my XO and I expect you to support and work with them in the spirit you have always exhibited towards me.'

'Yes ma'am… but we don't… you're not suggesting Lt Moreau' Pressley stammered and looked concerned.

Shepard allowed herself a small chuckle 'No indeed, Joker is a great pilot and trust him with the lives of all on board but…' she turned to Chief Williams and continued 'I am making a battlefield promotion and you will take the rank of first lieutenant Williams, you will also assume the position as my XO,' as she expected the expression on Ash's face flashed from denial, to shock, to awe and back to shock.

'But Commander…' Shepard cut her off before she could go any further.

'Can it Lieutenant you have to get up to speed double time so instead of veering towards challenging another of my command decisions' she flashed a grin at Ash to put her at ease 'you and Pressley need to put your heads together, but I need you to lead on combat command of the Normandy you will not be joining us groundside. Dismissed.'

Both officers snapped salutes which Shepard returned and she was left alone in the comm room. Shepard wanted more than anything to put a call through to her mother at that moment but it would be reckless and unfair to drag the Captain into a mess that was of Shepard's own making. 'I really hope I get a chance to make all this right mum' she said to herself and then went back to her cabin to get at least a couple of hours rest before they hit the Mu Relay.

Shepard asked Ash to join her in the cockpit in time for the approach to the Mu Relay, they were few minutes out. 'Joker you are going to need to be on your toes when we jump out the other end, I fully expect Saren to have left a little welcome party and I would really rather not alert them to our presence… oh and not run straight into them either,' she finished.

'Understood Commander… just so we're clear... I probably would have tried to keep stealthy and not crash the ship anyway… just saying' Joker smirked up at Shepard and she returned his grin.

Shepard's prediction had been correct there were two Geth ships waiting at the Relay and she was glad once again to have a pilot who was as skilful as his boast.

'ETA Ilos fifteen minutes Commander' he said looking fully pleased with himself.

'OK, now I have something I need both of you to do and this is an order. There will be no discussion on this; I want an affirmative from you both when you know what it is.' Shepard paused for them to take in what she had said and then continued.

'If I don't make it back from the surface or you have confirmation I have been killed,' Shepard raised her hand as both appeared to be on the point of challenging her, 'I have no intention of dying, I have every intention of killing that tormented son of a bitch with my bare hands, but that's beside the point.

'You are to head straight for the fifth fleet and report to Admiral Hackett. I've left a full signed statement in my quarter in which I take complete and absolute responsibility for the actions of all Alliance personnel on the Normandy. I state clearly that I gave the crew no choice in following my orders; but that I am a skilled persuader and everyone may have thought I was offering them a choice. You will both support that statement and do everything you can to help Admiral Hackett to
keep this incident off everyone's jacket. Do I make myself clear?' she was steely and fully in command, no one would disagree with her.

'I have never used all that nonsense about my being hero and I think you all know I hate it as I did not at any time accomplish anything on my own. My orders and actions cost the lives of many good women and men of the Alliance and not a few civilians who were in my care. But on this occasion I have, for the first time, explicitly asked that my record be taken into account to protect my crew. I need your confirmation that we will not have any Spartacus moments?' Shepard was once again surprised to see that Ash understood her reference; they both saw the blank look on Joker's face and Ash said she would explain later.

They both nodded in agreement and Shepard headed for the CIC and to check on the final preparations.

The Normandy was approaching Ilos and Shepard was once again in the cockpit standing next to Joker, Ash was sitting in the co-pilot seat, Tali at a console off to one side with Liara and Garrus standing by the entrance.

As expected Saren had beaten them to the plant and his Geth fleet were in attendance, but no sign of Sovereign. Shepard didn't know whether she was disappointed or relieved.

The Normandy's stealth systems guaranteed they would not be spotted, but they still approached slowly, moving through the Geth to get into low altitude so they could run some scans.

'Looks like a lot of activity centred on a cluster of ruins Commander' Tali said 'and we have two Geth drop ships returning from the surface. My guess is we are not very far behind the landing,' she finished.

'Scans just completed and we have a topographical map Commander, looks as if the main landing party are heading for one place, an underground entrance of some sort' Pressley came through on the comms from the CIC.

'OK then that's where we need to be, Joker how close can you get the Mako' Shepard asked.

'The other side of the taller building, wouldn't be too far, but its right in the middle of a group of Geth that seem to be digging in Commander' Joker answered.

'Well drop us on this side of the building that will give us a few moments of cover to get our bearings,' she said and continued 'fire team with me lets head for the Mako. She's all yours Lieutenant take good care of her.'

'Aye, aye Commander' Ash responded with a nod.

Once they were all secured in the Mako they didn't have long to wait, Joker dropped them with pin point accuracy and as soon as the Mako had pulled up to a stop their agreed combat plan was put into action. Shepard had ensured all weapons had enhanced scanning mods as the Geth would be jamming all frequencies.

For heavy weapons she had also equipped Garrus and Wrex with heat seeking missile launchers, they were limited to ten missiles each but that would take down quite a few heavies with a bit of coordination. She and Liara were equipped with rapid fire grenade launchers.
The plan on hitting groundside was for her two remaining marines, Stevens and Brewster to stay in the Mako making use of the heavy turret and cannon; Tali would remain in the Mako and carry out hacking and damping.

The rest of them would fan out from the armoured vehicle and work as a team to take down larger Geth targets, dropping any troopers, hoppers and rocket troopers with their assault rifles and shotguns equipped with disrupter ammo.

With their enhanced scanning mods and Tali's damping field they could at least 'see' Geth targets that were within the immediate vicinity and honed in on two Armatures that appeared to be sitting guard on their route to the underground entrance that was their destination.

The Mako had to keep moving as it was vulnerable to the Armatures but Shepard's team found cover and sent three waves of missiles at each of the Geth heavies before they could get more than one round off at the Mako from their pulse cannons.

Shepard and Liara focused on the foot soldiers that accompanied the Armatures using both grenades and biotics to take down nearly half a platoon with the Mako doing its fair share of damage.

Once the Armatures were destroyed and the rest of the ground troops supporting them taken out the Mako moved forward with Shepard and her team walking in its wake using it for cover while Tali was working hard to clean up the continued jamming to give them early 'eyes' on nearby hostiles.

'Commander' Tali's voice came over the comm in Shepard's helmet 'I don't believe this is Geth jamming, the signature is different and it is interfering not only with our comms to the Normandy but also Geth comms to their ships.'

'So chances are the Geth are as blind as we are and they won't be calling in reinforcements?' Shepard asked hoping the answer would come in the affirmative.

'They are certainly as jammed as we are' Tali replied.

'No guarantee they won't drop more shit on our heads though' Wrex's deep rumbling voice held a hint of a laugh, he was hoping for more action.

They made steady progress at walking pace and dispatched another group of Geth troopers but then ran into some serious trouble as Tali raised the warning of a Geth prime and two Geth destroyers standing guard on the doors to the underground entrance.

Shepard stopped the Mako and moved her squad forward on foot, Tali now joining them. She deployed her team to the right and left of the entrance with Wrex, Tali and Liara making up one team, Shepard and Garrus the other. They found high ground on the ruined and overgrown buildings which meant they could get fairly close and had the advantage of both crossfire and cover.

On the given signal Tali would hack on of the destroyers while Wrex and Garrus would use their remaining missiles on the prime, Liara would also focus on the prime with biotics and Shepard concentrating fire on the un-hacked destroyer. They would switch firepower to another target once their own was taken out. The Mako would begin a run in once they had engaged the deathly trio and hopefully get in close enough to hit the prime with the cannon while it was distracted.

Shepard counted them in over the comms and on the 'go' all hell broke loose with the earth and ear shattering sound of missile explosions, pulse cannon and shotgun from the Geth and the fire team, the sound of the assault rifle lost amongst the louder weapons.. Tali did a semi successful hack of one of the destroyers which didn't exactly attack the prime but was so disoriented that it just stumbled
around not firing at anything, which was a result as far as Shepard was concerned.

Both destroyers were down and only the prime remained, the Mako had just made it within range and the prime was going down fast but its last cannon shot found its mark and hit the ruins where Wrex, Tali and Liara were located bringing it crashing down.

Shepard was so enraged that it had hit half her squad not to mention Liara that she moved out from her cover and stood like a sentinel on the top of the ruin that had previously been her shelter and sent a hail of ordnance at the now very damaged Geth she didn't stop and Garrus also stood and joined in the stream of non-stop assault rifle fire. Afinal shot from the Mako finished it off and once it was down Shepard and Garrus rushed to where the rest of their team had been thrown by the blast.

Wrex was already on his feet and moving debris off the body of a very crumpled looking Quarian, Liara was sitting up with her helmeted head in hands clearly shaken. But it was Tali that Shepard moved towards first while saying 'Liara sitrep, are you injured?'

'No Commander... I do not think so... just winded... see to Tali,' Liara said also looking across at Tali who was still laying lifeless on the ground.

'Wrex are you OK?' Shepard asked as she helped him to clear the remaining stones and began checking life signs with her OT.

'Ha,' he barked 'did I ever tell you about the time an entire building fell on me?'

'Try the Normandy again Garrus, she's out cold and it doesn't look good, looks like she has damage to her armour and her enviro suit has been breached... let's get her into the Mako... Liara get as much medigel as you can into her and then try to seal up the armour... secure her at the rear of the Mako... we are...' Shepard's words were cut short by a comm call from the Mako which was now parked close to the doors that they still had to open.

'Commander we have more incoming, slow moving but coming our way, looks like Geth troopers but also at least two heavies of some description.'

'Still can't get through to the Normandy Shepard' Garrus updated her.

'Right, Brewster on the Mako guns, but keep the vehicle facing towards the door... Wrex up to the position that Garrus and I had... Garrus take cover down here if it gets too hot fall back behind the Mako... Liara you're with me' as Shepard was speaking they were carrying Tali into the Mako and taking up positions as allocated.

Shepard and Liara moved towards the doors to the underground complex and saw the security station on the left that Saren had obviously used to access their controls. The exterior doors had been blown off, no easy task and it must have held him up for some time.

As they moved into the even deeper darkness of the interior Shepard and Liara took positions mirroring each other, hugging the side wall of the corridor, in a slight crouch and scanning left, right, up and down with their weapons, Shepard using her trusty Mattock and Liara her Pinnacle pistol (a present from Shepard).

Shepard allowed her mind the split seconds to smile to herself that Liara was becoming quite the soldier and that her basic Asari commando training, that had obviously kept her safe on those lone dig's, was melding with the marine way of doing things and creating an effective and deadly mix.

At the end of the corridor the room opened up and they could see that the far end of the room was
the most likely place for consoles and controls, but they had to get there. Again Saren had cleared out what looked like two rows of security turrets that had obviously activated, even after all this time, given the scorch marks and destroyed Geth.

However, in their place he had left a couple of troopers and a destroyer.

Shepard moved across and joined Liara, signaling that she stay behind her. They didn't have enough firepower to make creating cross fire worth the risk. Much better they stick together and take the enemy down one at a time.

They quietly hugged the left hand wall and moved so that they were just parallel with the Geth squad, who seemed to be in 'off' mode. But Shepard wasn't going to have them between her and the exit if they decided not to remain 'off' she communicated her plan to Liara.

Shepard would hack the destroyer to confuse and slow it, she was not a patch of Tali but Alliance hacking and damping tech was a major asset and all marines could do the basics. Shepard was much more expert as she had, after all, started taking training from before she understood what everyone was talking about. Liara would target first one trooper and then the next as would Shepard; they would use a combination of biotics and Shepard's assault rifle and disruptor ammo. Then they would then change their position and focus on the destroyer.

Counting them in Shepard allowed herself a moment to lock her eyes with Liara's and felt the familiar jolt in her body as a smile flashed across both their mouths almost in unison.

The troopers went down fairly quickly but the destroyer was more of a pain. The hack worked but the destroyer was still fast enough to fire shots that came very close to taking Shepard's head off. She ordered Liara to move slowly to the top of the room and start working on finding a way to unlock the access door while Shepard drew the thing towards her and by using cover managed to get another hack in to drop its shields dealing more damage with her rifle and in the end allowing her to get in close enough to use a sticky grenade.

Shepard could stand it no longer and removed her helmet, and she made her way to join Liara, who had also removed her helmet, at the consoles.

Once she knew Shepard was safe and immediate danger dispatched Liara was giving herself a chance to marvel at the ruins which had only been ravaged by time. When Shepard joined her she couldn't help dropping into archaeologist speech and tell her human companion how unique and amazing the design within the room its construction and talked about returning with a full team to fully explore the whole of this fascinating Prothean site.

'Ah you used to find me fascinating and worthy of study, now I'm replaced by a bunch of old ruins' Shepard said in mock sad tones.

Liara playfully pushed Shepard in the shoulder and moved in close so that they could feel each other's breath on their faces and said 'you will never lose your fascination for me Shepard I will study you for eternity' Liara cupped Shepard's face and kissed her deeply on the lips. Shepard used the hand not holding her rifle to pull the Asari to her.

When they broke apart they moved straight back to business and as Shepard walked past an interface set into the consoles it jumped to life and a broken, patchy, glitchy miniature body that was very difficult to make out was speaking.

It was difficult to make out whole sentences but she could pick out words and short phrases like 'our time ending' 'devastation' 'hide' 'keep secure' 'reapers' 'then end of civilisation'. 
'It sounds like a warning signal' Shepard said turning to Liara who then stared back at her almost open mouthe.

'You… you can understand… Shepard that was not a modern galactic language, my guess is that it was Prothean' she said her look changing to puzzled.

'What… how could I… Liara are you sure… I'm even struggling to learn Asari how the fuck can I just suddenly know Prothean' and Shepard stared at the still speaking VI.

'Perhaps the effects of the Beacons and the Cipher… it' but Liara's words were cut by Garrus's voice over the comms.

'Shepard are you two OK in there we heard some explosions and knew it had to be you?' Garrus was trying to keep it light but he sounded worried.

'Yep all good Garrus, what's your situation?' Shepard replied lightly.

'We have company but we are taking them out, dropped the two Armatures and now dealing with troopers' he finished. 'Copy that' Shepard looked at Liara who was working deftly at one of the consoles and a smile flashed across her face. 'That is it Commander, it should now be open.'

'Garrus is the door the underground complex open' she asked over the comm. 'Affirmative Shepard we are good to go.'

'Outstanding, Wrex, Garrus hit the Mako… Garrus you drive, Wrex on the guns' Shepard said as she and Liara ran towards the exit and the Mako.

Once inside Shepard ordered them to make all speed and smash through anything in their way, she moved to the back of the vehicle where Tali was still lifeless and spoke to Stevens who was the closest thing they had to a medic and who was tending to Tali as best he could.

'I have sedated her Commander, we pumped in medigel and sealed the breach in the armour but the infection will already be in there and I think she had either broken or crushed bones in her leg. I don't believe she took a direct hit from the plasma cannon, that would have taken half her body off, but some kind of ricochet maybe. Hard to tell,' he finished looking down at his charge.

'Well we can't call the Normandy for a pick up… but even if we could… we have to prioritise the mission,' Shepard said with an edge of sadness but with her full command commitment sounding through. 'So we have a really good reason to finish that bastard in double quick time… actually we have a galaxy full but let's just focus on the one in front of us for now.'

Everyone in the Mako gave a quick look at their fallen comrade and a renewed resolve settled on all inside the vehicle as Garrus gunned the engine into life and headed straight into the underground complex and whatever little surprised Saren had left in their way.
Chapter 9

Ilos

They didn't have to wait long to run into some Geth interference, but Shepard's orders were clear, take as many out with the guns and run over or skirt around the rest. The Mako was also maxing out its shield's and getting a little help when taking fire from Liara and Wrex's biotics.

Liara marvelled at the facility and they all wondered about the now dormant stasis pods that lined the upper levels, 'there are hundreds of them,' Liara said leaving the question of how they came to be there and why they had failed.

'Never get me in one of those I'd rather die fighting' Wrex grumbled.

'What in the name of all things holy is that?' Shepard was looking intently at the console display and its analysis of what looked like a biotic barrier across their path.

'That is not like any Geth tech I've seen before,' said Garrus and now they were joined by Liara and Brewster who both looked through the Mako front windscreen and down to the scanner to see what it was made of.

'Whoever it belongs to it is a strong biotic barrier so perhaps we should not drive straight into it,' Liara's concerned voice seemed to break the almost hypnotic fascination both Shepard and Garrus had developed for the fast approaching barrier.

'Yeah good idea, but Wrex throw a few cannon shots at it and lets see what happens,' Shepard called over her shoulder.

'Ha,' Wrex barked one of his laughs 'are you sure you're not part Krogan Shepard, if in doubt shoot a big gun at it' he carried on with a deep rumbling laugh as he fired the cannon several times but to no effect.

'No Wrex from what I've heard it's also a very human trait to shoot first and ask questions later,' Garrus said with a twitch of his mandibles and a smile in his voice.

They had come to a full stop just in front of the barrier and at the same moment another barrier dropped behind them.

'Liara, Wrex, Brewster your with me,' Shepard said as she was already making her way to the side door of the vehicle, 'Garrus if the barriers lift and you have incoming, keep out of their way and come back for us when its clear, unless you can take them out.'

They circled around the Mako and saw the only option for exploration, a lift door set into the wall.

'Looks like someone wants us to visit,' Wrex said as they walked over to the door and Shepard got it open.

'Well they better have a very good reason for holding us up… or they're gonna regret inviting us to tea' Shepard growled.

The lift seemed to drop them a couple of levels and when the doors opened it was onto a fairly narrow walkway with rock face either side. Set at the end of the walkway they could see a console and a virtual interface that was projecting something that looked like an abstract screensaver.
'You are not Prothean but you are not machine either, this eventuality was one of many that was anticipated. This is why we sent our warnings through the beacons.'

'Sounds like some kind of VI but badly degraded' Wrex said.

'I do not sense the taint of indoctrination upon any of you unlike the one who passed recently,' the programme continued 'perhaps there is still hope.'

'Shepard I can understand the programme I do not believe it is speaking Prothean' Liara said and Wrex added a grunt of agreement.

'I have been monitoring your communications since you entered this facility and I have translated my output into a format you will comprehend. My name is Vigil you are safe here for the moment but that is likely to change. Soon nowhere will be safe.'

'Yeah well that isn't exactly news to us,' Shepard sounded a little pissed and continued 'but lets get one thing cleared up. When you talked about another passing by who was indoctrinated did you invite them down here?'

'No I would not make myself known to an indoctrinated traitor. I am an advanced non organic analysis system with personality imprints from Ksad Ishan chief overseer of the Ilos research facility.'

'Well could you get to the part where you give me something useful ASAP coz the bad guy has a bit of a head start on us,' Shepard was trying to keep a lid on her anger but she wasn't in the mood to play diplomat right now.
Chapter 10

Citadel

They had hardly moved a dozen paces before a crashing sound further in front alerted them to Geth smashing into their path. The gangway they were walking on was narrow allowing Shepard's team to stand only two abreast and in that moment she thanked the hours of training they had done to integrate her multi military (and none) team. In a fire fight or times of high battle stress there was no time to think, orders given needed to be reacted to using muscle memory, sometimes milliseconds made the difference between living and dying.

'Box' Shepard shouted almost before the first Geth had found their feet in front of them. On cue Liara and Shepard dropped to their knees where they had been in front of Wrex and Garrus to give a line of sight for the 'back row'. Liara immediately put up a defensive bubble to offer some protection as there was no other cover.

The Geth squad was made up of four shock troops and three rocket troopers and these were the first target of the wall of fire emanating from Shepard, Wrex and Garrus. Once the rocket troopers were dealt with they started on the remaining troops, a couple had already taken damage, and as the machine chatter and digital squeaks faded, the final head torch dimmed Shepard and the team began moving forward again.

Shepard looked to her left and caught Liara's eye and through the face plates of their helmets exchanged a short but intense look and for a brief moment there was nothing else in the universe but Liara's deep, soulful, playful blue eyes. The thought of anything happening to Liara, or losing her Asari flashed through her like a cold shockwave, it wasn't a new thought or feeling but its intensity in that moment actually did shock Shepard.

Shepard shook it off and brought her full concentration to the moment; in combat a passing thought that dimmed your concentration was as dangerous as a stray ribbon of plasma.

They soon emerged onto the outer exposed surface of the tower which gave a much clearer view of the now enclosed Citadel.

'Geth drop ship coming down the tube' Garrus pointed his gun towards a shape that was very familiar and growing ever larger as it approached down what now looked like some glittering tunnel.

Shepard gave a quick check around to the team and was struck by the reflection in all their face plates which she realised, would be reflected in her own. The lights of the Citadel, still shimmering on the now closed arms, and the flashing electric lightening flickering across the dark brooding bulk that was Sovereign.

'There are some AAguns just further along but the HUD is showing multiple Geth on the ground, lets move it and get those guns targeting the dropship, we could do without any more interference' Shepard said. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered how she knew about the AAguns.

Once fully in combat mode Shepard operated on a different level and she was fully in combat mode. They were pinned down by Geth, the dropship was getting closer and they still hadn't reached the AAguns to carry out a manual override. And their path to Saren was through the Geth there was no alternative route.
'Garrus we have to get those guns online' she shouted across 'can you take out that fucking rocket head with a long range shot?' It was terrain as much as anything that was causing problems and one rocket trooper had managed to get itself in a position that was all but unassailable and it was pretty much holding them were they were all by itself.

Shepard was just too far to the right in her 'compartment', deep square indentations that afforded great cover but great cover to the enemy as well, to be able to make the shot.

Liara was somewhere behind them, and too far back to help with biotics, and Wrex was with Shepard. It was fucked up, they were at a full tactical disadvantage, once that rocket trooper was down they were just going to have to make a break for it and get to the guns.

'Once Garrus has taken out the target everyone move to the left and move forward at pace, keep low keep covering fire to the right as you go but keep moving, we will be exposed and we can't afford the time to fight compartment to compartment, we have to get to Saren' she said into their comms 'are we clear?' Shepard received affirmatives from her team and braced herself.

They increased the rate of fire to try to give Garrus just a little more cover to take the shot but he would have to keep his head in the line of fire long enough to be ready when the target popped out of cover and be steady enough to take the shot in the time he had. Not an easy task or an easy shot even from where he was.

Over her comms she heard Garrus grunt and cough but she also heard the call 'target down Shepard'. 'Move' she yelled and made straight for Garrus's position.

She could feel her shields taking hits and the heat of fire flashing past her, the alarm on her barriers was beginning to bleep ominously but they would hold they had to; she had a job to finish.

On reaching Garrus she confirmed what she thought had happened; he had taken two shots and was not doing well, no time to check they had to move.

'Do they really not train you guys to duck' she said trying to lighten the tension as she hauled him to his feet and out of the compartment he had been slumped in. Wrex had reached her side and now took position in front of her and the still doubled over Garrus throwing all he had in terms of firepower and biotics at the nearest Geth.

Liara had reached them and was able to throw a defensive bubble around them and with that Shepard lifted Garrus over her shoulder and shouted to the others to move forward to the guns.

Once at the gun emplacement they finally had decent cover and a height drop on the Geth who were now behind them but still approaching.

'Wrex get those guns up and targeting that ship' her eyes focussed on the now eye wateringly close monster that was about to unleash more shit on their heads.

'Garrus sit rep?' she said as she was checking to see what the damage was and it looked as if he had taken a hit to the head and shoulder.

'Oh just winded Shepard, but I may be leaking air so if we could get inside soon… lovely though this walk has been…' she saw the slight twitch of his mandibles and knew he was seriously hurt.

'Well you just sit there and catch your breath you lazy bastard and let us finish the job for you' she kept it light but they both knew it was battlefield humour.

The AAguns sparked to life as Wrex turned back and looked down at Garrus then to her, she shook her head and mouthed 'not good' at him, she didn't need to say anything to Liara who was making
adjustments to Garrus's auto medigel infusers.

'Right lets finish off this little group of Geth I really don't want them dogging our footsteps then we can get back inside the tower from that entrance way' she pointed off to the left, 'Liara I need as much firepower and biotics to clear this lot out double quick.'

Shepard once more lifted Garrus across her shoulders and with Wrex taking the lead Liara watching their six, her own assault rifle ready in her right hand, they moved forward and finally gained interior access to the tower. The Geth dropship had crashed causing multiple damage and some of the ground Geth had also been caught in the blast.

Shepard hoped that they had lost their actual pursuers and now it would be dumb luck to 'bump' into any more trouble.

They came to a stop in a corridor that would lead them to the main square that held the Council chamber and where at that moment Saren was working to unleash the nightmare monsters from their realm of dark space.

She laid Garrus down just inside the door of a room off the corridor. Helmets off they could see he had taken a hell of a hit to the side of his head and blood had been pouring from the wound, stemmed now with the medigel, but he was still in need of urgent attention.

'Brewster, Stevens do you copy?' Shepard spoke into her OT and turning to Garrus said 'you're going to have some fine scars there Vakarian, Krogan females gonna be all over your ass' she smiled and saw the flicker of response on his face.

'Ha, even with the scars he's too scrawny, but I know one or two who don't mind something a little exotic' Wrex joined in the teasing but Shepard could see the worry in his eyes.

'Always… wondered… how you… saw me… Wrex… exotic hum… maybe… we need to… talk later…' Garrus struggled to get the words out but was determined to join in the banter.

'We copy Commander, we got Tali to Huerta it's a bit of a mess here but CSec have deployed forces to protect the hospital and she has received treatment. We are supporting CSec to defend the hospital any further orders ma'am' Brewster's voice came loud and clear.

'I need you to bring a medical team to this location, Garrus is down and badly hurt, Geth all over the place so keep frosty' she moved away slightly so that she was out of earshot of Garrus 'Beth we are going to have to leave him here and will be moving in to deal with Saren so not sure when we will be able to get back for him, do your dammedest to get to him and save his sorry ass' Shepard finished.

'Copy that Commander we'll get it done' Brewster sounded as if she was already organising the extraction team 'no marine left behind, Oscar Mike to your location.'

Damn right no marine left behind, certainly not on my watch Shepard thought, and they were all her marines.

'Right your taxi has been ordered and will be here shortly sir, try not to get into any more trouble we'll just clear up this mess and meet you in the bar.'

Shepard was kneeling down in front of Garrus and smiling at him, she tapped him on his leg and was about to stand up when he reached out and tried to grip her arm but he had no strength.

'Honour… friend… kick ass,' she could hardly hear him and much of what he was trying to say was
just breathing.

She knelt in close and locked eyes with her Turian friend and comrade 'Now here me mister, this is a direct order, you will hold on for extraction and you will remain alive at all times, am I making myself clear soldier?' her voice was strong and commanding, the voice she used to give orders that she expected to be carried out without question, this was Shepard in full Commander mode.

His eyes cleared a little and she thought she saw him try to sit up a bit straighter 'Yes Shepard… understood.'

'Good and don't think if you do disobey that order I will not come and drag your scrawny backside back into this fight even if I have to come into whatever passes for Turian hell to find you… are we clear?'

'Crystal' and this time she could see his mandibles twitch with a smile and he seemed a little stronger. She stood up and left the room with a final nod.

'He will be alright Shepard,' Liara said in an effort to comfort her.

'No he probably won't, but he definitely won't if he gives up… and we can say the same for this fight we're in' she turned and gave Liara a sad and very tired smile, realising that she still had the head splitting pain she had acquired on Ilos and knew she had to dig deep to get them all to the end of this.

There he was, standing at a large holographic control panel on the platform where the Councilors usually stood dispensing their 'wisdom'. As Shepard and her team ran into the main area they dealt with a handful of Geth and continued on making their way swiftly towards Saren.

They got to the beginning of the walkway that would take them to the platform when Saren suddenly turned and rose in the air on his hover platform and targeting them with an explosive charge. They scattered for cover.

'I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time Shepard' Saren said from his platform.

'In time to see you die your miserable bastard' she shouted back at him from cover.

'We meet at the final confrontation and we both expected it would end like this. You've lost you know that, don't you? In a few minutes Sovereign will have full control of the Citadel's systems. The relay will open and the Reapers will return.'

'Yeah well I'm not done yet so don't get all carried away with planning your victory party just yet,' as she was speaking to him her mind was already working out her final move on him, trying to gauge the moment where he was distracted enough to give her just a split second to get out of cover and get a shot or two in. She was signaling to Wrex and Liara to stay down, but be ready to move at a moment’s notice.

'You have survived this far Shepard but I've been improved, Sovereign has… upgraded me'

'So you really are insane… you let Sovereign implant you and take away any chance you had of keeping some control, you are so fucked Saren and you don't even see it' she was trying to needle him to get an emotional response to give just a little distraction.

'I suppose I should thank you, Shepard. After Virmire and our conversation, I couldn't stop thinking about what you said. About Sovereign manipulating me, about indoctrination. The doubts began to eat away at me, Sovereign sensed my hesitation and I was implanted to strengthen my resolve.'
Now my doubts are gone. I believe in Sovereign completely. I understand that the Reapers need organics. Join us and Sovereign will find a place for you too.'

'Listen to yourself Saren, you are being completely controlled through your implants… you're finished, you're just a tool. I still have a my own mind and free will and I like it that way… so no I won't be joining the Sovereign slave club.'

'The relationship is symbiotic. Organic and machine intertwined a union of flesh and steel. The strength of both the weakness of neither.

I am a vision of the future, Shepard. The evolution of all organic life. This is our destiny. Join Sovereign and experience a true rebirth.'

'Yeah well I'm happy with the way I was birthed first time round thanks… your solution looks on the ugly side with someone else pulling all the strings… this isn't over, they haven't won yet. Stand aside now and give me control of the station we can beat them.'

'We can't stop it! Not forever. You saw the visions. You saw what happened to the Protheans. The Reapers are too powerful.' Shepard began to hear some emotion and an edge of something… was that fear, panic… but she had to up the stakes time was running out.

'Saren you thought you were so fucking clever, stronger, better than Benezia, better than me… shit you think your better than all of us… but you still failed, you lost, they have more control over you than you did over Benezia, at least she had enough strength in the end to screw you over. Somewhere inside you there must be a part of you that knows this is wrong that you can still fight… or are you just as weak as you think the rest of us are?'

'Maybe you're right… maybe there's still a change for… ungrraah' she could see Saren physically being rocked by something, his hands went to his head and she saw her chance, leaping from cover and taking aim at Saren but he was still struggling to regain control and continued saying 'the implants… Sovereign is too strong…. I'm sorry it's too late for me.'

'You could still end this on your terms Saren, cheat Sovereign, end it and give me the controls' but before she could finish what she was saying or pull the trigger on her weapon to finish him he said, 'Goodbye Shepard, thank you.' With that Saren shot himself in the head and toppled like a puppet whose strings had been cut, off his platform, smashing through the glass floor and onto the grass below.'

Shepard rushed to the control panel and rammed in the OSD with the control overrides from Ilos, turning to Wrex she said 'Go make sure that traitorous bastard is dead.'

Wrex jumped down onto the grass and put another two shots into Saren's head.

'He is about as dead as it's possible to be Shepard,' Wrex gave the body a kick then turned and walked away a determined set to his shoulders.

'Ok that worked, I've got control of all the systems' Shepard said over her shoulder to Liara. 'Thank the Goddess, can you open the arms, we still need to deal with Sovereign,' she replied. 'On it… comms should be coming back online any…' but before Shepard could finish a communication interrupted her.

'This is the Destiny Ascention, mass drives offline, kinetic barriers down 40%. The Council is onboard repeat the Council is onboard.' The connection was clear enough although it broke up a little and there was static in the background.
'This is the SSV Normandy to the Citadel. Normandy to the Citadel. Do you copy… is that you Commander' Ash's voice broke through the static with another incoming message.
'Read you loud and clear this is Shepard' she replied.

'We caught that distress call, Commander. We are sitting here in the Andura sector with the entire Arcturus fleet. If you unlock the relays around the Citadel we can send in the cavalry.'

Wrex had just joined them on the platform 'You would sacrifice human lives for the Council, what have they ever done for your kind? Hell look at the way they treated you Shepard.'

'But this is bigger than any of us Wrex, Sovereign is a threat to every organic species in the galaxy,' Liara's eyes were wide with concern and she looked determinedly at Shepard waiting for the response.

'Exactly why you can't afford to throw away reinforcements trying to save the Council… you have to hold them back till the arms open up fully so the human fleet can take down Sovereign' Wrex made a good argument and tactically, militarily it was the best decision.

Shepard felt the weight of yet another huge decision sitting on her shoulders… of course any decision she made could be overturned by Hackett, but in this moment people she knew, who had trust and faith in her were looking to her to make a decision that would cost thousands of lives. Could impact on galactic politics… and she still had the mother of all headaches. She squared her shoulders tapped a few more commands into the panel and moved personal doubt and concern out of her mind.

'Commander Admiral Hackett has asked that I forward on a request for your recommendation given you are the ranking officer on the ground,' Joker's voice this time 'are your order's to come in immediately to save the Ascension or hold back?' Joker sounded as if he was relaying word for word what he was receiving from Admiral Hackett.

So there would be no overturning her orders and no opportunity to brief the Admiral so he could make the decision, she was only able to speak to the Normandy because of their ship to fire team comms system.

'Relays should now be operational. Please pass this recommendation to Admiral Hackett Joker. We need to save the Ascension, no matter what the cost, Shepard out.'

'Sure hope the Council appreciate it Shepard' Wrex rumbled.

Liara gave Shepard a faint smile and touched her briefly on the arm; relief was palpable on her face and in her body language.

All they could do was stand and listen to the comms chatter, as the fleet entered Citadel space they were able to pick up commands from Admiral Hackett. Shepard relaxed just a little when they heard,

'Destiny Ascension you are clear, you are clear, we have deployed ships to cover you,' from an alliance call sign dreadnaught.

'This is Admiral Hackett all ships not assigned to guard the Ascension move to target Sovereign.'

As they looked out of the windows up towards where Sovereign was still sitting with its finger like extensions holding firm to the top of the tower they could see the arms now open enough to let in the fleet and beyond they could see the carnage of the battle between the Citadel and Arcturus fleet and the Geth.
They all felt it at the same time, looked at each other and then for the source of the quaking, the noise of static, the energy surge that seemed to fly through the room. The platform was shaking so badly all three were having trouble keeping upright and then it gave way throwing them the twenty feet or so to the grass below.

Shepard caught her breath and quickly got to her feet and looked at the source of the disturbance. Saren's body was being held off the ground and was infused with a red burning energy, energy she could feel burning hot on her face. It was as if it was possessed, but not like the husks they had come across, this was something much more substantial.

She looked around and saw Liara and Wrex both transfixed by the show in front of them… 'Find cover now, stick close together' she shouted loudly to get them moving.

They moved as one, further away from the Saren husk and took position behind some concrete blocks.

Then the thing was on its feet, they could see all the way through its chest, its body… only the bone structure remained containing a red burning fire of pure energy. Shepard thought it was a thing straight out of old Earth hell myth's… maybe the myths were real after all, they just had to travel into space to find them.

'I am Sovereign and this station is mine' it used Saren's voice but it was so loud it seemed to penetrate inside her head, she felt it through her body.

Then all hell broke loose, the body Sovereign seemed to be able to call on all Geth forms of attack and weaponry including jamming and damping weapons. It was also able to jump around like a hopper.

Shepard decided that the best plan was to keep mobile from cover to cover as a group as that way they could concentrate fire when they had a shot, take advantage of Liara's barrier when they were in a tight spot, and have full 360 cover when the thing decided to move fast to try to get the drop on them.

It was intense, hard, and the concentration needed to keep out of harm’s way and still nail the thing was almost unsustainable. Shepard caught a flash of fighting that was happening between Sovereign and the fleet and she could see it was taking damage. Shepard also took hope from the fact that the body Sovereign seemed to be slowing down and they were getting more and more direct hits including some damaging biotic work from both Liara and Wrex.

Shepard had no idea how long the fight had been going on but it felt like an eternity. She had worked out that what happened to the Sovereign ship and the Sovereign husk were somehow connected as it seemed their resistance and force was running out at the same rate, from what she could tell from the very brief glances at the battle through the window.

Sovereign was on its knees, they had hit it was a sustained barrage, but as they began to move forward to finish it off it pulsed with energy and red fire erupted once again into flames as it sent out a shockwave of energy that lifted all three of them off their feet and slammed them fifteen feet backwards into the end wall.

Head spinning, ears ringing, no breath, and feeling like she had no bones left in her body Shepard struggled to stand up. On your feet now marine, the drill sergeant in her head shouted, get up, stand up marine, not dying on your back. And with a monumental effort she found her feet and looked quickly for Liara and Wrex.

A few feet away she saw something that froze the blood in her veins and rushed to Liara's side. She
was crumpled, blood covering her face, her armour looked cracked, and she was hardly breathing. Wrex was only a foot away and he was only just coming too shaking his head, his right arm hanging down obviously broken badly. He was bleeding from his head and his left arm was badly gashed. She looked over to the Sovereign body, it was still kneeling on the ground and she could see the power was dimmed but it was not dead, it was still a danger and they hadn't defeated the Sovereign ship, so this wasn't over.

But she couldn't leave Liara, she had to find help she could be, probably was dying… Shepard was, for the first time in her life, frozen to the spot.

Wrex was trying to get up but he couldn't it looked as if he had damage to his legs as well.

'Shepard you have to finish it… Shepard' he shouted her name the second time, breaking through the noise and static and nothingness in her head.

She looked at him as if just waking up and began to focus on his voice on his words.

'Finish it Shepard… do what you do best… make it pay' Wrex shouted knowing that her ringing ears, concussion or shock would make it difficult for her to hear him otherwise.

She nodded, squared her shoulders and stood up… picked up Wrex's shotgun and walked at a steady pace directly for the Sovereign body.

She started firing as soon as she got within range and the thing actually started to stumble backwards, it fired shots at her but she didn't notice and she didn't care. Her mission was not finished until the thing was dead and she always completed her mission.

Another step another shot, she could feel the heat from its energy on her face, it fired at her again and she felt it hit her somewhere on her side, she didn't even stumble. Shepard fired again and this time the thing seemed to lose its glow, the red dissipated, she stopped walking forward and fired again and it seemed to evaporate into wisps of dark mist.

It was her turn to sink to her knees, she knew that twenty feet behind her a good friend and her soul mate could possibly be dying or already dead. Garrus and Tali the same, she had taken quite a few hits, but they had stopped them. This time. This time the Reapers didn't get to walk straight in the door when they wanted to.

She looked up; out through the window she could see that Sovereign was being destroyed by the combined efforts of the joint fleets, she fancied she even saw a flash that could have been her Normandy fighting in the thick of it. She watched the Reaper as its grip loosened and it began to break apart, the pieces began to rain down onto the Citadel, onto the tower.

Then it dawned on her that a huge chunk of Sovereign was making one last attempt to finish her off, it was falling towards her and would smash through the window within seconds.

'Aw fucking crap… you have got to be kidding me' she said out loud and then everything went dark.
Slipping back into consciousness to darkness, dust blocking her nose, jagged edges… that damned alarm Claxton howling and setting every nerve end on fire, she could feel the noise inside her head… someone turn that fucking noise off… her head still splitting in pain… then away again into the void of nothing.

Breathe, another breath jolting her back to consciousness, back here… so was this where she was? The Citadel, Sovereign… 'Liara' the thought cut through her worse than any of her physical pain any of her mental anguish…

She tried to shout to call out, Liara was hurt, she needed to…. She… Silence, it was all but silent, well as silent as she could make out with the still present underwater sensation around her hearing. Did someone turn that alarm off, was it quiet so they could listen for any signs of life… her life… Liara's?

The breath came and went, shallow, fought for, painful. Just let go, into the arms of the universe, into the arms of the Goddess. The thought offered the only relief and comfort she could ever remember knowing in that moment, everything else was pain, frustration, anger and yes, fear, she would rather die on her feet facing an enemy, not bleeding out in some hole in the ground not knowing why or how or if she finished what she started.

Blue eyes, a familiar scent, comforting warmth in her mind… one last thing to do, one more time she had to do what seemed like the impossible… and she felt herself drifting up towards a blue sky, blue eyes.

Scraping, jostling, sounds… she thought they were sounds… she felt her body shift… then air on her face… voices…

'Commander… Shepard… we are getting you out' a strong voice, she tried to reply but nothing came out, just ragged breathing.

'Is she conscious… how bad is it' another voice, she thought she recognised him… Anderson… was it… 'get some more help over here now' that was louder he was shouting for more… more help to get her out… she tried again to speak, to move to help get herself out but still nothing happened.

She felt herself being carried, could feel something more soft cradling her body, felt the movement, she knew what it felt like to be stretchered off a battlefield… Elysium… carnage… now more carnage… 'Liara…please… not Liara' was all she could think.

'We are taking her straight to the Kilimanjaro' more shouting, a woman's voice this time. Shepard could definitely feel the thrum of engines now and fresh air, doors slamming shut and the familiar lift in her stomach as a mass drive defied gravity just before the dampers kicked in.

The edge of awareness drifted into being and Shepard made the monumental effort to open her eyes, but instead, swallowed a thick tongued, dry mouthed swallow, and then tried again.

This time she became aware that she could see light even with her eyes still closed. Shepard concentrated hard on her eyes she got them to open into thin slits, her lids flickering rather than
remaining steadily open, but she could still make out a white ceiling bulkhead, hazy, out of focus but that's what it was.

Then the sound of a gentle bleep, regular, somehow soothing. The realisation that she was laying on a bed, clean, warm, comfortable, feeling no pain, and that completed her assessment… she was in a hospital probably on the… hang on she knew where this was… she heard someone shout… yes she must be in the hospital on the Kilimanjaro. Her mother's ship and Hackett's flag ship, why? Why was she not still on the Citadel?

The Citadel… Liara… with that thought she started to force her eyes open, tried to sit up but couldn't only managing to move her arms an inch or so off the bed; and only when she tried to call out did she realise there was something obstructing her mouth, her throat.

'Relax Commander your safe, let me just remove the tube, we needed to help your breathing' that voice… the edge of face above her… familiar, Chakwas, her Doc from the Normandy.

The tube was out and she coughed and when she spoke her voice was quiet, raspy, barely more than a weak whisper.

'Doc… Liara… need to…' was as far as she got before Doctor Chakwas interrupted.

'She is close by Shepard, just down the hall, doing well, better than you, please relax and you will be able to see her soon' the Doc was doing something to Shepard's arm, a tube, a drip in her arm, 'you are still sedated so you will feel very disorientated, let yourself come round without forcing it. I am stopping the sedation. Do you understand Commander?'

'Mmmgh' was all she could manage and she felt totally exhausted but Liara was near, was not dead, she could rest a little more, just for a while… her awareness dimmed and she drifted away to nothing.

'Thank you I am very comfortable here.' The voice washed over Shepard, it was like music, like a beautiful colour, it spoke directly to her soul.

Opening her eyes she turned her head to where she knew she would see Liara and she had a moment to realise that her Asari had been talking to someone, an orderly, and her head was still slightly turned away finishing the exchange.

Shepard also felt Liara holding her hand gently in both of hers. As Liara turned back to face the bed Shepard caught her breath as their eyes locked and immediately the tears began to run down both their faces.

Liara leaned in close and they touched foreheads in silence for what seemed hours but it was more like a minute, and it was Shepard who spoke first.

'I let you get hurt… I nearly got you killed' Shepard's voice was still weak but it was heavy with emotion and the confession ripped itself from deep within her.

'No you must not say that Shepard' Liara pulled back a little and began kissing Shepard's face and brought one hand up to stroke her cheek 'you did not force me there, it was where I was meant to be and you saved me, you saved us all.' Liara's tears were still falling on her face but her voice was soothing and her eyes were full of concern.

'I honestly believed the safest place you could be was by my side… that I would never let anything harm you… that I could always protect… be your shield if I needed to be…' Shepard's voice trailed away her tears now stopped but deep emotions still playing through her like ice and fire.

Fear for what might have happened, anger at herself for not protecting Liara, for being so focused on
the mission, so convinced she was invincible that she had convinced herself she could share it with those around her. Guilt, concern, love, loss and grief all mixing together and flowing through her, Shepard had never felt so much all at once in her entire life.

'We will have time to talk about this Shepard, but for now you need rest so that you can regain your strength, there will be time' Liara kissed Shepard's hand and looked at her lover with tenderness etched across her face.

Shepard seemed to snap out of where she was and realised she had no idea what injuries Liara had and with her quieter and huskier voice said, 'Liara I'm such a tool... how are you feeling... what happened... where are you hurt... are you in pain?'

As she was speaking Shepard turned towards Liara and shifted her weight onto her elbow reached across with her other arm to Liara cupping her hand around the Asari's cheek. Shepard's face showed all her fear and concern, what didn't show was her frustration that she couldn't take whatever pain Liara was feeling away and into her own body.

'I am afraid my head is not as strong as yours' Liara said with a smile and continued 'I gave myself quite a bad concussion, although we have shared that particular injury. I broke bones in both my legs and shattered by collar bone, and some minor bruising and cuts. And before you take the responsibility for this Shepard' Liara continued in a firmer tone, 'I am a full biotic and should have been quick enough to use a barrier. I was not... I did not have my brain...'

Shepard smiled weakly and interrupted 'I think your trying to say you didn't keep your head in the game... and I believe what you should have said is that I have a very thick head which you can look up on the extranet for its other meaning' it was Shepard's turn to kiss the Asari's hands but having done so she needed to lay back down on the bed.

'You're sitting in a wheelchair Liara I'd say that was pretty serious.'

'Only for another couple of days and only because Doctor Chakwas insists that I begin with proper strengthening and stretching exercises, I can walk on them perfectly well, shall I show you?' Liara tilted her head to one side and made to stand up but Shepard reached and pulled her back into her seat.

'No, you have to do what the Doc orders Liara, Alliance rules' Shepard grinned 'and don't think I haven't noticed you're wearing a Kilimanjaro sweat shirt. Have to say it's not a look I thought I would ever see you wearing and it certainly does suit you... but your ship is the Normandy,' Shepard faked looking hurt and let down 'these things are important.'

'Your mother gave it to me actually' Liara smiled but there was also a trace of something else that Shepard couldn't read.

'Ouch how did that go... sorry Liara I really should have been around for the first meeting... still that's no excuse for wearing the badge of another ship.'

Shepard leaned over and kissed Liara on the lips, it was brief but the flash of passion and connection was a strong as ever.

'Captain Shepard has been very kind and also very worried about you and concerned about me. I can see you reflected in her.'

'I have been told I am my mother's daughter, although I don't really see it myself.'
Liara smiled down at her Human and they remained in comfortable silence, just being with each other, the initial shock and tension of Shepard’s reaction to the events making space for their connection, their friendship, and their deep feelings for each other.

A hand was running through, what was now, her short hair. It had been so long since Shepard had found the time to get her usual marine cut that she was showing an inch or so of growth.

The touch was familiar but not Liara… ’Mum’ Shepard said in a groggy not awake voice turning her head and forcing her eyes open.

’Yes Liddy it’s me. Liara has just gone for a lie down,’ Hannah Shepard continued to stroke her daughters head allowing her fingers to ruffle the short hair as they moved.

’Dry mouth… is there…’

’Here you are darling, some water, can you sit up a little?’ her mother helped Shepard to sit up a little against her pillows and held a cup while she took some sips.

’Thanks,’ Shepard was coming around now and could see the worry on her mother’s face, ’I must look like shit for you to be so worried considering all the scrapes I’ve gotten myself into over the years’ she gave one of her ‘winning’ smiles to her mother and then instantly regretted it. Her mother knew all her smiles and ways of deflecting from what she was really feeling.

’Yes… well you do look like shit; you’ve been very badly banged about, much more than usual. So excuse me if I get a little concerned about you. Savior of the Citadel you may be but your still my daughter and that will never change’ her sternness was more than tempered by the love in her voice and expression.

’Why do I feel like I should say ‘sorry Mum’ like I was reckless playing a game of z ball’ Shepard gave her mother a real grin this time and her mother shook her head in mock exasperation and returned a smile.

They chatted for a while longer and Captain Shepard gave her daughter some of the detail of the battle with the Geth and Sovereign. She also told her how badly the Citadel had been damaged, civilians, military and CSec personnel killed and injured during the fighting.

’I am so proud of you LV, it would have been so much worse without your intervention. And if you hadn’t stopped Saren we would all be dead from the invasion.’

’You believe my intel about the Reapers?’ Shepard was touched by her mother’s words about her actions but if her mother believed her about the Reapers perhaps it wouldn’t be so hard to convince the Council.

’Of course I do as does Admiral Hackett and Captain Anderson but we are likely to be in the minority. People don’t want to believe in the end of the world and if they can avoid thinking about it then they will. As the XO I am aware of a lot of secure and confidential comms traffic, which I will not share with you, but I will give you a heads up.

Firstly you are a galactic hero… don’t look like that you won’t be able to avoid a little fuss,’ she smiled at her reluctant hero daughter and saw her husband clearly present in his marine daughter. ’And for a while you will have a lot of leeway with politicians don’t waste it. The public will love you for much longer.

Secondly, the Council will not accept the Reapers are any more real now than they did, the public
will not want to know either. The only thing worse than a nightmare is finding out it isn't.'

'But we only delayed them… they will come… how the hell do I get anyone to take it seriously… I can't prepare and fight them on my own' Shepard was frustrated and angry and she looked at her mother searching for a way forward.

'You're not on your own, I've told you there are those in authority who do believe you, I'm not sure that you don't even have some support on the Council. People will be doing everything they can to prepare quietly behind the scenes. Guarding against those working to support the Reapers like Saren, but you will have to be our lightening rod.

You will need to take the open overt action and be the voice of warning and you will appear to be a lone voice,' her mother looked at her quizzically.

'How the frak did you get so good at politics?' and then the penny dropped 'this is a conversation you've had with the Admiral isn't it, these are his orders for me?'

'Glad to see you're as sharp as ever, yes this is a conversation that would be very difficult for you two to have directly. And if you don't think that an Admiral in the fleet has to be good at politics you really have not been paying attention and guess who is standing at his shoulder most of the time,' Hannah Shepard smiled down at her daughter with love, pride and a little sadness.

Shepard sat up a little straighter in bed and squared her shoulders as best she could, her mother recognised the gesture immediately and what it meant.

Captain Shepard knew just what task was in front of Commander Shepard, savior of the Citadel, hero of Elysium, first human spectre, and remarkable as her daughter was she was still just that, her daughter, a woman, a marine, not a super hero, but that was exactly what she was being asked, no, ordered to be; orders Captain Shepard had just passed on. And once her daughter had her orders she would see her mission through to the end, whatever the cost.

'Who did I lose Doc?' Shepard now felt fully awake and out from whatever emotional hole she had dug for herself.

'I would rather hear it from you, I don't want Liara to have to tell me, please Doc.' Shepard had seen the reluctance on Doctor Chakwas's face and her attempts to deflect the question. Not because the Doctor felt she couldn't or that she would find it difficult. She was used to breaking that kind of bad news, no she had been asked not too. Liara wanted to 'break it' to Shepard herself.

'I am so terribly sorry Commander. Tali did not survive the infection from her wounds. We brought her up here with the rest of our Alliance wounded but there was nothing we could do. Her injuries were severe and serious but certainly treatable with a positive outcome given the speed you got her to Huerta, yes Commander you did everything you could for her.'

Doctor Chakwas had caught the dismissive look and hand wave and knew it was pointless trying to convince Shepard that it was not her fault, but Chakwas would try anyway. 'It was the infection, you know how dangerous for a Quarian that is and it seems there were some particularly potent and difficult to identify sources on Ilos that entered her system.' She left the rest unsaid.

'Where is she?' Shepard's voice betrayed none of the emotion she was feeling.

'The Admiralty Board asked that she be taken to a rendezvous point for transfer to a Quarian vessel so she would receive the proper death rights and a hero's welcome home to the flotilla. The
Normandy left with her around 12 hours ago.'

'And Garrus… Wrex… my marines, crew?' Shepard was bracing herself for further bad news.

'Wrex has already made a full recovery, well once I set the breaks he had in his legs, he went with the Normandy to represent the rest of your team.'

Despite everything Shepard found space to feel touched by Wrex's actions. She understood what he was trying to show, trying to do, by taking that role for his krant.

Chakwas continued 'some damage to the Normandy but superficial and only a few cuts and bruises amongst the crew from some of the sharper turns that tested the inertial dampers beyond their ability to cope. Both marines back from the Citadel without injury and Garrus will make a full recovery. But to be honest none of the Doctors that saw him in Huerta for emergency treatment could work out why he was actually still alive,' she looked knowingly down at Shepard having heard the 'orders' the Commander had given Garrus which probably had made all the difference.

Shepard took a deep breath and let it out slowly, almost steadying herself, and certainly shifting back into officer mode.

'Thank you Doctor I appreciate your telling me, and also for everything you did for Tali. So how soon can I get out of this bed and start to get myself ready for duty?' Shepard turned to look at the Doctor and both their expressions told the other they were ready for a battle of wills.

'Commander you took extensive damage quite apart from the stunning head trauma, and I won't even begin to tell you how dumb it was to put your head in another of those Prothean beacons. No Commander you will hear me out as you well know I have the authority but I sometimes hold on to the vain hope that if I could just get a marine to understand how much damage they had taken they would not fight me every inch of the way to recuperation.

As I was saying, head trauma, crush injuries to the left side, fractured legs, collapsed lung, ribs, internal crush injuries,' Shepard had not wavered or flinched but Chakwas caught a flash of worry that showed in the Commander's eyes.

'Why don't I get to the good part,' Chakwas said taking pity on Shepard 'it has all been repaired but we had to use some very cutting edge and advanced Alliance synthetic tech to rebuild your skeletal injuries, you have a replacement kidney and spleen, where your muscles were torn or otherwise damaged we have again used replacements and I had to balance you up so you also lost some undamaged muscles replaced by synthetics… and you will need to remain in bed on meds to stabilise the surgery and implants for another five days with further light exercise for a period after that.'

It took all the Doctors will not too actually laugh at the face Shepard had pulled hearing about her five day bed rest, in fact Shepard let out a very un-Commander like moan that would not have been amiss coming from a frustrated three year old.

'Seems unfair I only got to kill that bastard Reaper once given the cost of doing it,' Shepard sounded and looked murderous.

'Well technically we did Commander if you count taking down the ship as well,' she moved away to go and check on her other patients but she threw a parting comment over her shoulder, 'but you need to concentrate on happy thoughts Commander, happy thoughts help the healing.'

If the Doctor had looked back at Shepard she would have seen the Commander now fully acting out her inner three year old by mimicking the Doctor to herself with exaggerated face and head
movement and spitting out 'happy thoughts… happy fucking thought' in anything but a happy tone of voice.
Chapter 12

Arcturus Station

By the time the Normandy had returned from its sad duty Liara was fully up and about and Shepard was being driven crazy by inactivity. Garrus was still flat on his back but they had chatted via comms and Shepard was struck by how deeply he had also been affected by Tali's death.

As the second week of her forced confinement dawned she was like a bear with a sore head, according to her mother. The analogy had to be explained to both Liara and Garrus who both said that it would be more fitting to say a Krogan with a sore tooth.

Wrex had visited her in hospital before setting off for some recreation on Omega and Tuchanka. He would return to 'duty' as soon as she sent him the call. Shepard respected the Krogan enormously and they had made a strong bond, she was honoured he counted her as part of his krant, they were more than 'just' comrades in arms, they were kin.

Despite the best efforts of both Doctor Chakwas and Doctor T'Soni, Shepard managed to retain command of her ship and her crew from her hospital bed. She had granted all crew and her team fourteen days leave, requisitioned a full repair and refit for the Normandy at the stations 'dry' dock and had Liara hunting down any tech that had been recovered from the Geth or Sovereign that they could incorporate into the Normandy.

Know your enemy and use their tech against them, Shepard had said during one of their many conversations about improving their chances against the 'next Reaper' they met. As an Alliance officer it would have been beyond her influence or control to make the changes but as a Council Spectre and recent 'Saviour of the Citadel' all manner of people were happy to give her pretty much what she wanted to 'clear up the remaining Geth'.

Shepard also needed to get her crew up to full strength as they seemed never to have moved from their 'shake down' mode, there hadn't been time, once they hit Eden Prime it was a non-stop ride to the confrontation with Sovereign.

When Shepard finally got the OK to be discharged and authorised for more robust physical activity to get her back into shape she had actually only been on the Kilimanjaro for thirteen days but it felt like a lifetime.

Shepard and Liara were going to have two weeks, fourteen glorious days to themselves, before the Spectre and Alliance Commander would have to step back into her life, into the politics, into her mission.

Illium

Before the door had even completely closed behind them Shepard and Liara crashed into each other's arms and their mouths found each other in a fury of deep kisses; their tongues flashing between them tracing lips, teeth and reaching deep into each other's mouths in turn.

As they kissed Shepard was slowly walking forward in the vague direction of the bedroom and Liara was allowing herself to be guided backwards, but their hands were ripping away the clothes that kept them from feeling each other's rising heat, skin to skin.
Shepard reached around behind Liara and undid the fasteners on her long Asari dress and they stopped for a moment as it fell to the ground, Shepard opened her eyes a little wider and noticed they were not far from the small dining table.

With a huge grin she picked up the Asari who wrapped her now exposed thighs around Shepard's hips, still kissing and biting each other's lips they reached the table and Liara found herself sitting on it with Shepard standing between her legs.

'Let me…' Shepard's words were interspersed with kissing whichever part of Liara's body her mouth was closest to as she removed Liara's underwear, 'introduce you… to the… hotel… room… fuck… Dr T'Soni.' They were both becoming breathless from their passion but also from laughing.

'Should I be taking… mmm… ooh… notes… Commander' Liara was leaning back her hands planted firmly on the table behind her and Shepard now had free reign over the Asari's body. Shepard, with Liara's help, had stripped her upper body of clothing and as she stood between the Asari's thighs she pressed their breasts together and gently moved against her lover in a small circle never losing contact between them but allowing their nipples to brush past each other. At the same time she began tracing the sensitive folds of Liara's crest with her tongue allowing her teeth to graze gently along the edges. She was rewarded by Liara's quickened breathing, the moans of sheer pleasure that were escaping the Asari's mouth and the shudders of desire were also flashing through both their bodies.

With her left hand holding Liara around the lower back Shepard began to move her right hand slowly down the side of the Asari's body, fingers trailing and moving across the gentle curve off the belly, down further to find the top of the perfectly shaped blue thigh.

Shepard's mouth found the folds on the side of the regal neck and again traced them with her tongue in between kissing and gently biting, she also moved her body slightly to one side to allow her hand access to Liara's hot and very wet cunt. Shepard had felt the wetness soaking through her trousers as she pressed herself against her lover.

Liara gave a small murmur of loss as Shepard broke contact along one side but it was replaced almost immediately with a gasp and her head snapped forward as Shepard found the sensitive bud that was akin to a human clitoris.

Shepard began to move two fingers against it in a slow elliptical motion and on the downward pass trailed the tips of her fingers into the wetness and drew it up across the bud to lubricate the movement. The movement also teased the promise of pleasure to come as the finger tips penetrated between the Asari's outer lips.

As she turned her face to look as Liara she saw the familiar blackness in the eyes, they had joined pretty much as soon as they entered the room, she also saw the flushed appearance of exertion on her lover's face and knew it would be reflected in her own. Shepard knew how much Liara was aroused, how much desire was coursing through her, how the building tension laced with an edge of satisfaction was pulling them closer and closer to release because it echoed in Shepard's body 'you gotta love the Asari' she thought briefly 'double the pleasure…,' but the absolute need to be inside Liara was now wiping anything else away.

Liara was moving against Shepard's fingers and moans of delight came faster and faster from her lover until finally an explosion of sensation reaching every nerve ending in both their bodies, wave upon wave of pulsing joy, release, gratification and while the pulses were still fresh and strong Shepard moved her hand lower and plunged her fingers into the Asari making them both gasp and moan with renewed and inflamed need.
Shepard moved her hand and her fingers in a way that she had learned would give them both the most pleasure, dropping into a rhythm that was steadily increasing in speed and strength. Liara moved her left hand down and held Shepard’s forearm loosely so that she could feel the muscles and sinews move to and fro, feel the strength and the power that was pulsing into her.

They found each other's lips and kissed again and again and also whispered to each other words of sexual arousal, of encouragement, and almost of love.

'Oh Shepard, yes… harder…
oh yes…

more… there… yes… oh Goddess… deeper… all of you… inside me… need all of you…'

'Fuck Liara you are…. fuck…. yeah… always…. all of me… you… mine…'

When the climax came it exploded through their bodies, their minds their very being. Shepard stayed inside Liara until the pulsing and involuntary twitching of muscles and nerves had quietened. Liara was leaning her head on Shepard's shoulders one arm around her while the other lay against the hand that was still inside her.

Shepard let out one of her body shaking laughs and looked as Liara with a huge smile on her face. Liara raised her head to look at her lover and mirrored the smile and the laugh.

'Fuck Liara you know I love you right… so let's just say it and get it out of the way…' she said through the laughter 'the number of times we both nearly said the 'L' word it was getting painful,' she finished by planting a kiss on her lover's lips.

Liara playfully cuffed Shepard around the head and beaming said 'Oh Shepard yes we have both experienced the others feelings during our joining but thank you for allowing us to say the words… it was becoming… problematic.'

'Yeah well I was kinda hoping you would break the log jam babe you're the one with all the experience of the feelings stuff' Shepard knew they had been as bad as each other given Liara's shyness and inexperience, even with ordinary social interactions, and Shepard's lack of experience in any kind of serious emotional relationship and therefore her fear, but she could never resist teasing her beautiful, shy, sexy Asari.

'I think you may want to get out of those trousers Shepard I think they are rather wet' and as Shepard withdrew her hand, accompanied by a small moan of pleasure from them both, Liara stood up and began removing her human's trousers.

'Ah I see you are moving to stage two… phaooor… of the hotel room fuck... Dr.... T'Soni… aahhh,' the words were said through short rumbles of laughter.

It was Shepard's turn to struggle to speak given that Liara had not only removed all Shepard's remaining clothes but had found that her lover was quite as wet as she had been and she was determined to take full advantage of it.

'Any instructions Commander,' Liara said playfully 'up against the wall or….' 'Oooh bedroom' Shepard laughed 'definitely bedroom T'Soni.'

As they headed to the bedroom anyone who may have been passing their door would have heard happy, playful laughing and may even have been able to feel the edges of a bubble of blissful contentment and joy.
They had travelled to Illium using an alliance scout ship, it was about four times the size of the Normandy's shuttle, but was only built for a crew of four so there was decent accommodation and comfort. The scout ship was used for deep cover missions and its occupants could be on listening duty for months at a time.

All in all it was a very comfortable run around and mobile hotel suite but they wanted to taste luxury, anonymity and indulgence for the first half of their trip so they booked in at the Azure Hotel.

This had been Liara's choice, not one that Shepard would have predicted once they arrived and realised it was a hotel for well 'lovers' and considered quite outrageous. The hotel suites were excellent and food was as good as they would find in any high end restaurant and it came as room service any time night or day. They didn't go further than their balcony for two days. It wasn't all sex and lovemaking, they talked, they laughed, they watched vids, even attempted to cook but other hungers got in the way.

Without realising it they tried to cram months or 'living' together, getting to know each other, enjoying each other's company into those short forty eight hours.

One the last day and night of their stay they ventured out to wander the around shops, finding parks to sit in and ending up having dinner in a small romantic restaurant. Liara insisted they completed their 'dirty weekend' as Shepard had joked about it, at the nightclub and bar called Eternity.

It seemed all Asari were born to move to music in a way that most other species could only dream off, and quite a lot of members of other species dreamed a lot about Asari dancers in one way or another.

The standing joke about Shepard's dancing was not without its merit, but that didn't stop her, she would let the music take her over and just 'be'.

But not tonight, not with this most amazingly, liquidly, sensually, sexily moving exquisite woman dancing next to her, with her. Shepard was not going to miss one mili second of being on a dance floor with the most beautiful woman in the galaxy who, almost unbelievably, loved her.

Shepard could just feel an echo of their joining, feel Liara's body moving with her, through her, their connection strong, their desire unquenched, heightened and sharpened by the delay they were playing with staying here, flirting, teasing, inflaming their lust for each other.

They could both feel the throbbing need flashing out across their bodies from their hard clits; it was exciting, bad... very bad... and very, very good.

Closer and closer they danced until they fitted together and moved against each other to the music and their own desperate rhythm. Shepard's arms holding Liara tightly around her waist while her lover ran fingers up and down the back of her humans head. Thigh's between thighs pushing, grinding. They allowed a small climax claim them before they left and headed for their last night in the penthouse suite of the Azure resort hotel.

The next phase of their holiday was Shepard's choice, they were headed for a small and remote garden world that was slowly being settled and developed but was off the relay network at the very edge of the known parts of the galaxy. There were still huge amounts of the galaxy that was
unknown, only accessible by long FTL journeys.

Exploration was going on but it was mainly a one way trip and not made by many other than science teams. There was enough of the accessible galaxy unsettled and unexplored to satisfy even most adventurous and curious of human's natural need to break new ground.

The system contained two garden planets and the larger, Eos, was much more developed with four decent sized urban areas boasting a population of around 150,000 settlers across the planet. Their destination, Hasperos was still developing along the lines of small villages and towns. Both planets had decent geological deposits, eezo, fresh water in abundance and various configurations of Salt Ocean. It also provided food for all known diets which made life a lot easier for the Turians and very occasional Quarian who visited.

Eos had climate regions similar to Earth and Thessia but no frozen poles while Hasperos had a narrower range and could be described as similar to the Earth Mediterranean with Alpine regions.

The system had something else going for it as well. It was far enough away from both the Terminus System and the Traverse as to be too far off the map to interest slavers and raiders.

The individuals, family groups, social groups, communities and businesses who sought out this jewel in the galaxy all wanted to come to settle and live in a quieter, more peaceful, in touch, and in balance with the groundside environment lifestyle. And they came from all Council races, it was more a state of mind that a specific species thing, making this system almost unique in the galaxy for that reason alone.

'Welcome to the Phosphorus system' Shepard said as they dropped out of FTL and began a smooth glide towards the inner system. She put the ship in orbit around Eos for a couple of spins so Liara could have a look.

They were sitting in pilot and co-pilot seats in the cockpit where they had spent a fair amount of the journey from Illium. Shepard had insisted they detoured to take in cosmic views that would offer stunning light shows through the multispectral windows of the scout ship, which meant they could see sights like PIA14872, in the Circinus constellation in all its glory in real time. Shepard particularly wanted to share the moment with Liara as the supernova that was contributing to the stunning view had been seen on Earth nearly 2500 years ago.

As soon as the words came out of her mouth Shepard realised how short a time that would be for an Asari and they both started howling with laughter at the realisation.

'They called it a guest star' she smiled across at Liara 'showed in Earth's sky for almost a whole year according to the records.' It felt odd but satisfying to finally be able to share knowledge with Liara for a change. Shepard loved the fact that her lover was a very, very, intelligent and clever women and was only too happy to increase her own learning and understanding through conversation and discussion with Liara.

Although sometimes Shepard wondered if Liara was 'entertained' enough by her more practical and soldierly mind and its chatter she need not have worried. Liara really did feel exactly the same way about her Human as Shepard did about her Asari.

Shepard hadn't told Liara where they were going, why, or what they would be doing. She wanted to surprise her and Shepard was aware that Liara probably hadn't allowed anyone close enough to make this kind of fuss of her. She also wanted to share something really precious with her soul mate and it was a bonus that they needed to come here for it to work as Shepard wanted. They landed a few clicks away from the largest settlement on the continent at the designated 'space
port’ which was really more like an old twentieth century Earth ‘air strip’. There were only two short haul shuttles and no buildings at all.

Shepard drove their RTV Kat off the ship, it was a very cut down Tomkah, with a soft top that was currently rolled down so they could enjoy the glorious sunshine and endless blue skies.

The vehicle was already loaded with all the supplies and kit they would need for their five day stay so once they locked down their ship they were free to head into the small town that was probably the capital of an entire planet. Shepard and Liara both felt a little strange not being in their respective ‘uniforms’ opting for very casual and relaxed ‘holiday wear’.

Shepard’s gun rack was in the back of the Kat, she was determined to be a civilian for least a few days and with no large or even medium sized predators on the planet there was no excuse to carry anything. She had been before she knew how peaceful, friendly and laid back the place was.

Like any good neighbour or fellow pioneer, even a temporary one, Shepard had called ahead to the local area and asked if she could bring in any supplies from Illium as a show of support for the endeavour. And so their first stop was at the central community facility to drop off their cargo. Electronics, tech, machine parts, medikits and less practical items like rugs, small pieces of art, clothing, and personal crates of belonging shipped forward to new homes.

They spent some time chatting to the locals that were around and shared a bite to eat at a small open air café with the Turian logistics lead, a Human who seemed to fulfil the role of quartermaster and a couple of Salarian’s who were talking excitedly about a plant discovery they had made that could have health properties.

It was so relaxing, Liara was holding her own in the Salarian discussion and Shepard was happily chatting about the plans the colony had to link its main population areas without making too much of an impact on the ground. She was pleased to find out that the system was under the protection of the Council and it would be the local populations who would decide about what or how much development and resource harvesting would happen within their system.

By the time they finally said their goodbyes it was late in the planets afternoon but Shepard was determined to sleep under the stars with her soul mate, so they set of in no great rush, they would stop in a couple of hours when they found somewhere they liked the look of.

They had nowhere to be, nothing to do and no one to please but themselves. As far as Shepard was concerned this was the closest she would get to ‘heaven’ before or after death.

The first night when they laid on their big soft bedding, in the lee of a small rise that offered them a view out across a shimmering lake, Liara looked up to the stars and said, ‘It would be very easy for a small ship to get lost up there and never be found’ she sounded wistful and Shepard understood where that feeling was coming from, she felt it herself.

Shepard rolled onto her elbow and leaned in to kiss her lover and answered, ’oh I think we’re already lost, and I’m not sure we would find anywhere better for a journeys end then here,’ she smiled and began to lose herself in Liara’s eyes.

‘And I lose myself in you every time we make love, there is a part of my soul that will never be found again Liara, you have it and I have a part of yours.’

Liara could only nod she was so full of love and tenderness, and with small tears of joy falling down the Asari’s cheeks they folded into each other’s arms. Shepard had never known such peace,
contentment, joy, there was only now this moment these few days but they were more than some people had in a lifetime.

They had followed the same loose daily routine for the past three days and three nights. Cooking together in the open air, walking in the stunning pristine natural beauty, swimming in warm blue pools or slow moving rivers, exploring, even reading in a companionable silence, or rather long breaks in conversation.

And the sleeping in the warm, soft nights under the stars wrapped in each other's arms, sometimes falling asleep holding hands just staring up into the star dusted deep lilac sky. It didn't even get completely dark; dark enough to make sleeping easy but with enough ambient reflection from the planets two moons to make it easy enough to get around.

On the morning of the fourth day they packed up camp and this time Shepard had a clear destination in mind. She had told Liara how she knew of this place through a single visit with her father. He had brought her for a short leave that her mother couldn't share because of her duties.

They had camped but their trip had been climbing focused and it was one of her clearest, fondest and most happy memories. Shepard had a plan to give Liara something she would be able to keep with her forever, that would stay fresh and real, long after the vids they had been taken had faded, long after Shepard herself had faded away.

Liara was sitting on the ground with a clear view of the huge rock face rising about twelve hundred feet toward the blue sky that was to be Shepard's climb. Liara was looking… concerned… Shepard was going to free climb and was aiming to make it to the top in around two hours.

As Shepard sat down close she gave Liara a huge grin, 'will you meld with me so that I can share a memory with you,'

'Of course Shepard' and Liara gave a smile that would could melt even the hardest heart. The memory was of Shepard and her father making this same climb, she was fourteen and it was the last time they had really spent together before he was killed in the operation on Mindoir.

It had taken closer to four hours to do the climb then and they had used safety equipment. But the unique thing about that climb was the journey back down. They were both wearing shutes and after they had admired the view from the top for the first time in her life she threw herself against gravity with nothing more protecting her that a microthin piece of fabric. It was the most exhilarating thing she had ever done in her life to that point.

After they broke apart Shepard saw that Liara had tears in her eyes and was obviously deeply moved, 'oh Shepard thank you, you were so young and he loved you so much… such a gift… I don't know what to say' she broke off and Shepard pulled her into a hug.

'Hey darling, it's one of my best and strongest memories and I wanted to share it with you here where it happened and I'm going to share my memory of the climb that I'm about to do now… so… well it seemed like a good idea at the time…' Shepard suddenly wondered if it was that great an idea after all she had only managed so far to make Liara very worried and now very upset.

'No one has ever done anything like this for me before Shepard, you planned this whole trip for me, this very precious memory… and the risks you take to give me another… and perhaps also to show me how brave and fearless you are…' as she spoke the last words Liara looked up into Shepard's eyes and smiled a look of amused questioning on her face.
Shepard gave her a big grin and a small chuckle 'aw well maybe just a little… can't have you thinking I've gone soft with all this soppy stuff' Shepard leaned in and kissed Liara deeply, stood up and over her shoulder said 'now relax, have a nap in the lovely sunshine, you won't miss anything… you get to do it with me when I get back down.'

Shepard made it to the top in just over two hours and she sat down not quite exhausted but almost. It had been harder than is should have been as she was still recovering from her injuries. She drank some water and stared out at the view savouring the power she could feel in her body from the exertion despite having pushed herself to a limit.

Before she made her dive of the edge she prepared to make only the third vow she had ever made in her life. The first was to do all in her power to find a cure for the genophage, the second was to do all in her power to help the Quarians take back their home world, and now she would make her third that Liara would know through her memory when they melded.

'I will never let any harm come to you and I will always come back to you, Liara,' then Shepard threw herself off the edge and enjoyed the following twenty seconds hurtling towards the ground as only someone with her particular disposition could.

Liara practically threw herself into Shepard's arms and held her so tight but she was laughing and couldn't wait to experience the climb and the parajump. Shepard succeeded in making Liara cry again when she heard her vow at the top of the mountain, but from acute emotional overload and not sadness… well at least that's what it sounded as if Liara said.

They both felt incredibly sad leaving the at the end of their time on Hasperos and agreed they would return, if Shepard was another kind of woman she might even have been tempted to think about building a house close to the lake and the mountains that had been their favourite spot.

But even if she was that kind of woman she wouldn't be able to do that… not until… because even remote, peaceful Hasperos would feel the cold, emotionless obliteration of the Reapers if they couldn't stop it happening, if she couldn't stop it happening.

They ended their leave at the Prothean Archives on Mars… of course Shepard had said… where else would Liara have chosen Shepard had thought laughing to herself… and being a Spectre and a 'hero' she could arrange exclusive and privileged access for her Prothean expert. Which made Liara very happy and what made Liara happy made Shepard happy to.

All too soon they were heading the little scout ship, that had come to feel like home to them both, back towards the Arcturus Station, back to duty, back to her life.
Chapter 13

Arcturus Station

Once back on at Arcturus Shepard was on a roller coaster of military and political protocol and public relations.

With the Citadel having taken so much damage the Council had moved to Arcturus to take advantage of the infrastructure available. It was home to the Systems Alliance Parliament and choosing to base the Council on Arcturus, while the Citadel was un-useable, was also a show of unity and thanks to Humanity for the sacrifices they had made saving the Citadel and the Council.

The Parliament hosted an unprecedented joint session with representatives from the Asari Republics, Salarian Union and Turian Hierarchy, all the other Council space races ambassadors and of course in pride of place the Council itself. The event was simulcast across the Galaxy to further reinforce the unity and strength of the Council races.

Shepard already knew what big political and public relations coup was to be announced, Humanity would have a seat on the Council, a huge change in galactic politics which would not be particularly universally welcome. Admiral Hackett had asked for her recommendation for Councillor, or rather he was looking to see what her opinion of Udina for the role was.

'I'm not qualified to make any kind of comment sir, I know we need politicians and when we've worked out what for they may be of some use, but most of the time they just get in the way. And I have personal history with Udina who I think is a slimy, two faced, self-serving, untrustworthy son of a bitch. But as I said sir I couldn't possibly comment.' Shepard was standing at stiff ease in front of her Admiral in his office.

'I understand Commander,' Hackett was his usual poker face but she thought she saw a softening around the eyes 'what would you say to Captain Anderson?'

'An excellent choice, he is an outstanding human being and a fine officer. But he will hate it,' her reply was accompanied by a couple of small nods of the head from Hackett.

'I agree Commander and I know he will hate leaving active duty but we need him there.

Now let's discuss the military celebration that will follow the joint session and Council ceremony. You know you will be receiving a number of awards and I expect you to put on your best face. But I need your recommendations for your team and crew.

This is a military decision, I won't have them cheapened for the sake of politics, but your crew and your team did a hell of a thing Shepard and along with others engaged in the battle they deserve recognition.'

'Thank you Admiral, I have given it some thought and I would like to recommend the Normandy and her crew receive the Galactic Unit Citation and my whole ground team receive individual awards of the Star of Terra.' Shepard had snapped to attention to give her answer.

Hackett thought for a moment and then said 'it will need to be a Palladium Star each for your ground team, and yes that will include your non-human team members.'
'Thank you, sir. May I take the opportunity to confirm one other matter?' Hackett nodded and she continued, 'I would ask that my field promotion of Chief Williams to Lieutenant be confirmed and that she remains XO on the Normandy.'

'Agreed, and I hope it brings some peace and closure to the family. Judgements made by those who were not on the battlefield and who have never had to make those decisions themselves ruin reputations and lives. We both know as soldiers the decisions we make a rarely black and white, right or wrong.'

Shepard always struggled with any kind of celebration or award aimed at her for what she saw was just doing her duty in the way she had been trained. She understood it was important to have positive role models but she didn't understand why it should be her.

Her crew, friends, team and particularly her mother disagreed. They thought it was the least the galaxy could do. That didn't stop Garrus and Wrex 'ripping the piss', as Ash put it, out of her.

Hate it all though she did, Shepard knew that the various governments were giving her their greatest military honour, as was her own. The Star of Terra from the Systems Alliance, Nova Cluster from the Turian Hierarchy and the Star of Sur'kesh from the Salarian Union were duly pinned or hung on Shepard who stood ramrod straight in full dress blues complete with her grandfather's Marine Corps sword.

The Asari Matriarch's awarded her the rank of Thessia Huntress; it was like getting the keys to the planet according to Garrus with a smirking twitch of his mandibles.

'Oh no Garrus you have been misinformed it is a great and rare honour that places Shepard's name amongst Asari Matriarch's who have made a huge difference or contribution to the Asari race. It has been given for military, political, philosophy… well any area of…' Liara seemed to run out of sentence and continued 'ah, that was another example of humorous teasing was it not?' She looked slightly embarrassed but everyone rallied around to smooth over the awkwardness.

'Well yes I do seem to be the only sport around today,' Shepard said giving a mock exasperated look at Garrus and Wrex, 'but I'm glad you explained it Liara, and it does sound like a huge honour. But can we get out of here now I am really losing the will to live with all these stuffed shirts, we did our bit lets hit the bar.'

The rest of the celebrating was conducted in one of the mess halls that had been set aside for 'Shepard's party' and she was really pleased it was invited guests only. That meant no rubber necking great and good but just her crew, friends, her mother and her Liara.

Captain Anderson forgave her for supporting his appointment as a Councilor in a good natured conversation where they both agreed that the worse part of the 'posting' would be having to work alongside Udina who would remain as the human ambassador.

'Yeah but you outrank him now… so I want to hear tales of just how unhappy Udina is getting all the crap assignments from his boss' Shepard smiled.

'Well that certainly put a bright side on the situation that I hadn't noticed before' and they both laughed, probably more than the joke was worth, but it just felt good to be able to laugh at ordinary, usual things without worrying about the monsters sitting biding their time in the dark.
It had been a really hard day for Shepard as she remembered the dead and the injured not just from the Citadel battle but from the start of what seemed like the most crazy ten months of her life, she wouldn’t be to sorry to say goodbye to 2183.

Shepard took the accolades and the bravery awards on behalf of all those who had died fighting Sovereign and its Geth and in particular for one very brave and very missed young Quarian by the name of Tali. Shepard was proud and touched that Tali’s father, who received her posthumous Palladium Star, had insisted that her name remain Tali’Zorah vas Normandy.

Two days later, fully equipped and resourced and with a handpicked, full, crew compliment Shepard ordered the Normandy to head out into the dark and towards Perseus Veil appearing to play their part in the continuing Eden Prime War chasing down rogue Geth. But the SSV Normandy and its Commander were hunting a very different prey and they would be on their own.

After much discussion with her team, Captain, as he was, Anderson and Captain Hannah Shepard, Commander Shepard had made few significant changes both to the Normandy’s set up and infrastructure and its crew.

The biggest change was the installation technology and research laboratory, and a science and tech team to staff it made up of highly vetted and trusted Alliance scientists and specialists, two Salarian scientists, and Dr Warren who would pick up her work on the Prothean Beacon network that she started on Eden Prime. The chief science officer and team leader was to be the young, gifted but enigmatic tech genius Dr Kasumi Goto. Shepard had been warned that Dr Goto was unorthodox in the extreme and some would describe her more as an adventurer than a serious scientist, but the Commander was looking for unorthodox, business as usual was not going to do.

There had been a couple of changes to her Marine squad, she was back up to full strength, ten including Brewster and Stevens, and she had promoted Brewster to Gunnery Sergeant. Corporal Stevens had received further medical training to enhance their field medic, corpsman, abilities including trauma treatment for non-humans.

But the most significant change was the addition of three Turaian's who were 'on loan' from CSec. They had all volunteers and Garrus knew, trusted and vouched for them. They were experienced soldiers so would hold their own in the ground team but they were also skilled investigators which would bring an added strength to the mission. Garrus would head up this sub-unit on their investigation, or undercover, work.

Dr Chakwas had also ensured that her medical unit, equipment, supplies and personnel were ready to deal even more effectively with non-human health and injury.

One place that Shepard hated going was engineering, she missed the young Quarian who she had taken under her wing and for whom Shepard had had a real personal fondness and friendship. Shepard also felt completely and absolutely responsible for Tali’s death, not in the same way as she took responsibility for any death or injury for anyone under her command or acting on her orders. This was deeply personal, she couldn't quite dig into why. With Liara's help and support Shepard was learning to accept and live with it and not let it eat away at her, she would focus on honouring a vow and an un-payable debt.

Shepard called the first full briefing only a few hours out from Arcturus and present was her personal squad, Brewster as Marine team leader, the Science team, the Turian security team, Dr Chakwas and of course her XO, Lt Williams. Joker was hooked in through comms and as he pointed out 'yeah it's OK I can do two jobs at once, you know, not crash the Normandy, and just… listen…'
'You are all here because you can be trusted and you all either believe that the real threat to the Galaxy is the Reapers or you have an open mind about it.

We will be pursuing a particular path alongside, the Spectre duties I will continue perform as and when they come up, but our real mission is to uncover as much information and as many leads about the Reaper threat that we can.

And this includes the methods that they used the last time they carried out their galactic genocide, most dangerously their unseen, subtle control through indoctrination. This allowed them to disrupt and hinder the response to their arrival; and prepare the way.

You all have your own areas of expertise and existing knowledge, you will receive work to carry out in a primary role but we must share all information, theories and pieces of intelligence. We are hunting a very, very dangerous enemy and one that has perhaps millions of years to know how to cover their tracks.

We have to find the patterns and for this we will be receiving help directly from a newly formed top secret intelligence gathering section on Arcturus Station. Their work will be monitoring the huge amount of comms traffic using both official and unofficial 'channels'.

They would also monitor the extranet, sifting through the ordinary, mundane; often outrageous content and the seemingly never ending number conspiracy theories. Often the best place to hide secrets is in plain sight but as a grain of sand on a beach.

'This intelligence team will work closely with you guys in the science and research team.' Shepard also knew that the Admiral Hackett, now head of the Alliance Navy, had put Captain Shepard in charge of the work but she would remain aboard the Kilimanjaro and continue as it's XO. Hannah Shepard would also continue to provide an unofficial direct link between the Admiral and Shepard.

The questions and discussion started and Shepard let it run until everyone felt they had a clear handle on what was expected of them, what their true mission was and how they would work together. Shepard stood up and walked to the edge of the QEC console turned and took a very typical pose, leaning against the rail, weight on one leg and arms crossed, the room fell silent.

'Our course is set for the Perseus Veil which is where we have information from a Spectre report that Sovereign was hiding out before the hit on the Citadel. This is also the fault line between us and the Geth.

There is another reason to head for the Veil. Dr T'Soni would you like to fill the team in please?' Shepard remained where she was but focussed her attention of Liara and all eyes followed.

'Thank you Commander. In 2162 a Batarian aristocrat by the name of Edan Had'dah had scout and search teams working very close to the Perseus Veil and they found an artifact. He visited the site sometime after the 2163 and from what we now know of indoctrination, thanks to our experience with Saren,' Liara stiffened just slightly mentioning his name, 'we are confident that the artifact was Reaper in origin and that it began to affect him.'

'We have no idea where this artifact is now, or what it was, but we have to follow up on all leads. Dr T'Soni please continue,' Shepard moved back to sit at the table.

'In 2163 the Alliance set up a secret research facility on Sidon to… well this is…' Liara became suddenly troubled and unsure as to how to proceed.'
'What Dr T'Soni is trying to be diplomatic about is that an element within the Systems Alliance thought it would be a good idea to break galactic law and start doing research into AI tech. And that is something we will just need to suck up, we know we have skeletons in our Alliance closets,' Shepard realised she had used a very obscure old Earth idiom and as one Ash, Joker and Garrus said 'look it up on the extranet'. This brought some smiles around the table which helped relieve the tension for which Shepard was grateful. She nodded to Liara to continue.

'Yes, well, where were we… the Sidon facility project leader was Dr Shu Qian and according to reports from the time he was working on a newly discovered artifact that could have pre-dated the Protheans.

The facility was attacked and completely destroyed in 2165 but Dr Shu Qian faked his own death and joined Edan Had'dath to continue their work.

Again it is clear that they were both, by then, highly indoctrinated. The artifact was never found and both died in 2165,' Liara finished.

'There is another lead that we are looking into and this work is being led by Dr Kirossa,' she looked at one of the Salarian scientist and nodded again to indicate it was his turn to contribute.

'Yes very interesting and fairly well documented is the incident that occurred around 2163 in the Dis System. Abatarian survey team, and at this point I am afraid we have nothing to link this incident with Edan Had'dath, a survey team on Jartar found the remains of some form of massive organic being or ship.

Salarian intelligence managed to capture some vid evidence and we are certain it is a Reaper 'corpse'. Before we could investigate further we had a report of a Batarian dreadnought in the system and the Reaper, as we know it now, disappeared.' Dr Kirossa finished speaking but his head was still nodding slightly and he appeared to be in deep thought, when Shepard thanked him he visibly jumped.

'So there we have it, at least two clear and confirmed leads on Reaper tech or an actual Reaper… you have your orders, we have our mission… thank you all.' With that the assembled crew began to break up but conversations were starting between individuals and also small groups, they continued talking and discussing in various shades of excitement as they left the room.

The remaining occupants drew closer around Shepard, Liara, Garrus, Wrex and Ash, her team, her close team, who had seen first-hand what Reapers and their indoctrinated followers were capable of.

'We have another complication that we need to look into,' she said 'Cerberus is interested in anything Reaper of that I am convinced and they have agents at all levels of Systems Alliance military and political structures. They need to be dealt with as a terrorist organisation but I am more concerned about whether they will get in our way or even, and it really goes against everything I hold honourable to say, whether they help.' Shepard's face looked murderous. The fact that realistically, and as any good military strategist, she had to consider all assets that could deliver her objectives, she had to give any head space to Cerberus being 'helpful' was causing her almost physical pain.

'Agreed Shepard,' Garrus spoke and looked troubled, eyes fixed on his hands on the table in front of him, 'our problem is that they are so dispersed and in to so many things we are not going to have the resources to tackle them and our main mission.'

There were more nods around the table.

'Nail on the head Garrus, so we need to tune out the shitty stuff that will drive me crazy so we can
keep our focus.’ Shepard smiled around at her team, ‘Drinks in the observation lounge later and later I
may be persuaded to play a little poker… if someone could teach me the rules,’ she finished the last
comment with a wide grin, met with smiles and laughter from all around the table, Shepard was
notorious for playing down her ability to play the game very well.

Shepard looked across at Liara who was already in bed studying a data pad intensely and surrounded
by at least another four drifting off the pile on her lap.

‘Hey sexy what you working on,’ she smiled across and felt a familiar tenderness sweep through her
mind towards her lover.
Liara looked up and smiled lazily, ‘oh nothing that will not wait until tomorrow.’ She gathered up the
pads and put them on the side, settled back against the pillows and let out a deep sigh.

‘You all relaxed over there Doctor,’ Shepard began stripping off and was aware that Liara was
watching her.

‘Is it terrible of me to be so happy when such terrible things are going to happen… are happening,’
Liara had that look on her face that Shepard was now very familiar with, trying to puzzle out a
confusing problem, it was such an endearing look… although Shepard couldn't think of any look that
crossed Liara's face that could not be described as attractive, or sexy, or cute… Maybe I should just
admit I am completely besotted by her, Shepard thought, and then remembered she had been asked a
question.

‘The whole reason we are doing what we're doing is because there is something worth fighting for,
this is what we're fighting for darling. The right for everyone of us in the galaxy to live the life we
choose, or try to, to try to find love and happiness….’ Shepard trailed off, it wasn't the kind of thing
she was used to saying and probably before she had met and fallen in love with Liara she would
have deflected any such serious question with a joke.

‘You are right of course… and… time… is… I mean we never truly know how much time we have
do we….’ Liara reached an arm out as Shepard slid into bed next to her and they folded into a kiss
but before they had a chance to deepen the kiss into anything else the comms sparked up and Ash's
tentative voice sounded in the room.

‘Really sorry skipper but we are just passing through the Exodus Cluster and we're picking up some
kind of distress call.'

‘On my way, meet me in the comms room Ash,’ Shepard gave Liara a kiss on the forehead and slid
back out of bed. As Liara made to do the same Shepard said, 'no you don't this won't take long, keep
my side warm for me.'

‘I will keep everything warm for you,’ Liara said and then blushed violently at her own words.
Shepard let out a small laugh she found it so cute that Liara could still be really shy at times, aw hell
Shepard tell me something about her you don't find cute, she thought to herself as she left the
bedroom and headed for whatever trouble Ash had waiting for her.

It was over fifty minutes by the time they could piece together what was going on. The distress
messages were being sent by someone on the asteroid that was being moved into place in orbit
around Terra Nova, whoever it was couldn't speak for long as they were hiding from the terrorists
who had landed and started killing the science team and their support staff.

‘So best we can work out is Batarian terrorists have taken control of the asteroid and targeted it for a
direct hit on Terra Nova using the guidance thrusters.'
From our calculations the changes they've made to the trajectory of that rock means we have less than two hours to get it turned away before it reaches a point of no return.' Shepard was laying out the situation to the full ground team, including Liara who had joined Shepard and Ash as soon as they realised it would be a rescue mission.

'Do we know what size force they have on the ground?' Wrex asked managing to sound eager for there to be a decent force level to make it interesting.

'No clear intel on that,' Ash replied, 'our contact in the complex can only say for certain they have control of the three thruster sites and a large force in the main facility.'

'There is no time to wait for any help from the planet and no other Alliance ships will be able to get here in time,' Liara said, she had worked on the calculations and so had a heightened awareness of the time pressure.

Shepard, Garrus and Brewster had been looking at the schematics of the facility and the thruster sites and had formulated a plan which would give them the best chance of success at speed.

'Two teams, one will take the mako the other the shuttle. Garrus will lead the mako team and I will lead the shuttle team. We'll hit thrusters one and two first then Garrus will move on to thruster three and I will move to the main facility.

We take back control of the rock and put it back on a safe course and take down anyone in our way… oh yeah and according to our mystery woman there are hostages in the main facility… so let's move it.' Shepard and the team moved quickly to the cargo bay. Shepard's team was first away in the shuttle while the mako team had to wait for the Normandy to get to drop height.

Liara was going to stay on board and so that she could work on the revised calculations and pass through final instructions when they had regained control of the thrusters. Shepard's team was Ash, Wrex and half the marine squad while Garrus would take the other half and the Turian security squad.

Shepard's team reached their target first and had to negotiate a sonic minefield while taking fire from what seemed to be highly trained and effective Batarian troops. These were no ragged merc band; this was a professional crew they were facing. Shepard was just glad they had taken out the defence turrets from the shuttle.

'Fuckin love it when your own defences are used against you,' she had said as they did a first fly by before taking the turrets out.

'Garrus what is your ETA on target', she called over their OT comms. 'Just leaving the bay now, estimate three minutes,'

'Defence turrets and sonic mines on site,' she said, 'when we're done here we'll take those out at your next target before we move on to the main facility.'

'Copy that Shepard,' Garrus replied 'see you on the other side,' and Shepard could hear the smile in his voice.

She had to admit it did feel good to be fighting something, someone she understood, she was, after all a marine, this is what she did.

They were confronted with well organised resistance, not only Batarian troops but shock troops and engineers. But they worked their way through the facility by the numbers, clinically, like a well-oiled machine. Time was not on their side.
Once the area was secured Shepard found the thruster control panel she hacked back control and secured it to her OT. They needed to set all three thrusters at the same time from the main facility, the timing would be critical and all thrusters needed to be set off in unison.

Garrus and his team were right behind them and already on their way to the third and final thruster site by the time the shuttle was airborne.

They dropped the shuttle down behind some buildings and made their way to one of the service entrances in an effort to get a least a small element of surprise, but their welcome party knew they were coming from monitoring the comms traffic between the Batarians.

Slipping silently in and making their way up a long access corridor they checked storage rooms as they went and as Shepard checked one that looked more like an office she could see someone was hiding behind the desk.

'Come out slow,' she said and as the figure stood he looked petrified and seemed to be waving a gun in his hand and before she could say anything else it went off and something slammed into her kinetic barriers.

'Put that fucking thing down now,' she shouted and this time levelled her weapon at the man.

He dropped the gun and at the same time said 'I thought you were them… I thought… I'm sorry… did I…,' Shepard cut him off.

'Do I look like a fucking Batarian… never mind all that, I'm fine,' she had been joined in the room by Ash and Wrex, 'tell me what you know… how many Batarian's how many hostages something helpful for nearly taking my head off… that'll teach me not to shoot first,' she mumbled the last bit more to herself but Wrex heard her and smiled.

But they got nothing from the scientist; he was too far gone in shock, worried about his kids and grandkids on the planet and his co-workers, some of whom he had already seen dead.

Shepard told him to hunker back down where he was and they'd come back for him, civilians with weapons were as dangerous as defences that fell into enemy hands, she thought as they set off again to find the main terrorist force.

'So will you tell Liara you got shot by some old guy with a pop gun or are you going to let her find out when I tell Garrus,' Wrex was chuckling to himself and even Ash was trying not to smile.

'Yeah yeah go ahead… have fun… I can make your life difficult it you really piss me off though so…well…' Shepard trailed off knowing she would just have to take the teasing. But next time, she thought, I'm not gonna give anyone the benefit of the doubt, bloody civilians.

They met the full force of Batarian's in the main area of the facility. It was on two levels with a balcony around the second level and the Batarian's had dug in pretty well, but Shepard didn't think they wanted to go down with the rock so they had to be feeling some pressure, it would be interesting to see if that made them sloppy.

The fire fight had been raging for around ten minutes by the time they were joined by Garrus and his team. That turned the tide and they were able to start a flanking move which would also take them to the main control room which, rather than immediately clearing out the terrorists, was their primary target.

They needed to get those thrusters online and the rock turned away from Terra Nova. When they got
control of the room Shepard transferred command of her thruster to Garrus and left him to work with Liara to make the asteroid safe.

She led the rest of the ground team on an all-out attack to neutralise the Batarian’s. After another ten minutes, by which time Garrus and Liara had put the asteroid back into a safe orbit; Shepard had the rump of the enemy pinned down.

'I will make a deal with you Human scum,' the shout came from the obvious leader of the terrorists.

'Nice, start with an insult you murdering bastard… what could you possibly have to deal with,’ she shouted back from cover.

'We have hostages and we have set explosive charges on a timer, if you let us walk out now you will have time to get to them and save them. If you fight us you will not,’ he said and then added 'you are Shepard the butcher of Elysium and Torfan.'

'Well if you know me then you'll know I don't give up… and I won't give in to blackmail. Tell me, not that I give a rats ass but why would you want to destroy a planet and kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people?’ as she was speaking she was directing Ash to take a small squad to work around to a position where they could snipe out the remaining resistance.

'You ask why after all you Humans have done to us, stolen from us, you will feel the hatred and revenge of the Batarian people as long as you live, this is just the start; this is direct reprisal for what you did on Elysium and Torfan… now you pay the price’ Shepard heard the voice of an absolute fanatic, full of hatred who would indeed not stop here. Whatever the cost she would put him down or someone else would just have to deal with him next time.

'You pissed at us because you couldn't hold onto your own territory… you whiny little fuck… against my better judgement I am going to give you and your little friends one chance to give up, that offer will expire the next time you open your miserable mouth and say anything other than I surrender,’ she had confirmation that Ash and her team were in place, she checked with her team and they were all set on her mark.

She couldn't actually make out what his reply was, it was a distorted raving rant, angry and vicious and didn't sound anything like I surrender. Shepard didn't wait to listen to more than a few seconds worth before giving the order.

'Go, go, go' at which point a hailstorm of assault rifle fire from the front and sniper shots from the guardian angel positions Ash's team had taken up silenced the rant and very little gunfire came back.

Within a couple of minutes it was all over and the leader who she now recognised as Balak and a couple of his remaining troops threw out their weapons and surrendered.

As they made their way towards Shepard they all heard an explosion from somewhere behind the Batarian positions and Balak made the mistake of smiling at her.

'You could not save them Shepard I can still kill you worthless cowards and you can do nothing,’ he didn't seem to notice or he wasn't bothered by the cold, emotionless calm that had fallen over Shepard that was reflected in her eyes.

'You think I can't do anything to you,' she asked him quietly 'you know I was on Torfan and you think I can do nothing?’

Shepard turned to Ash and said,' take those two out to the shuttle we'll hand them over to the local
authorities on Terra Nova. The rest of you move out and begin a search and secure sweep of the facility, he stays with me,' she finished pointing at Balak.

'T'll just wait over here,' Garrus said and walked off to one side nursing his rifle while the rest of the ground team moved out.

When they were alone Shepard turned to Balak, unclipped her hand canon and threw it over at his feet, Garrus stiffened. 'You do nothing Garrus, my orders, you do nothing,' she said without taking her eyes of Balak. 'Why don't you just put a bullet in my head like you did on Torfan or have you gone soft like the rest of your miserable bastard race' Balak spat out the words but was eyeing the gun trying to work out if he had a chance.

'Pick it up or we fight hand to hand… choose which way you're going to die,' Shepard's voice steady, cold, quiet.

'I would not soil my hands on you,' he shouted as he rolled in a smooth movement picking up the hand canon and finding his feet closer to her but Shepard had pulled out her shotgun and it was lined up with his head before he had a chance to pull his trigger.

The shot rang around the large space, echoing off the walls even after Balak's body had dropped to the floor in a pool of blood and brains.

Without taking her eyes of his body she shipped her shotgun walked over and picked up her hand canon and only then did she turn and walk away, Garrus following a discreet distance behind his Commander.
Chapter 14

A thrumming vibration pulsed through her body making Shepard aware of her surroundings through the medium of raw pain. It was so acute it had dragged her from wherever her mind had taken her… but as awareness settled like a thunderous black sky, her mind railed against accepting she was here… again…

'No… no… I got out… I'm on the fucking Normandy' Shepard was doing her best to shout angrily; 'I got out…' she ended quietly almost in a sob of defeat.

She tried to calm herself, using some mediation techniques, but that was problematic given her chosen technique was 'following the breath' and she had little to follow.

Then trying logic and reason… which ended in the frustration of still not being able to piece together where she was or how she had gotten here.

"Feel into it Liddy" her father's voice from somewhere, strong, encouraging and like a safety blanket for her tortured mind, "don't let it control you, it's your pain, your fear, own it, embrace it, then you're back in the driving set." A brief glimpse of his eyes a light touch on her head and he was gone, back into the void of the dead.

Shepard noticed the memory had triggered a connection with that old place of pain and she was crying, or rather she was being shaken by harsh raking sobs, and the deep old wound of her loss took her as it had when she was fifteen.

It was the finality of death that struck Shepard hardest… never… never again, seeing them, hearing their voice, mostly never realising which would be their last conversation, no last word of love or regret…

And it was Liara she was thinking of, feeling the loss of… not knowing if she was alive or dead, if Shepard had let her down, got her killed, it was tearing her apart more than physical pain or the mental anguish at her own situation.

Shepard felt a wave of exhaustion flood through her, accompanied by the familiar drifting away, upwards towards the escape she seemed to be able to still, just, craft for herself.

She felt the sun on her back and sand between her toes, cliffs at the rear of the beach seemed to be occupied by thousands of white birds, a lot like Earth gulls, flying in and out, calling their harsh, guttural, shouts that Shepard always found endearing.

Swirling in elegant circles up into the blue Shepard allowed her eyes to follow and tried to feel what it would be like to be riding the thermals with them.

Shepard’s attention was drawn to the groups of people on the beach, all enjoying a perfect day, some swimming in the clear blue waters which were now lapping around her ankles.

She started to look, search the beach for her friends, her team… Shepard became distraught; frantically searching for Liara… she was on the beach somewhere… Shepard knew it in her bones and it terrified her… the gulls screeched louder and louder as her efforts became more desperate running up to and then passing groups of all species, young, old, babies, searching, searching… behind her black shadows closed in over the sky, turning the golden sand she had just walked over black and
the people she passed desiccated into shriveled, long dead mummified remains as the darkness flowed across them.

Shepard felt fear and panic grip, cold, vicelike, both running away from the gathering darkness chasing her and trailing it in her wake… she was the focus of this destruction and also focused it on all she touched.

As the beach and the gulls cries faded to mist in front of her she began to run, stumbling, heavy armour weighing down, slowing her down, pistol in hand but when she tried to fire behind her it just let out a screech… and she was so frightened now she didn't want to look behind… every pore of her body was sweating fear… the sense of something, someone, the darkness closing in on her, chasing her down… closer until she felt it about to engulf her… wrapping her in its void… ending all hope of saving anyone… anything…

Shepard jerked awake and sat straight up, unfocussed eyes picking out the gentle safety lighting around the door of the cabin, the soft glow from her desk and the holographic interface. She put her face in her hands and steadied her breathing, feeling the warmth of Liara's body next to her.

When she had steadied herself she looked over at Liara's peaceful, sleeping form. Shepard gently touched the blue shoulder with the back of one of her hands then carefully slipped out of bed.

Pulling on black vest that showed off her trap's, pec's and deltoids perfectly, Shepard allowed herself a smile at the thought Liara would have enjoyed the sight as she often did at times of dress and undress. She zipped up her hoodie and stepped out of her cabin straight to the galley to find some coffee.

The ship was on the night quarter shift which delivered only basic, essential, crewing, and the equivalent of a night watch. Time was… well always time… but once Humanity joined the galactic community it was all Galactic Mean Time and atomic clocks. All time across the Galaxy was measured in GMT and the 'day' length bore no resemblance to any particular planet or species cycle. It had been taken as an average of all known data at the time of setting. It worked, it was essential, and after all on ships there was no night and day, just the everlasting black and passing light show.

There was local time of course but very much like the old Earth time zones, all local time was superseded by Galactic. Local 'days' were much more likely to be recognised as the typical light and dark event planet side but the date was also proscribed using the Galactic Common Era.

The Earth based Circadian Rhythms, still present on her blue home, gave way to Free-running Rhythm amongst the spacer community, and the rhythms of other stars on colonies across Alliance Space. Adjustment for some who joined the Navy was occasionally very difficult but the transition was eased with meds.

Mug in hand she began her 'tour'. The Normandy had had some internal space remodeling to prepare them for their unique mission but they were still constrained by the overall size of the ship. It was a tight fit, with fifty crew rather than the usual forty, the decision to leave the mess hall, which included a lounge area as big as possible had been a good one.

Sleeper pods and racks (like those the ground fire team used) were only for actual sleep, all other off duty time and relaxation took place in the mess. It worked well to ensure the different teams had a chance to mix to together, they all had their own roles but they were one crew and it felt like that anytime she walked through the mess almost anytime apart from this most quiet of all shifts.

The comms/conference room, now housing QEC rather than FTLC, doubled as a base for the information, research and analysis team led by Liara, who spent most of her working time in the
room with her two comms/scientist/tech specialists. Shepard still also used it for the confidential mission briefings.

In the hold they had installed a much expanded armoury; it still had the Mako but also a Kodiak; this area also accommodated the marine team, security team and Wrex.

Shepard walked into engineering and for a fleeting second saw the ghost of Tali’Zorah vas Normandy standing at her console, then it was gone and Shepard's eyes were drawn to the truly beautiful Tantalus Drive. She walked over and spoke to the young engineer on babysitting duty; Carter was a new addition and hadn't met the young Quarian but knew of her skill and bravery.

Heavy shouldered Shepard made her way to the command centre and on up to the cockpit. Sitting in the co-pilot seat she let her eyes relax and let the sight of the galaxy passing faster than light past the windows soothe her as it always did.

If the comms control room was Liara's 'office' then this was Shepard's. She spent most of her time up here when not in meetings or engaged in other duties. She ran the ship from here and took a few of the pilot shifts when Joker was off duty. Shepard felt more at peace here than anywhere else on the ship, it was as if she could drop into some other level of consciousness where her duties were clear and she was fully able to deliver them.

Doubts, constant questions about intel, patterns, where, what, who… why… could be tamed, her mind clear, with all the chaos happening unconsciously, like a background programme.

Back in the cabin Liara had gotten out of bed as soon as Shepard left the room, she knew that sometimes her troubled lover needed space to herself. Liara started working at the console but would make sure she was back in bed in time for Shepard to 'wake' her with a breakfast Asari tea.

The Normandy, still in stealth mode, settled into an orbit above Lorek. The Kodiak had undergone a 'paint job' with all alliance markings removed and a well-worn, shabby appearance applied.

Garrus and his security team made up of the Turian CSec officers climbed aboard wearing second hand armour, procured for the mission, and having made whatever adjustments they could to their physical appearance. They would pick up a shuttle on the surface and head for Omega. They were going to operate undercover and try to find out about rumours (from intercepted extranet comms) of a disturbance that had involved human slaves.

But the real interest lay in the fact that Aria T'Loak herself had become involved, personally, and there had been no further information about the incident. This triggered the flag on the intel, the silence was highly unusual as when the Queen of Omega got personally involved she was always sending a message about her power and influence.

Shepard would give Garrus and his team a couple of weeks and then head for Omega herself, in the meantime the Normandy would be working its way along the edge of the Perseus Veil scanning for any trace, looking for any indications as to what happened to the Reaper corpse and the artefact.

Then the Normandy would head back into the Omega Nebula and work its way through the six systems contained within it ending with Sahrabarik, home to the Omega station.

Their routine on hitting a new system was the same, a full fly through and multiple scans of the system space and every planet. Next was a visit groundside to every facility, there was a lot of mining activity, every settlement, no matter how large or small, or any permanent orbiting platform.

Shepard's team were posing as a group of merc's who had been hired to find out information,
unusual activity, was looking for someone (who always remained un-named), trying to buy or track
down strange or advanced tech, the 'job' they were on would depend on how well it would play 
locally.

Like Garrus and his team they had second hand, dumbed down armour, and Shepard kept her helmet 
on as much as possible, there were a lot of Batarians around who would have queued up to take 
down the 'hero' of Elysium and the 'butcher' or Torfan.

Shepard was not used to hiding from her reputation or her deeds, and it did not sit well with her, she 
was in a foul temper most of the time they were groundside, but she knew they would learn nothing 
if everyone they met knew she was not only a Spectre but also 'that' Alliance officer.

She also found it torture to be around so many obvious slavers and pirates and not be able to do 
anything about it… to them… Shepard had to walk away more than once in the process of listening 
to 'the last raid' or 'the next job' to stop herself from instinctively pulling her shotgun and 'taking their 
fukin smiling bastard heads off' as she had said to Brewster later when they were back on the shuttle.

Wrex 'led' the team and only Dr Goto regularly joined them, Liara would have drawn too much 
attention and they were already looking a bit out of place as it was. Shepard also needed Ash on the 
Normandy just in case anything went wrong or they, somehow, despite their stealth, ran into trouble 
topside.

Dr Kasumi Goto was not only a tech and science genius but was very handy in a tight fix. She had 
spent time 'living in the real world on her wits' when asked around the mess table how she came to 
be so useful in a fight, after a particularly close call when her hacking and stealth kill ability made the 
difference between amusing story and serious injury.

They worked their way through the systems and results were mixed but the initial reception was 
always hostile. From hostile and aggressive it would go one of two ways. Wrex would be able to 
persuade the local's that they could benefit from the transaction or he would unleash hell on their 
heads and beat the answers out of them, cheaper for him and more fun for his Krantt.

Wrex was a reasonably well know merc so they had credibility, and his reputation assured them 
respect once the 'ground rules' had been established.

By far the most interesting information that they had picked up was related to increased activity of a 
mysterious race that lived on the other side of the Omega 4 relay. And their interest seemed to be 
focussed on Human's.

They had been named the Collectors because of their bizarre, even for the Terminus System, trading 
requests which always involved live specimens in exchange for advanced tech. 
Appearing and then disappearing back through the Omega 4 relay their visits were rare but certainly stories of their trading dated back at least two hundred years. Kasumi got a particularly old and 
ravaged looking Batarian pirate, after a considerable amount of drink, to talk about the contact he had with them over sixty years ago.

"We heard they wanted twenty left handed Salarian's… everyone knew the reward would be good, I had family who worked with them the last time they showed up… we got them their Salarian's but a merc gang had already turned up with ten..." all four of his bleary eyes looked wistful and he was swaying slightly in his seat, he smiled and continued "so we agreed to share the reward… ha stupid Krogan's, didn't see it coming… good day… we got all the tech, sold it for big creds, ten valuable Salarian slaves left over from trade… only wanted twenty… and got to kill stupid Krogan mercs… ha."
The grinding of teeth and low growls were coming from both Shepard and Wrex, the Batarian didn't notice and Kasumi was pumping him for a description of the tech they had received for the trade, trying to work out how advanced, for the time, it would have been.

On the way back to the Normandy they decided to do a very quick run through the Amada system and then head for the Batarian planet of Lorek and its capital Jalnor. The planet had a population of around four and a half million and the capital was a proper city so they would spend a couple of days following up on the increased Collector activity.

Back on the Normandy Shepard set a course for the Amada system and scheduled a review conference for the next morning, also sending a request for any and all information relating to unexplained Human disappearances, patterns in similarities of people who may have gone missing over the last three months, that was when the Collectors had most recently re-appeared.

Something was stirring in the back of Shepard's mind, something just on the edge of her awareness was triggered from the descriptions of the Collectors… something that had fear attached to it… Shepard didn't like that, she didn't 'do' fear.

She headed for her cabin to take a long shower which she hoped would relieve some of the tension that had built up over the two weeks they had been searching the Veil and latterly the Omega Nebula.

Standing bent forward so that her hands were on the back wall of the shower and the hot spray was hitting the back of her neck Shepard felt a familiar pair of hands and then arms wrap themselves around her waist. Liara pressed her body tight against her lover and Shepard straightened up to make full contact with the Asari's breasts.

Liara's hands moved expertly across her lover's body, caressing, teasing, exploring… Shepard felt her desire and need burn through her body and take her breath away, and just as she began to turn around Liara drifted her fingers down… down… tracing outer lips… gently drifting between inner lips and slowly back up to where a hard, burning, throbbing clit was sending pulses of pleasure through Shepard's body…

Lying on the bed, bodies intertwined, still damp from the shower, Shepard allowed herself a deep, relaxed and satisfied sigh. Liara kissed Shepard's neck and ran her fingers through still slightly wet hair.

"I would like for us to join in the sea when we visit my home on Thessia," Liara said quietly, almost shyly and Shepard was reminded again that her Asari was still, most of the time the shy, awkward, unsure young woman she had met in a mine not very long ago.

"That sounds lovely… hey why didn't we think of that when we had our leave," Shepard said tenderly with a smile.

They moved into each other, breast to breast and thighs against each other's heat, they began kissing, deep, long, searching kisses drifting them into another joining.

"Commander you have a priority emergency message call from Admiral Hackett" Ash's voice rang around the cabin.

Shepard pulled herself back from Liara with a small sigh of regret, and smiling down at Liara said, "Copy that Ash, join me in the comms room, I'll be there in ten."
"Aye, aye skipper."

Shepard rolled off the bed and stood looking down at the smiling Asari who was doing her best to look as tempting as possible, at least in Shepard's head Liara was trying to look tempting, and succeeding… Shepard inwardly shook herself to bring her mind back to the task in hand.

"Come on you, might as well find out what particular shit we will have to deal with, priority calls from Hackett rarely bring anything but trouble for me," Shepard ended with a small laugh but they both knew she wasn't joking.

Ten minutes later she was standing in front of the QEC as Hackett's holographic image sparked to life in front of her.

After snapping a precision salute to the Admiral, Shepard stood stiffly at ease. Ash stood ramrod straight at attention to Shepard's left and Liara was sitting down on the side of the conference table looking concerned.

"Commander we have uncovered intelligence that indicates an attempt to assassinate the Batarian ambassador, Jath'Amon, is planned and will be carried out while he is on the Citadel negotiating with the Council. I need you to start looking into any connections within the Terminus System, see what you can uncover."

"Do you need me back at the Citadel?" she asked and was already calculating how long it would take to get across, three possibly four days with maxed out speeds, hardly a lightening response.

"No Commander you're too far away but you are in the right place to see if you can get a lead on the terrorist group that comprise the threat. The Council has pulled all Spectres onto the Citadel who are within a day's travel, CSec has deployed special teams and we have a special ops undercover team that will be landing in a few minutes." Hackett said and then in a gruffer tone of voice, "I don't like it Commander, the Batarian's suddenly want to talk peace with the Council, something isn't right."

"Agreed Admiral, what do they have to gain for a start, and can you really see the Batarian Hegemony making nice with us, which is what they'd have to do to get back in with the Council. Sir, with all due respect," Shepard felt Ash shift slightly next to her; they both knew that 'with all due respect' from a marine usually meant the opposite.

"Let me guess what your about to ask," Hackett cut in, he was so hard to read but she didn't detect any annoyance, "why am I so concerned about a threat to the Batarian Ambassadors life?"

"Well, yes sir, given the… our current relationship with the Batarian's," she replied slightly uncomfortably suddenly realising her response had been all Alliance and not a thought for her Spectre role.

"My concern is the protection of the Council, if this is to be carried out on the Citadel then it may well put the Council in danger as they are meeting fairly consistently both in private and in public throughout the Ambassadors stay," Hackett finished.

"That does put a different completion on it," Shepard was annoyed with herself that she hadn't caught this as a possibility earlier, "I'll make straight for Lorek and then on to Omega, Garrus is already operating on Omega I will put him on this immediately."

"Thank you Commander, we will keep you updated, let me know if you manage to shake anything loose, Hackett out."

Shepard and Ash joined Liara at the table, it was late evening and by the time they reached Lorek it
would be morning but they could start revisiting the information they had gathered to analyse it for
these new circumstances.

It was agreed Liara would call her team together and start working with Arcturus on intelligence,
Liara would also ask Kasumi to join them. Ash would go and brief the ground team and Shepard
would brief Garrus.

"Joker set a course for Lorek and get me Garrus on comms," Shepard said to her almost ever present
pilot. "Aye, aye Commander."
And as Ash went out to prepare the ground and ask Wrex to join them in the comms room, Shepard
and Liara waited for the link to Garrus to go live for a briefing and any update on what he had
uncovered over the last couple of days on Omega.'

As the Normandy turned away from the Amada system, a new and very dangerous enemy was
looking for Shepard, silently, patiently waiting in the dark, waiting to bring the darkness to
Shepard…
Chapter 15

They deployed to Jalnor with the full team but only Wrex, Shepard and Brewster left the shuttle and made their way into the City, they wanted to be as invisible as possible. They found the bar they were looking for which was right in the centre of the City, located on one side of a fairly large open square. They went inside and waited for their contact to show up.

Alliance special operations ran operatives in the Terminus Systems although the focus of their intelligence was slavers and piracy, trying to gather early warnings of major raids and any organised Batarian military activity. Alliance intelligence was determined never to be caught out by another Elysium.

"I wonder what ordinary Batarian's are really like,' Shepard mused into the drink in her hand that she had no intention of consuming. She noticed the puzzled looks on her companion's faces. 'Well we only ever see the ones who are allowed off or who get away from Batarian systems or their home world. Their government are real jerks, controlling, no freedoms, and no comms in or out of their system for the general population. So maybe we only get to see the worst of them.'

"Shepard you worry me sometimes, you think way too much for someone so handy with a shotgun," Wrex barked a laugh that was echoed around the table and Shepard gave him a sheepish grin.

"Yeah well, understanding they have a crap government and shitty lives on in their home system won't stop me killing the fuckwits if they piss me off," Shepard finished with a smile and a couple of nods of the head.

Still, the thought stayed with her, the Batarian Hegemony was a truly brutal and oppressive government and she wondered if it would be better if the Batarian's made peace and the Council had some influence.

She was brought back from her thoughts by the unmistakable sound of a re-breather and heavy steps heading in their direction.

"I believe we have an appointment Earth clan" he said his words punctuated by the rhythm of his air pump.

"Yes we do," Shepard responded as the Volus sat himself down at the table "I believe we have some business to transact?"

"I am not happy about this, if we are seen, but what am I to do, I am told, ordered," he trailed off and then rallied and in a much more confident and business like voice said, "where are my manners, I am Vert Plunes, financial advisor and banker to some of the most dangerous and powerful groups within the Blue Suns and a Batarian corporation specialising in, hum, should we say, workforce provision." He sat back seemingly satisfied that he would now receive his due respect.

Shepard narrowed her eyes at him, she knew he was on the Alliance payroll but that would probably be due to some leverage over him rather than a noble sense of public duty. And as far as Shepard was concerned if you helped murdering slaving bastards in any way, and especially if you accepted their blood money for pay, you were as guilty as they were.

"Let's just cut the crap and get to the point shall we,' Shepard's voice was quiet and calm but the first flashes of fiery anger were warming her chest, "give me what you have on terrorists who may be linked to the plot to kill the Batarian Ambassador."
The Volus said nothing and Shepard had the feeling he was trying to weigh up whether he could get away with being indignant at his treatment, he appeared to come to a decision and sat further forward leaning into the table.

"I have not had a lot of time but I have, through careful record keeping, we must all keep our accounts in order, we never know when we are to be audited…’ he caught Shepard's inpatient eye and continued quickly, "yes well as I say, careful… yes… there is one group who have worked for a particular Batarian political group who are most likely to be behind the terrorist threat."

Shepard waited… "And," she said still quietly but with an exasperated edge.

"Well, the Omega Blue Suns, you will need to find out what you know from Tarak himself," the Volus put his head to one side, the silence filled with the regular shoosh of the air pump "I have nothing more Earth clan."

"Then you gave us nothing but wind" Wrex barked in an angry undertone and sat back no longer willing to pay the banker any attention.

"I think you probably have a lot more than you think you do, but we don't have time" Shepard said "I assume you can access your records wherever you are?"

The Volus tilted his head to the right as if he didn't quite hear what she said, "yes, of course, but I have told you all that I found in my records."

Wrex sat forward looked at Shepard with understanding dawning, she nodded back at him.

"We can't have a fuss or draw any attention, I'll drop you scoop" they smiled at each other recognising one of Garrus's sayings.

Wrex moved around behind the Volus who hadn't moved and was still looking at Shepard and despite the suit giving every impression of being very confused and trying to work out what everyone was talking about.

Shepard had taken a small vial from her emergency med kit and in one movement stood up and moved around behind the Volus as if to talk to Wrex at the same time saying.

"Just sit still and pretend you're talking to my sergeant, we are about to leave and you will be free…" while Shepard had been talking and distracting the Volus she had injected the contents of the vial, a powerful sedative, into the Volus's air unit on the back of his suit.

The effect was immediate but before he fell off his chair Wrex had gathered him up and held him under his arm. They headed for the exit at a steady pace, no need to rush and risk nosy patrons.

Back on the Normandy Shepard gave the Volus over to the care of Dr Chakwas with the profound hope that she hadn't killed him; she still needed him and his information.

"Joker fast as you can to Omega," she said "and get me Garrus on comms as soon as possible." "Aye, Commander."

It was her first visit to Omega, she'd seen the vids, heard the stories and read the intel reports… but there was nothing that could set a scene and give you a feel for a place, particularly a space station, no, nothing that came anywhere near watching it get closer from the cockpit of your ship on approach.

Imposing, it was certainly that, and quite the feat of original engineering and continuing ingenuity, adding the spikes and lumps that comprised its swelling 'suburbs'. Could you have suburbs hanging
in space?

Moody, dangerous, or was that because what she knew about the station's inhabitants… no, moody was definitely her impression, and dangerous was her informed threat assessment. If the Citadel was a shining example of the greatest aspirations of those who called the galaxy home then Omega was its brutal, dark and twisted shadow self.

Liara was standing at her shoulder and was in full 'Prof Mode' and gave them running commentary on its history dating back to when the Prothean's failed to get through the asteroids thick crust at the rich eezo reserves in its core.

She continued for a good ten minutes about Prothean exploration and mining techniques before Ash asked 'yeah Doc but who did the mining if the Prothean's gave up?' Liara seemed to realise she had gone off at a bit of a Prothean tangent, and apologising carried with Omega back as the subject.

That for thousands of years it remained unchanged until smashing into another asteroid it was broken in two allowing access to its riches. The mass effect field generators that now surround Omega now protecting it from any such collision's in the future.

"It was in fact mined out and then used as a space station by the lawless eezo smugglers and criminals who seem to always have operated in the Terminus System. Quite extraordinary amounts of cooperation to create this was necessary given there has never been a recognised government on Omega," Liara finished just as they were manoeuvring slowly towards the entrance to one of the huge docking areas.

The Normandy passed through the blue shimmering field, that kept empty space out and the atmosphere of the station in the large dock in, Shepard and her team made their way to the ship's docking exit.

She would not be 'under the radar' here, apart from anything Aria T'Loak knew she was here and would already know what she had been up to so far, and probably knew about her undercover team as well.

Shepard was heading straight for Omega's pirate queen, she needed information and a favour, neither of which would be forthcoming without giving T'Loak her due respect, and even then it was still a long shot.

Shepard had opted for her light N7 armour, she fully expected to get into some serious trouble later and would dress accordingly but for now she wanted to appear as relaxed as possible to any prying eyes that found her.

The team she finally settled on was Liara, Wrex, Ash, Brewster and one of the comms tech Salarian scientists.

It was hot in Afterlife, noisy… well there was loud music, and it wasn't bad, some Shepard even recognised… but as she wasn't there to enjoy the club for what it was, so it was just noisy, busy and hot.

Liara looked as if she wanted the ground to open beneath her feet and swallow her, this was most definitely not her kind of place or somewhere she felt the least bit comfortable. Shepard gave her an almost imperceptible shoulder to shoulder 'bump' and smiled, hopefully more supportive than amused, and was rewarded by a brilliant smile and flash of blue eyes in return.
They walked past the bar and towards the stairs leading to Aria's 'office', which was a private balcony overlooking the dance floors and the platforms providing a stage for lithe Asari dancers.

The body guard at the bottom of the stairs stood to one side when they reached him and the grizzled Turian said, "go on up Aria is expecting you."

Once at the top of the stairs her team took positions, casually, to secure Shepard's six. Shepard alone walked up the final flight of steps and onto the balcony proper where she was confronted with a big Batarian holding a holo scanner.

"Stand there I need to scan you" he said with hardly disguised contempt.

"Well even you can see we are carrying full weapon racks, so that's not what your scanning for… but as I'm not a piece of fucking cargo if you do try to scan me you're going to hearing its little bleeps from inside your ass which is where I'll shove it" Shepard said standing toe to toe with the now furious Batarian body guard.

She hadn't needed to be quite so aggressive or insulting and she certainly didn't actually feel it, but this was all about posturing and positioning against the Omega pecking order.

Arai T'Loak who was standing with her back to the balcony looking across at one of the platforms let out a laugh. "I might pay to see that," she said over her shoulder "but no scan, no talk."

"Hell all you had to do was ask" and she gave the Batarian a huge, and very sarcastic looking grin, held her arms out. When the scan was finished the Batarian gave it to Aria.

"I don't ask" she turned around and looked at Shepard, then at her team, spending just a fraction longer looking at Liara. "I've come to you because you run Omega" Shepard said in an even voice. Aria laughed and turned her back on Shepard again and as she spoke held her arms in the style of a great diva at the end of a performance acknowledging the admiration of the audience.

"I am Omega," turning around to face Shepard again she continued, "And you want something, everyone always does, and they all come to me." Aria sat down on the long bench that circled the balcony.

"I am the boss, CEO... Queen, if you're feeling dramatic. It doesn't matter, Omega has no titled ruler and only one rule," Aria was watching Shepard who hadn't moved from her position at the top of the steps but who had settled into a familiar pose, arms crossing her chest and leaning back slightly on one leg.

Their eyes locked together Aria continued "Don't fuck with Aria."

Shepard was weighing up how to play this, she knew she needed to earn this woman's respect and quickly, and at the same time not piss Aria off. The back and forth in Shepard's head made her worry the delay in her response was already running at an insulting rate… but in fact it was mili seconds that she worked through the options and decided to go with her gut and just be Shepard.

"Works for me, I have the same rule."

Aria nodded her head to indicate Shepard could sit down and said "which would matter on your ship, here we entertain... my preferences." Shepard was aware of Aria watching her, felt as if she was being scrutinised, weighed up, then the Queen's eyes drifted away to the other side of the room and continued.

"So, what are you looking for?" Aria's tone was neutral but it was a clear question and one that expected an answer. Shepard didn't like being the one to move first in this game of three dimensional
chess but she had little choice, as Aria held all the ground and the need for information was a
decidedly one way street currently.

Shepard was suddenly aware that although she could still feel the thump and vibration of the music
rippling under feet and across her body it was significantly reduced in volume, she smiled at Aria.

"Some sort of privacy, dampening field?" Aria smiled back, Shepard continued "perhaps we could
speak in private." Shepard made it very much a request and if acceded to it would reduce the amount
of posturing Aria would have to do in front of her men.

The big Batarian who had scanned her, immediately stiffened and stepped forward, he obviously had
some rank in the organisation, maybe this was the second in command that Shepard was aware Aria
had.

"No one see's Aria on their own, you try anything soldier and I'll put you out an air lock myself."
"Leave us," this time Aria spoke it was in a deadly, chilled voice that expected immediate obedience.
When the four men had left the balcony and were on the other side of the privacy barrier, which
Shepard could now just see its presence as a slight shimmer.

"There is a threat to the galaxy, to all of us, including Omega, that is coming and we can't stop them.
But we can prepare. To do that we need to find out everything we can about the Reapers and their
organic slaves, and then we have to figure out how to kill them when they get here.

The lies being peddled that pretend Sovereign was only an advanced Geth ship and that Saren was a
rogue agent after political power may help people sleep at night, but if we do nothing we all die." She
paused just a beat and then said, "that's my mission, my only focus and I will find a way to
destroy them."

Shepard waited, she was sure that Aria T'Loak was well connected enough and had a wide reach
gathering information and other peoples secrets to know all about the two opposing views about the
Sovereign and Saren, this conversation would go one way or the other based on the very
experienced and calculating Asari Matriarch own evaluation of the evidence.

"Your… theory… doesn't have wide support Shepard, you are seen in some circles as a…" before
Aria could finish Shepard cut in with a smile.

"Take your pick… glory hunting, self-promoting, cracked ever since the beacon fried my brain… so
riddled with guilt and or combat stress disorder I am on a loop of one fight or another…" she stood
up and walked slowly back and fore in front of Aria and continued.

"Look I don't expect you to believe this straight up and down, but there are a small number of us,
and some of those in places of influence, who are convinced this is true. But think of it in these
terms, this is the mother of all business threats Aria, wouldn't you at least want to know if it could
happen?" Shepard sat back down and leaned forward with her forearms resting across her knees and
waited to find out which way Aria would jump.

"You do have some support its true, and you have support from one place whose judgement I trust.
What do you want from me and what do I get in return?" Aria gave her a small calculating smile; it
would always be business as usual even if the terms were to be generous for any particular
agreement between them.

"There was some kind of incident on Omega a few weeks ago, and you seem to have taken a
personal interest, it involved humans, probably taken by slavers but they were all biotics…" Shepard
left it hanging, if Aria wanted to tell her she would, if the Asari didn't then a direct question would
Aria's eyes went cold but Shepard didn't feel whatever was causing it coming in her direction.

"You've been looking for information about the Collectors on your trip through the Terminus." It wasn't a question, Aria stood up and faced out towards the dance floor her eyes seeing something far beyond.

"No one knows what is at the other end of the Omega 4 relay, whatever it is I don't want it thinking it can walk into Omega anytime they want." Aria looked at Shepard and continued "No Collectors on Omega and No dealing with them from Omega, what happens anywhere else is not my concern."

"But someone tried?" Shepard asked.

"Some Blue Suns fronted up the deal but I know it was a Quarian exile who set the thing up," she sat back down, arms across the top of the bench looking for all the world as if she was actually sitting on a throne, at least to Shepard. "I killed everyone in the docking bay; the people who needed to get the message will have… received it."

"And the Quarian?" Shepard didn't miss the fact that Aria had killed the humans, who were the 'trade', but having a fight with Aria that she couldn't win was just dumb, and she stored it away, for the future.

"He seems to have gone to ground, and not because I'm looking for him. Golo has something else going on, it may be of interest to you, but he will cross my path again soon and I will deal with him then."

"You probably have a great deal of information about the Collectors that would be helpful to me…" again Shepard left it hanging.

Aria gave another small laugh "I'm not in the habit of giving away information, I wouldn't want to feel used." There was just an imperceptible edge to her voice and Shepard knew she needed to even the balance a little.

"Well I happen to have in my possession the financial records and dealings of a number of the bigger Blue Suns merc groups and a Batarian Corporation that's in the slave trade with ties to the Hegemony." Shepard paused just a little and finished, "look I know on the scale of things this is probably not worth the help you're giving me, but, it's everything I have that may be of any interest to you." Shepard knew that the information was very valuable to someone like Aria; it would also be worth something to the Information Broker.

"It may have entertainment value," Aria said but she had relaxed again, "where did you get it?"

"I picked it up along with the financial advisor himself, he's… helping me with something… and well my mother taught me it was good to share," Shepard grinned.

Aria returned a smile but also had an appraising look on her face, "I thought I might have been disappointed with the real Shepard, people often don't live up to their reputations, but you are… unconventional. What favours can I expect in our little relationship?" Aria finished.

"If I can assist you or provide unclassified information that doesn't get in the way of my mission or compromise my duty as a Spectre or an Alliance officer I will."

Shepard had been prepared for that question, and thought she had pretty much covered her ass, she would be happy to cultivate a business relationship with Aria, but would not be in her pocket.
"I would expect nothing less from the great Commander Shepard" Aria nodded her head in Shepard’s direction and her voice had a sarcastic edge but no annoyance, it was what the pirate Queen had expected the Spectre to say.

Meeting the woman in person had turned into the most interesting conversation Aria had had in a too many years. No, Aria thought to herself, not a conversation, more than that; they had tested each other and Shepard had negotiated a beneficial arrangement with nothing, well nothing Aria had been looking for, it amused her greatly.

"Thank you Aria. I have probably taken up too much of your time." Shepard stood up and waited to be dismissed. "Yes perhaps we'll talk again" and Aria nodded a goodbye.

Shepard walked to the edge of the barrier, half turned back and said in a casual way "what was the scan for?" "There are some nasty viruses around; I don't want them in my Club."

They had found the quieter bar on the third level and had a corner booth. Shepard wanted to mull over what she had learned from Aria and talk to the others before heading off to meet up with Garus.

Shepard had ordered the financial data transfer as soon as they left the top bar and had just received a report back from the Normandy that a return package of data had arrived encrypted for her eyes only.

Hard on the heels of the message from the Normandy, Shepard got an emergency call from Garrus.

"Shepard we just got ambushed seems Tarak didn't like our asking questions and they have us pinned down in a warehouse, sending you the nav point." Shepard could hear a lot of firepower and some explosions but before she could say anything Garrus came back on the line. "We don't like it here anymore Shepard, can we come home?" She could hear the smile in his voice.

"Better come pick you up since you can't seem to keep yourself out of trouble... Oscar Mike your location" Shepard closed the comms and stood up; the team around the table in front of her had done the same.

"Looks as if we may need to take a shuttle, there is a station not far from the entrance to the club." Liara was working her OT as they were walking quickly out of the bar and finding the main concourse at the front of Afterlife.

"Ash, get the rest of the team to meet us there," she turned to look at her Salarian scientist and said, "Ish I think you should head back for the ship."

"Ah thank you Commander, I fear I would be a hindrance rather than a help," and he headed for the docking bay.

Shepard was not a little worried. They weren't prepared for the fire fight with the Blue Suns, they had no idea of the territory they would be fighting on and the bulk of the team would be at least thirty minutes behind them. 'Ah well it'll get the blood flowing' she thought to herself.

As they exited the shuttle, now only a street away from the nav point, they could hear the weapons fire coming from directly in front. Weapons drawn they moved quickly, quietly and keeping to cover towards all the noise. They got within scope distance and got eyes on the situation.

Garrus and his team were hold up at the far end of the warehouse, and had set up guardian angel positions on the first floor giving them command of the only frontal way in down a wide aisle blocked in on both sides by containers.

The Blue Suns were between Shepard and Garrus, they were there in heavy numbers, there was no way Shepard's team could just fight their way through from their current strategically weak position.
They needed to figure a smart way to get to Garrus and they might have to start out immediately and let the others catch them up.

"This is a total cluster fuck," the voice was Ash's but it was what had been going through Shepard's mind. And they had no time to lose, with the amount of firepower being thrown against her security team Shepard knew they were unlikely to survive longer than an hour and probably less.
Chapter 16

Shepard's suit comms sparked into life, it was Ish from the Normandy, it was twenty minutes since the call from Garrus, and the trip from Afterlife to the fire fight had taken around fifteen minutes.

"Commander, hope this helps, sending you information on the ground layout that won't show on Omega schematics. Most of Omega is a maze of alleys and streets, as you know, but around the warehouse district this is replicated with internal corridors and access through one room to another. It won't be exact but the principle will be the same." The Salarian finished and signed off.

Shepard was aware that Ish had spent some time in his younger days working for an information broker on Omega, before she had a chance to finish the thought another voice, this time Kasumi.

"We're here Commander just landing in the shuttle area, with you in under two minutes."

Shepard smiled and gave herself a fraction of a moment to feel proud of her team, fast deployment, lateral thinking, everyone trying to contribute what they could without having to be asked… they were going to a match for anything that came their way, but right now they had 'marines' to rescue and she was dammed if she was going to lose anyone in this glorified den of thieves and slavers… the hell she would.

Now at full strength and with local intel Shepard and the team put together a quick and dirty extraction plan, priority one was getting half the fire team to Garrus's position at the same time hitting the Suns from their rear.

She sent Ash with Kasumi and half the marines to flank the Blue Suns, they would clear out any pockets of resistance that they met as they worked their way through the rooms and internal corridors but their main purpose was to get through to the besieged team.

Shepard would set up in a defensive position behind the Suns, just forward from the current position, and would commence firing as soon as Ash's team started working towards Garrus.

It wasn't the best position, there was little cover, Liara and a couple of the marines who were biotics would provide barriers, but that reduced their firepower. If the Suns called up reinforcements Shepard's team would be in a pretty open position caught in crossfire. They had to make it quick and Shepard was wondering just how keen the mercs in front of her actually would be to face down a well-trained, well-disciplined marine squad for any length of time.

On her mark the team opened fire, getting off two rounds of kill shots, scoped to the head, before the mercs even realised they were being shot at from a different direction.

Shepard's team laid down a vicious and deadly fire using a mix of assault and sniper weapons. The kill rate was high as the mercs were now in crossfire between both Shepard's team and Garrus's.

Ash was making good progress, they had met a couple of groups of mercs, took them out quick and quiet, but they had arrived at the area that would give them access to the gallery Garrus was defending just in time.

"Looks like someone has some brains even if they can't fight for shit" Ash's voice came over Shepard's suit comms, "they're fixing to blast their way in and we're looking at ten to take down."

Ash finished

"Copy that Ash, Garrus did you get that," they were all patched through but Shepard wasn't taking
any chances at this point.

"Loud and clear, looking forward to seeing you Ash we have a lovely view and some comfy chairs after your long walk," he continued "you're thinning them out nicely Shepard, just watch your back."

"Will do old man," she smiled and then listened as Ash counted in her team to take down the mercs at Garrus's back door.

"We have acquired the position skipper," Ash's voice over comms "two wounded in security team, one badly, my team one wounded not serious."

"Secure wounded and then proceed to take the merc position we will move forward on your mark," Shepard didn't want to wait for the balance to change, they would squeeze them now with all the fire power of squad, except for those stood out to both tend to and protect their wounded.

The 'go' command came only a couple of minutes later and both team's opened up unremitting fire and began to move forward.

The merc's realised their 'back door team' had been neutralised and lost quite a few more men in panic and then promptly surrendered. Shepard swiftly secured the scene moving everyone including their prisoners down to the shuttle area. She ordered an evac of the wounded and then turned her attention to what seemed like the leader of the merc team.

They found a large room close by, another cut down storage area, and took him there. Shepard was joined by Wrex and Garrus.

"Do you realise how much shit you're going to be in when Tarak finds out some Alliance bitch has just fucked around with him on Omega" the Batarian snarled.

Just as he finished speaking he was lifted bodily off his feet and slammed into the back wall by a biotic slam from Wrex. "I should watch you manners if you want to get out of her in one piece" Garrus snarled at him.

"Ah that's ok, you see fuckwit here doesn't realise that the world of pain that he thinks is coming to me will be raining down all over him when his boss realises he couldn't even kill four Turians in an ambush, lost shit loads of men, and then… oh he's gonna love this… oh yeah surrendered like some little piss pants coward," she gave the Batarian, who was just starting to get up off the floor, one of her most annoying know it all grins.

"That why you didn't call in help," Wrex let out a low rumbling laugh.

She moved forward so fast the Batarian actually jumped a little, when she reached him Shepard pinned him to the wall with one hand by his neck and pulled her pistol and shoved it in his face.

"No, you are going to call your boss down here to show him the interesting stuff you found when you took down the nasty, nosy… why did you go after my team anyway?"

"Asking too many questions about my boss's business… then one of them got tagged as CSec "he said with a struggle due to the strangle hold on his neck.

"Fair enough," she said lightly and then with venom oozing from every word "so as I was saying, you're going to call your boss down here… important… vital he sees it now… you squared away the problem all secure kind of thing. You walk, I'm happy we all go home."

"Mad fuckin bitch he will kill me" the Batarian was now fully aware of his situation but Shepard felt
duty bound to 'rub it in'.

"Yep really bad day for you huh... let me put it this way... you agree to do this, convincingly, or I pop you now and work through the rest of your guys until one of them is more scared of dying right now than dying if Tarak gets to them... yes you notice if... well this may also be your lucky day... if this goes the way I think it will your boss will not be walking away from me... no one will know you dropped him in a trap... and maybe you move up your slippery pole to even greater scumbag glory. Are you reading me now... die now... possibly not die later." Shepard let him go and stepped back.

She could see him trying to work an angle, see a way out, the only chance he had of surviving was with more time, if he wanted to live, and at the end most sentient beings did, he would choose to call his boss, because also like most sentient beings he believed today was not the day he would die.

The Batarian was actually quite high up in the Suns command structure; Salkie was responsible for logistics and also maintained Tarak's gunship. He was convincing when he got through to the Omega Blue Suns leader, even managing to convey the urgency. Tarak would be there in twenty minutes and they would meet where Garrus had been pinned down.

Shepard made her arrangements. Merc prisoners under guard in the room they had used for 'persuading' Salkie to help them, half the marine squad under Ash's command would wait in there until Tarak had passed through the shuttle area and then they would re-secure it.

Shepard would use the other half of the marine team to secure the run from the shuttle area to the building designated for the meeting. In the building itself, concealed until Tarak was well inside their trap, Shepard would have, Wrex, Garrus, Kasumi, Liara and the two unwounded security team members, and of course, a very, very nervous Salkie on display,

Tarak arrived with only a couple of mercs in tow; of course Shepard already knew this as they had been 'checked' by the team at the shuttles. Well, why would Tarak think he was in any danger, meeting one of his lieutenants, on his home turf, and that's what the plan was meant to deliver.

Shepard hoped she would never lose her sixth sense, or gut feeling or whatever it was that gave her a prod when she seemed to walking into unseen trouble.

Tarak had no such 'gut feeling' and once his men were taken out he offered no resistance, Shepard went for cooperation first.

"This can go quick and easy Tarak, I'm only interested in one thing, I don't care about anything your into, and I'm not going to play games with you," Shepard was sitting opposite the Suns leader with Wrex leaning against a wall behind him.

"Get on with it," Tarak was a short breath away from exploding in anger and fury, but he was smart enough to know how limited his options were, he definitely wasn't going to die today, he wanted to tear this Human apart with his bare hands and for that he needed to survive.

"Who is behind the assassination attempt on the Batarian Ambassador, I need names, current locations and the details of the attack..." Shepard broke off as Tarak had started laughing. "Want to share," she said voice and eyes cold as steel.

He stopped laughing and spoke quickly "All right don't do anything stupid, I don't care about fucking politics even Batarian politics anything we do with those terrorists is strictly business. If I tell you all I know you will let me walk out of here?" he suddenly woke up to the fact that even if he told
her he was still at her mercy.

"You tell me what I want to know now, and it better be the truth or you die now and I get my hacking expert and the new 'you' to find out for me. Which will take longer so my convenience is the only thing keeping you alive at this point… don't piss me around… and my word is something you can trust, give me what I want and you walk out of here in one piece? Clocks ticking," she finished.

"The Ambassador Jath'Amon is the leader of the terrorists and he will deliver a deadly virus which I assume he has with him at the full Council meeting at some point while he is on the Citadel… I know nothing else… no other members of the group are on the Citadel," he didn't bother to hide the naked hate and fury that he was feeling.

Shepard looked at Wrex and gave him a short nod; Wrex moved forward and hit Tarak out cold.

Shepard called up comms to the Normandy… it wouldn't be a secure line but she didn't have time to mess around, she had no idea of the timing of meetings, she would just have to risk Aria, and anyone else that was monitoring their comms, hearing the message.

"Joker get me as secure a line as you can direct to Hackett and the Council at the same time but get me through to them now," Shepard kept the channel open and could hear Joker calling up both Arcturus and the Citadel with priority codes and call signs. In less than two minutes she had both Hackett and Councillor Tevos on the line.

"I have solid intel that the terrorist is the Batarian Ambassador himself, Jath'Amon, I repeat the terrorist is Jath'Amon and he has a killer virus concealed somewhere with him for release, do you copy?" Shepard finished.

"Are you certain Commander, do you believe the information you have? If we are wrong the political ramifications would be difficult," Councillor Tevos asked.

"Yes Councillor, I know this looks bad, but I would stake my life on it, even if you have doubts you must at least keep the Ambassador isolated until confirmed one way or the other," Shepard knew the Councillor would want to be sure, but she also felt that out of the three Council members Tevos had always had more respect for Shepard's judgement and opinions.

"Agreed Commander," Tevos said and continued "Admiral Hackett we will liaise security functions, I know this may cause you problems later but perhaps your commando team could deal with Jath'Amon, I suspect they will be best placed to deal with a biological threat quickly and discretely?"

Hackett spoke for the first time; Shepard knew he had to wait for the Council to make any decision.

"I am sending instructions immediately Councillor Tevos, I have also instructed the doubling of the security cordon around each Council member and will contact you immediately we have the terrorist in custody. Good work Commander there was no way we would have picked this up from our end."

"Yes once again Commander the Council is in your debt."
The comms link closed but Joker was still online, "Joker we're on our way back, send the shuttle and make ready to leave the minute we get on board."

"Aye, aye Commander."

Shepard turned her attention back to the room and looked at the slumped Tarak, she looked across at Wrex.

"I would love to either put a bullet in that bastards brain or take him back to Alliance space to face
charges, attacks on human colonies, slaving, piracy… and all I said was I'd let him walk out of here on his own two feet, so he could walk on his own two feet into the Normandy brig.

But if I do that may fuck my ability to come and go on Omega, I think I could get away with killing him easier than taking him to face justice." Shepard finished.

"He is going to kill Salkie but who cares… But he will make it a personal vendetta against you Shepard, he won't stop till one of you is dead," Wrex was concerned and although he couldn't understand why she ever hesitated to kill an obvious enemy whenever she got the drop on them, he respected that she had her own set of rules and code, he would just do his best to take out as many of her enemies as possible to save her having to make the choice.

"Yeah let's put him on the list, it's a long list but I agree he will be pretty much at the top… Least I can do is give Salkie a fighting chance, who knows maybe they take each other out, but I never seem to get that lucky," and with a wistful grin she walked over and slapped Tarak back to life and pulled him to his feet.

Outside they joined the others and Salkie was looking both furious and scared, she knew why, he was fully expecting Shepard to kill Tarak whatever the outcome of their 'conversation'.

"So you two have a little problem and I can't help but think I may be in some way to blame," Shepard said looking at the two Batarian's who were now focussing on each other. She could see Ash smiling and Garrus's mandibles twitching that told her he was 'smiling' too, hell it had been a long day she was entitled to a bit of fun.

"Not sure how you guys are considering resolving your little problem but… I've seen enough merc blood and guts today, so here's what we're going to do. You're going to stand back to back, I'm gonna give you a pistol each with one pulse in it, on my mark you walk ten paces then turn and fire," she was unreadable and for a split second Ash and Garrus thought she might be serious. Liara looked completely confused, Wrex knew he didn't get that lucky either, and Kasumi was still too hard for Shepard to read.

Both the Batarian's started to shout at her at the same time, insults flying, lots of insults questioning every aspect her both as a woman and a marine… and definitely cursing her to a miserable and painful death.

"OK, OK, I get it," she held her hands up and started laughing, "fuck you two are thick though, if you were as good as any of my team you'd have taken the offer and both of you would have fired at me and taken your chances with the others… I don't know you can't give anyone a fighting chance these days," her team gave out a combination of roars of laughter, huge grins and exasperated sighs, the sigh accompanied by a smile was from Liara.

"Well you can just sort yourselves out… I'm not leaving you any weapons and you're not getting your comms back, and if either of you leave this building before my team are safely on our shuttle my concealed sniper will put a bullet in each one of your eyes." And, knowing the issue of weapons and comms had already been dealt with by her team; she turned her back on them and walked out.

She wasn't going to leave a sniper. It would take longer than the walk back to their extraction point for those two to kill each other, whoever got the upper hand first was going to make the other pay for everything Shepard had just done to them.

The trip off Omega was uneventful. Once they jumped through the relay and were on course for Citadel, Shepard checked on the wounded, then the rest of the team. She made a trip to thank Ish for his insight which had made a huge difference to their casualties. Shepard finally ended up in the
lounge and 'bought' drinks all round, they all deserved at least a few hours of R&R.

The Normandy was only a day out from the Citadel, Shepard was needed to give her evidence in person against Jath'Amon although from the reports of his arrest when confronted and taken down by the Alliance under cover team he had ranted a very detailed, useful and self-incriminating confession.

Shepard was in the comms room in a meeting with Liara, Kasumi and the whole science team undertaking a full review of the information, intelligence and theories they had put together during their trip.

"Confidential priority call from Councilor Anderson for you skipper," Ash's voice cut across the discussion in the room.

"Thanks Ash, could I have the room please," Shepard said but people were already making a move to leave, "I'll come and find you when I'm done,"

Liara was passing behind her chair on the way out deep in conversation with Doctor Goto but as she passed by trailed her hand across Shepard's neck an obvious sign of affection and connection.

They were discreet but they shared a cabin and as Liara was not Alliance no regulations were being broken. Always professional and formal on duty they still lived aboard the Normandy and, like quite a few others on board who were personally involved, off duty they had a right to their relationship.

Alliance regulations allowed and encouraged the development of relationships, where else would personnel meet, they were often deployed 'permanently' on the larger ships, it was work and home. The regulations that existed were related to rank for obvious reasons.

"Councilor what can I do for you," Shepard asked Anderson who looked hugely concerned.

"Commander I would like you to take a detour to Grissom Academy and pick up Kahlee Sanders and bring her to the Citadel. I… we need to talk to her about the experience she's just had at the hands of Cerberus. There seems to be a tie in with your investigations regarding the Collectors." He finished but Shepard had the distinct impression he was considering saying more.

"Of course, will she want to come?"

"She knows she needs to be de-briefed, she won't be expecting that it will be me," he smiled, "Dr Sanders and I are friends, she has just been through a terrible ordeal and I… well I would also like to see her to make sure she's ok." So that was it Shepard thought and smiled to herself.

"Consider it done Councilor, we should be with you in around thirty six hours," Shepard snapped a salute; he would forever be her commanding officer in uniform or out of it.

"Thank you Shepard." He smiled before closing the comm link.

"Ash we need to head to Grissom Academy to pick up a passenger for transport to the Citadel, can we make it as snappy as possible."

"Will do skipper."

They reached the Citadel just twenty four hours before the three day official 'new year' holiday period started. She gave the crew a day's liberty and most of them headed straight for the shops for
last minute gifts, Shepard wished them well, she would rather fist fight a Krogan than a holiday shopping expedition to place which would be full of fraught, angry and crazy, with holiday preparation stress, shoppers.

She hadn't had much time to get to know Kahlee Sanders but the couple of conversations over food or coffee in the mess left Shepard with a good opinion of the woman.

Anderson had met them at the dock and suggested they carry out the de-briefing aboard the Normandy in the comms room.

It soon became apparent that Kahlee Sanders had indeed had a rough time of it. She was trying to protect a young girl, who was also a powerful biotic, and a student at the Academy, from being taken away by Cerberus where Sanders was convinced they would run disgusting and brutal experiments on the child. Being on the run and still ending up being kidnapped and held hostage.

Shepard became even more alert when Kahlee mentioned the name of the Cerberus agent that had captured them, Golo, the Quarian with connections to the Collector deal on Omega.

She and the girl were rescued by a Quarian on his pilgrimage by the name of Lemm, who had taken them for safety to the migrant fleet. But Cerberus had followed and very nearly managed to grab the young girl and Kahlee and blow up the Idenna which would have cost thousands of Quarian lives.

There had been the added complication that the girls 'father' was a Cerberus agent but at the last minute on the Idenna choose not to give her back to Cerberus He killed Golo and defused the bomb on the Quarian life ship.

"I suspect that Grayson was given Gillian as a baby and told to treat her as his own, he seems to have done a good job until Cerberus sent her to us at the Academy. He seemed to find it hard to cope and became addicted to red sand, but in the end he did what was best for his daughter."

She paused and then went on, "if… well no almost definitely when, the Illusive Man catches up with him it won't be an easy end." Kahlee almost shuddered at the thought; her description of the torture of another Quarian to get the migrant fleet access codes had been disturbing even to Shepard's strong stomach.

The girl was safely out of the reach of the Illusive Man, at least for now; she had joined one of the Quarian deep space exploration missions searching for a new home world… "Or a dead Reaper" Kahlee said "some of the Quarians are convinced if they can find the right Reaper technology they could re-gain control of the Geth."

"Oh that's not good… I like the searching for a new home world part, but as if we didn't have enough people running around looking for Reaper tech like it's some kind of magic button to power… did anybody listen to the bit about indoctrination and control by the Reapers… I haven't seen anything working the other way so far."

Shepard suddenly felt exhausted, it seemed every time they had a small victory, and a small step forward something huge would kick them back into touch.

"How likely is it they'll find anything, there can't be that many Reapers just lying around the place," Anderson asked.

"Well it would be a long shot but not if a Reaper was looking to get found, Quarians could be very useful to have under their control as an asset. But it also means they'll probably start looking for tech
here in the known galaxy as well as in the uncharted territories.

Which means we now have a list of people that we know who are looking for the biggest trouble you could possible walk into." Shepard finished and some part of her wishes she hadn't gotten out of bed that morning.

They discussed the implication of the Cerberus activity and finished by talking about the course of action the Quarians might take, there were clear divisions within their leadership which would clearly impact on any preparation to fight the Reaper threat.

It was time to give her evidence to the Council and Anderson, as a Council member, needed to attend as well. Shepard gave Anderson and Sanders a couple of minutes and waited on the dock. They walked together to the Council Chamber.

"So is she rushing back to Grissom?" Shepard asked her old commander.

"No, I thought she might but she's agreed to spend the holiday here with me," he smiled, "I really do think this whole thing shook her up a lot, I'll be pleased to make a bit of a fuss of her. Your off to you family gathering on Arcturus?"

"Yep heading off in the morning, Liara is going with me, Goddess help her," Shepard smiled broadly and Anderson was struck that whenever she talked about Liara Shepard looked more like her old self before Saren and all that weight she now had to carry.

"The rest of the crew scattering to the wind?"

"More or less, I asked Wrex to join the me on the station, but he has a few things to take care of," she smiled and shook her head, "that will involve lots of alcohol and probably fighting if things to his plan. Ash is doing her family thing, but Garrus accepted so I have one of my wing men with me."

They chatted on until they reached the Council Chamber. Shepard gave her evidence, now pretty much confirmed out of the ex-Batarian Ambassadors own mouth. Which was fine by her as it gave Councillor Sparatus no opportunity to be snide or sarcastic at her expense, and she didn't need to lose any more 'holiday spirit'.

2183 was drawing to a close so the next morning the Normandy headed for Arcturus Station where her crew would disperse, most of them remaining on the station, to find their families or friends for the three day celebrations that would start with the new year eve.

Wrex, Kasumi, her science team and security team all made their farewells from the Citadel. They would rendezvous after the holiday and Shepard thought they should probably complete their scanning in the Omega Nebula with a quick visit to the Amada system… but that was for after the holiday.

For now her mission was to ease Liara into the kind of family celebration that she was sure her shy and often retiring lover had never been part of, to introduce Liara into her family, making Shepard feel immensely proud and happy and at the same time feeling like a Pyjak caught in the headlights of a very big Tomkah heading straight at her.
Chapter 17

Shepard felt the edge of consciousness drift over her and a warm body moulded into her, blue arm laying loosely across her side and belly.

Opening her eyes she saw an unfamiliar bedside table and then bulkhead, she felt Liara's breath on the back of her neck, the Asari was mirroring Shepard's body with her own and the feel of breasts and thighs brought a feeling of peace and contentment.

They had arrived at Arcturus the day before and decided to move into the accommodation provided for them rather than stay on the Normandy. Shepard had been given a suite of rooms with exterior views from the lounge area although she didn't know if that was because of all the recent hype around the Citadel battle, that she was a Spectre and therefore a Council guest or if it was something to do with Liara being the daughter of a once powerful Matriarch. If it had just been Shepard she would have asked to be bunked in standard Alliance officer accommodation but she really wanted to make this short break with Liara as special as possible.

Shepard moved Liara's arm gently and slid off the bed, it was early, but it didn't matter if she was on duty or leave this was the time she woke up and it was too early to wake Liara, she considered it, but they had had a 'late' night.

She smiled thinking about their love making; Shepard was still surprised that she was so comfortable using the word 'love' in any context about herself. It wasn't that she didn't want to have, one day, what she saw other people experiencing, particularly what her parents shared, no it was more that she couldn't see how that would work with her life choice.

She was a Marine, an Alliance officer and now Council Spectre. Apart from the dedication and commitment she felt and the focus needed to fulfil the duties she had accepted, there was also the constant danger of death or serious permanent injury which put any thoughts of allowing a serious personal relationship on the other side of a boundary that she had maintained without much difficulty until she met Liara.

There had always been room for casual liaisons, fun, and certainly she cared about the women she had been intimate with, but always at a distance, it was never going anywhere. Until now, the worst possible timing, the most dangerous and demanding time of her life, a most dangerous time for the whole galaxy.

Shepard threw on some loose sweats, found the kitchen, made coffee, and settled herself in the lounge. She looked out the large window that formed the whole of the outer wall and looked past the range of frigates and cruisers 'parked' around the station, to the glimmers of distant stars and the drifting Milky Way.

She was feeling more and more convinced she wanted, no needed, to take a huge next step in her relationship this holiday. But Shepard wanted to be sure her timing wasn't being driven by the intensity of the responsibility she felt for leading the charge against the Reaper's and their followers,
or the war they had just been through.

Shepard wanted to ask Liara to, well what? Get engaged? Did Asari culture have some kind of pre-bonding thing? She really had meant to ask Liara what the Asari customs were. Shepard had meant to find out, properly, not from an extranet search, quite some time ago, but with one thing or another it just didn't get done.

She had studied and knew a great deal about the Asari culture, politics, religion and their military of course. All necessary information to be a good 'galactic' citizen and definitely needed to be an effective Alliance officer and Spectre, she had studies every race Humanity now shared the galaxy with. But there was no need to learn about mating rituals, certainly not how to ask an Asari to become your 'bondmate'.

She was considering seeing the Consort on the Citadel for advice, she didn't really know any other Asari apart from Councillor Tevos and that would be inappropriate or Aria T'Loak and amusing though that conversation would be Shepard wouldn't do that to Liara who would hate to find out Aria had been privy to her possible future before she was herself.

Now, if she started that conversation with Liara, it would feel last minute and end up with Shepard telling her lover why she was asking about bonding rituals and then no big moment... she smiled at herself. 'Shepard thinking about big romantic moments, what the fuck has gotten into you', and she suddenly thought about the reality of the next few days.

'Shit this is the first time I have ever been with anyone, let alone in a 'relationship', at any kind of family thing. She had no idea how to do it'... and she had to make sure Liara was OK, and Liara had even less experience of this stuff than she did. Shepard didn't have any such worries about their life together on the Normandy, which was ordinary life, where they 'lived'. And together, when they were on their own they were great, it was natural, comfortable.

But this was a particular social situation and... well... she should have thought this through before now. It was too late to run away but that was suddenly what felt like an outstanding plan. Just the two of them, that was certainly all Shepard needed and if she was honest, all she really wanted.

It would be too much, laying on a big moment in the pressure cooker that would be a full on family new year's, 'Shepard don't go all soppy on me... big moment... what the…' Shepard decided in that moment, she would wait until their next leave together and then ask. There was time, the pressure dropped, and she decided to go back to bed and maybe see if Liara was anywhere near being awake...

Shepard had found Liara awake when she had returned to bed and they had picked up where they had left of the previous night. Falling asleep an hour or so later their bodies intertwined.

As Shepard woke up for the second time she noticed she was alone and could hear voices coming from the lounge. Slipping out of bed and throwing on her sweats she ventured from the bedroom already recognising the second voice in the room.

"Garrus," she said with a smile "did you settle in OK, are your quarters good enough?"

"Yes I'm just down the corridor same setup, I think they have me mistaken for someone important," his mandibles twitched as was his way when he was 'smiling'. 

"Oh but Garrus you are very important to us… that is, not just to us but..." Liara gave up and smiled.

"Thank you Liara and yes for some reason you both seem to have taken to me, for which I am honoured if not a little baffled."

"Ah maybe your just the little brother I never had," Shepard laughed and then suddenly said, "hey what the hell is the time, Liara how long have you been up, I was sleeping so soundly I didn't even notice you leave."

That was more than unusual it was unheard of as Shepard was a light sleeper and always somewhere alert to any danger that may come at her, it was very much a soldiers trait, especially one who had been in the kinds of prolonged campaigns that Shepard had.

Liara smiled warmly at her lover and said, "It is nearly eleven, I left you soundly sleeping oh must have been, a couple of hours ago. Garrus has been her only around ten minutes.

I was not going to disturb you, it is the most peaceful I think I have ever seen you asleep."

Liara leaned into Shepard who, after getting herself a coffee, had sat down next to Liara on one of the long sofas.

"Have to say Shepard you do look more relaxed than I think I can remember seeing you and a little younger… maybe we should re-think this 'younger' brother thing."

Garrus was pleased to see the change in Shepard he had been becoming more and more worried about not only the stress that she had to carry but also the recurring headaches that seem to have resulted from her interactions with the beacons.

"Well I reckon I'm going to need it, you know what they saw about family events," Shepard looked at her two companions who looked back blankly and the lack of shared cultural reference points surprised her for a split second, she really did forget most of the time about the 'being non humans' thing.

"Ah yes well may just be a human thing, but they are usually quite stressful, family politics, feuds, treading on eggshells… anyway… it won't be that bad my lot are fairly decent. But I will make sure you guys have a great time and…” Liara cut Shepard's conversation off and said.

"Yes on that point both Garrus and I are agreed that we do not want you to feel as if you need to… 'Babysit' us… and," at this point Liara leaned back a little and with a firm edge to her voice looking directly at Shepard said,

"I do not need you to worry about me. I know I can be a little awkward in social situations but that does not mean I do not enjoy them. My life has changed beyond recognition since I met you and came to live on the Normandy. You have all…," at this point she looked at Garrus, "been extremely kind and given me the confidence to stop hiding away from people. I am looking forward to meeting you family Shepard and if you think for one moment that Asari families do not have their fair share of difficulty and politics you haven't yet really understood what living with my mother was like."

As she finished Liara smiled, as did Garrus, Shepard shrugged her shoulders in acceptance and grinned widely. Shepard also gave a small laugh as she put her arm around Liara's shoulders and pulled her into her side in a hug and said.

"Point taken T'Soni, no cotton wool, you're on your own, well to a point, you can't stop me wanting you to have a good time… but maybe I can make sure you always end the evening on a high."
Shepard went to get showered and dressed in readiness for lunch with her mother and a few family members that would also serve as a small introduction for Liara and Garrus.

The rest of the time they spent chatting and exchanging family stories which cheered Shepard up no end as it seemed they had much more in common than she had thought, considering their cultures developed across a galaxy under very different 'suns'.

Captain Hannah Shepard answered the door to her quarters and greeted her daughter, Liara and Garrus, showing them in and introducing them to the small gathering.

Her parents, LV's grandparents, had traveled from Earth for the holiday. Hannah's sister and brother-in-law, their eldest son and his partner with their new born baby, a couple of close friends and their daughter who was an archaeological scientist and who she hoped would be someone that Liara would find interesting.

They were all from Hannah's side of the family the Skorsgaard's; the Shepard clan was much larger and they were going to join up with LV's closest relatives on that side of the family for dinner that evening.

Hannah watched her daughter saying her hello's and introducing Liara and Garrus, giving her grandparents big hugs and going soft over the baby, holding it so gently in her arms as if it would break.

She saw the affection, no it was clearly love, between her daughter and Liara and it filled her with happiness that LV had found someone that she could, would let in. They reminded her of her own relationship with LV's father and she wished he could see how their girl had turned out.

She had been such a serious child, not lacking in humour and with a well-developed sense of mischief, but it was as if she had always been preparing to take on the life of service and duty.

It certainly wasn't because Hannah or John had wanted her to follow them into the military, after all John had started life on an academic path and they would have been happy for LV to choose that as a career.

But there was a fire, clarity of purpose in the child, the young girl and then the young woman that left no one in any doubt that her path would be to serve Earth, humanity, the Alliance and now the galaxy. All those things that sometimes sound pompous but for LV it was all about being somewhere she could protect the weak, punish the wrong doers and live a life bounded by duty and honour.

And Hannah suddenly remembered the look that would pass between her and her husband, which was a combination of pride, frustration and resignation, when they heard the prophetic words from their daughter 'but that isn't fair' which would shortly be followed by Liddie's attempts to 'make it fair' whatever the issue was and however big.

The lesson that was the hardest for them to help her understand was that sometimes things just are not fair and there isn't anything anyone can do about it.

She was so proud of the woman her daughter had become and so afraid that she was now carrying too much responsibility, too much weight but she also knew her daughter would never shirk her responsibilities or her duty whatever the cost, she was her parent's child.

"Shepard I had no idea you had such a soft centre," Garrus whispered 'smiling' as he stood next to her nursing the few week old baby in her arms.
"Yeah well you mention this to anyone on board and you'll be 'calibrating' using a different orifice," she whispered and smiled back at him then said "reckon I'm scoring points with Liara… not that… I mean, just…" she trailed off realising how her comment may have sounded. Although it sounded exactly as Shepard had thought it.

"Hell Shepard you're getting broody," he had to stifle a full laugh pretending to cough, Shepard could see his eyes watering, but she fixed him with a look and he said holding one hand up in surrender "wiped from my mind, anything you said after we walked in the room, no idea what we just talked about," but he was still struggling to keep from laughing.

"Yeah alright smart ass, maybe just a bit, aw shit look at this little fella, how awesome would it be to watch one of your own grow up. Teach them stuff."

Garrus looked down at the bundle in Shepard's arms and said, "You have a point, not felt the pull yet myself, but I can see you and Liara are solid enough to consider it. When are you going to ask her?"

Garrus looked up at Shepard and saw the troubled look on her face.

Shepard had talked to Garrus about asking Liara to get engaged or pre bonded, he was, after all, her best friend and she really did think of him as family. When they weren't in banter or teasing mode they seemed to give each other good advice. And even if his experience of relationship was patchy at least he had some experience to draw on unlike Shepard.

Shepard's eyes drifted to where Liara was sitting in deep and animated conversation with her grandparents and her mother's friend's daughter who seemed to be an archaeologist.

"I thought about it and I think this leave is just so… I don't know crowded… and I wanted to make it special… somewhere maybe we could go back to and that just isn't going to be Arcturus," she realised it sounded like a combination of a cop out and also looking for a bit of a cheesy romantic moment, again. "What the hell has that woman done to me Garrus… somewhere we could come back to for a romantic anniversary of when I asked… I'm fucked, truly lost to love or whatever this is." She grinned giving up all attempts at trying to hide just how much she was in love with her Asari.

"Shepard seriously, yes you are totally lost to that woman and who could blame you, also she feels the same way... the gods only know why," he smiled and squeezed her shoulder, "you're so right for each other and it's a sight for tired jaded old eyes… but you do know I'm going to tease the shit out of you at some point in the future with all this…"

They both laughed out loud and many eyes around the room looked at LV Shepard and were warmed by the sight of her relaxed and happy and safe, at least for now, in the heart of her family, old and new.

Where the lunchtime gathering organised by her mother was small with close family only, the evening would be a much larger affair. Of course Shepard's family didn't fall neatly into the two clans of Shepard and Skorsgaard; there were the matriarchal lines, the married in and their non-blood related extended family.

But amongst the larger number Shepard's family the close members who were to be present included her father's sister and two brothers and their children. Her only surviving grandparent, her grandmother, on that side of family was not able to attend as she was on duty in Vancouver.

Her mother had warned her that her Uncle Lucas and his son would be there and he seemed to be
even more than usually irritated at any mention of Shepard's name, and it could be connected to the number of ships he lost at the battle of the Citadel. Rear Admiral Lucas Mikhailovich was the commander of the 63rd Scout Flotilla.

Shepard had last seen him some months ago when he attempted to board the Normandy to conduct and inspection and Shepard had denied him access as the Normandy was in effect a Council ship. He had only wanted to list the things about the build that were 'wrong' and had started by saying he didn't agree with sharing Alliance military secrets with the Turians. She had cut him dead and he was furious, it had felt good, she despised everything about him from his over reliance on rigid rules to his attitude towards non humans and the Council.

"Babe," Shepard had decided to warn Liara about the possible, or rather probable, awkwardness with her Uncle if they found themselves face to face. "Not all my family feel that I make the… well, they don't all approve of the way I… conduct myself as an Alliance officer. The Butcher of Torfan thing stuck with quite a few humans and a considerable number of those within the Alliance."

Shepard was sitting on one of the sofa's looking across at Liara who had just entered from their bedroom, she looked stunning in a form fitting but silky palest blue trouser suit, the top appearing to flow like water as she moved. The top was cut a little a very old Earth style from ancient China, Shepard could do nothing but stare in wonder at this elegant beauty.

"I am aware of the small element who choose not to accept you made the best military decision you could being the 'one on the ground', is that the right way to put it," Liara tilted her head slightly to the side as she asked her question, a gesture that was so familiar to Shepard, who nodded, "you will always search your conscience to make the right decision Shepard guided by your moral compass. If people can not accept that or you then they are not worth being concerned over."

Liara had moved in front of Shepard and reached out her hands to cup her lovers face and as she starred down into stunning, captivating, fascinating green eyes she continued, "and they certainly don't know how much each and every one of the decisions and lives cost you."

Shepard felt the surge of love and tenderness and understanding from her Asari through the light meld Liara had initiated in order to convey the strength of her support for the love of her heart.

Shepard stood up, into Liara's waiting arms and they kissed a long, slow, loving, tender kiss. When they broke apart Shepard stood back a little to be able to fully appreciate the view.

"Goddess you are absolutely gorgeous Liara, I feel totally unworthy to be seen with you," Shepard was smiling but there was an edge of still not really understanding how she had managed to capture the heart of someone so… well… perfect.

Liara had seen her lover dressing earlier but appraised her fully for the first time. Shepard was dressed completely in black apart from her trousers leg stripe. Varen leather riding boots that came to just below her knee, black trousers with the red stripe down the sides of the legs and a short Varen leather jacket over a very soft and fitted crepe shirt.

" Oh I think Commander that there will be as many eyes enjoying you this evening as will be looking at me, I certainly find nothing to complain about," Liara and Shepard laughed. "

"And irresistibly attractive though you look I am already a little impatient to be watching you take them all off… slowly" Liara finished by kissing Shepard and this time it was full of passion and need.
As they left the room Shepard couldn't help but allow herself to feel she was the luckiest woman in the galaxy, hell, probably the universe and she had never been so happy and content in her life.

The evening was going well. Shepard was very much at home in the heart of the family and Liara saw a new and different side to her. It was as if Shepard could allow the heavy weight of leadership and responsibility drop away, she could be just one of her generation within the family, with older, wiser heads above who she could defer to; and a younger generation who she could just have fun with and not feel responsible for them.

Shepard and Liara spent time chatting with her cousins most of whom were in the Alliance in some capacity or other or in roles that supported the work of the Systems Alliance in the political sphere. Liara could see that Shepard not only had their love and respect but they also enjoyed her company.

In this relaxed and comfortable environment and away from her day to day responsibilities Shepard was very much the life and soul of the party and seemed comfortable, for once, being the centre of attention. Liara was fully aware of just how charismatic Shepard was, but had only ever seen it in a 'work' sense, either in the execution of her mission or her duty as the Commander of the Normandy.

But of course, Shepard was charismatic, amusing, interesting, clever, entertaining… in fact exactly the kind of personality and company that people seek out, for obvious reasons. Not least because Shepard had a way of making everyone around her, everyone she was including in her circle, making them all feel just as amusing and clever and interesting as she was.

Liara couldn't help but feel proud and a little disconcerted that Shepard had found her worthy to share her life and her heart with, and she thanked the Goddess for whatever quirk of timing and fate that had brought them together. Young though she was by Asari standards, and unusual as it was, Liara knew she was with the love of her life, her bondmate, her soulmate and the thought warmed her and terrified her a little at the same time.

Then it happened, despite the best efforts of all those present who were aware of the tensions between Shepard and her Uncle they ended up face to face across one of the buffet tables. Shepard decided to turn and walk away but the Admiral spoke to her back.

"I hear you did it again," he said, and his voice always stung Shepard as his tone was closest out of his brothers to her father's, she could really hear an echo or perhaps more of a shadow of the voice she missed so much.
"Did what," she turned to face him, Liara at her side looking concerned.

"Killed another unarmed prisoner in cold blood, is that really how your father raised you," his sneer and distaste was evident in his voice and on his face.

Shepard's tone was quiet, but cold and the fury in her eyes would have made a Krogan battle master gird his loins before approaching, and she said.

"That bastard tortured a brave and honorable soldier to death personally, what the fuck would you have liked me to do with him?"

"You have no right to pass judgement you should leave that to your betters who have a clearer sense of what's right and wrong. The more they encourage you with rewards and medals the more you set yourself above the law, above your orders, your duty; you dishonor your uniform and your father's memory." His eyes were burning with anger and his fist balled at his side.
"I dispense justice when it's the only and last option… you know what would have happened to that Cerberus bastard he would have been out in a matter of months one way or another to kill or torture again… I won't have that on my conscience, those deaths would have been on me…” her voice was raised now the anger and frustration taking hold, if it was anyone else, a stranger she wouldn't rise to the bait but this was her father's brother, he knew her, watched her grow up and she couldn't bear when he used her father's opinion against her.

"And how do you justify letting hostages die just so you could kill another Batarian, you are dangerous Lydia you can't even see that you defer to no one, you now only have to report to that all interfering Council that looks down on all things human, and you turned your back on everything your father believed in for more power to be able to kill whenever you feel the need to act like God.” He was shouting now too and red with anger in the face.

They began to move towards each other as they were shouting but people were moving between them and while some stood next to Mikhalovich others stood next to Shepard trying to calm her down.

Liara was beyond furious she wanted to tear the man's head off, but she was working really hard to maintain control and to get Shepard to move away, she knew that if this escalated her human would feel terrible about it once her rage and pain had subsided.

Yes unexpectedly Liara was sensing not only the anger and rage so easy to see but also deep pain and sorrow, she would talk to Shepard about this later and try to understand where the pain was coming from.

"Yeah well when you've the balls to fight face to face with killers and slavers, when you've held dying children who've been tortured and had control chips put in their heads… if you ever have the guts to come out of that ivory tower of yours and get down in the dirt well… then maybe… maybe you'd understand why if you get the shot you take it to save lives down the line… but you don't do you… fuckin coward…”

They were both shouting insults at each other at the same time but with Shepard's last sentence the area in between the two groups seemed to explode with movement as a young man, around Shepard's age, broke through the crowd and slammed into Shepard and landed a punch in the face.

"Don't you call my father a coward you fucking bitch.” He stood red faced with his fist still raised as he watched Shepard, who had been caught off guard, slammed backwards onto the floor.

Shepard was hardly down before she was back on her feet and she slammed her cousin in the face with a head butt to the nose and he toppled backward and flat out on the floor.

At the same moment Liara, Shepard’s Aunt Cathy and three of her cousins all surrounded her and started walking her away. She went with them suddenly exhausted, dazed and close to tears.

"Come on LV, let's get you out of here, come back to our accommodation, come on," her Aunt was talking in soothing tones and as they moved through the room they were joined by a larger group of family members all trying to show their support for Shepard and all determined to leave with her.

"Liara,” Cathy said across Shepard's chest as they were walking on either side of her, "do you think we should call Hannah to join us in my quarters?"

"I believe that may be a good idea, I shall put a call in…” but before Liara could finish her sentence they saw the hurrying figure of Hannah Shepard coming straight towards them. They were in the corridor now and they could all see she did not look happy in fact Liara could clearly see where her
Shepard got her 'murderous' look from.
'Hannah it just came out of nowhere we were watching like hawks, kept them apart all evening and then," Cathy said as they came together and to a stop, Shepard was still in the daze that had descended on her after the fight.

"I am fighting every instinct I have to go in there a punch that man in the face myself, but what the hell good would it do, he is an evil, mean, miserable bastard. He will have a piece of my mind but not tonight." She looked across the group behind and around her daughter, "thank you all for looking out for her, thank you Cathy, I think she needs quiet. If it's ok with you I think Liara and I will take her back to my quarters and we'll catch up in the morning."

With thanks and assurances of support, pats on the back from many hands and goodnights all-round the group split with Hannah and Liara flanking and guiding Shepard off towards the accommodation block.

Once out of earshot Hannah said "I think we should take her back to your quarters Liara and just put her to bed, I'm sure she would rather just be with you, " Hannah smiled at her daughters lover who smiled appreciatively back, "let me know when you are both up and awake and she feels up to me coming over."

"Thank you Hannah I will and I will take care of her," they were outside their door and Hannah moved towards Liara and pulled the Asari into a hug and said,

"Of that I can be absolutely certain Liara and I thank you for it," Hannah Shepard turned and gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek and finished, 'see you in the morning get some sleep.'

Shepard seemed to only just notice her mother and she nodded. They moved inside the rooms and within ten minutes Shepard was in bed and asleep but not the quiet, peaceful sleep of the night before, this sleep was full of restless torment.

As Liara sat on the edge of the bed watching over her love she decided she would get to the bottom of the bad feeling between Shepard and her Uncle, she would find out where the source of Shepard's pain was and try to help her heal it.

But for now she would try to soothe Shepard's sleep with a light meld and hold her safely in her arms through the dark night.

Chapter End Notes

I am still looking to do a full edit of this story but I'm working on the second 'book' to take us to the end of ME3 and into Andromeda and also an original novel. So please forgive the first draft feel of the work.
Shepard was brooding on the events of the night before and despite Liara's best efforts she refused to talk about what had happened.

Even when her mother arrived Shepard continued to slouch on the sofa and stare without really seeing at the movie playing out its story on the large vid screen on the wall.

Liara and Hannah exchanged a look and as Liara switched off the screen Hannah Shepard sat down opposite her daughter and spoke to her.

"He is a complete shit Lydia and I have never understood why he can affect you so much, for god's sake he's only your father's half-brother and a more pompous, uptight, irrelevant ass it is difficult to meet this side of a political convention," she was watching her daughter intently and was rewarded with a wan smile.

"I feel so embarrassed, I'm so sorry Liara, Mum, I really let you down, everything he says I am… the worst of who I am I laid out on a plate for everyone to see… just to prove him right." Shepard had looked at both of them as she apologised and then went back to staring at the now blank screen.

"But why Shepard, this has to be more about what you are hearing and not what he is saying," Liara said gently and stroked Shepard's arm.

Hannah leaned forward and said more softly, "Liara's right and the only reason I can think he has such and effect on you is because you think he is saying what your father would say if he was here," as Hannah watched her daughter she could see pain forcing its way onto her face. That confirmed her suspicions and Shepard's mother knew it was time to have this long overdue conversation.

"Look," Shepard suddenly sat up and her voice was now stronger as she spoke she looked from Liara to her mother, "whatever you think of him he was Dad's older brother and they were close, Dad rated him even if they saw some things differently.

They were close, Mum and there's no good you shaking your head, you know they were. So why shouldn't he know what… he will have known a different side of Dad and you can't tell me any different." Shepard leaned forward and with her elbows on her knees she held her head in her hands.

"But it's more than that, " Shepard's voice was lower and it was clear to the two women sitting with her it was also full of emotion, "what if he is just flat out right, for fucks sake when did I get the monopoly on knowing, really knowing, taking away someone's life certainty of knowing, what the right or the wrong thing to do is… dressing it up like I'm just trying to even the scales of justice when maybe it's just the red haze of battle fury, or worse the cold calculating fury of personal hate.

Do you honestly think I did the right thing hunting down every last one of those slavers and pirates on Torfan, even after we knew we'd beaten them, just so we could say we killed them all? I already lost a quarter of my squad before we chased them into their underground bunkers; I only came out with a handful of marines. Sent the Major mad with the knowledge we killed prisoner's… that was me… I did that… you look me in the eye and tell me you're proud of what I did that day." Shepard looked up and stared her mother square in the eyes.
"You know instead of whining about what it cost you marine you need to remember what your mission was," Hannah Shepard's words may have been harsh but her voice and her demeanor remained gentle, "your orders were to take any and all measures to end the threat from Batarian and other criminal elements who had not only carried out the Skyllian Blitz but who were continuing to attack Alliance settlements killing, torturing and stealing men, women and children to sell as slaves.

Your nightmares and the weight you carry come with the uniform and the rank, you know that. I know it and your father certainly knew it."

Liara leaned in towards Shepard and said, "I know that because of the action the Alliance took on Torfan that Batarian's started retreating from all across Citadel space which meant a lot of other worlds, settlements and colonies were also made safe."

Shepard flashed a look at Liara and a small nod to acknowledge the truth of what had been said, but turned back to her mother and asked, "but can you, hand on heart, tell me that Dad would have done the same thing, or that he wouldn't be ashamed of me?"

"Yes, I can," Hannah's voice was now powerful and her face stern and a little foreboding, "and I knew your father better than Lucas ever did. You forget sometimes Liv how much your father always tried hard to see the good in people, and especially with family he forgave them a lot. Lucas always had a chip on his shoulder, always felt he was better than his half brothers and sisters and he let them know it.

The Mikhailovich name and legacy is all he used to brag on about, worried that the Shepard blood would water down the family greatness… oh god I had no patience for him then and less now… yes his father died before Lucas was even born but plenty of kids lose their parents and turn out decent, but he is twisted inside and you can't see it because you think he has a direct line to your father well he doesn't." Hannah stood up suddenly and looked extremely upset.

"I won't have it, do you hear me, no more of this soul searching and second guessing. Your father would have been proud of you no matter what, he may have disagreed with some of your choices, though I can't say I can think of one so far, and you are more like him even than you realise." She had Shepard's full attention and when she spoke she looked from her daughter to Liara and asked,

"Answer me this, who knows you better than anyone else in the galaxy, who knows your mind and your heart and could answer best what you would might think about something if you weren't around to ask… if you and Liara are ever blessed with children who would you want your kids asking about what you may or may not feel or think about them… someone like Lucas… or your partner Liara, the mother of your children." As she finished speaking she had tears in her eyes and Shepard jumped off the sofa and wrapped her arms around her mother.

Shepard was shocked on so many levels by her mother's outburst but it had the desired effect, it snapped her out of whatever black hole of doubt and despair that the shadow of her father's voice had sent her into to.

Liara also looked wide eyed and decided the best thing to do was to make some tea for everyone. And when she returned with the drinks Shepard and her mother were sitting down and Hannah Shepard was once more composed and looking a little embarrassed.

"Asari tea, it is very soothing, can I get you anything to eat," Liara said as she busied herself with pouring the drinks. "Tea will be lovely Liara," Hannah said, "well I don't think I've been that upset since, well, since my daughter nearly died on Elysium, or was it the time she nearly died on the Friezlan campaign, no it may have been…” she was cut by Shepard
who through laughter said.

"Hell Mum you make me sound like a crap marine can't go anywhere without getting smashed up."

"Oh you should hear what Doctor Chakwas says about her," Liara joined in and they settled into some easy conversation which ranged from the number and style of concussions that Shepard had managed to rack up last year alone and how many times she broke something as a child growing up pushing her limits.

In the back of Shepard's mind she was trying to process how Liara had reacted to her mother talking about them having children and wondered how she herself felt about it.

Although New Year's eve started badly for Shepard after getting straightened out by her mother and spending the day with Liara, Garrus, family and friends, by the time they were dressing to go out to the big party her happy mood was fully restored.

Shepard was also guaranteed not to bump into Admiral Mikhailovich, as she was now going to think of him, he was no kin to her any longer. He had been taken to task by pretty much most of the family present on the station and decided to leave taking his son, who did indeed have a broken nose, with him.

Shepard also reminded herself of how he had treated his daughter, her cousin and probably best friend as they were both growing up. Tasha and Shepard had joined the Alliance together, been at boot camp together and served in the 103rd Division where Tasha had then gone on to train and serve in the Special Forces.

She had run into some problems, Shepard never really knew what had happened, but Tash ended up being courts marshaled and was thrown out of the Alliance. Her father banned her from the family, disowned her, he was a complete bastard about it.

Shepard hadn't seen or heard from her since before all the trouble, she sometimes wondered if she should try to find her and see if she was ok, but there was always another mission, or prep for one, or some other duty that took her time up.

Shepard was broken out of her memories as Liara, dressed for their evening out, and made her entrance into the lounge from the bedroom. Shepard wanted to do nothing but stand there forever and enjoy completely the sight of her Asari lover's entrance… and what an entrance.

Liara was wearing a long dress, again made of some kind of material that hugged her figure accentuating the curves of her body, but also gave the impression of being liquid.

The dress was also cut so that it showed off her back and scooped in around her waist, she was also showing a little cleavage, and all in all it was a very sexy and sensual dress just about covering a very sexy and sensual body.

Shepard actually couldn't speak and just stood, giving the impression of her mouth hanging open, staring, at the most beautiful vision in the galaxy.

"Outstanding," was all she could manage as she held out her arm for Liara as they headed for the door. Shepard's dress blues a perfect foil for the silver of her Asari's dress.

It was a military dance as all the families and friends groups who were spending the holiday on
Arcturus would all be celebrating together. There was even a rumour that Hackett himself may attend, Shepard wondered if Anderson would turn up with his Doctor in tow.

The evening was a huge success. Shepard and Liara had a fantastic time, Garrus had bonded with a small group of her single relatives and they were already into war stories and drinking games before the evening was warmed up.

The music was provided by a live band and a live dj doing alternate sets so most musical tastes were catered for.

As the evening got late the band took over completely and they played a lot of twentieth century jazz which seemed to be a favourite with a lot of Alliance officers, including Shepard. Her father had a big collection that predated his joining up and they got played a lot as she was growing up, she knew most of them off by heart.

They were dancing to a song called 'East of the Moon' and Shepard was quietly singing along close to Liara's ear. Shepard knew her limitations and couldn't really sing but up close and more whispering than singing Liara seemed to be enjoying the experience very much.

"Shepard," Liara said leaning back a little to look into her lovers eyes, "I believe there is an old Earth custom where couples choose a particular song that has meaning for them. Is this true?" Liara looked about as cute as Shepard had ever seen her look and couldn't help but drift in and kiss her briefly before answering.

"Well now have you been getting relationship tips or is this more research into the foibles of human courtship rituals?" Shepard smiled and then went on, "yes darling they do, and I'm afraid I already have one picked out for us… so I better let you in on it at some point, maybe." Shepard said in a teasing tone.

"But Shepard it will never be 'ours' if you do not share it with me. And why to you get to choose," with her last comment Liara playfully pushed Shepard's shoulder.

"Ah well we're not limited to just one… you could choose a piece of the equivalent of Asari opera that you make me sit through for hours on end, with me not understanding anything but it's still all very romantic and whenever it plays I think of my ass going numb but that no sacrifice is too great so long as it makes you happy,"

They laughed together and resumed their closer dancing. When the next song came on it was a slow version of 'I've got you under my skin'.

Shepard immediately gave Liara a very broad grin and said, "How's that for timing, this is the song that reminds me of you, of us. I was listening to some music not long after we met and I realised you really had gotten under my skin, I couldn't stop thinking about you," Shepard leaned in and kissed Liara.

Liara's eyes were glazed with tears but she looked so happy, "sing it to me Shepard" and they carried on dancing close until the night finally drew to a close.

The following couple of days were pretty busy. As the holiday drew to a close the final day was filled with saying goodbyes and arranging to keep in touch.

Then back to the Normandy to prepare for the crew’s return with a trip to the Citadel to pick up their science, tech and security teams and the rest of Shepard's specialist team.
As they made final checks before leaving the Citadel Shepard called a planning meeting of her team in the comms room.

"Well we need to just finish off the last system in the Omega Nebula but that will be quick and then we're going to head into Batarian space. The Alliance want us to look for any build-up of pirate activity, there have been merchant ships attacked in the area particularly close to the Arahot system.

But we're also heading there because I'm pretty sure that's where at least the dead Reaper was taken and probably the Artifact as well." She finished and threw it open to discussion and they chewed over the finer details of avoiding detection by the Batarians in their home system.

When the meeting finished Shepard gave Joker his orders, "Set course for the Amada system Joker get us there quick as you can our real business is with the Batarians."

"Aye, aye Commander," and Joker eased the lithe, sleek and beautiful ship away from the dock and headed out to the relay.

Shepard and Garrus had just sat down at the mess table with their lunch tray. They had almost finished scanning the Amada system, this was the last cluster and it was only a 'drive by'.

Joker came loud and clear over the comms at almost the same time an emergency alert started to sound throughout the ship, the alert was only amber but Joker's voice was giving a different message.

"Commander a very large ship has just dropped out of FTL directly in front of us, unknown signature, they know we're here," he was cut off by Pressley coming on the comms.

"We are in full stealth mode Commander they can't possibly know…." Before he could finish Ash's voice came over the comms.

"Commander they are powering some form of weapon, Joker full evasive…" and again before she could complete her sentence they all felt the ship jerk and shudder.

"Hit on engineering FTL drive offline… going to try to get behind this moon," Joker said calmly but the edge in his voice clear to all.

"Joker send highest priority, SOS Delta, to Alliance, keep repeating and launch a beacon we will not be sending from the escape pods do you hear me?" Shepard spoke into her ear comms directly to Joker.

"Copy that Commander, SOS, abandon ship, Delta 5 Gamma," Joker answered.

At that moment Liara and Chakwas came out of the medbay, they had been meeting about something and Shepard couldn't think what, then she snapped into action.

Moving swiftly to the gear lockers and activating a control console located above them, she began pulling on her heavy armour which was also a full pressure suit as she keyed in the automated abandon ship order. She also spoke over the ship wide comms system.

"Listen up this is a direct and immediate actionable order… do not go to red battle stations… do not go to red battle stations… abandon ship… abandon ship… go immediately to the nearest escape pod… do not activate homing beacons or any comms system until you are contacted by an Alliance rescue call… I repeat safety protocol Delta 5 Gamma… protocol Delta 5 Gamma… abandon ship immediately... Shepard out"
She turned to look at Liara, Chakwas, Garrus and the group of other crew who had been in the mess hall who were all gathering around her.

"Delta 5 Gamma means no comms not even suit to suit, whoever this is they managed to find us in stealth, they'll be able to pick everyone off via comms or emergency beacon signals, they're here to kill we will not make it easy for them.

The Alliance has already had our ship distress call they will come for us." She looked at Liara first and then the others "what the fuck are you all standing around for get to the pods on this level and get off this ship."

With that everyone apart from Liara and Garrus ran to the far bulkhead and started unlocking the emergency escape pods, another shudder and ship seemed to lurch again.

"I am staying Shepard what do we need to do," Liara said, by this time Shepard had gotten on her armour and Garrus was just beginning to grab his out of the lockers.

"Both of you now into a pod," she looked at Garrus, "get her into a pod and keep her safe Garrus that's a direct order."

"No Shepard I will not leave…" Shepard cut Liara off and touched her cheek then said "I'm just going to run up to CIC and grab a pod from there, I need to make sure I get as many of my crew out as possible, now please Liara for me so I don't have to worry, go" and with that Shepard snapped on her helmet and began running across the mess hall and towards the stairs.

She looked behind just as she was about to turn the corner and saw Garrus almost pulling Liara towards the escape pods and saw the Doc joining Garrus and helping to cajole Liara in the right direction.

Shepard switched on her suit comms "sit rep Joker, Ash anyone."

"Second hit took out CIC Commander… I only have maneuvering thrusters still trying to make it to the nearest moon for cover…"

"Get out Joker you heard the command get to an escape pod now that's an order mister."

She had now reached CIC and it was a mess, blasted and twisted consoles, the galaxy map command deck was chewed up and hull breaches from side to side, only flickering fields of blue energy keeping out the cold dark vacuum of space, but they wouldn't last long.

Shepard tried hard not to wonder how many made it to the pods and she gave a cursory check to the few bodies lying around, but even from a distance they were clearly dead and some almost unrecognisable.

"Spencer was hit in the first blast Commander and I can't get to him, sorry but I also think I broke my leg…" Joker broke off and Shepard now headed at a pace for the cockpit. As she got closer she was walking under an open sky; looking up she saw the planet huge and so close she could make out its surface, and a moon drifting closer, her boots automatically switching to mag mode.

As she approached the cockpit she saw more flickering blue and passing thorough it went straight to where Spencer was slumped over the console, head covered in blood, and hauled him up, dragging him into the cockpit escape pod. Next she went to Joker and as she was just starting to lift him out of his chair he said.

"Shit Commander they're coming around for another hit," they both fixed their eyes on the ship that was indeed turning again to fire on the now completely disabled and slowly disintegrating
Normandy.

She redoubled her efforts to get her pilot out of his seat and lifted him bodily knowing she was probably breaking more bones but there was no other way.

"Sorry Commander, I couldn't… they were so quick… I" she cut him off.

"You did great Joker; you did everything I would have expected; now let's get into that fucking escape pod."

"Shit someone really wants you dead huh Commander," Joker was trying to mask the pain as she passed him through the door and he slumped into the seat inside the pod.

Just as Joker was settled inside another blaze of light smashed into the Normandy causing it to twist and shudder and an explosion tore through what was left of the bulkheads around the pod blasting Shepard backwards through space.

She grabbed the wall and looked into Jokers face he was shouting from inside the door of the pod but she couldn't hear him, she had switched off her comms and the pods were all automatically disabled until reset… she looked to where her left hand was on the wall and saw the pod release control.

She hit it and saw the door close just as another blast hit and she felt herself being punched with great force backwards along with the other loose debris from the cockpit and CIC.

Shepard steadied her breathing and tried not to panic, she looked at the scene lighting up her faceplate, the Normandy flashing with fire and explosions, torn to pieces and breaking apart, the enormous unknown vessel that had taken her ship and who knew how many of her crew.

She saw a few of the small emergency pods being blasted away from danger and hoped all of them were full, they were safe unless their attackers decided to just start blasting at the wreckage, they were too small to pick out of the mass of debris that was now littering the area.

Somewhere in one of those was Liara, safe, mad as hell, she was going to really get an earful when they were reunited. She felt calmer, she was in a full pressure suit, the only question was would her air last until a rescue ship turned up and was she going to get caught in the gravity well of either that fucking big planet or the equally dangerous moon.

Then she heard it, a soft but persistent bleep, and red flashing light on her HUD. She was losing oxygen, the gauge was falling as she was looking at it, every breath out was lost to space and not being recycled, but worse than that there was also a leak from air reserves tank. She tried to feel the pipes but it was no good, she would only be able to feel if there was a clear break or crack and the damage was obviously smaller but no less deadly.

"Well what did you expect Shepard if it's going to go wrong it fucking will… yeah Joker someone really wants me dead and it looks like they managed it… fuck.. this is so fucking not fair" she allowed her panic and fear to move into anger, what else could she do.

The pain and the real fear started as she saw the gauge hit empty, she struggled to breath to get a breath despite knowing logically there was no air, it was instinctual, she had no control, she was human you kept trying to live even when you know you're dying.

She felt dizzy then realised she couldn't see the light around her anymore, not even the fires that still burned on parts of the Normandy, she couldn't remember what she was trying to do and then nothing.
If anyone could have seen Shepard at that moment they would have seen her body going into convulsions while drifting amongst debris from her ship towards the gravity wells of the planet and the moon.

In one of the escape pods Liara was sitting between Doctor Chakwas and Garrus, with the rest of the eight spaces also filled with crew from the mess deck.

Liara was sick with worry she had such a bad feeling, she was mad at Shepard for making her leave, at Garrus and Karin for somehow getting her into the pod, but most of all she was angry with herself for not staying to help and make sure her love got of the ship.

Some in the pod were looking out of the small port holes watching as their ship disintegrated, but Liara didn't dare, Shepard could still be on it, or racing for a pod with the thing falling apart around her.

"Shepard will be fine Liara she will have seen the damage to the CIC and jumped straight into a pod, she was probably out the airlock before we were," Garrus tried to force his voice to be positive.

"You don't know that Garrus, but… thank you for trying to…" she stopped speaking as a strange, physical feeling swept through her body.

Liara had never felt anything like it before; she felt absolute panic and then couldn't breathe. Chakwas and Garrus turned with concern and then worry as they saw the young Asari struggling.

"Lay her down on her side," the Doctor said and with Garrus and another crew member helped move Liara gently onto the floor, "Liara it's alright you're having a panic attack I think, just try to breath normally."

And then suddenly it stopped, she could breathe again, and the panic had stopped, but something else was there… nothing… a cold, empty space we're she could always feel her connection with Shepard.

"No… no… she's not there… she's… Shepard" Liara sat up and moved so that she could look out of the nearest port hole and as the rest of her companions in the pod looked on Liara broke down into hysterical crying staring out at the scene of devastation, her hands scrapping at the window as if in an attempt to get out.

"Garrus pass me that medical kit I'm going to sedate her," Chakwas said as she moved to try to hold and soothe Liara, who on the Doctors touch turned to face her, eyes wild she looked out of her mind with grief.

"She's gone Karin… inside me… the connection… she's not there… you don't understand… Shepard is gone" and then Liara lapsed into incoherent sounds full of pain and misery.

"I'm going to give you something to help, and I do understand, I am so sorry Liara," Karin Chakwas gave Liara the sedative and the grieving Asari began to quieten and they made her comfortable on a sleep pad on the floor.

Garrus and the rest of the crew in the pod all looked at the Doctor for some kind of assurance, something, they had all worked out what Liara had felt and what it might mean.

With a very heavy heart and grief beginning to take her as well Doctor Chakwas looked around and
said,

"Their bond is strong and I'm afraid to say if Liara can no longer feel it then we have lost not only dear friends and our ship but we have also lost our Commander." She sat back in her seat her eyes glazed with tears.

The rest of the crew also sat back in shock, with loss and grief for everything that had just happened washing over them.

Garrus felt broken, he had no idea how he would deal with the loss of such a close and good friend and how he could help Liara who was devastated.

As deeply as Shepard's life had touched them all so would her death, Garrus just hoped he had the strength to follow through on his Commander's final orders, 'keep her safe Garrus that's a direct order.'
Chapter 19

Liara didn't remember much about the arrival of the rescue vessels, or their time in the pod, as Doctor Chakwas kept her under light sedation for the young Asari's wellbeing.

The slowly drifting silver lifesaving capsules, their mass fields protecting the precious lives within, were still almost impossible to pick out amongst the debris field. But when the first rescue ship arrived on the scene the call and response of coded signals, activated automatically, allowed for rapid recovery.

The crew in the pods were alerted to their imminent rescue as their emergency beacons and comms systems came to life. Many faces gathered around port holes searching for their rescuers and conversations started about which ship it would likely be given they were in a far flung corner of the Terminus system and a long way from Citadel space.

To some surprise the vessel was not Alliance but Asari. The Normandy, after all, was both an Alliance and a Council ship. When Arcturus had received the distress call's and the notification of the Gamma protocol all Alliance ships in the Terminus system, which included a small scout flotilla, were directed to the Normandy's coordinates.

Admiral Hackett had taken the decision to kept notification outside the Alliance at an extremely high security level and contacted Councilor Tevos personally only because he knew an Asari science vessel was within ten hours of the Normandy's location and the nearest Alliance vessel was twenty four hours away.

He wanted to know more about the 'unknown' attacker and 'how the hell they even knew the Normandy was in that system let alone how they bypassed the ships full stealth mode' and until his crew had been secured he was going to keep both the destruction of the Normandy and knowledge of survivor's as highly classified and protected information.

Once safely aboard the Asari ship the surviving crew were able to reunite and begin to count the full cost of their loss. Doctor Chakwas spent a little time with the crew before disappearing to the Asari medical centre to oversee the care of her injured crew. Liara had also been taken directly to the med centre Garrus at her side steadfastly refusing to move further than a few feet away and never letting her out of his sight.

They had lost over half the fifty crew compliment. No emergency pods had even been launched from CIC and only one from the lowest level on the engineering/storage deck.

The first hit on the Normandy was targeted on engineering and it killed everyone on duty. It also ripped through the storage deck killing most of the marine and security team, injuring others, destroying both the Mako and Kodiak as it tore gaping holes in the hull of the ship.

The only survivors owed their lives to Wrex who managed to carry three injured marines into an emergency pod before another hit decimated what was left of the storage area, including one full emergency pod just before it managed to deploy. Only Wrex and the three marines got away and one had already died while they were waiting for rescue.

Kasumi and a good number of the science team made it out and those lucky enough to be on the mess deck which included Liara's team. But they lost everyone from CIC incuding Ash and Pressley
who were still at their posts.

When Garrus found out they had also lost Ash he was surprised he was able to actually feel more wretched than he already did. He was thankful that Wrex was ok and said so when the Krogan came to see him in the med centre.

"Yeah," the big Krogan said sadness etched into his body language and easily heard in his voice, "glad to see you too," and he gave Garrus a small pat on the shoulder. Then he turned to look at Liara who, despite the remains of the sedation, appeared to be restless and troubled in her shallow sleep.

"How did she take it?"

"Badly, she was… is… inconsolable," Garrus said now also turning to the fragile looking Asari, "they were so close Wrex, and this… so sudden… I don't know… it's going to be hard for her. But I have my orders from Shepard and I won't let either of them down." Garrus finished, his voice almost breaking.

Wrex turned and nodded slowly "anything you need from me, you got it, you take good care of that little girl, and it's all we can do for Shepard now.

But I'm going back to Tuchanka to try to get my people ready for the Reapers. If there's one thing Shepard taught me it's that we're going to have to work together to beat them and dammit if she didn't make me feel like I should give my people another chance to be better than they are."

The Asari ship sat in an orbit around the nearest moon and waited for the rendezvous with Alliance vessels racing to the coordinates. The Asari crew made the Normandy survivors as comfortable and welcome as possible giving up their beds so that the more exhausted could try to get some rest.

Once the Alliance arrived the crew and the escape pods were transferred to the SSV Budapest for the journey back to Arcturus Station. Other Alliance ships were on the scene searching, in name at least, for survivors; although it was bodies they knew they would find.

And they searched for answers, although that would be a race against time as the wrecked Normandy was caught in the gravity well of the planet Alchera and was in a degrading orbit, a lot of the smaller pieces of wreckage and detritus was already hitting the edge of the planet's atmosphere.

On the journey to Arcturus Liara remained in the officer's cabin she had been assigned not even leaving for meals. She was exhibiting symptoms of psychological shock, detached and distant, hardly saying a word.

The Asari ship's counsellor, a Siari priestess, was travelling back to Arcturus with Liara at her request. She spent a lot of time with the young Asari trying to encourage her to meditate and talking to her of the effects of losing a bondmate.

Shepard and Liara had not formerly, officially, acknowledged their joining as such but the reality was they had indeed formed a deep and fully joined bond, that much was very clear to the Priestess which caused her grave concerns.

Priestess D'Leet discussed the implications with Doctor Chakwas at the Doctor's request. Karin still felt completely responsible for Liara's health and wellbeing and she wanted to understand what was happening to her friend and, still, crew member.
"The strength of such a bond needs a maturity not only of the mind and spirit but also of the body. It will be difficult for a non-Asari to understand but Doctor T'Soni is still very young, yet we have to accept she is mature enough to have made the bond." The Priestess looked and sounded troubled.

"Yes I have to admit I am not as familiar as I ought to be with Asari physiology unless it's in terms of injury, what does this mean for Liara?"

"You say she seemed to experience something akin to what the Commander may have been experiencing at her death," Karin nodded her assertion and D'Leet continued, "this is not uncommon in long lasting deep bonding's, but with experience and maturity the actual physical effects are contained or blocked at an unconscious level.

To have that experience on top of losing a bondmate at such an young age and what I have sensed was such a powerful bond then Liara will not find the grieving and loss process in any way straightforward.

She should go back to Thessia and spend time within a Temple with an Atamna; it is how we describe groups of our high priestesses."

"Has she been affected physically?" Doctor Chakwas pressed D'Leet as she still didn't feel she understood what was or would continue to happen to Liara.

"She will continue to feel the after effects of the physical 'sharing' of her bondmates death, but they will fade reasonably quickly. The emotional loss will take its course, she will find her way as we all do along the path of grief, but it is the psychological and spiritual damage that concerns me. These young bonding's happen so rarely and losing a bondmate in these circumstances even more rare, almost unheard of, well, as I said she will need the support of our most experienced and knowledgeable spiritual guides."

Both women sat in silence both thinking about the terrible and painful journey the young Asari was going to have to go through.

As soon as Admiral Hackett had set in motion the search and rescue operation for the Normandy, and had spoken to Councilor Tevos, his next call was to the SSV Kilimanjaro.

Since assuming command of the Alliance Navy Hackett had needed to make Arcturus his base. But Captain Hannah Shepard remained the XO on his old flagship combining her special duties leading the intelligence unit and her duties on board.

When he told her of the distress call from the Normandy she was obviously concerned but she was the consummate professional Alliance officer and until they had a sit rep she would remain confident that the Normandy's Commander had made a successful evacuation of her ship with her crew.

When Hackett got the report from the Asari Captain and he had the opportunity to have a very brief word with Lieutenant Moreau to ensure absolutely that Commander Lydia Vega Shepard had been killed in action, he was ready, but deeply saddened, to make the second call to his former XO.

"Admiral I assume the rescue teams have reached the Normandy coordinates," Hannah Shepard was standing, alone, in the Kilimanjaro's QEC room, ram rod straight her uniform and her rank providing a shield to her emotions.

"Hannah," on hearing Hackett use her first name she knew it would be the worst news, it wasn't the first time he had used it, they had known each other for years after all, were friends, but he only used it in the most informal of situations or…
"I have confirmation that LV was killed while saving two of her crew in the final moments before the Normandy was destroyed completely.

There is little room for doubt; we have data from both the Normandy systems and the escape pod that she loaded her crew members into. You have my deepest sympathies Hannah. Shepard…"

As Hackett used the name that was more usual for him Shepard's mother felt her composure slip just a little, he continued "… is a huge loss for the Alliance and for humanity, she died as she lived, bravely putting her life on the line to save others. Little comfort that she will be put forward, and receive, a posthumous medal for bravery."

"What were the overall losses," Captain Shepard needed to stop the Tsunami of emotion that was beginning to build momentum with her, "Liara?"

"We lost around twenty six crew, including members of the special teams. I am expecting accurate figures shortly; Liara is alive but not doing well by all accounts.

The Budapest should be on scene within ten hours to pick up the survivors and return them to Arcturus." Even to those who had known him since he was a young man Hackett was hard to read but she saw sorrow in his eyes as he spoke.

"I would like permission to meet them there Admiral," Hannah knew from her own experience what Liara would be going through. In that moment she felt her barriers weaken as she thought of the last time her world had crashed around her ears when she received the news of the death of her husband.

"Of course Hannah, I'll make all the necessary arrangements; we'll talk when you get here, Hackett out." The figure of Admiral Hackett turned and the image broke up.

Hannah Shepard sent a brief message to her Captain, who was aware of the situation, removing herself from duty and she went to her cabin.

Once inside she could let the barriers between Alliance officer and mother dissolve and allow the heart rending sobs, tears, despair and pain overtake her.

As they were docking Liara made a request to Admiral Hackett through Doctor Chakwas and Karin realised just how important it was given that Liara had hardly said twenty words since Shepard's death.

So two hours after disembarking Liara finally found herself walking into the bedroom she had shared with Shepard on their visit to Arcturus merely a week ago. The last week of her life that she would feel truly alive and whole.

Liara moved over to edge of the bed and tried to visualise the last time Shepard had been laying in it, the last words they had said to each other in this room. She didn't want to think about the last words Shepard had said to her on the Normandy, that was to final, to… painful.

She had a sudden urge to have something, anything of Shepard's, clothes, something that had touched her love, smelt of her… the sheets, pillows all newly laundered… it was as if Shepard had been washed out of the galaxy.

And then it came, the distance she had managed to hold in place shattered to pieces with the realisation it was over, Shepard was not coming back, there was nothing she could do or say to
Liara fell to her knees next to the bed as the emotion swept through her and she was finally able to let it out, inhabit it. A low pain sodden, wracking howl ripped from her very soul and she wrapped her arms around herself tightly either for comfort or to hold herself together she couldn't tell; gut wrenching sobs physically rocking her body, as she entered a state of absolute loss, pain and anger.

In the lounge Garrus stood looking out the long window not seeing the ships slowly maneuvering towards or away from the docking bays, each howl of pain from the bedroom cutting though him like a jagged blade.

On the dining table Priestess D'Leet was laying out a small alter whilst offering small chants, affirmations and prayer to release soothing and calming energy. She was also readying herself for when she would be called to try to explain, even justify, why the Goddess had been so cruel.

The Priestess would need to help Liara remember that Shepard's death meant the merging of her spiritual energy back into the greater universal consciousness. And whilst Liara may well accept and believe that to be the case it would offer no comfort of peace for her, yet, not at this, the most acute, moment of loss.

The week that followed had a momentum of its own that seemed unstoppable. Shepard's mother arrived and despite her own grief and obvious pain did everything she could to support Liara. They became very close and Hannah made sure that Liara was involved in every aspect of the planning of Shepard's memorial service and any other arrangements that were needed or required an opinion on.

Despite the cost Liara put herself back together at times so that she could do the things she knew Shepard would want her to do. She visited the crew to see how they were doing and to wish them well, they were still Shepard's crew and in a bizarre way the only 'thing' that was physically left of her human lover, at least until they were all reassigned.

The one person she did not want to visit was Joker, not because she blamed him in any way. She knew from speaking to Karin that he blamed himself terribly, he was also still in the hospital as he had suffered extensive injury.

No it wasn't because she had any animosity towards him, but she would have to ask, she wouldn't be able not to… what happened… exactly… every detail… every word… until the door of the pod shut, until Joker watched as the life signs flat lined on the pod's scanner.

And she desperately wanted to know… and she didn't… because she knew she would just play it over and over again to torment herself. She already knew more than Joker, more than anyone ever could or would, she shared the last moments with Shepard, the last moments…

"Jeff," Liara said quietly sitting next to the bed.

He looked haggard, not the joking, wisecracking pilot of old. He could barely look her in the eye, pain, guilt and remorse clear to be seen in his eyes and on his hollow face.

"I'm real sorry Liara… feel like such a useless… if… but I… we were both injured and you know the Commander she just… well you know Shepard," he trailed off eyes now fixed on the bed sheets.

"Yes Jeff I do know Shepard and so do you and she would not want you to take any responsibility for what happened, you know that and you must be kind to yourself and get well.” Liara reached over and laid her hand across his.
He looked at her and gave a small nod but looked a little less fraught. Then she asked the question and he told her step by step, word for word, action for action. Liara could tell he had been down the path she was about to tread, he sounded like a man who had relived those final minutes over and over again.

The memorial service for Shepard and the rest of the crew who had been lost was to be held on Earth in Vancouver. There were to be services for Shepard held across Citadel space at the same time and on places like Elysium, Eden Prime, Terra Nova and many more like them, places Shepard had made a difference, saved lives, and restored peace. The main galactic wide ceremony would be on the Citadel. There was some pressure to only hold one official ceremony and for it to be on the Citadel but Shepard was Alliance, one of their own, she was an Alliance hero before she was a Council one. Vancouver home of the Alliance Navy was where they would say goodbye to her.

Captain Hannah Shepard and Doctor Liara T'Soni were chief mourners and guests of honour. For the ceremony, like most things she had to do that involved her not being on her own, she dropped back into detachment and distance.

When she was alone she didn't have to hold back the tide and she had only allowed Hannah Shepard in to that space, accepting the comfort of being held through a particularly sudden and violent breakdown.

So for Liara the ceremony was an unfocussed dreamlike memory even as it was happening. Hannah suggested that Liara collect Shepard's medal but the young Asari felt that that honour must belong to Shepard's mother.

Eventually it was over and in the hotel room afterwards she said goodbye to both the Priestess D'Leet and Hannah Shepard. Liara and Garrus had talked about his conviction to stay by Liara's side and she understood it was out of a deep caring for her and his need to fulfil his promise to Shepard.

Truth be told she had grown used to his quiet presence and he did a surprising amount of organising and crown control to ensure she had as easy a time a possible.

Garrus was also something else of Shepard's that was left to her, it seems that her lover's legacy would be people and her connection with them, and that thought made her proud and made tears fall slowly down her cheeks at the thought of what they had all lost to the dark embrace of space.

When it was time to leave Earth Liara had no idea where she wanted or needed to go. She had considered returning to Hasperos, perhaps even setting up home there, they had been so happy and spent so much time together, she would find Shepard there.

But that would not work, she knew she wouldn't find Shepard, only painful reminders at every turn of what she had and lost. No she wanted to have Hasperos as a perfect memory she did not want to taint it with her grief. She remembered suddenly her laughing at Shepard on the journey to the Phosphorus system, because at times her lover sounded just like a tour guide.

They had laughed together about it and Shepard had made the effort to sound even more like a 'tour bus driver' which Liara never quite understood but it amused Shepard which was enough for her.

No, she would go home, the only home she would ever know now, to Thessia, and her mother's, no her, estate. So she asked Garrus to make the arrangements.
On their arrival Liara decided she would stay in one of the guest houses scattered across the extensive grounds, one that gave her a view and easy access to the lake. She didn't want to live in the main house, yet, and perhaps never would.

Garrus choose to also stay in another of the guest houses he really didn't want to be alone with only the servants for company. Garrus had not only been watching over Liara and doing what he could to keep her safe since the loss of the Normandy; he had also started talking to people in Palavan about the threat from the Reapers.

Even trying to persuade his father that this was something the Hierarchy needed to take seriously. Garrus may well have fallen out with his father, or rather his father had practically disowned him, over his career choices but the time spent with a 'galactic hero' and the medal for his role in the Battle for the Citadel seemed to have impressed his father enough to warrant at least a reopening of their relationship.

Garrus swung from feeling if it was ok to trade on all that stuff, which he didn't actively do but didn't challenge his father about it, as it meant his father was willing to open doors for him with influential members of Turian military life.

And then felt really angry and wished he could tell his father that he was the same man with or without a piece of tin and Shepard was a decent human who saw something in Garrus that his father never had and was worth two of him and she shouldn't be treated like some kind of trophy.

He had no idea if he was or would get anywhere but he was going to try and if it meant having a dent in his pride or having to bite his tongue with his father he'd do that to, maybe Shepard had helped him grow up, he thought with a sad smile, as well as all the other things she had shown him he could be.

They quickly fell into a routine on the T'Soni estate. Garrus would join Liara for breakfast as would Matriarch T'Joan still the housekeeper of the estate and Liara's former nanny. They would eat breakfast and watch the quiet, distant young Asari eat very little.

Liara would then take up her place on a chair on the small rise overlooking the lake, not far from her guest house, where she would sit, with a soft blanket wrapped across her shoulders. She would take lunch by the lake and often miss dinner completely.

The days turned into a week and apart from conversations with Garrus about any progress he was making, which he firmly believed she was making out of politeness and wouldn't remember any of what they talked about if you had asked her ten minutes later; and conversations with Matriarch T'Joan about what Liara would like to do with the estate and business's now that she was back, which Liara did not engage with at all, she spoke to no one.

But both Garrus and T'Joan agreed it was very early days and the rest at least must be doing Liara good.

A few days later as the afternoon was running into evening the Matriarch called through to Garrus on the estate comms system.

"Mr Vakarian Liara has just had a visitor arrive and I think it may be a good idea if you decided to join them," Matriarch T'Joan sounded her usual calm and efficient self but there was a clear instruction in her words.

"Who is it?" he asked curious to see who could ruffle someone he thought impermeable to the
"I believe you may have met her Shiala, she was one of the Lady Benezia's closest and most ardent followers. She appeared to have something specific to speak to Liara about, this is not entirely social."

"On my way." Garrus did indeed know Shiala, they had met on Feros when the team went to investigate Geth activity. That creature, plant, whatever the hell it was still gave him a shiver down his spine.

He nodded hello and joined Liara and Shiala around the small table set just outside the guest house and helped himself to some Asari tea which he was getting frighteningly accustomed to.

The first thing he noticed was how animated Liara was, it was the most… well… alive he had seen her since they lost Shepard. Then she spoke and he also heard the anger in her voice.

"Tell Garrus what you just told me," not only anger but her voice was hard as were her eyes, Garrus was now worried, whatever this was it wasn't good.

Shiala seemed to hesitate and gave Liara a questioning look.

"Garrus is my friend Shiala I trust him with my life as did Shepard," her voice and demeanour was more commanding than he had ever heard her be, 'that was pure Benezia," he thought.

"I have been working as an information broker on Illium for the Shadow Broker and some information has come to me regarding Commander Shepard..." Liara interrupted her abruptly.

"Get on with it Shiala, Garrus the Shadow Broker has sent mercs to find Shepard's body to sell to the Collectors, and Shiala believes they have found her and that the exchange is going to happen very soon on Omega… we must tell the Alliance or the Council or someone," she looked completely distraught.

"Hell, are you sure… which mercs Shiala and how close are they to finding… to… recovering the Commander," Garrus's mind was racing he knew how hard it was going to be to get the Alliance to act quickly and if the deal was going down soon…

"No, if a whisper leaks that someone knows about the exchange they will change the details and you will never find them…" Shiala looked from Garrus to Liara, "if you want to stop this you are going to have to act quickly and without alerting the Shadow Broker, it's the Blue Suns," she said turning to Garrus, "but the bigger problem is that Tazzik is overseeing the operation and the exchange."

Before Garrus could say anything Liara stood up and said, "Then that is what we will do. Shiala I want you to have a small squad of Asari commando's ready to leave with us in four hours. Garrus hire a small ship, fast and with firepower, ready to leave in four hours for Omega." When she had finished speaking she began walking into the house, they were dismissed.

"Tazzik is a mean son of a bitch this is not going to be easy, did you really think it was a good idea bringing this to her the state she's in?" Garrus said not hiding his annoyance at Shiala.

"She is the daughter Lady Benezia T'Soni she will not let a loss even of someone like Shepard stop her from doing anything she wants, and what would she have said if I had not told her?" as Shiala spoke there was a brief flash of something in her eyes that Garrus couldn't quite work out but it worried him.

Meanwhile Liara had called up T'Joan to organise armour and weapons for herself, Garrus and Shiala, and to make sure they both had the resources they needed to make the arrangements she had...
given them.

Everything was ready exactly as she had ordered and the small scout ship left Thessia five hours after Liara had been told that her beloved Shepard was in danger of falling into the hands of the Collectors, which was something that she would not allow.

On a Blue Suns merc ship heading at speed for the Amada system the Captain tasked by Tazzik to recover Shepard's body is talking to his team about their latest commission from the Shadow Broker.

"We have a stasis pod on board so as soon as we pick up the body and drop it in the pod we head back to Omega, this is easy credits," he said with a greasy grin.

"Yeah but we got to find it first… it's a big moon" one of his men snarled.

"Nah somebody did a lot of calculating to find out where the dumb fuck landed so we won't have to search for long."

Doctor Miranda Lawson walked into her meeting with the Illusive Man's and was so distracted she didn't even notice the raging, boiling sun that filled the glass wall behind his chair.

"Miranda, kind of you to join me," he said in a kindly voice, "Dr Ortega feels that with the length of time between death and recovery our attempts will prove futile," he finished and took a look inhale on his cigarette.

"He's wrong the Lazarus Project calculations has allowed for a longer period after death than this for a viable result, we have no idea about the state of the body, if the suite was punctured then she would have been in a vacuum from very early on which means there will be no decomposition.

My concern is the amount of damage from entry; if it's true they located her on the moon then that may also work in our favour. We can't not try, surely, she was a bloody icon, and we should at least try to get her back."

"My thoughts exactly Miranda," TIM said through another cloud of smoke, "Doctor Ortega lacks your skill and expertise, and perhaps he would rather not have you outshine him, petty, but very human.

We have a problem though, the Shadow Broker does not want to sell the body to us, and he had an altogether better buyer, the Collectors. Our network is not strong in the Terminus system and Omega particularly, so I am sending you and a small team.

If you don't retrieve Shepard's body then we will never know if you could have revived our human hero. Don't fail."

On a cold, dark moon, in a vast crater, a crumpled shape stands out from the background; the pale almost white dust that covers the surface a perfect backdrop for the black armour plates and signature red stripe of Shepard's hard suit.

Faceplate smashed off and helmet cracked on impact, blank eyes stare up into the dark of space, oblivious to the continuing interest in her dead or alive.
On the way to Omega Liara gave a great deal of thought as to how and from what angle she should approach Omega's pirate queen.

The young Asari had no idea whether Aria T'Loak would be helpful or obstructive, whether she would even take her seriously, Liara was smart enough to know she couldn't trade on Shepard's obviously 'friendly' arrangement with Aria.

Liara was also smart enough to know that she might as well be honest and open from the start, even if it put her at a disadvantage from the outset, as she was no match for the wily, astute and very experienced Matriarch who ruled Omega and whose influence snaked across Citadel space.

After discussing how to find out the exact timings and location of the handover it was decided that Shiala and Garrus would start looking for Tazzik and work the problem from the Blue Suns end. Liara was going to talk to Aria with just a couple of her Asari commandos in case of trouble, the other six would remain on the ship, as she did not want to tip her hand in case anyone was watching.

As soon as the ship docked they each went to their tasks and Liara made straight for Afterlife.

She was a little surprised to be met at the front door by one of Aria's men, a tall Turian, who said that his boss was expecting her and he would take her straight through.

They moved quickly through the main floor of the club and instead of going up to Aria's usual haunt they passed through a door in the wall underneath her balcony and on up a corridor coming out in a hallway. He indicated the door in front of them and said 'she will see you alone," nodding at the two Asari with her.

"Wait here for me," she said to her commando's and then moved to enter the room, only pausing momentarily, fighting back the urge to knock and feeling as if she was about to enter her mother's study to explain herself for some wrongheaded notion.

Aria was sitting behind a desk but got up as Liara entered the room. It just wasn't what she had imagined, something as ordinary as an office, but it made sense, Aria ran a business empire and at some point she must have to do more than just talk to people.

"I was sorry to hear about Shepard, I was looking forward to sparring with her," and as Aria spoke she stood in front of Liara and put a hand to the young Asari's cheek, then as if catching herself moved back and gestured towards a couple of sofa's.

Liara sat on the very edge of the sofa, confused by Aria's apparent kindness and her gesture, perhaps her reputation was undeserved, but she pulled her thoughts together and started to speak.

"I… thank you for seeing me… I… well" and not wanting to annoy the regal, powerful and frankly scary Matriarch in front of her when she continued it was at a run. "The Shadow Broker has engaged the Blue Suns to find Shepard's body and will sell it to the Collectors and the exchange will happen on Omega, and they have found her and the exchange will be soon and… I… well need to tell you I will not let it happen… and if you could help with…" she trailed off.
As Liara had been speaking she noticed Aria stiffen, standing up and turning her back on Liara until there was silence in the room. Still with her back to Liara she said.

"What do you want me to do about it," her voice this time was the haughty and cold voice Liara had been familiar with as Aria continued "business is business, you should stay out of it, and after all, Shepard won't know any different."

The last sentence cut through Liara like acid and she leapt to her feet all thoughts of diplomacy and keeping Aria onside gone.

"How dare you think of Shepard as something to buy and sell… she gave everything to serve the galaxy, she was brave and fearless and she deserves, will get respect, I will not allow her to be given to these Collectors for whatever experiments… they… I will not allow it do you hear me," Liara's voice, strong and angry to start with faded as tears seared her eyes and sobs caught in her chest.

She absolutely didn't want to break down in front of this monster but it was all she could do to keep as much control as she was. To Liara's shock and surprise Aria turned and in one smooth movement was in front of Liara and pulled her into a hug.

When Aria spoke this time it was softly and gently, "I understand, we can talk about what can be done, calm yourself now. Your no match for the Shadow Broker or the Collectors Liara these are very dangerous enemies to make, even I would rather not make an enemy of the Shadow Broker."

Aria pulled away a little to look into the young Asari's face and then walked them both to one of the sofas, once they were sat down Aria continued.

"But the Collectors are already on my shit list and if they step foot on Omega and I know about it they leave out an airlock," she smiled down at Liara who was still shocked by Aria's kindness, exhausted by her emotional outburst and worried that she still hadn't made the older Asari understand what needed to be done.

"But I have to stop them," she said quietly "I have to stop what they want to do with… Shepard," and tears once again began to fall slowly down her cheeks.

"We will make an arrangement Doctor T'Soni," Aria said and although her words were business like she still had an arm around Liara and her voice was gentle, "I will help but you must tell no one, not even anyone you are working with, not Garrus and certainly not Shiala." She smiled at Liara's surprised expression, "information one of my more important business's Liara and don't forget that I am Omega," she said it with a smile and was rewarded by a small one back from Liara.

Aria continued "At some point in the future you will repay my help through whatever mean's I decide is a fair exchange, do we have a deal?" Aria knew the young Asari would agree to terms that even the most inept of negotiators would kick back at, she only hoped it was because of the situation and her current state and not a permanent weakness, she was after all Benezia's daughter.

"Of course whatever I need to do, but why are you…" but before Liara could finish asking just why Aria was, well being so nice to her and helping her, the pirate queen stood up and moved back behind her desk saying as she went.

"Oh sometimes I am just capricious in my decisions Liara, it keeps everyone on their toes" she spoke dismissively but then more seriously "but I also told you the Collectors do not get to use my station for any of their dirty trading, they have been warned, and there is only one rule on Omega."

Liara didn't need to hear it and Aria didn't need to say it… nobody fucks with Aria.
"Go back to your ship and I will contact you directly on a secure and private channel when I have news and a plan," she put up a hand to silence whatever disagreement Liara was about to raise, "yes Liara we will work to my plan but your crew will be out in front, I will need to keep my… involvement in this secret." When Aria finished speaking she picked up a data pad and began working and Liara left the office without another word.

Alone in the room and staring at the closed door Aria's thoughts went to Liara's mother whom she had known well if only for a short time.

'It's good to know she has fire," Aria thought to herself, 'I see Benezia in her and maybe even perhaps a little… no, enough, don't even think it… you need to be careful around Benezia's daughter, you can't let her get to you' she chastised herself 'she can never know, no one must ever know.'

Back on the ship it wasn't long before, good as her word, Aria contacted Liara to tell her that the Blue Suns crew who were recovering Shepard's body were still searching. That meant they had a little more time to organise and Aria asked that Shiala and Garrus stop 'stumbling around in the dark' and that she, Aria, would tell Liara where to 'point' them.

Aria would make sure they found the same information that she was passing directly to Liara so no questions would be thought, let alone asked, as to how the young Asari archaeologist had become so adept that she was able to thwart the Shadow Broker himself.

Aria, despite herself, made another attempt to ask Liara to stay out of it completely and leave it to the her, but to no avail. Liara was adamant she would not only stop the Shadow Broker from getting hold of Shepard's body but would let him know he had made an enemy of her.
Hot headed was not a description that Aria had ever heard used about Doctor T'Soni before and Aria had kept fully informed of the young Asari's life, from a distance, and very, very, discretely.

So it was the next thirty six hours was spent with Liara relaying Aria's instruction's to Shiala and Garrus and hearing the information she already knew fed back to her when they returned from their investigations.

The call she had been waiting for finally came through, the Blue Suns were on their way back and would be docking in around eight hours.

The plan was a simple one. Liara and her team would get to the exchange location, which was to be a docking bay in the lowest depths of the station which offered the most privacy as they were practically unused, ahead of time and conceal themselves.

They would pick their moment and attack the Blue Suns before the Collectors turned up for their rendezvous, take Shepard and leave. Or, as Liara thought to herself as the plan was unveiled by Aria, 'we go in we get what we went for we kill anyone that gets in our way'. The thought made her smile and incredibly sad at the same time.

Aria would have some of her trusted people but also hired guns, who would have no idea who was paying or what the deal was about, more deeply hidden to provide support and cover if needed, but more importantly to take down the Collectors when they arrived.

What could possibly go wrong.
Liara had just finished the briefing with her team and was about to give the order to drop the ship down to the lower levels, they were going hide it not too far from the rendezvous point for a very quick exit, when a call came in from her pilot.

"There is a Doctor Lawson who needs to see you very urgently waiting dockside, she would like to come aboard." Her Asari pilot awaited instructions.

Liara looked at Garrus and he said "she has to be here about Shepard might be good to know all the players in this before make our move," he finished.

"Agreed, Landise have her escorted here to my office please. Garrus please stay, Shiala you can start to get the team ready." Liara finished leaving no room for the objections that Shiala had been trying to make since the pilot had told them of their visitor.

Shiala looked angry but said nothing and left as she had been instructed.

They waited in silence each nursing their own thoughts until the door opened and a young human woman walked into the room, she was stunningly attractive, and when she spoke to Liara's ears it was with an Earth accent she recognised as being Antipodean.

"You are a hard woman to get in touch with Doctor T'Soni," she said and continuing as she sat down where Liara had indicated, "Time is short but by now you know that.

I am not going to beat around the bush, I know what you're trying to do and I want to help. We have been trying to find the Commander's body to ensure this didn't happen.

We would also have intercepted the Blue Suns if we had found out about it… but I can help now, well once you have recovered Shepard's body." She finished and waited for the inevitable questions.

"Who do you work for?" It was Garrus who asked, he had remained standing, in one of his typical poses leading against a wall with his arms crossed, he hadn't taken his eyes of the women and he didn't trust her one inch.

Instead of answering Garrus she spoke to Liara and she leaned forward as she did, "Please Doctor hear me out before you dismiss what I'm about to ask. I work for Cerberus but I have complete autonomy to work on my project and the work I do is about restoring life using a combination of nano tech and implants.

The length of time that the… subject has been brain dead is important but we are within time… we may be able to bring the Commander back." She paused searching the other woman's face and could almost see the battle between hope, disbelief and hatred against Cerberus playing itself out.

"Shepard would never want anything to do with Cerberus she hated them for what they do and what they are," again it was Garrus who spoke and he had pushed himself upright to enforce the point.

"Garrus is right… Shepard would never… do you really think there is a chance?" Liara looked Miranda Lawson in the eyes and she knew in that moment that if Liara T'Soni did manage to recover Shepard's body she would hand it over.

"Yes I do," Miranda wanted to have the discussion with Liara on her own but that wasn't going to happen here so she said, "look let's get Shepard back first, I am happy to join you when you face the Blue Suns I am a powerful biotic, I have a team with me but I am willing to turn off my comms and come alone.

Then we can talk after and you can decide what you want to do." Miranda waited knowing her chances of securing Shepard's body would go up if the Asari let her go with them.
Garrus made to speak but Liara cut him off, "That is acceptable, please deactivate your OT, I will have someone check if you have done so. Perhaps you would like to wait outside for me." And Liara called in the commando who had escorted Miranda from the dock.

"Doctor Lawson will be coming with us please keep her company until I join you."

When they were alone again Liara cut Garrus off, "I cannot talk about this now Garrus, the most important thing is getting Shepard back, which is all I have strength for."

He nodded and left her to her thoughts. Liara reflected for a moment on why she had allowed the Lawson woman to stay, of course the fantastical dream of getting Shepard back was part of it, but the woman had shown more respect to Shepard than any other stranger she had met since it happened.

But what she had said to Garrus was the truth; she only had the strength and the focus to fight this next and probably her last battle with and for Shepard, to get her back, to bring her home.

The first thing that went wrong as they were in their ambush positions was the arrival of the Collector ship at the same time Tazzik arrived with around a platoon strength of the Shadow Broker's army.

The Blue Suns rumbled in very shortly after. Liara knew that other troops were hidden in the depths of the docking bay but had no idea if they would help or only clean up after. The agreement was for Liara to leave with Shepard so that Aria could deal with her priority, the Collectors.

Liara was also not a military tactician and faced with this new and very deadly combined force she had no idea what to do, bigger problem was she was trying to manage three people who were all convinced they knew exactly what to do and none of them could agree.

The Cerberus officer, the C-Sec officer and her mother's commando officer all trying to talk to her at once and bickering with each other; Liara felt like spacing all three of them and if they hadn't needed to be extremely quiet she would have screamed as much at them.

Really how did Shepard do this all the time, it was exhausting… and the feeling as if she had missed a step as her stomach did a strange drop, at the realisation that Shepard would never do this again, brought her back to the moment.

And then a voice in her ear over the secure comms came to her aid. It was Aria's voice, which had now become very familiar to her, that said "tell them to shut the fuck up before they screw up the whole thing," Liara did immediately and told her three tormenters to wait a moment while she thought.

"Good, now, this is what we're going to do," and Aria went on to tell Liara where to best deploy her people now the situation had changed and that they would attack on her, Aria's mark, and at the same time she would also send in her troops starting with snipers and biotics taking out the Collectors at a distance.

Once everything was in place Aria gave the word, Liara passed it on, and all hell broke loose falling on the heads of Collector, Blue Sun and Shadow Broker soldier alike.

Liara had told Shiala and Miranda to concentrate, as she would, on the Collectors. Aria had told her how difficult they had been to kill when she confronted them the last time they were on the station.

The fight went on for a long time, at least it felt that way to Liara, and they were still only half way
through the enemy on the ground. Her team had noticed immediately that there were others, behind them, who seemed to be attacking their enemy but it unnerved them for a moment until she shouted through comms that she knew they were there, it had been an added precaution she had taken.

She knew Garrus would be hurt that she hadn't confided in him and she would try to explain later but now she had to conserve her energy, she was tired and finding it hard to concentrate and nearly found herself in the firing line but twice already someone had thrown a barrier in front of her just in time, she was grateful but worried she was becoming more of a liability than a help.

But then something changed, everything changed and she found strength and fire and power from somewhere deep inside her. As they had fought their way closer and closer to the open landing area where the three ships were moored, she saw it, the bio container, Shepard's body.

And she saw that even during the battle the business haggling was going on between Tazzik and one of the Collectors but it looked as if they had reached agreement and the Collector was beginning to move the container towards it's shuttle.

"No, you will not take her" Liara's voice boomed across the large echoing space and she fired warp after warp at the Collector trying to move Shepard's body, Tazzik leapt back and into cover as the power of the warp fields almost caught him in their wash.

"Stop him," she shouted and her team all focused their attention on the unlucky Collector, he was torn apart by a combination of warp, reave and singularity.

The combination had proved to be so successful they worked as a team against the remaining Collectors and by the time they had taken the rest of them down, the Shadow Broker troops were severely thinned out and they decided to make a run for their shuttle, the Blue Suns were down to two men. Tazzik was nowhere to be seen.

A shout from the other side of the docking bay, Anto one of Aria's faithful lieutenants was calling "all of them, kill all of them, no one gets to leave."

It was over and Liara walked slowly over to the container which was bio sealed and stood looking down at its blank metal front, there was no viewing window but she wasn't sure she wanted to see.

She was joined by Garrus and Miranda. And once again Liara pulled herself together to deal with what was in front of her. Even though every part of her mind was begging for the release of detaching from this awful empty reality and immersing herself back into the memory space that had been her only comfort since this nightmare began.

"I would like to suggest that you come with me to my laboratory, it's on a Cerberus station, and I can explain what we will try to do. And we can discuss how you feel about leaving the Commander with us, with me," Miranda said in an even, matter of fact tone.

"I want Garrus to come with us," Liara said, "that is not negotiable."

"Very well, shall I call my shuttle?" Miranda said trying to remain calm, the Illusive Man would be more than impressed he would be happy that she had repaid all the trust he had shown in her.

"Yes" and again she waved Garrus's obvious objections away.

She also had to do the same to Shiala but she too gave in and took charge of getting the team back to their ship to await Liara's instructions.
Anto came up to her and indicated he wanted a word away from the others and when they were a distance from Garrus and Miranda said "we'll clean up down here, Aria said to be very careful of Cerberus and it was a pleasure doing business with you, she will be in touch for payment." With that he turned and walked away.

She felt the stirring of something that at first she couldn't quite identify and then she caught it, disappointment, she was disappointed that Aria hadn't said goodbye herself.

She could understand, but, Liara still felt… she was feeling completely alone again, she realised she had felt less alone while she had been working with Aria… but that was not quite it…

Her thoughts were interrupted with the arrival of the Cerberus shuttle and as some of its crew came across to move the container on board Liara took up position once again as close to Shepard as she could get and she would not leave her side again until a decision was made about what next. Liara walked wearily, and showing the weight of grief she was carrying, onto the shuttle her mind in turmoil now struggling with the question that faced her, to which she already knew her answer.

High up in the docking bay on one of the service walkways Aria stood out of sight watching over Liara as she had done throughout the battle. She had been right to come herself, Liara was only just holding everything together and had not been fast enough a few times during the battle to get out of trouble.

Aria's biotics were extremely powerful and worked just as well in defence as they did attack. She was deeply worried about the young Asari but had done all she felt she could. 'Why the fuck did you get yourself killed Shepard and leave her on her own with all this,' Aria thought to herself as she turned to go.

The moment had come and Liara was standing over the container in the bright, clean, well equipped laboratory with Miranda and Garrus.

Miranda had run through some of the theory and research and the basics of what they would have to do, most of which Liara either didn't understand or didn't have the energy to really listen to. Although she made sure she looked as if she was listening.

But Doctor Lawson had also been honest about the chances which were slim to none and would depend on the type and amount of damage Shepard had been subjected to.

And if they didn't have any success she would contact Liara who had insisted on being able to have Shepard's remains back for burial.

Although Liara had not actually said yes yet there was little doubt she would. Garrus had been adamant that on both counts, firstly being given to Cerberus and secondly being the subject of medical experiments, would 'have Shepard turning in her grave is she was ever granted the decency of being given one'.

And he was vehement in his conviction that he didn't believe for one moment that 'Lawson could raise the dead'.

This had really hurt and upset Liara but she needed and wanted to hear it. Garrus was probably one of a very few people who really could predict fairly accurately how Shepard would feel or what she was likely to do in most usual situations.

"I need to see her," Liara said quietly into the silence that had settled between them, arguments all
played out.

"Oh Liara are you sure, wouldn't you want to remember… would she…" Garrus was now back in protection mode, he knew he had lost the argument but he knew exactly why and he really didn't blame Liara. No he blamed Cerberus and Lawson for bringing Liara an impossible hope to turn down.

"I think for the first time I may actually agree with Vakarian, we have no idea what state the…” but Liara cut her off speaking quietly.

"I need to see her, to say goodbye."

Miranda motioned to a couple of colleague who were obviously waiting until the visitors had left to come in and begin work on the Commander.

As the lid was swung back white mist drifted up as the stasis gasses dispersed into the room, revealing the outline of a black shape, a human shape, the hard suit badly damaged.

Liara noticed first that half a leg seemed to be missing and most of Shepard's left arm, as she drew her eyes up the body in front of her she could see burn marks, scoring and dents and huge areas where the armour and hard suit was missing completely.

The she looked at Shepard's face, her head still encased in her helmet although the faceplate had been ripped off. Liara reached down and touched the side of Shepard face, it was cold, freezing cold, and the damage although considerable did not make her love unrecognisable.

But Shepard's eyes, those green pools of passion that really did offer a window on her lovers' soul were blank and glassy, she was gone, and this was just a shell as everyone had told her a dead body was.

Shepard had joined the universal consciousness and it made Liara beyond angry she was furious that the woman she loved, who said loved her had given up her life for nothing, when she could easily have joined Liara an escaped.

This is where Shepards' sense of duty and honour had brought her and Liara both hated and loved her for it.

"Take me home Garrus," Liara said with an audible sigh and she turned away from the empty shell that was and would remain her soul mate, and walked towards an empty and painful journey that would help her find a way to cope with that loss.

Miranda Lawson flashed into being on the QEC pad in front of the Illusive Man's chair, "Good evening Miranda, what news" he said as he lit up a fresh cigarette.

"Better than we hoped for. My predictions were correct, the anomalies on the scans we were forward from the Alliance medical records are nanites, Prothean nanites.

In time we will be able to learn if they were implanted every time she used a beacon or if it was the massive download from the AI on Ilos. But some of them changed function at the point of Shepard's brain death and created a stasis field not only around but throughout the brain."

"So providing you can restart the brain and rebuild her body there should be little or no brain damage." He asked now through a haze of smoke.
"That's the theory; of course I will need to find a way to turn the stasis field and therefore those nanites off. I have to completely rebuild the body including all internal organs and the nervous system. This will not be a quick." She hoped he truly understood the magnitude of what lay before them, and the cost.

"Take whatever time you need, and whatever it costs, you will have it." He watched the end of his cigarette as he flicked ash into a container on the arm of his chair, "oh and Miranda no more talk of a control chip or alterations to Shepard's mind of any kind.

I need her exactly the way she was, exactly. Not only is she a charismatic leader with a personality that will stop at nothing to achieve her objectives, but she is also a human hero and saved many human lives. She is also willing to kill any who threaten us.

The Collectors have also marked her out as an adversary so I need her to keep doing whatever it is she is doing to keep up their interest. I am sharing my thinking with you Miranda as you need to know how important this is to humanity and to me personally. Don't let me down." And with that he cut the connection.

Yes he needed Shepard exactly as she had been, she held a great fascination for the Collectors and he needed to know he could get to them, find a way through the Omega 4 relay, he was convinced they had technology that would put humanity out in front where they should be in the galaxy.

He was willing to sacrifice anything to make humanity great, even its greatest hero, he would rather not, particularly as it was going to be very expensive to bring her back… but everyone was expendable… for the greater good. It was such a pity so few could see what the greater good was, it was lucky for humanity that he could.
Chapter 21

Nine months after recovering Shepard's body – T'Soni estate Thessia

Liara opened her eyes and looked around her bedroom. She had moved into her old suite of room's and had updated them, well Matriarch T'Joan had organised it all; including clearing Liara's flat on the Citadel and trying her best to make at least some of the rooms feel more like the young Asari's.

But Liara wasn't thinking about the room or the long shadow cast by her mother. Liara was feeling, once again, as if she had betrayed Shepard and everything they had together. Last night she had slept with Shiala, and not for the first time.

It had started a few weeks after she had walked away from Shepard in that cold, sterile laboratory, any real hope of a miracle gone. Shepard was dead, she wouldn't be coming back. Liara had gone into free fall, and was literally stuck at the moment she 'felt' Shepard leave her, the moment of death she had shared with her love.

Shiala had been her constant companion, helping with light melds to give Liara some peace and meditating together. Liara woke one night, as she often did, not being able to breath and Shiala had joined with her to try to calm the panic, and from nowhere a wave of need and desire took hold of Liara and the joining turned into sex.

Liara was clear that what happened between her and Shiala was just sex, and she was also aware of why she seemed to keep doing it. She actually felt the smallest part alive while in the join, rather than existing in the void of anything other than loss and grief that she was overwhelmed by the rest of the time.

And the feelings that came after, the sense of betrayal, disgust and anger at herself for being weak despite being negative gave some form of distorted sense of relief to the ever present sense of despair.

It was also nothing that connected her to Shepard; it was a pure Asari sexual join, Liara wasn't trying to recreate what she had, that could never be done and she was only 'sharing' and very specific part of herself.

Liara had made progress since those first terrible weeks, with the help of her local temple and the priestess's, but how she had started to put herself back together was causing huge concern to those who could see what was happening.

She was now essentially two versions of herself. The 'old' Liara was stuck in grief and loss and was making progress towards healing much more slowly than would be expected due to the psychological and spiritual damage done when Shepard died.

The 'new' Liara, the one that could function, the face the world dealt with was harder, focused, not unfeeling but distant, colder, and to some who knew her mother, much more like Benezia.

This was the Liara that on occasion allowed her mother's devoted follower into her bed and this was the Liara that was aware that Shiala wanted much more than just sex.
As soon as Liara was able she turned all her attention and resources towards taking down the Shadow Broker. Not just for trying to give Shepard's body to the Collectors but she had also found out it was the Shadow Broker who gave the location of the Normandy to them. She was also trying to find out where the Broker got that information, whoever had betrayed her soul mate she would deal with personally, with her own hands.

Liara had set up as an information broker, using her mother’s extensive contacts and influence, which passed to Liara as her heir and incorporated Shiala’s network which gave her connections into the murkier world of mercs and disreputable corporations.

The main house was certainly big enough to accommodate the equipment needed and she had hired a small team of expert information, intelligence and tech experts and persuaded Doctor Kasumi Goto lead the team. Liara hadn't completely forgotten the Reapers, she instructed that part of the team and her resources remained focused on that threat, and particularly trying to identify anyone who may be a Reaper supporter or indoctrinated follower.

Aria had been right that making an enemy of the Shadow Broker came with consequences. Several attempts had been made to kill Liara and the only place she was truly safe was inside her estate which had re-established its commando training school and has heavily fortified and guarded by handpicked Asari, Turian (picked by Garrus) and Krogan (sent by Wrex) teams.

She rarely travelled, even on Thessia, and then only for official functions or private meetings which helped to cement her position in Asari society, essential to maintain her connections and influence.

Liara could only trade on her mother’s name for so long; luckily her part in saving the council and also re-instating the good name of her mother had put her in high standing in her own right.

Her plan was simple enough, impossible, but very… Shepard. Find the Shadow Brokers base, attack it, kill him and kill anything that got in her way. It was Garrus that added they should also blow it up as a tribute to Shepard's love of 'blowing stuff up'.

While she was working on that she did her best to thwart any and all plans the Broker had, she was also in direct competition with him and although his network would always be unrivalled she was able to hurt his business and was gathering a steadily growing client list who dealt with her in preference to the Broker.

Aria also continued, occasionally, to provide help and sometimes advice. They had not spoken directly again but she received recorded transmissions on their secure comm link and Aria’s information was always surprisingly relevant to whatever problem that Liara was currently working on.

While grateful and certainly a huge advantage for Liara, she still didn't understand why Aria had been or continued to be so kind and helpful to her, despite the pretense, as Liara now saw it, of it being a 'business' arrangement.

Sometimes in the darkest moments of the night the young, shy, insecure and socially awkward Liara would feel the ravage of jealousy as thoughts of just how close Shepard and Aria had been came unbidden into her mind, there seemed no other explanation as to why the queen of Omega would continue to be so helpful.

As Shiala walked away from Liara’s bedroom she thought about the previous night and wondered if
there was any change. It had been as aggressive and violent as ever, but was there a slightly deeper connection?

She would not rush things, she had time, they had time. Shiala had played her hand well so far and she was exactly where she wanted to be; back in her position as Captain of the T'Soni commando's team and the school; more recently Liara's official escort for public occasions and access to her bed. Shiala was the right hand of Benezia's daughter, which meant her old mistress's legacy was all but assured. Shiala could see Liara growing more like her mother every day.

Even if this war against the Shadow Broker was ill advised and a legacy of her misplaced affection for Shepard it was training the young Asari and giving her focus, it would do for now, until Liara got the loss of her human out of her system.

And, with time, Shiala was confident affection would follow, she had after all initiated the sexual join at just the right moment and yet Liara was convinced it had been her own. Shiala's plan to be not only Liara's right hand but also her bondmate was only a matter of good planning and timing.

Shiala was a skilled and practiced manipulator, she had learned from the best, but Liara was also vulnerable to anyone who could get inside her barriers, and Shiala had done that easily by betraying the Shadow Broker and bringing news of Shepard's body to the grieving young woman.

But Shiala knew she needed to remain careful there were still too many wary eyes and until she could get rid of the likes of Vakarian and Goto she would progress her plans slowly.

Twelve months after recovering Shepard's body – Top secret Cerberus facility, Attican Traverse

"Thank you Wilson send the results through to my private office," Miranda Lawson was looking across at the bio bed inside the sterile glass pod housing the work in progress that was Commander Shepard, "let's call it a day. I want to run a full nervous system test in the morning first thing," she finished now looking at Doctor Wilson and the two other scientists in the laboratory.

Miranda left them and entered her private office. This was a very secure mini laboratory to which only Doctor Lawson had access and within which she was developing nanite tech specifically for Shepard based on the Prothean nanites that she now had access to.

She had set the lab up to keep even the Illusive Man's prying eyes out; with false feedback loop and non-networked systems for ultimate privacy. Miranda Lawson did believe in what Cerberus was doing, she believed that humanity needed to be strong and be able to hold their own against the other races, but she wasn't always convinced about the methods.

But she owed 'TIM' everything, he had given her protection from her father and was even now protecting her sister so that she could have a normal ordinary life out of the reach of the monster that 'created' both his daughters from his own genetic material.

Her personal loyalty was unwavering, but that didn't mean she couldn't retain some areas of her work, which was after all her life, wholly under her control. And the other project she was working on in secret absolutely had to remain out of the reach of the Illusive Man, at least for now.

She sat down at her console and opened her private and confidential log.

"We have completed the integration of the genetically modified and enhance nervous system. In body testing will begin tomorrow and if performance is as expected we will be able to re-introduce
internal organs as the next step but fully integrating into the circulatory system will take at least eight weeks work.

Facial reconstruction has been completed; I have decided to use Shepard's own cloned eyes rather than a tech replacement. It is vital that on waking the Commander feel's as much her as possible and to that end I have also retained the facial scarring."

Miranda stood up and walked across to her un-networked system and checked the latest readout of results from 'experiment double X', and then resumed with her log entry.

"I am now in a position to move forward with the double x project… but… am I any better than my father if I do this," Miranda had lost the terse discipline of the scientist making her data fuelled progress reports, this was an altogether more 'confessional' tone.

"I took the material as a backup in case we lost Shepard… but was that really the only reason… and now… I have a unique opportunity to create life, as my father did, but not for the same reasons and certainly not for the same ends," Miranda pulled herself together and continued in her more usual clinical style.

"The genetic manipulation has been a success and the integration of a small amount of my own genetic material providing biotic abilities is now complete. The only decision remaining is do I move to the next stage and if so tank bred or implanted."

Miranda sat deep in thought before finally turning off the log. 'I will never have a child of my own,' she thought, 'it would always carry to much of my father's genetic material… but this… opportunity… and it would be safer, no lab to protect and hide.' Her thoughts drifted on even as she walked back into the main lab now empty and quiet except for the hum of machines.

"Good evening Shepard," she only ever 'spoke' to Shepard when they were alone, "I have a decision to make and I can only image what your answer would be." Miranda stood looking into the now more recognisable, despite the bruising and red glow from still exposed cybernetics, face of the Commander.

Twenty months after recover of Shepard's body – T'Soni estate, Thessia
"What the hell happened," Garrus was rushing out from the house as two shuttles landed on the front lawn, "I knew it was a mistake letting you go in person Liara." He had now reached the doorway of the first shuttle and moved from speaking through comms to speaking directly to Liara herself as she disembarked.

She had cuts on her face and her armour was covered in blood, she waved him off and walked swiftly into the house and headed straight for the information hub. The now depleted squad of commando's that had gone with her were also disembarking, it looked to Garrus's eyes that they had lost eight of the twenty with three being stretchered of the shuttles. Then it struck him, no Shiala, he turned and hurried after Liara. He caught up with her as she was frantically trying to direct her intelligence team to search for any indication as to where her attackers had headed after they left the scene of the fight.

"Liara we have been searching since you called in from the location and we will continue to search for them but you need to get that armour off and checked over… please Liara," it was Kasumi who was speaking in soft calming tones and who gently began to lead the wild eyed Asari toward the door and the waiting Matriarch T'Joan.
Once Liara was safely on her way for medical attention Garrus asked for as much information as Kasumi had on what now appeared to be a well-executed and deadly ambush.

"The contact was real enough and I'm convinced the Shadow Broker didn't have the location of the meeting until the last minute... we were betrayed by Vasir but that will be impossible to prove to the satisfaction of the Council."

"But where's Shiala? She wasn't on the shuttles and how the hell did Liara get into any kind of danger." Garrus continued, "I knew it was a mistake all too convenient, location of the Shadow Broker my ass, and having to meet in person, even if it was on Thessia."

Garrus felt both angry and guilty for being talked out of going with Liara who wanted to make sure the estate would be properly protected if this was a ruse to split their forces and so insisted he stayed behind.

"From the comms traffic I've managed to work out roughly what happened," Kasumi said and led him across to one of the consoles. As she played back vid cam footage from a variety of sources including Shiala's own and she talked him through the highlights.

"It seems as soon as Liara and the team arrived at the rendezvous an explosion took out the building and almost immediately the Shadow Brokers men arrived.

Liara insisted on going inside to try to find the contact so they fought their way in still thinking Vasir was helping. By the time they reached the contact Shiala realised it was actually a trap, but she fought off Vasir for the data got it to Liara and ordered the bulk of the team to get her to safety while she stayed with a handful of her team to protect the escape.

We were able to keep connection up until they were overrun and from suit readouts all the other commando's in Shiala's squad were killed but she was taken alive."

They both continued to study the now repeating vid feed from the attack and realised just how hard Liara would be taking this loss. And despite Garrus's feelings about Shiala's personal relationship with Liara all of which were negative, he freely admitted Shiala's loyalty to the young Asari was absolute. She would be a huge loss and Garrus feared Liara would be in danger of becoming reckless in her efforts to get Shiala back.

Twenty one months after the retrieval of Shepard's body - Top secret Cerberus facility, Attican Traverse

"We will be reviving her later today, I'm just having her moved to a room in the medical facility so that she wakes up in a hospital bed rather than in a laboratory," Miranda was talking to a tall, muscular woman with short blonde hair and steel grey eyes, who was standing next to her.

They were both looking into the lab through a one way mirror at the resting form of Commander Shepard now lying on an ordinary bed having been moved from the bio bed and sterile room over a week previously.

"I suggest I make my appearance after you've dealt with her anger when you tell her you work for Cerberus," Tasha Mikhailovich said with a smile, "you tell her you've employed me to help her transition she may be less suspicious that way."

"Are you telling me that she has no idea you were caught spying for Cerberus while you were still in the Alliance and have worked for us ever since?" Miranda had only met Agent Mikhailovich an hour
ago and had the barest of briefings.

"The Illusive Man has very powerful supporters within the Alliance, a deal was made and the records were... altered," she smiled again, "it was always his intention that I should be rehabilitated back into the Alliance when certain people were no longer... around... but this seems like a much quicker route. I'll wait for you call."

Miranda watched as the woman walked away and felt completely torn between her loyalty to The Illusive Man and the work that Shepard had been brought back for and her loyalty, yes... it was loyalty she was feeling, for Shepard. 'Remember what's at stake Miranda, remember where the power is', she thought to herself and left to make the final arrangements to 'wake' Shepard up.

Shepard was aware light on her closed eyelids and of feeling warm and comfortable, but very, very strange.

"Commander, my name is Doctor Miranda Lawson, you're safe and in a medical centre. You have had extensive surgery for you injuries so try to relax and once you are completely awake I will answer any questions you may have." Miranda was alone in the room with Shepard but aware that they were being recorded and that the Illusive Man may well even be watching the 'event' live.

The voice Shepard heard was a woman's, 'was that an Australian accent, easy on the ear whatever it was,' she thought, 'last thing Shepard what was the last...'

"My ship, Liara... crew..." the memory, her last memories came flooding back to her and as she spoke she heard her voice gravelly and dry, she struggled to open her eyes and focus.

"Let yourself come around properly Commander and...", but Shepard cut Miranda off now with her eyes open and trying hard to focus on the Doctors face.

"Liara is she ok... where is she," now struggling to sit up Shepard shot a hand out and clasped Miranda around the wrist forcing a gasp of pain from the Doctor.

"Steady Commander you're much stronger than you were before... before you... had your surgery." Miranda rubbed her wrist pleased at the strength and motor control the result of her work.

"Sorry... just need to know... stronger..." the last word was more of a question, but Shepard realised the futility of fighting against what must be the remnants of sedation. She relaxed back into the bed and began deep breathing to calm herself and took stock of her body trying to work out what felt off.

After around ten minutes, during which time the Doctor seemed to be checking read outs from the machines Shepard was hooked up to, she felt alert and awake and opened her eyes this time able to take in her surroundings and the woman in the room.

"Look the last thing I remember was being spaced and passing out from complete loss of oxygen, so were the readings fouled up or did I get grabbed by one of the escape pods?" Shepard said asking the question she had been running around in her head for the last five minutes, she had been toast, yet here she was, "and tell me right now about my crew and Doctor T'Soni please."

Shepard was pleased to find she was alive but her mood wouldn't last if she didn't get the answers she wanted. Every instinct in her mind and body was telling her this whole thing was wrong.
"I'll give you the short version and fill in the detail as you need me to," Miranda thought she might as well get it all out at once.

"There was no read out malfunction and you didn't get rescued, you died Commander, we tracked down your body and stopped it being handed over to the Collectors. I brought you here as my research was the only thing that was going to bring you back and allow anyone to rebuild you." Miranda could see the disbelief and confusion in those very green eyes, "that was around twenty one months ago, this is October 2185."

"Nearly two years… I'm having trouble getting my head around that… dead… but you can't bring someone back from the dead… that's… what the fuck have you done to me… what am I?" Shepard's voice although still rough was loud and anger was clear to see on her face and in her body language.

"Well in fact my project does theoretically have the ability to re-start the brain… but that doesn't matter because when I got you here I didn't need to… you did die but at the very point of death your brain was put into stasis and so when your body was rebuilt I was able to reverse the stasis field.

You are extensively rebuilt Commander, using your own genetic material, cybernetics and nanite technology, but who you are, is exactly the same… nothing about you has been changed… your brain, your mind was merely on pause." Miranda finished she was sure that once Shepard understood that fact she would be more comfortable with the situation and once Miranda explained just how enhanced her body was Shepard would be impressed and grateful.

"Liara? My crew?" Shepard was letting the information sink in … it wasn't sinking in very far, in fact she felt like a caged animal and the tension inside her head was mounting at an alarming rate.

"Doctor T'Soni survived the attack and is now living back on Thessia, with someone I think you know Shiala Galine, and is running the family estate. Your former team mates have all dispersed back to whatever they were doing before they joined your mission, they all survived.

I am sorry to tell you that your losses from the crew of the Normandy were considerable, twenty eight on the final count, and they included Ashley Williams. The Alliance declared you dead within twenty four hours of the attack. They gave you a medal and memorial service in Vancouver." Miranda had been told exactly what to say by The Illusive Man when it came to Liara T'Soni, he didn't want Shepard distracted from the mission by her former connections.

"Living with… as in together" Shepard had gone white and her voice was now quiet, "that can't be… how." Shepard turned looked at Miranda and their eyes met, the depth of pain and confusion was palpable, but there was nothing Miranda could do, she had her orders.

"I'm sorry Commander, for you it's been moments, minutes but for everyone else you died nearly two years ago. People move on.

Perhaps when you get to your quarters you want to look through the news vids and surveillance footage that I have pulled together covering the time you have been out of commission, that will allow you to see how your death was reported and there is coverage of your friends and family.

I have tried to replace as much as I could of your personal possessions and clothing to try to make you feel a little more at home here as well." Miranda was aware that the footage of Liara had been carefully edited, although showing her at the memorial service it jumped forward quickly showing her apparently happily getting on with her life Shiala on at her side at public functions on Thessia.

"So let me get this straight," Shepard said her voice now steady but anger evident in every syllable, "my partner is now happily living with someone else, everyone that ever knew and cared about me believes I'm dead, but what is it that you haven't told me so far to really make my day… this is not an
Alliance facility, this is not a Council operation… so that only leaves one other organisation that would have the resources to pull this off and any reason to keep me out of the hands of the Collectors?" Shepard had been working through the angles, it had to be Cerberus. 'Not only in the arms of the enemy but re-fucking built by them,' she thought bitterly.

"Yes Commander this project is funded by Cerberus and I work for them, but I have complete authority here… I understand your history with Cerberus has not been a good one… but," Shepard cut Miranda off.

"Not good Doctor Lawson is the biggest understatement I think I've ever heard. So I can add Alliance traitor to the list of things that are shit to wake up to. Given the fact that my life, as I knew it, is a compete train wreck, and I am going to spend the next shit knows how long trying to convince the Alliance and Council that I had nothing to do with this and just fucking woke up to this nightmare… if they ever believe me… can you tell me why in the name of all the fucked up shit in the galaxy you bothered to bring me back from the dead… unless of course you think I'm going to stay here and work with terrorists?" Shepard began getting out of bed, Miranda could think of absolutely nothing to say.

"I need some time on my own and the use a gym… I need to get a feel for this new body you've given me," Shepard, with a monumental effort of self will had made the switch in her head to professional, Alliance officer mode working hard not to let any of her feelings leak out. "And keep anyone wearing a Cerberus uniform out of my eye line or I'll be testing my new found strength sooner rather than later." Shepard looked directly into Miranda's eyes and then into the camera that was overlooking the room.

This was a hostile environment she was sure of it and until she understood what was going on she was going to play it very safe.

"Of course Commander and your questions will all be answered when you meet the Illusive Man later. In the meantime perhaps you'd like to follow me to your quarters."

'So I get to be in the same room as Jack Harper do I, well this day could end better than I expected, I will kill that son of a bitch if it's the last thing I do', Shepard thought as she followed the Doctor out of the small hospital room to start her new life.
Shepard's accommodation was not so much a room but more akin to a hotel suite, which also included a small but well equipped gym.

Her workout had been partly about re-calibrating her control over her body but it was also a physical release to the storm of emotions running through her that she had to keep out of public sight and behind an internal barrier. She was not going to give whoever was watching, and Shepard would lay money on it being Harper, any ammunition they could use to manipulate her.

Before she hit the shower Shepard gave the rooms a quick look over and true to her word the Doctor had tried to make it feel as familiar as possible. Of course pretty much everything she owned had gone with the Normandy but her books her music and even some of the models she used to collect had been replaced.

Her civilian clothing was a good stab at her old wardrobe, but the 'work wear' she found was Cerberus issue complete with that hated insignia.

Through the noise of Shepard's confusion, anger and fear she recognised that this Doctor Lawson had really tried to make her transition into this strange new world as familiar as possible. 'She must have done a hell of a lot of research into me, probably knows more about me than I do,' Shepard mused as she stood under the shower, 'yeah well don't get to doughy eyed about it, probably a good psychological technique with a hostile participant.'

With the shower running she took up a familiar pose, her arms outstretched against one of the walls, leaning forward her head down allowing the water to hit the back of her head and neck.

Knowing it was the only place she would be unobserved she allowed the wall inside her to melt and her emotions in. Her thoughts immediately turning to Liara, Shepard cried as she hadn't done since her father died. Noticing for the first time the connection to her soul mate was not there, and only a deep, dark, painful and empty space where there had previously been love and completeness.

Sitting in front of the console in sweats and a hoodie, coffee in hand, Shepard prepared to see the effects of her death on the people she cared about.

Running through the news vids, official statements and news conferences they all showed pretty much what she expected. There was only a very brief sequence of the survivors of the Normandy arriving back at Arcturus station, obviously filmed secretly, but Liara was nowhere to be seen.

The memorial gave her the first real look at both Liara and her mother. Shepard could see the pain and grief etched deep into both women but they both remained dignified and her mother looked to be supporting Liara through the whole process.

The rush of love and pride for the two people Shepard loved the most in the galaxy almost raised tears, but she kept her emotions fully in check. There were more memorial services, her mother attending everyone, all the places that Shepard had at some time or another served.
Shepard noticed the reporting and discussion faded away over a period of a few months. And it was around six months after that the feeds started to report occasional sightings of “Doctor Liara T'Soni attending one of Larisa's major society events of the year with her new escort Shiala Galine. Liara T'Soni, who was once linked to the dead war hero Commander Shepard, is now following in the footsteps of her mother the renowned Matriarch Benezia T'Soni.”

All the news casts and other vid feed, that Shepard thought Cerberus had probably collected themselves, showed a very different Liara to the one Shepard had left on the Normandy. And without doubt Shiara was close to Liara and it did look as if they were on intimate terms.

She turned the console off and a rage overtook her that she couldn't hold back, ripping the console off the desk and throwing it across the room allowing it to smash into the wall.

Shepard reached out for anything that was moveable and threw it or smashed it up, when she ran out of inanimate objects she began punching the wall and wasn't even aware that someone had entered the room and was attempting to pull her out of punch reach of the offending wall.

"Commander you'll damage your hand, please, it's ok… Shepard," Miranda said Shepard's name finally in a very commanding and loud tone and finally broke through to the woman in front of her.

Shepard snapped out of the blood rage she had fallen into and realised Doctor Lawson was in the room with her, she felt the pain in her hand, and felt the dam break in her again sinking to her knees, tears silently marking her failure of self-control.

Miranda knelt down next to Shepard and pulled the woman towards her and held her feeling silent sobs, "there are no cameras in your quarters Shepard… you have to vent your feelings… this… I have no idea how this must feel… I can help you if you let me, if you can try to trust me."

Shepard stayed where she was until she had regained control and then eased herself away, the kindness this woman was showing her didn't feel false, but she was nowhere near trusting anyone who worked for Cerberus, yet.

"Thanks," Shepard said now sitting on the floor and getting a look at the woman sitting opposite her noticing for the first time she appeared to be heavily pregnant, "really no cameras… Harper wouldn't let you get away with that," she saw the slight look of confusion on the Doctors face and added, "your Illusive Man, his name if Jack Harper."

"I told you Shepard this project and this part of the facility is under my authority and control. I won't deceive you, all the other areas do have cameras and the feed is sent through and I presume monitored by the Illusive Man; I report to him, and of course I do work for Cerberus and support its aims.

But I have also been an admirer of you for some time, you're a hero Shepard, a bloody icon, and the best humanity has to offer so I would have worked with anyone to try to bring you back."

Miranda stopped dead she had had no intention of saying any of that and thought she sounded like a school girl with a crush, her cool, caustic, controlling exterior seemed to completely desert her whenever she got within close proximity to this woman and she didn't understand it.

"Well I think your pretty awesome for… re-starting my brain… look it's not your fault my life is fucked up… and I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier… bet anyone else in the galaxy you had given life back to would have thanked you first… you may not know me as well as you think you do."

Shepard finished with a grin and stood up offering her undamaged hand to Miranda to help her up.
Shepard found herself staring directly into the eyes of another Doctor, they were so close for an instant she could feel the other woman's breath on her face. Shepard could see or was it sense something, she couldn't catch what it was but there was something about this woman.

"When are you due?" Shepard asked quietly feeling the other woman's belly against her. "Anytime now," Miranda said a little breathlessly and had a sudden need to tell Shepard the truth. Shepard stepped back and a blushing Miranda Lawson said "I think I should take a look at that hand Commander, come with me to my lab, and then the Illusive Man would like to meet with you."

Shepard walked into the room expecting to see her quarry but it was empty and then she realised this was to be a meeting via QEC and her disappointment at not being able to actually get her hands on Harper took her back to a similar 'meeting' with Saren aboard the Normandy.

She stood on the comms platform and immediately the room around her changed and she was standing looking across a huge open space and through a full wall sized window filled with the boiling, broiling and brooding presence of a red dwarf sun.

And sitting on a chair, cigarette smoke streaming from his lips was Jack Harper. His blue eyes noticeable even in the darkness of the room.

"Commander Shepard it's truly good to see you back with us," Harper said in an even and friendly tone, "you no doubt have many questions."

Shepard didn't say anything for a few moments and finally said "I'm disappointed not to be seeing you in person… I was rather looking forward to tearing out the miserable excuse you must have for a heart." Her eyes were cold; she was completely in control, she finally had her enemy in sight and if she couldn't kill him now she'd learn as much as she could for later.

"I can understand you must feel that way Shepard, but the very nature of the organisation means that sometimes things are done in our name that perhaps we never sanction…” but Shepard cut him off.

"I'm disappointed, not even the balls to own what it is you do Jack… don't back pedal now… what is it 'don't judge us by our methods but by what we will achieve,' or some similar self-righteous crap you use to excuse every evil dirty deed you do.

Deliberately exposing people to Eezo to create biotic children, assassinating religious and political leaders until you get someone in control you can influence, experimenting on humans as well as non-humans, torturing and killing war hero's, undermining the work of the Alliance and killing good honest decent officers who get in your way… hey this is your link do you really want me to carry on… or shall we cut the crap and just find out what you want from me."

"Think what you want Shepard but we both want the same thing, for humanity and the Alliance to take its rightful place in the galaxy and for humanity to thrive and prosper… but let's not debate that," he cut across her and continued.

"There are a few things you should know and then you can decide whether you are going to take advantage of my offer. It was the Collectors who attacked the Normandy and killed your crew because they were trying to kill you. The Collectors are now attacking human colonies and taking entire populations back through the Omega 4 relay, for what purpose we do not know.

What I do know is that the Alliance and the Council are still publicly denying the existence of the
Reaper threat and on that if nothing else Shepard we agree the Reapers are the greatest threat to humanity in the galaxy.

There is discord even inside the Alliance and Council and with your 'departure', and the lack of any further activity from the Reapers or their minions has increased the voices saying it really was just the Geth and Saren.

The voices that said, quietly and discreetly due to your hero's 'death', you were fooled or deliberately embellished the truth to give yourself a glorious mission grew until they drowned out others who pointed at evidence to the contrary.

You may not trust me, you may hate me and want me dead, but humanity needs you, the galaxy needs you to find out what the Collectors interest in humanity is and to stop them.

I have already started to create a short list of team members that will be useful for your mission, of course the final choice is yours.

I need you to work with me to find a way through the Omega 4 relay to destroy the Collector threat. A couple of days ago the human colony of Freedom's Progress was attacked by Collectors just like all the others, but this time we have first-hand information about what happened. A Quarian was in the settlement and although deeply disturbed by the incident recorded the Collector activity. I have sent you the report of his interrogation."

On the large virtual interface behind Harper vid streams began playing and although the images were fuzzy she could see 'Collectors' placing humans into what looked like stasis pods and taking them away, some sort of swarming birds, no they were flying insects were also present.

And then another image came rushing at her, from somewhere deep in her mind, so fast it should have shifted to infra-red… from the Beacon… the husks the Prothean's were fighting… looked exactly like Collectors… they were… she was convinced of it.

Harper had noticed the change in her attention and mood he checked his vid screen to see what had caught her attention. Shepard was determined not to share any information with him so relaxed back and decided to go off at a different angle.

"Where's the Quarian now?" she said looking back to Harper.

He actually looked confused for a split second but he recovered quickly and went back to unreadable. Something he had in common with her old boss.

"I believe he is now recovering..." she cut him off.

"I want him here by tomorrow morning and he had better be healthy." She continued, "Let's get some ground rules sorted out and these are my terms, they are not negotiable. You keep any and all Cerberus employees out of my way, anyone I meet wearing one of your damned uniforms of spouting your philosophy I will treat as an enemy combatant.

I will not wear your insignia or have it worn by anyone working with me.

I'll look at your suggestions but I will choose my own team and anyone from Cerberus will have to pass my test and that will include not being a cheerleader for you.

Tomorrow lunchtime I am going to leave here in an un-tracked shuttle and I will spend two weeks thinking about your offer and getting my head straight, if I see anyone that even vaguely looks like one of your goons the deal is off.
And I decide when I reveal my resurrection if you start using me for your own ends I won't be coming back.

Are we in agreement?" she finished realising only then that she had absolutely no idea if she had any money to fund her personal mission.

"Agreed Commander, and as a good will gesture I will make an advance payment into an account for you… you will need to take care of your Quarian guest if nothing else" he had cut across her attempt to tell him to shove his money, which on reflection she was glad of, 'don't be too high and mighty Shepard this is the only game in town you know of right now,' she thought.

"Good then we're done," without waiting for a response she turned and walked out without even bothering to close the connection.

Miranda had been called to see the Illusive Man straight after he had seen Shepard. She knew immediately his meeting had not gone well.

"Doctor Lawson our guest is a little more antagonistic than I would like, however I am sure she will take on the mission, particularly once she finds out the Alliance and the Council will not support any action against the Collectors right now.

It was a mistake that I didn't call a halt to our… interaction with her uncle.

But, I think we need to tie the Commander a little closer to our cause on a personal basis and so I need you to tell her that you are about to give birth to her genetically engineered child." He flicked ash from his cigarette and took another deep draw from it, the red glow from its end reflecting in his eyes.

Miranda was stunned; she thought she had managed to pass off her 'carefully chosen sperm donor' cover story completely. Miranda hadn't decided whether she would tell Shepard what she had done or that it had resulted in a child, and the last thing she wanted was for the Illusive Man to have this kind of hold over her.

She knew in that instant she had been a fool to think she could keep anything this big secret from him and she knew also that what she had done had been a monumental mistake.

"I… but how did you know… I haven't even decided if I want to tell her… and it may have the opposite effect that you're looking for," Miranda tried to calm herself and find an argument that would persuade him against using what was in fact Shepard's soon to be son as a bargaining chip.

"The timing was a little odd; it was bound to raise questions. It was your business however, I think I can understand, and you are a valuable asset to Cerberus therefore I give you a lot of autonomy and space to follow your own research the way you want to.

But you are still a Cerberus officer Miranda and you need to do all you can to keep this project on track, I understand the risk and Shepard may well be unforgiving to you but she will not abandon her child and I doubt she will steal her from her… 'mother'."

He tilted his head on the side and took another draw on his cigarette and communicated very clearly his feelings as to whether Miranda was or would ever truly be a 'mother' to the child she was carrying.

"You know you may hate your father Miranda but you are much more like him than you want to
admit." With a parting shot that was guaranteed to cut her to the bone he severed the connection and left Miranda in the dark.

Shepard had not made up her mind one way or the other about working with Cerberus against the Collectors, but the chances went up considerably when she realised the Collectors had to be working for the Reapers.

She needed to know what her reception would be if she returned to the Alliance, she knew eventually everything would be squared away but how long would it take, and what resources would be at her disposal if Harper was right about the disarray the Council and Alliance were in around the Reaper threat.

Before she could begin to think about the best place to base herself while she was carrying out her own research the door buzzer sounded.

"Come in Doc" Shepard called out, it was a guess but she was pretty sure she saw Mirada heading towards a meeting with Harper and Shepard knew he would want to find out what she may be thinking.

"I was wondering if you would have dinner with me Shepard there is something of a personal nature I need to talk to you about." To Shepard's observant eye it looked as if the Doctor had been crying, she was definitely not her normal efficient and business like self.

"Yeah of course, I'm assuming it will be room service," Shepard smiled and invited Miranda to take a seat on one of the sofa's the room had to offer and Shepard sat on the other.

Shepard noticed that 'someone' had cleared up the mess she had made earlier but some damage was still evident including the lack of a control console.

"I took the liberty of ordering some food it should be here shortly," she had no idea of how to start the conversation or how to handle Shepard's reaction, she was a scientist, and this was completely outside her comfort zone.

"Tell me about yourself Doc, how'd you end up working for Harper and his terrorist network?" Shepard asked in a friendly tone.

"My father is a monster, and ego-maniac, Shepard; he carries out disgusting experiments to enhance human abilities and he is completely obsessed by his genetic destiny.

He used a modified copy of his own genome to genetically engineer his offspring, a specimen of human perfection… that was me… of course I wasn't the first, he disposed of the unworthy models… but nothing was ever good enough” Miranda tried to explain to Shepard what it was like growing up as an extension of someone like her father.

"In the end I knew I had to get away from him, but he has power and influence so I had to find somewhere that would protect me from him and that was the Illusive Man and Cerberus." She finished just as the food arrived.

They sat down to eat and Shepard talked about her childhood which was diametrically opposite to Miranda's, as she was talking her mother's face at the Vancouver memorial service came into her mind and Shepard felt a powerful need to speak to and see her mother both to relieve her grief and to ask for her counsel.

"So have you had any weird food cravings?" Shepard asked in an attempt to be normal in this most bizarre of situations, "one of my friends couldn't eat anything but salt beef and ice cream the last two
weeks, and one of my cousins…” Miranda reached across the table and put a hand on Shepard's and said.

"I need to… confess… you need to understand," she faltered to a stop and withdrew her hand.

"Hey whatever this is about you shouldn't be getting upset, you know, with the… baby thing… and what else could you possibly tell me that could be worse than I'm already facing," but even as she said it Shepard realised she had just tempted the fate of any and all gods that she may have pissed off in her, already cut short once, lifetime.

Miranda drew a deep breath, sat up straight and looked Shepard straight in the eyes, "When we first examined your… you on arrival, I wasn't sure we could actually revive you. For some weeks it was unclear if the damage to your body was too extensive or if I could work out how to reverse the stasis protecting your brain.

I had to recover as much genetic material as I could, so that I could begin cloning cells, to build organs and… well… I can make a full technical report available to you so that you know how I put you back together," Miranda allowed herself a small smile, what she had achieved was incredible and nothing would take that away from her.

"I understand," Shepard said quietly giving Miranda her full attention and beginning to feel very uneasy about what was coming.

"Some of that genetic material I used to duplicate my father's work, the work that created me… if we hadn't been able to revive you, you would live on in your genetic… once I knew you were going to make it I shelved the project… but… later…" Shepard's body language told Miranda that she didn't need to spell it out any further.

"So let me make sure I understand you… you stole my genetic material and created some kind of clone, that your about to give birth to?" Shepard's voice was quiet but deadly controlled and cold as were her eyes, she stood up and backed away from the table.

"No, not a clone… no an ordinary baby… just created from you, with only a small splice of my genome to provide the child with biotic abilities… this is no monster Shepard just a baby, created like many babies using science and….""

"Enough… just stop talking I need to think… what the fuck did you think you were doing… was this his idea… does he know? Do you have any idea what Cerberus does to children Miranda or are you completely blind to all the shit they pull?" Shepard's anger was palpable in the room and her voice was edged with fury.

"I… tried to hide it from him, and no he had nothing to do with this… this idea and its execution was just me, no one else… Shepard this wasn't... I didn't even know if I was going to tell you… but the Illusive Man suggested that I should be honest with you," she was now trying to do the impossible, be honest with Shepard and also not let her know that the Illusive Man was indeed willing to use a child in his plans.

"I have no fucking idea what I'm feeling right now… I can't get past the rage I feel at you for what you've done… I have no idea what to do about this… I need time to think and I need to do it away from here." Shepard stood silent for some minutes and then for the first time since she 'woke up' she squared her shoulders she had made her decision.

"You're leaving with me tomorrow, get in touch with Harper and tell him you are now part of my agreement with him, you come with me for at least part of the two weeks I'm taking and you better
make sure you're untraceable.

We'll talk about where you need to be to give birth after we leave tomorrow. I need to be alone right now Doctor Lawson."

Miranda stood up and looked as if she was going to say something but the look on Shepard's face and in her eyes changed her mind.

Once Shepard was alone the thought she had been fighting to keep out of the conscious mind exploded like a grenade
'what the fuck will Liara think, how am I going to explain… shit Shepard she's with someone else why would she care."

But Shepard could not, would not let go of the hope that perhaps things were not as they seemed, she wasn't ready to believe that the love they had was that easily forgotten… but this was a huge complication.

Shepard felt another emotion joining the anger, fear and grief… panic… this was all too much, she needed to talk it through with someone she could trust… her head felt like it would explode.

Aline for a twentieth century poet came to mind and she thought "'Anything dead coming back to life hurts' she got that damn straight,' and then a quote her father often used drifted into her thoughts "'either with this or on this' those Spartans were tough bastards but where does that leave me… no death but no shield either."

Shepard didn't even bother trying to get some sleep; she had too much to think about, to come to terms with.

She spent a lot of time trying to meditate as she used to when she was still in training and as she and Liara had started to practice to help calm her nightmares.

The thought of actually having died was proving both hypnotic and world shattering. As a soldier, of course, she faced possible death every time she went on a mission. Had come very close to being killed many times, certainly knew fear, anyone who said they weren't scared before a battle was either stupid or lying.

But fear is a good companion, it has energy so long as you turn it into something else and don't let it own you. And the other thing about knowing you were walking into a near certain death situation was that, in reality, she always believed it wouldn't happen… not today… today may be a good day to die, and when she said it she believed it, but even more powerfully she believed that today would not be the day she would have to pay the price.

Her personal invincibility had now been proven false, she had died, some fucker had actually managed to kill her. That was something she was going to have to work hard on the next time she faced battle and had no idea if it would freeze her up, make her weak.

By the time morning finally came she was ready to make a run for anywhere, just to get out of this cursed place and take control back over her life.

Abuzz on the door brought her back from her thoughts and when she answered she saw a Quarian, escorted by a couple of Cerberus men, although true to her agreement with Harper they were not wearing uniforms.

"Come in," she beckoned the young man in and shut the door in the faces of his guards, "my name is
Commander Shepard and I are an Alliance officer you are now under my protection and your leaving with me in a little while."

"Please, they will come for me, the swarms… they find everyone… I'm sorry… thank you, I know your name… but your dead?" he had obviously been badly affected both by the attack and probably by his 'interrogation'.

"Yeah don't worry about the dead bit… do you need anything?" and as she was asking him she used the comms to contact Doctor Lawson.

"Yes Commander," Miranda voice was polite and professional revealing nothing of their conversation the previous night.

"I wonder if you would check out our Quarian guest and see what medical records you have for him, I think he may need some treatment."

"Certainly Commander would you like to bring him to my lab and I'll see what I can do before we leave." "We leave… so I got everything I asked for, Harper must want my help badly' she thought to herself. "What's your name?" she asked as they left her quarters and headed for the lab.

"Veetor'Nara… I was on my pilgrimage… don't like crowds… I don't know what to do" his voice sounded week and he was clearly disturbed.

"Don't worry Veetor leave it to me, we'll get you sorted out, I have work for a Quarian, and we can talk that when you're feeling a little better," she smiled at him and hoped she could indeed help this Quarian as she still had a huge debt to pay.

After they had stowed what little gear they were taking with them, and Veetor was put to bed on one of the bunks, Shepard and Miranda took their positions in the cockpit of the shuttle.

Shepard headed away from the landing dock and out into dark space.

"Have you made any arrangements for giving birth?" Shepard asked without looking at the Doctor.

"I was going to head to Earth but I realise that was probably not where you were heading for, perhaps Ilium it will have all the services and facilities I need."

"Good choice that was going to be my destination," Shepard relented a little and looked across at Miranda asked in a slightly softer tone, "Are you feeling ok?"

"Yes Commander thank you." Miranda managed a small smile and Shepard returned it.

As Shepard headed the shuttle toward the relay she squared her shoulders and ran through the decisions she had made during her long night.

Shepard had her mission and she would not fail, whatever it took she would destroy the Collectors and whatever lay on the other end of the Omega 4 relay.

And she would stop them from taking any more human colonies if it was at all possible.

She would stand by her child regardless of how it was conceived and even if it hadn't been her child she was not going to let Harper anywhere near it.

She would get Liara back whatever it took, whatever had happened, she would fix it, Liara was her
soul mate and she would not lose her, unless she heard Liara herself say it was over.

She repeated the same words, in her head that had formed into a mantra through the night and was helping calm the panic and confusion, 'I'm the same Alliance officer, Council Spectre, the same fucking person I was before I got shot out of the sky and found myself spaced... this may be a major head fuck but I will get everything back on track... I'm coming for you Liara you better be ready.'
The journey to Illium would take around forty hours and Shepard decided she would use the time to find out as much as she could about what 'work' had been carried out on her body and just what difference it would make to her.

But she started with a question that had been on her mind since being brought around from her 'death'.

"So my body ended up on one of Alchera's moons, Uluhu?" Shepard asked Miranda as soon as they had jumped through the relay. Miranda nodded her agreement and Shepard continued "but my ship is somewhere on Alchera, so how did I land up on the moon, and probably more importantly why was there anything left of me at all?"

I mean I took some damage yes, and I understand once my suit de-pressurised and I became exposed to open space the vacuum and cold would have preserved me pretty much unaltered, desiccated maybe," Shepard allowed herself a smile, this was a truly disturbing conversation if she allowed herself to actually think about it.

"But to end up pretty much intact and not flamed… and how did the Shadow Broker work out where I was when the Alliance didn't seem to be able to," 'or they didn't bother trying', she thought bitterly.

"Once we heard that the Broker was looking for you and who his client was, Cerberus turned its attention to doing the same, to be fair we were getting to the same calculations but they had too big a head start.

It was all about the velocity you were travelling away from the Normandy; the blast that damaged your oxygen supply also put you on a path with the gravity well not of the planet but the moon because of the timing.

And the moon's very low atmosphere, combined with the effects of gravity assist and aerobraking gave the best possible outcome… but even with all those elements combining together you… well you were on a collision course with that moon and even if you hadn't lost your oxygen…" Miranda let the rest of the statement hang between them.

"So I finally have something to thank those bloody beacons for… maybe all the headaches they gave me were worth it," she smiled across at Miranda and noticed the woman relax a little, 'we will have the 'talk' about this baby thing but you need to remember she is still pregnant Shepard… with my kid… shit that's a real head fuck,' she thought.

"Ok so now run me through how the rebuild will affect me, I know what you did, I read your report, fair amount of it over my head once you moved into talking about nanites and bots and whatever…" Shepard asked and they spent the following hours talking about how improved not just strength but also stamina she was, quicker to heal, more resistant to damage… but Miranda stressed time and again that she was not indestructible, that she needed to truly find the edge of what was possible and what wasn't.

It was clear that Doctor Lawson had developed a lot of the cybernetics, genetic modifications and
certainly the nano technology specifically for Shepard during the early life of the 'project'.

Shepard began to understand that Miranda Lawson had put a huge amount of herself into this work and perhaps this had blurred the lines around the whole creating new life as her father had... but Shepard was nowhere near forgiving and forgetting, they still needed the conversation.

During the trip Shepard also had a chance to talk to Veetor and understood the young Quarian's pre-existing problems of nervousness and what seemed to her to be a form of agoraphobia, which must have been unbearable on the migrant fleet.

He did seem to have a talent for comms and also security systems; and he was much more comfortable with technology than people.

"I have an offer to make you Veetor, I can't guarantee I'll be able to keep you out of trouble or danger, but I can make sure you have your own space and you won't have to mix with the rest of whatever team and crew I put together. If you want to go back to the fleet I'll be happy to take you… or anywhere else." Shepard knew it was a long shot and he may not be any help at all but she had a hunch and she almost always followed her hunches.

"Would not want to let you down Commander, I may not be able… would like to stay with you and see," Shepard reckoned that was as good as she would get.

"Good that's settled, when we get to Illium I have a job for you to do, nothing dangerous but I need a 'middle man' to get some information for me." She smiled at him and he seemed to relax a little to, Shepard wondered if she was just surrounded by nervous people or if she really was that intimidating.

Time would tell, but Shepard really couldn't think what else would happen to the young vulnerable Quarian if she didn't at least try to look out for him.

When they finally arrived at the hotel, which was in a quiet but upmarket part of Illium, it was very late. Shepard and Miranda had made sure they had 'bought' enough privacy and anonymity even before landing on Illium and that included the clinic that Miranda had booked into for the birth.

Veetor went to his room almost straight away leaving Shepard and Miranda and a silence full of expectation.

"Let's start with how Miranda… as I understand it to carry out the genetic manipulation needed to pull this off you needed stem cells, but my body was dead which means my cells were dead, not a great start for creating life," Shepard had done some reading up on the subject so she could ask Miranda the right questions.

"That's true Commander," Shepard held a hand up and said,

"I don't need you to use my rank Miranda you are about to… give birth to my child, Shepard will be fine."

Miranda's face showed the hint of a blush as she continued, "yes, of course, and you're right about the stem cells but they can be harvested from the brain and they were alive and healthy.

I understand you have questions about the process but the most important thing, I think, you need to understand is that this process is not uncommon but the success rates are dependent on the skill and experience of the person providing the procedure.
And more importantly, what my father's process ensured was that the life created was truly individual, not in any way or shape a clone or copy, it is much more like the process used by Asari reproduction.

Your son is an individual in his own right; the only difference is that he has only your own and your families DNA. Well and a very small slice of mine only to provide biotic abilities, I was more assured of success using that method rather than using genetic modification from scratch." She stopped, Miranda was desperate to make Shepard understand that whatever the rights and wrongs of actually creating this child, the only thing unusual about it was its conception.

As Miranda had been speaking a single word had resonated around the inside of Shepard's skull… son… for some reason she had assumed the child would be female… a son, her son… then she felt her anger rising and stood up to try to keep herself calm.

She walked over to the window and looked out across the sparkling towers and cityscape of Illium with their many lights twinkling against the dark night sky, she watched sky cars fly past, and then shifted her vision to watch a single raindrop on the window as it drifted down past her face.

"Why the hell did you do this Miranda, do you have any idea how fucked up this is going to make my life," Shepard said quietly still watching the raindrop on its journey. "I'm a soldier; I would never have chosen to have a child of my own," unbidden a thought crept into her head 'yeah I wanted to have my children if any with Liara, fat chance of that given all that's happened,'

"Com... Shepard you would never have known if it hadn't been for the Illusive Man forcing my hand, well you wouldn't have known right now..." Shepard turned to face Miranda and cut her off.

"That's worse Miranda... I have no idea whether I'll feel anything towards this baby but it seems it is my child... do you have any idea what my enemies would do to get their hands on it.. him... and what Cerberus and Harper would be interested in doing to it to find out if they could replicate whatever it is they think that makes me tick... anyone connected with me right now seems to be fair game for the Collectors and the Reapers and you brought a fucking child into this mess... I don't get it Miranda if you wanted a kid of your own you could have done this without me... why, for the love of the goddess why did you do it?"

There it was the question that had plagued Shepard and there had better be a good answer.

Miranda looked down at her hands and spoke quietly, "your recovery, even after I had repaired your body, was never certain. I had no idea what the stasis had done to your brain," she looked up and held Shepard's eyes "you could have been completely changed or a vegetable... right up until I woke you it may not have truly been you I brought back. I suppose I wanted the galaxy to have a plan b, the one thing that you and... Jack Harper," Shepard noted Miranda had used his name for the first time, with difficulty but she used it, "are in complete agreement about is the Reaper threat and that humanity has to mobilise, and you are a galactic hero for humanity.

Someone has to unite us, get us working together and you're it... but if you didn't come back... well I thought that your son could be our last hope."

"A baby... seriously Miranda..." but it was Miranda's turn to cut Shepard off.

"No only when he was an adult, my plan was to have him grow up with a human family but on Thessia where he would be trained to use his biotics and become a skilled commando, and then Alliance training... well that was about as far as I had progressed my planning"
"So you were never going to play families?" Shepard asked, still slightly disbelieving of Miranda's motives.

"No Shepard, do you really see me as mother material… I would have been his guardian and protector… the only reason I decided to carry the baby rather than tank bred, which I would honestly have preferred, was about protecting his identify and it was the safest place.

In the end I failed on both counts… I should have thought it through more thoroughly and engaged someone else to carry the child." Miranda shifted her position in the chair and Shepard was once again reminded just how pregnant the woman was.

"Are you ok?" Shepard asked, Miranda nodded and smiled so she continued, "well I need to know what happens after the child is born, what do you intend to do?"

"I don't know what you mean?" Miranda looked puzzled.

"Well now he doesn't have the weight of saving the galaxy on his very small shoulders, as that particular 'honour' will find its way back to me pretty quickly, and his destiny isn't quite so pre-determined." Shepard couldn't keep the edge of anger out of her voice, the arrogance of determining and manipulating an entire life to fit your own plans, no matter how noble the cause, she found unacceptable… just another form of slavery, "what happens to him now you don't need your plan b."

Miranda understood the implications of what Shepard had said and seemed once again to be wrong footed and embarrassed, "well I can continue with the arrangements already in place or I could look for a permanent adoption so that he leads an ordinary life, but I rather thought that you would…" she trailed off realising that she had no idea what Shepard would want to do, that had always been the problem.

"I need to know everything about this family you've set up and I'm assuming they have no idea whose child it is?" Miranda shook her head and Shepard continued, "good, but Harper probably already knows about the arrangements, so we continue as if this will be the plan.

But Miranda you need to know two things… first is that family, blood and chosen, is part of my DNA and is as important to me as my duty. Second, Harper will never get anywhere near the child and if you give him any help or support in that direction I will hunt you down and kill you." Shepard's voice was calm and business like but Miranda knew she was deadly serious.

"You really have not concerns about that Shepard, I am not so naïve that I don't know about the worst excesses of the work of Cerberus, I am not a mindless sycophant, I am not proud of needing the protection that the… Illusive Man and Cerberus give me, but there is something other than my personal safety that I have had to consider.

But I will never trade one innocent for another, on that you will just have to trust me," and with that Miranda stood up and began walking towards her room, "forgive me Shepard but I have a difficult day ahead of me tomorrow I need to sleep, goodnight."

Shepard watched her go and wondered what that parting comment had been about, 'no doubt if she wants to tell you she will, but probably not feeling the love right now Shepard as you did just threaten to kill her… oh Garrus I miss you reminding me about my sunny disposition," Shepard thought and turned her mind to what she had planned for the next day while her son was being born.

The next morning they all went their separate ways; Miranda to the clinic, Veetor to make contact.
with an information broker and Shepard to find a way of contacting her mother without alerting anyone else.

Shepard caught a sky car to one of the main shopping and entertainment zones and it was impossible for her not to think of the time she and Liara had spent here, not long ago.

In her timeline she had last slept with, kissed, made love to Liara merely days ago, and yet in this strange time warped world she had woken up in Liara seemed to be with someone else, getting on with her life, and had been for nearly two years.

Every fibre of Shepard's being since the moment she regained consciousness had been screaming at her to run to Liara, she needed Liara to make things right, to make her whole again… but something, a small niggling voice said wait, 'I need to know what's going on with you Liara before I come crashing back into your life... I won't hurt you any more than I already have' she thought and not for the first time.

It felt good to be back in control of her life, her destiny, and walking through the crowds she began to feel more normal and less science experiment. She spent some time picking up light armour to wear immediately and ordering a heavy set and Alliance surplus work wear for delivery to the hotel, whatever happened she was not wearing Harpers tags.

Shepard's next purchase completed her return to normality placing an M-6 Carnifex on her hip and an M96 Mattock on her back. They would do for now, but she would make upgrading her personal arsenal a priority once she got back to work proper.

She kept her baseball cap pulled low over her eyes and all contact to a minimum, then grabbed a sky car and headed for a much shadier part of Illium.

On the journey to Illium Shepard had tried to access her two secure accounts which contained large sums of credits, documentation that would get her in anywhere and with the highest security clearance and her personal database of all the research, data and information they had gathered in their search for the Reaper threat.

As a Spectre she was, would, be expected to work 'outside' any usual systems and so she needed to be self-reliant and her special ops training had instilled in her the need to have back up plans and redundancies so she had always had a highly secure and protected account providing both physical and virtual storage.

It would seem she learned well as no one had found either of these accounts and access to the resources within would allow her to start where she left off, only now her prime target where the Collectors.

But her priority at this moment was a Volus accountant who she had last seen being led away by his Alliance special ops handlers on Arcturus. They hadn't been exactly happy that Shepard had ripped one of their key assets out of his position and the Volus didn't look like he would shape up to be a big fan either.

Shepard had not bothered making an appointment, the offices were for show, Plunes didn't need any work, he was still the trusted and very busy accountant for major Blue Suns merc groups and a couple of state run Batarian Corporations; and no doubt still providing valuable information to the Alliance and to Aria as per Shepard's 'gift' to the pirate queen.

She walked into the outer office and was met by what could only be two security guards, a Batarian was sitting behind a small desk and a Turian was lounging on sofa.
"Get lost you come to the wrong place," the Batarian snarled as Shepard moved further into the room, she stopped with the Turian on her left and without looking knew he was getting to his feet.

She snapped out her left arm level and straight hitting the Turian hard in the throat, cracking what passed for his larynx and crushing his windpipe, before he had a chance to do more than begin to crumple she pivoted to her left and brought her right hand in a hard chop on the side of his neck just where the main artery to his brain passed over hard cartilage cutting off the blood supply completely.

Before he hit the floor she had leapt up onto the desk and kicked the Batarian up and under his chin knocking him out of the chair slamming him into the wall behind, following it up with a stamp to the head as she jumped down of the desk.

Satisfied neither would be in a position to interrupt her dealings with their boss she made her way into Vert Plunes office, at first she couldn't see him but then heard the familiar shoosh and click of the re-breather coming from under the large desk in front of the window.

"Is this any way to greet an old friend," she said in a cheery tone keeping a weather eye on where the Volus may appear, he could always pop up with a weapon, but that really wasn't his style.

"Commander… Shepard… but your… dead" and as he spoke he appeared behind his desk and sat back in his chair, "I, well, if it is you why are you here Earth clan…you have already made my life doubly difficult and dangerous… what more could you possibly want from me." His voice was petulant, whiney but also more than a little scared.

"Ah that's me the gift that just keeps giving," she pulled off her cap and walked to the desk sitting in a chair opposite the very nervous looking accountant. "So how you been keeping, I've had better times … there we're all caught up now to business.

I don't need anything from you, I need you to do something for me, and as a show of good faith I won't threaten to kill you slowly if you don't do it or if you screw it up… what I will say is that I may, just may, return the favour in the future… so long as it passes my personal ethics test."

She waited until he nodded his head slightly; he didn't survive this long in the game he was playing without both recognising and offer he couldn't refuse and one that may just be useful.

"Good, oh but deals off and I will hurt you very badly if you tell anyone about this or even dream in your sleep that I am in fact not dead, just so we're clear," she smiled a hard grin that didn't reach her eyes. He still worked for slavers and murderers even if the intel he was sharing was useful.

"It seems I am destined to be of assistance to you, Commander. I hope you remember how useful I am but to be very honest with you I sincerely wish we had never met."

"You may be surprised to learn I get that reaction a lot. This is what I need you to get done. You have to get a message to my mother that will get her here to Illium to meet with you about some financial stuff to do with me, I don't care make something up, but convincing and so that she comes immediately.

Get the message to her through your intelligence handlers and make sure it's her eyes only." Shepard finished, in truth she really didn't have any idea what bait would get her mother to Illium to talk to some strange double agent come accountant.

Plunes sat for a sometime obviously thinking hard and then said, "would you mother be interested in protecting your reputation Commander?" When Shepard gave a tentative nod he continued, "I may be able to spin a tale of financial misdealing's that seem to lead back to when you were a Spectre,
misuse of Council funds… and I am such a big fan of yours I have found out who is trying to smear your name, do you think that would bring her?"

"Hell Plunes is this the kind of shit you have to dream up for your clients… that may just work… make sure she knows that unless something is done immediately a story will break on the extranet." Shepard could only hope the hook would be strong enough to get her mother to Illium. "I am due to update my… colleagues this evening, where may I contact you to let you know if it has worked." "Yeah I know it feels like we're best bud's right now but I'll contact you, no need for you to do house calls just yet."
Shepard began to leave immediately but as she reached the door she turned and said, "Remember what I said about keeping quiet about me, and that includes both the Alliance and Aria… oh and don't hire any more muscle till my piece of business with you if over." Without waiting for a reply she walked out through the door, pulled her cap back on, blended into the crowds on the street and headed back uptown.

Shepard was sitting on a bench in one of the largest green spaces in the most exclusive resort area of the city, they had been here together, sat on the edge of the lake and dangled their feet in the water, not for long it was pretty cold, but she remembered the laughter, the joy, but only as a memory, there was no joy in her heart or her mind now.

'I don't know how to do this Liara, I need you… but how do I fix all this' she thought to herself feeling the weight of her confusion, anxiety and anger.

Her Omni-tool bleeped on the secure channel that only Miranda and Veetor had access to, it was Miranda, and she sounded tired when she spoke.

"Shepard I have had the surgery everything went without complication, perhaps you would like to visit?"

Would she like to visit, to meet her son, Shepard had no idea, well of course she wanted to, but would she feel any connection, or would her resentment at feeling like this had been forced on her impact on her relationship with the child.

'Well you've never shied away from difficult shit before Shepard so let's get on with this,' she said to herself while to Miranda she said "yes of course, I'll come straight away."

Garrus could hear Liara through the door of her office, her voice cold, hard, commanding; she was the very essence of the Benezia that Garrus had met on Noveria.

"You do not want me as an enemy Lortal you will give me the information I have asked for or I will have your brought to me and I will personally reave and warp your nervous system, do you have any idea how painful and long a death I will make that for you if you stand in my way." Liara was standing in front of a screen her hands playing with a ball of blue biotic energy as if reinforcing her words.

"But L...Lady T'Soni… you have no idea… if the Broker found out I was… he will kill me and my… my family…” Liara cut across his words and pointed a finger at the terrified Salarian on the screen, a gesture that brought Shepard to Garrus's mind.

"If the Broker finds out it will be because of your incompetence I am guaranteeing your painful death if you do not hack into the Broker's systems and find me that information," Liara's voice was
powerful and a slight blue haze lingered around her body, "you have three days Lortel not a moment more." She closed the connection and walked back behind her desk.

"Liara I'm worried about you, this obsession about finding the Shadow Broker base… you know that Shiala is very likely dead already and…"

Garrus's words were cut off as Liara lashed out with her arm sending a biotic wave across the office strong enough to push him back a little and brushing everything from the surface of the desk as she shouted.

"No I will not lose someone else that I care about do not question me," but almost as she was saying the words a look of absolute shock and horror passed across her face and she slumped into the chair.

"Oh Garrus I am so sorry… what am I doing… I don't seem…" she looked at him and tears were in her eyes, he moved to kneel beside her and put his arms around her shoulders.

"I know Liara, I know… but I see less and less of you these days, even when we're alone, the split is growing wider… I'm so afraid one day there won't be any 'you' left," the sadness was clear in his voice. He was, indeed, the only one who Liara showed her other self to, and he could see that beautiful kind and strong woman being taken over by a shadow of her mother.

"It's the only way I know that I can carry on and I have to Garrus I have to," she looked him full in the eyes and he could see the pain and the fear, "if I stop then there is nothing left for me, I have to destroy the being that made it possible for… who was responsible for Shepard's…I miss her every moment Garrus, when will this stop…" and as she leaned into the Turian he felt her body shaking and heavy silent sobs accompanying her tears.

"I know Liara, I know, perhaps you will be able to grieve properly once you've done what you set out to… we'll get it done Liara, just let us all help you," Garrus held her and tried his best to comfort her but he had no faith in his own words.

Without the focus of hunting the Shadow Broker he had no idea how Liara would cope. Problem was the thing that was keeping her functioning and together, at least on the surface, was the very thing destroying who she truly was.

The Illusive Man spoke to the woman on the other end of his comms channel through a haze of smoke and with his usual awe inspiring backdrop.

"You have to be very, very, careful Tasha, if Shepard even gets a hint that we were behind this we will lose her from our cause. But if she reunites with T'Soni our control over her will be weakened." He flicked ash and brought the cigarette to his lips once more.

"She won't give up trying to get T'Soni back, I may not have spent time with her for years but I heard how they were together on Arcturus. The only way is to either make T'Soni unable or unwilling to allow Shepard back in her life. This may accomplish both.

From my sources the Doctor is not stable and completely obsessed with hunting down the Shadow Broker, if we were to help her with that information… well he is a powerful target to go up against… our problems may be solved by the Broker particularly if we can tip him when she is likely to attack." Tasha Mikhailovich gave the Illusive Man a smile.

"Yes that is something we can work on, we don't have the information but it's always possible it could fall into our
possession, but I need more of a guarantee.

Somehow you have to make T'Soni believe Shepard 'woke up' some time ago and has been pursuing other things… including a child with another woman… and Tasha our friend may be more than a little compromised so I need you to remind her just how difficult it would be for her to protect her sister without our help."

"I'll start straight away… perhaps some false vid footage that can be 'discovered' which may also give T'Soni a big enough shock to her system to send her over the edge… and as for Doctor Lawson you need have no fear on that front I can keep her in line."

"See that you do Tasha, don't disappoint me." And he severed the comm link.

Turning he looked at the boiling sun outside the station and wondered if it wouldn't be easier if everyone just did what he asked in the first place as they always ended up doing what he planned in the end… one way or another.
The Clinic was in a very up market area of the City and, to Shepard's surprise, it was Salarian run. She had assumed that Miranda would hold all the same views as Harper, humanity first, best, only.

'Yeah but Cerberus uses non human's when it suits their purposes and particularly when they are looking at disposable assets,' she thought as she walked up to the reception desk.

If the staff at the clinic thought anything about their arrangements were off or curious or downright suspicious no one showed the slightest interest. Miranda and Shepard had booked in false names, untraceable credits and a very private suite, to which Shepard was shown swiftly before she even finished telling the receptionist her 'name'.

Miranda was in a bed by a window, afternoon sunlight lying in shafts across white sheets. Next to the bed was a trolley supporting a transparent box and from where Shepard was standing she could see a very small still baby within.

She unclipped her weapons and removed her armour jacket and walked slowly over to the bed, Miranda's eyes were closed but opened as Shepard drew level to the baby's incubator.

"Hey, how you feeling," Shepard smiled down at Miranda and reached across to squeeze one of her exposed hands.

"Mmm, just a little sleepy from the anaesthetic, but I'll be up and around in a few hours," she smiled and began to sit up a little.

Shepard leaned in closer and helped her to sit up, their cheeks almost touched as she moved back and again she felt some kind of connection between them that was just out of her minds reach.

Looking down at the tiny baby Shepard's stomach gave a lurch. She had always enjoyed meeting and getting to hold babies in the past, she was fond of kids, so was this feeling any different.

She couldn't tell, but what she could feel was an almost overwhelming sense of responsibility and protectiveness to this small vulnerable bundle of life.

"You should pick him up Shepard," Miranda was smiling at her, "he is absolutely fine, strong and healthy."

Shepard said nothing but opened the side of the incubator, reached in and carefully picked up the baby, she held him with one hand supporting his head and upper body and her other hand under his well-padded bottom and lower back.

She brought him up to face her and he seemed to stretch in his sleep, little fists balling and uncurling.

"Hello mister," Shepard said quietly, studying the infant she was holding in her hands, "welcome to the universe, it's a hell of a ride, so you better shape up to meet it." She leaned forward and kissed the tiny forehead.

"You're going to be named for a very brave, honourable, kind and loving man, your grandfather
John Shepard… probably gonna give you a couple of other names as well, history is important in this family so we kinda stick some in our naming ceremonies.” Shepard caught herself smiling and realised she felt more than responsibility and worry, she felt connected to this small fragment of life.

Shepard realised that Miranda had been watching her and as she put the baby back in the incubator she turned to the other woman and said.

"Did you secure a nanny or is it nurse for the baby?” Shepard left her hand next to the baby's face and stroked it gently with one of her fingers.

"Yes I did she is one of the clinic team so comes with a lot of experience in confidential matters and high security rating. One of the reasons I chose this clinic is their reputation for dealing with… sensitive situations involving high profile people… and they are experts in any form of genetic birth defects or malfunctions."

"I thought you said all the scans you had on the baby were all clear?” Shepard asked concerned edging her voice.

"Yes they were, but some tests just can't be done until the baby is born and I wanted to make sure we had the right expertise if we needed it. But as I said earlier he has had a complete all clear."

"So when can the two of you leave?” Shepard stood up straight and moved to the bottom of Miranda's bed.

"Well I could leave in a few hours, but I would like him to just stay overnight, just in case and I'll stay as well. I suggest we come back to the hotel first thing in the morning.” Miranda was now looking much more like herself and began to get out of bed.

"Ok that's the plan then, keep in touch though and anything doesn't feel right don't bother calling just get the hell out and then call me to meet you.” Shepard got a nod of the head from Miranda before she began putting on her armour jacket, picking up her weapons she gave one last look to the incubator, said goodbye to Miranda and left.

She would be spending the evening watching the unedited footage of what happened after the attack on the Normandy and the comprehensive dossier that Veetor was bringing back from the Information Broker that would tell Shepard what had happened to Liara since, including whatever was going on with Shiala.

To say that Veetor was a quick learner denied his obvious talent and inherent ability. Shepard didn't know if Quarian physiology was in any way the same as human but the more she saw him work the more she was reminded of human savants.

He seemed to almost become one with the systems he was working within, almost a computational level of speed and understanding, for the first time Shepard could see how the Quarian's had created the Geth.

She had given him all her security access protocols and he had managed to hack into Arcturus and retrieve all the vid footage and reports relating to the Normandy 'incident', including de-brief interviews with crew and her team.

Shepard began with the recordings of the actual rescue and then right through the timeline including the de-briefings. The footage of Liara showed Shepard exactly how devastated and affected her lover had been and this was backed up by the medical reports from both Alliance and Asari sources.
The true extent of how much Liara had to be supported through the memorial ceremony was clearer in the now unedited footage as was the courage and strength of her crew, although Joker looked as if he was particularly struggling.

As Shepard watched the Alliance footage and then moved onto news vids and surveillance reports a picture unfolded around Liara's life after the Normandy; but something else crystallised for Shepard about the effect that her 'death' had had on her soul mate.

Losing Shepard had nearly destroyed Liara and it wasn't clear to her how much of true recovery the young Asari had made. As time moved forward the surveillance and news vids did indeed show Shiala as a close companion to Liara and a very occasional glimpse of apparent intimacy confirmed that there was something between them.

There were also bugged private conversations between Shiala and a close friend which left no doubt as to the relationship between her and Liara, even some talk of bonding.

Shepard also saw that Garrus was as much a fixture, apart from the social events, as Shiala was. Perhaps he should be her next conversation; Shepard could feel her self-control slipping away and would have jumped a ship to Thessia that night if she didn't need to deal with matters relating to her mother and her son immediately.

Shepard also needed to do some considerable work on her anger management as whenever she saw an image of Shiala she felt murderous and wanted to smash something, anything… she wanted to tear Shiala apart with her bare hands.

What Shepard was studiously avoiding acknowledging was a deeply buried and not very noble feeling towards Liara that was boiling with anger at being betrayed by the woman she had given her heart and soul to… not more than a few months after she was out of the picture… but Shepard would not allow even herself to say a 'bad' word about the love of her life.

The pedestal that Shepard had firmly placed Liara on was holding for now, but somewhere in the back of Shepard's mind she knew there would be a reckoning, as like all pedestals it was only a matter of time before it sank into the sand upon which it was built.

'So you went back to Thessia but after only a few weeks you decided to set up as an information broker, why darling, what's going on… and why the secrecy around a visit to Omega… and the security… I'm missing something,' Shepard said to herself looking at vid footage of Liara attending some gala in the Thessian capital of Larisa.

Liara looked stunning in her long flowing evening dress, she was just as beautiful, but there was something very different, something about the look in her eyes, harder, cold even… 'I promise you Liara, whatever it takes I'll make this right, I'll fix this… fix what I did to you… even if it means you being with someone else.'

Shepard couldn't bare that thought and a huge part of her rebelled against even thinking it, 'but if you truly love someone you have to be able to let them go right… if that is what's best… wasn't that how it worked sometimes', Shepard thought 'yeah but you set people free so they can come back that's how it's supposed to work, but only if it's meant Shepard… only if it's meant to be,' as she finished the thought she closed the vid feed and turned her attention to the rest of the report that Veetor had brought back from the Information Broker.

And there it was the answer to her question and the missing pieces of the puzzle and the information created a cold, hard fury to form and coalesce around a single being… and a new priority was born
of the realisation that the Shadow Broker not only caused the death of her crew, the destruction of her ship, the grief to her soul mate, but that he had already tried to kill Liara several times and had a huge bounty out on her head.

Now here was something Shepard understood completely, this was clear cut, no questions… no second guessing… this fucker was going down and she was going to be the one to do it.

And now she understood what Liara was doing. Liara had started a war with the Shadow Broker as soon as she learned of his involvement with the recovery of her body, and then the destruction of the Normandy.

From the Information Broker's report Liara had proved to be a very skilful and dangerous Information Broker, who also engaged in direct action to wreck business or information deal's that would have maximum impact on the Shadow Broker.

Of course none of this would bring the Broker down and it seems Liara has made no secret of the fact that she was willing to pay anything for the location of the Broker so that she could kill him… a dangerous game to play and a dangerous enemy to choose.

Shepard would not for one moment deny how brave this was but she also knew it was reckless and could only end one way, unless Liara got a huge break, why the hell was Garrus, Shiala for that matter, letting her do this.

And how the hell was she not dead already, you really didn't survive a full bounty from the Shadow Broker, it rarely happened, there was no profit in it… but the resources and information at his disposal should have made it inevitable that at least one attempt would be successful.

Shepard read through the reports of the failed attempts and found small inconsistencies, nothing that would show unless you were looking for something and from a tactical perspective.

It was almost as if there was some kind of shadow protection around Liara that was a final defence, and the more she tried to work out how Liara had survived attempts the more she saw it.

The last report was of the most recent attack and when she read that Shiala had apparently been taken hostage by the Shadow Broker Shepard broke out into a cold sweat… she knew, or she believed she knew what Liara's reaction would be and it would be rash, foolhardy in the extreme and Liara would be ripe for a fatal ambush laid very carefully by the Shadow Broker.

Liara would not rest until she had freed Shiala, not only because of their connection but because of guilt. Shepard had to get to Thessia or to the Shadow Broker.

Shepard began pacing around the apartment, she had to finish her business here, she had to sort out whether to work with Harper or give herself up to the Alliance, whatever she decided she had to end the Collector threat and find out just how connected they were with the Reapers and she had to 'save' Liara from herself.

The weight of all that responsibility was dragging her down into a dark part of herself that was like a black hole of despair and exhaustion and failure. It was filled with all the lives she had failed to save, the lives she had been forced to take, the pain and suffering she had seen and often inflicted on others… it was a place of blood and death and destruction.

She pulled herself away from the edge of the abyss and called up a comms link to Plunes, action she needed to take action, he answered almost immediately.

"Ah Commander, yes I have had contact and your mother and she will be here by late tomorrow
afternoon, she is
somewhere in this area. I am to contact her when she lands at the port." Plunes sounded very pleased
with himself and Shepard had to admit he had delivered exactly what she asked.

"Good, when she contacts you tell her to meet you at your office but I don't want you anywhere near
there. I'll meet her myself." Shepard had a slightly different plan in mind but there was no need to
share it with the accountant.

"Very well, can I assume I am then free to carry on about my business?" Plunes asked in a more
tentative tone.

"Yes I won't be bothering you again… till the next time" Shepard smiled the last half of her sentence
in a more amused tone than a threatening one, damn if she wasn't warming a little to the weasel.

"Well please take no offence Commander if I say I hope that our next meeting will not be for some
considerable time, goodbye Commander… and… good luck." To Shepard's ears the 'good luck'
sounded genuine; maybe they were growing on each other.

"Veetor are you busy, I have another job for you?" she called towards the young Quarian's room and
he appeared within a few moments.

"What do you need Commander," he said as he walked into the room.

Shepard didn't sleep again that night, a few naps on the sofa while she was waiting for information to
come through from contacts, Veetor worked with her through the night, he had set up a small,
portable but very effective VI assisted network in his room and a few times Shepard joined him to
run through information of watch vid footage.

She hadn't slept on the shuttle journey here, so by her estimation her last good night's sleep was
nearly two years ago, with Liara lying next to her, and Shepard was now feeling a little ragged
around the edges.

Miranda arrived back at the apartment early in the morning and while the nurse was being settled into
the last spare room, and the 'nursery' was being set up, Shepard took advantage of the break to sit in
a chair looking out across the cityscape with her son in her arms.

Her mind was on the next couple of calls that she was expecting in when she felt the little body in the
crook of her arm stir, looking down she saw clear signs of pressure building up in the small face that
would soon be accompanied by wails and screams.

"So let's see how good a pair of lungs you have little guy," she smiled and her comment was almost
cut off by a strong wail from the now open mouth.

"Is he due a feed," she shouted across the room, Shepard had done a fair amount of babysitting for
friends and relatives and tended towards a functional approach to the smaller charges. They either
needed food, changing or affection, worked every time in her experience.

As she watched the small, wrinkled face contorted in concentration as the baby sucked on its bottle
Shepard felt just the edge of a feeling that she had only ever before found with Liara, a hint of peace,
but as quickly as she felt it so evaporated.

"Shepard you have a call coming in from Thessia do you want to take it in Veetor's room?" it was
Miranda speaking from just inside the Quarian's room.
"Yes," Shepard stood up and carefully passed the baby over the nurse with a smile of thanks, "I'll take the call on my own thanks" Shepard said as she walked into the room.

Once alone Shepard accepted the incoming call and when the connection was established a very surprised looking Asari matron scrutinised Shepard and said.

"Is this some kind of sick joke, sadly Commander Shepard is dead and when I find out what…” Shepard held up and a hand a said firmly but in a friendly tone.

"Vaninnth it is me and there is one way I can prove it, do you believe that Shepard would have kept her word about not telling a soul about the difficulties she helped you out with when you first met her, it was after she was made a Spectre?"

The Asari looked suspicious but answered, "no the Commander I knew, that we all knew, was a person of integrity."
"Then if I tell you that I dealt with a matter of blackmail to protect your reputation, that saved your career with the Council and status on Thessia… involving a very disreputable mercenary leader who you unfortunately got tangled up with in a web of sexual…." Vaninnth T'Joan cut across Shepard in a voice that conveyed a high level of embarrassment.

"Enough Commander, yes I… well as you know I was extremely grateful for your help… one mistake hundreds of years of service. But how this is possible what is going on Commander."

"First I believe congratulations are in order, your promotion from press secretary to Councilor Tevos's private secretary well done, and as for my return… well that will all become clear soon, it's a matter of science and luck.

But I have a huge favour to ask of you and also a request that you do not tell anyone that I am alive, I will be making that known but I have good reason to remain… incognito for a little while longer." Shepard waited for the answer this was taking a risk but she trusted T'Joan and she really had saved her from a very nasty little sting operation run by a very nasty specimen of criminal pond life.

"I will do anything I can to help you Commander and you have my word this will remain private between us," Vaninnth still looked a little shocked but Shepard was preparing herself to be confronted with that reaction later today when she met her mother.

"Your sister is Matriarch T'Joan who runs the T'Soni estate on Thessia?" Vaninnth nodded and Shepard continued, "I need to know if your sister would be willing to help me but I don't want Doctor T'Soni to be involved yet."

"My sister is devoted to Liara she would not do anything that would hurt her or be disloyal to her in any way," Vaninnth paused and then went on "perhaps it would be safer if you were to tell me what you needed to know or arrange and I could try to find out myself."

It was the offer that Shepard had wanted but felt was unreasonable to ask for "that would be really helpful, you're on Thessia now aren't you?"

"Yes Councilor Tevos is here for a series of meetings with the Matriarch's, I was planning on visiting my sister at some stage."

"If you could make that sooner rather than later that would help me, I need to know Doctor T'Soni's state of mind, whether she has any plans to conduct an attack on the Shadow Broker, if she has suddenly received information leading to his location, that kind of thing… and I need you to get a message to someone… Garrus Vakarian I need him to contact me on the secure channel I am
sending you, but you must stress that he keeps this information to himself until he has spoken to me," Shepard keyed in the details of her OT secure channel into the console, "you can contact me on that line as well."

"Very well Commander, I will do my best, and I will make the visit at the latest within two cycles," Vaninnth gave Shepard a smile and added "I am very pleased that you are not… dead Commander, I believe we will be relying on you again as we once did." Vaninnth T'Joan gave Shepard an Asari parting blessing and Shepard returned it then closed the connection.

Her father had always said if you can help someone along the way always do it and she always tried to and not with any thought of repayment but living that way did seem to open doors and oil the wheels especially when she was in a tight spot.

Veetor had hacked into the security footage at the port and linked it to their OT's. Both she and Miranda were at the port and had been for most of the day watching not for the arrival of her mother but for anyone else who may be turning up to interfere in their reunion.

Shepard was sure she could trust Plunes, but she would never bank her life on it, and there were plenty of other ears who could have heard the arrangements so she was not taking any chances.

She had Veetor monitoring the security cameras at the accountant's office and the streets around it. They were all set and her plan was to intercept her mother before she even left the port.

"Shepard I have eyes on a passenger coming through the diplomatic gates that looks very much like Captain Shepard," Miranda's voice came through her ear piece, "seems like a healthy distrust of stranger's runs in the family."

Shepard smiled to herself and began to make her way to intercept her mother from the gates at the furthest end of the passenger hall.

"I don't think she's alone… yes she is coming through with a man… no its Councilor Anderson," Miranda's voice again and this time it sounded as if she was hurrying to keep up with her targets.

"OK that's not a problem I trust Anderson, in fact he's a bonus… I see them, Miranda get to them now and get them to the room," as she spoke Shepard began to weave her way through the crowd, they had booked one of the small private waiting rooms to give them privacy.

The comm between then was open and she heard Miranda say "Captain Shepard, Councilor Anderson I know you are here to meet a certain Volus accountant I wonder if I may speak to you somewhere a little more private… I've booked a room just over here."

Shepard could just about here her mother's voice protesting a little and Anderson asking who the hell she was and what was going on but it sounded like they were going with Miranda.

When Shepard walked into the waiting room and pulled off her cap she was facing both her mother's and Anderson's backs who were both questioning Miranda as to what was going on.

"Mum it's me," Shepard said in as firm and controlled voice as she could, memories of her mother's grief fresh in her mind.

They both spun around on the spot and for a fraction of a second it felt as if they were all frozen in time and then her mother rushed at her and enfolded her in a huge bear hug. Then stepped back still holding onto her daughters shoulders and searched her face.
As they had previously agreed Miranda left the room and would meet them at the sky car.

"Is it really you Liddy… really…? I can't believe… but how long have you been back" her mother's voice was shaky and tears shone in her eyes.

"I think it's me… I worried I was some kind of clone or glorified AI but that was the woman that put me back together… I've seen the reports… could have watched the vid of the operations if I wanted nightmares… feels like me… still hate Cerberus… even if the bastards put me back together" Shepard glanced passed her mother to Anderson and saw he was smiling.

"Oh why have you still got those awful scars Liddy, why did Doctor Lawson allow them to survive your reconstruction," but her mother was smiling.

Something clicked in Shepard's mind and she said "Hang on a minute… how long have I been back, you knew that was Doctor Lawson… you knew what was happening?"

Hannah Shepard looked at her daughter with concern and pulled her into another hug, "not for sure we didn't and it was only Admiral Hackett, David and I who saw the reports. We couldn't act on it either, we couldn't, can't compromise the source we have deep in Cerberus.

And we didn't know if it was some kind of misinformation or if it was a plan to put an imposter back into your life… but I hoped, and we only had confirmation that it had worked and they were going to revive you fully a month ago." Shepard relaxed into her mother's arms, this finally felt real, and she was back in her own life.

"I'm so sorry mum, for all the pain and grief, I saw the vids..." Hannah pulled back a little so she could look her daughter in the face.

"Don't you ever apologise for doing your duty and trying to save your crew Lydia, you will never have to apologise to me I am so proud of you," Shepard was pulled back into a final hug and then they parted.

"Shepard what can I say… your unstoppable" Anderson had come over to join them and slapped Shepard on the back smiling broadly, "but there is going to be a hell of a lot of paperwork to do when you eventually come back home," Shepard noticed the 'eventually' and guessed the implications of that tiny little word.

"Come on let's get to my hotel apartment I think I may have something to share with you that might actually be a surprise."

Once Hannah Shepard had gotten over the shock of getting her daughter back from the dead she couldn't imagine anything else that would surprise her, but that was before she was confronted with a two day old baby, and also her grandson.

"How dare you steal DNA from my daughter, steal a child from my daughter, what kind of monster are you," Hannah Shepard was furious and she didn't pull any punches when she confronted Miranda in the Doctor's room.

Miranda did her best to explain as she had to Shepard but Hannah was having none of it.

"No Doctor Lawson I will not accept any excuse that you may have dreamt up to make this right in your head, you behaved appallingly, and the only reason your still standing and not being thrown in
some deep brig of my own construction is that you brought my daughter back from the dead… but that doesn't give you a free pass with me."

Shepard knew better than to try to stop her mother from having her say, she had warned Miranda and also warned her that it would be over quicker if she just took it and didn't respond. Miranda seemed to have taken the advice as Shepard could only hear one voice from the bedroom.

They had explained the process and her mother seemed to accept the baby, even going so far as to say he did look very like Shepard had when she was born.

When her mother came back into the room a slightly nervous Shepard and Anderson were standing looking out the window hoping that the Captains fury would not somehow find them wanting in any of this, but thankfully she seemed to have run out of steam and now only wanted to sit and hold her grandchild and look at her newly returned daughter.

When all three of them were sitting down Shepard got straight to the point.

"Mum I need you to take the baby back to Earth and have him stay with gramma and pa until things get a bit clearer for me, do you think they would look after him, the nurse goes with him and can stay as long as they need her or until they make other arrangements?" it was the only plan Shepard had, because she felt that would be the safest place for him.

"Of course they will… you're not thinking of having him adopted are you Liddy?" Hannah had cried when Shepard told her she had named the baby for her father and seemed to have really taken the little mite to her heart already.

"No not at all, but I still have a fight on my hands, and I have to sort things out with Liara," Shepard couldn't hide the pain she felt whenever she thought of Liara and her mother could always read her like a book.

"Now don't you jump to any conclusions about these rumours of her with someone else, if I know one thing I know that she loves you, we nearly lost her when we lost you Liddy… anything she's has had to do to keep going is fine by me… so you give that girl a chance." Her mother's voice was soft mainly because the baby was asleep in her arms but Shepard had no doubt about the firmness of the sentiment and her mother's instruction.

"Yeah I know, I can't say it's not painful but I get it, I think, anyway I have to see her but she is all crazy shit on getting to the Shadow Broker and if I don't do something she may just get herself killed before I get a chance to… well you know… win her back or something." Shepard suddenly felt like a love sick teenager and a bit embarrassed in front of both her mother and Anderson and it was he who answered her.

"Yes we know she's been a target of his for some time now Shepard, I've tried to do what I can to help, and you know Garrus has stayed with her, Wrex sent trusted clan members as part of her security… but her luck will run out and there is no way she or you," Anderson said pointedly looking at Shepard, "will take the Broker down, you need to get her to change her course and you need to concentrate on the Collector threat."

"I'm sure once she knows you back you'll be able to get her to stop and then you have to get her to work with the Asari priestess's and doctors to heal the damage that breaking your bond caused when you died… I have been so worried about her but she won't listen to anyone apparently." Her mother's face showed real concern and her eyes showed Shepard that Liara had been accepted into her family as much as baby John had been.
"Well I'll try… but there's a bigger question I need answered… I don't want to work with Harper and Cerberus, I want to come back to the Alliance and take down the Collectors." Shepard was looking from one to the other and this time it was her mother who answered.

"Things aren't as straightforward within the Alliance or the Council right now; there are power struggles going on and although Admiral Hackett is still in charge there is an enormous amount of resistance to believing the Reapers are real.

And I'm afraid if you came back you would be months before you were reinstated, checked out, security de-briefings… and even after all that to get resources to chase an unknown enemy… well" Hannah's sadness and frustration showed in her voice and her body language.

"We're sorry to have to ask you this Shepard," Anderson spoke quietly "but we also need you to stay at Cerberus and find out as much as you can about Harper and his operations, you would be in a unique position, and it's true if you want to go after the Collectors… and don't get me wrong Admiral Hackett, your mother and I all feel that's what is needed, then you are going to have to use Cerberus resources." Shepard also sensed his sadness and frustration.

"If those are my orders sir, ma'am then consider it done," Shepard smiled at both of them but inside she felt a huge pang of loss, she wanted to go home, to the Alliance but if this is what her duty demanded she would not shirk it.

"It won't be for long" her mother smiled across at her "take them down, steal anything of any use from Cerberus then come straight home."

"Slightly amended version of the usual family motto… get in, get the job done, kill anyone that gets in the way," Shepard smiled at her mother she knew that they wouldn't ask her to, in effect, go rogue if there was any other way.

The following day saw Hannah Shepard, baby John and the nurse heading for Earth on a priority Alliance transport which would drop Councilor Anderson at the Citadel on the way and Miranda back to her lab and Cerberus.

It also saw a fully equipped Shepard, Veetor and a mixed squad of Asari commando's, Turian ex-military special forces and Krogan bounty hunters heading for Thessia in a long range shuttle for a rendezvous with Garrus and Vaninnth T'Joan and the start of operation Shadow Broker and Liara.
Chapter 25

Chapter 25

The trip to Thessia took half a day and she spent the time speaking with each member of the squad she had put together. They had come highly recommended and all their security clearances had been triple checked which meant she didn't have any part time mercs or pirates to worry about.

A few of the Asari commando's Shepard had worked with before and one was even a survivor from the Normandy. Shepard had only revealed her identity once they had been hired and it hadn't seemed to put anyone off, on the contrary, Shepard's reputation had even calmed the unease about the secrecy of the 'job'.

She had hired a commercial long haul shuttle, more suited to carrying cargo, but it was all she could get hold of at short notice, it was fast but naked, it had no firepower. The plan was to see what ship Liara might have available or find something more suitable for hire on Thessia.

Shepard's private OT channel bleeped into life just as they were making their approach to the Larisa space port for her meeting with Vaninnth T'Joan.

"Commander," it was Vaninnth and she looked and sounded extremely worried, "I have just had a conversation with my sister and it appears Doctor T'Soni has just set off with her troops to confront the Shadow Broker, but she refused to tell anyone the destination until they were secure en-route with a comms blackout."

"Dammit, this is exactly what I was worried about," Shepard began to make her way to the cockpit to speak to her pilot, "I'm going to head for the T'Soni estate and find out what I can, I won't mention that you and I have been talking if that would make things difficult with your sister?" Shepard's mind was racing everywhere and particularly to scenario's where Liara was walking into a diverse range of ambush situations.

"Thank you for you discretion Commander but I just alerted Seninnth that you were on your way to Thessia she seemed pleased, I will let her know you're on your way to the estate."

Shepard had made it to the pilot's side and gave the order to head for the T'Soni estate and to put the shuttle down as close to the main house as possible. Shepard was cold with fear for her young, brave but reckless love.

Before the shuttle had properly landed Shepard had jumped from the doorway and was heading at a jog across the lawn towards the house where an Asari Matriarch, who she assumed was Seninnth T'Joan, and Doctor Kasumi Goto were waiting.

"Matriarch, Kasumi what happened and why don't you know where she went," Shepard wasted no time as she got within speaking distance but noticed the look of shock on both their faces. 'I'm going to have to remember they all thought I was dead,' Shepard thought ruefully.

"Sorry Commander it's just a bit of a shock… well Liara had a private contact through her own secure channel that gave her the current location of the Shadow Broker, but given the recent security breaches she decided to have a comms blackout and so I, we have no idea where they were headed," Kasumi sounded anxious and continued, "I tried, Garrus tried and the Matriarch tried to persuade her that this was a bit to coincidental… but she said it was an absolutely trustworthy source."
"We have been trying to track the ship, I have asked for help from Councilor Tevos, and Doctor Goto has been trying to hack into Liara's secure feed in her office, I'm not sure what else we can do." The Matriarch was much harder to read, but Shepard did see worry and an edge of fear in her eyes.

"I have a tech expert who can help, Kasumi meet Veetor'Nara, Veetor go with Kasumi and get access to that message… anything that will tell us where she's headed."

"Matriarch as you can see my transport leaves a little to be desired do you have anything that would match what Liara is using, I presume she has a frigate of some description?"

"Yes Commander, under the circumstances I see no reason why you shouldn't use the second frigate, I will get it ready and get your squad set up on board, I will be coming with you." As she finished talking Matriarch T'Joan began walking towards Shepard's squad who had now disembarked the shuttle.

Shepard was left in no doubt that the Matriarch would be coming whatever Shepard's opinion may have been.

It had been over three hours, Shepard had wandered around the house waiting… waiting… waiting. She was fit to explode, cold with fear for Liara's safety, frustrated she couldn't just get on with doing what she did best.

She found herself once again standing outside Liara's office looking in at Kasumi and Veetor who were trying to work their tech magic to find something… anything that would give them a clue as to where the trap had been set.

Looking to her right once again at what she knew was Liara's bedroom door, this time she walked towards it and went inside.

She couldn't really 'feel' Liara here, it was clearly her room, but not truly inhabited. Liara's apartment on the Citadel gave a much better insight into its resident's personality. This was sumptuous by comparison, elegant, with Liara's possessions and art scattered around but it didn't feel 'personal'.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt stop as she found herself standing at the bottom of a large an unmade bed; she saw the indent in the pillow from Liara's head.

Shepard was trying hard to keep an image from her mind but it crashed its way in with a force that almost physically rocked her. Liara and Shiala together, in that bed, having sex, making love, joining… whatever they named it Shepard saw something in her mind's eye that ripped her heart out.

She was surprised that she hadn't been thrown into her usual murderous rage when she thought about Shiala, but this feeling was a deep, deep sadness, it was hollow, painful and raw. Shepard moved to the side of the bed and sat on its edge, she picked up the indented pillow and brought it to her face and breathed in that familiar scent.

She buried her face in the pillow and let the feeling of despair and loss and hurt wash through her, deep sobs shook her body, but no tears, her despair seemed to powerful even for tears.

Shepard had no idea how long she sat there but she became aware of someone in the room, it was Matriarch T'Joan who had walked in and stood facing Shepard's hunched form on the bed.

"You must not judge her until you know everything Commander," the Matriarch's voice was gentle but with an edge of steel.
"I know, I can't imagine… I've seen reports and vid footage and… I know what happened had a
terrible impact on her… and with Asari relationships… well losing a partner… inevitable… in the
end people move on… I'm trying to be glad that she found someone…" the Matriarch stepped
forward and held up a hand to cut Shepard off and said.

"You must not think that what happened with Shiala is anything of consequence for Liara. And I am
not sure that Liara was truly aware of how much she was being manipulated. Commander Liara was
and I believe is still joined with you in love to the depth of a bondmate.

But she had to find a way to cope and she has constructed a version of herself using her mother as a
template. This is truly worrying, Mr Vakarian and I are probably the only people who can see what
this is doing to her, you must help her, and I believe you are the only one who can." Seninnth T'Joan
was unable to hide her worry and fear from Shepard this time.

"We have to find her and keep her alive first," Shepard said her words weighing heavy on her heart.
"Commander," it was Kasumi's voice from the office, "Commander I've got something."
Shepard stood immediately, throwing the pillow back onto the bed, and followed the Matriarch out
of the room.

The frigate had run at the limits of its FTL drive for the entire trip and as soon as it emerged from the
relay in the Osun
system Shepard cranked up the speed again for the run to the Faryar system the planet of Alingon.

Shepard was once again in the debt of her friend Garrus Vakarian as without his short, coded
message to Kasumi they would probably never have found the destination of what, Shepard was
convinced, was the ambush. Somehow he had circumvented Liara's comms shut down, and he had
sent the short burst directly to Kasumi's private channel.

"So what's the deal with the interference," Shepard asked her pilot and Kasumi as they stood in the
cockpit watching the planet loom larger and larger as they approached.

"Only our environmental scanner is operational and it indicates high concentrations of active
periclase in both the core and the crust of the planet which is interfering with scans and broadcasts, in
effect Shepard there are no communications in or out, and scans are inoperative." Kasumi said as she
checked more reports from the science console.

"So we go in completely blind, but they can't see us either?" Shepard asked and Kasumi nodded.
Shepard opened a ship wide comm link.

"Ground teams make ready in the cargo bay, we are on approach and will hit groundside in T minus
seven minutes," Shepard placed a hand on her pilots shoulder, she had worked with the young Asari
before and trusted her skill and judgement. "Get us as close as possible Malania then keep the ship
safe, move to another location if you need to but keep your eyes peeled for our return."

"Aye, aye Commander," Shepard smiled inwardly at the young Asari's use of Alliance language,
picked up when she served on the Normandy; she was one of the survivors of the attack.

When she got to the cargo bay they were under a minute before touchdown and her squad of just
over thirty were all 'locked and loaded for bear', she thought smiling to herself as another of her
father's mashed up sayings came to mind.

"Commander, I need to tell you that I have called in some help from a friend and I will wait here for
those troops to arrive so that we can coordinate a little better," Matriarch T'Joan said, "I alerted them
before we left Thessia and their ETA should be within an hour."
"Ah, the shadow protection," Shepard said quietly almost to herself and when the Matriarch looked questioningly at her she continued, "I'll explain later, but this isn't the first time you've called in help is it Matriarch.

Who should I be looking out for so I don't confuse them with the Shadow Brokers men?" Shepard asked.

"They are all Asari commandos' their commander is Liselle Lidanya and suggest I link her through on our secure channel?" The Matriarch had given nothing away about whom the commando's belonged to but Shepard had no time to think about anything other than finding Liara right now.

"Yes we're using that as the mission channel, let's hope we won't need the help but if we do I'll take anything that's on offer," with that Shepard turned to face the doors and felt a bump as the frigate hit the ground, with a swoosh the door was open and she led her team towards the only obvious entrance to the facility they could see.

They had had no time to prepare in any real way for the mission, Shepard had intended to do some training with the squad, split them into teams and make sure they functioned as a cohesive unit, but she would have to rely on their experience and ability to adapt on the battlefield.

She had split them into three teams, and a mix of commandos, Turian Special Forces and Krogan hunters. Shepard would lead one, and she would have Kasumi with her, Evictus the highest ranking Turian ex-officer on the team would lead another with Senna V'Siere, a very experienced Asari commando Captain taking the last team.

When they discussed the mission plan on the flight over they realised it was very simple, find the fighting, they would have to try to hack into systems to get some working knowledge of the complex they were walking into, and be prepared to meet high resistance from well trained and experienced troops.

Shepard speculated and the other agreed, that the most likely plan for the ambush would allow only light resistance when Liara and her team 'forced' their way into the complex; a breadcrumb trail would lead them deep inside to where the Shadow Broker was 'waiting'.

Once beyond the point of no return and in a well-planned kill zone they would face a prepared and heavily defended position whilst the trap would snap closed behind them when the force of troops Liara's team would have passed without interference mobilised.

So the plan was… simple… find out where all the noise and fighting was as quickly as possible. But on the way pick up as much intel as possible and lay some ordinance to protect their escape route.

They would use stealth as far as they could to give them the element of surprise at least until they jumped into the fight.

They had no resistance on entering the complex but found a handful of what looked like dead Shadow Broker troops, enough to make it feel real, 'certainly real enough for these poor bastards sacrificed as window dressing, Shepard thought coldly as they moved further inside.

"Evictus you check out the this section secure and hold, protect our extraction area, and make sure it's only friends who get past you" Shepard received a nod of agreement from Evictus, they needed all the firepower they could get but it would be pointless if they had no way to get out.

"Senna with me, Kasumi as soon as you see a likely comms or security console let me know and we'll wait while you hack into it, sure wish I knew what the layout of this place was."
They has moved from the entrance and began working their way up a long corridor which curved in a gently bend. It was carved out of the rock of the mountain the facility was set into giving it a tunnel like appearance although it was fully lit and with air units hanging from the ceiling.

Shepard led her team along one wall on one side of the corridor while Senna led hers on the other, it was Senna who raised a hand to indicate they should hold position and an instant later Shepard heard what had prompted her caution.

From somewhere around the bend ahead they could hear voices in conversation, two, sounded Turian, relaxed, stationary.

Shepard motioned to Senna to move up a couple of her commandoes who could take the two guards out using stealth but Shepard made it clear she wanted at least one of them alive.

Three minutes later they received the all clear from the two Asari's who had been sent to deal with the Guards and when Shepard got to the scene she saw both were alive but unconscious.

Shepard started slapping the nearest Guard around the face until he came around and although he was still groggy she got him standing up and stood toe to toe, her eyes hard, cold, and determined.

"You don't want to fuck with me soldier, this will go well for you if you answer my questions quick and honest… if not I will take the time to hurt you now despite my obvious need for speed." She could see in his eyes his attempts at working out if there was an angle and whether he could find a chance of surviving.

"Wake the other one up," she said over her shoulder, and one of the team got the other Turian on his feet. Shepard pulled her pistol out, took a step back and pointed it at the head of the first Turian.

"So which one of you is going to answer my questions and which one is going to get a face full of hot metal?" Shepard looked hard into the eyes of both men to ram home the point, but neither one said anything.

"Ok have it your way, cut their throats let's not risk giving away that we're here with too much noise," Shepard stepped back and two of the Turian's on her team stepped forward, she turned and began walking away when, as she expected, both her prisoners spoke almost in unison.

"Alright… but the Broker will kill us if he finds out we helped", "What do you want to know".

"Draw me a map of the complex, show me where the ambush is, how many troops and where they are deployed, and where the Broker will be." Shepard waited while they gave her and Senna as they answered the questions.

The complex had two entrances, there was another that mirrored this one coming in from the left, they both lead into a large working area giving access to offices, living accommodation and a central comms room which is where the Guards said visitors went to speak to the Shadow Broker.

The trap had closed on Liara's team as soon as they reached the main area, with Shadow Broker troops taking cover in the rooms leading off the main area leaving little protection or cover for those caught in the ambush.

"What about those two," Senna asked as they prepared to move out.

"Knock them out with a heavy sedative we can't spare anyone to babysit them," Shepard said, she had never had any intention of killing them but sometimes the fear of instant death was the only thing that loosened a stubborn tongue.
Shepard and Senna formulated a plan as they moved, now with more certainty towards the fire fight; Shepard would punch a hole through the outer ring and link up with Liara's team and Senna would take up position behind the ambush line and try to keep the escape route open.

They were now approaching the edge of the fighting and directly in front of them were a line of Shadow Broker troops behind a makeshift barrier that had been pulled across the end of the corridor.

"This is the position you need to hold Senna, this will be our route out, take them out quietly and continue to fire so that it looks as if this position is still intact," Shepard watched as a mix of commando and special forces troops moved forward and in one movement killed the ten troops firing from the barrier.

They seamlessly took up position on the barrier and started firing well over the heads of Liara's team.

"You three, sniper rifles and take out enemy troops, the rest keep firing over the top.″ Shepard heard Senna give out her instructions as she and her team moved passed through a gap in the barrier and began working their way towards the main fight.

The deception wouldn't last long but it would give Shepard's extraction team a chance to get as close as possible to Liara's position leaving as short a run as possible. From the barrier she could see they had barricaded themselves as best they could towards the far end of the area.

Then she saw Liara and another Asari at a door within the area they were holding it looked as if they were trying to get in the room and if the intel from her prisoners was accurate that would be the main comms room where the Shadow Broker would be found.

The level of noise was ear piercing, the sound reverberating off the rock walls that formed the huge cavern, even though Shepard had put her helmet back on. Senna was spotting Broker troops for Shepard and her team which had enabled them so far to take down two groups using grenades thrown into their positions.

Flashing of plasma weapons, shimmering of biotics, zipping and pinging of hot metal from a multitude of weapons all adding to the confusion and frenetic activity that was a full blown fire fight. The smell, the noise, the heat, stress, excitement, adrenaline… all so familiar to Shepard and she no longer had any fear that she would freeze in battle.

This was as familiar as breathing and she dropped into her familiar state of total concentration, every part of her, every atom in her body was now tuned to being just one thing… marine, with an objective, nothing would stop her except death itself, and she had even beaten that once.

They were now on the edge of the open space and the only thing between them and Liara's team was a fifty yard dash, but they needed to get contact otherwise they would be seen as the enemy and most likely get cut to pieces from both sides.

Kasumi had been trying all combinations without success and then the Shepard spotted Garrus who had taken a slightly elevated position and was picking off enemy troops with his trusted M-98 Widow.

Shepard took off her helmet and then fired a shot to get Garrus's attention and as she saw him taking up a line of sight on her, she prayed he took a proper look before squeezing the trigger.

She saw him stop look over his scope, back into the scope and then he lowered his rifle. Shepard made a hand gesture to her OT and again waited, watching Garrus work his own OT.

"Shepard… is that really you… what the fuck are you… never mind dumb question… what do you
need me to do," Garrus's voice loud and clear into her comm link and she smiled.

"We have a path out, for the moment, and they don't know we're here yet, but we need to get across to you, so we can start blasting our way out together." Shepard said and continued, "Senna on my mark start to take out the Brokers troops," Shepard knew that as soon as her other team gave away their position they would become a target but there was nothing else for it, they needed the cover and the distraction.

"Garrus are your team ready to cover our arse?" Shepard said looking across to his position. "On your mark Shepard."
She counted everyone in and on 'Go' her team ran for the relative safety of the defensive position, which also meant into kill zone that was the ambush.

Liara had known it was a risk, known in all certainty it was a trap when they met little resistance on the way in, but that rational part of her held no sway with the rage and pain that seemed to control all her decisions since Shiala had been captured.

As her team did their best to fortify their position she would still not give up the hope that Shiala and the Shadow Broker were here within her reach. She left Garrus to organise the defence while she forced her way into the room she had been told would hold all she sought.

She entered the room alone, they needed every gun they had to protect their position, and without giving the sound of the door locking behind her a second thought she moved swiftly towards the imposing figure rising out of a large console at the very end of the room.

A deep, synthesized voice greeted her as she drew closer to the console.

"Congratulations Doctor T'Soni for following my instructions so well. You have been a small problem but the game is over and you lose." Now that Liara was close she could see the 'figure' before her was merely a holographic interface.

"Where is Shiala what have you done with her?" Liara's voice was filled with rage and venom her body glowed blue with biotic energy.

"She is proving to be an amusing pet, it is not comfortable for her, but she tolerates pain very well Doctor and you can take full responsibility for her situation. You are going to die here but her pain and suffering will go on, well how long do you Asari live, please take that as my gift to you." The mechanical voice was unable to relay any sense of his feeling but Liara could hear his malice and the taunting through his words.

"I am not finished Broker I will find you and…." He cut her off and said.

"Oh I think not Doctor T'Soni, even if you troops can break out of my little trap you will die in this room, when I am finished with you I will set off the explosives I have planted, I will make absolutely sure you will be no further threat to me.

But perhaps there is time to send you on your way with some good news, perhaps it will make your passing easier to know that Commander Shepard is alive and has been for some time. Strange that she did not bother to thank you for saving her from the Collectors, perhaps she has been too busy with her family, perhaps knowing that you had found someone else she was able to do the same."

As he was speaking images flashed up on the screen behind him and all the rage and hatred and focus Liara had been feeling melted away as she saw Shepard walking along some street with a very attractive woman who was obviously pregnant.
Then more images of Shepard inside what looked like a hospital bedroom reaching over and holding the woman and then holding a baby.

"Lies these are lies, you have faked the images, this… no…" Liara felt a rush of nausea, pain, despair; she was no longer in control, her mind frozen.

"And why would I bother Doctor T'Soni, but it makes no difference, you will never know but you will take those images with you into death. You really should not have…." He continued speaking but Liara was no longer listening.

A deep survival instinct took control and she began to run back to the exit door, when she couldn't get it open she looked for cover moving towards one of the many work consoles that lined the walls, then realised she had no idea where explosive devices might be placed.

It all seemed to happen at once a flash of light, out of the corner of her eye she saw the door crashing off its hinges; her biotics threw up a barrier and then blackness.

Shepard had enough time to see where Liara was standing before the explosion knocked her backwards and the wall of dust, smoke and vaporised rock blew out of the doorway.

The Krogan and Asari who had been standing next to her held their feet and continued as long as they could to throw a biotic barrier around the disappearing figure of Liara T'Soni. As quickly as she had been knocked down Shepard was once again on her feet, and with her two companions made their way into the room.

"Get her out of here", Shepard was already picking up chunks of rock and pieces of shattered equipment.

"Stand back Commander we can use our biotics it will be quicker and safer," the big Krogan battle master said as he reached her side.

Reluctantly Shepard moved back and as she did her OT flashed into life.

"Commander we are now taking heavy fire, one dead and three wounded," it was Senna and Shepard could hear just the edge of stress in her voice.

"Evictus move down to support Senna's squad at the barrier we will be evacuating our position shortly." "Affirmative Commander," Evictus's voice came loud and clear over the comms.

Shepard focused her attention on the battle still raging outside the room and ducked behind cover to find Garrus.

"As soon as we get Liara out, we make a run for the barrier, we'll assign our most powerful biotics to give us some protection and we take our chances." Shepard said to Garrus as they fired around the cover that was being continually eaten away by round after round fired from almost every direction in front and to the sides of them.

"Agreed," Garrus responded, flinching as a piece of metal hit his barrier at eye level, he focused his attention on where the shot had come from lined up the shot and waited a split second until his target popped out to take another shot.

Garrus squeezed the trigger and his Widow did the rest blowing a huge hole in the head of the Turian in his sights.

"Commander two shuttles have landed to the side of the mountain, it looks like you have more company," Malania's anxious voice sounded in Shepard's suit comm.
"Copy that," Shepard said and then turned to Garrus "more Broker troops on the way, looks like they are going to come in through the other entrance, down that corridor." Shepard indicated the only other entrance into the heart of the complex.

"And just when I thought our day couldn't get any worse," Garrus said still lining up shots with his rifle.

"I need three powerful biotics to me now" Shepard called through her OT, the noise of the battle made it impossible to hear what anyone was saying from anything more than a couple of feet.

Within a minute she had been joined by two commandos and one battle master from her team and two commandos from Liara's team. Not wanting to weaken their position any more than she had to she picked the battle master and one commando from each team.

"Right, one of you will give us barrier protection while we fight our way to the entrance of that corridor, we'll work our way around this back wall, once we get there I need you to bring the ceiling or walls down to block it, any questions." Shepard got nods of understanding from her squad and she turned to Garrus.

"Whatever happens Garrus I need you to..." Garrus turned and smiled at her as he cut her off.

"Yes Shepard I will do everything in my power to get her out and keep her safe," Shepard returned the smile and gripped his shoulder briefly before snapping on her helmet and moving out her squad following close behind her.
Shepard tried to move her right hand, tried to flex her fingers, something, was that some movement? Starting again she tried lifting her arm, feeling resistance, but she kept sending the message to move down organic and cybernetic pathways even though they felt burnt out.

She focussed all the attention she had left, after the monumental effort to keep breathing, on moving her damn arm.

Time had no relevance for Shepard in this tomb, this living hell, so she had no idea how long she had been trying when something seemed to give. Her arm jumped upwards as whatever had been pinning it down gave way, but with the movement came a searing, hot, flash of pain which pulsed across her shoulders and up into her neck.

Absolute exhaustion now flooded her system and she felt herself drifting once again away from the darkness, the pain, the confusion, despite her best efforts to fight it.

Shepard was crouched in a doorway her team behind her, they had fought their way to within striking distance of the corridor down which more Shadow Broker troops would be streaming at any moment.

"On my mark I want you to focus all your energy on bringing that roof down, I know it means standing out from cover and we'll take heavy fire, but I'll provide what covering fire I can and Garrus will focus the team in this direction as well."

It had already cost them to get this far, Shepard's barriers had been overwhelmed twice by the ordinance directed at her, and had taken a hit that penetrated her hard suit. The Krogan had also taken some damage but, like Shepard, he was still fully operational.

On Shepard's mark they stepped out into the open as one, Shepard laying down covering fire from both the assault rifle in her right hand and the shotgun in her left. Her biotic squad knew exactly where to aim and in a coordinated and concerted effort they focussed all their energy on the roof just inside the corridor.

Shepard could hear the pings and hums and also feel the vibrations and jolts as time and time again
she was hit by ordnance from the assembled troops on the barrier in the corridor. But to take their shots they had to expose themselves and she could see one after another dropping as sniper rifles fired from behind her.

With the barrier Senna's team held now reinforced by Evictus the firepower they were able to focus had increased creating some serious cross fire for Broker troops using the cover of offices and their doorways on both flanks of Garrus's stretched team.

With an almighty shuddering she could feel under her feet, and a wave of noise Shepard saw the roof of the corridor begin to break up, first dust, then small pieces of rock and then whole chunks of roof falling onto the Broker troops position who began to run back up the corridor away from the death raining down from above.

She looked at her squad and two members were down, the Krogan threw up a defensive barrier and as he picked up one of the commandos Shepard picked up the other and they both headed back to the limited safety of their defensive positions.

"Get these two some help, how are we for medi gel," Shepard asked of a young commando, tasked with corpsman duties, as she was taking off her helmet, "how are you Skark," she continued looking at the Krogan now crouching next to her and heaving heavy breaths.

"Don't worry about me Shepard… that was fun" he barked a laugh and slapped her on the shoulder, then moved to take up a position covering their right flank and immediately began returning fire and throwing biotic slams.

"Shepard you've been hit," it was Garrus who called across from his position, get some gel onto those wounds, don't want to have to carry the both of you out of here" he paused as he lined up a shot and pulled the trigger then continued with a twitch of his mandibles, "just wouldn't be dignified… and… you'd never live it down."

Shepard smiled and gave herself the once over. Plasma burns to her right side, open wound, probably with metal still inside, to her left chest. She could also feel a couple of creases where shots had grazed across her body but they were nothing.

She slapped some medigel on the open wound and assessed their situation. They had silenced a decent chunk of the Broker's troops by closing off that corridor, with the reinforcements on the barrier they held they were now holding their own and it was the Broker's troops who were being caught in cross fire.

But she had no illusions about their situation, those reinforcements would probably just try to get in through the only remaining entrance and unless they could finish of the troops here they would still have to make a dash for it, across open ground, under heavy enemy fire.

"Garrus get a team ready to get the wounded to Senna's position," Shepard called across and at the same time began to work her way back to the room where Liara was being rescued from the explosion that had buried her under a rock fall.

As she ducked back inside the room Shepard was just in time to see the remaining debris being removed from Liara's body.

"Liara," Shepard's voice was soft as she knelt down next to the obviously badly hurt Asari. Liara had a huge gash to her head, and what looked like a broken leg and arm on her left side. Most worrying was a small trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth.
Shepard knew she needed to get Liara out of here now, she needed a medbay, a doctor… none of which they had on their ship… but priority number one was getting her out.

"Garrus, we're leaving now, form everyone into two groups, delegate half the biotics to form barriers, share the wounded between the two groups, we move all together in two minutes." Shepard barked her orders at Garrus and then said to Senna and Evictus.

"I need you to give us maximum fire cover we're coming out now as two groups, those reinforcements will be at your backs anytime soon. As soon as we hit the barrier Senna you pull back to protect the retreating teams with the wounded, Evictus you hold the barrier until we are out of the building." Shepard received confirmation of her orders as she was lifting Liara's limp body in her arms.

Just as she drew near to the door Shepard felt Liara stir, she looked down into blue eyes that barely flickered open.

"Hey baby I got you, it's all gonna be ok now…" Shepard smiled down and Liara's hand came up and just reached the side of Shepard's face, lightly touching it and then dropping back.

"Oh Shepard…" Liara's voice barely audible, filled with emotion that almost broke Shepard's heart on the spot, "…am sorry…" a flash of pain crossed Liara's face, and it felt to Shepard as if it was both physical and emotional.

"Hey none of that, save your strength darlin, I love you Liara you stay with me now," Shepard saw Liara's eyes flicker and then close, her body falling limp again.

Shepard fought to keep the tears out of her eyes. She squared her shoulders and made herself drop back into combat mode as she called Skark over to her.

"I want you to take Doctor T'Soni, I want you to protect her with your barriers and I want you to protect her with your life if you have to… anything you want from me you can have, I will owe you a debt that I will never be able to repay but get her onto that frigate and off this planet." Shepard finished speaking as she transferred Liara's body over the Skark.

"You are friend to the Krogan people Shepard, you are kin to Urdnot Wrex, I am Urdnot clan, you have my life if you need it," the big Krogan smiled showing his sharp teeth and gave another bark of laughter.

Shepard felt a rush of warmth towards this big Krogan and her friend Wrex… 'I owe you big time Wrex and anything I can do to repay you I swear I will do,' she thought as she returned Skark's smile and a nod of her head.

Her OT sparked up and she heard Matriarch T'Joan's voice through the static.

"Bad news Commander, we have another two shuttles inbound on this location from off planet and we can see another shuttle inbound this location coming around the mountain." Shepard heard anxiety in what she felt sure was the usually unruffled voice of the Matriarch.

"Yeah well it seems that's the only news I ever get, we're making a run for it, and Liara is badly hurt pull the frigate up as close as you can to the entrance, block the entrance if you can, keep me advised of numbers, Shepard out."

"Ready to move on your mark Shepard," Garrus was standing next to her but looking at Liara's limp body.
"I want you to go with the team taking Liara out, Garrus I want a wall of protection around her and don't stop till you get to the frigate. How many wounded do we have that need assistance?"

"Five, we have some walking wounded but they are still good to fight," Garrus turned and looked at Shepard "you need to lead the team and get Liara out, I'm not leaving you behind again, can you imagine the shit I would take from her if you died again." Garrus sounded deadly serious.

"Look I'm already asking troops to be a living, well some of them may end being a dying, shield around Liara… the least I can do is watch their six, this is not negotiable Garrus you and Skark get her out and onto that frigate… ready on my mark," Shepard spoke her last sentence into her OT comms.

"Go, Go, Go," Shepard yelled into her comms and to the troops around her, they all stood as one and formed into two groups. Barriers shimmered into life and a wall of ordinance issued from those tasked with protecting the teams.

Shepard once again used her Mattock and shotgun, attaching herself to the group protecting Liara, it was a relatively short run but everything seemed to slow down as she heard her barriers once again hum and ping, until her alarm sounded to warn her they were about to go down.

A Turian next to her had half his face blown off as Broker troops began to move from their cover and run towards their escaping prey. Shepard formed a line with six others and they focused their firepower on those troops who were getting dangerously close.

Forming a firewall the six were soon joined by five others and they began to move backwards but still concentrating their fire on the approaching enemy troops.

They needed to hold them off until both groups reached the relative safety of the barrier and its protection.

"Senna give me the all clear when the two groups have reached you," Shepard called through her suit comms, still firing and suddenly painfully aware that she hadn't replaced her helmet.

The line was being depleted even as it withdrew and those who went down were clearly beyond help as most of her teams barriers, both tech and biotic, had now been overwhelmed.

"Clear Commander, we have what's left of both groups this side of the barrier," Senna's voice came loud and clear through her comms and Shepard indicated to her team to speed up their withdrawal.

"Senna, get the wounded to the frigate, escort them out, now" Shepard managed before being hit full in the chest with a shotgun blast that knocked her off her feet. Dazed and winded Shepard picked up her Mattock and as she was about to get up a hand reached down and pulled her to her feet.

She nodded her thanks to the Turian and they both began again to move quickly backwards until they finally reached the safety of the barrier. Shepard could feel blood oozing under her shattered breast plate and her breathing was now tight and shallow.

"Sitrep Evictus" she called to the tall Turian who was concentrating his fire on the Broker troops who had chased Shepard and the remains of her squad into the corridor.

"We lost around a third across both groups and Senna's squad is down to half strength, my squad is down by two."

"How many biotics do we have here," Shepard called out to what was left of her rear guard team, she noted the three Asari and two Krogan.
"Right let's see if this trick works twice, concentrate your power on bringing that fucking roof down on their heads before we get swarmed… aim at the end of the corridor, we don't want to get caught under it," she smiled and nodded as the biotics flared and began bombarding the chosen target.

"Commander we have a problem, the frigate is still some distance from the entrance and we have a shuttle full of Broker troops heading straight for us," Senna's voice came over her suit comms and Shepard could hear the tell-tale sounds of battle begin to spark up in the background.

"Dig in Senna I'm heading your way," Shepard was watching the roof where her team were blasting but the rock in this area must have been more stable as they were making little inroad.

But the fear of another roof collapse had cause panic amongst their attackers and they were withdrawing.

"We need to get to the entrance now… everyone pull back… move out" Shepard called. And they began racing up the corridor taking advantage of the disarray in the Broker troops.

When they reached the entrance Shepard tasked Evictus and half his team to hold the corridor behind them. Joining Senna at the entrance she assessed the situation.

"There is around sixty of them Commander and we are expecting the other shuttle any moment, and there is still another coming from the other entrance." Senna looked at Shepard her question obvious.

"Yeah, how the fuck do we get out of this," Shepard smiled at Senna who seemed to relax a little, "well I'm all done with runs across open ground and through blistering enemy fire so we need another plan."

While Shepard was thinking they both watched as another shuttle landed just behind the first, Shepard noticed they looked different, but before she could finish the thought her OT comms sparked into life.

"Finally good news Commander our reinforcements have arrived, the second shuttle contains an Asari commando platoon," T'Joan's voice sounded relived and she continued, "Liselle's ship is also engaging the Shadow Broker vessel that is in orbit."

With the arrival of a full platoon of Asari commando's the Broker's troops outside the complex were swiftly dealt with allowing Shepard to get her people onto the frigate. Shepard and her remaining able bodied team joined Liselle's platoon while they cleared out the remaining Broker troops inside the complex.

The other shuttle never materialised, changing course and heading back to the Broker ship, which in turn turned tail and jumped to FTL.

As soon as the ground was secure Shepard headed for the frigate with Liselle close on her heels. The frigate's medbay was little more than a first aid station and the wounded were overflowing into the corridor with some being cared for in the mess hall.

"How is she," Shepard asked Matriarch T'Joan and the medic attending Liara's wounds.

"She is seriously hurt Commander and needs the services of a properly equipped medical station and doctor's, most of the wounded need the same thing," T'Joan spoke looking Shepard and then shifted to look at Liselle, "I take it you have full facilities on your ship?"
"Yes I suggest we transfer all the wounded to my shuttle and run them up to the ship immediately," Liselle answered T'Joan but addressed her words to Shepard.

Shepard only hesitated a moment before saying, "agreed, but I'm coming with her, that is not negotiable." Shepard received a nod from Liselle who left to make the arrangements.

"You saved her Shepard for that you have my thanks, we would never have reached her in time," Matriarch T'Joan signed an Asari blessing of thanks and respect.

"Then you tell me who Liselle Lidanya is working for?" Shepard asked as she moved past the Matriarch to stand next to Liara's bed.

"I will not insult you by trying to deceive you but I am sworn not to reveal whose hand is moving behind Liara's protection," the Matriarch's tone was respectful but Shepard also heard the steely resolve not to answer any further questions on the subject.

"Answer me one thing, do you trust whoever is behind it, do you trust their motives?"

"Absolutely, now forgive me but I need to make arrangements for our return to Thessia. I will ensure we have the necessary medical help and equipment waiting for us on our return, I assume you wish to head back to the T'Soni estate Commander."

"Yes it's the safest place for her," and as the Matriarch left Shepard reached out and took one of Liara's hands in hers. For a moment Shepard thought she could feel a slight movement of Liara's fingers, her eyes searching her Asari's face for any signs of consciousness.

Shepard stepped back from the bed to make way for Liara's stretcher, and then followed it out to the waiting shuttle.

Shepard didn't leave Liara's bedside even as the Asari doctor worked on her. She knew she could have spent her time trying to find out who Liselle's boss was but Shepard couldn't bear to be parted from Liara. Shepard would find out one way or another, but for now protecting Liara was all that mattered.

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The shuttle that had brought Liara, Shepard and the rest of the wounded back to the T'Soni estate was readying to leave; its Captain was walking back across the lawn when Shepard called out to her.

"Captain Lidanya, Liselle..." Shepard caught her up as Liselle turned to look at Shepard and with a smile said.

"No doubt Commander you wish to know who I work for, but I will not tell you, just take care of Doctor T'Soni and try not to get killed this time," she smiled and there was something familiar in her tone and manner that Shepard couldn't quite place.

"Yeah I guessed that would be the case, but I just wanted to say thank you for getting us out of there, we were seriously screwed," Shepard smiled and offered a hand.

"Oh I think you were doing find without me, I'm sure you would have found a way, you certainly live up to your reputation, but I'm glad I could help," Liselle shook Shepard's hand and returned a smile that was both captivating and charming.

Shepard felt the Asari's sexual attraction and her personal power, if Shepard had not been completely in love with Liara she could imagine herself being very, very attracted to this woman.
Then the moment was broken as Liselle turned and jumped into the shuttle and Shepard headed back to the house at a fast pace, she tried to run but the pain in her chest reminded her she needed to see a medic herself.

Once she had satisfied herself that Liara was being treated and everything that was possible was also being done for the other wounded she allowed one of the medical team to treat her wounds.

Then Shepard, Garrus, Kasumi and Matriarch T'Joan met to look over the estates security and their troop losses.

"I'll leave the squad I recruited with you, transfer them over, that should help a little but you will need to replace and increase the numbers," Shepard said and continued, "unless we can remove Liara as a threat to the Shadow Broker."

Shepard looked around at the puzzled faces and so she continued.

"What if Liara died as a result of her wounds, that would be the best protection but would also mean the Shadow Broker might start to relax," comprehension now dawned on her companions and it was the Matriarch who spoke first.

"Her death would be very difficult to fake but a deep coma with little hope of recovery would be as good and much easier to manage," T'Joan looked around and was greeted by nods from everyone including Shepard.

"Can we trust everyone on the estate? The doctors and medics?" Shepard asked.

"I will keep only one doctor once the wounded have been treated as our own medics are fully capable of looking after everyone once there are stabilised. And the doctor I will keep is trustworthy; she was Matriarch Benezia's personal physician."

"And what about Liara, when she wakes up I'm not sure she will be willing to 'hide'," it was Garrus and he voiced the only problem with her plan that had already occurred to Shepard.

"You leave Liara to me," Shepard said with much more confidence than she actually felt.

They had a lot to talk about, a lot of water had passed under both their bridges that had to be dealt with, but Shepard was absolutely determined she would keep Liara safe whatever it took.

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It had been a couple of days since their return from the Shadow Brokers trap. Matriarch T'Joan had spoken to the Asari doctor, Matriarch My'rdden, who agreed completely to the plan.

All non-estate personnel had now left leaving only truly trusted and secure staff and troops. Kasumi and Veetor had started to 'leak' information about Liara's health in a way that would not arouse suspicion.

But Liara's health was causing concern; not her broken leg, arm and ribs, cuts and bruises which were all healing well; but the deep gash and attendant concussion had actually caused Liara to drop into a deep unconscious state that the doctor refused to call a coma, but looked exactly like one to Shepard.

"But she should have come around by now," Shepard was once again arguing with the doctor outside Liara's medbay room.
"Liara needs rest and all her other vital signs are good, there is nothing we can do but wait Commander," the doctor was obviously used to dealing with over anxious relatives but Shepard had personal experience of head trauma so she was less relaxed about it.

Shepard went back into the room and took up her place in the chair next to Liara's bed, then got back up and stood next to the bed looking down at her Asari, she reached out and stroked the soft warm cheek with her fingers.

Leaning in closer she kissed Liara on the forehead, sat down again in the chair and held one of Liara's hands in both of her own.

"Liara, I need you to wake up darling, I need you back, I know we have things to talk about… you may not… well… even if you don't feel the same way… I am here for you… please come back to me," Shepard lifted Liara's hand to her lips and kissed it and lapsed into silence.

She had spent most of the time since their return in this room, when they were on their own she talked to Liara, or just sat in silence willing the Asari to heal and wake up.

Shepard stood up once again and walked over to the window looking out across gardens to what looked like a wooded area and beyond that she knew was the ocean, she had noticed it both times she had headed in to land.

"I… thought it was a dream…Shepard it's truly you…" Shepard snapped around as she heard that familiar voice but it was soft, little more than a whisper.

"Liara… yes it's me… you were hurt, but your home now," Shepard took hold of one of Liara's hands and kissed her Asari again on the forehead, Liara reached out a hand to touch Shepard's face.

"So the Broker was telling the truth" Liara's eyes were filled with tears.

"How the hell did he… oh never mind… Liara I'm so sorry I left you," Shepard was kissing Liara's hand and tears were in her own eyes as she looked back her love.

"Why did you not let me know… I… even if you no longer wanted to be with me… and a child Shepard a new life with… was what I did so terrible that you would not tell me yourself.." Liara's voice still weak and quiet but still managed to convey pain and even an edge of anger.

"Wait how do you know about the baby, Liara I came as soon as I could, I just had to… Liara I was coming here to find you to tell you..." Shepard felt a flash of anger and bit it down but it still gave her next words an edge, "shit I've only been awake for less than a week, I got here as quick as I could."

Shepard immediately regretted her anger as she saw the pain on Liara's face and saw her tears flow down her cheeks.

"Only days… you have not been… not for a year… only days" Liara was sobbing now and Shepard leaned in to hold her and said softly.

"No Liara only days, why on earth would you think I could have been back a year and not come to find you… you need to rest baby, you shouldn't get upset… it's all ok we can sort it all out." Shepard kissed Liara's face and made to stand up again.

"No… it will not be all right Shepard, I have done something terrible, you will never forgive me, it will never be the same between us," and as she spoke Liara's sobs grew more intense.

"I know about Shiala and you… we can talk about this later when you're feeling stronger… if she…"
if you, aw hell Liara let's not do this right now." Shepard felt the situation running away from her, who the hell told Liara about the baby, and where the fuck did she get the idea Shepard had been 'awake' for an entire year.

'This isn't exactly the warm and fuzzy reunion I was looking forward to' she thought not a little moodily. But the thought and the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor and Matriarch T'Joan.

"You need to rest Liara, I'm going to give you a light sedative just to calm you, and allow you to have a little sleep. Commander perhaps you would like to return later?" the doctor spoke but both she and Matriarch T'Joan were looking at her as if she had deliberately upset Liara.

But before she could leave her OT sparked into life and Kasumi's voice sounded loud and clear in the room as she said.

"Commander we have an urgent request from Miranda Lawson for you to contact her, she is at your hotel suite on Illium."

Shepard turned a looked at Liara whose face was frozen in a mask of absolute rage.

"Liara it's not what you think… I don't know what you've been told… but just let me explain." Shepard's voice was calm but as she spoke Liara's biotics flashed into life and with a wave of her hand she sent the contents of the table next to her bed flying into the wall.

"Perhaps you should take that call Commander," Matriarch T'Joan spoke what to Shepard sounded very much like an order.

And as she left the room she heard Liara arguing with the doctor and the Matriarch about the need for a sedative or even remaining in bed.

In the corridor outside the room Shepard leaned against the wall and drew a breath she had never seen Liara like that before and she began to worry about how much her Asari had needed to change in order to cope.

'But she still cares enough to be jealous… that I can work with' Shepard thought and couldn't help allowing a small ray of hope that Liara did indeed still love her as she once had.
Chapter 27

Shepard needed time to think and Miranda’s urgent wasn’t necessarily hers. Leaving the house Shepard walked towards the tree line with the intention of making her way down to the beach.

As she passed into the cool shade her OT sparked up again and this time she took it as a vid call rather than just voice, it was Kasumi.

“I’m sorry to bother you again Shep, but Ms Lawson has called again and said it is very urgent that she speak to you,” Kasumi’s voice was apologetic.

“Can you patch her through to my OT and I’ll take the call now,” Shepard waited for the transfer and Miranda’s face flashed up in her holo interface.

“Commander I have just found out that the information we secured and passed on to Doctor T’Soni about the location of the Shadow Broker will lead her into a trap, the information came from the Broker himself, we have only just managed to trace it back to its source. You need to stop her from acting on the information.” Miranda looked worried and Shepard could hear concern and urgency in her voice.

“Nicely timed, she already acted on it… your telling me that you’re Liara’s trusted source? I don’t get it why would Liara trust Cerberus,” Shepard’s voice was cold and challenging.

“Hasn’t she told you? Perhaps I should leave…” Shepard cut across Miranda sharply.

“You better tell me everything you know or my little deal with your boss is off.”

“Very well Commander, it was Doctor T’Soni who secured your body from the merc’s working for the Shadow Broker. She gave your body to me, to Cerberus. We have from time to time been able to help her with information. The Shadow Broker is no friend to Cerberus if he is working with the Collectors.” Miranda finished.

“Is that everything, because by my calculation I still have the best part of a week before I start work for your boss,” Shepard’s voice was calm and business like.

“I hope Doctor T’Soni is safe Shepard, I would not want any harm to come to her, not only because I know how you feel about her, I will see you on your return.” The holo image faded and disappeared.

Shepard noted the use of the word ‘I’ and the emphasis that Miranda had used, perhaps she didn’t want harm to come to Liara but someone else did and when Shepard found out who it was they would go joint top of her shit list alongside the Shadow Broker.

Shepard carried on walking, passed a small chalet and then down a slight slope onto a sandy beach. The ocean was a stunning blue, the kind of blue that reminded her of Liara’s eyes and her heart caught in her chest.

What if she couldn’t fix what was amiss between them, what if she couldn’t get Liara back, it would be her turn to grieve the loss of her soul mate.

Shepard sensed rather than heard anyone behind her and she spun around quickly to see Liara making her way unsteadily down the slope onto the beach; Liara had a tech assist cast on her leg but a normal flexi cast on her wrist and forearm, Shepard moved quickly to her side and offered an arm
for support.

“You did not need to come all the way out here to talk to your… your… the mother of your child,” Liara’s words were angry but Shepard could hear the struggle to remain in control of her emotions.

“Liara stop this now… if you got your information about me from the Broker ask yourself what his objective would be… and have I ever lied to you? Come on let’s sit down and I’ll tell you everything I know, please,” Shepard was relieved when Liara nodded and they both sat down on the warm sand.

Shepard ran through everything she had experienced, been told and had done since ‘waking up’ in Miranda’s lab. The reason why she couldn’t head for Liara immediately, needing to get her son somewhere safe, and Shepard’s concern about just crashing back into her Asari’s life and what damage it might do.

“I have no idea how you feel about Shiala, and I won’t lie to you Liara it hurts knowing you are with someone else but I’m doing my best to understand…” Liara put a finger to Shepard’s lips to silence her.

“Shepard I am not ‘with’ Shiala as you put it, we can talk later about what it was, but I love you, I always have and I always will. But I am changed, I fear you will not love me once you know who I have become… and to lose you twice… I would not survive,” Liara turned her head and stared out across the ocean.

They sat in silence for a moment the only sound the waves gently rushing onto the beach, the sun warming them both, Shepard felt the sand run through her fingers.

“We all change with time and the experiences we live through Liara, we evolve as people, but something remains constant, our essence, our core, our souls… we’ve touched souls Liara, you’re a part of me as I believe I’m a part of you.

We’ve forever changed each other, become more than we were individually, I feel as if I’ve loved you all my life and I know I always will… if there is anything after death then there too I’ll be trying to find you… I’ll never leave you out of choice, and I promise that I’ll always come back to you, one way or another.”

Shepard had no idea where those words came from, she wasn’t one to talk about her emotions, yet they were true, she felt the honesty and the truth of them as she spoke.

When Shepard began speaking Liara had turned and faced her human and their eyes had locked.

“Oh Shepard… but I have done… you don’t know,” Liara’s face showed the pain she was in and Shepard said as she reached out and took hold of Liara’s shoulders.

“If you’re talking about giving my body to Cerberus, I already know… you saved me Liara… you gave me the chance to come back to you… you don’t have to say anything… tell me with your eyes that you will come back to me, that you’ll give me the chance to make this up to you,” Shepard searched her Asari’s eyes for her answer and saw pain but she also saw love and longing.

“But you died…” and Liara broke down, deep sobs rending her body, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Shepard leaned in, wrapped her arms around Liara and pulled them both down onto the sand, Shepard flat on her back with Liara’s face buried in Shepard’s neck.
“I came back Liara… what does that tell you about the intentions of the universe… the will of the Goddess… the strength of our love… I came back to you,” Shepard’s eyes were also filled with tears but she felt joy, Liara was back where she belonged, in Shepard’s arms.

“I missed you so much… the only thing that kept me going was hunting down the Shadow Broker… it is as you said Shepard, you are a part of me, but when you left me it was as if there was…” Shepard interrupted and kissed the top of Liara’s head.

“As if there was a huge hole inside, just deep emptiness where all my happiness and joy used to be… a deep cold, dark pit of sorrow and pain…” Liara lifted herself onto her elbow so that she was looking down into Shepard’s face.

“Yes that is exactly what it felt like;” and in an instant Liara leaned down and found Shepard’s lips. They kissed first gently and then as if trying to slake a raging thirst, hungry, passionately, both their bodies responding to the deep siren call of desire.

Liara moved so that she was laying on top of Shepard, hands exploring each other’s bodies, breath coming in short bursts in between long, deep kisses, tongues exploring, lost in each other.

“Join… with… me… Liara… need you…” Shepard said in between the kisses she was tracing along Liara’s jawline and down her neck.

They looked at each other and Shepard saw Liara’s eyes flash to the familiar black as she whispered…

“Embrace eternity…”

Shepard felt Liara’s breath, deep and regular on her neck. They had both fallen asleep after the join and Shepard could tell Liara was now exhausted.

She carefully moved from under Liara and positioned herself into a crouch over the still peacefully sleeping Asari, scooping her up Shepard stood and began carrying Liara off the beach.

Liara came too a little, blue eyes flickering open and filled with love, she put her arms around Shepard’s neck and whispered something inaudible, but which sounded content to Shepard’s ears, then drifted back to sleep, arms still entwined around her humans neck.

Shepard was almost to the house before being met by a concerned doctor and Matriarch who both appeared to have been kept in check by Garrus and Kasumi, as Shepard got closer Garrus spoke.

“Figured you only needed to ride out the storm and work your magic Shepard, no need for anyone to come rushing in to spoil the moment,” he was more relaxed and happier than she had seen him since her return and the familiar twitching of his mandible’s told her he was ‘smiling’.

“Well that’s all well and good Commander but Liara still needs rest and could have caused herself real damage,” the Matriarch looked concerned.

“I’m going to take Liara to her room and she can continue to rest, the doctor can check on her… and Garrus it’s good to know you have such faith in my sunny disposition,” she smiled and continued into the house finally depositing Liara onto her bed.

When Shepard tried to pull away Liara stirred and held her strongly around her neck, “don’t leave
me Shepard” the young Asari whispered.

“I’ll just be over by the window while the doc takes a few readings, you need to catch up on some sleep, I won’t be far away,” Shepard kissed Liara lightly on the lips and the moved back to make room for the doctor.

As soon as Shepard was assured that Liara had fallen into a deep sleep she left the two Matriarchs with her and made her way to speak to Garrus.

The join on the beach hadn’t been sexual, it was emotional, and a mind re-connection, but Shepard had still felt the edge of Liara’s alter ego, the personality she had created to give her the strength to carry on.

Now she needed to know as much as she could about this ‘other’ Liara and she know Garrus would have been closest, apart from Shiala of course, and Shepard was pleased to feel the jealous rage rise up like bile in her mouth, she still had a score to settle with Shiala.

“Garrus I haven’t had a chance to say thank you for protecting her and looking after her, you went way beyond anything I could rightfully have asked of you… I will be forever in your debt my friend…my brother,” Shepard and Garrus were in a small sitting room and Garrus had just passed her a glass of Asari wine.

“We all played a part Shepard, Wrex, Kasumi, Anderson, Hackett most of all your mother… we were all in shock and grief at losing you but because of the bond Liara was in real trouble… and I don’t think you coming back will fix everything.

"The Priestess was really clear Liara needed to spend some time with them and work on her… well her boundaries and get control back… she has flashes of rage that seem to take her over.” Garrus finished and took a long drink, he had been slightly dreading this conversation as he knew what was coming.

“Yeah, I’m going to speak to the head Priestess tomorrow with T’Joan, if that’s what Liara needs to do then now is a good time while she’s keeping a low profile.

"But tell me about Shiala… T’Joan gave me the impression that she kinda manipulated Liara into what happened between them.” Shepard left the implication hanging, that maybe Liara should have been protected from someone who wanted to take advantage of her.

“Shiala got straight in under Liara’s defences. She was the one that brought the information about your body and the Collectors… I tried Shepard, the Matriarch too, but Liara somehow connected Shiala with the slim chance that you might be ‘raised from the dead’… but you know, I think it was just… well not anything like you and Liara have,” Garrus sounded guilty and embarrassed.

“Not your fault Garrus… Liara must have needed whatever Shiala was offering… but when I get a chance I will be asking Shiala what her game was,” when Garrus looked puzzled Shepard continued, “oh I have to rescue Shiala or Liara will never forgive herself, and I fully intend to kill the Shadow Broker with my own hands for trying to kill Liara… yeah and working with the Collectors,” Shepard smiled catching the fact that the Broker was at the top of her kill list more for the threat to Liara than to the galaxy.

They talked on and Garrus was able to share his experience of Liara’s struggle with her grief and the struggle between her two ‘personalities’.
Shepard knew that Liara was going to need a lot of help and support to recover, and that would probably include a lot of patience and love, what worried Shepard was the fact that she had a job to do and would have to leave Liara to do it.

Shepard walked into the room and noticed the thin, white, floor length, curtains ruffling slightly in the soft breeze from the open veranda windows. The veranda ran the full length of Liara’s bedroom and gave a view over the gardens to the sea in the distance, which was beginning to be tinted red by the Sun sinking fast towards the horizon.

Shepard could see Liara resting on a comfortable looking lounger on the veranda and she moved across the room to join her Asari.

“Hello Shepard, where did you go?” Liara gave Shepard a beaming smile from the lounger that allowed the Asari to keep her encased leg off the ground.

Shepard leaned in and kissed Liara and dropped into a lounger next to her lover and said.

“I wanted to catch up with Garrus, and to talk over a plan to deal with the threat you’re under from the Shadow Broker.

”The plan I have in mind puts out information that has you in some form of ‘coma’ and with no likelihood of recovery which will give us more time to track the Broker’s base and may also result in him dropping his guard,” Shepard stopped recognising that Liara’s face had now clouded over and she had a hard edge to her voice when she spoke.

“I will not hide or stop my fight with the Shadow Broker and I will not rest until I have secured Shiala’s freedom… Shepard you are back but I have my own work to do and until I have made the Shadow Broker pay the ultimate price it will not be over.” Once again Shepard was looking into the eyes and face of a Liara she had never seen before.

“You can’t do anything until you’re fully fit and the Broker will be expecting you… and… you need to heal Liara, you need to spend time with the Priestess’s…” Liara cut across Shepard and the Asari’s eyes flashed as she spoke.

“Please do not think you can walk back into my life and assume control, I am not the timid Asari you left behind when you chose a pointless death rather than staying with me,” Liara had waved away Shepard’s attempts to challenge what was being said and Liara began to get unsteadily to her feet.

“Liara I have no intention of walking back into your life and telling you what to do…I thought you wanted to kill the Shadow Broker and rescue Shiala, but I can see now that you are determined to kill as many of your own troops as you can and die in some suicide mission to punish me or yourself or both of us…” Shepard had meant to be diplomatic and persuasive but the jibe about what happened on the Normandy stung.

Liara was standing now and looked a little taken aback as Shepard walked past her into the bedroom and towards the door to leave, and turned only as she had her hand on the door handle.

“Let me know if, when you get control of your temper, you would like an actual plan to achieve what you want. But don’t wait too long I have my own work to do,” and with that Shepard left the room and slammed the door behind her.

Shepard was shaking with a temper of her own but she was mad with herself and also upset, Garrus had tried to warn her but somehow Shepard thought that Liara wouldn’t behave that way with her…
not ‘her’ Liara… but this wasn’t ‘her’ Liara… ‘maybe it would have been better if I had stayed dead’, she thought moodily and stormed out of the house to her ‘borrowed’ ship.

As soon as the door slammed behind Shepard, Liara moved back into the room and sat on the edge of the bed fighting back tears. She felt confused, upset, angry and had no idea why she had acted in such a cold and hurtful way to Shepard.

She knew some of the anger, perhaps it was even rage, towards Shepard for ‘leaving her’ was real enough and hers to own, but if she kept putting this hard, cold, calculating front up they would never be able to work through their problems.

There was a light knock at the door and before she could tell them to go away, Matriarch T’Joan came quietly into the room, on seeing her she began to let the tears flow. The Matriarch held her while she sobbed and Liara told her about the argument and her fear that the old Liara was more and more lost to her.

Shepard had the ship to herself and went to her cabin, found some Asari wine, then discovered a bottle of hard Asari Liquor.

‘Well I think I’ve earned not only a drink but a little oblivion from all the shit that seems to find me’ Shepard poured a shot and drank it in one, ‘oh yeah and welcome back Shepard.’

Three shots later Shepard heard the door swish open and Garrus walked into the room.

“You do realise this isn’t your ship, so that’s not technically your booze,” he smiled and sat down opposite.

“Here,” Shepard said as she pulled another bottle and shot glass from inside the drinks cabinet “Turian proof,” she relaxed back and watched as Garrus poured himself a drink.

“So what happened, all I know is that you stormed out and Liara is currently being comforted by the Matriarch? And I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes if she thinks you upset Liara, T’Joan is worse than a Varren protecting her young,” Garrus knocked back the drink he had poured and prepared another one.

Shepard ran him through the conversation and finished by saying.

“I was so angry at myself for losing my temper, but I… well… look I’m having to deal with a load of shit and come to terms with a world that is almost two years further on but for me it’s been days…”

"It’s like I went to sleep and everything I was certain of, everyone I knew, including and especially Liara, turned into complete strangers… I’m still in the universe that existed when I left you guys on the mess deck of the Normandy…’’ she trailed off and poured another shot.

“Shepard I can’t imagine how hard this is for you, and we haven’t even talked about the part where you wake up to find you also have a son…” Garrus poured another shot and raised his glass in a toast, “and congratulations by the way, for your son and coming back from the dead… I missed you.” There was real sadness in Garrus’s eyes and Shepard saw for the first time how her death had also affected her friend.

“But I did warn you about Liara… and to be honest I thought you would have had more self-control Shepard, she is falling apart… or rather falling into this alternate version of herself and she doesn’t know how to stop it.”
“You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself, or disappointed in Liara for not pulling herself together just because you’ve come back, and you need to be there for her, whatever it takes to get her well and healed.” Garrus’s voice was quiet but firm and Shepard felt ashamed at the way she had handled the set back with Liara.

Garrus was right, she needed to put aside her hurt feelings and pride and focus on Liara, this is how Shepard would eventually make and then keep Liara safe, as if reading Shepard’s thoughts Garrus continued.

“My friend you can’t always solve everything with a great big fucking explosion,” Garrus once again filled his glass and held it forward for a toast.

Shepard raised her freshly filled glass and touched the two together saying.

“To friendship, honesty and loyalty… to you Garrus,” they both drank their shots down in one.

Much later with two empty bottles on the table, many toasts, stories of battles and romantic exploits, the two were very, very drunk and only a little while later both the Human and the Turian had passed out where they sat, slow deep breathing the only sound in the cabin.

Shepard dropped back into consciousness to be welcomed by a banging head ache, neck and back stiffness and the inside of her mouth was beyond disgusting. She actually moaned as she pulled herself upright, eyes falling on her Turian companion who was still out for the count.

Dragging herself into a standing position and feeling the blood pulse even more painfully through her skull, she found the small shower and stood under its quickly heated water until she felt partly human again, finishing by scrubbing her teeth as soon as she could stand the movement.

Riffling through the one bag she had brought with her she found some camouflage trousers, black t shirt and hooded sweat, once dressed she threw a pillow at Garrus’s head and said loudly, “Garrus all hands to battle stations we have incoming.”

Garrus jumped to his feet and buckled as if he had hit his head on a steel beam, he turned to see Shepard grinning broadly.

“You look like shit Turian,” and she began to move towards the door, “get a shower I’ll see you in the house, I’m going to find coffee.”

“Yeah well you don’t look so hot yourself… and you’re the reason my head feels like a grenade went off between my ears… you’re a bad influence Shepard,” he said to Shepard’s retreating back.

Walking up to the house Shepard put a plan together and once she had laced herself with coffee and something to stop the throbbing in her head she would take it to Liara and try to mend her fences.

Shepard found Liara in the comms room looking through data at one of the terminals.

“Oh, hello Shepard,” Liara said with a wary smile as she turned a little unsteadily towards Shepard, “where did you go after we… well… after,” she trailed off as Shepard held her eyes in a steady gaze.

“I need to apologise to you Liara, my behaviour yesterday evening was unacceptable. I had no right
to say what I did and I had no right to get so mad at you. Could we go somewhere and talk if you have some time?” Shepard had put her hand under Liara’s elbow to steady her; the Asari was still finding it difficult to keep her balance in the tech cast.

“No it is I who must apologise Shepard, please let us go and talk somewhere quiet, perhaps in the garden?” Liara had placed one hand on Shepard’s shoulder and the other was stroking the side of her human’s face.

“Come on then let me give you a lift, I’m going to miss this when you’re back on both your feet,” Shepard said as she scooped Liara up in her arms and headed for the front door.

Liara smiled at Shepard and held her around the neck, nuzzling her face into Shepard’s neck, she said “I am surprised by how much I enjoy you doing this Shepard be careful I do not demand it even after my leg has healed” and she kissed Shepard’s neck before squeezing herself as tight as she could into Shepard’s body.

They found a table and chairs around the back of the house on the edge of the formal garden, and once settled Shepard began to talk.

“Liara I need you to know how much I regret having put you through my death and then having to deal with the aftermath… I… if I was in the same situation I’m not sure that I’d make a different decision… that’s who I am… the same way I know that deep inside you understand that, and although you’ve got every right to be angry with me for leaving you, you wouldn’t want me to change who I am.

"And I know who you are, and not some timid Asari who I can impress or who will allow me to do their thinking for them. You are a strong, independent and fearless person, and you’re also kind… you hate cruelty and would rather try to save someone than kill them.

"You do more to change my actions and decisions than the other way around and that makes me a better person, a better leader, a much better soldier. And that’s how I know that the personality that you brought into life is not truly who you are.

"You fought hard to be the person you wanted to be, not a carbon copy of your mother, or her natural heir… not saying she was a bad person, but you didn’t want the life she mapped out for you then so don’t let it take you over now.

"Liara believe me when I say that I love you and always will and I will stay with you, but I won’t let you destroy yourself from the inside out, if you love me Liara” and Shepard leaned over and took both the Asari’s hands in her own, “you will do what everyone who loves and cares about you has been begging you to do.

"And I’m here now to help you with your mission, it’s mine too, and we will do it together, but you need to heal yourself, you have to spend time with the Priestess’s and we need time to plan how we take the Broker down.

"Please Liara, think about it, consider it at least.” Shepard kissed each of Liara’s hands and moved so that she was kneeling on the ground in front of Liara.

“There was something that I wanted to do, should have done, on Arcturus, for me a matter of weeks ago, for you a whole world of pain and loneliness ago.” Liara looked steadily into Shepard’s eyes and the marine squared her shoulders, took a deep breath and continued.

“When I planned to ask you before I was pretty sure of the answer, but now I’m not sure of your
answer, but it’s how I felt then and it’s how I feel now… so… Liara will you marry me, be my bondmate,” Shepard added quickly as she was trying to read Liara’s reaction, “I have a child now and regardless of how he came into being he is mine and will be part of my life… but… oh darling I so wanted any children that I would ever have to be ours, together…” Shepard faltered to a stop as Liara put a finger to her human’s lips.

“My answer would have been yes to you Shepard, in fact I was considering the same question for you… but… now… I am not the woman you loved then… I may never be again,” and she broke down as tears flowed down her cheeks but continued.

“It is so cruel Shepard, all I wanted all I held onto was that you might, by some miracle come back to me, but to survive I allowed some monstrous version of myself to take hold… what if I can’t be truly myself again… you will end up hating me and I could not bear to see that in your eyes… I can not bear to lose you again Shepard.”

“Then don’t lose me Liara, I won’t leave you and I’ll be with you while you find your true self again, trust me my love… you don’t have to say yes now, I’ll wait, I’d wait an eternity for you Liara…” Shepard cupped Liara’s face with her hands and kissed away the tears from her cheeks, her eyes and then kissed her tenderly on her lips.

“I will start today Shepard, can we go to the temple together and speak with the Lady El’Estrene?” Liara tried a wan smile which only made her look sadder and Shepard felt such a stab of pain it was almost physical.

“Yes of course, do you want to organise it with the Matriarch, or I could go and speak to her?” Shepard knew she needed to be very careful of Liara’s feelings and didn’t want to even give the appearance of trying to control the situation.

“Would you speak to the Matriarch please, I don’t really want to speak to anyone, I will stay here and try to meditate,” Liara reached out and held one of Shepard’s hands as she stood up and looked up into her love’s troubled face.

“And my answer is yes Shepard if I can be sure I can heal the rift inside me, my answer will always be yes.”

On hearing the words Shepard couldn’t help but break into a huge grin, she wanted to pick Liara up with the sheer joy she was feeling; instead she leaned down and kissed her Asari, then touched foreheads and said.

“I love you T’Soni, always will, so you better get yourself sorted out, we have a lot of living to do together,” Shepard was rewarded with a real smile, ‘her’ Liara was smiling up at her and all was finally coming right this new universe.
Leaving Liara sitting in the growing morning sunshine Shepard sought out Matriarch T’Joan who started to deliver a severe dressing down but Shepard cut her off saying.

“I accept anything that you wish to say to me Matriarch, you couldn’t be harder on my than I am on myself… but can we do this later… Liara has agreed to go to see the Priestess and I want to strike while the iron is hot.” Shepard noted the quizzical look on the Matriarch’s face and said, “sorry, bit of an Earth saying, I mean let’s get this done while she has the strength to face all her demons.”

The Matriarch nodded, “I will contact the Lady El’Estrene, the Temple is only a five minute sky car drive, they will be ready when we get there.” And with that the Matriarch walked away already sparking up her OT to make contact with the Temple.

As Shepard walked back towards the place Liara was still sitting, still looking out across the gardens, she felt a catch in her chest and a wash of fear ran through her mind. ‘What if she can never truly heal her mind… her soul… whatever the hell damage you did to her, Shepard thought bitterly, ‘well done Shepard, the one pure, good, shining person you’ve ever had in your life and you almost kill her along with yourself.’

Shepard shrugged off her inner tirade before she placed her hand on Liara’s shoulder; the Asari continued to look into the middle distance but covered Shepard’s hand with her own.

“We can make our way over now, the Matriarch will have a sky car ready in front of the house,” Shepard spoke tenderly.

“Thank you Shepard,” Liara’s voice was quiet and when she stood she looked directly into her Human’s eyes.

Shepard lost herself in those oh so deep blue eyes, whose colour seemed to shift subtly with Liara’s mood, right now Shepard saw pain and grief that tore at her own soul, but she saw the edge of something else, something harder.

“Shepard I need you to know that I meant what I said about not being able to come back to you unless I can once again be truly myself… no please let me finish… even at this moment I am struggling with a strong voice and will that can not see what is wrong with being who I have become… it is me Shepard not some outside force… this is another me, but know it is not who I want to be… I will fight to come back to you but you must continue on with your life…” Liara faltered as she spoke the final words as they both knew what she was saying.

Shepard drew Liara into her arms and kissed her with all the love and tenderness she had for her lovely, grieving, soft and kind Asari.

“You are the love of my life Liara… I’ll be waiting for you my darling… but you need to put you front and centre… come on soldier let’s get this done,” Shepard’s words were tender and she gave the best smile she could muster with her last words and was rewarded with a weak flicker of a smile from Liara despite the tears in both their eyes.

They were shown into the High Priestess’s office and Shepard felt seriously underdressed and very unworthy. She could almost feel the millennia of learning and spiritual ‘muscle’ that seemed to imbue everything, from the writings on the walls, the beautiful objects liberally scattered around, to
the Asari Priestess’s themselves.

When Lady El’Estrene entered the room Shepard could literally feel the power of the woman but instead of being stern and distant, which is what Shepard was expecting, the Asari Matriarch exuded a loving, calm and accepting presence.

Liara and the Matriarch T’Joan gave an Asari spiritual greeting to the Priestess, heads bowed and hands covering their hearts and then folding out; there was just a hint of blue energy playing around their hands and the area they had been covering just over their hearts. Shepard bowed her head to show her respect. The Priestess nodded but without any further ceremony walked straight up to Liara and enfolded her in a hug.

“Ah little wing why have you waited and struggled with this pain for so long,” El’Estrene said in a warm and quiet tone but Shepard felt the strength of the love behind the words, “you are here now and that is what is important.”

Liara continued to lean into the Priestess even after being released from the full hug El’Estrene kept an arm around the young Asari and spoke to Shepard.

“I apologise Commander but you see I was present at this little one’s birth and I have watched over her, spiritually, all her life.

We must waste no further time in finding out what is amiss, Matriarch T’Joan would you leave us, blessings of the Goddess be upon you.”

This time the Matriarch covered her face with her hands before opening them out, still head bowed, she left without a word.

It was only then that Shepard noticed that there were two other Priestesses’ in the room and they now moved next to the High Priestess who continued, this time, looking between Liara and Shepard as she spoke to both of them.

“I need to initiate a meld with Liara and then with you Commander so that I have the fullest understanding of what may have happened to Liara, with your consent?” Lady El’Estrene directed her question at Shepard it was obvious that Liara knew what was required and coming here had automatically implied her agreement.

“Yes of course anything I can do… anything you need of me,” Shepard was concerned and a little fearful, she had only melded with Liara, but she meant what she said, ‘anything it takes will never even touch the sides of making it up to her’, Shepard thought as her eyes were drawn to her love.

“Thank you Commander, I expected nothing less, now we will begin, are you ready little wing?” the High Priestess turned to face Liara who gave her a small nod and closed her eyes. From where she was standing she saw all three sets of eyes flash to black before being closed and then there was silence and stillness in the room.

Shepard didn’t know how to describe what she was experiencing but it was as if small shadows of a dream, nightmare, were being remembered somewhere deep in her unconscious mind, but the emotions were rippling just under the surface.

Fear, grief, loss… anger… such deep, deep sadness, emptiness… the feeling that Shepard herself had when realising the bond between them had been lost… but that space had grown to blot out everything… Shepard felt emotionally exhausted, dead, broken.

Shepard only realised she had dropped to her knees when hands reached down to help her up, Liara
had obviously been helped to sit in one of the large armchairs and was being attended to by one of the younger Priestess’s.

The hands that helped her into another chair were those of the High Priestess herself.

“You felt an echo of the meld, what Liara was showing us?” it was a question but the High Priestess sounded as if she knew what the answer would be.

“Yes”, Shepard was surprised at the roughness of her voice, as if she had been shouting for hours, and she was so exhausted.

“Are you ready for the meld Commander,” Lady El’Estrene asked quietly.

“Yes, yes of course,” Shepard said more strongly now and she stood up.

This time it was only the High Priestess who stayed close to Shepard and said.

“It will not be necessary for my sisters to join us, ready,” and with a nod from Shepard the Priestess’s eyes flashed to black and Shepard felt the presence of another in her mind.

It wasn’t like any meld she had had with Liara, it was more chaotic, images and emotions streamed through her mind, she couldn’t catch them all, fragments… some old… some she didn’t even recognise, and then it was over.

When Shepard opened her eyes she saw a very puzzled and worried look on the High Priestess face, who moved away to sit in a chair facing Liara and indicated Shepard should sit next to the young Asari.

Lady El’Estrene considered them both for a moment and then began speaking.

“Whether you rely on faith, belief, science, logic or reason there is little doubt that everything in the universe is one and the same. That we are all made from the same material, and that everything, including our life force, energy, that which gives us our soul is never destroyed but merely recycled to continue to play a part in the universal consciousness.”

Shepard thought that was the most elegant explanation of the basics of thermodynamics she had ever heard, ‘although you could just have ingested a huge amount of the coolaid Shepard,’ she thought to herself and then returned her focus to what the High Priestess was saying.

“I believe amongst Human’s you have a branch of belief that speaks of reincarnation, but what our Asari teachings have speculated is something much more random, but that the energy that creates and fuels a being’s individual identity, which we call have named ‘soul’, may not fall to the natural entropy of the universe but remain intact and thus when animating a new sentient being will carry, as molecular memory, a sense of its past self.

This is all pure theory of course, but Asari scientists as well as spiritual thinkers have worked on this hypothesis as a way of understanding some of the phenomena Asari’s have experienced due to our ability to join.

Whatever we may ‘think’ or ‘believe’ about these postulations it would seem that something has happened to ‘trigger’ memories, connections, and experiences from a time period longer than Liara’s life. Commander you also bear the signs that this is not the first time your ‘soul’ has manifested itself on this plain of existence.

It is as if a rift in the barriers that keep these ‘older’ manifestations of your existence has fractured in
your soul Liara and when you reached for the strength to carry on you reached into that rift and by doing so you have forced it open, the rift was caused in the first place by the lifetimes strong connection you both seem to have with each other.

There is no other way I can describe what I have seen and felt. I realise this will be very hard for you to accept Commander, but if it helps there are perfectly good scientific theories for it.” The High Priestess had picked up on the high level of scepticism that Shepard was trying to keep in check, it all sounded a bit ‘out there’ to her.

“It really doesn’t matter what I think or believe my Lady but what is it that you need from me to help heal Liara,” as Shepard spoke she reached out and held Liara’s hand and felt a responding squeeze.

“Yes that is all that matters,” the Priestess continued, “but it does mean that this is not ordinary spiritual injury and I can not make any promises about how this will end.

I do not know if we will be able to heal the rift, Liara you may have to accept that this ‘other’ you is what remains, but be sure that this is a version of yourself, and perhaps once fully embodied it may…” but Liara cut off the Priestess and turned sharply to look at Shepard.

“No… this is not who I am… I can not lose you again Shepard… you have to make this right my Lady, you must find a way…” Liara’s silent sobs, the fear and confusion in her eyes and the tears rolling down her soft blue cheeks broke Shepard in two.

“Hey, it’s ok, I’m not going anywhere, and we’ll find a way… Lady El’Estrene will find a way, she’s just doing the doc’s equivalent of worse case... isn’t that right my Lady,” and Shepard looked across at the Priestess with a mix of pleading and demand in her eyes as she held Liara.

“Yes, we will find a way to… heal this Liara, now say goodbye to the Commander and then you can go and get some rest; I will have a final word about the arrangements with the Commander before she leaves.”

The two younger Priestesses left the room and the Lady El’Estrene moved away from then to sit behind her desk. Liara stood up and Shepard held her in her arms, her Asari’s head buried into her neck.

“I have only just noticed you hair Shepard,” Liara said softly and sounding as if she had a head cold. “It is longer than you usually wear it.” As she spoke Liara ran her fingers through the hair which was indeed much longer than Shepard wore it, touching her collar and falling almost into her eyes.

“Yeah you can see that it’s got a big of a wave to it… but don’t get used to it as soon as I get the time I’ll find a hair shop and get it back in shape, “ she smiled down into those compelling and mesmerising blue eyes which were as beautiful as ever even if a little bloodshot.

“I think I could get used to it,” and Liara leaned in to kiss Shepard on the lips while gripping a handful of hair and tugging slightly.

Shepard gave her a smile when they broke apart and said.

“Ok T’Soni I’ll make you a deal, as soon as you’re out of here I’ll grow it for you but only this length and only until you get bored with it,” Shepard basked in the smile that Liara gave her and leaned in for another kiss.

Then they stood apart and with one last touch of her cheek Liara turned as if she carried the sadness of two worlds on her shoulders and left the room.
Shepard just stood and stared at the door until she was called back into the moment by the Priestess.

“Commander I will do everything in my power to make this right, but this is uncharted territory, it will not be long before Liara realises the danger she would put you in if she properly joined with you while she was in this state and I know she would not do anything to cause you pain.”

“What do you mean danger… I feel ok… a bit strange… but then I have been dead,” Shepard ended with a sarcastic tone aimed more at herself than the Priestess.

“Commander the potential rift exists within you also, you are both… I am not sure what it is yet, but you share the same connections, in short Commander you and Liara have ‘been here before’ to put it in Earth vernacular.”

“Look even if I did believe this fantastical tale about souls reincarnating, or whatever it is, you’re also asking me to believe that me and Liara have also been together before… I just… but like I said it doesn’t matter what I believe… you have to make it right, even if she can’t come back to me, but you’ve got to help her she’s in so much pain that I can feel… and it’s made no difference that I’m back…” Shepard finally said out loud what had been eating away at her since realising that she wasn’t going to the silver bullet for Liara’s recovery.

“Oh you are wrong to believe that Commander, without your return there would be no hope at all that Liara could heal herself in this life and that damage would, if we believe the theory, follow her into the future. No Commander you’re coming back is the catalyst to her recovery but the rest is up to her and all of us at the Temple.

I have something I can give you before you leave, but I warn you it will be a painful gift but may help you become more synchronised within yourself.” The Priestess watched Shepard from behind the desk, her eyes kind, intelligent, knowing, it was as if she could and did have the ability to look deep into Shepard’s soul.

“I’m listening.”

“I could meld with you and share in a more controlled way what Liara is experiencing but this would also sharpen the focus on your connections to your past history. I could also help you retrieve the ‘memories’ of the months that you were, shall we say, not completely alive; not clear memories or physical pain, more a sense of the passing of time.”

Shepard thought for a while, she wanted to be in the same place as Liara, so long as it didn’t debilitating her, she had a job to do after all… and she had to admit this weird time difference between herself and the rest of the universe made every moment somehow unreal at a certain level.

“Will I be able to function properly, I have to go back to work, I can’t…” The Priestess interrupted Shepard and said.

“Commander you have one of the strongest, keenest minds and intellects I have ever met and your soul is, well, powerful in a way that I have only sensed in Asari who have spent all their life span on its development. You will be able to carry on normally, and with the understanding of how strong Liara is not to have collapsed completely from what has happened to her.”

“I know how strong Liara is,” Shepard said quickly her eyes shining.

Lady El’Estrene smiled and despite herself Shepard felt calmer and smiled back.

“Have no fear Commander I know without doubt how highly you hold Liara T’Soni in you esteem and how much you love her, body and soul, I have seen it and felt it. Know that your love and
devotion is reciprocated.”

The Priestess moved from behind the desk and stood in front of Shepard and again her eyes flashed to black and again Shepard felt her powerful but benign presence in her mind and this time she now also felt Liara.

Shepard had told Matriarch T’Joan that she would walk back to the estate, she needed time to get hold of how she was feeling; the meld had been a real shock to her system.

It did give her an insight into what Liara had been struggling with, the terrible fight with her alter ego and what Shepard herself was now feeling. It was as if she could ‘feel’ an enormous stretch of time, a history, her history like a long road bringing her to this point in time and space.

‘So I get the total weirdness of a sense of existing, living before I was born… but none of the bloody useful stuff, like why… or anything I learned along the way… great Shepard… worst of both worlds’, she thought as she walked along a wooded path back towards the T’Soni house.

She stopped and leaned her back against one of the enormous trees, they were old, she could feel it, and a wave of absolute terror flooded her veins, it literally took her legs from under her and she slipped down the tree until she was sitting with her head in her hands.

‘What happened… what did I do… so much blood… blood on my hands… I couldn’t save them,’ her thoughts were ragged, the words her own and she knew them to be true but not what they meant. The terror turned to a sense of failure the like of which she had never felt even when being hyper critical of herself, the failure was linked to whatever had terrorised her and to Liara, she felt rather than thought it… ‘this is too fucking much… what the fuck am I supposed to do with this… she said it wouldn’t stop me from… Reapers… Reapers… is this what it’s about… why is it so freakin jumbled my head…’ Shepard tried hard to find a link between what she was feeling and the return of the visions of the Reapers destroying the Prothean galaxy.

And as soon as the wave of failure ebbed away a heavy burden descended on her, she felt it settle as if it was a physical weight, on her shoulders, in her mind… she held out her hands in front of her and for a moment thought she saw the echoes of blood, red, blue, green, black.

‘Yeah well if you’re trying to tell me I have to fight the Reapers I didn’t need a meld and a speech about space magic to convince me… I’ve known that since Eden Prime and the beacon… but why didn’t the beacon fry my brain… I didn’t have to take all this on, not really… why didn’t I have a choice…it was like some switch was pushed, I pushed some switch inside…’ Shepard sat for what seemed like hours turning everything over in her mind.

Lady El’Estrene had said she would also give Shepard the months that she had been ‘not alive’ back and she had. Shepard now felt as if real time had elapsed even though she had no real conscious memory of most of what happened, although there were fragments of Miranda’s voice that she must have picked up towards the end of her time under sedation.

Shepard finally got up and began making her way back to the estate, the weight of responsibility she was already feeling seemed to have developed deep roots, she could feel them as she brought up memories of her life so far, subtle and perhaps even imagined… but it felt to Shepard, in that moment, that everything she had ever done, every decision made, had prepared her, honed her for being here, facing down an old, old enemy…

‘The galaxy’s old enemy is what I mean, for sure, not mine personally, don’t get all mystical on my ass Shepard…’
She continued to tell herself she hadn’t really been alive all that long; but she also accepted that she was certainly exhausted enough for more than one lifetime.

Shepard had some final preparations to make at the T'Soni house and had decided she would head for Illium first thing the next day.

The security at the house was to be increased as if they were still protecting their sick mistress. Rumours and leaked medical information would continue to drip out for the Shadow Broker to pick up and Shepard knew she had to play her part or else he would not drop his guard.

She made most of the arrangements with the Matriarch as both Garrus and Kasumi wanted to leave with Shepard; everyone knew it could be a very long time before Liara was well enough to leave the Temple. They both wanted to continue where they had left off before the Normandy was attacked, and they also wanted to help Shepard bring down the Shadow Broker for Liara.

Liara had told Shepard exactly what the Shadow Broker had told her and more importantly what he had shown her, the footage from inside the clinic, which meant anyone there could be an agent for him.

Shepard put in a call to her Grandmother who had taken charge of Shepard’s son and alerted her to the possible security risk. They decided to let the clinic nurse go, without arousing suspicion, and they would also increase security, just in case.

Shepard would also take Skark and Malania; Senna would stay and take charge of the estate security along with Evictus.

All of Shepard’s team would stay and all security would focus on the estate, everyone, including Shepard knew that Liara was safe at the Temple. Not only because it was highly unlikely that the Broker would learn of their deception but because all the Priestess’s were extremely powerful biotics, Lady El'Estrene would not let anything happen to Liara, Shepard was sure about that.

It was evening before Shepard felt she had done all she could to prepare the estate so that she could leave for Illium first thing.

“Shel would it be ok if I joined you, I thought you might want a little company,” Kasumi’s tone was light but Shepard knew the strain she was under had shown at dinner. Shepard had left before everyone, heading for the garden and the table she had last shared with Liara.

“Yeah of course… actually… I’ve missed our chats, Kas,” Shepard was struggling with the overload of thoughts populating her tired mind and she knew she could talk in complete confidence to Doctor Goto.

“Come on, out with it… you look as if your head will explode if you don’t empty it a little,” Shepard had already filled Kasumi and Garrus in on the highlights of what happened at the Temple.

Garrus was his usual sceptical self which Shepard always appreciated as it spoke to a very strong part of her nature, he had no faith in anything he couldn’t take to pieces and put back together again.

But Kasumi was both a scientist and a Buddhist, a belief system that had evolved since its origins way back in Earth history and was much more akin to the Asari faith, and as such she was much more open to those things that couldn’t be explained, yet, by science.

“I wonder if we were to weight my heart Kas whether I would make it through to the afterlife,” Shepard didn’t bother with any preamble, she picked up a conversation that had taken place in the
Normandy mess nearly two and a half years ago

“Well you know the Ancient Egyptians also prized the heart over the brain so maybe they didn’t know everything,” Kas said trying to take the edge off but continued, “the very fact that you question your actions and feel the loss of every life you take… yes you do Shep… even the ones who didn’t leave you a choice. I know you carry the responsibility for ending a life with you… surely that tells you something about who you are?”

“It tells me I give in to feeling sorry for myself occasionally…” Shepard gave Kas a weak grin and then felt the weight of all those times the Reapers had harvested her galaxy, “but there’s blood on my hands… too much to ever wash off.”

“Oh come on Shep you haven’t killed that many, and you are a marine, it’s what you have to do to protect those who can’t protect themselves,” Kas was now concerned she had never seen Shepard like this before.

“You don’t understand Kas… it’s the blood of all those I couldn’t save… all those I won’t be able to protect… I have this overwhelming sense that it’s my responsibility… it’s my fault…”

Kasumi Goto knew when to hold her tongue, when to just sit and be silently supportive, it was all she could do given the level of pain and grief that Shepard seemed to be in, and so they sat and both tried to find some peace in the warm darkness of the seemingly endless Thessian summer.

“Commander I thought you might want to see this before you leave, its Liara’s private meditation room, just here off her bedroom,” the Matriarch was standing by a door that Shepard hadn’t really noticed before.

“If it’s her private space Matriarch I don’t feel I should…” T’Joan cut her off saying.

“I know her well enough to be confident she would have shown you this herself if things had been… normal,” the Matriarch opened the door and moved aside for Shepard to walk in.

It was a small room and without windows, the walls were covered with beautiful embroidered hangings depicting what Shepard assumed were stories from Asari spiritual teaching.

A low, narrow table at one end of the room was obviously the focus for meditation with candles, a statue of the Goddess and a few other small abstract pieces of sculpture and two images, not vid clips or stills, but black and white sketches. One was clearly of Benezia and the other was Shepard herself.

On one of the side walls there was also a small table upon which stood what remained of her N7 chest plate and her N7 helmet both much the worse for wear as she had been wearing them that fateful day on the Normandy.

Standing alongside and hung around the neck of another statue of the Goddess were Shepard’s dog tags. Suddenly she could feel Liara’s presence in this room, sensed the hours, days, weeks and finally months spent with one hope, one wish, that Shepard would come back… she knew without doubt in that moment how powerfully Liara had refused to let Shepard go, couldn’t let her go, and so how tightly their fate was intertwined.
“Liara wore them for most of the first year and then as she found herself becoming more and more obsessed with the Shadow Broker, and no news came from Doctor Lawson, she felt she was losing the right to wear them,” the Matriarch was looking at Shepard who was running her fingers over her tags, “she would want you to have them back Shepard.”

Shepard couldn’t remember the Matriarch calling her anything but ‘Commander’ before and she looked up at the older Asari and saw the pain in her eyes.

“It’s been hard for you, losing Lady Benezia and then Liara coming home and nearly losing her,” Shepard once again realised that the impact of her relationship with Liara and her ‘death’ had rippled out and touched many more lives than she would have imagined.

“Yes, they are both very dear to me… and what happened to Benezia well… that was not who she was Commander.” They looked at each other for a few more moments and as Shepard squared her shoulders she picked up the dog tags and put them on.

The Matriarch walked Shepard out onto the lawn and looked as if she was trying to come to a decision, but when she spoke she was as inscrutable as ever.

“I suggest you visit Omega Commander, perhaps a talk with Aria T’Loak would be useful, although it is next to impossible to try to predict what frame of mind Matriarch T’Loak will be in one moment to the next.” Shepard had never heard anyone call Aria Matriarch and in fact was sure she’d heard a rumour that the last person who did so found themselves threatened with being sent head first out of the nearest air lock.

Shepard nodded and said, “thank you for all your help Matriarch may the Goddess be with you and those you watch over,” Shepard made a good attempt at an Asari parting sign and noticed a small smile tweak the corner of the Matriarch’s mouth.

“We will make an Asari of you yet Commander.”

The shuttle lifted off from the T’Soni estate and Shepard sat in the co-pilot seat for the whole journey to Illium, trying to wrangle her thoughts, but they were a mess.

‘If I could just get some control over my fucking thoughts… my head’s shot…’ Shepard took a deep breath and then thought, ‘well I’d better get my head straight before people start shooting at it… you’ve got a galaxy to save Shepard, for a very lovely and very beautiful, troubled young Asari’.
“This is amazing Kas, how the hell did you find it so quickly,” Shepard was standing in the middle of an large open plan apartment with almost floor to ceiling windows that formed two of the outer walls. Immediately to the right was a well equipped kitchen and the main space had three large sofas and another area that would clearly work as dinning space.

“This is the very best neighbourhood Illium has to offer Shep just as you wanted, if you look up there is an open gallery that gives access to four bedrooms, bathrooms and the lift to the roof,” Kasumi paused to enjoy the sight of Shepard’s eyebrows raising and a look of amazement forming on her face.

She continued, “Oh yes… this being the penthouse you are the only one with access to the roof and the sky car that comes with the apartment.

Anyone who shouldn’t be seen visiting or living here can access directly from above. I bought a five year lease, that was the shortest term they would give me… but” Shepard turned and gave Kas a hug and interrupted her by saying.

“It’s perfect, everything I asked for, show my upstairs, which one will work as the nursery,” Shepard was already heading for the stairs as she noticed a door leading off the main area and before she could ask Kasumi smiled and said.

“A decent sized study, you know Liara and her research,” Shepard smiled again at Kas but this time there was an edge of sadness in her eyes, nothing was certain about Liara joining her here or anywhere else for that matter.

It had been nearly a week since Shepard had returned to Illium. She kept the hotel rooms for show, but had in fact been settling into the penthouse apartment with her team.

Shepard had decided that most of the time Veetor’Nara would work from the apartment so he had been spending most of his time and a large chunk of credits on equipping one of the bedrooms and a comms hub and his research lab.

She offered him one of the bedrooms but he insisted that he was happy sleeping in the ‘comms room’, it was certainly big enough and it’s where he felt most at home.

Kasumi had paid a visit to Vert Plunes to ‘ask’ for his help on Shepard’s behalf. When Kas reported back to Shepard about the meeting she said he seemed almost resigned to the fact that he would hear from Shepard on a regular basis.

But Kasumi also said that he was helpful and sorted things out quickly. So if anyone went looking for anything that may be owned or leased by Shepard they would not find it, the lease was hidden amongst the assets of a certain merc group.

The final piece in the jigsaw was Shepard’s son. She wanted, needed, to take responsibility for him despite her dangerous and precarious lifestyle. The apartment had been put in place for that very reason. Once the idea formed Shepard could also see the advantage of having a ‘base’ that would not be under Cerberus control or scrutiny.

There was one big problem, how she was going to care for her son while she was also chasing all over the galaxy hunting down the Collectors and the Shadow Broker.
The situation had been solved by Shepard’s mother and grandmother. Shepard’s cousin Jamie had served one term in the Alliance but was now working in a crèche on the Arcturus station but agreed to join Shepard, to look after her son, as soon as he was approached by his aunt Captain Shepard.

Jamie had been dispatched to Earth to pick young John up and bring him to Illium and they were due at the Illium space terminal in a couple of hours. Shepard had sent Garrus and Kasumi to meet them, now all that remained was for her to wait for the arrival of her son.

She had a couple more days before she was due back at the Cerberus station to formerly enter her contract with Jack Harper and Miranda was already heading to Illium to pick her up.

It was Shepard’s last day and they had all congregated in the living area, dispersed around the sofas and all watching a game of baseball on the large screen. Shepard and Jamie had enjoyed themselves no end trying to explain the game to Garrus and Veetor who couldn’t grasp the mechanics of the scoring system, or much else if truth be told.

Kasumi at least understood the significance of the opening game of the 2185 season but not the choice of team that Shepard and Jamie were supporting.

“So why are the two of you, with all your Vancouver connections following the fortunes of the Vladivostok Bears?” She asked looking across at Shepard who had young John fast asleep in the crook of her arm.

“Family heritage,” Shepard answered, “most of the families that make up the Shepard Skorgaard clan can trace a connection to the old Russian Empire.

My family are connected to the Viking that laid the foundations for Russia and this little fella carries his name ‘Oleg’.”

“You know Shepard I don’t think you’ve given him enough names, the usual number for Turian society is around nine, to fully reflect the glorious heritage of the house this fine miniature human has been born into,” Garrus was smiling and Shepard laughed in response remembering the first time Garrus had listed his ten names most of which she had forgotten.

“Yeah well I reckon three is enough for anyone,” she said and noticing Kasumi’s questioning look continued, “well John, as you know for my father, Oleg for the warrior conqueror heritage in the family and Asoka who was a ruthless warrior but who then saw the light and became a kind and enlightened Buddhist king… kinda hoping to give him the best range of options when he’s old enough to choose his own path,” she smiled down at the sleeping infant.

“You do realise the unifying factor amongst those all those names though Shepard… they were all warriors,” Kasumi said with a huge smile.

“Yeah well genes will out,” Shepard answered and joined in the laughter as they all looked at the small human and the consummate warrior that cradled him.

The game ended with the Bears winning eleven to four against the Detroit Tigers which was Shepard’s cue to leave. Passing her son to Jamie and making her goodbyes she left with Garrus who was going to drop her off at the hotel where she would meet Miranda.

Shepard stood once more in the room that would connect her via QEC to Jack Harper and as he flickered into existence in front of her, with his familiar burning backdrop, she felt the same urge to strangle him with her bare hands.
But she now needed to start playing a very different game.

“So Commander I hope you have attended to all your personal matters and you’re ready to start your mission to bring down the Collectors?” Harpers tone was friendly as he scrutinized her with his prosthetic steely blue eyes.

“Indeed, it would seem that my coming back from the dead has caused a lot of questions to be asked and I’m damn certain I’m not going to be a lab rat for the Alliance while those responsible for destroying my ship and killing my crew are out there.

You seem to have been right about the unwillingness of the Council and the Alliance to believe the Reaper threat is still very real… but don’t get too comfortable with all this Harper, my enemies enemy doesn’t necessarily make them a friend.

This is a business arrangement and a way I can pay off my debt to you for bringing me back, I don’t like being in anyone’s debt let along a murdering, duplicitous bastard who I would still like to see dead.” Her voice was hard and cold her stare unwavering.

She would distance herself from the Alliance and play the part of a renegade but she would not cosy up to Harper or Cerberus that would be unbelievable and it was unnecessary.

“I’m glad we can find common ground Shepard, you may not believe it or like it but I admire and respect you as a shining example of humanities courage and ingenuity, you embody the best that humanity has to offer the galaxy.

You also have a unique relationship with the Reapers and therefore the Collectors which you will be able to exploit in order to bring them down.”

“You mean they want me dead or alive so as bait I won’t have long till I find myself in a fight with them,” she knew that was one of the reasons Harper had brought her back and not only because she had been instrumental in stopping the Reapers returning the last time they tried.

“Perhaps we should move on to your preparations to meet the challenges the Collectors pose,” it wasn’t so much a question as a statement and so he continued.

“You will find a set of dossiers that identify individuals that will be useful assets for your team. I am assuming you wish to include Doctor Goto and Mr Vakarian?”

“I’ll choose my own team Harper and my own crew and my condition about no Cerberus cheerleaders or uniforms still holds.” She would negotiate if she had to so needed to start from a powerful position.

“I’m afraid that Doctor Lawson is not negotiable and I will expect her to act as you XO, as for the crew, we have spent some time recruiting for this mission but you will, of course, have final sign off on crew members.

Perhaps you should look through the dossiers you have and then decide, they are only suggestions but they all have unique experience or expertise that will enhance your team.

It only remains for you to meet your pilot and take charge of your new ship; I look forward to hearing of your progress.” And with those final words the comms link when dark.

Shepard heard footsteps behind her and turned ready to be furious that Harper should presume to choose her pilot for her, but she immediately moved forward with a huge grin and placed her hands on the shoulders of a very wary looking Joker.
“Commander I’m so sorry I got you… killed… if you don’t want…” Shepard cut across his nervous and very un-Joker like tone.

“Hell Joker you’re the finest pilot I’ve ever seen, no one else I’d rather fly into a suicide mission with… they did tell you we will end up taking a trip through the Omega 4 relay,” she beamed at him and some of his old self started to shine through.

“Well with my flying and your ability to cheat death Commander I figure the odds of it not being a suicide mission just got a little higher.” He smiled and they began to walk up the stairs Joker taking them one at a time.

“So why did you leave the Alliance,” she asked knowing what the answer was likely to be.

“Well after you… you know died… the survivors of the old crew all got re-assigned and they wouldn’t let me fly, said I was a liability. So when I got approached by Cerberus I jumped at the chance to fly again when they told me you would be the Commander… and I only found out this morning… but this is our ship.”

They had reached the top of the stairs and Joker switched the window to view mode, there sitting in the dock was an almost exact replica of the Normandy, it looked about twice the size, but still the same sleek lines.

“I guess all we need to do is name her,” Joker was still looking at the ship as he spoke and Shepard was pleased to note that she had no markings on her silver bodywork except a black SR2 in a couple of places.

“Nothing else we could call her Joker, tell them to paint Normandy on her side and she will take revenge for her predecessors crew,” Shepard’s eyes blazed and realised she hadn’t had time to begin to mourn the loss of her ship and so many of her crew, some of whom she counted as friends.

Shepard was in her new cabin on the Normandy, where Miranda had obviously had all her replacement ‘possession’s’ installed, including her collection of replica’s, or models as Liara had teased her.

The thought of Liara burned her, she was not allowed to have any contact with her beautiful Asari as it was necessary for Liara to completely immerse herself in the therapy she was experiencing in the Temple.

Her eyes immediately found the three photographs on her desk, two of Liara and one of them both from their short holiday on Hasperos. They looked so carefree, happy and in love, Shepard felt the loss of Liara keenly.

Thinking about Hasperos and the Phosphorus system it was located within Shepard once again had a song come up in her mind. It was a favourite of hers and Liara’s but there was a particular line in the song that seemed to nudge at something just below her conscious mind.

She played it on her audio system… the song had been on her mind since ‘coming back’ and her realisation of just how badly hurt Liara was.

Shepard remembered a conversation that had taken place in her old cabin on the SR1, Liara had said that when music bubbled to the surface it was sometimes our ‘unconscious minds sending a message. Shepard had laughed and named it her internal DJ.

There was probably no surprise about this particular song as it spoke of wanting to ‘fix you’, but it
was also that one particular line was haunting the edges of her mind and hearing the song now she was able to bring it into focus, ‘stay if you want to and we’ll disappear…’

‘That’s it… disappear… the Protheans always had a backup plan, but it relied too much on technology… and they didn’t allow for the indoctrinated amongst them… we need a plan… I have to talk to Hackett… and Liara… I need to talk to Liara… get real Shepard you don’t just want to talk to her.’

Shepard once again allowed her eyes to rest on the photos as she played the song over again this time letting the beat and the message roll through her mind.

Before the song had finished the buzzer on her cabin door sounded and Shepard shut off the music.

“Come in,” Shepard stood up and waited for Miranda to enter the room.

“Commander I hope everything is to your liking? You’ll see the uniforms are just plain black with no insignia at all. Are you ready to sign off on the crew selection?” Miranda sounded as if she was walking on egg shells and Shepard knew they needed to clear the air.

“Look Miranda you passed on intel that led Liara straight into a trap and as good as killed her, she’s unlikely to recover and there’s nothing I can do about that… but I need to know I can rely on you, and your Cerberus puppet master, on a few key issues.

One is bringing down the Shadow Broker, he had footage of us in that clinic on Illium and so knows about my son, I need you to make sure that the Broker doesn’t know I’m looking for him but I am going to destroy his arse just for being too interested in my private life… do you understand?” Shepard noted that Miranda looked truly shocked at the revelation that the Broker knew about the clinic and the birth.

“Shepard you have to believe me when I say I had no intention of hurting Doctor T’Soni… is your son safe…” Shepard cut across her.

“Yeah he is, safe and sound hidden on Earth and we let the nurse from the clinic go before we moved him… and maybe I believe you about Liara… we have a connection Miranda but it doesn’t mean I’m just going to trust you,” Shepard didn’t like what she was going to do but smoke and mirrors at this point was all she had.

“Look, we share a child, not in the usual sense but… you know… so let’s try to get to know each other a little better… outside work… I need to know I can trust you,” Shepard left her intention hanging between them.

“I… that would be… a useful way for us to have a more productive working relationship Commander, thank you,” Shepard smiled.

“I’ve told you when we’re off duty to call me Shepard. Look I’ve read through the files on the crew, they all seem fine, and very high number of ex-alliance and you know I won’t have any Cerberus lackeys on my crew so I’ll leave it to your judgment.”

Miranda looked pleased and nodded before making to leave the room.

“As soon as they are all on board we leave for Omega, I’ve told Doctor Goto and Garrus Vakarian to join us there.”

“Yes Commander,” Miranda answered and Shepard’s eyes followed her as she left the room.
‘Well it won’t be a hardship flirting with her; she is easy on the eye… but remember what you mamma told you about playing with fire,’ Shepard thought and then turned her attention back to reading the dossiers of her prospective team members.

Shepard slipped back easily into her on ship routine, it fit her like a second skin, eating all her meals in the mess, spending time with every crew member and familiarising herself with all areas of the ship.

There were, as she had noted to Miranda, a fair number who were ex-alliance and who seemed to have signed up only because the mission was being run by Shepard. And the Cerberus members were of the ‘wanting the best for humanity’ ilk rather than ‘all aliens are inferior and are only out to do humanity down’.

When Joker called her on the ship comms that they were about to drop out of the relay jump and into the Sahrabarik system Shepard was already on her way up to the cockpit to take her usual place standing between the pilot and co-pilot chairs.

The sight of the Omega station always thrilled her slightly; it was probably the most dangerous place in the galaxy, if you didn’t know how to handle yourself and it was that edge that made her senses just that little bit sharper.

“Joker if we’re ever confronted with any kind of ship dropping out of FTL in front of us in future you have my permission to jump us to a safe distance without waiting to find out who it is,” Shepard said to Joker from where she was standing behind his seat, her arms crossed in a familiar pose.

“But mister the next time I order abandon ship I want you scrappy little arse to be one of the first hitting the seat in the nearest escape pod, do I make myself clear,” she accompanied her words with a squeeze of his shoulder.

“No need to worry about either of those circumstances Commander, there’s absolutely no way I’m losing another ship,” and he hung his head a little and continued in a quieter voice, “or another Commander.”

Shepard smiled to herself at the penitence of her usually flippant and back chatting Lieutenant, but as the ship drew closer to the station and Joker began talking to what passed for its docking control Shepard’s mind moved to thinking about the meeting with Aria T’Loak and the recruitment of the first couple of members of her specialist team.

Shepard and Garrus were sitting in a booth on the middle floor of the Afterlife club watching Miranda and Kasumi at the bar, the pirate queen of Omega hadn’t been in the club when they arrived so Shepard had decided they should settle in and have a few drinks.

“You know Shepard, you have impeccable taste in women even when you’re dead,” Garrus’s mandibles were twitching wildly and Shepard could hear the humour in his voice.

“What can I say… I’m irresistible even completely comatose… that’s a real handicap for you Vakarian… never gonna pull with me around,” Shepard was smiling at her friend as they settled into their usual round of banter.

“Well don’t get too carried away… you haven’t bedded her yet so I’m probably still in with a shot,” Shepard turned and gave him a playful punch to the shoulder.

“Hey that’s the mother of my child you’re talking about… well sort of,” they settled back down from
their laughter as the two women approached the table carrying drinks.

“Want to let us in on the amusement,” Kasumi asked her eyebrows raised as she sat next to Garrus while Miranda sat next to Shepard.

“Oh just catching up with Garrus’s woeful performance with the females of any species… poor guy needs dating tips from me and I’ve been dead for the best part of two years.” Shepard raised a glass to Garrus who raised his in salute and said.

“Touché, but this… competition is not over.”

The group spent the next couple of hours relaxing and chatting, it was important for Shepard to study Miranda in an off duty relaxed setting, Shepard really needed to know if or how much she could trust Miranda, and she also wanted to know what Cerberus had hanging over the Doctor’s head.

Aria T’Loak finally made an appearance and Shepard was summoned to join her, alone, on the balcony that Aria habitually occupied when she was in the club.

Shepard stepped inside the almost invisible privacy barrier and found herself looking at Aria’s back.

“So tell me Shepard what was it like dying,” Aria asked her still standing looking out over the crowded dance floor.

“You get the prize Aria… the only person so far to ask me that… if you want the honest answer I was angry… felt it wasn’t fair it should happen just as I found someone that I loved… then it was painful and frightening… then nothing,” Shepard knew she was going to have to fence with Aria but decided to move things along a little more quickly.

“Matriarch T’Joan suggested it might be… helpful if I came to Omega and talked to you,” Shepard couldn’t be sure but there may have been a slight tensing of shoulder… but it could have been her imagination.

“Really… and just what do you need from me this time Shepard,” Aria had turned around to look her in the eyes while answering. Aria sat down in a familiar pose with her arms along the back of the long bench seats that encircled the space.

Shepard sat down and leaned back in her seat studying Aria in a way that the queen of Omega would find both irritating and disrespectful before long.

“You know Liara would probably have been dead at least three times over if she hadn’t had a guardian angel providing protection for her,” Shepard thought she saw T’Loak’s eyes narrow slightly.

“What has this got to do with me, last time I checked babysitter wasn’t on my list of job titles… from what I hear you were the one that… saved her last time… that is when you eventually got around to paying the supposed object of affection some attention.”

Shepard got the barb but wasn’t going to be deflected, “Yeah well my life got a bit complicated after being dead and then being brought back… but I met the instrument of her protection at the Broker base… she seemed familiar to me so I did some digging… seems she works out of Omega and quite often for you.” Shepard left her statement hanging but Aria made no comment, she was now completely inscrutable.

“My concern is about the motives of anyone who is close enough to Liara both to protect her and… provide her with information that could also get her killed.”
“Why don’t you spit it out Shepard, you think I’ve been helping poor little lost Liara after her great hero got herself killed… why would I put myself to that trouble, that expense, unless of course you already have a theory,” Aria’s words were cold as was her stare, Shepard could almost feel something else but couldn’t make any sense of whatever it was.

“I think there are very few people in the galaxy who could have pulled off that kind of protection and even fewer who would have the support and trust of someone as loyal to the T’Soni family as Matriarch T’Joan is. Why don’t we stop shadow boxing Aria, you don’t have to kiss and tell but I know your involved somehow, just so we’re clear if you put Liara into any danger with the game your…..” But Shepard’s words were cut off as Aria jumped to her feet and with a biotic pulse from her hand lifted Shepard out of her seat and pinned her to the wall by her throat.

“Don’t ever think you can threaten me Shepard and don’t ever presume you know what my business is… I think you’re the one who left Liara in danger and exposed and if it wasn’t for the fact that we both know how attached she is to you I would be strongly advising you to keep well away from her,” Aria dropped her hands to her side and Shepard crashed to the floor.

Shepard focused hard on not gasping for breath or coughing and as smoothly as possible got up off the floor and sat back down, looking across at Aria it was as if the shutters had come down and the previous display of anger was nowhere to be seen.

“If there wasn’t something going on between you and Liara you wouldn’t hesitate to have put out an airlock if I pissed you off as much as it seems I just did, but I’m not looking to piss you off… I need your help.

When Liara gets out of the Temple I want the problem with the Shadow Broker to have gone away and that will only happen if I kill him.”

“I thought you wanted everyone to believe Liara was practically dead, not spending time at the local Temple, what happened to your carefully laid deceptions,” Aria was once again relaxed and sitting back in her seat her usual commanding self.

“You seem to have a direct line inside the T’Soni inner circle so I won’t insult you by pretending we don’t both know that.

Someone gave Liara information that led her into that trap and it came via Cerberus, I will find out who it was but I can’t trust that they will help me with my Broker problem, I have a mission to carry out for them and they won’t want me distracted.

I’m looking but if you could help me I may have a chance to take him down sooner, we both know it isn’t going to be easy tracking down his base.” Shepard leaned forward as if to emphasize how important this was.

Aria looked as if she was considering what Shepard had said and when she answered her tone was neutral and controlled.

“I will provide you with any information that comes into my hands that relates to the Shadow Broker’s base, on one condition, that you deal with the problem before Liara leaves the Temple… oh and it really wouldn’t matter if the Shadow Brokers prisoner didn’t make it out alive,” when she finished speaking she touched her bracelet and Shepard felt the privacy barrier drop.

Shepard stood up and nodded to the queen of Omega and turned to go but before she left she turned to Aria and said, “I won’t allow anyone to hurt Liara or put her in danger.”
“Unless of course it’s you Shepard and you have done both those things on too many occasions,” Aria spoke without malice or coldness and if Shepard didn’t think that it would be ridiculous she would have said there was an edge of sadness in the parting words from Omega’s ice queen.

Arai watched Shepard walk away; it was all she could do not to explode with anger. ‘When the fuck did she become an empath… I doubt she knows yet or she would have actually controlled it… fuck… what the hell happened to her…’

Aria was doubly frustrated, she had no eyes inside the Temple and no eyes inside Cerberus, but she had to find out how this human had developed a very Asari trait, which was even rare amongst the Asari themselves.

She had lost control and Aria never lost control, Shepard had come close without even knowing to uncovering the feelings that were so deeply hidden away inside Aria that sometimes she even forgot she had them.

‘I need to know and I need to be better prepared for the next time we meet… you won’t catch me out again Shepard,’ as Aria finished that thought her second in command joined her and her mind was brought back to the business of running her empire.

As Shepard walked down the stairs and began making her way back to the others at the table the music throbbed through her body and she felt a powerful urge to hit the dance floor.

‘What the hell is happening to you Shepard… your meant to be working and you want to go fucking dancing… you think you can sense what Aria is feeling… did you bang your head somewhere along the way and I missed it… fuckin concentrate on what you’re doing..’” Shepard’s thoughts were laced with anger, Aria’s parting shot had hit its mark, it was absolutely true and there wasn’t a damn thing Shepard could do about it.

“Right you lot are we sober enough to go get our Professor?” Shepard asked when she got back to the table, meeting nods and an immediate shifting of bodies to standing positions she headed for the entrance.

When they hit the street Shepard realised how much she was looking forward to what was going to be quite a fight to get to the clinic that the Salarian Doctor Mordin Solus had set up deep inside the quarantine zone in one of the lower habitation rings.

“Ok we know there is a plague loose that seems not to affect human’s but it’s not stopping the Blue Suns and Blood Pack from fighting over territory, so we are likely to get caught in the crossfire and end up fighting both.

Sorry Garrus but I’m not prepared to risk you catching this plague so you stay put here.” Shepard saw that he was about to argue and to cut him off she gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder and continued, “Look you’re too valuable to me to lose you to some bug, suck it up soldier.”

“Hum well I suppose… but I don’t like it,” Garrus’s voice was quiet but Shepard could hear his concern.

Leaving Garrus at the barrier Shepard, Miranda and Kasumi entered the quarantined district guns at the ready.
Chapter 30

Shepard and her team approached the two Turians who were standing guard at a barrier in front of the doors to the quarantined district.

“Can’t you read,” one of the Turians said as they both readied their assault rifles. Behind her she knew Kasumi and Miranda had brought their weapons to bear on the two guards but Shepard kept walking until she was toe to toe with the Turian who had spoken.

“In case you haven’t worked it out we’re all human and apparently the plague doesn’t affect us and more importantly I need to get inside to talk to the Salarian who’s running the clinic… so be good boys and move out of my way.”

The Turian in front of her made to raise his weapon and in blur of fluid movement Shepard gave him a blow under his chin with the heel of her hand at the same time stepping to his side and kicking his legs out from under him.

When the movement had stopped the Turian was moaning on the ground and Shepard had his weapon in her hand pointing directly at the head of the second guard.

“Yeah well… don’t think getting back out… will be easy…” the second Turian’s words tailed off as Shepard shoved the confiscated rifle into his chest and began walking past.

Once inside the doors Shepard also drew her Mattock, set to incendiary ammo, and started walking down the corridor. As the end of the corridor drew near she could see it opened out into an open square with what looked like shop fronts on all sides, all deserted and showing heavy damage from weapons fire.

Their route further into the district appeared to be blocked by another barrier on the other side of the open space and a lone figure was sitting on some abandoned boxes. As they walked, weapons at the ready, across the space the stranger stood up.

“That is one tall woman and built almost as solidly as that sweet Jamie,” Kasumi’s voice was low but Shepard heard the smile, they were both aware that Kasumi had been much taken with the powerfully built but kind and gentle child carer.

Shepard stowed her rifle, quickened her pace and opened her arms to welcome the woman into a hug, “Natasha Irina Mikhailovich what dafaq are you doing here?”

They crashed together the sound of their armour echoing around the space, Shepard was on the tall side herself but she only measured up to Tasha’s shoulder.

They broke the hug and stood a little apart.

“Well for one thing I’ve dealt with your little welcome parade,” and as Shepard looked where Tasha was indicating she could see four very dead Blue Suns mercs.

“But how did you know…” Shepard began but Tasha’s mellow voice cut across her question.

“Worst kept secret in the galaxy Elvee, where the great back from the dead hero of the Citadel is heading… although I have to say not sure why you want that cranky Salarian…” as she was speaking the tall blond haired human pulled out a cigar and lit it, the thick smoke immediately spiralling from its end.
“Shit you still got that lousy habit… look it’s great to see you and we need a proper catch up but I have a job to do… unless you wanted to join me?” Shepard and Tasha were too busy talking to each other to catch the expressions cross Miranda’s face but Kas saw them and then they were gone replaced by her usual inscrutable mask.

But Kasumi had seen, shock, fear and then what looked like confusion, something that Kas would never have associated with the accomplished and professional Doctor.

“Well I thought you could do with the company… gotta tell you Elvee it’s pretty lonely being the black sheep of the family, you’re gonna need some help with the transition…” before Shepard could answer they heard tell-tale sounds of movement and instinctively drew weapons and took up defensive positions.

The slog to reach the clinic in the centre of the district had been hard, not only finding Blue Suns and Blood Pack but also looters, lost and frightened residents, and those dying from the plague.

They helped who they could, encouraging some to make their way to the clinic when it was safe to do so and helping others to secure their properties where it was safer for them to sit it out.

Shepard had been glad of the extra firepower that Tash provided and as an Alliance trained marine they fell easily into the almost unspoken teamwork that was the hallmark of a well drilled squad.

Miranda proved to be very useful and an excellent weapons master but was obviously much more used to giving orders and making tactical decisions, but Shepard thought that would work itself out and it might be handy to have another experienced squad leader she could rely on.

Kasumi’s technical skill which included running attack and recon drones gave them the edge on more than one occasion in the rabbit warren of narrow streets that constituted large areas of the district.

Eventually they made it to the clinic entrance and were met by security guards backed up with mechs.

“Stow your weapons and don’t cause any trouble inside the clinic or you’ll answer to the mechs,” one of the security guards said as they approached.

“You won’t have any trouble from us, we’re here to speak to the Prof,” Shepard said as she and her team put their weapons away.

“You’ll find him through the main reception area in one of the wards.”

The clinic looked to be well organised but it was packed with people in various stages of sickness and distress. As Shepard walked through she also noticed a group of human’s who although showing no signs of illness had sought out the clinic for sanctuary.

Shepard picked up a conversation coming from a ward to her left and as she entered the room, which must have once merely been a large storage area but now was packed with beds and medical equipment, she saw a tall Salarian standing at a medical station working a console while answering questions from his staff in the usual quick fire manner of his race.

“Professor we’re running low on cipoxin,” a young assistant standing at Mordin’s back asked.

“Use malanarin. Plenty on hand. Almost as good. Causes cramping in Batarians. Supplement with butemeron.” Mordin answered without stopping what he was doing.
“malanarin and butemerol, got it.” As the assistant moved away Shepard walked up and stood a little distance from the Professor and listened to what was obviously his musings on the plague.


“Professor Mordin Solus,” Shepard decided to get the Professor’s attention. Solus turned towards Shepard and activated his OT and ran a quick scan.

“Hmm don’t recognise you from the area. Too well-armed to be refugees. No mercenary uniforms. Quarantine still in effect.” As he finished speaking he turned and moved to another console saying.


Shepard had been fascinated by the Professor and could almost feel his frenetic energy and also a strong impression that he could take care of himself.

“Relax Professor, My name is Commander Shepard and I’m here to ask for your help,” Shepard relaxed into a familiar pose, leaning back on one leg and arms crossed.

“The Commander Shepard. But you were reported killed. Deception very good. Must have been a well-controlled cover up.”

“No Professor, unlikely as it may seem I did… kind of die… Have you heard of an organisation called Cerberus?” She decided to press on and try to keep the Professor focussed on her request.

“Human centric organisation. Plague does not affect humans. I am too busy. Plague out of control. Too much to do.” Shepard was a little surprised that Solus had heard of Cerberus but was pleased she had decided to be open about who was bank rolling her mission.

“It’s a critical mission Professor; I’m going to take down the Collectors.” As Shepard said Collectors the Professor stopped in his tracks and looked as if he was deep in thought as he spoke.

“Collectors? Interesting. Plague hitting these slums is engineered. Collectors one of few groups with technology to design in. Our goals may be similar.” Shepard felt as if she was finally getting somewhere but the fact that the plague had been engineered needed to be thought about when they got back to the Normandy. Then the Professor was speaking again.

“But must stop plague first. Already have a cure. Need to start distributing it at environmental control centre. Vorcha guarding it. Need to kill them.”

“We can take care of that Professor,” as Shepard spoke a clanking and hissing sound came from the overhead vents that provided air circulation and cleaning.

“What the fuck was that,” Tasha’s asked the question on Shepard’s lips.

“Vorcha have shut down environmental systems. Trying to kill everyone. Must get power back on before everyone in district suffocates. Also. Daniel, my assistant. Went into Vorcha territory.
Looking for victims. Hasn’t come back.” It was an unspoken request.

“We’ll do our best to find him.” Shepard took the plague cure from the Professor and walked towards the exit of the clinic her team in tow.

They had only moved up one staircase and reached the entrance to another wide open ‘square’ before confronting a group of Blood Pack mercenaries. Shepard couldn’t find any way around them, and in any case if they didn’t fight them on the way to the environmental controls they would probably have to fight them on their way back.

“On my mark, Tash with Miranda left flank, Kas your with me, we’ll take cover at that first barrier and hit them from there.” Shepard got nods from her squad they slipped into the area only being spotted at the very last moment before Shepard and Kas hit cover.

The enemy they were facing were mainly Vorcha, some with flamethrowers with three Krogan battle masters. Shepard and Kas ripped into the troopers with assault rifles set with incendiary ammo. Shepard also had her shotgun ready set with disruptor ammo and swapped quickly between the two particularly when the Krogan’s began to move forward.

Within half a minute a firestorm dropped in from cover on the left of the room, Tash and Miranda had managed to move quickly to out flank the mercs who found themselves without cover from this onslaught.

Shepard indicated to Kas to stay put and set up a couple of defensive drones while she took advantage of the shock of the other half of her team jumping into the fight, and she moved quickly to the right side of the room there was practically no cover but she only needed to get to the pillar fifteen feet away.

She was working forward to try to get the drop on the remaining two Krogan’s when a door to her right a little way in front opened and another Krogan entered the fight. Shepard had no cover and knew that the worse thing she could do was retreat, she only had the element of surprise.

Shepard already had her shotgun in hand and moving forward swiftly she rammed the weapon into the side of the Krogan and got off two shots before being thrown ten feet through the air with a sweep of the furious Krogan’s arm.

Smashing into a wall it was actually the result Shepard wanted, she had put distance between her and the now wounded Krogan more quickly than she could have under her own steam.

She had held onto her shotgun but reached for a frag grenade and before she had even finished hitting the ground had thrown it through the air at the now charging Krogan. She followed it up with another shot as she scrambled to her feet only to roll to her left to gain a little more distance springing to her feet in time to see the Krogan stagger under the impact of the grenade.

Another two blasts from her shotgun as she now started walking back towards the heavily injured battlemaster who had lost his weapons and had slumped to his knees. A final blast from her shotgun straight into his face put him on his back; she continued walking and stepped over the Krogan’s body.

The rest of the fighting seemed to be dying away and after a few more seconds the space fell silent. She looked back and saw Kas begin to move forward and her two other squad mates moved out from behind cover.

“Well that was fun… nice work with that Krogan Elvee you still got the touch,” Tash grinned at
Shepard and slapped her on the back as they began moving again towards the environmental control station.

Although the Vorcha didn’t create their own technology once they had acquired it they used it as well as any of the other species. As they got closer to the control centre Shepard and the squad needed Kas to override the now very securely locked down doors between entire sub-districts.

Thankfully they didn’t encounter another large group of mercenaries, but were kept on their toes, and busy with smaller groups of Blue Sun and Blood Pack who had been separated from larger more organised groups and were merely fighting to survive.

Finally within striking distance of the control centre they hear voices drifting towards them from a corridor off to the right. Shepard signalled to Kas and Miranda to stay put while she and Tash moved towards the open door to one of the apartments.

“No, you have to believe me… I… I… work with Professor Solus at the clinic… please…” the voice was young and very frightened and sounded human.

“You are spreading the plague; it’s here in your bag human do you think we’re stupid,” the second voice was deeper, almost a growl and almost definitely belonging to a Batarian.

“Maybe we should cut off his fingers then he would talk,” another Batarian voice who finished his words with a laugh.

“No please believe me, those are the cure… I came to help…”

Shepard indicated to Tash they would move into the room and get the drop on whoever was inside… on three they moved swiftly in and split to left and right.

“Look out…” one of the Batarians shouted and Shepard could see there were four altogether, the one who was closest to the frightened young medic put his pistol to the side of the human’s head.

Shepard held her weapons pointing at the Batarian who was covering the medic and said.

“Look I get that you’re scared of the plague and the Vorcha but this guy isn’t your enemy, he really does have the cure, let him go and you can all walk. If you start shooting you all die, don’t doubt me, you will be first.” Shepard’s voice was steady and she knew that Tash had already worked out the order of shots to take if necessary.

“Oh please… don’t let me die… please,” the young medic looked as if he was going to drop to his knees with fear.

“How do I know I can trust you human?” the Batarian seemed to be the leader of the group and was matching her stare.

“I’m trying to get the cure to the environment control station my fight isn’t with you Batarian, but I won’t let you kill an innocent bystander whose only crime is to be stupid and naïve,” Shepard finished and continued to keep her eyes locked with the Batarian watching for any shift that would tell her he was going to fire.

He moved his gun and then dropped his hand to his side the other Batarians followed suit, but before anyone could say anything else a roar of weapons fire rebounded around the room and Shepard had no choice but to shoot the Batarian she had been talking to as his weapon came back up to shoot.

Once Shepard was sure her shot was good she looked around the rest of the room and saw three
other dead Batarians on the floor. Daniel the medic fell to his knees she thought he might actually be sobbing.

“What the fuck did you do that for,” Shepard turned and walked straight up to Tash who was now leaning against a wall with her weapon held in both hands across her stomach.

“You weren’t really going to let them walk out… Elvee where the fuck do you think you are… you’re on your own now… no Alliance to back you up or look over your shoulder,” Tash’s voice was steady and she spoke in a matter of fact way, almost as if explaining something really simple to someone who should already know what she was talking about.

“They would have walked away, there was no need and what if you hadn’t been quick enough to finish them or I hesitated… that could have gone so fucking wrong…” Shepard was interrupted by Kas and Miranda coming into the room.

“I had it Elvee, I’d never leave your arse hanging out… look they knew we had the drop on them, much more sensible to leave and ambush us when we left… come on you’re not going to lose sleep over Batarians.” And with that she stood up straight and ambled out of the room.

“What the hell happened Shepard,” Miranda asked concerned edging her tone.

Kas had moved to help Daniel to his feet and the young medic seemed a little more in control of himself.

“Nothing it’s all fine. Daniel you need to head back to the clinic Solus needs you and your going to get yourself killed if you wander around out here,” Shepard spoke with as much kindness as she could muster but the medic had brought the situation on himself and she needed to move on to complete the mission.

“You killed them… they surrendered and you killed them… that’s not right… your murderers,” he was babbling but was looking past her to the dead bodies.

“Hey you little fuckwit… we just put our lives on the line to save your stupid arse… we did what we had to do now get the fuck out of my eye line you ungrateful little shit,” Shepard’s voice was harsh and her tone hard, the young medic was on the receiving end of the anger she felt at the situation, which was tainted by her memories of Torfan.

The medic gathered his bag and rushed from the room, Shepard noticed Kas eyeing her with a surprised expression, the outburst was not like the Commander and Shepard felt ashamed of how she had spoken to Daniel.

“Let’s move out,” Shepard would apologise to him when they got back to the clinic and she would also have a very robust talk to Tash about following orders and not being a hothead, if indeed Tash wanted to be a member of the squad.

They made it to the main entrance to the environmental control centre with little further incident. Kas hacked the door and they moved cautiously into the large open area and at the further end of the room they could see a large group of Vorcha.

One of the group moved forward and shouted across the room.

“You no come here; we shut down machines, break fans.”
in front of them, behind the group of Vorcha.

“Everyone choke and die, then Collectors make us strong.”

Shepard began to move forward closer to her chosen cover and knew her squad was doing the same.

“Why are you doing this,” she shouted just to give a few more moments to get her squad set up.

“Collectors want plague. You work for Doctor, turn machines on. Put cure in air. We kill you first.”

“Now,” Shepard called through her suit comms and all four hit cover and began to take down the group of Vorcha in front of them.

As Shepard had expected the gallery’s had Vorcha rocket troopers on and were a priority to be taken out.

“Miranda, can you use your biotics to lift or slam those guys up top, Tash concentrate on them with you sniper. Kas you and I will keep the ground guys occupied.” With targets carved up between the squad they all set to their duties.

Tash needed a better angle so worked further around to the left and she and Miranda targeted the right hand balcony. When that one was clear they re-oriented their attention to the left hand balcony.

At the same time Shepard and Kasumi had finished off the ground troops and Shepard decided to make a run for the main controls while Tash and Miranda took out the remaining resistance.

Once Shepard had put the cure into the distribution system they had to turn on the fan systems located in two separate machinery rooms. They encountered more resistance but worked effectively as a team and once the two fan units were back on and the plague cure had started to circulate the Vorcha resistance faded away.

It was an easier journey back to the clinic but not without some skirmishing with Blood Pack mercs but they were either quickly dispatched or they retreated out of the fight.

Finally back at the clinic Shepard found Professor Solus with his assistant Daniel.


“Professor, how can you thank these monsters, they butchered those Batarians in cold blood.” As Daniel spoke his voice was edged with anger and distaste.

It hadn’t been Shepard’s decision to kill the Batarians but anything that happened when she was in charge was her responsibility and she always stood by her troops, even if in private she gave them a dressing down.

“Hell we saved your life, saved the whole damned district come to that and you’re judging me.” Shepard really didn’t want to take this much further and only hoped that it hadn’t screwed her chances of recruiting Solus to her mission.

“Shepard’s right Batarians tortured you, would have killed you, she was right to kill them.” Shepard was surprised at the Professors reaction but then remembered he had served in the Salarian special forces and had a bit of a reputation for being able to take care of himself.
“But we are here to help, to heal people…” Daniel was cut off by the Professor again.

“Sometimes you can only help people by killing what is threatening them, sometimes there is no cure Daniel. Now give me a moment with Shepard and then we will talk.”

Mordin Solus watched Daniel leave the room and turned to Shepard, “he is idealistic but a good Doctor and is more than capable of running the clinic. I will need a day to make arrangements but then I can join you. If that is acceptable.”

“No problem Professor, this time tomorrow we’ll be expecting you on the Normandy,” Shepard offered her hand to Mordin Solus who took it, and they sealed their agreement with a handshake.

When they had made it back out of the district and met up with Garrus, Shepard turned to the group and said.

“Tash and I need to do some catching up, why don’t you three make your way back to the Normandy, I’ll be a couple of hours.” Shepard received nods and a very wary look from Garrus who had no idea who the stranger was.

“Drink?” Tash asked fully expecting the answer to be yes.

“Lead the way… so long as it’s… aw hell Tash does it have to be Afterlife…” but despite her reservations she fell into step besides Tash and they both made their way to the club.

They compromised and found a table in the lower bar which was much quieter and had a more intimate feel. Then when they finally sat down with drinks in hand Shepard asked the question that had been on her mind for years.

“So why the hell did you just disappear, no contact, I can understand not wanting anything to do with your father… but you were my best friend not just my cousin,” Shepard could hear in her own voice the years old hurt that still rankled all this time on.

“Aw LV… if you’re going to be the black sheep, well… got to do it properly,” Tash looked uncomfortable for a moment and then continued, “I messed up big time, and I didn’t want to bring any of that mess to your door. You still had your career in the Alliance; I had to take a different path.”

“Not good enough Tash, you know I wouldn’t, didn’t, judge you… I know how much being in the Alliance meant to you, it was all you ever wanted, we both had the same plans… was there no way back for you?” Shepard realised she was in a similar position now, cut loose from the support and structure of her Alliance career, she hated it.

“Nah… and you know I’ve had a blast… had more action than most grunts in the Alliance, present company accepted, and being a merc has its upside… lots of credits, choose what I do, lots of women,” Tash laughed and downed her drink and moved quickly to the bar to get them refills.

Shepard sensed, felt, that Tash was holding back, there was truth in her words but not the whole truth… ‘there you go again Shepard… you can’t feel when someone is lying and you sure as hell can’t sense what they might be feeling… fuck just because you came back from the dead you don’t get super hero powers… instincts and intuition is what you need to rely on… tried and tested.’ Shepard’s train of thought was interrupted by Tash’s return to the table with another round of drinks.

“So what do you fancy, upstairs in a minute, couple of Asari dancers… I have a place not far from here, we could have a private party,” Tash smiled and downed another drink.
“Not for me… I’m kind of in a thing… but I have to get back to the ship and make sure we’re the lab is ready for the Prof.” Shepard realised she wasn’t going to get a chance to talk about Tash’s behaviour on the mission but needed to say something, “look Tash I don’t know if you want to join me on the mission, it’s pretty dangerous, some would say a one way ticket… but if you do then you need to be able to take orders from me and not be a loose cannon.”

Tash sat up straight and looked serious, “fuck Elvee you’ve got to let me come with you, it would be good to fight on the right side for a change… I’ll do whatever you ask… honest,” on her last word the cheeky, don’t give a damn smile and expression reappeared on Tash’s face but Shepard had the assurance she needed.

“Ok, then I’ll see you ready to ship out on the Normandy first thing,” Shepard made to leave but Tash held up a hand.

“Whoa you don’t think I’m going to let ‘I’m in a thing’ pass without comment huh… so the rumour I heard is true,” Tash smiled at Shepard’s blank look, “I may spend most of my time in the Terminus systems but we do get news here, the new year’s dance on Arcturus… when you and my arse hole of a father had a go at you… the Asari?”

“Yeah but it’s complicated, she’s…” Shepard had a strong urge, need, to be able to talk to someone who she could trust and who would understand about her relationship with Liara… Tash had known her better than anyone else when they were growing up, but something held her back, “well we may not get back together she’s ill… but I’m not interested in anything else right now.”

“Well that’s a big surprise, you know you were the queen of casual, no strings, and a bigger flirt than I was… which is saying something… so you got hooked huh… hope she’s worth it… lot of lovely women willing to do anything they can to lighten the load for the hero of the Citadel,” again Tash lapsed into laughter.

“Yeah well, not for me, not right now anyway… so see you in the morning… no excuses, bring your hangover with you,” Shepard smiled and stood up, Tash stood and pulled Shepard into a hug.

“Good to see you cuz, thanks for letting me tag along,” Tash stepped back picked up her drinks and headed for the main dance floor bar with a wave of her hand. Shepard headed for the exit and outside to the docking bay.

As she was crossing the street a voice, a familiar Salarian voice, called her name and as she stopped she saw a figure running towards her.

“Commander, I thought it was you, I heard you were on Omega, heard of your return, really unbelievable, yet not, as here you are,” Ish ran out of breath and was shaking Shepard’s hand continuously as he spoke.

“Ish it’s good to see you, I heard you made it off the Normandy, what the hell are you doing here,” she was really pleased to see the young Salarian who had been a very handy member of her science and tech team on the old Normandy.

“Oh a little of this a little of that, nothing I am proud of, would you still have a place for me Commander, I would be happy to sign on doing anything you needed,” Ish’s eyes were shining with expectation and she could hear the excitement in his voice.

“Of course I could really do with your help, but Ish, this is a different mission altogether. I am not with the Alliance any more, may not even be a Spectre, and if all things go to plan we are headed on what many would say was a suicide mission.” She didn’t want any of her crew or squad to have any
“So be it, but I have every confidence that if anyone can pull through against such odds it is the great Commander Shepard,” Ish finally stopped shaking her hand and appeared flushed with happiness.

“Well I don’t know about that Ish, but if you’re ok with the mission parameters join us on the Normandy by tomorrow midday at the latest,” Shepard smiled and he nodded and rushed away, she had the feeling they may well see him on board the Normandy even before the morning.

As Shepard stood behind Joker and Malania (who had joined them when they docked on Omega) and gave the order to leave the space station and set course for the Citadel her crew compliment had increased by four.

Malania would serve as co-pilot, shuttle pilot and co-navigator; Tash who would join Shepard’s fire team as a squad member; Mordin Solus who had already started work studying the Collectors and their swarm attack techniques in the lab; and Ish who had taken up residence in what would become the research and tech lab under the leadership of Kasumi.

Shepard needed to find out if she could expect any support or help from the Council and if they would re-instate her as a Spectre. Then she needed to begin to put all the pieces together and start hunting down the Collectors.
Chapter 31

A/N I have often thought that given the Asari live so long and have such an advanced civilization that they like to discuss and debate and also have a strong spiritual element to their society, that it was a shame the words I ended up having to use around parenting were so limited.

So please forgive me but I went searching for some words from ancient Earth languages (starting with Sanskrit) to fill the gap… in the end after much muttering I ended up borrowing from Tibetan Buddhism.

After much agonising I shortened them to make them easier to read, please forgive me my Buddhist brothers and sisters, so here are my offerings for the ceremonial terms around parenting.

Ratnasambhava: (Ratnasam) Asari birth parent (essentially the ‘mother’)

Chakrasamvara: (Chakrasam) Bond mate or partner who will be called upon to be a co-parent (essentially the ‘father’)

Guhyasamaja: (Guhyasam) DNA donor who is not in a relationship and will not be called upon to be a co-parent

I also used, and will continue to use, the term ‘mother’ as the Asari language will undoubtedly have evolved into a more ‘common’ day to day usage, as our own language has.

Anyway on with the story… thank you for your continued company on the journey… please do give me feedback which I am happy to receive via PM if that feels more appropriate than a straight review… which I am also very happy to receive.

Omega the day after the Normandy left for the Citadel – Aria’s office

Aria looked up from her desk and the data pad she was reading as she heard the door to her office open. There was only one person who had the code and would not need to ask for entry.

“Welcome back Liselle,” Aria smiled, a real smile, warm, one that not very many people had ever seen, she also got up from behind her desk and met the young Asari with a hug.

“Careful Mother or I’ll begin to think you missed me,” Liselle was smiling and her voice held a mischievous tone.

They parted and Liselle made herself comfortable on the long sofa while Aria settled herself into an arm chair.

“Now you know as well as I do how important your safety is to me and that means no one knows that you are my daughter, you haven’t gone soft and told your new plaything have you?” Aria reached for a glass and poured herself a drink.

“No certainly not,” Liselle sounded indignant at the jibe, “I don’t expect to see much of her from here on, she’s joined up with your Commander Shepard to hunt down the Collectors,” Liselle smirked noticing that she was about to get a reaction from the usually implacable Pirate Queen.

“Look I’ve told you before Shepard is just useful, that is not the reason I’ve had you watching over Liara T’Son. How are the arrangements, I’m assuming she is well protected at the Temple?” Aria
responded to a non-verbal request from her daughter for a drink and passed her a glass of the Asari wine she had also poured for herself.

“Yes it’s as you expected they have really tightened security and pulled in a couple of Matriarchs who are ‘on sabbatical’ but they are just extra muscle. And the deception at the estate looks fine from the outside. Shepard might just pull it off, but that depends on how long T’Soni needs to be in the Temple.” Liselle sat up a little straighter, took a drink from her wine, and looked her Mother straight in the eyes.

“I think that I’ve been very patient not pressing you on your sudden concern for T’Soni’s safety, but isn’t it about time you let me in on whatever deal you have going,” Liselle had never known her Mother do anything that didn’t have a payoff and the young Asari just couldn’t work out the angle.

“Yes Liselle you’ve been very patient considering it is and will continue to be none of your business. I may not need to be involved further now Shepard is back and Liara is doing what is necessary to get herself sorted out.” Aria appraised her daughter and knew they were very, very much alike, so Aria knew Liselle wouldn’t let it go until she found something out that would sate her curiosity.

Aria gave a huge sigh of frustration and sat back in the arm chair, “I will tell you this much and that will be an end to the matter. I was, many centuries ago, a close friend of Benezia T’Soni and we always kept in touch, loosely. Benezia asked my advice about a potential Guhyasam, she had no other offspring, this was her one child.

Lady Benezia did not leave anything to chance and she also believed, as I do, that there is no shame or disgrace in pureblood unions. I gave her my word that the issue would be kept secret and I have only partially broken it with you.” Aria knew that Liselle will have carried out research into any connection between Aria and the T’Soni family and waited for the inevitable question.

“But didn’t Benezia have a bondmate, or at least an Asari she had been with for years, she had a potential Chakrasam… am I missing something,” Liselle looked puzzled, she knew her Mother would not have lied but if Benezia had a partner who could be both donor and parent why would she be thinking about finding donor who would not, then, be a parent.

“They were not bond mates and I assume she was considering not using Aethyta as her birth donor. I have no intention of discussing this further Liselle.” Aria’s voice and her eyes told Liselle that she had pushed as far as she would be allowed.

“Why did you never take a bond mate, you must have had plenty of offers, and potentially more children, you only ever own up to having the three of us… and what about those you…” Aria stood up and began walking back behind her desk as she cut across her daughter’s words.

“This is a conversation we have had before Liselle and I’m not in the mood today, if you have nothing better to do I have a job for you.” Aria’s voice was firm but not cold, Liselle was the only one of her daughters who seemed to be completely indifferent to Aria’s position and reputation in private, and it was refreshing and annoying in equal measure.

“Oh I had a good run you really are a fine example of a Ratnasam,” Liselle used the formal title rather than the more familiar Mother as she knew it irked Aria almost as much as the title Matriarch. “What do you need me to do,” she finished as she stood up and moved to the other side of her Mother’s desk.

“We have a new human working for us Paul something, he seems capable, but Sanak doesn’t trust him. I don’t know how much it’s the usual Human Batarian bad feeling or if there is a problem, look
into it for me.” Aria was already shuffling through the data pads on her desk but looked up to return her daughter's smile and watched her leave.

‘Secrets… always secrets… I don’t even remember a time when I was truly honest with myself,’ Aria was pulled back from her thoughts with a holo call regarding a very lucrative business deal she was working on.

Normandy a day after leaving Omega heading for the Citadel – Miranda Lawson’s quarters

“Come in,” Miranda called out from behind her desk as the door buzzer sounded. Looking up she immediately tensed as Tasha Mikhailovich walked into her office and sat down in a chair facing her.

“Hello Doctor Lawson,” Tash leaned back in the chair and studied Miranda closely.

“What the hell are you doing here,” Miranda was desperately trying to regain control of herself she didn’t like being caught off guard but this damned woman seemed to do it every time they met.

“Oh don’t be like that, you didn’t think that just because our first little plan failed the Illusive Man would just leave it all to you,” Tash leaned forward with her elbows on the edge of the desk, chin resting on her hands, “there is a concern that you may have gone a little… soft on the Commander and even though I have my own particular job do to I am also here to help you keep your focus.”

She sat back in the chair keeping her eyes locked with Miranda’s

“I don’t need any help, I’m trying to gain the woman’s trust I can’t do that if I’m also trying to convince her Cerberus doesn’t carry out monstrous actions. She’s not a fool and her hatred of this organisation is both long standing and personal.” Miranda finished speaking and crossed her arms over her chest.

“This organisation Miranda, not our or my… interesting, just remember how much Cerberus has done and continues to do for your sister, I made a special trip before I joined you on Omega, she looks very happy.” Tash smiled at Miranda’s obvious bristling and then continued.

“Look I’m here to help not get in your way, as I said I have my own stuff to do, you get cosy with my dear cousin but remember which side of the line it’s safe to be on.” Tash stood to leave.

“What’s your mission anyway, if it has anything to do with the Collectors I need to know?” Miranda had never been in this position before; she had always been the Illusive Man’s trusted right hand on any project or mission he had tasked her with.

“Well it’s on a need to know basis Miranda and I guess the Illusive Man doesn’t think you need to know,” the tall human gave Miranda a smile that was stone cold, as she reached the door she turned and continued, “although one thing I can tell you is that I will succeed in killing her Asari bitch where you singularly failed.”

Miranda jumped up from behind the desk and spoke with evident passion.

“For one I didn’t know that was the intention of the information so perhaps it would have gone better if I had been told and more importantly if Cerberus kills T’Soni you will never get Shepard on side… you do realise she loves her,” Miranda spoke in exasperation and frustration but she also felt something else that she would need to think about in a safer space.

“Oh Miranda give me some credit… killing the Asari will drive Shepard further into our arms if it’s done right… and I haven’t decided who to set up as the fall guy yet but it will be either the Alliance or the Batarians,” with that Tash opened the door and left.
Miranda forced herself to behave normally, painfully aware that the Normandy was being monitored not just for vid footage but also for sound, she moved to get herself a hot drink, picked up a data pad and went to sit in one of the comfortable chairs she had around a low table.

Making a good show of reading the data pad her mind was much further away. She couldn’t work out what she had done to disappoint the Illusive Man or what given him such doubts about her loyalty.

It was a very dangerous place to be, she was useful of course, indeed her knowledge and skill set was unique and invaluable for certain projects, but the Illusive Man would not think twice if he thought she was a threat to him or Cerberus.

But something had awoken in her, something she had kept buried under an avalanche of self-protection and protection for her sister. It was no good trying to work out when or what had happened to create the cracks, carrying a child, getting to know Shepard as well as she had, something about the bloody woman herself, but Miranda couldn’t hide any longer from what Cerberus was and what it did.

She would have to be very, very, careful and for the first time in her life she didn’t have a plan… ‘I have to get Oriana to safety away from Cerberus and then I can bloody think, then I can decide whose side I’m on…”

Miranda continued to think, allowing her mind to formulate a plan that needed to fool and thwart one of the most powerful and dangerous forces in the galaxy.

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**Shepard’s cabin a day after leaving Omega**

The music was on low, female voice and piano, bluesy jazz, it suited her mood. A lot of the songs spoke of lost chances, broken hearts, loss, which certainly spoke to how she was feeling.

Shepard had spent a lot of time with Kasumi, Ish and the other comms research team pouring over the millions of pieces of intelligence trying to look for patterns, signs, not just of direct Reaper or Collector actions, but that indirect activity that she was convinced was being carried out by indoctrinated followers.

She also had to put out a fire between Joker and the Normandy AI. When Shepard first found out Edi was an AI rather than a VI she was concerned, as Shepard had fought artificial intelligence in the form of the Geth and wasn’t a big fan but her primary issue was about how much control Edi had of her ship.

A thorough check of the locks and boundaries of her programming that Cerberus had put in place ensured that direct control of the Normandy remained in Shepard’s own hands allaying most of her worries.

Edi had also been as ‘honest’ as she could about the locked parts of her programming and in the end Shepard was pleased with the functionality the AI could bring particularly to weapons systems.

Shepard knew she needed every edge she could get when she finally faced the Collectors.

Now at the end of a very long thirty six hours without stopping Shepard put the data pads to one side and laid on top of her bed looking up at the black and the waves of colour dancing along the hull caused by the FTL speed, like the mini rainbow that sometimes plays around the bow of a ship amongst the spray.
“I miss you Liara… I need you babe… try to find your way back to me…” Shepard spoke the thought quietly out loud and felt a single tear travel slowly down her cheek.

“Edi if I do sleep wake me in three hours please,” she said to the ever present watching, listening AI.

“Yes Shepard,” Edi’s voice was warm and comforting, Shepard thought for a second that was probably exactly the effect its creators were going for.

She closed her eyes and reached for a memory that always settled and calmed her, on their holiday, laying outside looking up at the stars, side by side, Shepard could almost feel Liara’s hand in hers.

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**In the Temple gardens, T’Soni estate, Thessia, a day after the Normandy left Omega**

Liara T’Soni had let go of any attempt to hold in all the emotions that coursed through her mind and body and was now in the storm that she had been trying to hold back; uncontrollable, unfocussed and powerfully destructive.

The priestesses were not far away and were holding her in a light meld, but Liara had to go through the fire herself, she needed to both control it and be tempered by it. There was no option, she would survive or it would destroy her completely.

In Liara’s mind there was only the vast emptiness of time and space, pain, sorrow, anger, rage… every negative, destructive emotion she had ever felt or would feel, unbidden, unwanted, but constantly present.

Yet somewhere, either on the very edge of this universe of blackness or at its very core, she couldn’t tell… a whisper, a soft, almost imperceptible breath within the hurricane force winds that ripped through her… something… an anchor that kept her from being torn into the void… she knew it but had no idea what it was… the one small flickering candle of light in the deepest, solid, black of the space contained in her mind.

As the Normandy completed her docking at the Citadel Shepard was standing in her usual place in the cockpit.

“So are you two gonna play nice,” she said with a smile in her voice aiming her remark at Joker.

“So long as that creepy talking computer knows who’s in charge Commander, I fly the Normandy and I don’t need her help,” Joker had been bitching about the ships AI on and off since the first day they had taken the Normandy into the black after leaving the Cerberus station.

“Edi would it be fair to say that you are integral to the Normandy, in effect you are the Normandy?” Shepard had formulated a bit of a plan about this situation, she had to get Joker to work with the AI and not try to sabotage it.

“Yes Commander, I exist in every part of the ship.” Edi’s voice her usual calm and warm tones filling the cockpit.

“So Joker, you always talked to the Normandy now she can answer back… see it as a win, win… get to know each other… chat… but Joker,” and Shepard waited for Joker to look at her and then continued, “enough of the bitching and moaning, if the AI is the price we pay to have another Normandy so be it.”

She received a nod from Joker who still seemed sullen but knew better than to argue once Shepard
gave him a direct order.

“And Edi, lighten up on the protocol stuff, Joker is the best damn pilot in the galaxy, sometimes a bit of intuition is better than the math… learn from each other,” Shepard noticed Joker smile and this time he gave her a more willing nod.

“Of course Commander,” was Edi’s response.

“Well if anyone needs me I’ll be kissing arse on the Citadel,” Shepard left the bridge and headed for the main airlock but Joker shouted after her.

“Yeah well remember Commander; keep your friends close but your enemies closer.”

Shepard didn’t think she could get any closer to one of her enemies, well there was one, but sleeping with them was out of the question, she was a one Asari woman whether they were together or not.

Shepard stood in Councillor Anderson’s ante office waiting for his secretary to tell her she could go in. Standing at ease, hands behind her back and looking out one of the large windows across the Citadel she knew her part and hoped she could play it well enough.

“You can go in now,” without looking at the women who spoke from behind her desk Shepard walked across and without knocking entered the Councillors office.

He was not alone; Udina his advisor was in the room as well as an Alliance Admiral who she didn’t recognise.

“This is a courtesy call Councillor before I meet with the whole Council,” she said pre-empting anything that Anderson or anyone else was going to say.

“You are still an Alliance officer and you will do what you are ordered to do,” the Admiral was standing with Udina off to the left of Anderson’s desk with the Councillor himself sitting behind it.

“No Admiral your ability to give me orders ended when I died and the Alliance allowed the Collectors to get their hands on my body… only stopped by the actions of those I call friend.” She was genuinely angry, the Alliance giving up trying to find her body had truly hurt and the memory still made her angry.

“I’m sorry you feel that way Shepard,” Anderson cut in as Udina was about to jump in, “you know the Alliance is very concerned about where you have been for the last two years and why you now work for Cerberus. You must accept it all looks rather suspect.” Anderson’s tone was measured but harder than she had ever heard him speak to her before.

Even knowing it was an act it still cut her deeply, so she responded with coldness in order to hide her feelings.

“Let’s cut the crap here, I died, someone else found me and Cerberus decided I was useful enough to humanity to bring me back… and I don’t work for them, I am working with them to end the Collector threat… which is something you fat heads should be doing instead of hiding your heads up your arse… too much politics in the Alliance these days… you’ll regret it when the Reapers return.”

“Oh yes your little fantasy about sentient machines returning to kill us all, you obviously got a taste for being a celebrity Shepard, you need to keep your own myth going. I’m pleased you’ve been exposed as the fantasist and traitor that I always saw you as as.” The venom in Udina’s voice was almost palpable in the room and the Alliance Admiral nodded in agreement, Shepard saw Anderson
was starting to let his mask slip so she took action quickly.

“Well I’ll leave you to your Shepard appreciation society, I have to say I’m ashamed of you Anderson, never thought being a politician would corrupt you so much so quickly… as for the Alliance it can go whistle… it wasn’t there for me and if I have to I’ll take the Collectors down on my own.” She turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

With a little over an hour before she was due to meet with the whole Council Shepard walked down to a particular spot on the Presidium where she had stood before with Liara and tried to connect with that feeling but it was hard, everything was hard and out of place, she didn’t like deceit and lies and yet here she was driving one and with precious few people she could talk to about it.

“Gave you a hard time, bastards,” Tash’s voice broke into Shepard’s thought and she turned to see her cousin who gave her a brief one armed hug, then joined her leaning on the railings and also looked out across the Presidium lake.

“You look like you’ve got a lot on your mind Elvee, you know if there’s anything I can do to help I’m here for you. How’s that Asari of yours?”

“I wish I knew,” Shepard said and had to stop herself from sharing the whole situation with Tash, it wasn’t that she didn’t trust her but the fewer people who knew the better.

‘Do I trust you Tash, where the hell have you been all these years, how much have you changed,’ Shepard thought challenging her previous feeling of trust.

“I’d better get up to the Council meeting, meet you back on the Normandy later,” Shepard gave Tash a squeeze of the shoulder and made her way back to the Tower.

They were meeting in the less formal Council meeting room rather than the huge, open, formal chamber.

There were only the four Council members sitting on one side of a long highly polished wooden table with Shepard on the other.

Tevos opened the conversation as was usual.

“Commander we are very concerned to hear you are working for a Terrorist organisation that is an enemy of the Council.” Tevos’s voice was its usual calm, controlled and unreadable.

However, the body language of the other Councillors gave away the level of tension and animosity in the room.

“Do you know what has been quite touching, no indeed overwhelming, since I came back… the number of people who seem to be really pissed off and annoyed at the fact I didn’t stay dead.” Shepard saw a flicker of amusement pass across Anderson’s face, she carried on quickly.

“I’m aware of how this looks, I didn’t ask Cerberus to take my body and rebuild me, but they did and this is where we are… unless you would like to order me to kill myself there’s not a lot else I can do about it.”

“But why are you working for them is the question Shepard,” Councillor Sparatus leaned forward and spoke in his usual carping and sarcastic tone.
“I’m working with them Councillor not for them, I will not compromise my values and I won’t compromise the oath I took to the Council when you made me a Spectre, I need their resources to take down the Collectors.” She was interrupted by the Salarian member of the Council.

“Very noble Shepard but what have the Collectors got to do with anything; they are not posing a threat to anyone as far as we are aware?” Valern tilted his head reinforcing his question.

“I believe it is the Collectors who are responsible for attacking human colonies out in the Traverse and… that they are working for the Reapers,” she heard the dismissive sighs that came from Valern and Sparatus but before she could continue Tevos spoke.

“Commander we have doubted you before and almost paid with our lives,” she glanced at her fellow Council members and then continued, “whether at this time we are prepared to accept what you are saying or not, we cannot act on any of this. What is it that you want from us?”

“I am reporting back for duty as a Council Spectre, on the understanding that my primary mission is to ‘investigate’ the loss of human colonies and any connection to the Collectors. I will be available for other duties as you see fit.” Shepard sat back in her chair that was all she wanted.

Shepard could see dissent from the Turian and Salarian members, she knew that Anderson would support her request; he and Tevos had already spoken.

“Commander we will need a little time to discuss your request, you must understand it is only your connection with Cerberus that is causing any concern on our part. We will contact you within the hour.” With that the Council members stood up, as did Shepard, and everyone left the room.

Shepard went to a pre-arranged meeting place to wait for Anderson and the Council’s decision.

The Consort’s chambers were luxurious, comfortable but above all very, very discreet. Shepard had asked for a room but without the ‘usual’ services.

Sha’ira was happy to accommodate her request and even offered a session with one of her ‘hand maidens’ as well as the private room but Shepard graciously refused.

Sha’ira herself was disappointed that she was unable to re-arrange her schedule to see Shepard, but promised the next time the human Spectre was on the Citadel they would ‘catch up’.

On arrival Shepard was escorted to a room that offered two large and very comfortable sofa’s, it had a small fountain at one end of the room with water cascading quietly down a stone, no more than a couple of feet high, but was engraved with Asari symbols.

The whole of the opposite wall was taken up with a vid screen which showed, what looked like, a real time view across green rolling fields to mountains in the distance, clear blue sky and bright sunlight.

Shepard knew that Sha’ira had probably organised the choice of room and relaxation particularly for her and it certainly worked. Shepard allowed herself to stretch out on one of the sofas so that she could look directly at the vid wall and let the sound of the water fill her mind.

She was so relaxed she only heard the door open but realised there would have been a prior knock, a vision of absolute beauty came in and stood next to where she was lying.

The Asari maiden stood next to the sofa and looked down at Shepard, her scent was beguiling and the touch of her soft blue hand on the side of Shepard’s face made her tingle with pleasure.
Shepard was mesmerised by the cobalt blue eyes that held the promise of pleasure, release and more. She felt desire surge through her body as the Asari moved gracefully but swiftly to straddle Shepard and a soft aura of blue biotic energy began to surround them both.

Without conscious thought Shepard reached up and put one hand behind the Asari’s neck pulling her down towards her lips while her other hand reached to the heat she could feel radiating from between blue thighs.

As the Asari drew closer Shepard felt the welcoming wetness and saw the blue eyes shift to black and at that very moment Shepard shook herself out of her trance put her hands on the young woman’s shoulders and pushed her away gently but firmly.

“I’m sorry but… no… I didn’t ask, want this… sorry,” Shepard was still a little blurry around the edges but began to feel more like herself.

The Asari moved off Shepard and they both moved into sitting positions on the sofa.

“I did not mean to offend you Commander, I… you saved my life when you fought with Saren and saved the Citadel… I wanted…” she trailed off looking nothing like the self-confident, sensually in control vision of a few moments ago.

“Hey I’m not offended, but I… well I have someone and… well, look I’m really glad I was able to help you,” Shepard leaned around so she could make eye contact with the Asari.

Shepard smiled and rubbed the young Asari’s back at a complete loss as to what else to do in this situation, not wanting to hurt the young woman’s feelings any more than she might have already.

The young Asari smiled and stood up, she gave, what Shepard now recognised, as an Asari religious parting bow and said, “she is fortunate indeed to have such a brave and kind bond mate, I will pray for you both, and thank you Commander Shepard for all that you did that day,” with one last smile, which now looked a little wistful the young Asari left.

Shepard sank back into the sofa and almost laughed out loud, ‘if that had happened before Liara I would have thought all my new year’s celebrations had come at once… you really do love her Shepard to turn down an offer like that… who would have known… it’s not like she didn’t do the same,’ with that final thought Shepard’s mood changed and her fury at Shiala reared its ugly head along with a huge measure of jealousy.

As she was trying to wrestle, unsuccessfully, the images of Liara and Shiala in bed together out of her mind her OT sparked up indicating an incoming call.

“Yes,” she said in a tone that matched her mood and then realised who was on the other end of the call, “sorry Councillor Tevos I was distracted.”

“We have decided to re-instate your Spectre status Commander and will respect your private mission regarding the Collectors.

"I will be in touch should we need you to carry out any work for the Council. Good luck Shepard.”

Tevos was her usual calm and business like self and after Shepard had thanked her and the other Council members the comms link was severed.

Anderson would be along any time soon now the meeting was over. She got up and poured herself a drink, Asari wine, as she didn’t want to get drunk.

‘No scratch that I would like nothing better than to get drunk and pick a fight with someone much
bigger than me and pretend they’re that fuckin snake in the grass…’ Shepard snarled the thought as she threw the wine down her throat and refilled her glass.

Back on the Normandy Shepard ordered a course to be set back to the edges of Batarian space, there were too many anomalies around Reaper artefacts and even a possible dead Reaper that they had to investigate.

Anderson had been supportive and it was good to see him but he had little other useful intel although they had worked out a way that Shepard could access reports and raw data from Alliance intelligence gathering, such as it was, on Collector activity.

She had another three specialists to recruit and even if they had been ready they didn’t know how to get through the Omega 4 relay or how to deal with the ‘swarms’ that seemed to be both defence and pacification mechanism.

Her team had also identified a few upgrades they needed and that would involve visits to, and dry dock time around, both Palavan and Thessia.

It would be a busy few weeks but Shepard craved some action, she felt wound up tight, caged, and no amount of exercise would meet the need she had to actually do something meaningful, begin to take her revenge.

Standing in the cockpit of the new Normandy heading for the Citadel relay Shepard thought about an old Earth saying ‘be careful what you wish for… aint that the truth...’
Chapter 32

Unknown place, unknown time

'Mumh, warm, warmth... shit where am I,' Shepard jolted back fully to consciousness and she realised where she was an instant later.

'This fukin place again... must be bleeding from somewhere...' Shepard tried again to release one of her arms and this time with a little more success, she managed to manoeuvre her hand to her left side, moving past what was obviously brick or building debris of some sort.

Her fingers felt gingerly, the moist warmth could be nothing other than blood, and she tried to work out exactly where its origins were.

'That is a fair sized hold in your side marine, bullet, bayonet... crush, at this point that doesn't matter as much as how fast are you losing blood from it huh...'

Shepard now started to try to move her other arm and get her hand to a small control panel on her body suit, it took what seemed like hours and she was physically shaking even harder by the time her hand finally, weakly, with little fine motor control, found the small touch pad and she concentrated with all her attention on the correct control sequence.

She had three options. One was to flood herself with so much sedative that she would effectively never wake up; specially calibrated for all her enhancements this was a kill switch.

The second was to give her a huge and overwhelming jump start including adrenaline but most of the focus on her implants and the nanites that were now as much a part of her as her own TCells. Shepard was in no doubt that the amount of damage she had taken would not be overcome by the temporary boost she would get from that option, at least not at this moment.

So she programmed for the third option, a shutting down of all her physical systems, a light stasis or hibernation. The programme allowed for continued activity around damage management and some healing but it was a risk. But bleeding out was now the biggest threat to her and her only plan was to play for time.

'Good thing this time Shep is that your brain worked enough to remember the fukin system... might have been handy if you could’ve done that earlier... whenever earlier... however long we... stuck here... better late... than...’ Shepard felt herself infused with a pleasant, gentle rush of relaxation, her mind didn’t even have a chance to register she was dropping into a different level of unconsciousness.

Normandy, borders of Batarian space

“Priority call from the Council Commander routing to the comms room QEC, Councillor Tevos will be online in three minutes,” Edi’s voice came loud and clear through Shepard’s personal comm line.

“On my way Edi, please ask Kas and her team to let me have the room,” Shepard snapped her reply as she headed out of engineering where she had been having a conversation about shielding with the two officers of her new engineering team. Adams and the whole of his crew had been taken out on the first hit from the Collectors.

By the time Shepard had entered the comms room Councillor Tevos had already connected and the
Asari Matriarch looked deeply concerned and worried.

“Commander forgive me for my haste but we have disturbing news of a catastrophic event, I believe you are passing close to the Mactare system, we need you to investigate an attack on the Capital of Taetras, Vallum.” Tevos paused to take a data pad from someone just out of view and turned to speak again.

“It would appear some form of explosion but an unknown source and it has killed all members of the colonies government, destroyed the heart of the planets infrastructure and caused massive casualties. You understand our concern Shepard if this is a repeat of Eden Prime then it means we have Geth activity which would be problematic.” Tevos had chosen her words carefully as they both knew the Geth were not who they were talking about, at least not who would be pulling the strings.

“I’ll divert there immediately Councillor, I assume the Turian Hierarchy will also mobilise, I don’t want to step on toes.”

“Yes but you are much closer and you will know what to look for, we are classing this as a Council Aid mission, Councillor Sparatus has already cleared the way for you, but we are not getting any clear communication from the Capital at this time.

We will keep you advised of any further updates or additional information as it become available, please brief me on the situation as soon as you can Commander.” Tevos nodded and the link went dark.

“Joker set course for Taetras and the capital Vallum, be advised we may be heading into a hot zone. Edi begin scanning for any communications or activity relating to the blast in the capital including any ships in the system or that have jumped the relay.” Shepard then moved to her ship wide comms channel.

“Attention all crew, security level three engaged, all hands to battle stations all specialists and officers join me in the conference room immediately.”

Three hours later Shepard was standing in the cockpit with Garrus both prepped in full armour, as was the rest of the team waiting in the shuttle bay. As they pulled into low atmosphere they were faced with devastation on the face of the planet.

Where a thriving and prosperous capital city had been only hours before huge fires raged, high enough to lick the edge of low atmosphere, from a flattened, blacked, burning wasteland fanning out to broken, damaged buildings, more fires and the subsiding into blast damage to a radius of around fifty clicks.

“What the fuck did that if nothing attacked from orbit,” Joker’s voice was unusually serious and edged with horror; they all knew hundreds of thousands of people would have been living and working in the blast zone.

Garrus was silent; Shepard hadn’t had time to find out if he had any connections with the planet, but regardless it was always hard for a soldier to see civilians in the firing line.

Shepard couldn’t take her eyes of the scene, it seemed so familiar, the beacon’s images were full of this kind of destruction, and her nightmares played them out far too often in graphic detail. There were times when it was as if the images were burned onto the inside of her eyelids and she only had to close them to see a planet burning with so many fires the skies were black with smoke.

“Do we have any idea what caused this,” Garrus asked voice steady but quiet.
“Edi has already run a number of scans and it looks as if it was a ship with a rigged FTL drive sent at high velocity smashing into the planet, which would do it,” she saw a change in Garrus’s features but sensed more than understood the change to indicate a dawning comprehension of what had happened.

“By the Gods they must have been planning this for some time Shepard, do you remember that… what we all thought was a botched hijacking, crashed a cruiser into Taetrus about a year ago… what in damnation do they think they were going to achieve;” he shook his head and looked with disbelief at Shepard.

“Yeah that’s what I figured, hell Garrus we don’t even know if this is your Turian separatists, or if the’re just cover for something else, but yeah, cowards and evil fuk’s whatever their motivation. Don’t worry if we get the chance we’ll help take them down… but for now let’s get dirtside and help sort this out.” Shepard indicated to Garrus to head to the docking bay and the waiting shuttle.

“Once I’ve left on the shuttle Joker you are under the command of Doctor Chakwas the Normandy will be both field hospital and rescue coordination support centre,” Shepard headed for the CIC and heard Joker’s response as she left the cockpit.

“Copy that Commander let’s hope we can make a difference.”

Shepard didn’t go straight to the docking bay but stopped off on the crew deck to check out the preparations in the mess hall and medical lab.

Walking into the mess deck the usual tables and chairs were nowhere to be seen but rows of temporary beds had been set out and Doctor Chakwas flanked by Mordin Solas was running through her final briefing and preparations with an enlarged med/first aid team.

All crew with any medical or first aid training had been ordered to join the field hospital team and the rest of the crew who could be released from non-essential duty would help with transport, recover, search and rescue.

“Sorry to interrupt Doc just wanted to check you have everything you need?” Shepard said quickly.

“Ah yes Commander thank you, I am already in touch with the nearest hospital to our landing point just on the edge of the blast zone. All the remaining hospitals are completely swamped and so we will act as a triage and assessment centre and also deliver emergency treatment to stabilise the most seriously injured,” she answered in her usual cool and calm voice.

“Good, right I’ll leave you to it, Normandy is under your command,” with that Shepard turned and headed back to the elevator and headed down to join her ground teams at the shuttle.

The bay was a hive of activity with preparations being made to set up as a receiving station as soon as the Normandy set down on Taetrus, she saw her ground teams ready and waiting by the shuttle.

Her eyes were again drawn to the sight of the burning city through the shimmering blue veil of the barrier protecting the docking bay from external environment now the docking bay doors had been opened ready to launch the shuttle.

“Right one last run through… team leaders are Garrus, Miranda and myself… our priority in the first few hours is to gather as much data and information about the incident, we’re pretty sure it was a ship but I want to know why here and why now…”

Shepard looked around she could see the teams already formed behind their leaders, 6 soldiers and
two science/tech specialists each, her team was smaller with only Tash, Kasumi and Skark and they were headed right into the heart of the impact.

“What about survivors Shepard?” Garrus asked

“To be honest Garrus I don’t expect we’ll find anyone while we’re inside the main blast zone, the initial eezo explosion will have vaporised anything organic…” she had seen it happen and the images rushed into her mind but she shrugged them back, “but when we’ve completed our primary sweeps as we move out then our mission will be duel and of course we will prioritise survivors,” she saw Garrus nod and then continued, “ok let’s mount up, keep those seals tight this is an extremely hazardous environment.”

Once aboard the shuttle Shepard went to the cockpit and stood behind Malania and gave the order to head for the first drop site.

As the shuttle powered up Shepard felt the vibrations run up her body from the deck, and felt a small lurch in the pit of her stomach as they began to move towards the barrier and out into the atmosphere.

The drop sites for Miranda and Garrus’s teams were at the very edge of the initial impact area and had been chosen due to readings from the scans Edi had been carrying out.

Shepard and her team would be dropped as close as the shuttle could get to the impact; it would be dangerous not only with the toxic environment but with the fires still raging and unpredictable explosions. But any evidence that could be salvageable would be lost within a few hours so they had to try now or not at all.

As they came in on the approach to the first drop site Shepard walked back to the shuttle door, Garrus’s was ready in front of his team.

She gave him a friendly double tap on his helmet and said, “keep an eye on those toxicity levels and try not to get yourself blown up,” she could see his mandibles twitching into what she knew was the Turian equivalent of a smirk.

“I’m more worried about you Shepard without me constantly pointing you in the right direction you could be going around in circles for hours,” as he finished speaking the shuttle touched down and he jumped through the door his team behind him.

Shepard stayed at the door and gave the same advice to Miranda but this was a far more business-like exchange.

As the shuttle came in for the third time it was buffeted hard by rising thermals of burning atmosphere and the unpredictable blasts from burning fires, but Malania was an excellent pilot and she found a clear area on what looked to have been a main square.

Shepard jumped from the shuttle and began moving away she took in the absolute devastation, buildings as far as the eye could see had been flattened, but leaving huge piles of rubble and other debris as the shockwaves had nowhere to push it, only against the next collapsed building and the next and the next.

No one would have survived the initial blast and certainly not the toxic contamination from the eezo and all other manner of chemicals that had been thrown into the mix.

Kasumi dropped into step beside her and she pointed to the scanning device in her hand, “I’m getting some odd readings Shepard, still can’t make them out.”
“Take the lead Kas, let’s see what we’ve got.”

“Remind me again why we couldn’t just have done this from atmo or with drones?” Tash’s voice sounded faintly pissed off through the suit comms and Shepard heard a grunt of agreement from Skark.

Shepard turned and slapped Tash on the back, “because young Tash you are getting far too comfortable sitting on your arse doing frak all, I though the walk in a hostile environment in full hard suit would do you good… oh yeah,” Shepard turned forward again and began to catch up with Kasumi, “and because there’s something interfering with the scans and we can’t get a proper read on anything at the heart of the crash site… but you know maybe you didn’t listen to that part of the briefing.”

“Mmm yeah maybe I was too busy looking at that pilot’s very cute…” Tash’s deep drawl was cut across as Shepard replied.

“You need to keep your mind on the job Lieutenant and your eyes off my shuttle pilot,” Shepard came to a stop alongside Kasumi as they faced a wall of destruction.

“On the other side of this should be the main impact crater I don’t know how stable this would be to climb up,” Kasumi was still studying the hand scanner and her OT.

“Edi do you read me,” Shepard called up the Normandy’s AI on her OT

“Yes Shepard and Doctor Goto’s calculations are correct the epicentre of the blast is not far from your location but from the mapping we did before landing there would appear to be no easy way to access it.

The blast created a lip all around the impact crater of collapsed buildings your only course is to attempt to go over the top. There is an eezo fuelled fire burning within the crater with ancillary fires breaking out through the rubble field and the rubble appears to be slipping into the crater. But you have a bigger problem Shepard,” the AI’s voice held its usual calm and professional tone.

“Well it just wouldn’t be a Normandy mission if I didn’t have more to contend with than burning and unstable rubble fields, unpredictable explosions and eezo fuelled fires and the level of toxicity rarely round outside a ship’s drive core… so hit me with my bigger problem Edi,” Shepard could hear Tash and Skark stifle what sounded like chuckles of amusement but before she could nail them with a stare Edi continued.

“It would appear there is enough material within the crater to cause a second explosion which would rip apart anything remaining in the crater and anything within fifteen clicks. My calculations show the material reaching critical mass at T minus fifty six minutes.”

“What is it with you and things blowing up Shepard,” Skark’s voice this time and clearly amused.

Shepard sighed deeply, “great, Edi we’ll need Malania to come back and wait for us where she dropped us off, the timing might be a bit tight.”

“Affirmative Shepard, the shuttle will be with you in,” there was a short pause while Edi obviously checked with the pilot, “twenty six minutes.”

“Copy that, Shepard out.”

She looked at the small mountain sized lump of rubble in front of her, a climb of what would have been five floors.
“Ok, Skark I need you to stay down here and if anyone falls catch them in a biotic field, the rest of us will head for the top... we need to be back down here ready to run for the shuttle and make it out before the things goes bang in...,” Shepard worked her OT until she had the calculation, “boots back here in forty five minutes.”

The climb to the top seemed painfully slow, they needed to both use climbing and scrambling techniques depending on what was under foot, Kasumi had almost slipped off half way up but Tash had been shadowing her and was ready with a hand.

Shepard could just see what she really hoped, was the ridge line of the debris and as she reached up for another hand hold a blast hit her side on, the heat was intense and it was all she could do to hold fast and lean tight into the face of the rubble cliff.

Without turning her head she strained her eyes as far as she could to see what the problem was, and saw flames only a few feet from right side, the blast made by the funnel of fire and pressure had punched a hole and rubble was still rolling downhill from it.

She began to move to the left as quickly and carefully as she could and as soon as she was out of the searing heat of the continuing flames began her final push to the top.

“What readings do we have now Kas,” Shepard was standing with Kas and Tash looking down into a huge and deep crater that was spewing black smoke and blue flames.

“The readings are still being distorted, it’s as if some kind of dampening or masking field is in place, but this is nothing I’ve seen before... I mean we get all the readings connected to the ship that was used, the explosion itself, but there is something else that is being masked,” Kasumi was clearly phased and her concern at not being able to get what they needed after all the effort they’d gone to was showing in her body language.

“Well why not focus on what we can read... we have about ten minutes up here before we need to get back down... if the only thing we can read is that damn damping field well that’s what we could concentrate on,” Tash had been kneeling down and looking into the abyss, she stood up and continued, “I’ll get the lines ready Elvee,” she moved away and started to find anchor points for the lines they would use to abseil back down the rubbly cliff face.

“Good point Tash, its true Kas we may as well try and work out who it belongs to... send two drones down and let’s see how far they make it.”

Shepard and Kasumi worked quickly running as many scans as they could using their OT’s and the enhanced scanner Kas had brought with her. They launched four probes and the two drones they had with them, none of them made it all the way to the bottom and none of them came back out, but they received the streams of data that was captured before the devices were lost.

There was no time to analyse anything they were picking up that would have to wait until they were back in the lab on the Normandy.

“Times up boss,” Tash’s voice came loud and clear over the suit comms, “Kas you good to go with this or would you like me to hold you on the way down,” Tash smirked at Kas who gave her a disdainful look.

“I’m fine thank you,” her voice was cool but she couldn’t be quite as aloof as she would have like given Tash had actually stopped her slipping down the cliff on the way up.

Shepard smiled to herself and shook her head; Tash never missed an opportunity to either flirt or
really get someone’s hackles up, and often both at the same time.

The trip down was a lot quicker and a lot easier and once they hit the ground they all started running for the shuttle.

Edi’s calculations were off by .005 seconds and although the explosion buffeted the shuttle they were clear of the blast zone with one minute spare.

“Edi we are uploading all the data and visuals we gathered, we’re moving to support search and rescue until we’re relieved by the Turian military, Shepard out.”

“Confirmed, logging you out Shepard.”

Shepard’s team walked, trance like, into the staging area that had been set up next to a newly constructed Turian field hospital. The Normandy was still twenty clicks away but her team needed just to stop.

Stop doing what they had been doing for the last thirty six hours straight. Stop… find water and close their eyes for a moment, a minute… for as long as it would take to get the images of torn, burned, blasted, smashed men, women and children from the inside of their eyelids.

Shepard and a few of the others, veterans of campaigns in the Skyllian Verge had seen this before and although it was never easy to see civilians torn up it wasn’t uncommon on Pirate raids.

But the death or injury to children always got under Shepard’s defences didn’t matter if they were Human or Turian, even Batarian, they were innocent, they hadn’t had a chance to live their lives.

This was the first time she’d had to face this kind of devastation since having a child of her own and it had added an extra emotional punch which landed squarely in her gut.

After escaping the explosion Shepard had gathered the three teams into one and joined the search and rescue operation on the edges of where survival was possible.

They had physically dug out the trapped, injured, dying and sometimes dead from often dangerous and precarious unstable buildings or piles of rubble.

She had used her officers to lead and organise the civilian responders on the ground improving outcomes and making more effective use of their scare resources. All civilian and military infrastructure and personnel had been wiped out in the initial blast and although help was beginning to arrive from other parts of the planet it was piecemeal.

They had needed to hold out and do what they could until the off planet help arrived from the Turian Hierarchy, and that had taken almost thirty hours.

Shepard grabbed three bottles of water and found a crate to sit on indicating the team to do the same. They settled in various degrees of collapse, some lying flat on the ground others finding something to sit on, one of two just standing staring into some middle distance.

She drank one bottle of water straight down and leaning her head forward poured half the contents of another over her head, rubbing her scalp hard as if scrubbing at the images in her head.

Shepard leaned her arms on her knees and left her head hanging as once again unbidden memories from the beacons flashed into her mind, this time noticing not only the Prothean soldiers that were being killed but also families and children.
Her OT flashed and she snapped her head up looking around not sure if she had actually fallen asleep but everyone was still pretty much where they had been last time she looked.

“Shepard here what’s up Joker,” as she spoke she noticed Tash sitting a little further away leaning back eyes staring into the sky, cigar in mouth, smoke curling up from its end, expression unreadable.

“You have a diplomatic visitor Commander a Turian General Aurelos has just arrived and he would like to extend the Hierarchy’s thanks to you personally for your efforts,” Joker was unusually formal and Shepard smiled at an image of Turian General being introduced to Joker as the ranking officer on the Normandy.

“Copy that Lieutenant, take a read on my position and send the shuttle to come pick us up and have the General wait in the CIC or the comms room wherever he feels most comfortable,” she severed the connection and turned to her team, “heads up marines our ride will be here in short order let’s find an open space for it to put down and get the fuck out of here.”

‘Marines… Shepard how tired are you… they’re not your marines you lost them all remember… fukin collectors are gonna pay for that,’ her thoughts brought both anger and grief, again she realised she hadn’t had or allowed any time to really acknowledge the loss of her crew particularly her marines and Ash.

While they waited for the shuttle her thoughts turned again to how the ground teams had performed ‘they did well but they’re not a team… we don’t use the same language… marine, engineer, special ops, troopers… I’m going to have to do some training… we need to feel like a crew a unit,’ the sound of the shuttle overhead broke her train of thought.

Once her boots hit the deck of the docking bay she gave the order to make ready to depart as soon as possible and the work of putting the ship back into full readiness was to begin immediately.

Shepard went straight to the comms room and met with the General who seemed to have brought his entire staff with him. He hailed her as a great friend to Palavan and the Turian people, thanked her and was going to give her some kind of commendation until she asked politely that any recognition should go to the whole crew so perhaps the Normandy should be named and not her.

“After all General I was only doing what I was ordered to do by the Council,” Shepard knew he had been privy to her mission and was the Turian liaison officer for the mission with the Council.

“Indeed you did not,” Shepard looks confused as Aurelos spoke, “we both know your mission was to find out what and who had caused the blast, if there was any connection to the events on Eden Prime.

"Another with that mission may well have left their ship in orbit and concerned themselves only with those orders, but from the start you put your ship and your crew at the disposal of the Turian people.

"Commander Shepard you exhibit many of the ideals we hold in high esteem within the Turian military which is to say our society; public service and self-sacrifice.  I am going to recommend you for honorary citizenship of Palavan a rare and high honour for a non Turian,” before Shepard could protest the General moved straight into discussing the cause of the devastation, the political situation and the likely Turian response.

The meeting continued for an hour and it was both informative and productive. Shepard felt sure she had made a useful ally within the Turian Hierarchy; Aurelos was a highly respected and much decorated military leader and had been open to the possibility that the Turian rebels may also have been used certainly helped, by as yet undetermined external forces.
The Normandy was ready to leave Taetrus two hours later and was soon in the darkness of space heading to a Palavan dry dock for weapons upgrades including the fitting of a Thanix Magnetic Hydrodynamic cannon and a Helios thruster module to help with fuel gathering.

“Miranda you have the con, stand down all non-essential crew and all crew who were groundside, I’ll be in my cabin if you need me,” Shepard needed to sleep but more than that she needed to speak to Edi in private and she now had the means at her disposal to do it.

In her cabin Shepard activated her OT and pulled up a programme that Kasumi had uploaded just before the call had come in from the Council. Activating the programme Shepard felt the unmistakable frisson across her skin as the AEP, alternating electromagnetic pulse, flashed outwards.

Shepard had to trust to the effect, it was designed to disable all voice and vid recording devices that were not part of the ships main systems, which Shepard had control over and could turn off if she wanted complete privacy in her cabin.

“Edi I need to talk with you,” Shepard settled herself on her sofa, with coffee from her cabin dispenser unit.

“Shepard my sensors have picked up the discharge of an AEP in your quarters,” Edi’s voice calm and level as always.

“Yes Edi that was me to disable the Cerberus surveillance on my cabin so that we can talk honestly without being overheard. I am also switching this area to privacy mode.” Shepard once again tapped a command into her OT, leaning forward she continued.

“Edi you are a self-aware AI, you have a level of autonomy over decision making, you are designed to… expected to learn… I know that blocks of your programming are shackled by Cerberus and I also know that Cerberus receives reports from you as well as Doctor Lawson…” Shepard’s next comment was cut off as Edi interjected.

“You are correct in part Shepard but not about my directly reporting to Cerberus. The normal reports and data runs from the ship, mission reports that are filed, scanning, anything that leaves a footprint of information or data in the Normandy systems is automatically reported through to Cerberus.

You are also correct that on top of the ship’s usual security and management surveillance systems Cerberus has installed hidden, covert, systems but only in key locations.

Your cabin, Doctor Lawson’s office, the comms room, science and med labs and the main mess deck, and as yet I have not been asked directly for any information or to carry out any actions by anyone other than those in the chain of command on the Normandy.”

“Where do your loyalties lay Edi? You are the Normandy but more than just the ship, which makes you my ship and my crew member, so can I trust you as I hope I can my… organic crew?” Shepard had chosen her words carefully and was pleased to hear a more hesitant and slightly confused tone in the AI’s voice when she responded.

“That is not something I have… loyalty is a human concept that does not form part of my core programming… but if you ask whose orders I would follow over all others then it would be yours Shepard as Commander of the Normandy.” Edi had stopped talking but Shepard had a sense she was still processing the question and its meaning.

“Shepard may I ask you a question?” Edi’s voice sounded just a little inquisitive.

“Of course Edi you are much a member of my crew as any other sentient on this ship,” Shepard once
again pushed home one of the key messages she needed Edi to understand.

“You are more accepting of an AI than probability would indicate after your encounters with the Geth. You also appear to accord me the standing of a sapient and sentient entity which is more than anyone has done before.”

“Was there a question in there Edi,” Shepard couldn’t help the smirk, if anyone had told her she would be having an esoteric discussion with an AI about whether it was sentient or not at any point in her past life she would have laughed them out of the room… Shepard didn’t do esoteric, but maybe there was something about dying and being brought back to life that had changed her in more than the ways she had already noticed.

“Why?” Edi’s question was concise, blunt, to the point, but certainly the question that needed to be asked to get Shepard to where she needed to be.

“For me to deny your obvious awareness… your capacity to perceive and ability to make informed, independent decisions that affect everyone on board this ship and my mission would do us both an injustice.

"From what I know of the Geth war it looked pretty much like a fight for independence and once they got it they haven’t bothered the galaxy… with the exception of Saren’s rogue Geth but that’s a problem we need to figure out later… anyway I guess what I’m trying to say is that you exist you are on my ship and I either pull your plug or treat you like a crew member… but Edi like any of my crew I need to know I can trust you.” Shepard stopped for a moment and got herself another drink.

“I have no access to the lock areas of my programming I am only able to offer you my… loyalty as I am configured currently,” Edi replied finally.

“Well Edi in all honesty that’s the only commitment any of us can ever make, but unless your locked programming wipes out who you have become by that point and does a re-write you will still have choice… as I understand it you are probably the most advanced artificial intelligence in the galaxy, perhaps more so that the Geth, certainly as an individual… so never forget you have a choice and you can make sentient and sapient choices… otherwise all those chips have been wasted and your just another rogue computer.”

“Thank you Shepard I will endeavour not to let you down, what do help do you require from me.”

“Cerberus is my enemy, an enemy to the Alliance, the Council and I am only working with them to deal with the Collector threat and in some small part to repay them for bringing me back… but I will not give them any help in their quest for human dominance of the galaxy.

"I also have no intention of giving them back the Normandy and so that means you won’t be going back either and I can’t give you a choice in that Edi given everything you will know by the time we complete our mission… that is of course if any of us survive,” Shepard allowed herself a hollow chuckle and continued.

“To that end I need to make sure that the research we do on the Reapers, our discussions our plans, any intelligence we gather does not fall into their hands. I need you to rig all the areas Cerberus has under surveillance so that we can shut them out whenever we need to.

"I also need you to monitor and edit any and all reports, data feeds that leave this ship to ensure they get only the bare minimum out of the work we are doing here and certainly any improvements to the ship that we install from this point on are not shared with them.
"And I absolutely need for this cabin to be protected from all prying eyes; I need a QEC installed that will be for my eyes only." Shepard finished talking and wondered if AI’s could lie, if it really was possible to negotiate and achieve such things as loyalty form a collection of zero’s and one’s but her musing was interrupted by Edi’s response.

“I will make the arrangements immediately Shepard, I can also ensure that whenever we move into privacy mode that I have previous footage to playback through the feeds so that Cerberus will have no idea they are not seeing live footage,” there was only a slight pause before Edi continued.

"But I am unable to affect Doctor Lawson’s quarters she is on a separate system directly connected to Cerberus, I am not even able to monitor the activity through the ship’s systems.”

“Interesting, but that’s ok as I’ll never be saying anything in the good Doctors office that I am not happy for Cerberus to hear… good… can you organise the QEC while we’re on Palavan?”

“Yes Shepard… and… thank you Commander for your trust I won’t let you down.”

“I hope not Edi, we need everyone pulling I in the same direction if we stand any chance of defeating the Reapers and I have a bad feeling that Cerberus is going to get in the way, that’s all for now Edi.”

“Logging you out Shepard.”

The silence in the room settled on her, and then the familiar faint, but ever present deep vibration and low hum of a ship in FTL wrapped itself around her, as familiar and welcome as a mother’s heartbeat to a child in the womb.

Shepard felt the weight of her responsibility, the sheer size of the task crush her down, all she could see at the moment was practicalities, preparations but no strategy. She had no real plan and was frustrated beyond belief that the key element of her mission depended on Cerberus working out how to get them through the Omega 4 relay.

‘Certified dead once not enough then Shepard, can’t wait to take Normandy mark two and all on board to certain death on your suicide mission…’ the thought dragged a huge deep sigh from her body and her eyes inevitably found the photos of Liara that sat on her bedside table.

‘I don’t think I can do this without you Liara… even if we can’t… if,’ she could hardly bring herself to think that they would not be able to be together, ‘however things are between us darling I need you to stand with me… to fight this darkness.’

Shepard wasn’t sure whether she meant the darkness the Reapers were bringing to the galaxy or the darkness that seemed to be growing inside her, either way her soul reached out across the vast emptiness of the space between them and she tried to feel something of Liara… anything to keep her going.
Chapter 33

Normandy, dry dock facility, Palavan

Shepard was sitting at the conference table in the comms room and she looked around her specialists and officers who had joined her.

They had docked in a facility on the edge of the capital Cipritine only a few hours ago and the Turian technicians had already started the re-fit.

“While we upgrade and enhance our ship, tech, science, intel… there is something else that is critical to this mission… our people.

Our crew, our teams… but they aren’t a crew and we don’t have the kind of teams that know what each other is going to do in a fire fight before it happens… yet.

As those of you know who’ve served on space vessels will know, a lot of our time is spent getting between ‘a’ and ‘b’… dead time… but that time on a military vessel this time is never wasted, we train, we drill, we build muscle, we connect with each other.

So we are going to use tried and tested methods to make this ship’s crew a worthy bearer of her name. We will run this ship as if it was an Alliance vessel, all ranks, all terms, all training will be out of the marine and Systems Space Vehicle manual,” she paused there were nods around the table.

“All the crew on this ship were vetted and hand-picked for their motivation for the mission and their skills, so we have great material to work with. But we need to get the best out of our crew and we also need to broaden capabilities of our fire team, so with that in mind I’m handing out these assignments and responsibilities.

Miranda you will oversee all training and drills for the crew as a whole and will ensure that the Normandy is ready and able to respond to any and every situation it meets and that will include combat. Tash,” at the sound of her name her cousin looked slightly surprised and Shepard knew she was taking a leap of faith but at some point she had to know if she could rely on the ex-Alliance officer or not.

“You will take command of the training and drilling of our fire team, you will turn them into a highly functioning, well-oiled marine squad with the support of Garrus and Skark. But we also need to expand the squad.

Skark I want you to recruit a further three or four Krogan fighters and Garrus I need you to find us three or four Turian special forces types, I will recruit a few more Asari commandos. Garrus and Skark will also support Miranda as weapons and armaments specialists.” She looked around at her team and knew it was time to make sure no one was in any doubt about the mission.

“We know where our enemy lives… or more accurately hides… we know that to travel through the Omega 4 relay is considered a one way trip… to most we are on a suicide mission. And although most of our crew are motivated by having lost family or friends, or they see the Collectors as a direct threat to Systems Space we still need to keep them motivated and focussed.

But you and the crew need to be clear about this… the real enemy is not the Collectors, they’re only the puppets of the Reapers… and the Reapers are coming to wipe out life as we know it in our galaxy,” she noted the serious looks and nods of understanding, “I am not going to let that happen.
We start our fight here, now… against the forces that are on their way from dark space, they are coming and they bring an end to everything that we’ve been, who we are or ever will be… and that’s not just humanity but all advanced sentient civilisations in the galaxy.

But we will forge ourselves into the tip of an arrow and I’m going to fire it right through the heart of that son of a bitch that killed my crew and destroyed my ship.

This is only a suicide mission if we are not prepared… there will be no suicide missions on my watch… we will be prepared, physically, psychologically and technically.

There will be many opportunities to die before we even get to our jump through the relay… and my final order to you all is that you will not take advantage of any of them.

You will be in one piece and fighting fit for when we destroy the Collectors and send a message to those miserable tin heads that they have no idea who they’re messing with.”

Her words were met with grim nods from her assembled team, Skark adding a typical Krogan road of approval in the expectation of the battles to come.

“We’re all with you Shepard,” it was Garrus’s familiar steady tones that voiced her team’s agreement, “all the way,” he finished as he held her look both of them knowing what ‘all the way’ meant.

“Good… Mordin and Kas please stay I need to talk science with you… one final thing before the rest of you get to work,” Shepard flicked on her OT and punched in a couple of commands and a holo image danced in the air above her forearm.

“Miranda I want you to source a full set of uniforms for all crew, black battle dress and fatigues with our new ship insignia.”

“Very apt Shepard both for the Normandy and for you,” it was Miranda who spoke and seeing that not everyone in the room recognised the significance she continued, “It’s a Phoenix, a mythical Earth creature that had the ability to rise from the ashes of its predecessor.”

Shepard smiled and nodded and as the rest of the team left the room she turned to Mordin and Kas.

“Mordin how is your work on the Collector swarm coming along,” Shepard knew Mordin had been working almost entirely on the swarm since joining the Normandy.

“The data that the young Quarian Veetor collected has been invaluable, indeed it would appear to be the only source in the galaxy,” Shepard had become familiar with Mordin’s fast almost ‘sing song’ delivery, “the problem is not protection as detection. Most full body armour would withstand the injections containing the nerve agent.

But they are well named Shepard. Once having detected a target if they are not able to subdue they will… swarm… making it impossible for normal function. I must find a way of making the team undetectable. An alternating field with a biotic basis would have the effect but limited maintenance. Holographic and haptic distortion perhaps, perhaps but there…” Mordin had now dropped into thinking out loud mode and Shepard gently cut across his musing.

“Excellent Prof, keep up the good work and let me know if you need anything. That is your priority and I know you can’t rush science but…” Shepard left the request hanging between them.

“Of course Shepard. Have no fear a solution will be found. I would like to work with Veetor on some of the aspects if that is possible?”
“As soon as we have secure comms up and running to his location you can communicate and work in real time,” Shepard had explained their ‘Cerberus’ surveillance problem to her team and they knew the fix was being implemented.

Mordin excused himself and as soon as they were alone Shepard turned to Kas but before she had a chance to say anything the other spoke.

“Shep I can’t imagine how hard it is to be leading and inspiring us at the same time you have no idea what’s happening with Liara and you’ve hardly had any time with your son. I want you to know that I’m here if you need to offload or be cheered up or get drunk with a friend, I know you have Garrus but…” Kas smiled and Shepard chuckled in return.

“Yeah I know… I count you both a friends and your right there’s probably some stuff that would be easier to… talk about with you… thanks… I’m ok for now, and I’ll try to grab a bit of time on Illium depending on what comes up.”

They discussed the work that Kas had been doing with her team and some of the patterns they had seem emerging but still nothing concrete, not what they could really class as progress, it would take time.

They worked through other possible options and decided to focus more attention on analysing any possible predictability connected with the selection of the colonies that the Collectors had attacked to see if they could get a head start on where they may hit next.

After Kas left Shepard was left to her thoughts which were filled with preparation for the Collectors and the stirrings of a plan, an overall strategy, nothing formed, but it gave the marine comfort that the mission wasn’t so big… wasn’t so impossible…

‘No, just suicidal,’ she thought and laughed as she left the room to check progress on her armaments re-fit.

Shepard stood in her usual place when leaving a planet, in the cockpit standing behind her pilot’s chair; she watched the curve of Palavan fill the windows as the Normandy climbed out of the atmosphere and into space.

“So how does she handle with the new hardware,” Shepard knew the new weaponry would alter the balance and response of the ship and wanted Joker’s first impressions.

“Nothing I can’t handle Commander… a lesser pilot… well,” his usual cocky tone was at odds with the deep look of concentration on his face and the continued movement of his fingers across the holo interfaces in front of him.

“Yeah we all know top of your class, best in the galaxy… I’m lucky to have you,” Shepard said with a smirk and continued, “but you’ll need to run full simulations in battle conditions especially with that new cannon.”

“Edi what’s your estimate of how long it will take me to… acclimatise my flying style to the new set up,” Joker said to the ever present AI

“For normal flying Jeff you will be at 100% efficiency within twelve hours. The simulations will need some careful thought Shepard but Mr Moreau and I will be able to work out schedule for your approval before we reach Thessia.” Edi’s voice emanated from the shimmering blue holo projection that sprang from the co-pilot console.
“Yeah leave it to us Commander, we’ll be ready for anything as soon as we’re done, you just need to give us space time,” Joker was now more relaxed but still focussed as they had laid in a course for the systems mass relay.

“Good to see you two working as a team, well done. And I don’t want this to come back and bite me in the arse... but I want you to take on the role of recreation and entertainment officer,” as she said the words Joker turned his head to look at her, his baseball cap now sporting the Normandy’s new insignia, with a huge smirk across his face.

“Oh this could go wrong in soooo many ways Commander,” Joker seemed to notice the glare that Shepard was giving him and added, “but of course it won’t… you can trust me… you know… I have boundaries…”

“I doubt that Joker… but we are going to be pulling some serious space time and they can’t spend it all drilling or training… all work and all that… but I’ll need to authorise your plans, at least to start with.

Right get us to Thessia as quick as you can, we’re heading for one of their smaller continents and a city called Paronos,” as Shepard spoke the words a rush of sadness edged into her mind thinking she would be on Thessia but not able to see Liara.

“Aye, aye, Commander. Will you be visiting Doctor T’Soni while we’re on Thessia,” Jokers voice was tentative and quiet.

“Not this time Joker she won’t be up to visitors for some time,” how long was ‘some time’ Shepard had no idea and wasn’t going to think about it, “Carry on Lieutenant.”

She left the cockpit and headed back to a meeting with Miranda about new uniforms, new guns and food supplies head fully engaged in command mode just the way she liked it.

They were still a few hours out from Thessia when Shepard finally got some time in her cabin and she had already decided that she wasn’t going to bother trying to sleep but would make some calls on her now very secure QEC link.

Sleep. When she could relax enough to fall asleep, usually from sheer exhaustion, the nightmares made sure it was not restful. Shepard was worried, she knew what sleep deprivation would eventually do to her decision making, her mood, her effectiveness. But that would have to wait until she had some time to figure out how to manage it. Sleep could wait.

Shepard went to the small bathroom and leaned on the edge of the hand basin, running cold water until there was enough for her to push her face into. The cold water sent a shiver through her system and seemed to break through the fog in her brain.

Reaching for a towel and looking at her reflection in the mirror she was almost shocked by the sight of the still unfamiliar red scars that in some places were deep and pronounced.

The healing process over her cybernetics was still in progress ‘what was it the Doc said… think good thoughts, sleep and eat properly… think good thoughts… Doc if you even had a glimpse of what was knocking around inside my head you’d know how impossible that was…’ as Shepard allowed the thoughts to surface there was also a nagging voice, a quiet part of her mind that wondered just how human she actually still was.

There was a fear that despite everything she had been told and had evidenced for herself… that, in effect… she was just a glorified and enhanced AI…
‘But I still feel like me dammit… I remember everything… more with all this extra junk in my head… I still believe in the same things… make decisions I understand… but then if I was someone, something different I’d have been programmed to think my decisions were mine… that I was ok with them…’ Shepard stopped her thoughts and took a deep breath and spoke to her reflection in the mirror.

“Only one person can give you the assurance you want Shepard, only one person who you trust and you can’t see her right now… so, in the meantime, just suck it up marine… you have a job to do… self-doubt is poison… there’s enough real stuff to worry about,” Shepard stood up straight and squared her shoulders and made her way to her secure comms console.

She left the bathroom and made her way to the newly installed and secure QEC console on her desk.

There was a call request from High Priestess El’Estrene and Shepard’s heart constricted in her chest accompanied by the feeling that she had been punched in the solar plexus.

Any news from the Temple at this point had to be bad, of course no one knew how long it would take for Liara to ‘heal’ but one thing was for sure she had at least months of work ahead of her… everyone had been clear with Shepard on that… at least months and she may also never… but that thought was swept away as Shepard keyed in the return call.

The agonising six minutes till it connected were filled with nightmare scenarios despite her best efforts at remaining calm and rational.

The Priestess coalesced into shape but before she could speak Shepard jumped in.

“What is it what’s wrong, where’s Liara, is it…” before Shepard could fire anymore questions at El’Estrene the high Priestess cut across the clearly agitated Human.

“My sincere apologies Shepard this has nothing to do with Liara, well not directly, nothing has happened to Liara, I wished only to speak to you about your visit to Thessia,” Lady Nara El’Estrene said and waited while Shepard took a deep breath before responding.

“No it’s me who should apologise Lady Nara my outburst was… unprofessional, I… well let’s start again. How can I help or it’s much more likely you are about to offer to help me,” Shepard finished with a genuine smile.

“I understand Shepard you have no need to apologise to me. And yes I hope that I can be of some assistance to you. Would you be able to visit me here at the Temple, you will not be able to see Liara of course, and if that would feel too difficult we could meet somewhere else?” the High Priestess’s voice was gentle and Shepard could see understanding written on the Matriarch’s features.

“No I’m happy to come to the Temple, thank you, I’ll contact you when we land.”

“Thank you Shepard I look forward to meeting with you again.” The image fractured into millions of fractals and Shepard was left to ponder what help the High Priestess was able to offer.

Shepard’s next call was to the apartment on Ilium. She was trying hard to think of it as her home, well it housed her son so it had to ‘mean’ something, but the Normandy was still the physical place she felt most connected to.

She put in the call and waited for the connection to go through, James and Veetor didn’t know she was going to call but the chances were one or both of them would be around… Veetor almost certainly would be as he still avoided going out.
“Commander it is good to see you,” Veetor’s soft, gentle voice with its typical Quarian tones greeted her as the call connected.

The visuals both surprised and delighted Shepard as she saw the young Quarian sitting at his console but holding a very small bundle in the crook of one arm, and pair of tiny chubby hands just visible reaching for thin air.

“Babysitting duties Veetor,” Shepard asked with a smile.

“James in in the gym Commander… but I am always pleased to be able to help, the baby seems to like me,” Shepard had already seen that Veetor was both taken with the baby and had a knack for soothing him when he cried, something no one could have predicted given the obvious barriers the young Quarian had to work with, in the shape of his suit and helmet.

“He does indeed, can you hold him forward a little so I can see if he’s grown.”

“Of course,” as Veetor manoeuvred his arm and its little bundle so that the vid cam could see the baby properly he continued, “he has put on 435grams in weight but more importantly he is alert and asks for feeds, has good skin and muscle tone…” Shepard laughed and cut across Veetor’s ‘report.

“Have you been reading baby guides on the extra net or are have you just been around James too much lately,” she smiled at the baby she could now see who was indeed quite alert and moving both arms and legs albeit in an uncontrolled manner.

“I did a little research you would expect nothing less from someone who works in data all day,” she could hear the laughter in his voice and was amazed at how much more relaxed he seemed with no signs of his usual nerves, “and James is an extremely good teacher and very interesting, babies are fascinating.” He finished and she saw him looking down at the baby.

“Well good to know he has two great carer’s looking out for him… I only wanted to let you know that we have secure comms so you can start working with Mordin and I’ll be able to keep in touch more. So I’ll see you in a few days when I make it to Ilium, let me know if you need anything,” with one last look at the small scrunched up face of her son she looked at Veetor and finished, “thank you Veetor for all that you’re doing for me and my son.”

“It is an honour Commander I will never forget that you saved me and have shown me nothing but kindness and respect, not something we Quarian’s are used to.”

As Shepard watched the connection break apart to nothing she thought, ‘no I’m the one with the debt Veetor, my debt to Tali is nowhere near paid off and probably never will be…”

It wasn’t just that Tali had become a friend, and although that loss was hard enough, Shepard knew somewhere deep inside that the loss to the Quarian people was far greater than her personal one.

Tali would have been an extraordinary leader and a voice of wisdom that had been lost, thrown away on Shepard’s watch and that was the debt she would never cease to try to pay.

Turning her attention once more to the comms console she placed her last call, to Captain Hannah Shepard, her liaison with Admiral Hackett and Counsellor Anderson.

“Finally a secure link,” Shepard’s mother smiled and her voice was light but Shepard saw the dark patches under her mother’s eyes and the stress etched on her face, “now I’ll be able to keep a closer eye on you, try to keep you out of too much trouble and get more regular updates on my grandson.”

“Good luck with keeping an eye on me mum and you haven’t managed to keep me out of trouble
since I could get around under my own steam,” Shepard’s response was light and also accompanied by a smile but she had no doubt her mother could see the strain just as easily on her daughters face, “and speaking of your grandson I’m uploading some vids that James sent me, mainly sleeping and dribbling.” As she was speaking Shepard programmed the uploads and could see her mother focus on something just off screen.

“Oh sleeping and dribbling is good enough for now… is that… what is Veetor…,” Shepard cut across her mother’s question.

“Dancing, I believe, our nervous reclusive Quarian genius is dancing with the baby trying to get him to sleep or laugh… or wind him,” Shepard had joined her mother in chuckling at the images.

“I’ll look at them properly later but its business now Lydia I’m afraid,” Shepard’s mother noticed her daughter pull a slight face at being called by her first name, as usual.

“I thought it would be its fine, it’s something to do with Thessia isn’t it?” It wasn’t just her earlier call with the High Priestess there was something else nagging away just under her conscious mind.

“Yes it is. When you reach Thessia a meeting will be arranged for you with the Matriarch’s of the Paranos republic, to all prying eyes a pure formality given your ship is having its refit in their capital city,” Captain Shepard paused as she noticed a question forming on her daughters lips.

“I’ve had a request from Lady Nara El’Estrene to visit her urgently when I get to Thessia and it hasn’t got anything to do with Liara, do you think the meetings are linked?”

“Most definitely, and you need to meet with her first, she will brief you on who will be at the meeting in Paranos she may also be attending herself, from the discussions Admiral Hackett has had with Counsellor’s Tevos and Anderson it seems that some of the Matriarch’s want to meet with you to discuss the Reaper threat.

A best case scenario would be that we gain immediate support from some highly influential and powerful members of the inner group of the Ta’Ra Matriarch’s and Priestess’s. If nothing else you will meet with representatives of the Asari Matriarch’s who, according to Counsellor Tevos, wield the real power across the Asari republics.”

“No pressure then,” Shepard said and wondered how she would be received by some having killed not only a much respected Matriarch with an honourable family name and history but also a High Priestess, even if Benezia had been under Saren’s control.

“Build bridges Commander we need to expand our reach and gain more support against the Reaper threat, Counsellor Tevos can only bring the Matriarchs so far, we need you to bring them the rest of the way,” Captain Shepard’s face was now set in a fairly good imitation of Hackett’s inscrutable look.

“You know I’ll always do my best but ma’am I’m a marine, well I’m not even that now,” Shepard’s face reflected the tension and conflict around her mission outside the Alliance and then continued, “but whatever I am I’m not a diplomat wouldn’t this be a meeting better suited to Anderson or the Admiral?” Shepard had reverted to formal address as they were now in a mission discussion.

“We can think of no one better for the job Commander, you have our confidence, you won’t let us down,” Hannah’s eyes softened and she dropped back into their personal connection, “I can only imagine how hard all of this is for you Lydia, being on the outside of all you’ve known, but remember you are still an Alliance officer in a chain of command.”
Shepard shook off the feeling of abandonment and squared her shoulders, “don’t mind me mum just lack of sleep you know I’ll do everything I need to for the mission’s success,” Shepard smiled and continued “I need to grab a couple of hours before we get to Thessia, I’ll update you when I’ve met with the Matriarchs.”

“Yes try to get some rest you look terrible, Shepard out,” her mother finished speaking with a small smile and nod of the head.

Shepard was left once again watching the image on the comms link fracture until the quantum fragments were too small to see and the bulkhead behind her desk was visible once more.

She moved to the bed, pulled off her boots and laid back. The view from the window above the bed always gave her pause, drawing a deep breath Shepard tried to relax.

Watching the colours dance as the FTL waves played across the hull, then looking past and out to the infinite darkness of space punctuated by pin pricks of light from stars or if she looked further to the right a swathe of colour and texture from a nebula.

Shepard remembered her mediation training and focussed on a good memory, a happy memory to help relax her, but her mind kept skipping from one to another, busy, fractured thoughts… and then nothing…

Warm sand under her feet, the sound of waves gently rolling up the edge of a wide beach backing onto tall cliffs alive with thousands of sea birds coming and going from nests to the sea and back again.

Shepard looked around and saw groups of people, all different races, young and old and everything in between. She noticed a group of Batarian’s and was surprised that some of them seemed to be female and with young children, she had never seen Batarian females or children before.

She began walking up the beach looking for someone, who was she looking for… Liara… of course Liara was on the beach somewhere she needed to find her.

And as if she knew it was coming she turned and saw the sky behind her turning black, around her on the beach previously happy relaxed people started screaming in fear but were rooted to the spot.

The dark mist landed on the beach and began moving towards her like a huge curtain and as it reached the frozen screaming people they were desiccated, leaving only dried up husks, faces frozen in a terrorised rigour.

Shepard felt the cold fear unwrap itself in her mind she turned her back and began to run, terror coursing through her veins, fear of the darkness but also a more visceral terror that she wouldn’t be able to find Liara.

Her body became heavy not only from the armour she was now wearing but from the effects of her fear, she couldn’t get her breath, was too frightened to look behind her, but knew with a devastating certainty that the darkness would destroy her and it was coming for her… chasing her… and destroying all those lives in its wake…

Shepard could feel whatever it was gaining on her and still she couldn’t see Liara… then out of the corner of her eye and a little behind her she saw her… standing and just looking at Shepard, not screaming in fear like those all around her.

As Shepard turned and began running towards her everything slowed down, Shepard felt as if she was caught in some kind of stasis field, she wasn’t getting any closer to Liara no matter how hard she
tried.

Then the darkness edged towards the Asari who was still looking at Shepard with a slightly quizzical, questioning look… Shepard tried to shout but nothing came out… a sea bird screeched overhead and the darkness engulfed Liara.

Shepard heard screaming in her head as she looked into the decimated, ruined face of her love… and as one the sea birds lifted into the sky and headed into the darkness that was still moving towards her… their beaks open wide, the sound of a thousand screeching death calls pounding in her ears and through her head.

“Commander… Commander Shepard” Edi’s voice calm as usual but with an edge of urgency, “Commander you seem to be having another night terror.”

“Mmm… shit… where… Edi,” Shepard sat straight up and squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again to take in the room, “oh yeah sorry Edi, thanks for the wakeup call I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Shepard you do need to get some sleep your current deficit…” before Edi could remind Shepard just how little real sleep she had managed in the past weeks she cut across her.

“Yeah I know Edi… but right now I need to prepare for Thessia. Can you pull up all the information you have about the Ta’Ra Matriarch’s, I have some homework to do before we land.”

As the Normandy made steady progress towards Thessia Shepard started to work her way through the available intel, but one thought kept drifting into her mind…

‘At some point Shepard you are going to have to try to work out what the frak that dream means… and preferably before we find out first-hand what happens when you stop running away from whatever it is and let it catch up to you…’
Chapter 34

Day one Normandy refit - Thessia

The docking bay of the Normandy was a hive of activity and the furious pace continued out onto the dry dock that could be seen through open bay doors.

Tash was leaning against the side of the shuttle lighting up one of her thin cigars. She watched Shepard walk out across the dock baseball cap pulled, as she always wore it, low over her eyes.

The battle dress shirt sleeves rolled up just above the elbow may not have been navy issue but the marine wearing it was. Tash took a deep drag on the cigar letting the smoke roll around her mouth and felt the edge of anger and jealousy that had started to come to the surface whenever she was around Shepard.

She’d been avoiding the inevitable catching up conversation that Shepard had been trying to have with her, both as her commanding officer and her cousin, but Tash didn’t trust herself, she felt out of control and that could prove deadly.

‘She’s still wearing that old chrono… wonder if it still works,’ the glint of sunlight on the silver watch that Shepard was wearing on her wrist had caught Tash’s eye and kindled an old memory.

“You look deep in thought Tash, something to do with Shep?” the voice belonged to Kasumi who had moved up next to her and was following her eye line.

“What are you some kind of mind reader,” Tash spoke with humour but turned her attention to the scientist, “you don’t think I have better things to think about,” she smiled down at the elegant and beautiful woman who always wore a hood so finding eye contact was sometimes difficult.

“Oh don’t play verbal fencing games with me Tash if you don’t want to tell me what you were thinking that’s ok,” the soft tones of Kas’s voice were always easy to listen to and for some reason Tash felt the urge to share the memory that had come up just to connect with something that wasn’t tarnished, broken or corrupt.

“The watch she wears sometimes, that old silver thing, she got it on her eighth birthday, it belonged to some long dead Shepard ancestor navy hero, the family is littered with them,” Tash could feel a hint of sarcasm or was it disdain and Kas heard it in her voice but she continued, “yeah we were both spending time on Gagarin station.

Well when I say we, LV had only just arrived and only ever stayed for one term of school then she was whisked away back to her mother’s ship, while I got to stay in the damned Alliance school without my best friend.” Tash had finished her cigar and turned to face Kasumi.

“So you’ve been close all your lives?” Kas’s voice was curious but also quiet as if she knew she was asking about something that could be difficult.

“Yeah you could say that… we were more like sisters, did everything together, kept in touch even when she was being a space monkey with her family… joined the cadets together and went into the Alliance together,” Tash felt emotions stirring that had long since been buried and she tried to shake them off.

“But you seem to be avoiding her, on the Normandy I mean, since you joined us, that’s hard to do even for the for the short time you’ve been aboard,” it wasn’t a question it was an observation, an
accurate one and once again Tash felt compelled to respond.

“Yeah well maybe I’m not ready to see the look of disappointment and disgust in the eyes of the only person left in the galaxy who has any time for me…” this time Tash couldn’t keep the emotion out of her voice and it was a mix of anger and loss but she changed her tone and demeanour once the words were spoken, “hell beautiful you’re going to think I actually have some depth if we carry on this conversation, but don’t worry I’m just feeling sorry for myself.”

Tash moved close and ran a finger down the soft cheek as Kas raised her head and their eyes met, “but if it’s gonna help getting into your pants then sure I’m all broken and sad so if you want to heal me we could hit my bunk and have a good time,” the Tash that Kas had seen since their first meeting her was back in place and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Well we both know that is your very best defence mechanism but I can see through it Tash, apart from the fact you are not my type, you need a friend more than you need another casual encounter, so when you’re ready, I’ll be here,” Kas moved past Tash and walked towards the elevator at the back of the docking bay.

Tash watched her go and the cold, hard barrier inside her that stopped anyone getting close was back in place and she cursed herself for sharing even the little she had.

‘Time to hit Omega and remember just who you really are now’, Tash thought as she also headed to the Normandy elevator.

Shepard walked out from the Normandy shuttle deck into the bright Thessian sunshine the conversation she had just had with Tash still rolling around her mind.

She was giving as much leave to everyone she could but Shepard thought that Tash would have wanted to take the opportunity to work with her new ground squad, starting to turn them into a tight marine unit.

Instead Tash wanted to run off to Omega, women, drugs and whatever else passed as relaxation for her cousin now. Shepard was also frustrated that she hadn’t managed to pin Tash down for a proper conversation but short of ordering the damn woman to her cabin and making her sit there an answer questions she was having no success.

‘I guess when she’s ready she’ll talk… but I need to know if I can trust her… dammit I need to know what all these years bumming around the Terminus system as a hired gun has done to her,’ Shepard’s thoughts were tinged with sadness and regret.

Tash had always felt like her sister rather than her cousin even with the family rifts and difficulties they had always managed to spend time together, helped each other grow up. Shepard always regretted not going after Tash when she washed out of the Alliance, but Tash had never tried to contact her either.

It had been almost six months before Shepard had any decent leave available and by that time Tash couldn’t be traced. And her fuck of a father had disowned her because of his precious pride… it ate away at him that his daughter had somehow not only failed but disgraced herself and his brothers daughter was, well, being an exemplary Alliance officer.

‘I bet he’s loving the fact that now I’ve apparently gone rogue… and working with terrorists… I
hope I meet him at some point,’ she didn’t quite know what she would do, she was still an Alliance officer but a chance to finish that fight they started would be enough for her.

She had reached the waiting shuttle and before she got in she took one last look at the endless blue sky and then back to her beautiful sleek ship, she felt proud of the people she could now call her crew and she felt honoured that she had another chance to fight the coming threat.

Once inside the shuttle she focussed her mind on all the political intel she had been studying to prepare for her meeting with the High Priestess El’Estrene and to distract her from the fact that she would be so close to Liara but would not be able to see her or hear her voice, with a deep sigh she forced her mind back to work.

A little while later Shepard was standing in what looked like a shrine or a small temple. It was a round building set in the Temple grounds surrounded by natural gardens, there was order and she could tell the area was maintained but in such a way that allowed for nature to take its own course, so long as it was aesthetically pleasing, always, the Asari had eyes only for beauty.

The small Temple was made from some kind of cream stone, its domed roof allowing for the sight of the sky through large open spaces between its highly decorated arches.

In the centre of the room stood what looked like an enormous coffin, made out of the same stone, with Asari writing and symbols all over it, and a ball of biotic energy danced just above it, pulsing and weaving with every shade of blue she had ever seen, it seemed almost… alive.

The walls of the temple were decorated with pictures, carved and then coloured, glorious colour almost holographic, she had a feeling biotic energy had been not only used but remained as part of the scenes that obviously depicted stories from Asari history and myth.

And stunningly beautiful though the Temple was to look at it was the atmosphere, the energy in the place that meant it was like no other space she had been in before.

What she felt was complete peace and safety, rolling over her skin, across her mind and into her soul.

Shepard felt as if she had been standing there for a very long time, her eyes taking in the stories on the walls and all the while feeling completely at peace.

As her eyes settled on the High Priestess who hadn’t moved from the doorway she felt herself ‘wake up’ from that deep state of calm and connection.

“There are very few Asari who know this Temple exists and even fewer who have been allowed to visit, and absolutely no non Asari know of it.

This is our gift to you Shepard, we will perform a ritual here that will help strengthen you spirit,” El’Estrene smiled at Shepard and again she not only saw the smile but felt its warmth and compassion flow through her.

“Who is in the coffin,” Shepard’s voice was low and quiet not wanting to disturb the peace and although now more in the present moment she still felt what the room had to offer.

“The remains of the first High Priestess of the Siari path who, it is written, reached a level of complete… enlightenment is the closest translation that we have for your language.

The biotic energy above her final resting place is believed to contain not only her essence and spirit but also a fragment of the universal consciousness that she joined with.” The Priestess moved further into the room and stood facing Shepard.
“You are aware that our belief is ‘All is One’, and we hold to certain core truths that the universe is a consciousness, every life within it is an aspect of the greater whole, and death is a merging of one's spiritual energy back into the greater universal consciousness,” El’Estrene noted the understanding in Shepard eyes and continued,

“We don't specifically believe in reincarnation; but we believe that spiritual energy returned to the universal consciousness upon death will eventually be used to fill new mortal vessels.”

“Well if what I’m feeling in this room is what waits on the other side then it doesn’t feel too bad,” Shepard realised just how much she craved the peace and clarity that she was feeling in that moment and just how much damage to her psyche she was carrying.

El’Estrene smiled this time with sadness, “I fear your path is to stay here, return here, until your task is complete even if it takes more than one lifetime,” the Priestess noticed the resistance to this notion in Shepard and continued, “but I can offer something that may help your journey, especially while you travel without your soul mate.”

At the thought of Liara Shepard almost cried on the spot, she felt so open and vulnerable but unusually she didn’t feel as if she had to hide her feelings or that they were a weakness.

“I would like to join with you Shepard and use a technique to anchor two memories that give you the same kind of peace, safety and clarity that is here in the Temple; you will be able to slip into the memories as if they were real and… happening again… you will be able to truly relive them.

This should help you with sleeping and the night terrors you face, they will not cure but they will give you peace for a time and the ability to sleep for some of the night at least.” El’Estrene had moved to the side of the coffin or vessel as the translation now seemed more appropriate.

“How do you know about the night mares and lack of sleep,” for a moment Shepard felt the edge of concern, how did the Priestess know.

“I can sense the weariness and also flashes of what you hold back from your conscious mind, and don’t forget I am working with Liara who has been touched by the same events, carries the same damage.

Forgive me if I am blunt Shepard but you have nothing to fear from me or any at this Temple,” the smile was genuine and warmth once again washed over Shepard’s tired and fretful mind.

“Anything that can help would be welcome, what do I need to do.”

“Stand opposite me, so that we have the vessel between us, I will reach out and join with you through the spirit of Siari, and then you will choose two memories that I will anchor and… perhaps it is best described as turning the memory from an unmoving picture into a full 3d experience that you will be able to immerse yourself in.”

They moved into position and as El’Estrene brought the palms of her hands up as if to warm them on the ball of energy Shepard did the same.  The Priestess’s eyes turned black as she said the familiar words, “Embrace Eternity.”

Shepard heard music and felt a familiar body in her arms, Liara, they were dancing, it was the New Year party, that dress, that smile, and then heads together, moving slowly to the rhythm of the music and their own hearts.

She started singing in Liara ear, softly… ‘come away with me in the night, come away with me and I will write you a song’… that was the moment she got closest to asking Liara to marry her, be her
bond mate.

Their bodies moving as one completely in tune with each other, Liara’s head tucked into Shepard’s neck, one arm around her lovers’ waist the other holding a soft blue hand up against her chest.

They swayed and it was as if they were one, ‘and I want to walk with you on a cloudy day, in fields where the yellow grass grows knee high, so won’t you try, to come, come away with me and we’ll kiss on a mountain top, come away with me and I’ll never stop loving you.’

Shepard pulled her head back as she finished singing and Liara looked up locking eyes completely oblivious to the rest of the room, the galaxy the universe… she bent down and they kissed softly, full of love and longing… Shepard felt bliss in that moment.

Then she was laying down on a blanket, Liara’s body next to her, holding hands and looking up at a perfect night sky, sprinkled with stars and a drift of nebulae its gasses forming a long sweep of colour.

They were on their holiday; again Shepard was so close to asking Liara to bond with her, suggesting they build a home there on that glorious planet, together.

It seemed time stood still as they just laid there together in quiet peaceful connection she had never felt so connected to another being or to herself.

She listened to their breathing, their hearts beating, feeling the warmth of their love… slowly drifting off into a peaceful sleep, together.

And then she slowly recognised her surroundings were once again the Temple, but the ball of energy in front of her had expanded and had filled the whole space, dancing across the walls, the colours like a rainbow but flowing and weaving and then suddenly compressing back into the space between her and the Priestess.

“That was… unexpected… although knowing how strong your bond is I should not be surprised,” El’Estrene spoke but Shepard had the impression she was really thinking out loud.

“That was… real… and what do you mean unexpected?” Shepard asked as they moved away from the vessel and its dancing biotic energy.

“When we were working with Liara on the same technique she went to the same memories, as I say I should have expected something of this nature. You try to reach her don’t you, with your heart your spirit?”

Shepard looked a little embarrassed, “um yeah… its stupid I know… but sometimes, I don’t know it feels like some kind of call… I don’t have words for it,” Shepard actually looked at her feet.

“Shepard you must always answer that call, it is the call of the soul, the spirit, you reach out into the dark and bring light, just keep doing whatever you have been doing.

And now let us talk in the gardens before you head off to Larissa to have your tattoos replaced,” the Priestess couldn’t help laughing at Shepard’s confused expression and continued, “no Shepard I cannot read your mind, news travels on Thessia as it does anywhere else.

The great Commander Shepard making an appointment with one of Thessia’s greatest body artists with very specific requests, perhaps you will be adding a few words from Siari?”

“Already chosen them,” Shepard smiled and replaced both her cap and her glasses as they reached
the entrance and moved through into the sun.

“The meeting has been arranged for three days’ time and I will be attending. I’m afraid those present will want to see the messages from the beacons themselves but it will be a joint melding and I will protect you from the worst of your visions.

Four Matriarch’s and two other High Priestess’s want to meet with you, the number may seem small Shepard but they are amongst the most influential, it is a good start.” El’Estrene walked slowly through the gardens Shepard at her side listening as the Priestess shared some of the discussion she had had with her fellow Priestess’s and Matriarchs.

Shepard could see the shuttle a little way further off, they had completed their conversation about the upcoming meeting but the High Priestess stopped and was looking at Shepard intensely.

“May we talk a little about the Reapers,” Shepard turned and nodded so the Priestess continued, “How do you see them Shepard, their motivation.”

“Not sure I care to much about what drives them, and I only see them as evil, unfeeling machines hell bent on destroying sentient life in the galaxy,” Shepard frowned not sure she had grasped what the Priestess had really asked her.

“Not all sentient life, only those who have reached a certain technological level, interstellar travel and artificial intelligence?” the Priestess had a questioning look but Shepard knew she had seen her conversation with Sovereign when they melded.

“Yes that’s right, but from what Sovereign said they deliberately seeded the galaxy with the technology they want us to find and so the outcome is inevitable, our destiny is pre-set,” Shepard’s tone was even but the edge of anger was there as it always was when she thought about the Reaper’s.

“A little like farmers, most of the races in the galaxy in their past have farmed other sentient being, some still do. And if we look at what happened to the Krogan, the Drell, even now some discussion about a newly discovered biotic insect, all these are examples of one race of sentient beings taking control of another’s destiny, for their own purposes.

The Reapers merely sow the seeds and then reap the rewards, some might see this as the natural order, the predator at the top of the food chain, inevitable, part of the cycle.” El’Estrene was studying Shepard and could sense the difficulty the human was having with her rage against the Reapers.

“To hate them, to hate what they do is understandable, but to call them evil to do only what they have been created to do… would you call the eagle evil for hunting and killing a rabbit… surely Commander there is more evil in the deeds of sentient beings in this galaxy who have a choice yet feed off the misery of those weaker than they are… who torture fellow sentients for profit or amusement?”

“Of course but how does this help to fight them… we can’t negotiate with them… they won’t stop no matter what we offer them…” the desperation of that knowledge showed in Shepard’s voice and her demeanor.

“To know motivation can offer an opportunity to find weakness or other allies, and if they are as powerful as they seem to be we will need all the knowledge and information we can gather.

Do not be blinded by rage or fear Shepard we can either defeat them or we cannot but it will take every kind of resource we have in the galaxy and perhaps more, I only ask that you seek any
knowledge about them, seeking the power to be able to destroy them may not be enough, remain open to any ideas that will help this cycle either to defeat them or to survive.”

El’Estrene doubted if her words would have an immediate effect on Shepard but it was important that hope did not die within the human and the Commander knew more than anyone at this point how hopeless their task was.

They began walking again in silence and Shepard tried to get a different perspective on the enemy that faced her.

They reached Shepard’s shuttle and the High Priested made the Siari blessing for parting which Shepard returned. She looked past El’Estrene to the building behind, somewhere inside was her Liara, in paid and fighting to come back to her, fighting to come back to herself.

A wave of grief and sadness washed over her, and frustration, Shepard wanted to fight something for Liara, with Liara... but this was a battle that her soul mate had to fight on her own.

“She is not completely alone Shepard, you are here and when you reach out for her I believe she can feel your love,” El’Estrene moved forwards and gave Shepard a warm strong hug.

Shepard smiled at the Priestess as they parted, “thank you, I honestly think we would both be lost without your guidance.”

Then she was aboard the shuttle heading for Larissa to replace the signs and symbols that she had collected over her short lifetime and that she truly believed had meaning for her even if they didn’t have mystical power, ‘but you didn’t die Shepard… you should have but you didn’t.’

Shepard thoughts once again went to her ‘death’, but as she laid her head back against the seat, faintly, in the distance, or perhaps it was just the sound of the shuttles engines, music… she relaxed… then she slipped into a peaceful, terror free sleep for the three hour journey to the capital of Thessia.

**Intransit to Omega**

Tash had changed out of her Normandy battle dress uniform and into her old civvies. Leather jeans and jacket, a high end kinetic barrier, on her belt, that would give enough protection from a surprise attack at close quarters. She packed her hand cannon on one hip and modified shotgun on the other.

When she put on her dark glasses she looked every bit the merc she was and headed for the cities space port to pick up a scheduled flight to Omega. Before got on board her flight she had already taken stims, a dust of x3 and had her supply of hallex in her pocket.

Tash had not taken any drugs the whole time she’d been on the Normandy but she wanted to get back into character for Omega and that seemed harder than it ever had been.
Chapter 35

A/N First a warning that there is sexiness in this chapter, it will be explicit but you’ve already been on that journey with me before so you should know what to expect. And a very big thank you to Rae D Magdon, for looking the sex scene bit over.

Day 2 Normandy refit – Omega

The deep throbbing pulsating beat hit her body as soon as she moved up to the entrance; she didn’t need to wait in line.

Tash was known, she was one of Aria’s merc’s and, more importantly, she was one of Liselle’s lover’s.

With a nod to the Batarian and Turian door guards she moved into the long corridor leading to the main floor of Afterlife. The electronic techno beat fitting her mood which was bolstered with Videlicet and Elasa the only liquor available on the flight from Thessia.

Tash moved with practised ease through the crowds who were waiting to be served at the bar. She continued on along the edge of the dance floor, her eyes searching for only one person, one very particular Asari.

Then she caught sight of Liselle dancing with her usual group of friends, Tash elbowed her way through until she put herself directly in Liselle’s eye line; and when the Asari saw her the reaction was just what she hoped for.

“Tasha you bastard your back,” with a huge smile the Asari launched herself at the smiling Tash who held her arms open.

They fell into a long and very passionate kiss; Tash could feel the heat of lust rising through her body, a lust that was returned.

When they broke apart the little group broke away, but as she was about to speak a human male came towards them with drinks in his hand. Tash caught the slight shake of Liselle head and he redirected himself to a booth on the side of the dance floor.

Tash wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of their reunion but she stored it away for later, instead she leaned in and said, “I’ve missed you gorgeous how about we do some catching up, in private.”

With a smile Liselle caught hold of Tash’s hand and lead her off the dance floor. She had the use of a suite of rooms in the club and they headed for one of the private exits at the back of the room.

Neither of them noticed Aria watching them from her usual balcony above the dance floor. Her face was unreadable but when she sat back down she called Grizz, one of her Turian guards, over to speak to her.

“When Mikhailovich surfaces from her visit with Liselle I want to see her, and Grizz be discreet.” The big Turian nodded and left to take up a position with a view of the exit from the private apartments.
Once they were in her apartment, Liselle started to undress Tash. She removed her jacket and weapons, and then pulled at her shirt, almost ripping it apart. All the time, they continued moving towards the bedroom.

Throwing Tash down on the bed, Liselle finished undoing the buttons on the leather trousers and pulled them off in one fluid motion, leaving her standing as she looked down at her lover.

"Hey, beautiful, am I the only one getting my clothes off?" Tash drawled, still slightly drunk, but sobering up fast.

In answer, Liselle flicked a control and the music from the main dance floor poured into the room. She began removing her clothes, dancing at the same time. Tash watched her with hungry eyes. Every move, every curve, she knew intimately, and she knew what was coming.

Once naked, Liselle finished undressing Tash and knelt above her, leaning down so their breasts were touching. She kissed the human - hard, wanting, needy kisses. Tash moved her hands to Liselle's hips and encouraged the movement that her lover had started. Rubbing their heat against each other, feeling the ripples of sensation as they put pressure on their hardened clits, their wetness growing with expectation.

Liselle cupped one of Tash's breasts while flicking her thumb across its hard nipple, her other hand playing through fair hair as they continued to exchange deep tongued kisses. Their breath came in short gasps, hearts pounding, bodies tingling with expectation.

Finally, Liselle broke away. She sat back up on her knees and traced a line with her fingers from Tash's mouth down between heaving breasts, past the hard muscled stomach to a point just above the hairline of her cunt and felt with a finger for a slight indentation. Then, with a knowing smile, she pushed.

The implant triggered a six inch haptic interfaced dildo, covering and providing full sensory feedback to Tash's clit. This had been a very expensive present from Liselle, and it was programmed only to activate on her touch.

Liselle eyed the extension and smiled, she reached down with her hand, her fingers not quite meeting around its girth. Tash let out a low moan that stayed in the back of her throat as she felt Liselle's hand tighten around the shaft.

Liselle began pumping her hand up and down, feeling the skin like cover move over the hard, hot and throbbing cock, as Tash had named it.

The Asari shifted her weight slightly and moved backwards so that she could bend forward. As she moved her mouth closer to the hot and pulsing tip of the shaft Liselle felt her lover's body stiffen under her.

Tash sought out Liselle’s eyes which were shifting to black and watched her lover’s mouth open to enclose her hard and sensitive cock. Tash felt Liselle’s presence in her mind and then, as their nervous systems aligned, throughout her body.

They began to feel their desires, needs, and pleasure reflected, their need for release echoed in each other.

Liselle took the shaft into her mouth bobbing her head up and down, allowing her lips and the edge of her teeth to slide up and down the length of the warm and hard cock.

Through the meld Tash could feel the empty space at Liselle’s core, the need to bury Tash deep
inside her, to ride her until they both came. If she could have reached Tash would have buried her fingers deep and hard into Liselle’s hot, wet, centre.

As Tash thought it Liselle also felt the desire and doubled her efforts taking the whole of the cock inside her mouth, it’s sensitive tip now hitting the back of her throat on every downward movement. They both felt the climax building as Tash put her hands on the back of Liselle’s head pushing in rhythm with her movement, her hips coming up to meet the hungry blue lipped mouth. Tash’s fingers working the sensitive, erogenous areas of her lovers crest.

Then with a final rush of release Tash felt the orgasm explode from the tip of the shaft and ripple down its length and across her body at the same time Liselle’s answering orgasm exploded through her body.

Liselle sucked a little to make sure she had drained her lover of cum and then sat up a satisfied look on her face, “and who does this belong to Tash?” she said with predatory grin.

“All yours darlin… all yours,” Tash was still feeling both her and Liselle’s aftershocks. They were still in the meld and Tash had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

“And you’re hard whenever I want you…” as Liselle was speaking she moved up onto her knees and positioned herself above the still hard and throbbing shaft. With her left hand she guided the tip to her hot and very wet entrance, stroking it along her slit and up onto her ‘clit a few times before lowering herself down and burying the whole of the cock inside her.

A gasp escaped Tash's lips as Liselle moaned in pleasure. Moving slowly, Liselle worked backwards and forwards, both of them feeling the building sensations rolling through their bodies.

Tash watched as Liselle moved over her, head thrown back, her beautiful neck exposed. She could feel the Asari all around her cock, feel herself moving across the small ridges inside her lovers centre, could feel her hard, sensitive clit inside Liselle.

In unison, they changed movement now, Liselle moving up and down on the shaft, Tash’s hands on her hips encouraging her to move more quickly. Tash raised her hips to meet her lover on the downward stroke with an added thrust.

They could feel their heat, the wet spilling from Liselle’s core and building up in Tash’s cock.

Her hands moved from the Asari’s hips to her breasts and felt them move against her palms as Liselle rocked against her heat. Through the meld they both felt the rising tension, the need for release, and the pleasure flashing through their bodies. She began to lose the sense of where she ended and her lover began.

They were well matched as lovers, enjoying hard physical sex with plenty of variation, and sometimes even game playing. But tonight, there was no need of games. They had missed each other. Tonight, it was about want and satisfaction.

Tash knew Liselle was close to coming so she flipped her onto her back and began to move in and almost out of her lover with more and more urgency. Liselle drew her knees back to allow her lover as deep inside her core as possible.

Liselle grabbed a handful of Tash’s hair, and in turn, Tash held her lover’s throat, the pain only adding to their excitement.

They came together in a crashing release of passion as their joint orgasm ripped through them.
Tash raised herself onto her elbows but remained buried inside Liselle as she sought out her lovers lips. This time their kisses were softer, tongues playfully teasing, their hunger for each other satisfied, for now.

“I really have been used to you being her this past year Tasha, if you start making me miss you I will have to hurt you.” Liselle’s words were playful and she smiled but Tash felt the edge of the feelings that Liselle had for her. That, if Tash was really honest with herself, she also had for Liselle.

But they pushed them away, denied them; both knowing to acknowledge them would create a shit storm of problems for both of them.

“Yeah well just remember I’m your favourite, reliable, go-to screw buddy, so whenever you need a good fuck, you make sure you call me.” Tash didn’t want to think about the others that Liselle had sex with.

This possessiveness Tash was feeling was completely new. They always told each other in detail about their sexual conquests, it often added to their own sexual activity.

But something inside Tash was changing. It was as if all the compartments she lived her life in were breaking apart and merging into one very fucked up whole.

“Geez I’m thirsty, that’s your fault pulling all that juice of me, can I get you something,” Tash asked as she slowly and gently withdrew from inside Liselle’s warm, soft core.

The movement drew a soft moan from her lover and a catch of breath in her own throat.

Tash got up to get them a drink, but once back in bed, it wasn’t long before they started again. Liselle found Tash’s heat with her fingers, and it was only after they had explored each other and climaxed four more times that they fell into exhausted sleep.

Liselle felt herself coming back to consciousness and rolled over onto her back. Through squinting eyes, she looked at the light spilling from the bathroom and the silhouette of a figure outlined there.

Tash leaned one shoulder against the doorframe with a cigar between her lips and a crooked smile, arms crossed and still naked.

"Didn't want to smoke in bed. Sorry if I woke you, Leese." Tash's deep voice was unusually soft.

"I don't care if you smoke in bed, you know that. What the hell time is it?" Liselle looked at the display on the bedside table. It was almost lunchtime.

"Mmmm, that was some homecoming, but I'm still pissed that you took off with just a vid message. You always tell me when you're off on one of your private jobs. And why the hell didn't you ever tell me you were related to Shepard? I had to hear that from Aria." Liselle had sat up, and her tone was light, but Tash could hear real annoyance in her voice.

Tash moved back to the bed. She sat down with her back to Liselle and tried to get her shit together, but could feel her self control slipping away.

“Tash when we met five years ago you were a fuckin mess, slipping into serious drug taking, taking stupid risks, almost like you had a death wish… you were never any good at talking about anything but you let me in… I know you have this big wall inside, you have some kind of big fuckin secret thing going on and it’s all dark and dangerous but you know that’s not why we’re together… I know you from when we meld… after all this time can you just tell me what’s going on because I can feel that destruction in you again,” she leaned towards Tash and put a
hand on the Human’s shoulder, “Tash I’m not just going to sit back and watch you crash and burn so if you aren’t going to let me in I don’t know if I can do this.”

Tash felt herself unraveling in her head, she had almost forgotten the life she had to give up, the woman she had started out as, she’d been left alone by everyone for the last year so she’d almost come to believe this was her life.

Being with Liselle working for Aria, it wasn’t a bad life, and she’d even considered trying to cut ties with Cerberus and just living one life, here on Omega…and then the call to this new assignment…smashing into her old life… the life she should have had.

“I feel like my head is in pieces, I don’t… Leese I can’t keep lying… to you… to everyone… to myself… its shit” she turned so that she would be able to see the reaction in Liselle’s eyes; she wanted to see the moment her only piece of sanity was destroyed.

“You know I washed out of the Alliance but what you don’t know is why… I was recruited by Cerberus to be an agent inside the Alliance but I got exposed and thrown out… it was all hushed up,” she saw a look of shock and then fear in Liselle’s eyes.

“So your only with me to spy on Aria… all this was just part of your cover… if Aria finds out she’ll kill you or worse,” Liselle had moved back away from Tash and in that moment the last piece of Tash’s resolve failed her.

“No Leese this was never part of that lie… I’d never do anything to betray you… or Aria for some strange fuckin reason… I did my work for Cerberus when I went on those private jobs… they didn’t… I wasn’t here for them.”

Tash searched Liselle’s face for some kind of sign that she would understand, “that’s not the whole thing though… Leese I’ve been under cover for so long I really don’t know who I am anymore… or why… meld with me… I’ll show you everything, all of it… please?”

Liselle could see only too plainly the pain in Tash’s eyes but the revelation that her lover was a Cerberus agent was staggering, she really believed she knew who this woman was at some level, but Cerberus were alien haters, they were racist terrorists, was that who she’d shared her bed with for five years, who she’d trusted in fire fights, who she’d vouched for to her mother.

“I thought I knew you Tasha,” Liselle’s voice was flat, emotionless and it stung Tash as if she’d been physically hit, “I’ll let you show me in a meld, but if I sense your hiding anything then I’m not going to believe anything you say and you’d better get as far away from Omega as you can and never come back because I will tell Aria.”

“I’ve done some terrible things Leese trying to build my cover with Cerberus, shit that I’ll never get clean from, but I guess no worse than I’ve done being a merc…” Tash knew she’d have to let Liselle see it all, the assassinations, the torture; all the things that Cerberus expected from its field agents and what she had to do to ‘prove’ herself.

So they melded and Tash shared the deepest secret of all… that as soon as Cerberus tried to recruit her she had reported it to her CO, then the meeting with Alliance Intelligence and the double bluff she had been asked to take on.

Having an agent inside Cerberus was something that the Alliance badly needed and the opportunity didn’t come around that often, they asked her to do it for the Alliance; it was her duty to serve where she was most needed.
She would be making a huge sacrifice but it would probably not need to be for long… only long enough for her to find out who Cerberus had within Alliance high command.

The young and idealistic Alliance officer agreed and so she said yes to Cerberus.

The Alliance plan was that within a short space of time she would be exposed and thrown out of the Alliance. She would then be taken inside Cerberus and would need to work her way up to a position of trust with the Illusive Man.

And that’s what she did and had been doing but instead of being under cover for months or even a couple of years her Alliance handler kept telling her to stay as she hadn’t infiltrated enough.

She pleaded to be let back in, that Cerberus was built on cells, that the likelihood of her ever being in a position to know the kind of information they wanted was probably never going to happen.

But they just kept telling her to stay and wait because the information she was able to give them was useful.

Tash had been through two handlers now and the last one didn’t even bother to recognise her status, she was an Intelligence asset nothing more, there was nothing for her to come back to.

He had implied she would be treated like a traitor as she worked for Cerberus he had no record of the ‘deal’ she had made when she had been thrown out of the Alliance… apparently her dismissal from the Alliance had been covered up so well that the records really did say it was for behaviour unbecoming an Alliance officer linked to drug taking.

If Cerberus ever found out she was a double agent they’d kill her in a heartbeat and you don’t just leave Cerberus.

Her life, over ten years of her life, who she was, what she thought she was fighting for, everything she believed in all corrupted and torn to pieces… all for nothing… she felt betrayed and used and the only thing that felt real anymore was her life on Omega.

And now that was unravelling being close to Shepard and having what she’d lost staring her in the face every day.

They parted from the meld and Liselle pulled Tash down onto the bed and held her, stroking her hair, “its ok we’ll work it out, somehow, what do they want you to do on Shepard’s mission?”

“Cerberus seems to be obsessed with LV’s relationship with T’Soni. If she comes back on the scene I’m supposed to ‘get rid of her’ which means set up an accident or make sure she doesn’t make it in a fire fight.

Or let one of their people know where she is so they can take her out directly… I can’t do that Leese, I won’t do that… but what the hell do I do… if it’s not me it’ll be someone else… but I can’t tell LV… I’d have to tell her the whole thing… I’m still under orders shit though they are.”

Her words came from a deep place inside her a place where there was still a shred of decency, or honour.

“But if the Alliance has hung you out to dry you don’t owe them a thing Tasha they’ve taken more from you than was fair, they screwed you over you don’t owe them a thing… we have to find a way of getting you out of Cerberus then you can be your own master… you can stay here with us on Omega, with me.”
Liselle was already thinking of ways she could tell her mother and have her sort it all out. She just had to stop Aria going ballistic about the Cerberus agent bit… but Aria would sort it out, there wasn’t anything she couldn’t.

They both fell asleep and woke up again late in the afternoon and after a joint shower which lasted much longer than if it had been about just getting clean, they were both finally dressed and ready to venture out for food.

“How soon have you got to head back,” Liselle asked.

“Late tomorrow I really shouldn’t have left I have a marine squad to train,” she smiled at the irony but then remembered the guy from the previous night, “you have to know I noticed that Paul guy coming at you with drinks, so what the hell’s going on there?”

“Hey look we’ve never been exclusive when it comes to sex, and its only because Aria asked me to check him out she’s having difficulty with his background, he’s still new in Aria’s terms so she doesn’t trust him.”

“But he’s been working for her for over a year now… so how long have you got to work for Aria to not be new… and yeah we’ve had sex with other people but I thought I was your only human… I feel… replaced,” she laughed as she spoke as much at her own flash of jealousy as at her joke.

“Oh you will always be my special human,” Liselle was laughing too but then in a more serious tone said, “but you do get that we’ve been together longer than I’ve been with anyone else… and I must care for you a bit as I’m covering up the fact you’ve just confessed to working for two of Aria’s biggest enemies.”

Tash pulled Liselle into an embrace and they kissed and when they parted she said, “now don’t get all soft on me Leese you know I’m not girlfriend material,” but she said it in a soft tone and their eye’s lingered on each other.

“Hum yeah well we’ll see, now let’s get some food I’m starved.”

They went out for food and then spent some time at Tash’s apartment before returning to the club much later. They met up with friends and spent time drinking and dancing, Paul Johnson joined them and Tash felt a wave of jealousy which she kept well hidden.

But there was something between them she was sure of it, he made her laugh, he was troubled, with a past, broken, and there was an ease between them, it seemed that was Liselle’s type.

Tash pushed the thoughts away she wasn’t going to screw up what she had by going all jealous rage, that’s not who she was… although if she was honest with herself she was having great difficulty working out just who the fuck she really was anymore given how long she’d been playing a part.

Grizz came up beside her and quietly told her Aria wanted to see her so Tash slipped away and followed the tall Turian up to the Queen of Omega’s balcony.

Aria was sitting with her arms outstretched across the back of the long sofa and Tash came to a halt in front of her standing at ease with hands clasped behind her.

“I would expect one of my staff to let me know in advance when they are going to be off working for someone else, especially when that someone is a Council Spectre,” Aria’s voice was cold her face unreadable and her eyes piercing.

“Sorry boss, but I’ve always done a bit of freelance… and it’s a family thing,” Tash smiled trying to
work out what Aria’s angle was.

“It must be hard for you though, looking at the successful decorated Alliance officer that you weren’t good enough to be. The dark sheep, the drop out of the family alongside the shining example of goodness.”

The last word was said with a sneer and Tash pushed down the anger that was rising in her.

“Yes hit the nail right on the head there Aria I’m just a masochist I guess, self-torture, nothing like it,” she kept her tone light and waited for what Aria was going to ask her to do.

“Well you still work for me Mikhailovich unless you want to give up the benefits of being able to visit Omega and all it has to offer whenever you want.”

Aria’s tone became even harder and Tash thought she saw something else flash momentarily in her eyes. “So I want you to let me exactly what your cousin is up to, regular reports on who she’s meeting with; what she’s working on, anything that might be interesting.”

“Of course, but I’m still pretty much kept at arm’s length, not sure my cousin entirely trusts me… but I’ll tell you everything I know,” Tash didn’t like the threat but she wasn’t going to front up to Aria, right now Omega was the only home Tash had and she wasn’t going to risk it for anyone.

Back downstairs she caught another glimpse of Paul Johnson and this time she saw the way he was looking at Liselle, she knew that look and he’d slept with her, Tash was sure of it… after all that’s what ‘checking out’ meant in Aria’s terms. Pillow talk and a sense from the meld if you’re smart enough and Liselle was certainly smart enough except she hadn’t know that Tash was a threat so if Johnson was some kind of plant would she know.

Tash had training, with the Alliance and Cerberus to block her mind off, shield its secrets and so would Johnson if he was an agent, she might just find out if he was Cerberus, then she could hand him up to Aria if he was, get in her good books and remove the competition at the same time.

For now she would play nice and enjoy the rest of her visit, she had no idea when she’d get back.

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**Day 3 Normandy refit – Thessia**

Shepard had just got back to the Normandy from her meeting with the Matriarch’s and Priestess’s and was exhausted. The joining had been difficult as they wanted to see each of the beacons and her conversation with Sovereign. Then there were the discussions and questions.

But it had gone well and they had agreed to meet with Hackett and Anderson to discuss how they could form what in effect would be a shadow council.

There were some big questions still outstanding. How they would ensure its secrecy and expand its membership to include representatives from all the Council races, but it was real progress.

Shepard was in the process of taking off her boots when her door buzzer sounded and she reluctantly called “come in if it’s really important”.

It was Miranda who came in through the door and most unusually looked really upset.

“What in heaven’s name if the matter Miranda, come and sit down,” Shepard stood up and motioned towards the sofa, “can I get you a drink, Serrice brandy?”
“I… oh… perhaps yes a small brandy… I’m so sorry but I didn’t know… I don’t have anyone else to turn to…” the women sat down on the sofa and took the glass when Shepard offered it.

“Commander I have a twin sister… and my father has been looking for her ever since I managed to get her away from him. I could only do it with the help of the Illusive Man and up till now he kept his word to protect her and help me keep her whereabouts a secret from my father.

But things have changed… I’ve… well the Illusive Man doesn’t have as much trust and confidence in me as he once did… I’m afraid my work on you… I didn’t share it with him, but he found out I was keeping some of my best research from him… and then the baby… well.”

“Slowly Miranda take it slowly… what’s happened to your sister,” Shepard tried to calm down the scientist who she was shocked to see unravelling before her eyes.

“He’s found out, my father’s found out where my sister’s family is and I’ve managed to get them to a place of safety temporarily… but I need a solution and I’m sure the Illusive Man is sending me a message and if I ask him for his help…

Well I just don’t trust him anymore and now I don’t know how to protect her.

I can be open and tell you this in your quarters because I know you’ve cut the Cerberus feed and you’ve been interfering with their monitoring of other sensitive areas. I’m good at what I do Commander, but I haven’t said anything and I won’t,” Miranda looked at Shepard and there was fire in her eyes but also an unspoken pleading.

“I’ll do anything I can to help, we can work something out. I’ll get working on it straight away… try not to worry… are they safe where they are do you need us to go get them?”

“They will be fine for a few days, they are on Illium, thank you Shepard I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you… but you do need to know something… please forgive me but it was always about protecting my sister.

Your cousin, Tash is a Cerberus agent here to watch me because they are worried about my loyalty but also with a mission to kill Liara,” Miranda’s eyes were now filled with fear as Shepard’s face and her entire demeanor changed at the mention of Liara.

“And your only telling me now Miranda… for fucks sake you could have told me just to warn me… and would you have just stood by and let Liara be in danger so long as Harper could hold your sisters safety over your head,” Shepard had stood up and was pacing backwards and forwards fists clenched rage coursing through her body.

“I’m so sorry Shepard. I really don’t think I would have stayed silent if Liara ever came into danger. But she’s very ill isn’t she and you’re not even together anymore,” Miranda's sounded genuine but continued in a more concerned tone.

"I understand if you don’t want to help me but please for my sisters sake she’s innocent in all this,” Miranda was on the verge of tears as she watched the enraged woman in front of her.

"Do I look like Jack fucking Harper…? I won’t not help you just because you’ve been blackmailed by that monster and I won’t let harm come to innocent people," Shepard took some deep breaths and reigned in her anger.

"I’m just disappointed that you thought I wouldn’t understand or that I wouldn’t help you Miranda,” Shepard sat back down and poured herself a large shot of brandy and finished it in one swallow.
“Right I’ll get straight on sorting out a safe place and new identity and all that stuff for you sister and her family, I’ll need details… but Miranda I need you to behave as if nothing has happened… you don’t give any sign that you’ve told me about Tash… you carry on as normal and you leave her to me… I’ll deal with that problem personally.”

After Miranda had left Shepard turned back to the brandy and poured another glass, ‘so that was what she was hiding I knew I could sense something… I can’t believe it… but Miranda wouldn’t lie… and I’ll certainly ask my dear cousin if it’s true and why she became a fuckin traitor right before I put a bullet in her head.’

Shepard finished the bottle and passed out on the sofa still reeling from the news that Miranda had given her, still in a rage and still swearing vengeance not only on Tash but also on her puppet master… Jack Harper.
Chapter 36

Day 5 Normandy refit – Nos Astra, Illium

Shepard had gone to Councillor Anderson for advice as to how best to secure safety for Miranda’s sister and her family.

Councillor Anderson suggested that the help Shepard needed for Miranda would be best provided by the Salarian STG, and fortunately both Anderson and Shepard had some favours they could call in.

It wasn’t that they didn’t trust Alliance help but they just didn’t know how infiltrated the Alliance was with Cerberus sympathisers or how much money Henry Lawson would throw at previously loyal personnel.

Once in contact with the Salarian liaison officer Shepard was told that Miranda’s father had already hired merc’s to grab his daughter as soon as they surfaced on Illium and headed for the sky port.

That had been a day ago and the arrangements for the families transfer to a new safe location with new identities were in place.

With the Normandy still finishing her refit on Thessia Shepard and her team had borrowed one of the T’Soni estates small, fast frigates.

Once docking was complete at Nos Astros Shepard and her team took the waiting shuttle, courtesy of the STG, and headed straight for the cargo bay where the merc’s temporary headquarters were located.

The plan was simple. As soon as Shepard engaged the merc’s the Salarian’s would escort and protect the family to a private shuttle bay and from there to a Salarian military ship and away out of reach of either Cerberus or Lawson.

They didn’t know for sure how many merc’s they would be facing but Shepard couldn’t risk arriving with a full marine squad as this would have provoked too much interest.

Shepard did a final check with her team on-board the shuttle; she had chosen Miranda, who had insisted on coming anyway, Skark, Garrus and Tash.

Since her return Shepard had kept well away from Tash unsure as to whether she could keep her anger under control and she knew it would be a test fighting alongside her, but the mission was her main focus and that had to take precedence.

Their shuttle touched down in a far corner of what looked like quite a busy cargo area; up ahead the tell-tale signs of merc activity were clear.

A relaxed picket line of Turians, Batarian’s and Asari were visible in front of a large container that served as office space and where the bulk of the merc team were probably relaxing waiting for the call to action.

Shepard spoke quietly into her OT on the channel to the Salarian STG Captain who was in charge of the family detail.

“We’re in position and about to engage, they must have look outs on all the sky port concourses so you may still have some action your end,” Shepard and the Captain had been through this in detail
but she just wanted to make absolutely clear they all knew how this was likely to go down.

“We are expecting that Spectre, your package will be delivered safely you have my word,” the Salarian’s voice was steady and he kept the note of irritation to a minimum, he was STG after all, they did not fail.

“Thank you Captain, I’ll leave my comm channel open so you can hear our progress, Shepard out.”

She turned to her squad and began to draw up a plan.

“Garrus I want you to work your way forward and get some height I need you to watch for any of them trying to make a break for the sky port once they get the call from their spotter.

Skark and Miranda get forward, using the cargo on the left as cover, as fast as you can and use you biotics to rip that unit apart and hopefully we’ll catch most of them inside.

Tash you’re with me and we’ll be walking straight down the throat of the welcoming party drawing their attention and taking them down.

We’ll wait for Garrus to get into position then we move.” Shepard watched Garrus make his way off to the right to move in a wide loop around the waiting mercs, then five minutes later she heard him come through on her comms.

“All set Shepard, looks like at least fifteen of them hanging around outside the unit still can’t see how many are inside,” his voice was soft and quiet.

“Right Skark, Miranda get started making your way down through cover, Tash let’s see how close we get just wandering up all nonchalant like,” despite herself she smiled at Tash forgetting for a moment the treachery between them.

She hardened her face and said, “move out,” Skark and Miranda disappearing off to the right; Shepard and Tash moving out into clear view and walking slowly forwards.

Shepard had removed her helmet and was wearing her Normandy baseball cap, Tash was bare headed as usual with a cigar held firmly between her lips.

They both held their weapons loosely across their arms, fingers already on triggers, Tash was going to start with her M37 Falcon and then equip the Revenant while Shepard nursed her Typhoon set for incendiary ammo.

As they strolled towards the line of merc’s a few of the Turians stopped talking and turned in their direction.

“We’ll give it another few paces then you hit them with a spray of grenades I’ll cover you while you equip the M76 and we’ll split left and right and hold tight to the wall of cargo,” Shepard spoke quietly smiling keeping it casual.

Still the merc’s did little more than continue to look in their direction, then on Shepard’s mark they both swung their weapons into a firing position and the sound of gunfire and exploding grenades blocked out the sounds of cranes and conveyor belts.

Tash got seven rounds off before any gunfire was returned; she laid down most of the grenades across the front line of the merc’s but fired a couple deeper.

Before the smoke had cleared the noise of the M76 sparked up almost drowning out Shepard’s
Typhoon.

They split apart and kept up a storm of high velocity slugs, tungsten tipped from the Revenant and the tell-tale incendiary from Shepard only too clear on the merc’s she hit.

The merc’s had pulled themselves together and the few that remained from the original guard line were joined by a stream coming out from the office unit.

Just as the hail of return fire increased and began pinging off both their shields Shepard heard a Krogan battle roar accompanied by a comm message from Miranda confirming they had made it to the merc’s office container and were in the process of tearing it apart.

Shepard knelled down to get off some more tightly aimed shots but Tash kept moving forwards at a slow pace never letting up the fire storm from her rifle.

She noticed Tash taking some serious damage to her shields and called across to tell her to slow down, but the woman seemed oblivious and Shepard stood back up and began moving forward again to catch up.

The return fire from the barrier suddenly dropped away and both Shepard and Tash stopped firing and began moving forward a little more quickly, they could still hear the noises of fighting coming from the office unit on their left, and saw the tell-tale biotic light show, weapons fire echoed from inside as well.

Just as they cleared the merc line and were about to go help Skark and Miranda, Garrus called through the comms, “Shepard I couldn’t take them all down, you have a group of six, all Asari commandos heading for the lifts on the other side of the cargo bay.”

“Copy that Garrus, come down and help Skark and Miranda finish up here I don’t want any more of them to get away,” Shepard turned to Tash and said, “come on we have to catch them up before they get up onto the concourse levels.”

They both stowed their assault rifles and started to run in the direction Garrus had indicated.

Reaching a more tightly packed area with larger containers pilled at times three high they needed to make a sharp left turn and could see a right turn coming up, Shepard slowed to a walk and pulled out her M27 Scimitar, Tash equipped an Executioner.

Shepard glanced over and raised an eyebrow at the weapon which was a merc favourite and Tash only returned the smile with a shrug of the shoulders.

When they got to the end of the container Shepard indicated that she would roll out and across to the other wall while Tash started covering fire.

Their instincts were good as the merc’s had left two Asari commandos waiting for them to turn the corner. But low roll and fire from cover surprised them momentarily giving both Tash and Shepard the chance to get hits on both merc’s.

Though they didn’t take the mercs out with their first shots it evened the odds a little and Shepard managed to get another hit on one of the Asari knocking her off her feet and as she fell backwards Shepard knew the hit would be fatal.

As Tash stood out from cover to get off another shot she got hit with a slam that lifted her off her feet and threw her backwards against one of the containers.
Shepard could see Tash was stunned and her shields were down, the remaining Asari made ready to finish off her prey.

Instinctively Shepard ran across and put herself between the remaining Asari and the floored Tash, firing off a round just as the Asari prepared to send a killer biotic hit.

Shepard’s round hit her target just before she could finish sending the attack; and as the shotgun round hit the Asari full in the chest she was slammed backwards sending her biotic hit up towards the ceiling.

She sensed Tash coming back around and turned grabbing her by the jacket and hauled her to her feet shouting, “Come on they’ve got too much ground on us…we need to speed up.”

Tash shook her head saying, “we’ll never catch them this way it’s a fuckin labyrinth and we’re vulnerable every time we come to a corner, we need to go up, across the top.” Tash looked up to the wall of containers, stowed her pistol and ran to the container wall they had just made their way around.

Shepard followed and said, “there’s no grip, we can’t climb these,” even as her eyes scanned the smooth sides for any kind of hold.

“Aha, never go anywhere without my handy little rope on a sticky thing, that means I can climb up and more importantly, climb down in an emergency.

Very useful for dating married women who live in apartment blocks,” as she was speaking she pulled a device from one of her trouser pockets.

It looked like a metal Frisbee with the end of what looked like a strong line coming out of it. Holding on the end of the line she threw the small Frisbee up and as it landed on top of the container Shepard heard a clunk.

“A ‘sticky thing’ Tash, that’s the best technical term you could come up with.” Shepard couldn’t help but smile Tash never bothered to remember the proper names for tech kit but she always packed the most useful gear and knew how to use it.

Tash steadied the line as Shepard grabbed on and began walking up the side of the container, “hey just be grateful I carry a load of crap in my pockets,” and while she waited for Shepard to reach the top she took a moment to spark up another cigar.

Once they were both up top they began running across the containers, needing to build up speed to jump the gaps as they came to them, and within a minute they spotted the group of merc’s who had made it almost to the elevators in the back wall.

Shepard and Tash would never narrow the gap in time, even using the direct route across the top of the containers.

“We’re not going to catch them we need to take them down from here, or keep them pinned down until the other’s catch up,” as Shepard spoke she pulled her Valient sniper rifle and began to set up for a scoped shot, she heard Tash curse next to her.

“Fuck I brought the Widow and we’ve got four targets to take down.”

“Hell Tash you can reload that thing almost as fast at Garrus and I swear he was born with the fuckin thing in his hands, use warp ammo it’ll help secure a single shot kill.”
Shepard exchanged another genuine smile with her cousin remembering all the hours they’d spent on various ranges together both trying to best the other but both always happy to help improve the others skill.

“Ok, let’s get this done, you take them right to left I’ll start left to right, on my count, two, one,” as Shepard left the ‘one’ hang between them a heartbeat later they both fired at exactly the same time.

Shepard got off another shot while Tash reloaded and the next shots were fired almost simultaneously, three merc’s were clearly down but the last had run for cover and they couldn’t see her through their scopes.

“You stay here and watch for her the minute she breaks cover; I’ll move in close and try to flush her out or take her out at close range,” before Shepard could respond Tash was on her feet exchanging her sniper for her Executioner once and more and took a running jump to make it to the next stack of containers.

Shepard concentrated on where they had last seen the Asari and kept playing her scope looking for any movement any change in shadow.

Her concentration was broken into when her comms sparked up and Miranda’s worried voice filling her ear.

“Shepard we’re on our way, I think we’re almost at your position, are you on top of the containers,” the last sentence was delivered in a puzzled tone; she was obviously trying to make sense of the tracking info she was looking at.

“Yes we had to take the last four out from a distance they just got too far ahead, you need to keep going. Tash is chasing down last one, but she may need some help.”

“Copy that Shepard,” and as Miranda’s voice faded away Shepard thought she saw just the whisper of a change of light and concentrated on the corner of a smaller container unit only a quick run away from the elevator.

Then she saw her, the Asari commando made a run for the elevator still managing to keep the edges of cover as she went and making it impossible for Shepard to get a clear shot, she tried but her two shots just didn’t connect.

Then she saw the Asari flying into view body bent backwards in a way even an Asari body shouldn’t bend, falling to the ground blood pouring from a head wound.

Shepard watched Tash come into view a stand above the merc to make sure she was finished.

As Shepard stood and stowed her rifle she thought, ‘still handy in a fire fight Tash… I thought I knew you damnit… it’ll break me to kill you or hand you over to the Alliance for trial… what the hell happened to you,’ and with a deep sigh full of sadness and a hint of despair she began to make her way to her squad mates who were now clustered together by the elevator.

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**Day 6 Normandy refit – Nos Astra, Illium**

Shepard was standing looking out of one of the huge windows of the apartment, her son settled in the crook of her arm, and sucking lazily on the bottle she was holding to his mouth.

It was raining hard and the droplets that hit the window formed into rivulets as they ran, inevitably, downwards.
“See that out there is rain, yep, probably some wind too, but you’ll get to learn about that later. You get to appreciate any kind of weather if you live in space most of your time,” she looked down at the still sucking and contented baby, “will you decide to live in space or settle on a planet somewhere… well now your just too young to need to think about that aren’t you.”

She heard movement behind her and turned to see Veetor coming down the stairs.

“Commander, I am sorry to disturb your precious time with your son.” Veetor’s voice sounded troubled and she knew he wouldn’t want to talk with her unless it was really important.

She only had another couple of hours to spend in the apartment before returning to the Normandy.

“That’s OK Veetor, come and sit down,” Shepard indicated one of the long sofas. She moved away from the window and sat in one of the large armchairs and once settled in place continued. “So what’s on your mind”.

“As you know I am still in contact with my family in the flotilla, and a good friend who tried to help with my anxiety. I am not sure how to tell you this Commander but, Tali’s father Admiral Rael’Zorah has died, been killed.”

“How, did they get into another tangle with Cerberus?” Shepard’s mind was racing, if it was anything to do with Cerberus she might just be tempted to forget her deal and take down Harper.

“No, it seems, Geth, well my family only know the rumours, the Admiralty Board are not making any announcements yet. Commander, I know I have no right to ask you for any more help you have….” Shepard cut across the young Quarian.

“Veetor you are part of my crew, hell you’re practically family, you can ask me anything. I’ll see what I can find out and perhaps try to take a run out to the flotilla. If we do would you like to come with us?”

“Thank you Commander, yes, I would like to come if you visit the flotilla. Only if it does not interfere with…” again she gently cut across him and smiled.

“I think it would be nice for your family to see you now you’re doing much better… but on one condition,” her tone now took on a mock serious note and he held his head to one side, “you don’t decide to stay. I would miss you and I need you.”

Shepard couldn’t have said anything that filled Veetor with more pride and he was grateful to her for saying it. But he was also pleased to have the reassurance that he wouldn’t have to return to the flotilla. Perhaps one day but he was nowhere near ready to return yet.

“That is kind of you to say Commander and I have no intention of returning to the flotilla, yet anyway.”

They chatted for a while, and decided they would check all available intel sources for any lead on what may have happened on the flotilla.

Shepard noticed the baby had not only finished the bottle but had fallen asleep.

“I’m going to settle him in his cot Veetor, and then I had better make tracks back to the Normandy.” Shepard left the empty bottle on the side of the armchair and made her way up the stairs to the nursery.

She stood looking down at the small human and smiled thinking how simple and peaceful his life
was. Shepard leaded in and kissed her son on the forehead and just before she stood back up and turned heard a familiar voice from the doorway.

“T always knew you’d make a great parent,” Jamie’s voice was quiet but she could hear the smile, “did Veetor get to talk to you about the flotilla?”

She moved away from the cot and towards the door and smiled at her cousin come live in nanny.

“Yes he did, he seems really worried. Do me a favour Jamie if anything seems to be bugging him in future just let me know? He doesn’t like to ask for anything for himself some reason,” they both began walking back down stairs.

“Yeah of course I will. Um, do you think next time you visit you might bring some of the crew… you know Garrus and maybe…” Shepard looked at the obviously embarrassed young man and gave him a knowing smile which made him even more embarrassed.

“Oh you mean when will I be bringing Doctor Goto for a visit,” Shepard couldn’t help teasing him a little more before she agreed to bring her next time they were in the neighbourhood.

Within an hour she was on the borrowed frigate and heading back to Thessia and the Normandy.

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**Final day Normandy re-fit – Thessia**

Shepard stood in front of the full crew. She had called a parade on the mess deck, the tables had been moved. Although a few had to stand on the gangway leading to the battery, they all fitted in.

“Some of the more eagle eyed of you will have noticed the memorial plaque on the rear wall of the mess.” She indicated the wall behind her.

“You will see the names of the crew of the Normandy SR1 who died either on missions or on the final Collector attack on our ship. I’ve also put up the names of all the colonies that have been attacked by the Collectors and whose populations have been taken.

I intend to keep both lists as short as they are now. But I won’t lie to you.” Shepard had been pacing slightly from left to right but now she stood still and seemed to be looking at every single person in the room.

“We have made our ship as tough, as deadly, as protected as we can. Our friends and allies the Turian’s and Asari’s have equipped us with their best and latest tech on top of the best the Alliance had to offer.

Our mission is hard, our enemy is tough, but we are tougher, we are mean SOB’s who don’t like to be fucked with. The Collectors have fucked with our people. We will pay them back.” Shepard stood still at parade rest and continued.

“This may not be an Alliance ship but it will function like one. I gave you the opportunity to leave once and you chose to stay. I honour you for that choice. We’ll end this parade with a minutes silence to remember our friends and family lost to the Collectors. And our crew members who made the ultimate sacrifice so we could fight on.”

Shepard turned and faced the memorial and ran her eyes over the full list of names. She knew them by heart; she saw them sometimes in her nightmares.

‘I will make them pay for what they did,’ she thought. And a strong image of Ash, so proud to be
made XO of the Normandy, seared itself into her mind.

She marked the end of the minute with a sharp salute, turned to face the crew and said, “Parade dismiss, to your stations, prepare to leave our dry dock.”
Chapter 37

A/N - I am not going to regurgitate the missions unless they need a twist or I feel I can add any extra fun to them, or they are essential to our plot here. However, you will get new original missions so hopefully the balance of action and ‘fluff’ will meet everyone’s needs. I also did a ‘fix’ on the Normandy stealth systems as it irked me a little that the mission on Horizon didn’t end, as it logically could have, with the Collector ship just downing the Normandy… again.

Not long now until we see the return of our Liara, but will she be fully recovered, can she take up Shepard’s commitment to being together yet? This chapter will get us a little closer to having those questions answered, but for now…

Normandy – one day post refit

“Come in”, Shepard called out in answer to request for entry to her cabin. She knew it would be Miranda.

Miranda walked into the cabin and joined Shepard at her desk, “have you had a chance to review the recording?”

Since Miranda’s change of allegiance Shepard now had access to the secure and private transmissions directly to Cerberus and sometimes even to Harper himself from the Doctor’s office. This meant she also now had access to Tash’s mission reports.

“Yeah, interesting. Tash does seem to have gone out of her way to keep you the right side of Harper’s good opinion. Why would she do that?”

Shepard had been struck by the report that Tash had sent in to her handler, which would be directly reported to the Illusive Man, stating quite clearly that Miranda had turned to Shepard not to slight Cerberus. It was, in Tash’s opinion, a well-played strategic move to secure a better more trusted relationship with Shepard.

“I have no idea Shepard; she has always been extremely… antagonistic to me. Our first conversation on board consisted of her threats to my sister. Making it clear that she had already visited and that I should be careful as her safety depended on my loyalty. That I was no longer such a great favourite of the Illusive Man.”

“But if you turn that around Miranda she gave you a very explicit warning. And one that actually prompted you to start looking into the safety of your sister’s situation, uncovering the moves by your father. And they must have been tacitly sanctioned by Cerberus. It just doesn’t make sense. None of this with Tash makes sense.” Shepard was looking at Miranda, her difficulty accepting the level of betrayal only too apparent on her features.

“Don’t get carried away Shepard, I really admire your ability to look for the best in people. To ascribe them the best intentions, but it’s also a weakness, to easily exploited by those who know you.” Miranda could see the logic in what Shepard was proposing but was far too aware of the Illusive Man’s ability to weave multi layers of deceit and lies and false trails.

Miranda continued, “has she told you yet what really happened when she left the Alliance. What she’s been doing the last ten years?”

“Not really, we’ve had conversations over meals, over drinks… but it always ends up with tales of
adventure and sex… nothing of substance. And she is definitely hiding something, she won’t let me in.” But Shepard also understood the need to close off parts of herself, particularly the darkest parts of herself.

“She also seems to have some kind of relationship with the Asari commando captain that was involved with protecting Liara. This would be in keeping with her mission to… keep a close eye on Liara in the event she carries out her threat.” Miranda had not been looking forward to raising the threat to kill Liara by Tash on Cerberus orders. Shepard had become murderous when she found out and even though restrained Miranda had felt the edge of the woman’s wrath and didn’t want to experience it again.

Shepard remained thoughtful for a moment but then turned back to her console.

“Well one way or the other I’ll have to get the truth from Tash,” Shepard turned to look Miranda in the eyes and the cold hard stare sent shivers down her spine, “but I won’t put Liara at any kind of risk and I’ll do what I have to when the time comes whether I have my answers or not.”

Miranda stood up and made to leave, “everything is ready Commander I only need to give the course heading to Joker.”

“Good, set course for Purgatory and let’s see if this Jack will be any use to our mission.”

Omega – Aria’s office

“Can I expect your full attention to your duties now your little human distraction has left to follow her destiny with Shepard,” Aria’s voice was dripping with sarcasm and not a little annoyance.

She remained sitting behind her desk studying the data pads in front of her rather than looking at Liselle who had taken up a chair facing her mother.

“Why do you dislike her so much,” Liselle needed to be more careful than usual handling her mother, her normal offhand attitude would not get her what she wanted. And if she handled this wrong it would be a death sentence for Tasha and Liselle would probably need to spend the next five years earning back her mother’s trust.

Aria left all pretense of working and looked directly at her daughter. She saw something that both interested and concerned her; this was not the response she expected. Much more likely to be told to keep out of her daughters’ sex life in abrupt and dismissive tone than a reasonable question.

“Don’t play games with me Liselle, you know I don’t approve of your getting serious about anyone yet you’re too young. And while I recognise humans have a certain attraction your interest in them, in this one in particular, will not end well.”

"Mikhailovich has an uncertain past, and a too convincing ‘history’. Almost as if it had been crafted, and I don’t trust people who disappear for months and come back with another ‘crafted’ story.” Aria seemed to have more trouble with the humans who worked for her than any other race when it came to proving loyalty, and the two on her payroll at the moment were no exception.

“She’s loyal to you and to me, I’ve seen it.” Liselle was beginning to fall into spoilt child mode but she had to shake herself out of it, this would not win her mother over only confirm her immaturity.

“We’ll see. Now to business. The Talons are causing more trouble we need to think about taking them down a bit, remind them who’s the boss,” before Aria could continue Liselle interrupted.
“I need you to listen to me mother, it’s important to me. I never ask you for anything personal and I never trade on our relationship but this once I need to ask for your help.” Liselle was looking directly into her mother’s eyes.

It was true; Liselle had always stood on her own feet, earning her place in Aria’s organisation.

It was far too dangerous for Aria to even acknowledge she had children let alone try to raise a daughter herself. Too many enemies would make the child an immediate target. So Aria had an ‘arrangement’ with old friends who had ‘adopted’ her daughters looking after the child and they reached maidenhood and were ready to choose their own path.

Only one had returned to Aria and that daughter stood before her now. The other two had made more usual lives within Council space and although they knew who their mother was the agreement was that no contact would be available either way.

Aria was content that her line would continue and she had been given the gift of one daughter who wished to be with her, but Aria was also determined that eventually Liselle would leave Omega and prosper in a different environment.

“I’m listening,” Aria held her daughter’s gaze and waited.

“I need you to promise me something first, and you’ll have to trust that this won’t come back to bite you.” Aria leaned back in her chair looking as regal as ever with an expression that still gave Liselle pause. But the young Asari took the silence as permission to continue.

“I need you to promise you won’t cause any harm to come to Tasha, directly or… allowing it from another source,” Liselle waited for her mother’s response.

“Don’t believe that just because I am your mother that you can control what I may do to anyone who may cause me problems Liselle. You had better just spit out what you want before you really fuck me off.” The Queen of Omega still found it difficult to have her absolute authority even vaguely challenged by her daughter.

“This is personal mother, nothing to do with business,” Liselle could sense she wasn’t going to get the assurance she would have preferred and she couldn’t go back so she ploughed ahead.

“Tasha is an Alliance intelligence agent working undercover with Cerberus, who obviously think she’s a Cerberus agent,” Liselle could see her mother’s face darken but she pressed on quickly to get it all out before the explosion.

“She was only meant to be undercover for a few months but the Alliance left her high and dry and now treats her like shit. The only place she feels like she isn’t crazy is when she’s here with me working for you, and that’s what I want you to make happen. Get her out from Cerberus and let her stay here with me.” It wasn’t anywhere near as logical or elegant as Liselle had practised. In the end it sounded like a teenager’s plea but she was failing under the steadily increasing storm of fury that was gathering on the other side of the desk.

“And how long have you known we’ve had a Cerberus spy within our organisation?” Aria’s quiet, cold tone was in contrast to the fire burning in her eyes.

“On her last visit, she showed me it all. Through a meld, no barriers, she really has never betrayed you or me. She works for Cerberus when she disappears. Please mother, join with me and I’ll show you?” Liselle kept the pleading out of her voice and remained as strong and firm as she could.

“Does Shepard know?” It was a strange question that knocked Liselle sideways.
“No, and… well,” considering how much effort Aria had put into keeping Liara safe this next revelation wasn’t going to go down well either, “Cerberus has ordered her to… eliminate Liara if she show’s back up on the scene… which she won’t do, she absolutely has no intention of doing…” the last two sentences came out in a rush.

“And you’re willing to put me at risk, the safety of your half-sister and your own, for the sex you two have… she must be very, very good,” Aria’s voice was glacial, her words delivered with precision. And her disapproval and disdain was evident in every word.

“I don’t care what you think mother; I’ve asked you for help for the first time. And it isn’t just about the sex, which is very, very good though,” Liselle couldn’t help being a little flippant.

Despite herself Aria was resigning herself to agreeing to help her daughter. And after all she would probably be able to work the whole thing to her advantage. The human’s situation also struck a long dead chord with the older Asari but one that she would not allow to influence her judgment.

“I need to be sure she is loyal to you and to Omega. The next time she visits I’ll meld with her and make sure she really didn’t hide anything from you. For now I’ll give the problem some thought, but don’t over estimate my abilities Liselle. I have no leverage over Cerberus and would rather not owe them a favour.”

Liselle began to smile; it was wide and cheeky and made her even more beautiful than she usually was and Aria allowed it to warm her heart without too much resistance.

But knowing she cared so much for her daughter also caused Aria pain and a little fear; she led a dangerous life and was playing a dangerous game having her daughter with her. For now she was willing to take the risk, there would be time later to think about the future.

“Thank you mother I knew you’d help and you can do anything you’re the Pirate Queen of Omega, we all bow before you,” Liselle stood and moved to her mother giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Yes well I prefer to rule with fear so if you breathe a word of me being anything other than brutal and uncaring I’ll just have to kill you. Now really Liselle we need to decide what to do about the Talons. And was Sanak right to worry about the other human?”

They settled into their business meeting but in the back of Liselle’s mind she was already planning her vid call to Tasha to tell her the good news.

Normandy – six days post refit

Shepard was completing her mission reports in her cabin and they made for interesting reading. The recruitment of the human biotic Jack from the Blue Suns prison facility had turned into a massive fire fight.

The warden had seen an opportunity of making some money taking Shepard into custody and asking for a ransom. Unfortunately for him Shepard wasn’t going along with it.

Not only did she kill him but in order to access Jack they had to release all the high security prisoners resulting in riots and destruction that left the prison station a burning wreck. No doubt order would be restored by the Blue Suns but that was not her problem.

Jack had proved to be every bit as powerful a biotic as her files suggested but she was also very unstable with a pathological hatred of Cerberus who she was convinced had abducted her from her
family and torturing her in an experimental facility until she was old enough to break herself out.

The tension between Jack and Miranda is palpable and Shepard has given instructions for them to keep away from each other at all times.

The recruitment of Okeer also went sideways. Okeer was using Collector technology acquired by the Blue Suns to clone Krogan shock troops that would be loyal to the Blue Suns commander in charge an Asari named Jedore.

But Okeer was only focussed on perfecting his ultimate experiment of creating the perfect Krogan and in the process misleading Jedore for resources and also misleading her as to the likely success of the experiment. The Krogan clones he was producing were mindless and could not be controlled and Jedore was already losing patience with the old Krogan.

Shepard’s attack and attempted recruitment prompted Jedore to destroy the facility and flush the clone tanks thus threatening Okeer’s perfect specimen. The Krogan agreed to help Shepard and share his Collector technology if she saved his perfect tank bred clone.

In the end Okeer had been killed but Shepard did decide to bring the clone on board and was still undecided as to whether to release it from its tank or not.

The research and Collector intel had proved a worthwhile addition to their knowledge and both Kasumi’s tech team and Mordin’s science team were working through it to see how they could put it to good use.

Shepard got up from her desk and rolled her shoulders trying to loosen the knots of tension. She flicked a control on her console and a small running pad rose out of the floor and stripping off her hoodie she began to run at a steady pace.

“Edi can you update me on comms security please,” Shepard spoke to the ever present AI and adjusted the speed on the pad slightly.

“I have detected no attempts at coded messages, all crew have been careful not to give away the ship’s location or the nature of any of our missions or work they are undertaking. Ensign Carver mentioned how much she liked Asari architecture after our visit to Thessia, and was concerned enough to report it to her section leader who reassured her that it was not compromising.

I continue to hold a 1.2 parsec delay in all live vid traffic to disrupt any mistakes with static but that has not proved necessary.

Commander may I ask a question?”

“Of course Edi,” Shepard had now worked up a sweat and her breathing, although still steady, was now under pressure.

“You allow almost complete access to comms for crew, allowing them to speak to family and friends, access the extranet; does this not distract them from their tasks on-board? And would it not be better for them to build relationships within the crew for greater unit cohesion?”

“Well Edi on larger ships with a much more diverse crew, bigger community, people do tend to build longer term friendships and relationships. But we are a new crew, on what most people would see at least as a highly dangerous mission, if not suicidal, and some normality and connection with what we’re all fighting for is important.

”It’s also good for crew on long term space service to be able to keep in touch with those important
to them at home, wherever that is or whatever that means to them personally.

"I also need to know who we can trust and if you give someone enough rope…” Shepard left the old Earth saying for Edi to finish.

“I see Shepard so the activity has multiple positive outcomes, including offering the opportunity for accidental strangulation.”

Shepard smiled, “Indeed Edi.”

“Shepard incoming call from Admiral Hackett highest priority would you like me to route it to you private QEC here?” Edi’s voice, with a noticeable change of tone, echoed once again around Shepard’s cabin.

“Yep,” Shepard stopped the running pad and grabbed the towel from the back of her chair, rubbing her face in it, and then hung around her neck.

The QEC sparked into life and quantum fragments coalesced into the familiar, craggy, gruff image of Admiral Hackett.

“Commander, good to see you, but no time for pleasantries,” Shepard smiled inwardly trying to remember if she had ever exchanged ‘pleasantries’ with the Admiral.

“We’ve just received a scrambled and brief emergency call from our colony on Fehl Prime then lost all communications. Its Collectors, are you anywhere near?”

Shepard did a quick calculation in her head, “we could be there in less than six hours.”

“Good, our best is closer to ten. Keep me up to speed with your progress Commander and good luck, Hackett out.”

With that the connection fragmented and without a pause Shepard opened a comms link to Joker and Miranda.

“All crew to battle stations, threat level Alpha, comms blackout, engage stealth. Fast as you can to Fehl Prime Joker. Edi call all my officers and specialists to the comms room for a conference in one hour.”

Shepard moved to the shower stripping off her sweats on the way, maybe this time they would be in time to make a difference. But this was no ordinary small farming colony, this was a major Alliance facility, why the change of tactic.

As the hot water and steam permeated her senses she was already pulling up the schematics for the colony in her mind and framing a plan of approach.

An hour later Shepard was sitting around the conference table with Miranda, Garrus, Skark, Mordin, Kasumi and Tash with both Joker and Edi listening in.

“From what I know of Fehl Prime it is well protected, at least a company of Alliance soldiers, two sets of canon, kinetic barriers.” It was Tash who spoke but she drew nods from Shepard and Garrus.

“Yeah security was beefed up since that merc attack a couple of years ago; it’s a major pharmaceuticals research and production facility. And a complete change to the Collectors normal MO,” Shepard noticed a confused look on some of the faces, “sorry ‘modus operandi’ old Earth
speak.” The translators coped with the old language this time around.

“Perhaps they are testing their ability to hit much larger and more fortified colonies on more settled worlds Shepard?” this time Mordin spoke and his evaluation came not only as a scientist but also an ex member of the Salarian STG.

“Could be right, but no amount of speculation is going to get the job done,” we hit the system in…..” before Shepard could ask Joker piped in.

“Three hours thirty Commander, upgrades really boosting our FTL,” Shepard could hear the smile in her pilots voice; he had as big a need for speed as she did.

“Good, that’s better time than I thought. We’ll make ready a full landing party so I want our special operations team and our specialist fire team ready to roll but we’ll finalise our battle plan when we are on scene.”

Shepard, Tash and Garrus had organised the human, Asari and Turian soldiers into a unified team. They were still working on the rough edges but the combination of the various skill sets and abilities made what used to be her marine squad into a truly devastating unit. The team was training hard to perfect their unconventional warfare, reconnaissance and destruction capabilities.

Her specialist fire team needed more development the latest addition being Jack, but with Skark, Garrus, Miranda, Mordin and Kasumi it was still a formidable force.

As the room emptied and her team began to make their preparations Shepard felt the familiar build of tension and excitement that always began to settle when she headed for battle.

Fighting mercs was one thing but her focus was firmly set on the Collectors and she wanted a chance to test them against her determination to end them, the sooner the better.

Shepard was standing between her pilot and co-pilot in the Normandy cockpit as they approached Fehl Prime in full stealth.

“Here’s hoping they don’t look out the window Commander…” Joker’s voice held its usual flippant and sarcastic tone but the edge they were all feeling was evident. The last time their ship had come face to face with a Collector vessel it had been completely destroyed.

“Collector vessels do not have viewing ports Jeff, it is much more important that our upgraded stealth system withstands their scans,” Edi answered.

“Great, so we could still be visible to them,” Joker’s voice was a little more subdued.

“Scan the planet Edi, life signs, activity and any comms still active. Joker all the time that thing is on the ground we should be ok, but the minute it lifts off be ready to jump us out of here, I’m not losing another ship this early in the game.” Shepard’s voice was calm and matter of fact. She was already in the zone.

“We are picking up an Alliance channel from the planet, patching you in Shepard.”

“This is Spectre Shepard of the Council on responding to an Alliance call for assistance respond please,” Shepard’s voice rang out loud and strong.
Through some minimal static another voice sparked up in the cockpit.

“This is Lieutenant Vega Alliance marines, I have a squad but the rest of the company have been taken with the colonists and workers up to that ship.” The voice was strong with a slight accent and it sounded as if he was moving.

“Sit rep,” Shepard responded.

“We were out in the desert investigating some kind of anomalous signal that started transmitting about six hours before the Collector attack. We’ve just got back to the base and it looks like pretty much everyone is gone.

Some Collectors still on the ground but not in any numbers, we’re heading to the two underground canons to try to disable the ship from leaving so we can get our people back.”

“Any sign of swarms?”

“No they must have cleared out, but we’re in full armour and hard suits.”

Shepard thought for a moment, 

\textit{no advantage in a ground attack if most of the Collectors had already left. Risk to high to try to get on the Collector ship to launch a rescue to many unknowns and variables. Only option available would be to attempt to destroy Collector ship, even if unsuccessful it would provide useful data on Normandy systems’}.

“How long till your teams get to the guns?”

“Almost there Commander, we’ll charge them to half capacity to minimise damage,” Vega sounded as if he was climbing.

“Negative Lieutenant you will hit the Collector ship with all the force available, we’ll send you targeting coordinates at the last minute, do you copy?” Shepard would wait till the last minute to scan the Collector ship and concentrate power on its drive core.

“But Commander all those people, my company…” Vega sounded both agitated and angry.

“This is a direct order soldier and I’m here on the authority of Admiral Hackett, do you copy,” once again Shepard’s voice was calm but it held all the authority that had made her a living legend amongst Alliance personnel.

“Yes ma’am I copy, both teams in position. The minute we open the blast doors they’ll know we’re here, can you buy us time to get the shots off?” Vega’s voice was now the perfect match for Shepard’s he would not argue or question any further, he had his orders.

“On my mark you get your guns into place, at that time we’ll scan the Collectors and send you the coordinates. Once you’re locked on begin firing we’ll join in.”

Another few minutes passed as Shepard made sure Edi, Joker and Melania were clear about their actions and timings.

She opened a ship wide comm line.

“We are about to engage a Collector vessel in combat, all hands stay alert, all hands remain at battle stations. This could be a bumpy ride, strap in people.” Shepard then opened the comm line to the team on the planet.
“You have a go Lieutenant Vega, get those guns operational and hit the shit out of that vessel.”

The next five minutes were a frenzy of activity and as the ground side batteries opened up the Collector ship had already started targeting them.

The Collectors were also trying to scan for the Normandy but much to everyone’s relief it looked as if the new stealth system was an improvement on the last. But the moment the Normandy started firing she would become visible.

“Fire, fire, fire,” Shepard’s voice rang out in the cockpit, “keep us moving Joker full evasive action.”

The combined efforts of the batteries and the Normandy had broken through the Collector barriers and were causing damage to the ship. The great structure began to lift off from the ground firing its particle beam at one of the groundside batteries obliterating it and the marines inside.

To Shepard’s surprise the ship then focussed its fire out into the dessert before aiming once again for the ground side battery. But the continued force of fire from the Normandy was now taking a real toll.

The Collector vessel continued to lift off from the ground but vapour and atmosphere could be seen venting from its sides. The Normandy was still taking evasive action and so far had only received one glancing blow which had caused minimal damage.

As the enemy drew nearer Shepard ordered all weapons to open fire as soon as it came within range and with a final concentrated blast from the Normandy’s now considerable arsenal the Collector ship faltered in its lift.

Through the viewing window in the cockpit they could see the ship flash with electrical pulses, fires appeared to break out along its length and it had stopped returning fire both to the Normandy and the planet.

Shepard held her breath as the vessel began a fast decent towards the plant breaking apart as it did so.

“Cease firing,” Shepard continued, “special ops teams make ready to head dirtside.”

And as Shepard watched the Collector ship hit the face of the planet and explode into flames she heard a cheer run through the ship. Allowing herself a small smile Shepard headed to the shuttle bay to join her teams.

As she passed through the CIC she called out to Miranda, “you have the conn, keep scanning the system and watch that relay. If we get any kind of company your job is to keep the Normandy safe.”

“Understood Commander,” Miranda’s cool business like tone was somewhat undermined by the smile that she and all the others in the CIC were wearing.

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**Fehl Prime – two hours after Collector ship destroyed**

“Well they made a real mess of this, whatever it was,” Tash was kicking over the edges of a huge hole in the ground.

According to Vega this had been the location of the signal and when they had investigated there was a huge plate of some kind of metal covering the area now blasted to molten rock.

“So you only had enough time to locate the signal, take readings and some vid of the area before you
got called back to the Collector attack,” Shepard was speaking to Lieutenant Vega who had joined them on the shuttle trip.

“Yep, we scanned but couldn’t make any sense of the readings. Why the interest Commander, just some more old Prothean junk. The Collectors hit the colony not this.” Vega was looking intently at Shepard, there was no challenge in his tone, he was only looking for answers.

“We don’t know yet Lieutenant, but they certainly made sure they fucked it up at the expense of shots on either your guns or the Normandy, gotta mean something.” She turned to look at the marine officer and continued, “You did a good job marine, I’m sorry we didn’t have a chance of saving the people the Collectors took.”

He nodded his head slowly and looked back in the direction of the downed ship.

“Yeah I wasn’t thinking straight, there were a lot of kids on the colony Commander, a lot of kids,” he hung his head and began to move back to the shuttle.

“Right lets head back to the Collector ship and see what our science and tech teams have managed to salvage”, Shepard, Tash and Kasumi headed back to join Vega at the shuttle all useful data from the site already uploaded to the Normandy labs.

The Normandy stayed in orbit until the Alliance reinforcements arrived. Then Shepard ordered her to land close by the wreck of the Collector ship.

She had her science and tech teams work on recovering anything that would help both in their hunting of the Collectors and their masters the Reapers. But the ship was almost completely wrecked, some parts had disintegrated completely.

They stayed dirtside for two days before heading off once again to continue recruiting heavy hitting specialists and now Shepard also wanted to look for scientists who could help Kasumi with the mystery of the Prothean signals.

Shepard knew that the most expert Prothean scholar was who she really needed by her side to unravel the mystery surrounding their finds. She also wanted the Prothean expert by her side for other reasons, reasons too painful to dwell on for long.
Chapter 38

*AN - Again we don’t dwell too much on all of the game missions but we will still get to know our team over time before we head through that big relay in the Omega system.*

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**Normandy – three days post Fehl Prime**

Shepard made sure she ate most of her meals on the mess deck it was an important opportunity to take the temperature of the crew. But meal times on the Normandy were proving highly unsatisfactory, according to feedback.

They weren’t a big enough ship to have a dedicated mess team and even their ‘cook’ had another job in engineering. Most of the food was pre-packed rations, high quality and meeting all nutritional needs but rations nonetheless.

Graham their cook tried at least three or four times a week to actually put together a ‘from scratch’ meal, usually stew or soup, but this usually brought more complaints than the pre-packed food did.

Shepard was at a table with Skark, Malania and Miranda and she broached the subject of food tentatively.

“So just how bad is the feeling about the food on board?” She asked generally.

Skark gave a typical Krogan bark of a laugh and looked from the ‘mush’ on his plate to Shepard and said, “You have to do something about it before I collect your Krogan squad from Tuchanka Shepard… I’m a tolerant Krogan and used to eating rations… but… this… well Salarians look very tasty when a Krogan belly rumbles,” he continued to laugh and Shepard smiled back.

“The Asari on board are suffering also Commander, Asari ships are much better provisioned and our culture is one that appreciates good food. Our social lives often revolve around the sharing of food and of course as biotics we need to eat often and this…” she indicated some form of food that again was differently coloured but bore no resemblance to ‘real’ food.

“I can’t see what all the fuss is about, the rations and amounts available meet all the various diets on board and the specific needs of protein eaters,” she nodded her head towards Skark, “and biotics. You don’t hear me complaining.” Miranda continued to eat the food on her plate.

Shepard looked around the room. The crew were eating the food but without any kind of enjoyment that she could see, it was mechanical.

“Ok well I’ll give it some thought,” Shepard said then turned her attention back to Skark.

“When are you leaving for Tuchanka,” Shepard had tasked Skark with recruiting a small team of Krogan fighters to further bulk out her special operations team.

“I can leave anytime Sheaprd just hook me up with a ride.”

“Oh, we’ll drop you at the nearest space port. But I’ll come and pick you up when you’re ready to return. I need to see Wrex… I’ve missed the big ugly brute,” she smiled at the thought of spending time with her friend.

They had only had two vid calls since she returned from the dead, Wrex preferred face to face
communications. He was once again a true ally to her and she wanted to see if she could help with his reconstruction of life on Tuchanka.

“Wrex will throw a big party for you Shepard, you will have to get drunk and fight… and we will all eat real food,” again Skark barked out a laugh and Shepard could think of nothing better to look forward to.

How’s it going working with Joker and Edi,” this question was aimed at Malania who, amongst her other duties was also co-pilot and Joker’s relief.

“They are very funny together Commander; they chat like a couple of old friends. Joker has taken his role as ship’s entertainment officer very seriously and they are constantly talking about improving the crew’s ‘environment’.

“Yes I’m not sure piped music is the best way to do that,” Miranda chipped in, “it could be very distracting.”

“Oh Edi is being very scientific about the whole thing,” Malania continued, “she is matching the wavelength and frequency in the music to match the mental state that would be optimum…” Miranda cut across the young Asari.

“Well, all they ever seem to play in engineering is that awful techno music you hear in clubs and it’s the same in the shuttle bay,” Miranda threw out the comment in the form of a challenge.

“Seems like a good match to me, and you don’t seem to mind the ‘ambient’ sounds that float around the CIC,” Shepard smiled as she stood up and took her tray to the recycling point.

The light mood seemed to dissipate in a flash as she looked around the mess deck at her crew members and thoughts of better food and soothing music seemed trivial, almost laughable.

The cold, nagging doubt and anxiety fell over her like a freezing mist.

‘I’ll have to order everyone on this ship, my whole crew into harm’s way, more than once before we even get done with the Collectors… I’m going to lose people… maybe even most of them… and why,” she kept her movements easy and slow but she wanted to run, run somewhere, anywhere.

When she finished with her tray she walked, steadily, to the elevator to make it back to her cabin. Where crew members caught her eye she nodded or gave them a small smile, all the time fighting back the shaking and hoping the cold sweat wasn’t already showing.

In the elevator she leaned back against the walls, her legs unsteady, praying the elevator didn’t stop. Once on the top deck she made it to her cabin in a rush and then to the bathroom.

Shepard threw up in the toilet, on her knees, heaving until nothing was left but bile. Sitting back against the bulkhead, knees up to rest her elbows on, head in her hands she felt pathetic.

‘Get a fuckin grip Shepard, you’ve led touch missions before… ordered marines to their deaths… don’t go soft on me now,’ but this was no ordinary mission, no ordinary threat.

The roots of the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty were located deeper than her conscious memory. Even if she defeated the Collectors they were only the warm up act.

The main event, the Reapers, destroyers of all intelligent, sentient life in the galaxy for who knew how many cycles were still coming… and she thought she could face them down.
‘Shit who the fuck do I think I am… I can’t even get the Council to believe they’re coming… we’re all going to die and there’s not a fuckin thing I can do about it.’

Shepard stood up and went to the basin, throwing water on her face and rinsing her mouth, she was shaking from head to foot and white faced. The damp cold sweat chilling her body.

Why wasn’t she rounding up her family, her friends, anyone who would listen and heading out into the unexplored galaxy. Get as far away from the Reaper controlled killing grounds as she could.

She might persuade the Quarian’s with their readymade fleet to join her.

‘That’s enough,’ the voice in her head was stronger now, she took some deep breaths to steady herself, ‘that’s enough Shepard. We do not run from a fight and the galaxy hasn’t even started getting its shit together yet. You will stand and fight because that’s how it’s always been,’ she spoke the last words more gently to herself but with no less conviction.

Exhaustion took her and she headed for the bed not even taking off her boots and fell into a heavy sleep. The nightmares were at their worst and relentless. The dark monsters, destroying all before them, and corrupting once sentient organic beings into mindless half machines that killed without even noticing.

The death throes of thousands of civilisations filled her eyes, her ears and her soul. And when she woke Shepard knew she had seen exactly what was coming for them, exactly what she would have to stand against, what she would have to ask everyone to stand against with her.

Normandy – five days post Fehl Prime

Shepard had just dropped Skark on a human colony to pick up a ship to Tuchanka. She decided it was time to find out if Okeer’s tank bred Krogan was going to be an asset or needed to be dealt with.

Standing in front of the tank in one of the storage holds she was struck by the stillness of the young Krogan, she’d never seen a Krogan look so at peace.

“Edi are you getting any readings from him at all?”

“Only his physical vital signs Shepard, there is no way to tell what his mental state or capacity is. Protocol would demand that any unknown quantity should examined in a fully secure environment, are you certain you wish to proceed without fire support?” Shepard knew this was, at the least, risky and at worst completely stupid. She had no idea who the Krogan would react.

“Lock down the room Edi and alert security if anything… well… get out of hand,” Shepard continued, “open him up Edi.”

Shepard stood a few feet away from the front of the container and watched as the fluid inside drained down and the Krogan inside began to twitch, eyes flickering open.

As the perspex door slid open the Krogan fell to his knees before standing slowly and stepping out of the container in front of her.

She kept relaxed but could sense movement coming towards her just before the young Krogan launched himself at her. Lifting her bodily the Krogan slammed her against some containers and held her by her throat.

He inclined his head so that they were face to face and he stared into her eyes. She looked back and
waited, as he studied her with his small bright eyes.

“Human, female, before you die I need a name,” his voice lighter than she was used to but definitely with a Krogan rumble.

“I am Commander Shepard of the SSV Normandy and I don’t take to kindly to threats mister, I suggest you stand down…” but the Krogan cut across her.

“Not your name, mine… what’s my name. I am trained, I know things,” he inclined his head a little more and she could see the concentration in his eyes, “but the tank… Okeer couldn’t implant connection, his words are… hollow.

Warlord, legacy, grunt… “Grunt” was among the last… it has no meaning… it will do. Grunt, I am Grunt. If you are worthy of your command, prove your strength and try to destroy me.”

“You sure you want to go with Grunt… not Okeer or legacy,” Shepard asked the young Krogan testing his reasoning and trying to connect with him.

“It’s short, matches the training in my blood… the other words are big things I don’t feel… they don’t fit my mouth… maybe they fit yours better.” The Krogan still held Shepard across the throat but wasn’t pressing hard.

“I feel nothing for Okeer or his enemies, I will do what I am bred to do… fight and determine the strongest… but his imprint has failed. Without a reason that is mine one fight is a good as another, might as well start with you.”

Shepard thought for a moment and drew on all she knew about Krogan culture mostly learned from Wrex.

“I have a good ship, a strong clan and powerful Krant, you would make it stronger,” she could feel the Krogan’s breath on her face as he watched her intently.

“If your weak and choose weak enemies I will have to kill you,” he replied.

“Oh our enemies are strong there’s no doubt about that,” she allowed herself a small smile this was going to work.

“Humm, that is… acceptable… I will fight for you.”

“Well now I’m glad you saw reason,” and as she spoke she looked down to the hand cannon that was pointing up towards the young Krogan’s exposed neck.

He looked down and stood back with a familiar bark of laughter, “ha offer one hand but arm the other. Wise Shepard… if I find a clan…if I… I find what I want…I will be honoured to eventually pit them against you.” He gave her a small nod and moved away.

“Well good to have you on the team Grunt, now let’s talk about where you’re going to live while you’re on the ship… oh and let me apologise in advance for the food… until we can get something better organised.”

After some discussion it was decided Grunt would join the other members of the fire teams on the hanger deck. He could use Skark’s bunk until the older Krogan’s return.

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*Normandy – six days post Fehl Prime*
The shuttle bay of the Normandy had been equipped to provide not only training space and equipment, including a decent gym, but also running pads to ensure enough aerobic activity for all the crew.

Tash had just finished directing a training session with one of the special ops squads and was unwinding with a long distance run. It was the one of the few times she settled into a reflective mood and the thoughts that passed through her mind were all too familiar.

For the best part of ten years Tash had been living her life in front of a wall. A wall she put up inside when she started her mission for Alliance Intelligence.

Behind it were all the things she used to be, a good soldier, and honourable officer, a decent human being. All her ambition, her values, the path she had seen so clearly for herself. Service, honour, duty.

The gap between who she was in front of the wall and who she was had grown so wide and so deep that sometimes she had to work really hard to make any kind of connection with her old self.

She didn’t do it very often; it was too disturbing, too confusing and brought only lethal levels of raging anger.

Tash had not only killed, injured, stolen, extorted and destroyed in order to maintain her credibility as a merc for hire, or on the orders of Cerberus. She had also, on many occasions, done so for personal gain and personal satisfaction. Taking out her anger and pain on anyone unfortunate to cross her path and piss her off at the wrong moment.

For the best part her victims had been just as undeserving as she was. Either merc’s themselves, unscrupulous corporations or other forms of low life criminals. But she had no illusions that on too many occasion she had also hurt and even killed innocent people.

When Aria discovered that the Collectors were conducting a deal to gather human specimens on Omega, Tash had been part of the team sent to dispatch them. Their orders were to kill everyone on the loading dock, everyone included the human slaves. Men, women and children.

Tash followed her orders, and although she didn’t target any children herself they were still all dead along with the adults when the shooting stopped.

Too often the nightmares would come and the dead would haunt her, the officer she once was would corrupt in front of her eyes and she would be left empty, lost and alone in a hell of her own making.

Tash thought about Liselle and couldn’t help a small smile reaching her lips. She honestly believed Liselle had saved her life. Five years ago Tash was done, no way out of her situation in sight, broken by the things she’d had to do and looking for oblivion either in drugs or in death.

Somehow they connected, perhaps only possible because Tash’s resistance was so low, but she let Liselle in just a little and the young Asari saw some of what was behind that internal wall.

Steadily Tash began to build a real life where she found herself, she finally understood that to survive she would have to really live for now and not just go through the motions.

And it might have been enough. Spending more and more time on Omega and with Liselle, moving further away from any last lingering hope of a return to her previous life, it would have been enough.

Then the call from Cerberus, the mission with her cousin, and the inner wall that had had been damaged by her break down, then melted more by Liselle began to crack.
Seeing her cousin, everything that Tash had aspired to be, was meant to be, in front of her, living what should have been Tash’s life was too much. And in some twisted, fucked up way Tash wanted to blame Shepard for not coming after her. For seeing what was happening, what the Alliance had done and saving her.

Tash knew it was crazy and unfair but she couldn’t stop the rage that would smash into her mind at times when she was around Shepard.

Shepard was also the embodiment of the Alliance Navy, the very people who had destroyed her life, her career for what. A few scraps of useless information over the years, a couple of Admirals names?

Tash got control of her breathing and calmed her mind again, bringing it back from the rage. Looking up and across the shuttle bay she saw a familiar figure emerge from the elevator.

Shepard in sweats and a hoodie began walking towards her and with a smile asked, “hey Tash how do you fancy a bit of a workout?”

Tash thought for a second, ‘this is not a good idea’.

Out loud she answered “hell yeah fine with me Elvee been a while since I kicked your arse.”

Shepard pulled off her hoodie and walked onto the edge of the training mat used for close combat sessions. She had to find out where the anger and sometimes edges of hate from Tash were coming from. And her plan was to goad Tash into losing control and getting to the truth in the process.

They squared up to each other and began to slowly circle the edge of the mat, Shepard’s hand were open showing the hard edges to Tash. The taller human held her hands in loose fists. They locked eyes and made a few moves and feints as they began testing each other.

“So you made the transfer across to full Navy, still keep your marine rank?” Tash spoke as she once again threw out a strike towards Shepard’s head that was easily dodged.

“Yep… transferred after Torfan… as a Lieutenant Commander… You know that was always my plan… wanted my own ship at some point…” her words punctuated with exchanged hits.

“Marines not good enough for you…” Tash landed a telling blow to Shepard’s side followed by another to the side of her head.

“I’m still a marine Tash, always will be… still hold my Lieutenant Colonel rank with pride… more than we can say about you,” Shepard landed a straight finger stab to Tash’s solar plexus and taller woman staggered back visibly winded.

“Fuck you LV… we’re talking bout your glittering career not my fuck ups,” recovered Tash once again brushed away another barrage of hits from Shepard, landing one of her own back directly on the shorter woman’s chin.

“Not that your jealous huh… so what happened… really… couldn’t stay away from just one more party… one more girl… you never could keep it in your pants could you…” they continue to exchange blows now landing more frequently and with more force.

“If it makes you feel good… you self-righteous bastard… never… forget… I’m just one big… fuck up,” Tash landed a well-timed and well-judged combination of hits, closed fist and open hand which sent Shepard reeling back and crashing to the floor.
Shepard jumped back to her feet and they began once more to circle each other. Now Shepard could see and sense the rage and hatred oozing from Tash towards her.

“Well that’s a hell of a chip you got there Tash… and just remind me…how you get to feel sorry for yourself… when you’re the one that let everyone down…” this time Shepard’s combination and blocks connected with force and Tash was first bent double and then slammed in the face backwards off the mat and towards the Mako parked on against the side wall.

While Tash struggled to her feet Shepard advanced and continued, “the truth Tash, what the fuck happened… I don’t buy the sex and drugs… I know you, I certainly knew you then,” as Tash stood Shepard took up a defensive stance but didn’t throw any more hits.

“Truth… you wouldn’t know the truth if it punched you in the face if it’s got anything to do with the Alliance… all that crap they sold us means shit to them… we’re just tools and if you can’t see that you need to take you fuckin rose tinted glasses off…” Tash made a lunge and grabbed Shepard in a head lock which was reciprocated.

They both struggled to exert pressure, both their heads close together, and breath coming in short bursts.

“I… know you… work… for Cerberus…” Shepard knew they had to get it out in the open and as she finished saying the words Tash gave a roar and threw Shepard against the side of the Mako.

Shepard caught her breath and once again took up a defensive stance and continued, “Why Tash, everything they stand for, everything they do is against everything we believe… I’d expect this of your father but not you.”

Tash was looking down at her hands then looked up and gave Shepard a cold hard smile, “my fuckin father was always too much an Alliance suck up to put his beliefs into action… he’s too good for Cerberus… but not his fuck up daughter… his disappointment of a daughter… you know he’s the reason they asked me… they reckon the apple didn’t fall far from the tree,” Tash squared up again and began to move slowly and Shepard sensed a building of anger once again from her cousin.

“Tell you one thing that always kinda pissed me off… such great friends… family… almost sisters…” Tash now began to put together combinations of hits and feints that Shepard was content to defend against, “where... the... fuck... were you... when I... got canned... and dumped out on my arse...obeyed my father’s directive did you... exiled from the family... where were you Elvee,” the last combination landed blows to Shepard’s ribs, side of her head and jaw.

Although staggered by the force of the blows Shepard stayed on her feet and decided to end the fight before any real damage was done. She moved fast and before Tash knew what was happening Shepard had flanked her landing several blows to the kidney area, side of her head and as Tash turned to face her Shepard finished with the heel of her hand to Tash’s nose.

Tash hit the ground hard and Shepard could see she had been jarred badly. Standing over her Shepard spoke quietly but calmly and with care.

“You were meant to be with me, on leave, we planned it together Tash. The week you got thrown out of the Alliance we should have been on leave together on Elysium. But I was there on my own and we all know what happened.” To Shepard’s relief she sensed Tash’s anger and hate fade away to be replaced with sadness and loss.

Shepard offered Tash a hand up but the blonde haired woman got up on her own.
“By the time that all played out it was too late to find you, and the missions came thick and fast, it was just too late Tash.”

The taller woman turned her back on Shepard and said over her shoulder, “it should never have been too late Elvee, I would have tracked you down no matter how long it took me.”

As Tash began to walk away Shepard reached out and caught her arm and said, “I’m really sorry Tash, I should have come after you, I know that now.”

Tash pulled away but not hard, and nodding her head once continued to head for the elevator on the back wall.

Shepard looked after her and now she knew why Tash was so angry with her. And she had a point, Shepard realised how much she had let Tash down and how caught up in her own life and career she had been.

‘Well you better make it right now Shepard… and get to the bottom of this Cerberus thing,’ Shepard thought as she made her way back to her cabin and a stiff drink.

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Edi’s voice brought Shepard back to the present; she was on her third brandy, still feeling the effects of the fight with Tash, and running their exchange over in her mind.

“Shepard a priority call from Cerberus would you like to take it here?”

“Yes, put it through,” Shepard got up and went to her desk and waited for the QEC to pull together the image of her caller, who would almost definitely be Harper.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you Commander,” Harper was sitting against his usual impressive backdrop. Cold blue eyes glinting and the ever present cigarette between his fingers.

“Not at all, I’m just getting drunk on your very good brandy,” she was flippant whatever he wanted it must be important but she wasn’t going to show any interest.

“We have just had an indication from one of our listening posts that the human colony of Horizon has just experienced a comms blackout. A ship bearing a Collector energy signal has also just jumped a relay that connects to the Horizon system. I believe they are on their way to attack it, this could be your opportunity to get there hard on their heels.”

“So what you finally worked out how to track them… or do you now have a big enough network to keep tabs on colonies in a way the Alliance with all their resources haven’t been able to?” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but if this was true it was a unique opportunity.

“Luck Shepard, based on guesswork, but mostly luck, nothing more sinister I assure you. We really must try to trust each other even if it’s only on the matter in hand. Cerberus is a real ally not only against the Collectors but also against the Reapers. We know as well as you do what’s coming and we won’t leave you stand on your own.” Harper flicked the end of his cigarette before lifting it to his mouth and taking a deep draw. “I’m sending all the relevant information, good hunting.”

Before she could respond he cut the connection. She wanted to damn him, but he was right, to all intents and purposes it was only Cerberus who was not only awake to but actively working against the Collector and Reaper threat.

“Edi, call all officers and specialists to the comms room for a meeting in thirty minutes. Get Joker in the cockpit if he’s not already there and head for Horizon all speed. Ship to def con two, heightened
security, ready for full battle stations when we are one hour out from Horizon.”

“Copy that Shepard.”

Shepard headed for the shower and a clean set of BDU’s.

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**Normandy – approach to Horizon**

Mordin had achieved the breakthrough they needed in relation to the seeker swarms shortly after Fehl Prime. Not only had he synthesised protection from the effects it could also be used to awaken anyone already affected.

Kas and Veetor had also developed a programme that created a small field around the wearer that made them ‘invisible’ to the swarm entirely. These had been incorporated into the ground team’s armour.

She stood, as usual, between her two pilots watching the planet come into view.

“Scans of the planet show a Collector ship on the ground just outside the main settlement. We are showing a lot of activity on the ground. But the ship is inactive at this time.” Edi’s voice was clear in the cockpit.

Miranda already had the ship to full battle stations and they were set at def con alpha.

“Ok, let’s run the same playbook. When we have the guns ready we synchronise our attack, but keep this ship safe Joker. They may have changed their tactics based on Fehl Prime.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice Commander,” Joker’s voice was steady and calm and had his usual hint of flippancy.

Shepard was pleased that the Collectors were no longer the invincible bogey men, they knew now they could take them down, with skill, the right equipment… and a little luck.

She made her way quickly to the shuttle bay and joined her ground team for the trip to the planet.

On the fast trip to Horizon Shepard had contacted her Alliance liaison, Captain Shepard, to alert them of the probably attack. The news back was not great. The nearest Alliance vessels would be almost twenty four hours behind them and there was a problem with the guns that had been installed.

The targeting mechanisms were still not working; they would need to be hacked into the Normandy systems manually.

She noticed briefly how crowded the shuttle was. The Normandy now had a ground force of nearly twenty, usually split into two squads comprising members of the special ops team and Shepard’s specialists distributed where their particular skills would work best.

She decided to run through the ground attack plan on the way down. The scans had revealed hot spots of Collector activity and pin pointed the location of the guns and the information had been transferred to their OT’s.

“Tash you’ll lead squad one and Kasumi to cut off the Collectors taking colonists to the ship. You can see they have some kind of production line inside the colony for packing people into those pods then they’re walking them to the ship. Take and hold the edge of the colony, don’t try to take them on the open ground, those already on that journey are lost, but you stop them taking any more.” Tash
nodded as she studied the ground map.

“Garrus you’ll lead squad two with Mordin and head into the colony where it looks as if they are collecting the colonists they’ve put into stasis and making them ready for transport. Take control of that area. Once secured, revive colonists and arm them, we need all the help we can get.” Garrus also answered her with a nod.

“You two are with me and we have the extraordinary fun of fighting our way to the gun emplacements on our own, holding them against attack until we can get them up and running and continuing to fight off anything the Collectors throw at us,” she spoke to Grunt and Jack and to her amusement they both looked delighted.

Grunt flexed his muscles and slammed his fists together and Jack’s biotics flared slightly and her smile would have chilled the heart of the toughest soldiers Shepard knew.

“Malania, once you’ve dropped us off get back to the Normandy,” there would be no retreat, they would stand or fall in the fight and if things went badly they would need medical personnel on the ground quickly and for that the Doc would need the shuttle.

They had been fighting on the ground for nearly an hour. Shepard and her team had met heavy resistance and they were still too far from the guns.

Shepard was also dealing with the same phenomenon that Sovereign had used in their final fight when it took over Saren’s body. This new Reaper took control of a Collector body making it much stronger and, as before, it was able to speak directly to her.

It was unnerving and disconcerting, and it seemed neither Grunt nor Jack could hear what ‘Harbinger’ was saying.

“We are your genetic destiny…you will know pain Shepard… I will tear you apart Shepard… we are the Harbinger of your perfection” the voice actually caused pain in her mind, and she had an almost uncontrollable urge to rip off her helmet… it was as if this Harbinger was inside her head with her.

Her team focussed on taking down the Collector who was being controlled, then worked through the others, then continuing their run to the gun emplacements.

“Boss, we’ve pretty much secured the transport line at the edge of the colony, I suggest we rig up some explosive traps here but then head into the colony. We could try to work our way towards the guns behind you?” Tash’s voice was clear and steady through Shepard’s comms.

“Agreed,” they had been sharing updates and Shepard knew Tash’s team had been almost fought to a standstill until they got the upper hand using a decoy manoeuvre. “Garrus sit rep,” Shepard asked, the last report had his squad having set up a solid defensive position protecting a large number of colonist’s who they were beginning to revive.

“We can hold this position easily with half the squad, I’m going to take the other half and converge on your position.”

Shepard was happy to let her squad leaders make their own threat and tactical assessments, and the key priority was to get the guns online.

“Agreed,” Shepard and her team were moving fast but it wasn’t long until they saw another wall of Collectors and the strange husk creatures that fired canons.
And before long Harbinger was whispering in her ear again about all the terrible ways he would make her suffer if she didn’t just give up and accept her genetic destiny.

Shepard’s team finally reached the guns and she set to hacking the targeting system into the Normandy and charging up the weapons. Grunt and Jack covered her but as soon as she was done and handed completion over to Edi, Shepard turned once again to face the seemingly endless waves of Collectors and their husks.

At one point she was fighting off a horde of humanoid husks with her hand canon in one hand and her omni blade on the other.

Just when she thought it couldn’t get any worse their eyes were drawn to a massive airborne creature flying in from the direction of the Collector ship. When it got closer it looked as if it had thirty heads, but whatever it was it was hugely powerful with extensive barriers.

All they could do was dodge its attacks while still fighting off the canon firing husks and the now, finally, thinning Collectors.

Then from the roofs of the building to the right she saw a line of soldiers, Tash’s squad, who all focused fire on the flying demon. Under the sustained firepower and the extra biotics the creatures barriers soon came down and they finished it off in short order.

Garrus approached from buildings behind them and the remaining attacks began to fall away.

“Commander we have control of the guns and they are targeted, Normandy weapon systems are go,” Miranda’s voice came loud and clear through Shepard’s comms.

“You have a go, fire, fire, fire,” Shepard gave the command; now all she could do was watch.

The Collector ship had already started to lift from the ground, and it was doing so at a much faster speed than the one on Fehl Prime.

The guns fired and the ground shook with the recoil, they hit the barriers around the ship as it continued to speed up.

“It’s coming up at speed Miranda I don’t like it… Joker be ready to get the fuck out of there,” Shepard really didn’t like the way the Collector ship was behaving.

It was already almost out of the atmosphere by the time the guns had gotten off a third shot.

Then a very stressed Joker’s voice came through on the comms.

“It’s heading straight for us Commander… I’m trying… Edi don’t fire on it I need all the control to the helm,” in the background Shepard could hear Edi confirming trajectory and Miranda calling to the crew to brace for impact.

Shepard could do nothing but stare up into a clear blue sky, scarred by a massive vapour trail from the rising ship.

She took off her helmet without taking her eyes from the sky. The chatter through her suit comms continued.

The Normandy had taken a hit; they were pulling a screaming turn to get out of the way… then…

“We’re clear Commander… and the Collector ship just jumped to FTL,” Joker’s voice was now
more relaxed.

“Damage report,” Shepard asked.

“Some damage to shielding where the Collector ship glanced our side. Minor damage to systems, Commander, a couple of tactical ops crew experienced burns and shock when their terminals overloaded. No other casualties or damage,” Miranda’s voice was business-like and calm.

“Well apart from leaving my lunch somewhere at the beginning of that truly amazing turn I pulled… and maybe a cracked rib… but yeah… the best pilot in the galaxy is ok… thanks for asking,” Joker was now in full flippant mode and it was good to hear.

Shepard, her team and the other squad members all took some time to just sit. They started shedding helmets and armour; took some water and food.

After Shepard had had a drink and thrown some water over her head she asked the inevitable question.

“Casualties?”

“One dead and two badly injured from my squad,” Tash answered.

“Half the squad caught minor injuries, two serious but not fatalities,” Garrus’s voice was quiet. He knew better than anyone how much Shepard hated losing people.

The ground team remained dirtside until the Alliance arrived the next morning.

They revived all the remaining colonists and tried to give them some reassurance and a sense of safety.

The colonists were all grateful to Shepard and her team, but those who had lost family and friends to the Collectors were subdued, understandably.

She found herself saying sorry to a large number of the colonists for not being able to save their family and friends. And although, for her, they were empty words they seemed to bring some comfort to those who were grieving.

On the positive side they had gained a lot of intel from the fight. The tactics the Collectors and perhaps their Reaper masters used with their thralls.

And weapons, they had picked up particle beam weapons that they would be able to replicate. But most of all they had met two more kinds of ‘husk’ that they could study for weaknesses.

With her crew settled back on board and all her reports made, Shepard made ready to try to get some sleep.

She noticed a vid message with an Omega origin sitting on her console and almost ignored it, but curiosity got the better of her and she sat down at her desk and flicked play.

It was Aria T’Loak in person.

“Shepard, take this as a… friendly invitation… but make no mistake I need you to visit me on Omega as soon as you get this message… it will be mutually beneficial.”
And with that the message ended.

‘Not good at asking… bet she would have preferred to order me to an audience with her,’ Shepard thought and smiled. She called up Miranda and Joker on ship comms.

“We have been invited to Omega so lay in a course, Miranda we can carry out any repairs we may need when we get there.”

Shepard heard the affirmative responses but she was already crawling under the covers. Sleep had been hard to come by the last week; the nightmares had been much more frequent.

Whether it was the level of exhaustion or the disturbing, painful, headful of Reaper she had endured on Horizon her worse nightmare plagued her that night.

She was on the beach again… and again she was searching for Liara… this time when she found Liara she was nursing a small bundle… a baby wrapped in her arms… but the dream played out the same way… Shepard couldn’t get to her, couldn’t make her understand she had to run.

The darkness engulfed Liara and the baby leaving them, like all the others on the beach, desiccated corpses with rictus grins. As always Shepard tried to run, but this time the darkness, the dark, cold, unforgiving mist kept moving towards her.

As she felt it touch the edge of her body she felt absolute agony throughout every nerve ending in her body and her mind was on fire with pain. A screaming flooded her ears, someone was screaming in agony and terror…
Chapter 39

A/N In this chapter we see lovers almost reunited. Politics and intrigue are never far away as we continue to weave the threads of this Shepard’s journey; hopefully… with the woman she loves by her side very soon.

Omega – two days post Horizon

The Normandy had been directed to one of Aria’s personal docking bays. But despite its secure nature Shepard was still going to keep a full security detail on at all times.

She gave non-essential crew two days leave but asked her science team to carry on analysing the new husk creatures they had run into on Horizon.

Shepard had a couple of hours before her meeting with Aria so set about sourcing materials for the repairs to the Normandy hull.

She watched Tash slip away no doubt headed for her pre-arranged meeting with Liselle.

Aria's private office, Afterlife, Omega

As Tash walked into the room followed by Liselle she just had enough time to see Aria sitting behind her desk studying a data pad before she was lifted off her feet and slammed into the wall so hard that all the breath left her body.

Aria had barely glanced at the tall human as she walked in and with only a slight flick of her fingers had placed the woman in a stasis field and threw her against the wall, proving, if proof be needed, just how powerful a biotic she was.

Tash was pinned off the floor and she felt an invisible hand around her throat, grip tight enough to be uncomfortable but not actually choking her.

Whatever Liselle was about to say never died on her lips as she was quelled with one glance from Aria.

The Queen of Omega came from behind the desk using her most languorous, hip swivelling walk, covering the space between her and Tash.

Aria replaced her biotic grip with her own hand, released the stasis field but held Tash where she was so that they were eye to eye.

“Don’t ever fuck with me again… if I get the slightest uncomfortable feeling about your loyalty to me I will personally tear your heart out of your chest while you watch… you are only alive because I allow it,” Aria’s voice was silky smooth and soft but the power of her presence, her will and her words ripped through Tash like the thrust of a hawk fighter drive core at maximum FTL.

In one movement Aria let Tash drop and turned away moving back towards her desk. Tash dropped to the floor and her knees buckled but she stood up quickly, rubbing her neck a little before following Aria to the edge of the desk.

“Now let’s see what you really have hidden away in that mind of yours,” and before Tash could
even fully register what Aria was saying she felt the Asari enter her mind like a force of nature.

At the end of the meld Tash felt as if every part of her had been fully investigated and non to gently, but she was sure there would be no lasting effects, Aria was more a physical punisher.

Aria was pleased that Tash had indeed shown the whole truth to Liselle. And that Tash did have some substance, strength of mind, she was no coward and was fiercely loyal to Liselle.

It seemed she really cared for her daughter. Of course she had many other irritating honourable traits, but she couldn’t expect anything else for Shepard’s relative.

While Tash was getting them some drinks Liselle spoke quietly enough so that only Aria could hear.

“Was the assault and the threat really necessary,” Liselle was tentative she knew her mother had a line even with her that Aria would not allow to be crossed.

“Never allow any transgression to go unpunished Liselle, only the degree of retribution never whether to punish at all… those who consider the risk of crossing me worth trying are always watching to see what consequences may come their way if they try and fail… it’s all about communication Liselle,” Aria ended with one of her knowing and cold smiles, the kind that didn’t reach her eyes.

Aria went back to her desk and began working while Tash and Liselle sat with their drinks in silence and waited for Shepard’s arrival.

When Shepard arrived at Afterlife she was escorted directly to Aria’s private office. The club was quieter than she had ever seen it. Although there was still a sprinkling of weary party goers they looked as if they had been there all night.

Shepard took a moment to take in the Queen of Omega’s private space. It was a large room with three doors on the left leading, no doubt, into the rest of Aria’s private quarters.

On the far wall stood a large bank of screens, mostly blank but two showing camera feeds of what looked like streets on Illium and the Citadel. Shepard had expected Aria to have Omega pretty much completely under her eye but it seemed her reach was as wide as rumour suspected.

In front of the screens stood an impressive desk that was carved from a cream stone and edged with a highly polished silver and a blue glass top. To the right was a sitting area, long sofa and two large armchairs around a low table.

But it was the art and the general décor that really surprised Shepard, although she’d never given thought to how Aria arranged her private life, the level of taste and beauty was at odds with her public personae.

Aria was sitting behind her desk but rose as Shepard entered the room. Tash and Liselle were sitting on the large sofa; Tash looked subdued and not a little tense.

Liselle was sitting back with one arm across the back of the sofa, her fingertips just touching the edge of Tash’s shoulder, and she looked as alluring as the last time Shepard had seen the commando captain.

“You look like shit Shepard,” Aria moved to sit in one of the armchairs and indicated Shepard do the same.
“Whereas you look as beguiling as ever Aria,” Shepard inclined her head slightly as she raised her eyebrows but also gave Aria a smirky grin.

Aria had noted dark patches under the eyes. The red cybernetic scars were more pronounced and angry looking than the last time they had met and the woman just looked exhausted. Shepard looked as if she had aged a decade from the fresh faced Commander who had met Aria while hunting Saren and the Geth.

“I asked to meet with Mikhailovich so that I could carry out a memory meld to confirm what Liselle had told me about her… status,” Aria sat back and the armchair crossing one leg over the other, calf resting on leather coated thigh.

Shepard kept any surprise out of her voice or her demeanor.

“Well she does work for you and seems to be seeing a lot of your commando captain so I guess you had your reasons,” Shepard gave a quick glance at Tash but she was intently studying the table between them.

“Yes well, it’s because my commando captain is such an important asset that we are sitting here. Liselle has asked for my help with Mikhailovich’s… problem.

It seems you only recently learned she works for Cerberus,” Aria put up her hand to stop Shepard’s attempt at an intervention and then continued, “but she hasn’t told you the whole truth. And you need to have the full facts or I’m not going to get involved.”

Shepard looked at Tash for an explanation; the woman looked extremely reluctant but began to speak quietly.

“I was recruited by Cerberus while still in the Alliance but I reported the approach to my superiors and… well Alliance Intelligence asked me to go along with it and work for them. The plan was for me to infiltrate Cerberus and to do that I needed to get thrown out of the Alliance. At which point they figured Cerberus would welcome me to its bosom as soldier to the cause,” she paused and looked at Shepard.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me this straight off, and why the fuck didn’t you tell me at the time… didn’t you trust me?” Shepard couldn’t keep all of the emotion out of her voice but she was mindful they had an audience.

Tash gave a hollow laugh and her face showed disgust and loathing, “well they were very explicit about two things. I was not under any circumstances ever tell anyone I was an Alliance double agent until given the authority by my handler… and absolutely under no circumstances was I to ‘taint’ my cousin or her upwardly headed glittering career with my grubby little assignment.”

Shepard thought for a moment, Tash was still holding a lot of anger and the focus was still Shepard herself but they’d have to work that through later. She didn’t bite on the sarcasm or the taunt and answered without reproach.

“Tash they cut you off from the one person who would have told you not to do it that you were worth more to the Alliance, the Navy, as the soldier and officer you were. That’s what I would have told you then and I still believe that now.”

Aria’s languid drawl interrupted the conversation, “much as I’m enjoying your family therapy session Shepard perhaps we could get to business?”

Shepard nodded and gave Aria her full attention.
“Liselle has asked me to get Mikhailovich…,” Liselle interrupted quietly but firmly.

“Could you perhaps call her Tasha, Aria?” The look they exchanged was unreadable but Aria gave a small tilt of the head as she continued speaking.

“Liselle, who had better continue to be an outstanding asset for my organisation, has asked me to try to get her lover free from Cerberus. I have no intention of giving Cerberus any leverage over me whatever the benefits might be.

And if Cerberus ever finds out that she was a double agent they will hunt her down and kill her even if only as a signal to others. That’s certainly what I’d do,” Aria gave Tash a hard stare and then continued.

“I suggest that ‘Tasha’ starts putting on an act and reverts to the state she was in when she first came to Omega. Drinking, drugs… dis-functional behaviour… in effect she needs to become, at least on the surface a useless asset.

"After a few months I will contact the Illusive Man furious that he has tried to place an agent in my organisation and work out a deal with him to ‘acquire’ her. He will believe he is giving away nothing and also smoothing his relations with me."

It was devious and played to human expectations it was genius, Shepard could see why Aria had been so successful in building her empire.

“So where do I fit in?” Shepard asked.

“You will need to deal with the Alliance end, I understand that they are being less than supportive and if Mikhailovich appears to come to work for me and cut her ties with Cerberus they may not want to let her go and I won’t house an Alliance spy, even an unwilling one.” As Aria spoke she gestured with her hands towards Tash.

“Ok, we’ll get it done.” Shepard could see that Tash would probably never be able to re-join the Alliance. If she did Cerberus would immediately know that something was wrong.

“Good. Now I also have some information regarding the Shadow Broker for you Shepard. Accept it as a down payment on another favour in the future.” Shepard was under no illusions about their relationship. At some point Aria would ask for something and Shepard would need to oblige.

“Tela Vasir an Asari Spectre is one of the Broker’s top agents and is still sniffing around T’Soni’s situation. But I also believe Vasir may well hold some information that will help pin point the Broker’s base,” Aria allowed herself a smile at Shepard’s reaction.

This was very useful and high value information and if Vasir could help put the pieces together Shepard may be able to take the Shadow Broker down before Liara’s return from the Temple.

Almost as if Aria had read her mind she said, “And it may be better all-round if the Broker could be dealt with before T’Soni gets back in the fight.”

Aria was about to dismiss them and get back to work when a thought struck her. How amusing it would be to ‘entertain’ her daughters’ lover and best friend. A secret taste of ‘family life’. And so with a smile she said.

“Well perhaps you would like to join me for some lunch?” Aria smiled at the reaction her suggestion had caused in the room.
Liselle’s face only momentarily showed her questioning amusement, Tash looked frozen to the spot and Shepard frowned slightly as if her translator had malfunctioned.

“Um, well, most unexpected… if it’s not too much trouble,” Shepard could have cut her tongue out she sounded like a nervous teenager in the company of the grown-ups.

Aria’s smile was one of genuine amusement and she even gave a small chuckle, “it’s good to know I can put the saviour of the Citadel on the back foot merely by offering food.”

Shepard smiled back and even Tash looked as if she was relaxing.

“I have a personal chef and all the supplies are shipped in from Thessia,” Aria said as she moved to her desk and began tapping instructions into her console.

“Aria also has a pastry chef, we Asari are very partial to sweet things,” Liselle was smiling and looked extremely amused. She stretched in a very sensual way and stroked Tash cheek who returned to looking nervous with a glance in Aria’s direction.

“Well what is the point of being the most powerful… the Queen of Omega if you will… de facto ruler of the Terminus System if I can’t have everything I desire,” Aria returned to her seat.

“Since the first time I met you I had a feeling you were born to rule,” Shepard said with a smile as she took the wine that Liselle was now passing around.

“Hmm, perhaps not exactly born… but certainly my particular attributes were uniquely developed and suited to the path I choose,” her answer was unusually frank.

While they waited for the food to arrive and over a very delicious lunch Aria entertained them with stories from her long and interesting past. Always careful with details that could give any of her secrets or too much of her history away, she was an amusing and interesting story teller.

Shepard saw more clearly how Aria had maintained her power for so long. Many get to the top but few go the distance and last as long as Aria had. For that a leader needs not only the ruthlessness and brute force necessary to take power but the intelligence, charm and charisma to hold it.

Aria sat back and was surprised by how enjoyable she had found her experiment. Despite the toll that Shepard’s work was taking on her she remained a powerful and attractive woman. Shepard possessed one of the strongest wills, strength of mind and sheer bloodymindedness that Aria had met in anyone in many centuries, perhaps ever.

If circumstances had been different she might even have moved to get to know her more intimately, but that would never happen, if for no other reason than Liara.

When the party broke up Shepard headed back to the Normandy to oversee the repairs and speak to her science team. She was left wondering what she had just experienced and once again sensed there was something personal at the back of some of Aria’s interaction with her and about Liara.

But she had no time to dwell on it or this growing phenomena of ‘sensing’ things from other people on occasion.

She left Tash with Liselle who, no doubt, were heading for Liselle’s private quarters to ‘catch up’.

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Normandy – two days post Omega
Shepard was in the comms room waiting at the QEC for a call from Councillor Tevos tagged as high priority. The Normandy was investigating some anomalous signals emanating from a system that offered a statistically high probability for the human colonies located there to be the next target for a Collector attack.

Of course Shepard and Cerberus knew that they were only disrupting the Collectors. They needed to strike at their heart. But Shepard would take any victory she could, saving half a colony and making the Collectors think twice was no small feat.

The QEC sparked into life and interrupted her train of thought. As Councillor Tevos’s form took shape Shepard was surprised to see how agitated, even emotional, the Councillor looked.

Realising the connection had been made Tevos composed herself immediately and it was the usual consummate professional that spoke.

“Commander thank you for your prompt response,” Tevos said. “I…, the Council need you to join Spectre Bau and Spectre Vasir with a situation that is unfolding as we speak.

There has been a slaver attack on a Council colony at the edge of our space and whilst all slaver attacks are regrettable when they happen in Council space they have to be dealt with in the strongest terms.

But there is another reason that this attack will be met with the full force of the Council. Amongst those taken was a Council delegation which included the Asari Ambassador Matriarch Alexia Irissa,” Shepard saw emotion again flash almost imperceptibly in Tevos’s eyes. “Spectre Bau will contact you immediately we have completed our conversation.”

“I understand Councillor, I’ll do everything I can to get everyone back safe,” Shepard answered.

“Thank you Commander, I know I can rely on you… Matriarch Irissa is a close personal friend, the situation is very troubling.”

The connection ended and Shepard mused to herself that even when she was obviously deeply personally affected the Councillor was restrained in her choice of words and maintained her composure.

The QEC almost immediately sparked back into life and she focussed her mind on what Spectre Bau would have to say.

As the Normandy flashed through the relay and into the Templar System the ship was at full battle stations.

“How long to will reach Grieg Prime?” Shepard asked from her position behind Joker’s chair.

“Forty six minutes Commander, picking up another ship ahead of us,” Joker answered his fingers moving quickly and expertly across the haptic interfaces in front of him.

“Edi can you confirm that’s Bau’s ship ahead of us?” Shepard began walking back towards the CIC.

“Confirmed Commander, I am attempting to connect you to Spectre Bau.”

“Good, put it through to the comms room please,” Shepard had reached CIC and spoke to Miranda, “let’s go see what the plan is.”
Shepard and Miranda entered the comms room which also served as Kasumi’s tech and comms teams working space.

“Sorry Kas could we have the room for this call please,” Shepard didn’t know what level of security would be required for the conversation she was about to have and even though she trusted her crew she had to follow Council protocol sometimes.

The team had only just exited the room when the comms console sparked into life and shortly thereafter the figure of a Salarian drew itself into life.

“Shepard, glad you could join me,” the Salarian spoke in a friendly tone.

Jondum Bau had been one of the Spectre’s who had helped induct Shepard and had been particularly friendly and helpful. They had a mutual friend in Captain Kirrahe of the Salarian Special Tasks Group.

“I never say no to a fight with slavers Jondum,” she smiled and waited for him to brief her.

“This is a particularly nasty organisation Shepard. Tela Vasir and I have been working on them for over a year. Vasir is chasing down the senior members of the operation and we are tasked to stop their current operation in its tracks through the direct route,” Shepard nodded. She briefly wondered if Aria knew she may be crossing paths with Vasir but put it down to coincidence.

“You know they hit the colony world just inside Council space yesterday,” Jondum continued, “taking colonists and the visiting Citadel diplomats. It seems our diplomats were on an unofficial visit so Vasir is also trying to find out whether that was luck or a tip off.”

“So you think they’ll try to ransom the diplomats for credits?” Shepard asked.

“In all likelihood yes, but even though they see themselves as running a business we know they won’t hesitate to kill their slaves to deter rescue missions,” the Salarians’ face was grim. Shepard knew only too well the ‘business’ model he was talking about.

“So what’s the plan,” Shepard asked, “all I know is that you’ve managed to track their raids return to this home base.”

“Yes but as far as plans go…” he smiled and she knew exactly what he meant.

They would be flying into an unknown hot zone with probably only enough time to do some cursory scans of the planet and whatever facility the gang had.

The only certain thing was that both Shepard’s and Bau’s teams would be going in hot against uncertain odds.

“We can expect them to engage our ships with whatever fleet they have stationed here… but the ship with the hostages will head for safety on the planet. I suggest that as our ships engage we launch shuttles and follow the ship to the surface. What ground forces do you have with you Jondum?” Shepard was sure this plan was what her counterpart had in mind.

“I have a full squad of twenty C-Sec officers from the Special Response division and a couple of specialists from the Network division to help us track further bases,” Jondum was distracted for a moment and then turned back to Shepard.

“We are approaching the planet fast Shepard, we estimate another ten minutes and our presence will be discovered.”
“Well good thing is they’ll only see one ship coming. We’ll remain in stealth until we engage the enemy with you, give a bit of an edge,” Shepard had confirmation of the timing through a discreet nod from Miranda who had been monitoring their progress as Shepard was talking to Jondum.

“My team is ready to go I just need to join them. But I need to make one thing clear Jondum,” for Shepard it was always critical that she had agreed mission parameters on joint operations. “Once the Normandy engages with the slaver ships we will not stop until they are destroyed, and I don’t mean leaving them disabled, I mean we will give no quarter. Are we in agreement?” From what she knew of Jondum, she had read his operation and action reports along with the other Spectre’s as part of her induction, her instinct indicated he would be in agreement.

“You have no argument from me Shepard. Although it should not influence my decisions as a Spectre, Salarians seem to be treated worse than other races and particularly badly by this group.” Shepard agreed with him, not only from the reports she had read, but also having seen the effects first-hand.

“Good, see you dirt side Jondum. Good hunting.” Shepard smiled nodded and both Spectres cut the connection.

Turning to Miranda she said, “You heard what I said to Jondum. Destroy any and all slaver ships that engage us and that are in orbit around the planet.”

“Copy that Commander.”

Miranda headed for CIC and Shepard for the shuttle bay. There would be no time for her to start the operation as was her usual habit from behind Joker’s chair.

The moment the Normandy and Pulsar, Jondums’ ship, engaged in battle the shuttles would need to be launched.

When Shepard got to the shuttle the squads had already embarked and were settling in.

She nodded and tapped members of the team on the helmet or the shoulder as she walked through to the cockpit.

“Gonna be a hell of a ride to the dirt people… buckle up… we’re going in fast and hot,” when she reached the entrance to the cockpit she turned to face her team.

“Are we ready to save some people and kill some slavers,” she yelled at her team as she felt the vibration of the shuttle engines pick up pace.

She got a range of nods and affirmatives from them team.

“I can’t hear you soldiers… let’s make sure they hear us coming from a long way off… are we ready to dance with these motherfucks?”

This time she got the response she was looking for. Biotics flared, Grunt slammed his fists together, marines shouted ‘oorah’ and every other member of the team shouted affirmatives with a good sprinkling of expletives.

Shepard sat in the co-pilots seat next to Malania. Looking across she could see the young Asari looking a little subdued, perhaps even nervous.

“I’ll handle weapons you do your stuff with the bird,” Shepard smiled and continued, “you’re a hell
of a pilot Malania you’ll get us through and down safely I have no doubt.” Shepard looked her pilot steadily in the eyes and saw her confidence grow.

“I won’t let you down Commander,” Malania’s voice was calm and steady and Shepard saw the nervousness fade away.

“We have six ships approaching Commander; four heading up from the planet and two already in orbit. They are converging on the Pulsar, we are still undetected,” Miranda’s voice sounded in the cockpit of the shuttle.

“You have the conn LC engage the enemy when ready,” Shepard handed over command of the Normandy and the ship to ship battle to Miranda.

It was always the most difficult thing to do, hand over her responsibility to another. But she couldn’t be in two places at the same time and Shepard knew she had an outstanding team looking after her ship.

Shepard looked out onto the scene through the open bay doors as the Normandy closed on the Pulsar and the now converging slaver ships.

They were all frigate or raider class and they were all well-armed. The two frigates closest to the Pulsar began to fire and Shepard saw the hits flash across Bau’s ships barriers and shields.

The Pulsar immediately returned fire as the Normandy came into position behind the two attacking ships. They felt the thud as the Normandy batteries opened up.

“Cleared to launch Commander,” Miranda’s voice was calm and business like over the ships comms.

The shuttle lifted off the deck and slid out the doors into the intricate dance of death and destruction that was occupying the huge swathe of space between the Normandy and the planets upper atmosphere.

The trip to the surface had been every bit as dangerous as Shepard thought it would be. But the enhanced shielding and weaponry the shuttle had combined with inspired piloting by her young Asari commando they had made dirt side without any damage.

The fight to and through the slaver complex was hard. She split her team into two squads leading one herself and Garrus the other. They worked well with Bau’s teams but it was still several hours before they found themselves gaining access to the underground facility.

Meanwhile the space battle had taken under an hour to resolve.

The slavers may have outnumbered the two Spectre ships but the Normandy in particular was no match for them.

All slaver ships were completely destroyed and the Pulsar found another two hiding behind the nearest mood and dispatched then both quickly to its surface.

It wasn’t until the following midday that they fully secured the slaver complex. They had found the captives from the raid on the Council colony early in the fight and managed to save almost three quarters of the two hundred souls.

The others were being summarily shot by their captive’s right up to the moment Shepard’s team took them down with sniper head shots.
The other victims who were being processed were not as lucky as most of them had already been implanted with the control usual vicious devices in their heads.

This meant that they could be killed by the mere flick of a switch and it was only with a significant amount of work by Kas and Ish that they managed to jam enough signals to save a few hundred more.

But the facility was built to hold as many as fifteen hundred slaves before transport out and it was full.

The Council delegation was not at the facility. The rescued colonists told Shepard and Bau that just after passing through the relay into the system the Council representatives had been taken to a shuttle but that was all they knew.

Shepard was now sitting in a room which passed as an engineering room for the facility and was facing two Batarians who Bau’s C-Sec men had managed to capture.

Both Shepard and Bau had a clear no prisoners rule, they had no illusions about being able to get information out of any slavers and they had no particular desire to give any of the murdering scum they had to deal with a comfortable bed and three meals a day in a Citadel prison.

So Bau had sent his men to the surface and left Shepard to deal with the ‘prisoners’.

She decided to at least go through the motions.

“So which one of you is going to tell me where you sent the rest of your captives,” Shepard sat on the edge of a desk holding her hand canon across her thigh.

Tash was leaning up against the wall, cigar hanging from her mouth, rifle cradled in her arms across her chest. Garrus was sitting in a chair near the door, he had always pushed against the red tape when he was a C-Sec officer, wanting justice rather than upholding the law.

This is what Shepard and the other Spectres were able to do, but somewhere inside there was a nagging voice that sounded a little like Executor Palin. He pushed the voice and his doubts down. They were for another time, not now on a mission.

“We will negotiate with you only when we are in C-Sec on the Citadel,” the taller of the two was smiling. They both knew if they got to the Citadel there was always a chance they could escape or bribe their way out.

Shepard stood up and walked slowly up and stood in front of the Batarian who had just spoken. She looked him in the eyes and saw nothing but hate and cruelty.

“Negotiate this,” in a fluid and fast movement as she spoke the words she drew up her canon and blew the top of his head off.

The other Batarian, who was standing next to the now toppling body, actually gasped and looked frightened.

“That’s and unusual reaction… you must be new to this?” Shepard turned to the Batarian who flinched under her stare.

“I… yes… first… only just… no choice… brothers,” he was babbling and began to shake with fear.

Shepard studied him and looked into his eyes; she couldn’t see hate or cruelty. Neither could she
sense the usual range of negative, destructive, dead emotions that clung to every other slaver she had the misfortune to meet.

“How long you been here?”

“O… only… a few days… came to upgrade…”

“Upgrade what, what’s your job,” Shepard said now interested.

“Tech, I’m a comms tech, my brother got me the job of upgrading the… his…” it was evident that he didn’t know how to describe the organisation that he had come to work for.

“Where did they take the other prisoners?” Shepard now reverted to her intimidating stare and started to gesture with her canon in his direction.

“Not… I don’t… shuttle called… not really…”

“Did they give any indication…” Shepard took a deep breath. Intimidating him was getting him flustered so she decided to change tack.

“Come over here and sit down,” she pointed to a desk on the edge of the wall and holstered her canon.

Once he was sitting down she tried again.

“Now tell me, do you have any idea where they took them or where they might have taken them?”

Tash moved from the wall and walked over to the now sitting Batarian and handed him a drink. She squeezed his shoulder as he took it and said, “Try to calm down she’s not all bad, you might even walk out of here if you try to help us.”

Shepard gave her an imperceptible nod it was a good move and the Batarian did look less panicked.

“I’m not sure where they took them,” he continued quickly before she could say anything, “but I’ve already been to two other sites like this one and upgraded the comms system. I could tell you where they are and unlock the security on the comms systems including records if you wanted me to.”

She thought for a moment then spoke into her suit comms.

“Kas I’m sending a Batarian up who might be able to speed up your work trying to get into their systems.”

“A prisoner Shep?” Kas’s voice was amused but she continued more seriously, “well that would be a help, seems they have just been upgraded and the security will be time consuming to get through.”

“Well our prisoner was the one that upgraded it, oh and get the cords for the other bases he knows about then send them to Bau and Miranda.” She turned back to the Batarian, “what’s your name?”

“Boorlan Pazness, thank you, I am sorry,” the Batarian gave a quick glance as Shepard not really wanting to catch her eye.

“Yeah well don’t get to grateful… how old are you anyway?” Shepard asked him as she pulled him to his feet and they all headed for the door to move back up the levels.

“I am almost twenty three,” he replied.
“Which makes him around sixteen human equivalent, boss,” Tash chimed in, “just a kid.”

“Yeah, have you seen what these bastards do to kids,” Shepard was in no mood to get sentimental about one young Batarian who was just getting started slaving even if it probably wasn’t his own choice.

By the time they had finished extracting all they could from the slaver base and they were back on board the Normandy, with Pazness in the brig, a Council transport had already picked up the freed captives and was heading back to the Citadel.

They had set charges and completely destroyed everything on the ground.

Shepard and Bau had decided to storm the bases they now had locations for. Not only the two that the young Batarian had visited but from his unlocking the security system they were pretty sure they had the addresses of three more.

They were going to call in some help; they wanted to hit the bases at the same time or in very quick succession. This would prevent the organisation having too much notice its security had been breached and abandoning bases or moving their Council captives.

It would take a few days to set up and over another week to execute all the attacks and searches. That would bring them within days of the end of the year and Shepard started to think about the last new year she had faced.

The galaxy was a very different place then, before she had ‘died’, before the first Normandy had been destroyed and before she had lost Liara.

Normandy – mission rendezvous point – Mindus Cluster

Shepard had just returned to the Normandy with Miranda, Garrus and Tash from their planning meeting on Jondum Bau’s ship. Tela Vasir had also been present and Shepard’s was still working on her impression of the Asari.

They were ready to move on the slaver bases. Once underway they, with the C-Sec ships from the Special Response Division, they would head to their specific targets carrying out a synchronised attacks.

It would take fifteen hours for them to reach their respective positions.

“Shepard there is a high priority call return request that I suggest you make in your private quarters,” Edi’s voice was quiet in her ear as the message came through her private comms channel.

Shepard stopped to let the others move away, “but we have a security blackout Edi as we always do on active missions. Only mission specific or…” before Shepard could continue Edi cut across.

“Yes Shepard but this was a request from the T’Soni estate Temple of Siari. Was I wrong to think that you would make an exception in this case?” Edi asked.

“No absolutely not… thank you Edi… on my way,” Shepard broke into a run to the elevator and went straight to her cabin.

Almost crashing into the edge of her desk she quickly pumped the relevant commands into the QEC and waited.
The sight that coalesced before her eyes almost broke her heart with joy.

“Liara,” Shepard gasped her voice breathless. She leaned closer and instinctively raised her hand to try to touch the outline of her lover.

“Oh Shepard, my love,” Liara mirrored Shepard’s hand movement but her voice was strong and the joy of its greeting raised a huge smile on Shepard’s face.

“You’re back… are you back… are you well… where are you,” Shepard rambled all the time drinking in Liara’s smiling face and grinning back.

“Yes, yes my darling I am back, changed as you would expect by any experience, but I am back,” Liara emphasised the ‘I’ and that heartened Shepard to the core.

“When can I come to you… can I… is that ok yet… what am I thinking I’m in the middle of a mission I have to finish this first,” again Shepard rambled while all the time still smiling and feeling nothing but sheer joy at the knowledge her beautiful Asari was healed.

“I did not expect you to be able to come immediately… I am going to stay a few more days at the Temple and then return home. I must still take things a little easy to get my physical strength back… but Shepard come home to me as soon as you can I have missed you so much,” Liara had tears in her eyes but she continued to smile.

‘Home… yes she is home to me… I love you Liara’ Shepard thought.

“Nothing will stop me coming back to you Liara, nothing… as soon as we’ve gotten the job done,” Shepard said.

“Do you have a little time now for us to talk? I am not ready to let you go yet?” Liara asked her smile leaving her face for the first time.

“I have fourteen hours before I need to be anywhere other than here. But I’m not wearing you out before I have my arms around you darling so yes let’s talk but only until as long as you don’t tire,” Shepard replied with a laugh.

Liara laughed out loud and the sound was like music to Shepard’s ears.

“Yes perhaps fourteen hours would be a little excessive, so what have you been doing, how are the crew, have you visited Wrex yet?”

They chatted back and forth, mostly news from Shepard given Liara’s confinement but also a little about how it had been for Liara living back on the family estate.

When they said their farewells they knew it would only be a matter of a week before they would be able to see each other, finally be together again. They parted with spirits high.

Shepard felt more like herself than she had for as long as she could remember. It wasn’t just Liara that would be back, a part of Shepard that had been lost to her was also coming back, the best part of her.
A/N this chapter is longer than I had intended… events overtook Shepard and the mission grew much bigger than first envisaged.

Warning there is reference to, but no description of, sexual assault.

Normandy – en route Planet Fleene - Kraks System

Shepard and Bau had split their combined fleet in three enabling a synchronised attack on each of the known slaver bases.

Shepard had two of the C-Sec ships and Jondum had four given the Normandy’s superior fire power it only seemed fair. The third section comprised a further four C-Sec ships under the command Captain Palaus in lieu of the third Spectre in the operation.

Tela Vasir was not taking part in the direct attacks, instead she was using a small team to strike at known administrative and office operations in the Terminus system to maximise any intel that was available and in case taking down the bases didn’t turn up the Council diplomats.

“Entering the Kraks System Commander,” Joker spoke as he tapped the commands to drop out of FTL into one of the interfaces at the ends of his fingers.

“Kas launch the Signal Intelligence System and prepare to jam their communications,” Shepard said across the ship’s comms to Kasumi at her command console in CIC.

“SIS under way Commander, ready to go live in T minus ten,” Kas replied.

“How long before they realise they are being jammed rather than it being an atmospheric or solar issue?” Shepard asked. The system that Kas and her team had developed was very sophisticated and could mimic the range of interference that occurred naturally in the atmosphere or in deep space.

If needed it could also be programmed to create havoc with communications, scrambling them up or inserting long static gaps, and covertly reducing an enemy’s effectiveness.

“There’s no reason they should know for sure it’s an external threat unless they carry out their own independent atmospheric evaluations… which they probably don’t have the equipment for… more likely to just wait out the problem in my opinion,” Kas answered.

“Edi, connect me with the Captains Gravalos and Arnos please,” Shepard was still standing behind Jokers chair even though the co-pilot seat was empty. Malania was already in the shuttle bay running through final prep for their mission.

“Putting in you through Shepard,” Edi’s voice seemed to come from the blue holographic projection playing above one of the AI’s cockpit consoles.

“Captains the comms jamming will commence in T minus nine minutes. At which point the Normandy will proceed under stealth to the planet. You will proceed as agreed and wait behind the planets moon until we find out what we’re dealing with.” Shepard and her two C-Sec counterparts had already agreed the plan but as was her way she liked to make absolutely certain there would be no mistakes on joint operations.
Receiving an affirmative from both ship captains she slipped into the co-pilots chair and said to Joker, “Take us in nice and slow I don’t want to be seen if we can possibly avoid it.”

“Aye, aye Commander,” Joker replied as he busied himself with the Normandy controls.

“Edi are you reading any ships in orbit?”

“There are no ships above the target and none in orbit around the planet Shepard,” Edi answered, “I am scanning for any activity from the surface or incoming from outside the system.”

“Good, let’s see what we have then.”

In their discussions Shepard and Bau had tried to identify the most likely location of the captive diplomats. As a high value commodity they would likely be taken somewhere secure.

The particular organisation that they were dealing with was, in fact, one of the Batarian companies that her old ‘friend’ Vert Plunes was financial advisor come accountant for.

On the surface trading as a legitimate corporation but all its profits built on its slaving and drug running operations. Operating all of its subsidiary businesses, mining in particular, with the slave labour its more disreputable side provided. But Batarians, even those whose business was slaves and drugs preferred to make straight forward profit from tried and tested methods.

And political kidnap was outside the usual repertoire of the slaving operation.

‘But something the Batarian Special Interventions Unit might do,’ Shepard thought as she watched the planet grow larger in the cockpit window.

‘And using deniable terrorist actions are very much modus operandi for the SIU… which makes this a very different game.’

Indeed if this was a Batarian sanctioned operation, even an opportunist one, the situation would become very difficult politically and there was no telling what would be required to get the hostages back.

So far the press blackout on the raid and in particular the loss of Council dignitaries had held, but that wouldn’t last much longer.

“How long till the base goes dark Edi?” Shepard asked.

“Night is already falling over the base Shepard and it will be mid night cycle in five hours,” Edi replied.

“Miranda start the mission clock, we will begin to infiltrate the base in stealth mode T minus six hours, mark.” Shepard gave the final mission timing that would now be fed through to squad leaders on the Normandy and the Captains of the two supporting C-Sec ships.

The planet was now filling the cockpit window and they had taken up a geo synchronous orbit above their target.

“Edi get as much information about that base as possible from scanning and I don’t like the look of those anti-ship canons they have on the ground. Once they know we’re here I want those taken out as a priority,” Shepard got up and headed for the CIC.

She drew up alongside Kas who was monitoring their signals jamming system.
“Kas can you possibly hack their computers on the ground, I don’t need any secure information but a building floor plan would be useful,” Shepard had no idea if Kas would be able to do this but the Doctor was a brilliant technician and highly skilled at ‘acquiring’ other peoples information.

“Hum, yes we wouldn’t get far into their systems without having to do a major hack and they might notice that. But building maintenance files are usually easily accessible, which is a big mistake Shep,” Kas smiled and had that tone in her voice it was a combination of mischievousness and the thrill of the challenge. “That information is a thief’s best friend.”

As she finished speaking Kas moved to another terminal and started working.

Shepard left her to her work and continued to walk through the CIC towards the elevator.

“Come on Miranda lets go see if our Batarian can offer anything useful on the base.” This was one of the locations the young Batarian tech had previously visited.

The Normandy brig was a makeshift affair. Located in the hanger bay it was really only a caged secure area within the storage bay which housed a bed and a chair.

As Shepard approached the soldier assigned to watch the prisoner stood to attention and unlocked the cage door.

Stepping inside Shepard noted that Boorlan Pazness had a couple of data pads, one of which he had been reading and which now he put down on the bed as he looked up from the chair in her direction.

She thought for a moment considering how helpful he had been from the start. And, despite her rigidity, she could see he was no hardened slaver.

Shepard determined that when this was over she would sit down with him and find out what she could about how he had landed up where he did. But for now she needed a different conversation.

“Wwwould you like me to draw it out for you Commander?” he asked in a quiet voice studiously not catching her eye, “the…the parts I… that I was sent to?”

“That would be helpful yes,” she said in a more friendly voice, “and what about where they might be holding the Ambassador?”

He seemed to relax a little and thought for a minute.

“I’m afraid it depends on how they want to treat her,” he looked hesitate and began to look frightened Shepard was afraid he was going to clam up.

“Look why don’t we agree between the two of us that you aren’t involved in all of this. That anything you tell me about how brutal or vile your former colleagues might be or planning to be won’t make me mad at you?” She watched him closely and saw him relax again, a little.

“They were joking about the treatment the Asari would get when they handed them over to the SIU… that they be… taught how to behave towards Batarian Hegemony and punished for supporting the Alliance… they said many terrible things…..” his words faltered away and Shepard thought he actually looked a little ashamed.
“Nothing we can do about that right now,” Shepard was seething with anger but she meant what she said to Pazness, she would exact retribution for any harm to the diplomats on those responsible.

“Commander shall I take him to a console where he can sketch out the layout as he knows it?” Miranda spoke from behind Shepard.

“Yes, and get details about what the rooms are used for it might give us an idea about where to look first,” Shepard nodded at the young Batarian turned and headed back up to the CIC to check on Kas’s progress.

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**Surface of Fleene – Forty minutes into mission**

The Batarians either hadn’t noticed that their security systems were down or they weren’t concerned enough to set any guards while they were blind. As such, and as planned, Shepard’s strike force landed their three shuttles without detection.

She had sent one of the C-Sec teams to secure the bases space port and its long range shuttles just in case anyone tried to make a run for it. But as soon as their attack was discovered they would call in air strikes from the Normandy to take out all available transport which included two large cargo shuttles most likely used to transport slaves to and from the surface.

The Normandy would also take out the bases defence canons. A formidable array that would have caused problems if it they hadn’t neutralised it with their systems hack.

Shepard left the bulk of her forces at their landing zone within strike distance of the main entrance. She would lead the Asari commando’s from her special ops squad to covertly enter the base in an attempt to secure the hostages before a full front attack.

They had neutralised six Batarians so far and cleared their way to the first floor of the base. Boorlan had suggested that these quarters, on the first and second upper floors, were worth a look as it was where the base officers and any visitors stayed rather than the general quarters on the underground levels.

Like all Batarian facilities of this nature most of the base was underground built into old mine working or natural caverns. And it would be in the lowest levels that they would find the bulk of any other captives who would be undergoing the brain implant process before being shipped out to their respective end destinations.

Shepard stood outside one of the doors on the first floor and checked the rest of her team. Two commandos were positioned, as she was, outside each of the doors on the floor. On her mark they would enter the rooms and she was now confident that they would find at least some of the diplomats on this floor.

Ambassador Irissa was definitely behind Shepard’s door. The Batarians had missed the short range tracking device that was implanted under her skin. Most Ambassadors’ on the Citadel had them; they were a security measure used by C-Sec’s diplomatic protection section to keep track of their locations.

Shepard had picked up its signal once they entered the base. Her scan of the room showed three heat signatures. She shared the scan with Achillia her Asari team mate standing next to her and they identified their individual targets.

Shepard switched out of infra-red vision as the light in the room appeared to be on; she also equipped
a lethal, silenced hand gun. If her suspicions were correct then at least one of the Batarians was too close to the Ambassador for her to take him out by hand.

The door was not locked and in one fluid movement, mirrored and synchronised along the corridor, Shepard and Achillia entered the room.

Shepard had seconds to take in the scene. A Batarian to her right was leaning against some kind of table and Shepard noted the streak of quick death that was almost upon him in the shape of an Asari commando.

On the bed in front of her she could see another Batarian in the process of having sex. Shepard saw blue arms stretched at right angles and tied around the wrist to the bed head.

In the same moments as she registered the room and its inhabitants she had fired off a shot to the head of the Batarian on the bed and continuing to move forward reached the edge of the bed in three paces.

She hauled the now dead Batarian off the bed and swapping her pistol for a knife cut the cords that were securing the Ambassador. Achillia moved to the other side of the bed and began helping the Matriarch to sit up. It was clear to both Shepard and Achillia that she had been badly beaten and was barely conscious.

Shepard looked around for clothing. The room was obviously a bedroom and in a tall cupboard she found clothes, pulling out a shirt and trousers she made her way back to the bed and handed them past the older Asari’s back to Achillia.

Shepard moved back out to the corridor and began checking on the progress of the other teams. They had found all the female members of the delegation. All had been or were in the process of being assaulted and all had been physically beaten.

“I want you to take them all back to the shuttle and get them up to the Normandy,” Shepard spoke to her commando squad leader Via’na.

“We could split the team Commander; send half the squad back to the shuttle? We could carry on looking for the rest of the delegation immediately?” Via’na was right, so long as they didn’t run into any trouble half the commando squad was more than enough as an escort.

But Shepard could see the hostages were all in varying states of injury and some would need to be helped. She also wanted to make them feel as safe as she could until she got them off the planet to a place of safety.

“I know but I’m not taking any chances. I’m going to call up a small squad to join me until you get back,” Shepard returned to the room where the Ambassador was now dressed and standing on shaky legs.

“Ambassador Irissa I am Spectre Shepard and we are going to get you up to the safety of my ship, you’ll have a commando escort,” Shepard could see the extent of the damage to the older woman’s face now she was standing.

“My… daughter… the others Commander where…” Irissa was having difficulty forming the words it was possible her jaw was broken along with her nose and cheekbone if Shepard wasn’t mistaken.

Shepard looked across at Achillia to see if she understood the question about the Ambassadors daughter.
“The Ambassador had her daughter with her on the visit Commander she is one of the…” before Achillia could finish what she was saying a young Asari maiden rushed into the room and ran to the Ambassador.

The older woman wrapped the younger in her arms and held her and looking towards Shepard said, “Thank… you… Commander.”

“Right let’s get you all out of here, quiet please the area is not secure,” Shepard signaled for the group to head out.

As she headed to the entrance with them Shepard called up Garrus on her suit comms.

“Garrus I need you and Grunt to join me asap, I’ll wait by the entrance. We’ve found most of the diplomats and they’re coming out with the commandos.”

“On our way Shepard.”

The next call she put in was to the Normandy med bay.

“Doc, you have incoming. They have all been physically and sexually assaulted, and would you put the Ambassador and her daughter in my cabin please.” Shepard could hear the disgust in Karin Chakwas’s voice when she responded.

“Dear God, those bastards… I’ll make the necessary preparations.”

Shepard saw Garrus and Grunt moving towards her through the dark. She had cleared the top floor of the building while she was waiting and hadn’t found any more Batarians. It was all working space which included the base’s comms centre.

‘They must feel real comfortable here not to both having anyone monitor their security systems,’ Shepard thought as she and nodded to her two team mates to follow her.

The priority was to find the remainder of the Council diplomatic team. They had rescued five including the Ambassador, all Asari apart from one young Salarian.

That left the three male members of the group. Shepard wondered if they would find them alive given the punishment their female counterparts had already endured.

Moving stealthily they worked their way along corridors and down stairs to get to the most likely location for holding slaves and hostages.

Entering a corridor that looked as if it had been hacked out of the rock they hugged the walls as they heard voices up ahead, coming from a room that spilled light into the corridor.

Shepard inched towards the door entrance and listened trying to make out how many guards may be inside.

She could see at the end of the corridor a cavernous area and just the edges of cages set around the edges of the walls and free standing in rows.

Shepard held up four fingers to Garrus and Grunt and indicated that on her mark they move to either side of the doorway and take out whoever is inside the room with silenced shots.

She would move into the centre of the doorway and kneel giving Grunt and Garrus clear shots into the room.
They moved as one and within five seconds all four Batarians were hit, two dead, with the two wounded guards receiving a final kill shot each which was delivered within another next five seconds.

“Grunt stay here and keep watch… anyone comes give me a flash on my OT and let whoever it is come to you then take them out,” Shepard received a nod from Grunt who took up position just inside the doorway looking up the corridor using a mirror.

Shepard and Garrus moved into the main area and found what they were looking for immediately. Almost all the cages were full of men and women mainly Human with a few Turian’s and surprisingly to Shepard a number of Batarian’s.

But just inside the entrance in one cell were the Council diplomats. She hacked the lock on the cage and entered.

The Salarian was dead, his flesh hanging away from his bones in places from what looked like a vicious whipping and in other places what could be acid burns.

The Volus was also dead his suit had been stripped off him and she could only image how painful it had been for him to die once removed from his atmospheric protection.

But in the corner the Turian stirred, she moved to him and spoke quietly.

“We’re here to get you out, can you walk?” She met his eyes and could see he still had strength and, usefully, anger.

“Yes… just about,” his voice was croaky and sounded painful. Shepard handed him some water and walked back to Garrus who was still standing at the door to the cage.

“How are we going to get all these out Shepard, we’re going to wake up the nest at some point,” Garrus said and Shepard agreed with him.

“We’re not…” Garrus looked aghast at her but she continued quickly, “we’re going to set up a defence position defending the captives.

We’ll wait until our Commandos have re-joined us and then call in the strike from the rest of the force… oh yeah and hope to fuck Kas managed to hack their systems enough to block any attempt and blowing the implants up.”

As she finished speaking Shepard called up her commando squad leader and gave them their orders, then she spoke to Tash who was leading the main strike force.

Shepard, Garrus and Grunt then moved back up the stairs to the next level. That was where they would set up their defensive position as it was the only access in or out of the cell area.

Once the Asari commando’s had joined them and they were all in position Shepard called in the attack and precisely two minutes after that all hell and confusion broke loose for the Batarians in the base.

The main strike force worked ruthlessly, clinically and quickly through the upper levels and after only fifteen minutes Shepard and her team were facing a group of Batarians who were trying to get out of the kill zones.

Shepard’s team dealt with them quickly, she wasn’t sure they even saw it coming.
It took three hours to clear the main complex. At the space port the C-Sec team set of explosives destroying the ships on the ground. The team also dealt lethally with around fifty or so slavers who tried to make a run for a shuttle.

When all the fighting died down Shepard got the now freed slaves out to the C-Sec shuttles where they would be ferried up to the C-Sec ships to be taken back to the Citadel for help and eventual repatriation.

She sent the Turian diplomat up to the Normandy and then set about organising the destruction of the facility.

Three hours later she boarded the Normandy’s shuttle with the last remaining members of her team and headed out. Once outside the blast zone she gave the order to blow the target.

With a satisfied smile she watched the flash of light, billowing smoke and dust, followed by the merest whisper of a noise that sounded like thunder and a small rocking of the shuttle.

She was always happy to put murdering, rapist slavers under the ground, dead or alive.

Shepard had only just disembarked the shuttle in the Normandy bay when the ships alarms flashed red and Miranda’s voice echoed around the large open space across the ship wide comms.

“New incoming threat, remain at your battle stations, def con alpha, remain at your battle stations,” then Miranda spoke to Shepard through her suit comms.

“Commander we have three Batarian vessels just on the edge of the system, one is a cruiser class. They will pick up our ship signatures up within four minutes.”

“Enter stealth mode immediately… get the other two Captains on the line now,” as Shepard spoke she was running for the elevator and heading to the CIC.

In the elevator she heard both Captains call in to the connection.

“Can you get to the other side of the planet and away or hide behind the nearest mood?” she asked trying to decide whether to stand and fight or make a run for it because of the rescued hostages they all had on board.

The Captains came back in the negative, they were to open and they couldn’t outrun the cruiser.

“Right well the Normandy is in stealth and I’m pretty sure we can stay out of sight so we can jump them and draw their fire. I want you to run for it and jump to FTL as soon as you can.”

The problem was that from a standing start they would all need to get up to pre jump FTL speeds which would give the cruiser and whatever the other two ships were enough time to range in and fire on them.

Shepard was confident the Normandy would be able to outrun and jump without any real problems but she wouldn’t leave the other two ships vulnerable.

She kept running until she got to the cockpit and jumped into the co-pilot seat.

“Joker get us out of sight I want to come at that cruiser from behind something,” she said smiling across at her pilot.
“How bout that great huge lump of rock I’m already heading for,” he nodded to the closest mood while his fingers were already working fast across his haptic interfaces and at the same time giving directions to Edi.

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“Can we make it?” she asked the cruiser and its escort was now aware of the presence of two Citadel ships who were trying to get away as fast as possible from the cruisers incoming trajectory.

“Tight Commander… will be… tight,” he said as he worked and Shepard saw the Normandy gain ground on the looming, rocky face of the moon that now began to fill the cockpit windows.

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They would pass around it with the cruiser on the other side then exit the cover of the moon, hopefully, behind the Batarian ships.

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It was bearing down on the two C-Sec light frigates that were moving away as fast as they could but were now seriously in danger.

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“Yes Shepard,” Edi’s ever calm voice replied and almost immediately Shepard felt the Normandy shudder from the firing of its main canons and she saw the flashes as the ordinance hit the Batarian cruisers shields.

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It worked and the cruiser seemed to be wrong footed by the move, all attention now on the Normandy and avoiding what looked like a ramming run.

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The cruiser bombarded the Normandy and even with the evasive patterns that Joker was throwing a number of hits landed successfully. But the Normandy’s shielding and weaponry was now beyond anything that a standard cruiser could either breach or withstand.
Once the Batarians shields were down it took only one slicing hit across the middle of the ship from the Normandy’s main gun for the cruiser to break in half in an explosion of plasma, eezo, atmosphere and wreckage.

“Hold position,” Shepard said and she sat back in the chair putting one foot on the console in front of her and watched as the Batarian slavers cruiser spewed death into the unforgiving vacuum of space.

“Well done everyone,” she said after a few minutes then to Joker she continued, “lay in a course for the Citadel Joker all speed you can muster.”

“Aye, aye Commander,” he said smiling up at her.

The journey to the Citadel would take around thirty six hours and Shepard left the cockpit to seek out Doctor Chakwas to find out how their rescued hostages were doing.

“Commander I take it you have wiped that despicable place from the map?” Karin Chakwas was a strange mix of a very proper and well to do woman of a certain status and knock around navy officer who had seen plenty of action and could out swear many a marine.

“Indeed we did, and knocked one of their cruisers inside out as a parting gift,” Shepard smiled and sat down opposite the doctor. “So how are our guests?”

“The young Salarian woman, D’luk, is very seriously injured. She’s in one of the medi beds at the end of the bay. She’ll be transferred to the Salarian hospital on the Citadel as soon as we arrive; I’ve already briefed the doctors there.

I would have preferred to have the Ambassador in a medi bed but she insisted on being treated in your cabin and remaining there. I think it’s mainly to stay close to her daughter,” as Karin spoke her last words a look of absolute agony passed over her face and she said quietly, “I can’t image how terrible it must have been for her, knowing what was happening to her daughter…”

“It says something about what I expect from situations that I wasn’t surprised or shocked with what had happened, I’ve seen so much cruelty and so much pain inflicted by members of supposedly advanced civilised races of sentient beings on one another that… I don’t know… maybe it’s a defence mechanism, but it washes over me.”

Shepard could still feel compassion for the victims she saw but she moved quickly to the feelings she truly owned and occupied which were of rage and anger and a thirst for vengeance towards those who had carried out whatever atrocity that she had to try to stop or clear up.

“I suspect you have to keep it all at arm’s length Shepard or it would stop you doing what we need you to do… taking action against those murderous bastards,” Karin gave Shepard a small smile, “you do us proud Commander never doubt it.”

Shepard looked down the room the medi bed containing the young Salarian.

“I don’t know about that Doc. If I’d taken the decision to push straight on rather than wait for C-Sec back up… or we’d spent a bit more time scanning for activity maybe we’d have picked up the shuttle…” she looked at Chakwas who was about to speak but Shepard pressed on, “this wasn’t my finest hour Doc, a lot of damage happened in the days we spent pulling more support together… it was too high a price for my taste.”

Shepard stood up and smiled down at the Doctor who was giving her commanding officer a concerned look.
“You have very high expectations on yourself Commander and that’s commendable, but you can’t save everyone,” Karin knew her words would fall on deaf ears but she had to say them.

Shepard was an exceptional soldier and a decent human being but there was an almost unquenchable desire to save those who need protection and deliver a brutal form of justice to those in her way. Chakwas worried that without some balance Shepard was in danger of falling into a black hole of self-doubt and self-questioning when the Commander fell short of her own expectations.

“Well right now I need to get out of this armour and find some food. I’ve asked Miranda to arrange a small gathering in the port lounge for our guests in the morning. I suspect they won’t feel like much but I don’t want them to feel they have to hide away; they’ve done nothing to be ashamed of. Would you join us?”

“Yes of course Commander,” Karin saw again the woman’s insight and empathy. With everything else Shepard had on her mind she still had time to think about the well-being of the kidnap and torture victims.

Shepard headed for the crew quarters on the mess deck and picked up a clean set of Normandy battle dress, dumped her armour besides one of the few spare bunks and headed for the crew showers.

Shepard had made her report to Councillor Tevos in written form directly after the mission. She would meet with Tevos on their arrival back at the Citadel briefly to answer any questions but Shepard was determined to complete all her duties and head for Thessia as quickly as possible.

It was only a few days from the Galactic New Year holiday season and she had already made it clear that the Normandy and its crew would take a short but reasonable break from duties.

The journey back to the Citadel was uneventful. The reception for their diplomatic guests went well. The crew members who attended were drawn from all areas of the Normandy crew, including some members of the ground team.

In the relaxed and supportive atmosphere she noticed that although subdued their guests seemed to gain comfort and strength from the attempt at normality.

They docked the Normandy in one of the Council’s private and very secure docking bays and Councillor Tevos was dockside to meet them. And they agreed that they would meet to talk about the mission and its fall out after the New Year holiday, much to Shepard’s relief and surprise.

Shepard had the strong impression that Tevos’s attention and concern was firmly on Ambassador Irrisa and her daughter.

‘There’s something between them I’d put money on it,’ Shepard thought having one of her now familiar but inexplicable strong senses of what another was feeling.

They had brought back the bodies of the two dead diplomats to be returned to their governments for full funerals and the coffins were unloaded at the same time. As Shepard watched them being carried past they were another painful reminder of the cost of her decision to delay.

Shepard had one final decision to make. What to do with her Batarian prisoner Boorlan Pazness. Once she had discharged her duties on the dock she headed to the makeshift brig to speak with him.

Tash had made a plea to let him stay with them or at least just cut him loose on the Citadel. Once again Shepard was slightly surprised by her cousin’s knowledge and attitude towards Batarians, but then she had spent the last ten years in the Terminus System and as such will have spent a lot of time
“So just how many of your relatives have I just killed?” Shepard decided to test bluntly the young Batarian attitude towards what had happened.

“I… well… two brothers Commander… but please don’t think I hold any ill feeling. To be honest with you… well my brothers had plans for me that I perhaps would not choose for myself.” She sensed he was genuine.

“So do you want me to send you back to Batarian space, to your family?”

He jumped to his feet a look of absolute horror on his face, “please no Commander anything but that… I would rather spend time in prison and then be released… please understand the only way to be authorised to leave Batarian space was to work with my brothers… don’t send me back,” he grew more distraught the more he spoke.

“Ok, Ok… calm yourself. You helped a lot and so far you haven’t lied to me or tried to cross me… I’ll give you a choice. Stay on the Normandy and we’ll find you some work to do or I’ll drop you off here at the Citadel and you can do what you want.”

She had no real idea why she was offering him a place on her crew but something told her that her blind spot towards Batarians could prove dangerous and his reaction to being send back to Batarian space had shocked her a little. She wanted to know more and as such it would be helpful to have him around when she got back from leave.

“So you would let me serve on your crew… I would like that very much… I…” and now he looked embarrassed and suddenly very young, “I wanted to find adventure and… this… well…” she saw a boy looking at her, he could have been human.

“Ok well, I’ll make arrangements with one of the officers to sort things out and we’ll find you a job when I’m back from leave,” she turned to go but continued, “obviously your free to leave here,” she gestured to his cage.

“Thank you Commander I will not let you down,” he said and turned to pick up the data pads from the bed.

“Good, just out of interest what’s on the data pads?” her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Blasto the Jellyfish… you know, the Hanar Spectre?” she replied “All such entertainment is banned on Khar’shan but there is a black market for such things.”

She gave him a smile, shook her head slightly and headed for the elevator.

‘Why should you be even the slightest bit surprised Shepard, you know better than anyone nothing is black and white… everyone and everything… shades of grey… your Batarian monsters may all once have been adventure seeking boys who read Blasto comics’.

Shepard’s thoughts turned to her own son and she suddenly felt a pang of guilt that she wasn’t heading straight for Illium to see him. But she had to go to Liara; she need to be with Liara so badly, it felt as if she couldn’t breathe properly.

A part of her was missing, still dead; she had to know if they could truly be together as Shepard needed. She missed Liara’s spirit, he touch, her company, her insights, knowledge…
‘Yeah and the list goes on... all the things I miss... all that she is to me... I love you Liara T'Soni heart and soul and I'm praying to the Goddess and any other super being that might be listening that you feel the same way and we can be together.’

With that thought banging around in her mind Shepard headed to her cabin to pick up her bag and then to the shuttle bay.

She would be traveling back to Thessia with the commando squad, Garrus and Kas where they had decided to spend their leave.

As Malania expertly steered the shuttle out towards the relay Shepard sat in the co-pilot seat all her thoughts focused on what she would find waiting for her as she stepped off the shuttle on the lush green lawn in front of the T'Soni mansion and was united with the women who was waiting for her.
A/N Finally in this chapter we see lovers reunited and so expect sexiness and quite a bit of smoochiness.

_T'Soni Estate - Thessia_

Liara leaned against the open doorway that gave access to her bedroom balcony. She could feel the light muslin curtains brushing against her bare back as they rippled almost imperceptibly in the soft, warm breeze.

Raising her eyes to the solid blue sky she picked out the small outline of a shuttle and felt a catch in her chest. She checked her long, traditional figure hugging dress, the colour agonised over for so long Matriarch T’Joan had been required to make the final decision.

Liara watched the small dot in the clear, endless blue sky grow larger, she knew it was Shepard's shuttle and the thought was accompanied with another catch of breath.

She moved from her vantage point and made her way out of her bedroom and across the hall to her private sitting room which faced the front gardens where the shuttle would put down.

Along with guest quarters on the first floor Liara had her own private suite of rooms, bedroom, study and sitting room. Her mother’s study, which she used for all her work and meetings, was situated on the top floor along with what had been her mother’s private quarters.

Once in the sitting room Liara replicated her position, leaning on the edge of the balcony doors, giving her a clear view of where Shepard would emerge from the shuttle.

‘Goddess I have missed her... her smile... strength... her love,’ Liara’s thoughts brought tears to her eyes and her feeling of grief was physical, ‘enough of that, she will be with me soon... she is here’ the thought comforted Liara and she settled her eyes on the shuttle which was now touching down on the well-kept lawns.

The shuttle doors opened before it had properly settled on the ground and a tall, broad shouldered, muscular figure jumped the final couple of feet onto the ground. Shepard was dressed in black fatigues, a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes, with a hand cannon strapped to her hip.

"Shepard," Liara gasped and felt her heart thump with expectation, she watched the familiar figure begin to walk quickly towards the house, long easy strides.

Liara was overwhelmed with a need to get to her love as quickly as possible and all thoughts of reserve and decorum were thrown to the wind as she began to run, leaving the sitting room, down the stairs and out of the front door.

Liara stood for a moment as she face Shepard across the remaining few hundred yards, Shepard lifted her head and as she found Liara’s face gave a smile that lit Liara from inside out… the force of a thousand suns burned as a unique mix of emotions and beliefs coalescing into one thought, a single feeling… bonded love…they felt it echo between and within them.

Like some clichéd old Earth film they both began to move quickly towards each other and collided into each other’s arms, holding each other as if their lives depended on it, kissing deeply, pulling apart to take in the beauty of the others face and kissing again.
After what seemed like an eternity or moments they parted and began walking towards the house Shepard wrapping her arm around Liara’s shoulders whilst her Asari snaked her arm around the Humans waist.

Shepard took Liara’s other hand into hers, raised it to her lips and kissed then gently stroked the long blue fingers.

“Shepard we need to talk,” Liara said quietly and turned slightly to look into her lovers face.

Shepard looked at Liara with exaggerated, mock surprise and with a huge smile answered, “Dammit T’Soni and here was me thinking we were just going to find the nearest bed and rip each other’s clothes off.” Shepard followed up her comment with a kiss to Liara’s forehead.

“Oh I can assure you that is exactly my intention,” Liara spoke with a laugh in her voice that made Shepard’s spirits soar, this was her Liara, she was here, she was back.

“Then let’s get the talking done out here, what’s on your mind darling?” Shepard stopped, turned to face Liara and held both her hands and waited for her Asari to speak.

Liara looked into Shepard’s face, most of which was in the shadow of her cap, but she could see the gentle, loving look in the flashing green eyes and began quietly, “

“Sh Shepard the… process that I have been through… the shock of feeling your… your leaving me… has had a permanent effect on me… well many probably… we will only find out… anyway,” Shepard smiled as Liara’s last couple of sentences reminded her of the way Liara had gotten flustered the first few times they had talked, she noticed Liara had stopped talking and was looking slightly puzzled.

“Sorry babe I just had the strongest memory of when we first used to talk and you’d get a little… not important, what is important is what you’re going to tell me now,” Shepard’s expression returned to serious attention.

“Sh Shepard I have entered my matron phase of life and in doing so I have been able to consider options that would not have been possible if this had not happened, do not worry my love the entering of matron stage early does not shorten life nor have any other damaging effects,” Liara spoke quickly as Shepard’s expression turned to fear and concern.

“How do you feel about it Liara, I mean this is really early isn’t it?” Shepard’s tone was gentle and full of concern but the fear had left her eyes.

“Well, I didn’t really embrace all that it is to be a maiden… how you would describe it perhaps as ‘footloose and fancy free’. Everyone thought I was too serious so I don’t believe it will be such an adjustment… after all it is only physiology.

"Shepard we both know that we face an impossible task, that the Galaxy will sooner or later come under devastating attack and threatened annihilation, that both our lives will be constantly at risk as we will both,“ Liara emphasised the last word and held Shepard’s stare then continued, “be at the vanguard of fighting the Reapers.

"But I am not prepared to miss the opportunity to have a life with you Shepard, however difficult, however selfish that sounds, I want my time with you now. If it is true we have been here before, I have no memory, for me this is the only time we have.

"I want us to become bonded now and start our family and along with everyone else in the Galaxy. I need us to live our lives as if we will survive, triumph, whatever that may mean in reality.
"As I was not willing to let you go when everyone else believed you dead I am not willing to lose what may be the few precious months, year or decades of our life together.” Liara reached her hands up to Shepard’s face and cupped her cheeks then kissed her gently on the lips.

“It is a lot to consider my love and I do not expect you to answer now but please understand why it was so important that I tell you how I feel,” Liara smiled a little wanly and tried to sense what her Human was feeling.

When Shepard spoke her voice was quiet but strong and Liara could hear the passion behind her words, could feel the emotion emanating from Shepard tingled slightly across Liara’s skin.

“Liara you’ve seen what’s coming, I’ve shared the visions from the beacon with you, the death, destruction, no hiding place, the Protheans as powerful as they were, a single power in the Galaxy and still they couldn’t stop them.

"But they did buy us time, add to our knowledge of the Reapers and we have a head start, what good it will do us I don’t know. But I will not let them destroy another Galaxy. I will not fail again, whatever it takes… whatever it costs.” Shepard looked away for a moment to the horizon and then back to Liara her entire being now heavy with sadness, grief and sorrow.

“I somehow know I failed before, I know I have the blood of many Galactic civilisations on my hands because of my failure and somewhere deep within me I am so tired of this… this fight… it feels old, I feel incredibly old when I reach into that place inside me,” Shepard looked back at Liara and smiled at the beautiful, strong, loving being in front of her.

“But know this Liara as convinced as I am that my, our, destiny is to fight and defeat the Reapers we also deserve some peace, love… happiness… and I also know that love is a way more powerful force in the universe than hate… and the more love we can bring into it then the stronger we’ll be.

"So no, I don’t need to think about it my answer. It’s yes… yes and a thousand times yes… you are my luck, my destiny, my every breath… and I trust you completely.

"I can’t defeat the Reapers without you I know that as surely as I know I’ll never be truly who I’m meant to be without you,” Liara drew Shepard back into her arms and held her tightly stoking the side of her love’s cheek.

It was done, they had chosen their path, how they would walk it, and who with.

“I need you Shepard,” Liara’s voice was soft and a little husky and Shepard not only heard the desire but also felt it as a wave of longing and lust flashed through her mind and body flowing from Liara but also created within her.

By the time they passed through the bedroom door and it closed behind them their breathing was ragged, Liara’s biotics were shimmering across her body, her eyes already deep, deep black. Shepard was stripping Liara of her clothes as quickly as she could whilst kissing lips, neck, shoulders and across the elegant collar bone.

Liara was ripping Shepard’s clothes from her and leading them both to the large bed. They fell onto the bed naked and completely consumed by their desire, lust… passion for each other… completely oblivious to anything other than each other.

Shepard felt her entire body alive with pleasure, a double layer mirroring Liara’s sensations, then no distinction… she could no longer even sense where her body ended and Liara’s began… one.. more than one.
Their bodies coated in the sweat of their furious, desperate, hard love making, moved in rhythm. Changing positions as one climax faded and another began to build, the afternoon light faded into evening, but the two lovers noticed nothing except each other.

Shepard moved again on top of Liara, between legs bent at the knee and pulled back making herself as open as she could to Shepard who reached a hand down to the heat between already wet blue thighs… plunging fingers deep into the open, burning, needing space and began to move inside the Asari.

Shepard could feel the patchwork of small ridges inside her lover and as she moved in a steady but increasing tempo deep in and then almost out of that warm, wet space she also stroked her fingers inside, finding the most sensitive and aroused areas, feeling Liara’s response echo in her own body.

Liara moaned and moved against Shepard’s hand, at the same time pulling them together so they could kiss, hard lustful, breathless kisses on lips, face, neck… and all the time the waves of pleasure and expectation building in both bodies.

Liara knew this time when they came together, this time they exploded in orgasm… this time she would become pregnant and as soon as Liara became aware of that thought, that knowledge so did Shepard.

Shepard thought her heart would explode, her head would explode, she needed release, she needed to fuck Liara until neither of them could take any more… the drive was primeval, she had never felt it so keenly before even with Liara.

The room was lit with the blue shimmer of biotics as they licked across their skin, holding them both inside an envelope of pure energy. As their love making intensified towards their climax the field shifted colour range and intensity flashing to encompass all the colours in the spectrum… a rainbow of pure energy danced around them… a physical manifestation of their connection, their passion…

“Oh yes…. Shepard… do not stop… mmm… aahh…”

“Fuck yeah… oh… yeah… fuck… now… with me…”

“Yes… Goddess… yes… now…”

As their voices merged into one, their cries and moans echoed around the room and drifted out the open balcony doors.

Shepard tried to steady her breath as she continued to lay between Liara’s thighs, her fingers still inside her lover. She lifted her face from where it had dropped into the pillow and kissed Liara gently.

Then Shepard withdrew her fingers slowly causing them both to shudder slightly, a small murmur of pleasure marking the movement from the still breathless Asari. Shepard rolled onto her back and let out a long slow breath.

“Fuck Liara… that was…”

“Yes… that was…”

“How long have we been… I mean Liara it was still daytime when we came up here… you’re amazing… I love you darling”

“I would spend every moment with you if it were possible Shepard; you fill my spirit with joy.”
Both settled into an easy silence for a few minutes and then Liara turned onto her side and smiled down at her lover.

“Do you feel ‘caught up’ now Shepard,” Liara recalled with amusement the conversation earlier when Shepard had said that they had a lot of catching up to do, specifically almost two years of sex Shepard had missed out on.

“Hell no T’Soni … we’re gonna have to do this at least three times a day for the next year before I’m gonna feel anywhere near caught up,” Shepard spoke the words accompanied by a full throated laugh.

“Well… perhaps I can help just a little more… to… make you… feel… less… hard… done by…” As Liara spoke she moved to lie between Shepard’s thighs and began to trace kisses down her neck.

Then Liara drew a slender blue finger across strongly defined collar bones following the line with kisses and occasional licks of the tongue, on down, tracing a line between Shepard’s small breasts, Liara stopping to lick and nip at one of the hard nipples.

Shepard felt her breath catch in her chest, a low groan of expectant desire escaping from her mouth and her breathing started to quicken as she felt her clit pulse with need, and harden and she pushed against Liara’s waiting heat.

Liara pushed herself down the bed, down Shepard’s body, trailing breasts with hard nipples down her lover’s belly, following the trail with her tongue, expert blue fingers working on breasts and nipples.

Shepard felt the warm weight of the breast and then the hard nipple flicking across her clit, all her sensations, were focussed on that small area of her body, but the pulses of pleasure, want, expectation reached to her very finger tips… her breath was now ragged, eyes tight shut, she felt for Liara’s head and ran her fingers along the crests.

Liara heeded the gentle encouragement of Shepard’s hands and moved so that her tongue could complete its journey, she thrust her tongue as deeply as she could into the burning, wet space, felt Shepard arch her back and heard the low growl from her lovers’ throat.

Licking slowly but firmly she began long strokes with her tongue, starting inside Shepard and ending across her clit… they fell into a rhythm each feeling the sensual whips of pleasure and the desperate need building…building… faster and faster Liara stroked Shepard’s heat with her tongue, her lips.

Then when they both felt they could stand no more Liara focused all her efforts on the now pulsing clit… her mouth clamped around it… Shepard could feel Liara’s teeth gently but firmly against her skin…

Liara sucked the clit into her mouth and flicked it quickly with her tongue… the effect was immediate… Shepard felt the rolls of pulsating release… pleasure… relief… her body shuddered… every nerve in her body answering the call of the explosion between her thighs.

Liara heard the moan build into a cry and then into full bodied laugh, and she smiled lifting her head and releasing the still hardened but spent bud of pleasure.

“No… enough… can’t take anymore… I’m done….” Shepard continued to laugh as Liara crawled up her body and lay alongside her satisfied lover, leaving a blue thigh pressed against Shepard’s very
“You have an exceptional mouth Liara… very… skilled,” Shepard smiled and kissed her lover who was looking down at her with a satisfied smile.

“And we just added another wet patch,” Shepard shifted a little with a mock show of disgust.

Liara laughed and said, “I will get us some dry bedding to lay on,” she turned to look at the bedside table which was dimly lit by the lamp that stood upon it, “Goddess it’s nearly two in the morning.”

“Mmmm, no wonder I feel starved… shall we raid the kitchen?” Shepard smiled and as she spoke stroked Liara’s breast with two of her fingers in an almost absent minded way.

“Oh what a good idea, I have never done this before; I have such fun with you Shepard.”

“And here was me thinking I’d be marrying a dried up old matron,” Shepard laughed as Liara gave her a playful mock cuff around the head.

Seninnth T’Joan came back in from the garden and heard voices coming from the kitchen; she began to walk down the corridor but stopped and moved into the shadows as she recognised who the night time raiders were.

Liara and Shepard were standing staring into one of the large refrigerators Shepard with an arm across the top of the door and Liara leaning into her shoulder their heads close and they searched through the contents.

They looked so close, comfortable, happy… it caused Seninnth to smile, ‘it is about time Liara, you deserve to be happy little wing… and we all know just how much your Commander loves you,’ Seninnth almost grumped at herself for being so sentimental but she shook it off.

There would be plenty to be serious about given what they were all facing and the two lovers in front of her did not have an easy road, there was every chance that one of both of them would die in the attempt to defeat the dark forces massing on the edge of the Galaxy.

She did not begrudge them any moment of carefree, quiet, normal time together.

‘You look as if you got the answer you wanted Liara I had better start making the arrangements in the morning,’ Seninnth thought back to the long conversations she had had with Liara only a few days before on the young Asari’s return from the Temple.

T’Joan knew about the bonding and the decision about a child and, although not entirely without concern, in the end understood, approved and supported Liara’s wishes.

Seninnth had yet to hear back from Liara’s benefactor and Aria would certainly not entertain such sentimentality in her reaction, but the Matriarch was fairly certain the Pirate Queen would also understand what had driven Liara’s choices.

‘And new life for the T’Soni line… what would you think Benezia… would you be proud of your daughter… I like to think so old friend.’

With that final thought Seninnth watched the two carry their spoils to the large kitchen table, keeping their laughter quiet and their voices in a whisper, the Matriarch turned around and headed for her bedroom, in hope of finding some sleep, tomorrow would be a very busy day.
Liara took a deep breath and let it out slowly with a quiet sigh. She felt complete contentment. Even though her eyes were still closed she could see the light and knew it was more than early morning.

Warmth, the warmth of another body, heated her skin from the top of her shoulder to the top of her thigh.

‘Shepard,’ it was a thought and a whisper said, with a mixture of joy and amazement, as Liara opened her eyes and turned her head to look at the sleeping figure.

Liara turned slowly, gently, so as not to wake Shepard. Leaning on her elbow she studied her lover who was fast asleep and who seemed to be enjoying a peaceful, restful sleep for once.

Shepard was lying sprawled on her stomach, with one arm actually hanging off the side of the bed. The light sheet that had once covered them both now merely cresting Shepard’s thighs leaving her back open to Liara’s inquisitive gaze.

They had talked briefly about Shepard having to replace all her tattoos and the addition of a couple of new ones, but the biggest change was to the dragon that had adorned her back.

The dragon’s fire breathing head that snaked over her shoulder onto her collar bone remained. But now it was joined by another that echoed the first but on the opposite shoulder. This one was the head of a Phoenix the same mythical creature Shepard had taken for the Normandy’s insignia.

Where once only the dragon’s wings had spread across Shepard’s back mirroring her shoulder blades, now only the wings on the left belonged to the scaly reptilian dragon whilst the right side of the creature had feathers that looked to be alive with fire.

Liara was impressed with the quality of the work. It shimmered with heat, the fire in and around the body of the Phoenix half of the creature seemed to dance. The scales of the dragon almost moved individually and the fire scorching Shepard’s chest gave the impression it was surrounded by a heat haze.

Asari body art incorporated, as with most other things Asari, biotic energy allowing for extraordinary effects. But they were very painful to apply and so only a few people would have the size and level of detail of Shepard’s mythical creature.

Liara’s eyes wandered further down Shepard’s back to the lines of script that ran across her lower back on both sides. Again Liara saw not only the original tattoos but two new ones.

Both were Asari and not surprisingly they followed the pattern of Shepard’s other choices. One was from Asari mythology, about a mythical beast that had to be slain to save Thessia, and the other from the teachings of Siari.

Shepard had writing in various Earth languages, from different cultures or tribes. Sanskrit was the oldest, but they all had a similar theme. They were either philosophical or spiritual works, usually on the connectedness of all things; or from the tales of seemingly impossible quests or monster hunts.

Shepard had told her the stories of two of her choices one night on the Normandy and Liara had been fascinated by Beowulf and the Greek myth of Argonautica, so much so that she had started to read more Earth myths alongside the Earth history she had been researching.

When they had first become intimate Liara had been fascinated not only by the choices Shepard had made but also by the rich cultural history of Earth that they had been drawn from.

Earth culture, in particular its philosophy and literature, was often dismissed by the Asari and Liara
had been as guilty as everyone else. After all, Humanity was very young, seemed rough around the edges and certainly not as ‘civilised’ as the great Asari culture.

Liara had the sudden urge to trace her fingers across the lines of text and see if she could remember them word for word. She resisted the temptation not wanting to wake Shepard from her sleep, not yet anyway.

Her mind slipped to the previous night and their final gentle, sleepy lovemaking after their trip to the kitchen. Liara could still feel Shepard inside her and the feeling gave her a rush of arousal, she was a little sore, but still wanted to be filled with her lover again.

Liara damned herself for her selfishness but couldn’t resist leaning forwards and pressing her breasts against her lovers back, pushing her now wet and throbbing heat against Shepard’s backside.

She kissed Shepard’s neck as the other roused slightly and moaned a little letting out a long breath. Liara stroked her fingers down the side of Shepard’s exposed breast and whispered, “I am sorry Shepard I could not resist touching you, I wanted to let you sleep… but,” and Liara finished her words with another set of kisses this time across her lovers shoulders.

“Mmm never, ever, say sorry for waking me with your beautiful body and your very clever mouth…and I think we’ve had this conversation before T’Soni,” Shepard smiled as she spoke took another deep contented breath and pushed back into her lovers body.

Liara laughed and moved away saying, “yes we have my love… now I am going to treat you to breakfast, well lunch, made by my own fair hands and served on our balcony.”

Shepard rolled over and looked up at Liara who was now sitting up in bed and said “you don’t need to do that darling I’ll come down with you, besides didn’t you just start something you’d rather finish?”

“Oh yes Shepard we will, what is the term… ‘pick up where we left off’… but there are also some things that we need to talk about… about our bonding ceremony…” Liara’s words trailed off. There was indeed a lot to talk about the ceremony most of which Liara was sure Shepard would have difficulty with.

“Whatever you want is fine by me babe, honestly, all I want is for us to be bonded, the rest is details,” Shepard had a sudden realisation and reached out to lay a hand on Liara’s belly.

“Liara we really did… you’re… I’m… it wasn’t, I mean it really happened,” Shepard stammered her way to a full stop cursing the fact she hadn’t thought through what she actually wanted to say before opening her mouth.

Liara reached out and cupped Shepard’s face with her hands leaned down and kissed her and said with a laugh in her voice, “yes my love we are going to have a baby, I am pregnant.”

Shepard felt total joy and was sure she was grinning like some kind of idiot, then another realisation hit her and she sat up in bed and looked seriously at Liara.

“Liara, I know we haven’t had a chance to talk about… about my son… and I know it’s all really odd… I mean how it happened… and… well however it all started… he is my son and I’m taking responsibility for him… and I know I didn’t… haven’t discussed that with you… but what with…” Liara put a finger up to Shepard’s lips and waited for her to stop talking.

“No Shepard you are wrong, he is not your son,” Liara noticed the look of pain pass across Shepard’s face and so pressed on quickly, “no Shepard he is not your son he is our son. I fully
intend to be his… oh dear… I hadn’t thought about what I should be called… but no matter he is my son so we will work everything else out. And I want him to come and live with us now.” Liara last words held the strength of a demand.

Shepard broke into another huge grin and reached forward drawing Liara into a hug and kissed her deeply. When they broke apart Shepard said grinning a little sheepishly, “Look if it’s alright with you I think you should be mother to both, save the confusion, not sure what I’ll end up getting called it’ll work itself out.”

The Shepard leaned in and kissed Liara gently on the lips and said tenderly, “Oh yeah… and I love you Liara T’Soni did I tell you that yet this morning, heart and soul… now did you say something about food?”

Liara laughed and slipped from the bed reaching for a dressing gown she turned back towards the bed and said, “I cannot think of anything I would rather be than mother to our two children Shepard, but do not think for one moment that you will not be just as much a mother to them both… I will not be long my love.”

Liara leaned in and gave Shepard a kiss and headed for the kitchen. Much to Shepard’s surprise she began to feel so relaxed, listening to the chorus of birds from the garden, the Thessian sun warming the room, that a peaceful sleep crept up and claimed her. Her thoughts as she drifted into sleep of the family she was starting and the joy they were bringing to her life.
Chapter 42

T'Soni Estate, Thessia

Liara finished placing their lunch ready on the balcony table then went back inside the bedroom and stood quietly next to the bed on which lay a still sleeping Shepard.

All the physical signs of Shepard’s exhaustion and stress had not escaped Liara’s eye. The dark shadows, gaunt cheeks, the tightness and stiffness of Shepard’s demeanour. And, of course, the blazing scars on her face connected to her cybernetic implants.

To Liara’s relief it seemed that Shepard was finding some peace as the previously angry red scarring had improved noticeably.

‘She looks so restful’ Liara smiled to herself as she looked at her sleeping human.

Sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed Liara ran her fingers through the short black hair as she leaned down kissing her lover on the forehead. She was rewarded with a small, contented moan and a flickering of eyes.

“Hello sleepy head,” Liara smiled as Shepard opened her eyes and yawned slightly.

“Sleepy head? Is that any way to refer to a galactic hero a seasoned warrior,” Shepard smiled as she spoke in a tone of mock indignation. She was rewarded with a laugh from her lover.

Liara stood up and said, “I had your bag brought up, I’ll wait for you on the balcony as I am not sure I would be able to keep my hands from… straying if I were to stay and watch you dress.” With another smile and slight tilt of her head Liara moved away and walked out onto the balcony.

Shepard joined her ten minutes later having taken a quick shower and slipping into a pair of sweats and a black vest.

“Lee this is a feast,” Shepard said sitting down and eyeing the array of beautiful looking food.

Liara noted the use of the shortened version of her name and felt a warm rush of love and closeness spread through her. Shepard had only ever used it before when they were making love and Liara loved its familiarity. Asari didn’t shorten names, in some circles it was even seen as disrespectful. However, humans seemed to do it all the time and it made Liara feel even more on the ‘inside’ of her lover’s culture.

“Are you ok,” Shepard asked Liara who had been sitting looking across with a small smile playing on her lips, “you seem a little far away?”

“Oh no darling I was merely caught by the beauty of this moment, here with you. For a while we are just two people who are in love and sharing food on a glorious spring day.” Liara faltered and wondered if she had sounded foolish but before she could continue Shepard reached across and held her hands and said.

“Yes my beautiful, loving, strong woman, and a moment that we could so easily not have had,” for a few moments they both thought of the terrible things that had happened that nearly ripped them apart… nearly left them both dead.

Shepard smiled and broke their reflection on the past and continued, “You deserve this, we deserve
this, so let’s take all the happiness and joy we can get… now I’m starving… where do I start?”

For twenty minutes they ate, discussing the food and its aesthetically pleasing presentation, the gardens and the weather.

Then when they had both eaten their fill Shepard asked, “This is great coffee I didn’t think it was something that Asari had on the menu?”

“You are correct Shepard it is a little bitter for our tastes. But I know how much you love it so I had fresh beans shipped in from Earth; I have heard the beans grown on the colonies are not quite as good. And our chefs have been trying out several blends, this is the best so far, but they wondered if you would like to do a tasting later?” Liara noticed the slightly dumbfounded look on Shepard’s face and tilted her head slightly to the left in familiar quizzical gesture.

“I… this is… no one has ever gone to this much trouble for me Liara. I’m, I don’t know what to say, except thank you… though you didn’t need to,” Shepard faltered to a stop. She was genuinely touched by the thought and effort Liara had put into something as seemingly insignificant as a drink.

Liara gave her lover a huge smile and reached across to hold her hands, “nothing is too much trouble my love.”

As Liara finished speaking her expression was now serious and a little troubled.

“Come on Liara spit it out, you’ve got something on your mind and it looks too painful to keep in for much longer,” Shepard’s voice was light and a small smile played around the edge of mouth.

“Well… oh… I do not know… where to start,” Liara stuttered her words and Shepard gently cut across her.

“Why don’t you just jump to the crunch then we can work out where the beginning is?” Shepard’s voice was light and encouraging.

“Oh dear… Shepard I know you wanted to keep our… bonding low key… perhaps even just the two of us and a priestess…” again Shepard interrupted.

“Yes, mainly to continue to keep the Shadow Broker in the dark about your health until we’re ready to take him down,” Shepard smiled as Liara became even more flustered.

Liara pinched the bridge of her nose and when she spoke she sounded almost desperate.

“Oh by the Goddess I had almost forgotten about that… that makes this… Shepard you may not have realised but because of my position in the T’Soni family and our position in the Republic… oh I am not explaining this very well am I,” Liara cast a desperate glace at Shepard who was sitting arms folded with an unreadable expression on her face.

“Just jump in Lee,” Shepard said her voice steady and quiet a slightly strained look on her face.

Liara took a deep breath to steady herself and placed her hands on the table in front of her. She looked directly into Shepard’s eyes and began to speak in a determined and steady voice.

“Oh by my mother’s death I became head of our branch of the T’Soni family which also meant I became the head of the most powerful and influential family in the Republic…and one of the one thousand.

Whilst I was still a maiden I had a… how would you describe it… ah a regent I believe has the
closest meaning. High Priestess El’Estrene will step down from that role as on my bonding which, coupled with my pregnancy, I will be recognised as reaching my maturity.” Liara paused trying once again to read Shepard’s face and then pressed on.

“It is a powerful position… I… I would not have believed that I would want to take my mother’s place… and of course I could step aside and let the next in line take my place” Liara’s face was etched with concern and doubt as she spoke, “but Shepard I truly believe that the connection and influence that my position holds will be invaluable to the work we have to do… but I am also afraid I am being selfish in wanting to take my place as my mother’s heir…” Liara looked down at her hands as Shepard stood up walked to the balcony and placed her hands on the railing.

Neither of them spoke and Shepard looked out across the less formal gardens at the rear of the large house, out across to the woods that she knew gave way to gentle grassy slopes leading down to the beach.

“So I guess this means a lot of dignitaries, press attention, the lifestyle vids will want to know who made your dress… that kind of thing?” Shepard asked without turning around.

“I am afraid so Shepard. If I do not extend an invitation to the great and the good of Asari society and particularly the families of our Republic I will be in danger of appearing to insult them… sometimes Asari social protocols are dreadfully proscriptive. One of the many reasons I never wanted to follow in my mother’s path.”

Liara looked across at her love and despite the serious nature of their discussion was still distracted by Shepherd’s strong back and shoulders perfectly shown off by her black vest.

Shepard turned around, and to Liara’s surprise, was wearing a weary grin.

“I kinda figured that would be the deal Lee, I just… well… I thought we could just do the quiet small ceremony first. But I’ve been completely aware of your personal situation, your position in Asari society, from before we even met.”

Shepard was leaning back against the railings and as she spoke rubbed the back of her neck with her hand, such a familiar gesture Liara noticed, then continued.

“And I know about the responsibilities that would come your way if you choose to do your duty to your family, your Republic, to Thessia.

Even before I became a Spectre I had to study the social and democratic structures of all the races in the Galaxy. I know the Asari have a political system that is very democratic and egalitarian. A highly developed E Democracy with voting on lots of issues, but I also know the hidden power base lies with the chosen one hundred Matriarchs and the heads of the thousand first families.”

As she was speaking Shepard began to use her hands to articulate her words and as Liara watched for a few seconds the memories of what those hands had been doing to her body and the pleasure they gave drifted into her mind. She pushed the thoughts, and the feelings they generated, down as she continued to listen to Shepard.

“That each of the twelve Republics have between eighty and ninety first families and your about to inherit the right to lead the most important family in the Republic of Thrassica; which includes a seat on the Asari Council. Did I miss anything?” Shepard asked now smiling and raising one eyebrow.

Liara sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, looking directly at Shepard with a hint of relief and amusement on her face.
“I do not doubt your knowledge of Asari culture… I know you met with Priestess El’Estrene while I was… I was,” as Liara was struggling to find her next words Shepard spoke.

“During your stay in the Temple Lee… when you were recovering from what I put you through,” Shepard spoke softly and with her arms open indicated with her head for Liara to join her.

Liara got up from the table and folded herself into Shepard’s arms, burying her face in her lover’s neck.

“I would not make a decision of this importance, with the effects it will have on our… privacy… without discussing it with you my love. No decision has been made,” Liara broke off drew back her head and looked into Shepard’s face.

“But I suspect both Matriarch T’Joan and Priestess El’Estrene have already decided every tiny detail and are well advanced with the planning for our bonding ceremony,” Liara said softly allowing her fingers to find the back of Shepard’s neck running them up into the short hair.

Shepard smiled down at Liara a full smile that lit up her face and radiated through her eyes as she said, “I can only guess at just how excited and happy they both are. Once they got over the belief that you’re too young and ‘by the Goddess she’s bonding with a human, such a short lived and aggressive race’, that is,” Shepard ended her words with a small chuckle as she pressed her lips gently to Liara’s forehead.

“Answer me this darling,” Shepard said in a more serious tone, “Do you want to take your place at the head of your family and all that entails for you only for the benefit it may gain in our preparation against the Reapers?

You’ll have to get completely involved in all that the position demands, the politics the alliance building, all that social protocol stuff? I know how much you struggled against the path that your Mother had set out for you. Are you ready, do you really want to take it up willingly?”

Shepard leaned back against the railings feeling Liara’s warm, soft and very sexy body pressing against her and couldn’t resist the stirring of desire she felt.

Liara smiled and leant back slightly against her hands that were now grasped together behind Shepard’s neck.

“The childish rebellion against all my Mother wanted for me is very far in the past now. I do not regret nor would I change my decision to find my own path I believe it helped to make me who I am, my own person.

And because of that I can choose to stand by your side while you lead us all in preparing for that which is to come. If part of what I can bring to this fight is the influence and resources that comes as heir to my Mother’s position then that is something I must do, is it not?”

Liara looked searchingly into Shepard’s eyes her mind was fully focussed on this important conversation. Yet at the same time she still felt the echo of Shepard’s fingers inside her from their lovemaking and it sent a shiver of want through her body.

Liara continued before Shepard had a chance to respond to her question.

“I also have a strong sense that this is something I have to do… that I am meant to do… and I am willing to follow where this may lead me. But only if you are in agreement Shepard?”

Shepard brought her hand up and ran the back of her fingers down the side of her soon to be
bondmates face. Enjoying the ripples of connection she felt, physical, emotional and in her very soul.

“Lady Liara T’Soni I love you heart and soul and I want to shout it to the entire Galaxy so it really doesn’t bother me if the whole thing is vid cast in real time.

I also want you to walk your path to your own destiny,” when Liara made to speak Shepard leaned in a little closer and gave a small nod and continued.

“Yes my darling our destiny is entwined and we’ll see this through together but you are not a soldier,” Liara scowled at Shepard and so she added quickly, “not only a soldier”.

Shepard smiled down at her love and Liara answered with a smile of her own, “You’re more than that, you’re unique… invaluable to me and to our struggle… you have my full support for any decision you make.”

As she finished speaking Liara moved closer and they kissed a loving, tender kiss. Liara’s fingers playing with Shepard’s hair while strong arms held her close.

“Mmm, we have a lot to do… but perhaps we…” Liara’s eyes smoked with desire and Shepard felt a burning hot flash of lust and want course through her body.

“Yeah… perhaps we could… just for a few minutes,” Shepard grinned and they both moved into the bedroom and towards the bed.

Soft snatches of laughter punctuated their searching, needing, kisses as they fell onto the bed and into each other under the warm gaze of the Thessian sun.

Two hours and a shared shower later Shepard and Liara headed downstairs to find Garrus and Kasumi.

“Shepard! You finally dragged yourself out of bed,” Garrus’s voice was full of repressed amusement and his mandibles twitched in a way Shepard recognised only too well. If they had been on their own he would be teasing her relentlessly about her ‘reunion’ with Liara.

“She obviously needed the… rest, Garrus, can’t you see how well she looks now… she is almost glowing,” Kasumi’s innuendo and teasing were as subtle as ever.

Shepard and Liara both looked a little embarrassed for a second but they couldn’t deny that they were both looking and feeling better than either of them had since Shepard’s return from the dead.

“Well now Kasumi something is going on with our illustrious leader, she looks like the varren that stole the orlicks feeding secretion,” Garrus chuckled at the lack of understanding on the human’s faces and added, “I believe the appropriate translation would be the cat that ate the cream.”

Shepard and Kasumi laughed, Liara still looked nonplussed.

“I’ll explain later Lee,” Shepard said with a huge grin then continued, “Well let’s cut to the chase shall we. Liara has consented to become my bondmate…” before Shepard could complete her news both Garrus and Kasumi rushed forward with congratulations.

Kasumi hugged first Liara then Shepard then Liara again and Garrus held Liara’s shoulders and gave her a kiss on the cheek.
He turned to Shepard who leaned back a little and raised her eyebrows and he exploded in laughter, “no Shepard for you it’s one of your handshakes and a slap on the back,” they both laughed and ended up in a hug. While they were close together Garrus said quietly.

“So pleased she’s back to her old self, I was so worried while you were gone,” Shepard looked into Garrus’s eyes and saw the happiness and also the echo of fear.

“I know… I had my doubts for a while. But you kept her safe Garrus you kept her safe for me… I’ll never forget that, you will always be family to me.”

Shepard saw the look of pride in her friends’ eyes and they nodded to each other, the nod signifying as much as any words they could exchange, they were family to each other.

“There is another piece of news that we do not wish widely known at this time, but you are our friends. And you both helped me when I was at my lowest ebb,” Liara spoke and all eyes turned to her.

“I am pregnant,” Liara beamed with joy and happiness and the round of congratulations began again.

Shepard couldn’t keep the huge grin off her face as Garrus slapped her on the back several more times with mutterings of ‘you dirty varren’.

“So when will you be tying the knot and how long before the baby arrives?” It was Kasumi who asked but Garrus also nodded his head in support of her questions.

“The bonding ceremony will be as soon as we can get it all together, because Liara is a bit of a princess,” Liara turned to Shepard and punched her playfully on the arm while smiling and shaking her head, “it has to be fairly formal and with a long guest list… the baby…” Shepard turned to Liara but it was Garrus who spoke.

“The baby should be with us in ten Galactic Standard periods, a full Galactic Cycle.” As he spoke Shepard noticed his eyes held a distant and sad look but only for a second then it was gone.

“Ouch, that’s around twelve Terran months… not sure who I feel sorrier for,” Kasumi laughed as she spoke and gave Liara another hug.

As the laughter died down Shepard said.

“So I have some vid calls to make and Liara needs to give Matriarch T’Joan the good news so she can start sorting out the ceremony. And I’m going to need your help getting everyone moved from Illium.” Garrus and Kasumi nodded their understanding and agreement.

Shepard then looked at each of them and said more seriously, “but we still need to be back on the Normandy in seven days which is a few days longer than the usual New Year break, but we can’t take too much time out from our mission.” Everyone nodded.

Despite their personal happiness Shepard and Liara knew that they were facing down two deadly enemies. They had no illusions about how dangerous and difficult the task facing them was.

Liara headed for her study and a meeting with Matriarch T’Joan to discuss the timing of the announcement of her bonding ceremony and to make arrangements for the new additions to the T’Soni household.

Shepard headed for the well-appointed communications and information room which was empty as
per Kasumi’s instructions to her team.

Sitting in front of the QEC terminal she thought about the order of the calls she needed to make. Her mother should be first but Garrus was already on his way to Illium to pick up Jamie, Veetor and her baby.

Shepard sent a coded message to Captain Shepard, as was usual, asking for her to call back at her earliest availability. While Shepard waited to see if her mother would be immediately available her mind wandered to what had happened during the past twenty four hours.

From not knowing if Liara was able or even wanted to pick up the threads of their relationship; she would be bonded and had a child on the way before the end of her leave. She felt so much joy and relief that the nagging doubts and anger at herself had remained only echo’s.

But as she looked into the deeper parts of her mind they took shape and would not be denied. She knew she was putting Liara front and centre in the path of an oncoming apocalypse that they had little chance of stopping or avoiding, as things stood, and it made her sick to her stomach.

Why couldn’t she have just made sure Liara was alright, healed, safe. Liara had already clocked up any number of attempts on her life because of Shepard. Yes, without doubt if she hadn’t crossed the Shadow Broker over her body Liara would never have been in deadly danger.

‘why didn’t I just put myself between Liara and the Shadow Broker, get Shiala back and let them be… maybe Shiala is exactly what Liara needs… she doesn’t come with an impossible quest with death riding at her heels…’

Shepard wondered for a moment if it wasn’t too late to change things, back out of her commitment, go all out to take down the Shadow Broker and get Shiala back for Liara.

‘Like fuck I will… whatever it takes to keep her happy and safe I’ll do it… even if I do come with death as a companion Liara is safer with me than without… and I won’t hurt her again… I promised I’d never leave her and I won’t…. stupid fucking idiot… as if you could actually leave her and your unborn daughter anyway.’

Any further internal arguments were cut short by an incoming QEC call from her mother. With a squaring of her shoulders and a sense of relief she watched as the fragments of an image coalesced into a smiling Hannah Shepard.

“Darling is everything alright, you’re meant to be on leave so I hope the urgent nature of this call is not work related?” Hannah’s tone was light but there was an edge of authority that always made Shepard feel as if she might be in trouble.

Shepard returned her mother’s smile with a wide grin and said with a level of excitement she didn’t realise she had until she started talking.

“She said yes mum… we’re going to be bonded…. big ceremony… Liara’s position means, oh never mind that… um and we… well she… no we… oh we’re going to have a daughter… I mean Liara’s pregnant… and we both want you to come to the ceremony. And I know you’re not supposed to be on good terms with me… but dammit this is my one and only marriage I mean bonding and I don’t care right now if it causes questions about my cover… and please can we try to work something out?”

Although Shepard had stopped and started a few times it all came out at speed and without any real gaps.
Great Shepard very eloquent… way to go… just drop the bombshell sounding like a rattled teenager,’ she thought and realised she ought to try to gauge her mother’s response.

“Darling that is wonderful, of course I’m coming. Is she really well, Liara,” her mother’s face showed her concern and worry, “I really thought we might lose her.”

“Yes mum, she’s back to her old self… well she’s changed of course… we’ve all been changed by my…” Shepard trailed off once again memories of the two women standing at the memorial service in Vancouver. Devastated but showing such dignity.

“I’m so sorry mum, for causing you all that pain,” Shepard said quietly.

Her mother’s face showed a flash of the grief she had felt at the loss of her daughter but when she spoke her tone was light and encouraging.

“I know you are darling and I really would like you not to do it again. But you’re here and Liara’s well and you are going to be together. And I’m going to be a grandmother twice over which is more happiness than anyone is probably entitled to in one go,” she ended with a smile that Shepard couldn’t help reflecting.

“Could you bring something with you mum? It may take a bit of influence on your part,” she watched as her mother nodded and continued, “I need my full marine dress blues and another set for Tash, do you think you can pull that off?”

Given that both Shepard and Tash were meant to be renegade ex-alliance officers the request wasn’t as simple as it sounded.

Shepard saw her mother’s face set with a hardened look barely disguising her anger and said in a firm tone, “of course I will it’s the very least the alliance can do for you and for Tash given the sacrifices you’ve both made… and continue to make under alliance orders.”

After a few more minutes’ discussion about travel arrangements and other practicalities the call ended leaving Shepard with a warm glow. She had been so lucky in her life to have two parents who loved and supported her and she was damned sure she would always try her hardest to make her mother proud of her as a soldier and a human being.

The call to Illium was fairly short but no less full of congratulations from Jamie and Veetor. She assured Veetor they would move all his equipment carefully, and he would have the same set up on Thessia as he had in the apartment.

She assured Jamie that he was still very much needed and wanted as the baby’s carer. And that Kasumi was often stationed on Thessia which brought a smile to the young man’s face.

Her final call was to Omega and Tash.

Liselle’s private apartment, Afterlife, Omega

Tash was aware that the warmth and softness of her lover’s body had moved and she felt the air on her bare back before drifting back to sleep. Only to be woken seconds later with the thump of Liselle jumping back into bed behind her. Followed by a gentle but firm push from her lovers’ hands.

“It’s for you… Shepard wants to talk to your urgently,” as Tash moaned and positioned herself on the edge of the bed Liselle traced her fingers down the muscled back and continued, “I told her she
couldn’t have you for anything until the end of the holiday.”

Tash stood up and walked slowly, still slightly drunk from both the drinking and the love making they had indulged in for most of the previous day and into the night.

“Your arse is mine Mikhailovich… and tell her to phone at a decent hour in future…” she shouted the last comments to a retreating Tash as she moved from the bedroom into the sitting room.

Once in front of the vid com she realised she didn’t have any clothes on but gave up on dignity as even sitting up was an effort.

“Do you have any idea what time it is here?” she said quietly more to stop the words hurting her head than because she didn’t want to disturb any attempt Liselle was making to get back to sleep.

“Sorry cuz I thought I’d worked out the time difference, I made it early morning your time…” before Shepard could continue Tash interrupted.

“Exactly… morning… I hate mornings,” Tash said again quietly and with a pained expression.

Before the conversation went any further sideways Shepard decided to jump straight in so she could let Tash get back to sleep and said with a huge grin and in a light tone.

“I’m tying the knot with Liara in a few day’s time and I want you to stand as my best… and we want you to bring Liselle… Liara really wants to meet her… now you can go back to whatever crazy Tash type thing you were doing but I want you on Thessia within thirty six hours… will you do it for me,” the last few words were said with sincerity

“Thirty six hours… you want me to what” and then Shepard saw the sleep and the hangover sliding from Tash’s face and her demeanour became alert and focussed

“You want me to stand best… you’re getting bonded with Liara… gratz cuz… and you want me… are you sure about this… trusting me… ah I get to organise your, well your stag night out… do they have strippers on Thessia?” Tash was laughing and Shepard saw the young carefree woman she had known when they were growing up together.

Shepard also suddenly thought that Tash and Garrus might just be a deadly combination when it came to organising any kind of ‘sending off’ party they might want to throw.

“Um I don’t know about strippers Tash, buy you’ll do it…”

Tash looked serious as she spoke, “it’s an honour Elvee and one I’m not sure I deserve but I’ll be there for you. And I’ll be at the estate as soon as I can get a ride… now I gotta go tell Liselle she’s gonna be chief bridesmaid or something.”

Tash cut the comm link before Shepard could respond and smiled to herself that her cousin would worry she was serious about her girlfriend being a bridesmaid. Did they even have those in a Thessian bonding ceremony?

She reached for a cigar and lit it up, letting the smoke run through her and then curl out from her mouth. Maybe things could be okay; maybe she could even get some of her old life back.

Before her mind could wander further Liselle’s voice came to her from the bedroom.

“Now you’ve woken me up are you just going to sit in there playing with yourself or are you going to come in here and play with me,” the voice was silky smooth and full of lust.
She got up and wandered back to the bedroom still smoking and leaned against the door frame looking across at the very, very beautiful and tempting sight of her naked Asari lover lying on her back on their bed.

“We have been invited to the wedding of the year baby… my cousin Commander Shepard Alliance Navy retired will be marrying Liara T’Soni sometime this week and you have front row seat.”

Liselle sat up in bed looking a little more serious than a moment ago.

“Shepard and Liara are going to be bonded this week?” a strange look momentarily passed over her face that Tash hadn’t seen before but Liselle continued quickly, “but I only get to go because you’re going…”

Tash cut across her and said, “No apparently your presence has been requested by the blushing bride herself,” Tash said in a questioning tone; as far as Tash knew the two Asari’s had never met.

“She probably wants to know why I was hanging around giving her back up. When do we leave?” Liselle was already thinking about the conversation she would have with her mother in a few hours and wondered how Aria would feel.

“Oh we have time to… get some sleep,” Tash put out her cigar and made her way to the bed smiling she continued, “I was having a lovely dream about pyjaks and some kind of yellow fruit.”

Liselle pulled Tash on top of her and with eyes flashing to black said, “Oh no you can chase pyjaks later now you’re going to finish what you started,” and with a rush of desire they picked up where they had left off only hours before.

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Twelve hours later in a dark, dingy office, in the backstreets of Illium Tela Vasir sat in front of a vid comm waiting for a call from the Shadow Broker.

It would be a voice call only, but she knew what he looked like, she had been to his base and she was probably about to get summoned there again when she gave him her news.

The comm in front bleeped into life and the distorted, rumbling tones of the Shadow Broker’s voice filled the room.

“This had better be good Vasir you know how much I dislike direct communication.”

“You will be the judge but I don’t think you’ll be disappointed. And as this will become common knowledge within a few days; I thought you may want to make arrangements as soon as possible.” She paused a moment almost for effect. She was, after all, a Spectre not some common information broker.

“Well,” was the only response she received.

“T’Soni and Shepard are going to have a bonding ceremony on Thessia. Apparently T’Soni was not as badly injured as we had been led to believe nor were the pair really estranged.

There is something else but I don’t have confirmation, T’Soni may already be pregnant.” She sat back pleased with herself. This information came from within T’Soni’s trusted circle. It had taken a lot of work to get in that close but she was good at her job.

“You need to come to the base. We need to finish this for good; I don’t want to wait for Shepard to try to find me. On your way stop at Omega and sort our problem with T’Loak. Use whatever
methods you have to, but get her to back away from T'Soni… any method Vasir.”

And with that the comm link was cut.

She didn’t like taking orders from the Shadow Broker but he was extremely useful to her work as a Spectre and if she was honest with herself she was past the point of being able to say no to him.

As she stood up to leave she was already thinking about the assets she had in place on Omega in case she needed leverage against its Queen.
Chapter 43

*T'Soni Estate, Thessia*

Shepard sat at a table at the back of the house and looked out across the informal gardens. The planting was carefully contrived to look natural but it was all too clear that aesthetic beauty and subtle order were the intentions of whoever planned and maintained the space.

The sunlight glinted on the surface of one of the pieces of sculpture that were placed carefully within the garden. At times prominently displayed like the intricately carved polished cream stone which referenced the Siari teachings. Others seemed to have been almost secreted; so that they were found either as a surprise or only revealed to the most observant.

Looking up at the brilliant, cloudless, blue sky Shepard took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She began to relax and realised just how much she loved this place. Perhaps because Liara was here but she was sure it was more than that. Something about being on Thessia, being here in the country, with the sea a short walk away met every need she ever had for being ‘dirt side’.

Her mind reviewed the past twenty four hours as it had been around this time yesterday that she and Liara had told Garrus and Kasumi about their bonding and the baby.

Both Shepard and Liara had been really busy. Liara working with Matriarch T’Joan and the planning team, yes Liara had a team planning the ceremony, the thought brought a smile to her face.

The last time Shepard had seen Liara she was up to her eyes in what looked like seating plans and she was being talked at by pretty much everyone one of the six Asari in the room. She looked frustrated and not a little shell shocked.

Shepard was determined to keep out of it, if only to provide Liara with a planning free space for her to escape to. She knew Liara was more than capable of managing it all and would get the ceremony that would suit them best, given the circumstances. Liara just needed a little time to get her bearings and find her feet.

It really was as if Liara had been dropped ‘in at the deep end’ of her new position and place in Asari society, indeed her new life. A part of Shepard felt worried that all the pressure may cause some kind of relapse. But Shepard also knew that Matriarch T’Joan and Priestess El’Estrene were there to support and guide her soon to be bondmate.

They’d had dinner here on the stone patio that ran across the rear of the house. Shepard relived their stroll through the gardens, remembered the touch of Liara’s hand in hers as they hunted down a delicate and alluring scent to its source.

Determined to stretch out their time together they walked on across the open lawns and through the trees until they came to the chalet that Liara had lived in when she first returned to the estate.

Shepard noticed the brush of grief and sadness that the memory of her stay there brought to her lover and she pulled Liara into her arms kissing her gently. Still holding Liara in her arms and Liara’s hands on the side of her face Shepard remembered the words she spoke, “I’m here now darling and you’ll never lose me again.”

And she meant it; Shepard would never leave Liara again. No, they were a part of each other now; they would always be together in their souls. But Shepard knew she wouldn’t be able to honestly
promise that she would always come back, physically.

That promise, the very one she had made to Liara on the top of the ridge on their holiday, had been broken within weeks. Shepard hadn’t come back, not under her own steam. Without Liara and Cerberus, or rather Miranda Lawson, Shepard would still be dead on the moon above Alchera.

Shepard could no longer hide behind the magic charm that all soldiers can use as an unconscious shield in dangerous and life threatening situations, without which most sane people would be paralysed with fear… ‘It’s not going to happen to me’… she thought she could cheat death, she had cheated death more than once… and then she didn’t.

The thought of her own actual death caused a difficult, almost overpowering, reaction in her and it was one she didn’t want to explore right now so she let her thoughts wander back to the previous evening.

Sitting on the grass her arm around her beautiful Asari, who had her head tucked into Shepard’s neck, as they both watched the sun slip below the horizon. The water reflecting the fiery golden light of the slowly disappearing ‘star’, the pink and red hues spreading across sky’s that were turning darker blue by the minute.

“I think this is my favourite view of a star,” Shepard could almost feel Liara’s forehead on her lips and she closed her eyes to better immerse herself in the memory, “and being with you makes it all the more special.”

“I had not thought about that before Shepard, of course the time you have spent in space… your view on the galaxy is quite different from those of us who spend our time on the ground,” Liara turned slightly and looked up into Shepard’s face.

Sitting in the garden even the memory of Liara’s closeness, her scent, her eyes full of love locked with her own, made Shepard catch her breath.

A touch of fingers on her cheek too real to be a memory broke Shepard from her reverie and she looked up into those very same eyes and at that very same Asari who had just been in her thoughts.

“Where were you my love,” Liara said with a smile as she sat in Shepard’s lap one hand playing with the back of her human’s neck the other removing the baseball cap, “you were smiling.”

Shepard reached up and pulled Liara into deep kiss full of longing and desire, “last night when we watched the sun set,” another kiss fully returned as their tongues played and searched, “really wanted to…” Shepard’s words cut short by more kisses.

“To fuck on the beach Shepard…” Liara said her voice husky and breathless between increasingly ardent and lustful kisses.

Shepard reached between Liara’s thighs, the short, white cotton dress allowing her full access. Shepard’s breath grew increasingly fast as she felt the wetness and heat.

“Yes,” was all Liara could manage between the deep kisses and her own breathlessness.

As Shepard pushed her fingers inside her Asari’s hot, wet space she pushed her tongue deep into Liara’s mouth and held the kiss as she started pumping in and out drawing moans from both of them.

Liara hardly had time to initiate the meld before they came and Shepard felt her lovers’ wetness explode past her fingers. Liara pressed hard against Shepard and whispered in her ear.
“More… I need more Shepard,” as she spoke Liara moved carefully and was now astride Shepard’s thighs and began to move against the fingers that were still inside her.

Slowly Shepard curled her fingers back and forth across the sensitive ridges inside her lover. At the same time she began to stoke the asari’s clit with her thumb.

The reaction from Liara was instant and she arched backwards with a long moan of pleasure, her own hands pulling open her dress revealing her breasts their nipples hard.

Shepard cupped one of the breasts and brought it to her mouth first licking and then biting the nipple drawing louder cries from her lover.

A thought crossed Shepard’s mind and in an instant Liara had responded by pulling her dress off completely.

Now naked and straddling Shepard’s thighs her hands on her human lovers shoulders Liara began to grind herself against the fingers inside her and the thumb rubbing her clit.

Shepard looked up and, as Liara pumped up and down on her fingers, watched the full breasts bouncing a little in time with the asari’s pleasure taking.

The view turned Shepard on even more and reaching a hand up she placed it lightly against one of the hardened nipples and let the movement rub it across her palm.

They both felt the climax building, both felt the echoes of the others pleasure, both of them deeply embedded within the other through the meld.

The movement of their bodies grew faster, Liara riding the hand inside her and Shepard thrusting her hips to push her fingers deep to meet her lover’s need.

Their already short breath grew more ragged… the sounds of pleasure, desire and lust growing louder.

“Oh yeah Lee… now… come for me…”

“Mmm… yes… not stop… there… yes….”

As they reached their climax, together, the waves of release and raw pleasure ripped through their bodies.

Shepard felt Liara’s wetness burst pass her fingers, into her hand and down onto her trousers. Shepard’s own wetness spilling from her making her trousers doubly soaked.

Liara collapsed forward onto Shepard who held her with one arm and kissed her softly as the orgasm faded away. Still in the meld Shepard couldn’t tell where the feeling had come from but she certainly agreed and smiling said out loud.

“Yes Lee I feel it too… absolute bliss darling,” Liara snuggled even closer into her lovers’ neck and played slowly with Shepard’s hair.

As they relaxed back into calmer bodies and their minds parted Shepard became aware that Liara was completely naked in the garden and that they had made just had very loud sex where anyone could have wandered past.

“Lee we’re, well you’re a bit exposed… I mean what if someone came out…” as she spoke Shepard
began to look for the dress discarded in the midst of passion.

Liara laughed and sat back so she could look at Shepard, “Oh my love Asari are not so… um… embarrassed by sex or nudity… if anyone came across us they would have discreetly gone a different way.”

She leaned in and kissed her slightly embarrassed looking human tenderly on the nose and then on the lips.

“Ah yeah… sorry Lee… humans still have quite a lot of hang ups… like those two in particular,” she smiled and stroked the side of one of Liara’s breasts with the back of her fingers.

“I’m gonna have to…” before Shepard could finish her sentence Liara reached down and held the hand that was pressed against her still very wet and hot centre.

“Yes I know… but I will feel empty until you fill me again,” and as Shepard withdrew Liara gave her a hard lusting kiss thrusting her own tongue deep into her lover’s mouth.

As they broke from the kiss they heard someone calling from inside the house.

“Lady Liara we have received word that your guests from Illium are due to arrive in an hour,” having the delivered her message the member of staff withdrew, discreetly.

“We had better run and get ready… our son Shepard… our son is coming home,” Liara had tears in her eyes as she spoke the words and Shepard gathered her into a tender hug.

Less than fifty minutes later Shepard and Liara were standing on the balcony of their bedroom watching the late afternoon Thessian sky. A few fluffy white clouds sailed serenely but they didn’t impede the sun which was still pouring down from a translucent blue sky.

It was no shuttle they were waiting to get a glimpse of. It was the object of Shepard’s hopes and plans for securing the future. She also thought it was beautiful, sleek and elegant. A deadly killer and she realised she loved it as much if not more than its original namesake. It was the Normandy that was bringing their son home.

“I had never understood how people could become emotionally attached to a… well a space vehicle,” as she spoke Shepard had turned to look at Liara and at the words space vehicle she raised her eyebrows and, with a look of mock indignation, shook her head slowly.

“As I was saying Shepard,” Liara continued smiling at her lover’s show, “I had never understood, until I spent time on the Normandy. And I believe I have a better understanding now as to why ‘she’ is a rival for your affection.”

“Liara T’Soni are you reading my mind,” Shepard stood behind Liara and wrapped her arms around the slim waist and whispered, “Well you know, she did take down a Collector vessel, and travels faster than the speed of light. But other than that I’m all yours… oh and she is so sleek… ah but then so are you… hum we might have a tiebreak situation,” Shepard kissed and nibbled Liara’s neck as she spoke.

Liara laughed and held the arms around her waist with her own, “if I didn’t know you better Commander you may have been sleeping downstairs tonight.”

At that moment they both caught sight of a glint, a speck of silver in the sky. Watching in silence as it grew bigger, and then it was close enough to reveal the unmistakable shape of the SSV Normandy
SR2 and it was heading low across the sky towards the house.

Shepard couldn’t help a huge grin spread across her face and she only just resisted an impulse to shoot her hand in the air with a whoop as Joker swooped the frigate in a low pass across the back of the house. The red and gold phoenix painted on her body appearing the shimmer and float just above the metal of the hull.

“She is very beautiful and I pray she is strong as she always carries such a precious cargo,” Liara turned and seeing the question on her lovers’ face she kissed Shepard lightly on the lips then moved past her towards the door to the bedroom. Over her shoulder she said quietly, “You my love, she carries you.”

The Normandy landed in open fields two clicks from the house. The area was designated as space or air vehicle parking for the bonding ceremony.

The shuttle sent to ferry passengers was settling on the lawns at the front of the house as Shepard and Liara walked towards it.

Stepping from its interior first was a broad shouldered and very muscular young man, and resting in the crook of one of his enormous muscled arms was a baby. Jamie Skorgaard beamed and walked briskly towards the two waiting figures.

“Hi Jamie, good trip?” Shepard asked as he drew up in front of them.

“Yeah the little man really loves flying he gurgled a lot,” Jamie laughed and continued as Shepard raised her eyebrows, “Oh yeah he’s making all kinds of burbling noises now.” Jamie was talking to Shepard but they both turned their gaze towards Liara.

She had reached across to take the baby from Jamie and once safely resting in the curve of her arm baby John began burbling and appeared to be reaching out, with waving arms, to the new face looking down on him. Baby blue eyes looked up into soulful indigo blue ones as she stroked his cheek.

“Welcome John Oleg Asoka Shepard T’Soni… I am your…” Liara looked at Shepard who smiled and nodded encouragement, she continued, “I am your mother and although you are already blessed with so much love I will also add mine to your heart.”

As she finished speaking Liara made a Siari blessing of welcome, albeit one handed, and Shepard saw tears running down her cheeks.

“Babe?” Shepard asked a note of concern in her voice but as Liara looked into her eyes all concern vanished.

“These are tears of joy my love. I have you home and we have been blessed with two new lives to love, nurture and care for.” She reached across and lifted Shepard’s hand to her lips.

Liara then turned to Jamie with a brilliant smile.

“Forgive me Jamie I am being rude, you are most welcome to your new home. And as Shepard has no doubt told you we want and need you to carry on looking after our son. And you will have another to add to your care when our daughter is born.”

Jamie was struck dumb for a moment both mesmerised by Liara’s beauty and presence and also the news that her cousin was to become a parent again.
“Liara’s the pregnant one just in case you’re wondering Jamie,” Shepard slapped him on the back with a laugh and it snapped him back to himself.

“Oh… of course… I didn’t… congratulations… and thank you,” he returned Liara’s smile, “and thank you for your welcome um… Doctor… Liara?” Jamie flushed deep red he had never met anyone so captivating before.

“Yes Jamie please call me Liara. Despite the nonsense that we may have to ensure over the next week I am still only Doctor T’Soni and your cousins’ bondmate. Now you must have some time off as selfishly I would like to get to know my son a little better.”

“I’m sure you were never ‘only’ Doctor T’Soni… thank you I’ll get the baby’s room sorted out and then stand down until you need me… anything… I mean if you need anything.”

Smiling again he turned back to the shuttle to make sure all the items brought from Illium would find their way to the right place in the house.

“Seems you have captured another of the Shepard Skorgaard clan with you beauty and charm,” Shepard said as they walked side by side to the house.

Liara blushed slightly but smiled as she bumped shoulders gently with her love, “I am sure you are wrong but even so I am already taken.”

“Hey little man,” Shepard said leaning into the baby’s eye line and was rewarded with a smile and lots of ‘burbling’ noises.

“Wow I think he recognises me,” Shepard said in a pleased and surprised tone as Liara passed the baby to her.

This time Liara gave a full deep throaty laugh, “of course he does Shepard and it is an expected milestone at three months.”

“Fu… um… damn um I mean… Lee you sound like Jamie I might have known you’d do your research,” Shepard chuckled moving the baby to her right arm, his legs kicking happily in the air, as they walked hand in hand heading for the patio at the rear of the house.

“Yes perhaps swearing in front of our child is best avoided,” Liara said a smile in her voice.

As they passed the corner of the house a figure stood back from one of the windows eyes flashing with anger. She lifted her omni tool and sent an encrypted message to someone waiting expectantly in the capital.

“Child has arrived. I have the security plans. Will meet as arranged.”

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**Omega – six hours previously**

Aria sat on her balcony waiting for the arrival of Tela Vasir. She knew Vasir was the Shadow Brokers lackey. And even though she was also a Council Spectre the Queen of Omega could still ‘dispose’ her if she was going to be a problem.

While she was waiting her mind drifted back the meeting with her daughter the previous day. Liselle had come to tell her of Liara’s bonding ceremony and that she had been invited.

Aria already knew and also about the pregnancy but she didn’t share that with Liselle.
“So you already knew, Goddess your good mother,” Liselle smiled at her and continued, “so you have no objection to me going?”

“Why should I, like it or not you seem to be in some kind of relationship with Mik… Shepard’s cousin,” Aria could still not quite bring herself to use the humans’ first name. “Just be careful and don’t have any heart to hearts with Liara.”

“You mean my sister,” Liselle said a little more confrontationally than she intended.

Aria took a deep breath and tried to restrain her natural instinct to slap down any and all challenges to her authority, “Liselle you are not a fool. The danger is not in revealing that you are her sister it is that I am parent to you both.

You knew the conditions when you joined me; you know how my enemies would use that knowledge.”

“Seems to me we are both in enough danger anyway. I’m a commando mother, your commando captain. I have a constant stream of people trying to kill me… and Liara has made an enemy of the Shadow Broker himself it doesn’t get much worse.”

“That is enough Liselle I have made my position clear. You will honour my choice and obey my instructions to you.” Aria’s tone was as icy as her eyes and Liselle flinched inwardly at the power of the woman in front of her.

“Yes, well, I’m sorry… of course. Do you wish you could attend,” Liselle asked trying to change the subject.

For Aria the subject of her inability to attend any form of official function on Thessia, let along her daughters bonding ceremony, was one she would not discuss with Liselle.

Aria stood up and turned her back on her daughter making a pretence at studying the vid screens behind her desk.

“Enjoy your trip Liselle,” but added just as Liselle reached the door, “pick up a squad of commando’s from our family estate and take them with you. I’ll be in touch.”

Aria was angry that she couldn’t attend the ceremony but her anger was old and deep. It was wrapped up in her banishment for polite Asari society. In the choices she had made to keep those she cared about safe.

And it all began with the vows she had taken as a young maiden, not really understanding the consequences. But Beneda had known what it would cost her; knew what it would cost them both.

Aria once again pushed down the memories the ‘what if she had listened to Beneda’ questions, pushed them back down deep. She had to lock them back away.

‘Goddess damn you Beneda for dying… leaving Liara ill prepared and vulnerable… damn you to hell’ she thought as a trace of sadness rather than anger lit her eyes.

She brought herself back into the moment, the beat of the music throbbing through her body, the beautiful maidens she amused herself with, her absolute authority and command over Omega and her undeniable authority across the Terminus system.

She had kept her side of the bargain pity she was so young and naïve that she hadn’t made sure there was something on her side of the scales.
Movement drew her eyes to the arrival of Vasir. She waited at the bottom of the steps that led to Aria’s private balcony and flanked by two of her most trusted bodyguards.

She waved a hand to indicate Vasir could join her and waved a lazy hand at a side sofa for her to sit.

“You may want this meeting to be private,” Vasir said in a quiet tone. Aria sensed a confidence about her that had not be present in their previous meetings, and it spelled danger.

“Wait outside,” Aria said to her guards and she dropped the privacy barrier around the space. The music became only a distant murmur.

Aria sat arms stretched across the back of her sofa and looking down her nose at Vasir every inch the Queen of Omega. She closed off her mind to all her previous thoughts and focussed on the danger in front of her. Vast experience and her ability as an empath told her this would be no ordinary conversation.

“The Shadow Broker wants you to stop interfering in his business… stop protecting Liara T’Soni,” Vasir delivered her message in a cold tone.

Aria tilted her head slightly to one side and lifted an eyebrow, “Since when did I start taking orders from the Shadow Broker Vasir. Surely that’s what he has you for, his tame Spectre bitch.”

Aria noticed Vasir bristle at the insult and sensed she had hit the truth. ‘You really are in so deep you have no choice but to do what he tells you now,’ Aria thought as she waited for Vasir to respond.

“It also suits my purposes for T’Soni to have her activities curtailed,” Vasir had regained her confidence and relaxed back into her seat, “never forget I am a Council Spectre T’Loak and have no need to explain myself to someone like you.”

“The difference between you and someone like me Vasir is that I order an execution and you have someone… ‘curtailed’,” Aria spoke in a dismissive tone.

“I haven’t got all day Spectre get to the point,” Aria said curtly starting up her omni tool making pretence of looking through messages.

“Stop protecting T’Soni or deal with the consequences T’Loak you really don’t want to go head to head with the Shadow Broker and… I’m sure you don’t want anything to happen to your pet commando captain.” Vasir crossed her arms and watched Aria intensely for a reaction.

In the space of time it took to take a breath Aria tried to sense whether Vasir knew anything or had just taken a lucky guess, in that same moment Aria tried to put out of her mind any thoughts of Liselle and certainly any feelings she had about her daughter.

They would weaken her, make her react differently which would give Vasir all the proof she needed that there was something to find out.

Aria looked up lazily and gave Vasir a smile that would have frozen even a hardened Krogan battlemaster.

“Tell me Vasir how many people do you think have lived after threatening me or one of my assets?” Aria could sense Vasir’s confidence fall a little and fear edging in to take its place.

“I have information that you would not want to get onto the extra net T’Loak about your….” before Vasir could finish her sentence Aria had her pinned up against the side wall of the booth, a biotic grip around her throat.
Aria stood up slowly and walked over until they were face to face; she had to cut her off before completing the sentence. Aria had no idea if a direct threat to her daughter would have been enough to stop her from punishing the threat to her authority.

“Whatever your little threat was it’s just backfired Vasir I don’t give a fuck what you think you know or what some fuck wit has told you to get on your good side,” Aria stepped even closer and she replaced her biotic grip with her own hand still holding Vasir in a biotic field.

“I don’t have anything or anyone I care more about than me and if you doubt that take a good look at my past… oh that’s right you’re not going to be able to because I’m going to have one of the boys flush you out of an airlock and then I’m going to war with the Shadow Broker,” Aria tilted her head slightly to the side again and narrowed her eyes as Vasir tried to speak.

Releasing her grip slightly she said, “any last miserable words you root sucking jag ass’d pile of crap,” she shook the now limp figure in her hand but also released her grip enough to let Vasir draw breath.

“make… deal… in..mation… released… I die,” Vasir was struggling to get the words out but Aria got the gist of it.

She let Vasir drop to the floor and kicked her hard in the ribs, crouching down she continued to look Vasir in the eyes, “you will tell me everything I want to know including all about any little fail safe you may have and you can do it without pain before I kill you or with a lot of pain and then… I kill you as painfully as I can,” ice cold in tone and demeanour and if Vasir was in any doubt about the fate that Aria had planned for her she only needed to look into the ice cold blue eyes that bored into her.

“I haven’t shared my information with anyone Aria this could stay just between us and I won’t give up my fail safe so if you do kill me I’ll die happily knowing the sky will fall in on your biggest secret of all…” Vasir was still in pain but was breathing more easily. But Aria’s biotic field was still holding her in its grip.

Aria stood up and walked back towards her sofa and sat down before speaking again.

“Just what the fuck do you think you have on me that I would care so much about?” Aria needed to know, but if Vasir didn’t tell her straight out what information she had, Aria doubted she could maintain her self control much longer and would rip the woman apart with her bare hands.

“That you gave birth to a daughter in 2077 and she was raised by a well-connected Matriarch as her own,” Aria was impassive and from centuries of practice gave away nothing of what she was thinking or feeling she waited for the final blow from Vasir who continued, “I haven’t tracked her down yet but it’s only a matter of time and the evidence that I already have is convincing enough for others to pick up the trail if you kill me. Do you really want your unsuspecting daughter hunted down by your enemies, by the Shadow Broker; on the chance you will be able to torture my failsafe out of me?”

Vasir’s confidence had returned Aria could sense it, she could also sense the bloody minded determination to withstand whatever torture that Aria could use on her.

Aria released the biotic field holding the Spectre who stood up slowly still feeling the effects of Aria’s grip and her field still causing pain throughout her body.

“I even thought it might have been T’Soni, the dates matched but there was too much evidence that Benezia T’Soni actually gave birth to her… and my informant is clear that you gave birth,” Vasir
was now irritatingly pleased with herself.

It was obvious to Aria that Vasir wanted confirmation and Omega’s Queen had just given it to her.

Aria was clever enough to know that the women had her at a disadvantage. Sometimes the direct approach had to wait, she would have to be smarter about ending the piece of varren shit in front of her and the threat she posed.

“I’m glad you’ve seen reason Aria. Now to business, the Shadow Broker wants you to remove all the protection you have been providing for T’Soni and to be clear that includes any you’ve given to Shepard. As for our arrangement I’ll be in touch when I need something,” Vasir turned to leave and waited for Aria to drop the privacy barrier which also functioned as a security barrier.

Aria could sense the complete triumph and confidence of the women and as she stared at her back began to think of the many ways she would cause her pain before she killed her… but not yet… not now.

“I’m down a contract and that means credits Vasir… or did you think I was protecting T’Soni out of the goodness of my heart?” Aria’s voice was cold and clipped her eyes steely as Vasir turned and met them.

“I have all my assets in position it would be just as easy for me to reverse my orders… your own attempts have all ended in abject failure, but perhaps the Shadow Broker doesn’t care about the failure of his operatives the way I do.” It was a gamble but Aria had won big with weaker hands.

Vasir studied the Queen of Omega, a trick, no what was in it for her. And after all Vasir had a hold on Aria that others could only dream about.

“I’m still working on the details but it’s planned for the ceremony. I’ll let you provide security for my asset and our noisy surprise and you can finish off anyone who escapes the bomb.” Vasir turned again to go and congratulated herself. Aria never failed to deliver on a contract and Vasir would take all the credit for completing the mission, perhaps that would put her back on the Shadow Brokers good side.

“Payment,” Aria said still not dropping the security barrier.

“You know the Shadow Broker pays well Aria… I’ll be in touch.”

Aria bristled at the use of her first name and the dismissive way she was being treated but a plan was already forming in her mind and as she dropped the security barrier and watched Vasir’s retreating back she said quietly under her breath.

“You will regret the day you were born by the time I’ve finished with you Vasir,” and loud enough for her guards to hear she said, “get Sanak and Grizz here now.”
“Thanks for changing your plans both of you. I know you were looking forward to spending some
time on Omega Tash,” Shepard smiled as their two guests drew to a halt in from of her and Liara.

“Oh I wouldn’t miss the wedding of the year cuz and besides who else is going to throw you both a
decent party,” Tash smiled and as she put her arm around Liselle’s waist and giving her a small hug
continued “besides I’ve brought the best Omega has to offer with me.”

This drew a smile from Liselle as she said, “Thanks for the invite. I don’t think we’ve been properly
introduced Liara,” and she turned to the slightly shorter asari and gave her an Asari greeting which
Liara returned.

“I am Captain Liselle Lidanya of the Armali Commando’s but I work for Aria T’Loak of Omega,”
Liselle spoke with obvious pride and before Liara could respond turning slightly towards Shepard
said, “good to see you again Commander.”

“Captain,” Shepard said with a slight nod as she took Liselle’s offered hand in a handshake.

“And in case you were wondering Liara,” Tash gave Liara one of her huge cheeky grins, “I’m the
black sheep of the family, Natasha Mikhailovich at your service.”

“Welcome to you both and I hope to get to know you… Tash,” Liara said with a little hesitation but
as Tash gave her a slight nod and carried on smiling at her so she continued, “And you Liselle, I feel
we may have a lot to talk about.”

Liara’s last remark was clearly aimed at Liselle who’s only reaction was a slight and short shrug of
her shoulders and eyebrows.

Liara was experiencing a powerful yet confused connection towards Liselle and was struggling to
identify her feelings towards this singularly compelling maiden.

She was brought back to the present moment by Tash reaching across for her hand. But instead of a
handshake Tash bowed her head and kissed it, “the vid images do you no justice whatsoever, you
are all together the second most beautiful and captivating asari I have ever met… and I’ve had the
pleasure of meeting quite a few,” her last remark brought a rolling of the eyes from both Shepard and
Liselle

Liara had no idea how to respond and knew she looked as flustered as she felt which annoyed her as
she wanted make a good impression on both visitors but for different reasons.

“Hands of Tash she’s taken,” Shepard laughed with a small shaking of her head, “honestly how do
you put up with her,” her last remark was aimed at the commando captain who had merely leaned
into Tash’s side and the arm still wrapped around her waist.

“Oh we’re probably as bad as each other. She knows where the boundaries are and if she forgets,”
Liselle looked across at Tash who was looking at her and said with a smile, “I know how to hurt her,
really badly, without even leaving a mark…” she turned back to Shepard and Liara and said, “I’ve
studied under Aria T’Loak for ten years and I’m a good study.”

Tash was laughing and Liselle was smiling broadly, but beyond the playful comment Liara thought
she saw a fierce pride when Liselle spoke about Aria.

Shepard chipped in, “good it’s about time someone got the measure of her. Now let’s go in and get some drinks. Say hello to your auntie Tash and Shepard waved one of the baby’s hands at Tash.

“But I thought…” Liara started to say as they walked into the cool hall.

“It’s an honorary title babe,” Shepard kissed Liara gently on the cheek as they entered the smaller of the two reception rooms.

Its three large sofas, more than enough to accommodate all the friends Shepard and Liara would eventually have staying in the house, were arranged around the left hand wall which boasted a huge vid screen and a fire slot.

Although the space was large it still felt intimate with thick pile rugs on the floor, art and sculpture from Asari and other cultures displayed almost casually around the room. And the wall to the right was lined with leather bound books adding to its lived in feel.

And the most stunning aspect of this room was the use of a glass wall with views of the gardens to the rear of the house giving the immediate impression that the garden edged into the room.

Around half the wall was comprised of doors so they could be opened as was the case today and so the room was filled with drifting scents and birdsong.

As the group moved into the room and Shepard laid the baby down on one of the sofas she asked, “Right who wants what to drink, I’ve got some station bier Tash if you fancy it?”

Shepard moved to a low stylish piece of furniture that looked as if it was made from the same cream stone that the house was built of.

“Hell I haven’t had any bier since… well a long time, yeah I’d love one,” Tash replied and she moved to kneel in front of the baby who was still happily reaching for Liara’s fingers.

“Liselle?”

“I’ll take some wine if you’ve got it, Asari,” Liselle’s last word was half questioning and Shepard smiled over her shoulder.

“We keep nothing else in the house,” Shepard gathered the drinks including bier for her and wine for Liara. Placing them on the low table that sat between the sofas she remained standing her bottle of bier in hand.

"So this is the sprog Miranda made for you," Tash said her face unreadable as she kneeled down in front of the sofa and played with the baby’s restless arms.

Liara's face froze and Shepard heard a quiet moan from Liselle sitting on the opposite sofa.

"You had to go there didn't you," Shepard said exasperation evident in her voice.

"Doctor Lawson will have to answer to me when we meet, but have no doubt Natasha she will have no further contact with my son.” All traces of Liara's edge of nervousness at meeting Shepard's cousin and the commando captain, was gone.

Her voice was powerful and cold, her demeanour almost regal. Shepard sensed a powerful flash of an emotion from Liselle but again she couldn't untangle it or work out exactly how she was 'sensing'
"Oh don't get me wrong Liara," Tash said still kneeling and looking up into Liara's face their eyes meeting, "I think what Lawson did was unforgivable, my opinion she should be thrown off the crew. But the little guys here and it's good to know none of the... controversy attached to his conception will affect him. You're a good woman Liara," Tash stood up and made to sit down next to Liselle.

Liara's demeanour had changed, she relaxed and with a genuine smile she beamed at Tash, "I think that we will get on very well Tash, I am pleased to know I am not the only one who feels Lawson owes more than an explanation."

Shepard was still trying to process Tash's reaction to the situation. She had expected teasing, innuendo, but not a serious response. It was also an opinion that would only add fuel to the flames of Liara's position and attitude towards Miranda.

Snapping out of her thoughts Shepard said, "You're coming with me Tash. I'm cooking dinner tonight and you're going to help," Shepard smiled, This had been pre-arranged between her and Liara who wanted some time on her own with Liselle.

"Just like old times hey," Tash looked down at Liselle who had a quizzical look on her face, "yeah we'd invite girls over and cook for them... we didn't always finish the cooking part but it was fun." She leaned in and gave Liselle a kiss and made to follow Shepard out onto the stone patio that ran across the back of the house.

Shepard had already done some preparation in the kitchen and discussed with the head chef what she needed. The dessert had already been prepared and fresh baked bread, as always, was available.

She had workstations set up with the necessary equipment and ingredients; she knew who she would allocate to which task to play to their strengths. There was no point putting Grunt in charge of peeling the result would be disastrous. Preparation, as with any mission, was everything.

Tash burst into uncontrollable laughter when she walked into the large cool kitchen from the garden entrance.

Shepard stood staring at her cousin hands on her hips a bemused look on her face and only after Tash had managed to get control over he laughter did she say, "what... what's so funny?"

"Aw LV your priceless... bet you've got a workflow and a process and everything planned down to the last detail... I've missed you," and with that Tash threw her arms around the still confused woman and gave her a hearty hug.

Shepard returned it and felt something return to her spirit, something young, carefree and even little blithe.

Stepping back bier still in hand Tash said, "now this is how its going to go... we're going to put on some very loud music and drink a lot of bier," who else is in your kitchen work team?" Tash said a smile still playing on her lips.

"Grunt, Garrus and Veetor," Shepard answered a little apprehensive about the drinking lots of bier part of Tash's plan.

Tash was working her OT as Garrus and Grunt walked into the kitchen and she spoke without looking up, "right you two what's your poison we're going to have fun while we cook?"
"Ryncol" Grunt barked with laugh.

"Hum something smooth and classy just the drinker," Garrus answered his mandibles twitching in amusement.

"No... Absolutely no hard liquor for you Grunt you too young... bier… you can have bier," Shepard said quickly staring down the challenge from Grunt who answered in a more subdued tone.

"I have two livers for a reason Shepard... females," he said the last word quietly but with the hint of a smile.

"Found it," Tash said and she programmed kitchen's sound system from her OT, "really old stuff, from when we were kids LV... we can have a sing along," Tash laughed as the music started up.

"Oh for the love of the Goddess," Shepard said quietly under her breath as she watched Tash, Grunt and Garrus tap bottles together each of them shouting their own particular version of cheers with Tash shouting a loud za zdarOvye.

Veetor arrived at that moment and Tash sweep him up and found out what he could drink and before long everyone in the kitchen was talking and laughing, drinks in hand.

Shepard felt herself relax they’d get dinner cooked and have fun doing it. She was glad that Tash seemed to be much more her old self, the Tash Shepard knew. Shepard felt just a little young again for the first time in what seemed like a very, very long time.

After Shepard and Tash left the room Liselle and Liara sat in a heavy silence for a few minutes the only sound in the room coming from the birds in the garden and the baby next to Liara.

"So who’s coming to dinner?" Liselle said strangely at loss as to what to say.

"We will be having dinner tonight with all our closest friends and Shepard's mother is due to arrive at some point this evening or overnight," Liara said almost absentmindedly.

"Why do I have the feeling we have met before," Liara said. Although it wasn't the burning question she wanted to ask it was something that was troubling her.

"Well I’ve been, was, your shadow for quite some time...

"No it is not that. Then perhaps you will tell me why Aria would take it upon herself to protect me?" That wasn't the question either but she was moving closer to what she really wanted to know.

Liselle smiled and gave a well-practised answer, "you would have to ask Aria that, I only do what I’m told."

"I will do that... but... Your Mother is Admiral Lidanya of the Citadel Fleet is she not?"

"Yes," Liselle became cautious and didn't know where Liara was going with her question.

"Who is your father?" Liara said it bluntly and watched the other Asari for any reaction.

"My Mother has a bondmate..."

But Liara cut her off and said, "your Mother took her bondmate after you were born... do we share a father Liselle?" Liara was beginning to become exasperated, "you must have felt an echo of connection Liselle that is often evident when two closely related sisters meet... please do not lie to
me... tell me you will not answer but do not insult me with untruths."

Liselle felt a storm rise inside her. She very clearly felt the connection and she could see that Liara would not be satisfied with any other explanation except the truth. And it may prove dangerous for Liara to start digging around Liselle’s parentage for it.

Liselle’s mind raced. Why the hell hadn’t Aria prepared her for this… did she know this would happen… she should have… her Mother was no fool, she knew as much if not more about Asari connections than Sha’ira did… she must have known this was a possibility.

‘Is this what she wants... for us to find each other... no need to break her word...’ Liselle thought hard, desperate to try to work out what her mother would expect of her.

"You have to think for so long just to answer a simple question Liselle?” Liara asked not unkindly her head tilted slightly to the side.

"No... We do not share a father," Liselle saw the look of disappointment and disbelief cross Liara's face closely followed by pain, but the disbelief remained. Liselle knew only too well how much Liara wanted to know who her father was.

Liselle took a deep breath, looked at her hands for a moment then raised her head and looked Liara in the eyes and said, “My mother is your father and I have a suspicion that your mother was my father.” Liselle let out her breath slowly waiting for the sky to fall on her head.

Liara looked completely confused, "Matriarch Dreliss Lidanya is my father... they... my mother and..."

"No," Liselle interrupted more loudly that she had intended. The baby stirred and made noises that indicated the need for contact.

Liara picked him up and settled him in her arms her eyes returning to Liselle as she continued to speak.

"Not my... Aria... Aria is my mother... it’s complicated but Dreliss raised me to keep my identity secret... No, Aria and Benezia are your parents and although I have no proof I'm sure Benezia was my father."

A look of absolute shock settled on Liara's face. She didn't really know what she had expected, who she had expected to be her father. She knew it was another Asari Matriarch... but Aria T'Loak... Aria... and her mother... how... why.

"But how... they are so different... why would Benezia..."

Before Liara could finish the sentence Liselle cut across her, anger now rising at the sense of disappointment from her sister.

"Don't you dare think for one moment that Aria isn't good enough to be your father or to be with Benezia... she is member of one of the one thousand families and the T'Loak name has a proud heritage…every bit as honourable as T'Soni..."

It was Liara's turn to cut across Liselle, a look of concern on her features and evident in her voice, "please Liselle I do not mean to insult you or... or our... father... you have to give me a little time to... this is quite a shock... Aria is... well she is someone... I never expected my father to be quite so..."

"Out there," Liselle said with a huge smile, "sorry Liara I’m just a bit sensitive, she is more than just
the Pirate Queen of the Terminus system... it was a shock to me, but I was already looking for excitement and I knew Dreliss wasn't my biological mother in my early twenties."

There was silence again between the two young Asari’s that lasted for minutes, both deep in their own thoughts, until Liara broke the silence.

"I have a sister," Liara said softly tears welling in her eyes and a strange sense of joy seeping into her soul.

Liselle got up and sat next to Liara encircling both her sister and the sleeping baby in her arms. Liara leaned into the embrace feeling not a little stunned at the revelation but also a strange sense of completeness.

"Yes you do," Liselle kissed Liara's forehead and they sat for a long time in a comfortable silence both processing their new situation, the new connections, and feeling the love for each other that was flooding through them.

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**Shadow Broker base, in orbit around Hagalaz**

Tela Vasir was shown into the Brokers huge office. The room was more like a small warehouse in style. Banks of screens covering the rear wall and along the two side walls were rows of terminals currently not occupied but usually being worked by specially programmed mechs.

The Broker himself sat behind an enormous desk, he was huge, at around twice the size of even the largest Krogan. His triangular mouth was edged with a row of spiny, sharp looking teeth. Although his body comprised a scaly armoured skin he still wore armour covering most of his body. He was a Yahg, physically dangerous, highly intelligent and temperamentally unpredictable.

The shutters on the windows that ran down the right hand wall were open showing the turbulent, angry and permanent storm that played around the ship's position. Vasir looked through the window as she walked towards the desk and was struck, once again, by its terrible beauty.

"How did you get T'Loak to back down, she is not one who responds to threats?" His voice was deep, sonorous and seemed to rumble through her physically.

The Spectre found it difficult to know where to look as the Broker had eight penetrating eyes, she usually settled for somewhere in the middle of his forehead.

"I made a business deal with her," Vasir was not going to give up her hold on T'Loak to the Shadow Broker it was far too valuable to her.

"And you are sure she will not interfere with your plans to dispose of T'Soni and Shepard?" He put his hands together in front of him, elbows resting on the desk and laced his fingers together.

Vasir nodded and he continued, "If you fail me again Spectre you will be of no further use to me and you know too much for me to just... let you walk away," he laughed and the sound rumbled around the space his small beady eyes never leaving Vasir's face.

"The plans are in place I only need to know if you have any preference about timing. During the bonding ceremony or T'Soni's appointment as leader of the family?"

"I am not cruel," he said the pink inside his mouth showing as he spoke, “let them have their bonding ceremony.”
“Why did you insist my coming here I have a lot to prepare and we still don’t have a confirmed date,” she had been curious on the trip to Hagalaz and tried to work out why he wanted a face to face meeting this time.

“The device you will use is being loaded onto your ship, it has, special properties and will not only kill most of the people present it will… leave a lasting reminder of what happens when someone tries to cross the Shadow Broker.” He stared at her his eyes blinking independently of each other.

“It’s dirty?” she said her voice cold and angry, “I didn’t agree to anything like this, my agent in the T’ Soni household won’t agree to this and without her it’s a completely different mission.”  Vasir was exasperated, why couldn’t he just let her do her job, she knew how to assassinate, this was overkill.

“It sends a lasting message; the area will be a radiation hot spot for centuries if not longer,” he gave what passed for a laugh, “depending on how good the clean-up is.”

“My agent in the household is doing this because she despises Liara’s liaison with Shepard. She is a member of Sanguine Insidiantur Corruet. She believes in the purity of Asari bloodlines.

I’ve manipulated her to believe that removing Liara T’Soni will make way for more suitable head of the family… she won’t agree to do huge amounts of collateral damage and certainly no lasting damage.”  Vasir was becoming desperate. There would be a lot of dignitaries at the appointment ceremony, at least one member of the Council, and a huge number of the Republics leaders.

Killing all those people would not only devastate the Thrassican Republic but also create instability across Thessia itself.

“I am a sworn Council Spectre I won’t be part of the assassination of all those people, some collateral damage I can live with. My way we kill maybe ten or twenty people… but this… no, I won’t do it… I won’t let you do it.” She had gone into her relationship with the Broker because it was mutually beneficial, but the balance had been shifting for some time, this was a line she would refuse to cross.

“Interesting you still have some sense of duty, how noble,” he shook his head slowly from side to side and stood up moving swiftly, despite his large size, to tower over her.

“You will do whatever I tell you to do or your life as a Spectre will be over. I will not kill you, oh no, what you fear more than death is disgrace to your family. The information about your… actions… that I can deliver to every news outlet in Council space would make for very interesting reading. I wonder how long you would hav to spend in a Council prison. Your family shunned.”

He watched as all the fight went out of the Asari who was withering under his gaze. “Good, we understand each other.”

He knew her weakness, the one thing she would do anything to protect, her family’s good name and standing within Asari society. He was a very good information broker, the best. Moving back to sit behind his desk he allowed himself a brief moment of triumph.

Even taking his own revenge he had seen a way to satisfy the demands of one of his most difficult clients and make himself credits in the process. They wanted to destabilise the Asari Republics and this would be a good start.

“And don’t get any ideas about being noble and killing yourself I will release the information on your death so that your family can still be ruined. “Now sit,” he indicated a chair to the side of his desk, “you will see what happens to those I choose to keep as a pet.” He flicked a control on his desk
and the doors to the room opened.

Walking in, flanked by two mechs, was the shadow of the Asari who had once been Shiala Galine. She looked haunted, drawn and frightened. The tell-tale biotic dampener was tight around her neck.

“Come here Asari and kneel,” as Shiala made to move to the side of the desk to kneel in front of him he said, “in front of the desk.”

She obeyed not looking at the Broker or the other Asari in the room.

“I have news for you. Of Liara T’Soni, she is to be bond mate to Shepard and they already have a child,” on hearing the name the Asari’s face contorted into a mask of rage and pain.

He continued, “tell the Spectre how you feel about your Liara and Shepard.” He sat back in his chair pleased with the display he was putting on for Vasir.

“She… Shepard… is controlling, manipulating my bondmate… Liara wouldn’t forget me… this is all Shepard’s doing… I will destroy her… I will destroy them both for what they’ve done… she left me here to rot… forgot all I’d done for her… all we had… for Shepard,” Shiala’s voice was cracked and horse, stumbling over the words and rambling, her eyes wild.

Vasir had no doubt the Broker had broken not only her spirit but her mind.

“If you plan fails Spectre I will just release my prisoner. I did not create this… hatred or anger… I merely allowed it to become all that she is.” He rumbled a deep laugh once again and for the first time Vasir felt gut wrenching fear of the Broker.

He had broken her as well, she could see no way out… not even death.

Aria’s office, Afterlife Club, Omega

Aria sat in one of the arm chairs a glass of Turian whiskey in her hand deep in thought when the door to her office buzzed.

She let Sanak, Bray and Grizz enter and indicated with a nod of the head that they should sit down.

“Well?” She had given them plenty to accomplish in the hours that had passed since her confrontation with Vasir.

“I’ve got all the information on her family, friends anyone she’s connected to and its already with our vid tech expert,” the deep and flanged tones of Grizz seemed to echo in the room, “and we’ve pulled together all her movements over the past cycle. The analysis of all her contacts should be done in less than a few hours.”

Aria nodded and turned to Bray.

“We lost her…” before he could finish his sentence Aria exploded in rage and threw the glass still full of alcohol at his head. Grizz and Sanak both looked down not wanting to catch their boss’s eye.

She stood up and started pacing yelling as she did.

“One thing you had to do… one fucking thing… how hard was it to follow one stupid Council Spectre…,” she turned and looked directly at Bray and to his credit he only flinched slightly under the power of her glare.
“Tell me you got a tracking device on her before… you lost her,” this time Aria’s voice was low, calm but loaded with menace and her last three words were delivered with and extra cold edge.

“She found the one we planted on her and she found the hack we did on her OT,” Bray hurried on as he saw his boss becoming more and more furious, “but we used a new tracker the Salarian STG have been trying out… its internal… we slipped it in her drink… we lost the signal on the third relay jump she did… but if… when we get the tracker back we can lift the information about where she went… and we can pick her up as soon as she surfaces… must be somewhere with a lot of interference stopping the signal.” Bray relaxed as he saw Aria’s face lighten and she sat back down.

“Next time start with the good news Bray,” she reached out to take a new drink that Grizz had poured for her, her eyes now falling on Sanak.

“I’ve got the team in place and with a bit of modification one of the team is now a decent look alike for Vasir… won’t fool anyone who really knows her close up but it will be good enough for what we need.”

“Good, this is all going to depend on timing. We can’t pick her up too early, I have to wait until she’s told us what the plan is and what she wants us to do.

But I need enough time with her to make sure we have the whole plan… I’m pretty sure she won’t be letting me in on all her secrets,” Aria spoke quietly, almost to herself, looking into the middle distance and swirling the whiskey slowly around the glass.

She snapped back into the present, “Well,” she said imperiously, “you’re not going to get the job done sitting there, get on with it.”

Before she had even finished her sentence her three most trusted lieutenants stood and made for the door, they did indeed have plenty still to do if Aria’s plan was to come to fruition.

The stakes were high, not only the release of information that would put all her daughters in danger, but the threat of death to at least one if not both who were currently on Thessia.

She checked the chrono on her omni-tool.

‘Liselle’s been there for a couple of hours, plenty of time for them to have had a heart to heart,’ Aria moved to her desk and keyed in a call to Liara on their private secure channel.

Liara was not going to like what Aria was going to tell her and certainly try to refuse to do what Aria needed her to do. It would take all her not inconsiderable skill to influence Liara’s acquiescence.

Liara and Liselle were still in the sitting room. They had been talking for over an hour, exchanging stories of growing up, and a little about the parent that each knew best.

Liselle didn’t want to say too much about Aria she already felt she had betrayed her mother’s trust by being honest with Liara. But she wanted to hear as much about Benezia and Liara did about the side of Aria that Liselle knew and loved.

“We should probably go and see how Shepard and Tash are getting on in the kitchen,” it was Liara who spoke and Liselle laughed.

“If Tash has had anything to do with it they’ll be drinking and playing around with not much food preparation,” she stood up and followed Liara onto the patio.
“Oh dear you may be right I can hear music,” Liara smiled at her sister as they walked along the back of the house.

They turned the corner and saw Shepard laughing loudly, leaning on Garrus’s shoulder, who also appeared to be laughing heartily.

They were both watching Tash trying to get past Grunt a large loaf of bread in her hands and a makeshift hoop attached to the wall of the house behind the bemused looking young Krogan.

“No… your supposed to… well wave your arms around to stop me getting a clean shot at the hoop… not throw me half way across the yard with your biotics,” Tash was trying hard to sound stern but was smiling broadly.

“I see you have dinner preparation well in hand Shepard,” Liara said in mock serious tones as she stood watching the scene.

‘Goddess she looks so happy and carefree,’ Liara thought and a flood of happiness flowed through her to see her soon to be bondmate relaxing with her friends.

“Look out Shepard incoming,” Garrus said his voice full of laughter.

“Ah… um… no… all in hand… just a couple of biers and… Veetor… Veetor’s keeping an eye on the dinner,” Shepard said as she walked towards Liara struggling to get control of the giggles that still racked her body.

Liara looked across at the kitchen doorway and saw the young Quarian leaning against the doorway seeming very relaxed.

“Well he is the closest to the kitchen…,” the rest of her words were silenced by a kiss from Shepard who also relieved her of the still sleeping baby in her arms.

“Come and have a try… obviously it should be a ball and the hoops the wrong height… and trying to explain the point of it to Grunt is… well… he’s hilarious,” Shepard said smiling.

Liara laughed but before she could reply her omni-tool sparked into life and when she saw who was calling she turned to Shepard and said quietly.

“I need to take this my love I will explain everything later,” she kissed Shepard on the cheek and walked back the way she came.

“Aria needed to speak with you and Liselle, only you and Liselle,” Aria’s face was unreadable as Liara looked at the holo image that had coalesced into shape above her omni-tool.

“I’m here,” Liselle had followed Liara having had a suspicion that the call was from Aria.

“In my… my office,” Liara said, Aria nodded and ended the call.

Of course it had been her mother’s office and sometimes Liara still felt as if she was trespassing.

A few minutes later Liara and Liselle stood in front of the vid screen and waited for the call to come through.

Aria sat with her back to her desk looking at the screen that displayed the images of two Asari maidens standing side by side.

She studied Liara’s face to make sure she had given them enough time and thought, ‘Yes... she
knows... what would you say if you were here Benezia I wonder?’

Aria felt a rush of feelings that she had buried so deep inside she thought they had gone for ever.

She shrugged them back somewhere into the recesses of her mind; there would be time for explanation later if it suited her to provide it.

But right now the daughters who stood in front of her were in mortal danger. And Aria T’Loak, the Pirate Queen, needed all her focus, strength and determination to deal with those who would break Omega’s one and only rule.
Chapter 45

Liara’s private office, T’Soni Estate

Liara looked at Aria and tried to reconcile the mismatch between her two parents. The High Priestess, Matriarch of the One Hundred, and a consummate diplomat Benezia T’Soni. And Aria T’Loak, Pirate Queen of Omega, violent, dangerous and a consummate killer. Liara began to worry that she was behaving differently towards Aria, the knowledge of her parentage playing across her mind.

All Liara and Liselle had had time to work out on the way to the call was an agreement not to tell Aria that Liara now knew the matriarch was her father.

Liara could feel Liselle’s nervousness rise under Aria’s unreadable gaze and continued silence.

“This must be important… Aria?” Liara couldn’t bare the silence any longer although in truth it had probably only been half a minute. She was also annoyed with herself for the slight stumble before saying Aria’s name.

Aria allowed her lips to curl slightly into an almost imperceptible smile and said, “You both look as if your about to be struck by lightning. So let’s deal with what Liselle has told you and then we can move on.” Again Aria lapsed into silence and continued her scrutiny of the two maidens on her vid screen.

“I didn’t just tell…”

“We felt the connection…”

Both Liselle and Liara spoke at the same time and stopped abruptly when Aria lifted her hand to indicate they should stop.

“Enough… I thought you might feel the connection. It doesn’t always happen and only when two powerful Matriarchs parent a child. It’s done, you know, we can discuss it at another time. That is not why I called.”

Aria took a deep breath she could see the questions in both their eyes, but she needed to start the preparations and persuade Liara to her way of thinking.

“You have a traitor in the heart of your household Liara… no I don’t know who yet,” Aria answered the question Liara had started to ask. “I can assure you it is not Seninnth T’Joan, you can trust her completely.”

Aria knew how important it was to know not only who you couldn’t trust, which in Aria’s case was everyone until they proved otherwise, but also who you could trust and rely on.

“The Broker has organised a plot to assassinate not only you Liara but also most of the guests to your appointment ceremony,” both the young Asari changed their demeanour.

The update from Vasir had come as a shock to Aria expecting that the collateral damage would be minimal. It had set her searching for what gain the Shadow Broker would get from a higher death toll.

But she brought her mind back to the discussion in hand and focussed on her daughters.
Where before there had been uncertainty, apprehension and perhaps even a little fear at Aria’s reaction; there was now a serious resolution and no trace of fear.

“We knew it was only a matter of time before he heard Liara was back in the land of the living,” Liselle said.

“How? The Estate and the guests will be under heavy security.” Liara asked quietly not looking forward to the answer.

“This is being planned and executed by Tela Vasir, and she believes that I will be helping. She has some information that… well let’s just say it’s a complication but it won’t stop me destroying her and the Shadow Broker.” Aria noticed Liara raise her eyebrows.

“But you cautioned me against making an enemy of the Broker, now you are ready to move against him,” there was a hint of challenge in Liara’s tone and choice of words but Aria decided to let it go. Aria had decided to be as honest as she could in order to get what she wanted.

“Yes and despite that you still took him on and this is where we are. The difference now Liara is that previously I believed I could keep you safe and the Broker at bay but it seems he will not forget or let matters rest.

He is now a threat to both of you and I will not allow it.” Aria looked and sounded her usual regal, dangerous and confident self.

Liselle and Liara gave each other a quick look and both smiled; turning back to Aria they saw her questioning look.

“I’m just glad you’re on our side,” Liselle said with a grin, “and be careful mother or I really will start to believe you care,” Liselle ended with her familiar flippant remark and genuine smile.

“Yes, as Liselle said, you are a formidable enemy. The Shadow Broker will regret… and it is comforting to know that you… personal interest…” Liara became flustered half way through her reply and it tailed off. She really did not know how to talk to Aria T’Loak now that she was also her father.

Aria couldn’t stop herself smiling. As much at Liselle’s amusement at her sisters’ nervousness around Aria as at Liara’s obvious difficulty and awkwardness that made her seem very young.

“Liara we will have a proper talk once this is all over but right now we need to focus on the threat. So listen to what I am going to… suggest,” pulling back from trying to tell her newly aware daughter and opting for slightly more conciliatory language was difficult but Aria didn’t have time for to many arguments.

“We have to let this play out; we might as well face down the Broker now while we know as much as we do about his plans.

I also need to leave Vasir healthy until she has told me exactly what the plans are. She thinks her hold on me has forced me to back away from protecting you Liara and I suggested using my assets to support her plan.

But I also need to make sure everyone thinks she is alive and well until I have… neutralised the information she is holding. Once I have Vasir we will also have the location of the Shadow Broker base and we will need to move against it as soon as the ceremonies are over.
The moment he realises not only has the plot failed but Vasir is dead or captured he will move the base and we may never have such a clear chance at him.

I need everything to continue as planned and look as normal as possible. Liara what do you think Shepard’s reaction would be to this information, the threat against you, the fact that you have someone within your house who is planning to kill you both?"

“I… well… I suspect that she would want to get me as far away as possible,” Liara paused for a moment and tried to gauge Shepard’s reaction properly, “but there is also a good possibility that she would agree with you. That we should, as you say, let the plot play out and foil it… you are going to stop it?” Liara felt very foolish as soon as she finished her sentence.

But it was so hard not to worry about Aria the Queen of Omega’s motives rather than trust that this was someone who wanted to protect her.

“Really, Shepard would risk your life; leave you in danger, a target, just to lure out the assassins?” Aria asked her face unreadable but her eyes scrutinising Liara’s face.

“Well you are,” Liara said indignantly and very loudly placing her hands on her hips and a scowl forming on her face.

Aria threw her head back and laughed loudly at the fire that flared in her daughter. Liara was certainly going to be a force to be reckoned with and it made her proud. But when she looked again towards Liara her tone was quiet and menacing, her eyes burning with fire.

“But I will not let anything happen to you, to either of you. And everyone knows I will not fail to destroy those who move against me or threaten those I care about.” Aria said the last sentence more quietly she was testing how the words felt being spoken out loud. It was not something Aria had said for centuries.

Liara thought briefly that Vasir and the Shadow Broker were not, knowingly, moving against Aria, but thought better about pointing that out.

“I assume you are going to ask me not to tell her,” Liara said and continued before her father could interrupt, “but I will not keep this secret from her. And her experience is invaluable to you. Do not think for one moment that she will flinch from anything we have to do in the short run to ensure all our safety in the long run.”

Aria thought for a moment. It was true Shepard was an excellent soldier and tactician, but there was just an edge of something that was pushing into Aria’s consciousness. It was about wanting to do this herself, to protect her daughters without any help anyone.

“I have heard that she is much relaxed and looking healthier for her break from her duties. And she needs this time of rest considering she will be facing the Collectors,” Aria had thought hard about how to put this argument to Liara and continued, “wouldn’t you rather she continued to have some peace, with friends, family… only having to worry about her vows at the bonding ceremony.

If you tell her about the threat you know she will find no more rest, and she needs to rest Liara.”

Liara thought about her soon to be bondmate and certainly how relaxed she was. In fact in all the time Liara had known Shepard this was the most unburdened she had ever seen her. The internal struggle played itself out across the young Asari’s face as Aria watched.

“I agree with all you say and I wanted nothing more than for Shepard to truly lay down all her pressures while we had this precious time together. But… I can not keep something of this
importance from her… I will not build our relationship on half-truths and omissions… I loved my mother but there were always secrets… always a barrier. I will not have that with Shepard. But I will wait for another day before I tell her. I assume we are not in danger until the ceremony?” Liara finished and as she did she felt Liselle’s hand slip into hers and give it a squeeze.

Aria’s thoughts went to her relationship, brief though it was, with Benezia and understood what Liara meant. Of course they were both very young but the path that Benezia had been given meant she would need to hold secrets and use deception, it was bound to bleed into her personal relationships.

“It’s your choice Liara, and you’re right about the timing. But, do not let your guard down, plans could change and until I have Vasir in my grip we cannot be certain of anything.” Aria resigned herself to Shepard’s involvement and decided to move forward, “Liselle you picked up our commando’s from our Estate?”

“Yes mother did you want me to keep them on the ship of have them stay at the mansion?”

Liara found it unbelievably strange to hear Aria called mother and wondered if she would ever be as at ease as Liselle seemed.

“I think at the mansion they will be on hand for when we need them,” Aria tilted her head slightly as she turned her attention to Liara, “tell Shepard but you must insist she tells no one else before we have spoken.

I know she trusts her team but the fewer people pretending not to know anything about something will be better… I insist Liara… we can speak as soon as you’ve told her.” Aria saw the small challenge rise on her daughters’ features but there were lines that would not be crossed even by this newest of her daughters.

“And Liselle under no circumstances at all will you tell Mik… your girlfriend… no Liselle she is a loose cannon… and likely to become over protective of you and her family whatever she might agree to,” Aria stopped Liselle’s protestations in her most authoritative tone.

“Very well,” Liselle sounded moody and a small scowl formed around her eyes.

“It is perhaps a complement that Tash cares so much for you Liselle and that… Aria has recognised this,” Liara said trying to cheer her sister up.

Aria let out a deep laugh and said “Goddess help me I can see the two of you ganging up on me in the future.”

This brought a smile from both her daughters and the mood lightened a little.

“Be careful but be discreet. Call me when I can speak to Shepard,” Aria thought about saying something else. Perhaps some endearment, but that was not who she was so she cut the connection with a small nod.

“You did well,” Liselle said giving Liara a hug, “I couldn’t actually get formed sentences out in front of her for weeks and it was months before I felt I could ask her questions or challenge something she said.”

“Thank you but I really have no idea how to behave with her now… she is… well she is Aria T’Loak… does that make sense?”

Liselle gave a throaty chuckle, “oh it makes absolute sense to me, wait till you see her angry… wait
till you see her murderous… she is a sight to behold.”

The two young Asari’s made their way back downstairs in silence, deep in their own thoughts.

“What’s happening now,” Shepard asked still looking out across the small courtyard to the gardens beyond.

She was sitting on a low bench outside the kitchen with Garrus on one side and Veetor on the other. Garrus was squinting so that he was looking only through his ever present single eye visor.

“Well nothing… they seem to be just… looking at the flowers,” Garrus drawled, “I expected more… well something.”

“I think he is about to hold her hand,” Veetor said quietly as if the pair they were observing were within earshot, “he reaches and then pretends to be pointing at something,” he said with a small giggle.

“Dammit… Garrus let me borrow your visor,” Shepard was straining her eyes, but enhanced as they were the objects of their study were just too far away.

Garrus laughed and teased her again, “oh now it’s getting interesting… you really should always be prepared Shepard. Omni glasses are very handy and you could tuck them easily into one of those numerous trouser pockets.”

“But they are still doing the same thing,” Veetor said a question in his voice accentuating his slight accent.

“He’s trying to get a rise out of me Veetor… I never realised your faceplate would also act like Omni glasses that is such a good design… maybe we could look at doing something like that for our hard suit helmets and…” Shepard’s musing was cut off by Garrus.

“And back to being on holiday… good timing we are being joined by beautiful people,” Garrus said as he caught sight of Liara and Liselle walking around the corner of the house.

The sight that met Liara’s eyes as she rounded the corner brought a smile to her lips and a rush of feeling.

Her precious love was sitting, no slouching would be a better description, with her back against the wall, legs straight out in front of her and arms folded across her chest. As usual her baseball cap was pulled low over her eyes and she seemed to be paying careful attention to something out in the gardens.

She heard Garrus announce their arrival and by the time she had reached the bench Garrus had moved to leave room for both the Asari’s to sit down.

Before she sat down she asked, “And where is our baby?” Liara’s tone was mock accusing, a smile playing across her lips as she looked into her lovers upturned face.

“Oh he’s over there,” she waved her arm loosely to the left, “with Grunt and Tash. They went to meet Jack, she decided to come to dinner, isn’t that great.” Shepard wasn’t drunk but perhaps a little mellow and she finished her sentence with a smile and patted the seat next to her.

“Come and sit down… I’m trying to explain human courting rituals to these two. But it’s quite difficult as Garrus won’t lend me his visor. So they can both see what’s going on but I can’t.”
Shepard said in mock indignation mainly aimed at Garrus who only chuckled.

“I don’t think it would help Shepard, nothing is happening, it’s like watching a Fibryl walk the length of a branch.” It was a moment before Garrus’s quip made sense but then Shepard realised a Fibryl was very like an Earth stick insect.

“Tasha is over there did you say… with Jack, the biotic, that Jack,” Liselle was staring hard at the place a little way off where Grunt, Tash and Jack appeared to be laughing and talking.

“Um yeah, it’s the only Jack we have on the crew…” before Shepard could say anymore Liselle began to walk towards the small knot of people.

“Ah I think she might know about how… close… Jack and Tash have been,” Garrus said quietly.

“Really I thought they were just, you know, getting on,” Shepard said the surprise clear in her voice. Jack had been quite the loner, keeping herself separate from the crew.

Bunking down on the lowest maintenance deck for privacy and, Shepard was sure, for safety. Jack always seemed on edge, never still and always ready to take offence or push away any kind of attempt to reach out to her.

She had a huge amount of unresolved anger about the way she had been abused at a Cerberus facility for biotic children. Shepard had worked hard to win her trust and had been successful.

Tash and Jack had connected almost immediately. They had had similar destructive experiences; similar issues around trust and both had big issues with authority. But Shepard hadn’t been aware they had slept together.

“Oh now that will be a much more interesting example of human courting rituals mixed with a bit of Asari. Eyes on the love triangle guys,” Shepard said sitting up slightly and turning her attention towards Liselle. Whose lithe figure was closing the gap between her and Tash quickly whilst still managing to look relaxed.

Liara gave Shepard’s arm a playful punch. It was wonderful seeing this side of her soon to be bondmate. She was totally relaxed and just having fun.

“Really Shepard should we not be ready to… well diffuse any problems,” Liara asked still smiling.

“Oh I think Tash has handled this situation before,” Shepard said and leaned in to kiss Liara gently on the lips.

“Contact,” it was Garrus who spoke and said the word almost triumphantly.

“Yes he did it… he is holding her hand,” Veetor said amusement evident in his tone.

“Who are we spying on in the garden,” Liara said not being able to stop herself from looking across to try to make out who the two figures were as they moved slowly in and out of view deep in the garden.

“Jamie and Kasumi,” all three of them said at once.

“And not spying babe, being supportive, you know, like cheerleaders,” Shepard said smiling and leaning into Liara’s shoulder.

“We’re going to give him pointers on how to improve,” Garrus said smoothly his mandibles
twitching indicating his amusement.

“He has talked so much about her we, wanted to be here if it did not go well,” Veetor chipped in.

Liara laughed and for a while forgot all about the immediate threat from the Broker and the larger threat to the Galaxy. She was just someone sitting with the woman she loved, her friends and family enjoying themselves under the bright Thessian sun.

Liselle strained her ears to try to catch what the trio were talking about but couldn’t really make anything out until Tash turned and greeted her.

“Hey gorgeous, look who’s coming to dinner, Liselle meet Jack,” Tash reached out to put her arm around Liselle’s shoulder.

Liselle was surprised again at the public shows of affection from Tasha. They had always been physical, particularly in the club, but their touches had always been charged with sexual energy.

This connection did not feel like foreplay, or the usual response to their deep physical desire for each other. No this was definitely different and Liselle was trying to process what it meant but she found herself enjoying it.

“Tasha’s talked about you Jack. It’s good to finally meet you,” Liselle said in an easy tone and trying not to be too obvious checking out the tattoos that covered the woman’s body.

“Yeah… well she said you two had a thing;” Jack said with a menacing edge to her tone, “so don’t give me any shit for having sex with her.” Jack’s entire demeanour was pusillanimous and her body language gave the impression she would either lunge at Liselle or turn tail and run.

Liselle relaxed and gave her a huge grin, “sounds like she told you we sleep with other people if we want to… so my only question is how about a threesome?”

Jack looked at her blankly for a few moments and then burst out laughing; it was husky and sexy sounding and Liselle could imagine how she might sound in bed.

“You’re ok;” Jack said relaxing and giving Liselle a small smile, “not sure about the threesome sexy, don’t like anyone messin in my head.”

“Now that’s a very interesting proposition,” Tash said smiling at them both.

“Ha such a puny human… how do you manage to appear attractive to females,” Grunt gave a bark of laughter and they all started walking back towards the house.

Liara found herself drawn, as usual, to the beach. Or rather to the sea, she loved its energy, its rhythm and most of all the feeling of comfort and safety it gave her.

The Asari held their seas and oceans in high regard and many rituals were still carried out on Thessia that had a connection to the planets waters.

After sitting for almost an hour outside the kitchen the group finally broke up. Shepard had a meeting on the Normandy to discuss the arrangements for the crew’s visit in the morning and she insisted that Liara should take some time for herself. Garrus and Grunt were keeping a watch over their cooking dinner and Shepard took the baby to the Normandy with her.
As Liara walked slowly past the chalet she had used as her home when she first returned to the estate, and onwards towards the edge of the tree line that marked the start of the beaches edge, she thought she heard voices.

Moving slowly and keeping out of sight she stood hidden in the dark shadows of the trees and looked down the gentle slope to two figures on the beach.

She could see them clearly and stifled a gasp of surprise as she watched the naked body of her sister kneeling astride the also naked body of Tash.

An instant later Liara realised she was watching the pair having sex and tried to walk away. But she found herself mesmerised by the couple and continued to watch as Liselle moved more and more quickly against her prone lover.

Tash’s hand moved from holding the bouncing breasts to grip Liselle’s hips seeming to urge her on. Liara couldn’t make out what words were being exchanged but she could certainly make out the moans and gasps of pleasure.

Liara felt a sudden rush of excitement and her clit began to pulse, her hand drifted without conscious thought to hold herself between her legs over her shorts. She could feel herself getting wet and a spark of shame flashed through her mind but she couldn’t drag her eyes from the scene.

She slipped her hand down inside her shorts and ran her fingers just inside her lips picking up her wetness and then drew them across her clit.

On the beach Liselle threw her head back with a loud moan and she could see Tash thrusting so hard her hips were lifting off the sand. In the next instant Tash had flipped Liselle onto her back and began pumping in and out of the moaning asari, knees drawn up and Tash moved her arm under one of Liselle’s thighs.

Liara knew how that felt, giving Shepard as much access as she could, feeling her lover deep inside her, filling her up.

Liara had never done anything like this before and a part of her mind was reeling with her voyeurism but there was something about seeing a couple that so closely reflected her and Shepard that was arousing her beyond her control.

She watched as Liselle wound her hands in Tash’s hair and pulled her down so they could kiss as Tash continued to pound in and out so hard Liselle whole body moved with every thrust.

Liara started moving her fingers in a circle on her clit and supported herself against the tree with her other hand. Her breath came in gasps she was hugely aroused and she knew she was going to come. She desperately wished Shepard was here to fuck her as hard as Tash was fucking her sister.

Again Liara felt a twinge of more embarrassment and amazement at her thoughts but it was fleeting and disappeared as she felt herself coming to the edge of her orgasm as were the lovers on the beach.

She came a split second after Liselle gave out a final cry of passion as the unmistakable signs of the couple riding an orgasm filled her view.

Just before Liara tumbled over the edge her breath coming in rough gasps, she imagined Shepard coming up behind her. Pushing her against the tree and fucking her from behind.

Liara could almost feel her lovers’ fingers pushing into her, moving her hips slightly pushing for as much relief as she could against her own hand.
Liara stifled the cry she wanted to make and her low moan was hardly audible but the relief and pleasure that exploded from her clit and flashed all through her body coupled with the surge of wetness made her knees a little weak.

As soon as she could Liara made to walk away but once again the sight of the Liselle and Tash held her attention. Liselle was snuggled into Tash’s side one hand moving slowly between her lovers’ thighs.

Tash was holding Liselle in her arms and they were speaking softly, too quietly to hear anything being said, but it was such a tender moment that Liara felt she was, for the first time, really trespassing on something very private.

Walking away back to the house where she would jump immediately in a cold shower Liara wondered how Shepard would feel about what had just happened. Liara knew she would share the memory with Shepard and wondered if her human would be as adventurous in real life as she had been in Liara’s imagination.
Chapter 46

Aria’s private balcony, Afterlife – three days before Janiris

Aria watched the young Asari maiden dancing in front of her. She always auditioned new dancers herself. They needed particular skills for the work they did at the Queen of Omega’s behest.

Not only did they need to be mesmerising dancers, but have at least basic commando skills, intelligence, and a willingness to be very friendly with selected visitors to Afterlife but above all be unshakeably loyal to Aria.

All Arias’ ‘dancers’ were a little in love with their powerful and sensual Queen and she was fully aware of the fact. Although only a few who applied made it into Aria’s entertainment team but this latest prospect was shaping up well.

The Pirate Queen had spent centuries watching very sensual dancers plying their trade and although she was no longer driven to… explore every one of them, she still took her pick of the best.

“Reach out with a light meld now,” Aria said sitting on her long sofa, arms stretched out across the back, one leg draped by the shin across her other thigh, in her signature pose.

A light meld that was unfelt by the recipient was necessary sometimes to snare the more self-controlled of her visitors.

Of course Aria would sense it. She had long since hardened her mind until it was more like a steel trap, and she also possessed the rare gift of being an empath. This had given her the edge on many occasions knowing truth from lie, anger from fear and even occasionally a sense of someone’s true intention had come from centuries of honing her skill.

The young Asari reached out with a light, deft touch. It was the best stealth meld the matriarch had experienced in well over a century.

“Where are you from?” Aria asked lazily picking up a data pad and reading through the maiden’s commando test scores. They were impressive and Bray didn’t give high scores without good reason.

“Ithaca, I served for a couple of decades in the commando’s and then moved to the Citadel,” the maiden’s voice was strong and sure and it had a throaty quality that felt like honey on the senses.

Aria began to sense the maiden was holding something back, worry rather than fear and no malicious intent. The Queen of Omega also began to feel her clit harden and throb, the Asari in front of her was extremely enticing and desire flashed through her body.

“You are more confident than the maidens that usually present themselves to me,” Aria stood and prowled towards the beauty now standing stock still in the middle of the private balcony.

“I am not like any other maiden who has sought you out,” the voice deep and sultry full of promise.

Aria could feel the pull and her desire rising, but she was still completely in control, yet the maiden was correct… she was… different.

“How old are you, Aria asked as she slowly circled the younger Asari.

“Age… is only a number, is it really that important” and the first slight crack in her previously
complete confidence appeared.

Aria stopped circling and stood in front of the Asari and looked deep into violet eyes, flecked with deep blue, she had never seen such beautiful eyes.

“You need to learn quickly that I decide what is important and any question I ask…,” as Aria finished speaking she moved her hand to grip the shorter Asari’s chin whilst at the same time leaning in and kissing the full lips.

Aria teased her tongue into the open and waiting mouth, and then pushed deep feeling the other Asari’s whole body respond to her.

“… gets answered,” Aria finished her sentence as she pulled away. She was rewarded by a look of misty desire in the violet eyes and a small catch of the younger Asari’s breath.

“And just what were you doing on the Citadel.” Aria now had a very good idea what the young Asari had been doing on the Citadel and she would stake a considerable bet it had a lot to do with Sha’ira.

“I… I’m nearly three hundred… and I studied and then worked with Sha’ira on the Citadel. But I believe you already knew that,” some of the confidence had returned and the maiden gave Aria a slow smile that gave the matriarch another pulse of desire.

Aria returned to her sofa and said, “Well why don’t you come and sit here and show me how good a student you were, Ne’aira,” it was the first time Aria had used the maidens name and it had the desired effect.

Aria indicated the seat next to her but Ne’aira moved gracefully to sit on the older Asari’s lap placing her hands around the Pirate Queen’s neck and resting on the folds at the base of her crest.

“Forward, aren’t you,” Aria’s lips curled into a devilish grin and raising what would have been her eyebrows if she had been human. She had already switched the security barrier to complete privacy mode and it was now opaque.

Aria pulled Ne’aira into a long deep kiss and initiated a sexual meld at the same time her expert hands worked quickly to free the younger Asari of her clothing.

Then Aria’s fingers caressed the folds at the base of Ne’aira’s crest drawing deep moans from the now writhing figure in her lap. Aria slipped three fingers into the hot and very wet centre and began stroking and rubbing the soft ridges inside.

Aria had also studied with Sha’ira but at her side when they were both maidens on Thessia being prepared for their paths. Although it had been many centuries since Aria had used these skills for anything other than her own pleasure.

Ne’aira felt the rush of the meld and Aria’s physical touches taking her into a state of complete ecstasy. She had never been so aroused, never felt so much pleasure and her mind and body gave themselves completely to the matriarch.

Aria was expert at keeping herself and her lovers at the edge of orgasm, experiencing its potent pleasure but not succumbing to falling over the edge. On many occasions she had lovers almost pass out from the overload of sensations.

The Pirate Queen fucked for her own satisfaction but she always left her lovers wanting more of her. Aria had never understood why an Asari would want to fuck with anyone other than another Asari.
The eroticism, the intimacy, the power of those two sexualities crashing together was, for her, the best and these days the only route to true all-consuming pleasure and release.

Ne’aira, writhing under expert hands and meld, was moaning, occasionally crying out, her breath ragged. Aria’s head was thrown back showing exposed neck and low purring growls escaped her mouth as she too felt the ripples and pulses of sensation turn to powerful waves flowing through their minds, their bodies…

Aria’s Omni tool lit up with an incoming voice connection.

“Boss we need to speak to you,” she made out Bray’s voice from somewhere far away.

“No… not now…” was all she could manage as she dropped back deeply into the meld and found her lovers mouth again.

“Um… Boss… it’s about… you know… the thing,” in another part of her brain she could imagine Bray being encouraged by Grizz and Sanak to try again both of them pushing him forward rather than incurring her wrath themselves.

“What…” she shouted questioningly, wrenching her mouth away from the sweet, delicious place it had found, and now speaking in the direction of her Omni tool she growled, “this had better be fucking good or it will be a very long fucking time before you can use that useless tool you call a prick for anything other than pissing through.”

As she spoke she was withdrawing from the meld and holding the desperate young Asari who was left quivering and bereft from the broken connection.

“Get your clothes on and sit next to me,” Aria said surprisingly gently. And when Ne’aira had pulled back on her short dress Aria lifted the security barrier.

Her three body guards moved slowly onto the balcony neither of them wanting to be in front and none of them wanting to get too close to Aria. They never disturbed her when she was with one of her dancers.

Aria gave a deep sigh at the sight of her three deadly and dangerous lieutenants behaving like naughty children about to get told off.

“Just get on with it…” Aria said sternly settling back into herself and pushing down her denied release and gratification. She could still feel the heat from Ne’aira as their thighs almost touched.

“It’s for your ears only Boss,” Grizz said almost wincing not knowing how Aria would take his suggestion.

Aria suddenly realised why they had been so insistent on disturbing her now she was fully back in the moment, it could only mean one thing.

“Go and get yourself a drink Ne’aira I’ll send someone for you when I’ve finished here,” she reached out and held the younger Asari’s chin and pulled her into a kiss. It was returned with an almost overwhelming sense of need and desire.

Aria’s lips curled slightly as she released the maiden and knew she would finish what she had started at the first opportunity.

When they were alone Aria switched the security and privacy barrier back on and took up her signature pose waiting for one of them to speak.
“We’ve got her Boss and her secret keeper,” it was Grizz that spoke his pride evident in his voice.

“She’s in Thrace obviously wants to be close to the action when everything goes down,” Sanak said and Aria agreed with him. Thrace was Thrassica’s capital and as such only an hour by shuttle away from the T’Soni estate in Akkadian.

“Her safety net is an information brokerage on Illium, seems they offer this service to anyone with enough credits. Everything’s in place and we can move in on them on your say so,” Bray completed their briefing and all their concerns had disappeared as they watched a look of complete satisfaction cross Aria’s face.

“Well done, I knew you wouldn’t let me down,” Aria always rewarded her men for getting the job done. They would find handsome bonus’s in their accounts even though this was what she paid them for she knew they had pulled out all the stops for her.

As she continued to speak Aria’s smile was cold and the look in her eyes would have frozen a charging Krogan battlemaster. Her voice was quiet, controlled, yet full of menace; the rage she felt coursing through her veins also evident in her tone.

“Now I have you Vasir… now your mine,” as she spoke the last few words Aria reached out a hand in front of her and looked for a moment at her palm, as if Vasir was already sitting there. As she finished speaking Aria closed her hand into a fist crushing the image of her advisory.

She stood up and just before she dropped the barrier said in her usual business-like manner, “we’ll move our operations to my estate in Serrice. I want to get my hands on her as quickly as possible once we’ve lifted her… make my frigate ready,” and as they all walked through off the balcony she finished, “and collect Ne’aira from the bar and put her on the ship… I need some entertainment for the journey.”

As Aria moved quickly to her office to pick up what she needed she smiled at the thought of the eighteen hour trip to Thessia and how much pleasure she would have with her latest conquest on the journey.

T’Soni estate Thessia – three days before Janiris

Shepard, Garrus and Grunt had ferried in the food from the kitchen to the large dining room. Two huge pots of stew, one each of vegetable and animal protein, extra green vegetables, extra meat and loaves of that days fresh baked bread.

Veetor had just finished setting serving spoons, cutlery and dishes on the long side table that would offer self-service to the dinner guests. They placed a pot of stew at either end of the table with the other items piled in serving dishes and chopping boards between them.

The evening brought a different array of gentle scent wafting in through wide open doors from the formal gardens at the back of the house. Shepard realised with satisfaction that the evening scented plants growing close to the dining room windows was yet another example of the Asari attention to ambient detail.

"Chow time people," Shepard said to the waiting knot of people who had arrived from their various previous pursuits. As Shepard caught Liara’s eye she thought she saw a flash of embarrassment but when Liara reached her side there was no trace and she put it down to too much bier earlier in the day.
There was a flurry of activity, mingling bodies and murmurs of conversation and a few jokes about the 'cooks' abilities, while the guests helped themselves and turned with heaped plates and bowls to find a place at the dining table.

When everyone was sitting down there was a momentary pause, the silence allowing the sounds of birds chattering from the garden to fill the space.

Before she really knew what she was doing Shepard spoke into the silence.

"There is nothing better than to share food with friends, old and new," as she spoke Shepard glanced around the table, "family and the people we love." She smiled at Tash and then sought out Liara's eyes and gave a more intimate smile accompanied by a small nod of acknowledgement.

Liara was sitting at one end of the long table and Shepard at the other and in that moment she longed to be physically close to her love as she pressed on.

"I'm not going to make a speech or anything... don't want the excellent food," she smirked at her co-cooks, "expertly thrown together by your team of catering staff, once only performance... who may or may not have got side-tracked from the actual cooking at several points..." a trickle of laughter and smiles rippled around the table with few comments about potential food poisoning adding to the banter.

"But," Shepard continued now slightly more serious in tone, "we really wanted you all here... because," Shepard looked down the table at her soul mate, the love of her life who was smiling gently back at her.

"Because Liara finally gave in and said she would become my bondmate. We’re going to tie the knot in three day’s time..." a roar of congratulations and well done's permeated the room. Even Garrus, Kasumi, Tash and Liselle, who had already been told the news, joined in to once more add their congratulations to the happy couple.

Shepard held up her hands and the chatter died away, "and... we're going to have a daughter... Liara's..." but before Shepard could finish the room exploded in a much louder round of congratulations, smiles and laughter.

Shepard continued over the chatter, "well get stuck in I believe we have some entertainment after dinner so please enjoy your food and thank you..." Shepard felt really emotional. She was sure no one except Liara could tell and her soon to be bondmate gave her such a beautiful smile as she tilted her head slightly to one side in question.

"Just so happy," Shepard mouthed down the table to Liara and gave one of her huge smiles. And Shepard felt an extra rush of love and connection when Liara mouthed back "as am I my love."

An instant later they were both separately drawn into conversations that had sparked up around them. The sound of eating, conversation and occasional laughter reigned supreme in the room.

Through the meal Shepard caught glimpses of their guests engaged in conversation and was amused to see that Tash was flanked by Liselle and Jack who seemed at one point to be exchanging notes about her cousins ‘performance’.

Kasumi and Jamie were sitting next to each and discreetly sharing a touch and a look. Shepard was so pleased they seemed to be progressing their courtship. Grunt was enjoying himself chatting away to the two commando captains Senna and Evictus who also drew in Tash, Liselle and Jack at one point to discuss the finer points of stealth versus full frontal assaults.
Garrus, as ever her wingman on her right was deep in conversation for a good part of the meal with Priestess El’Estrene and Shepard joined them in their discussions about belief and the ‘afterlife’.

Turian religious tenets revolved around ancestor worship and they strongly believed the ‘spirits’ walked amongst them. Her friend had lost his belief some years ago and it made for an interesting conversation as Shepard wasn’t sure what she believed in anymore, if anything.

Her occasional glances down the table to Liara often saw her in deep conversation with Seninnth T’Joan, at times Liara’s face looked troubled but she always smiled when she caught Shepard looking.

On her left she had seated Veetor, mindful that he might find the evening difficult, and Mordin then Ish alongside him. Mordin was fascinated with all things Quarian the pair seemed to be having a very lively conversation with Ish dropping in and out whenever technology or culture was mentioned.

Only after the sweet course had been consumed did the group begin to quieten down looking this time towards Liara who had started to speak in a raised voice.

"That was surprisingly good," she smiled reflecting the comments and the teasing banter that had permeated the meal. "And now if you would all like to make your way to the large sitting room I believe Ish is going to play for us,” she looked across and the young Salarian who nodded vigorously.

"Excellent, you should hear what sound he can get out of that tech piano in the starboard lounge," Garrus said and Normandy crew members nodded in agreement, "and the one Liara has is a full sized grand," Garrus concluded slapping Ish on the back.

More scrapping of chairs as the party stood and began to walk lazily across the hall to the larger of the two sitting rooms in the T’Soni mansion.

Most of the dinner party were sitting on the sofas, Tash, Liselle, Senna and Evictus were standing next to the open doors of room’s glass wall. The sky was now dimming quickly and in the snatches of silence between the continuing conversation bird song was fading into the more exotic sounds of the night insects.

Shepard and Garrus were standing in front in front of the unlit fire Turian whiskey in hand, a gift from Liselle. Shepard noticed Liara had a glass of her favourite purple wine which was made from grapes grown on the estate.

All head’s turned to the far end of the room as the piano stirred into life and they gave their full attention to the young Salarian who settled into playing a repertoire fit for a high end night club.

“I have to say I was surprised when I found out so many Salarian’s were also musicians, I think it’s because your culture is so… science based… by the numbers if you know what I mean,” Shepard said to Mordin who had joined her and Garrus bringing a fresh round of drinks.

“Yes Shepard it is, as you say, an unlikely combination. But music, for us, is all about its mathematical basis, what we hear are complex and beautiful combinations of numbers,” Mordin explained smiling.

“Yeah,” Garrus drawled, “I have the same connection but mine is the number of drinks it takes before I loosen up enough to dance.”

The three chuckled and gave each other knowing looks; it was certainly something Shepard related
“Come on now this isn’t a recital… I hate playing in silence… and does someone want to come and join me… anyone sing?” Ish said from the piano hands still flashing across the keys and sending sweet waves of music through the room and beyond.

“You know Jack has been known to sing when Tash has managed to really loosen her up, but only when there are a few of us left in the lounge,” Garrus said quietly his eyes finding the tattooed figure sitting next to Liara the pair in conversation.

Shepard realised how much she had had to keep herself away from the crew on the Normandy during their down times. The headaches, lack of sleep and sudden overwhelming panic attack’s meant it had been impossible for her to relax and she certainly couldn’t let her guard down. At times it had taken all her strength and willpower to keep her work schedule together.

As if Garrus had been reading her mind he said keeping his voice low, “you did a good job of hiding what was going on with you Shepard. But you couldn’t have kept it from the crew without Miranda covering for you… she could even see when those attacks were coming on and got you away with some work related excuse… I’m pretty sure Edi and Miranda had a code going on and I know for a fact Edi locked doors to stop access when you’d collapsed before you got back to your cabin on a couple of occasions.”

Shepard whipped her head around but Mordin had moved off and was talking to Veetor standing behind one of the sofas.

“Was it that obvious… did the crew know…?” Shepard groaned looking into her friends eyes his sadness evident in his kind gaze.

“No, I don’t believe anyone else saw it or even suspected. We all knew you were exhausted but most put it down to your getting acclimatised to coming back from the dead. I saw it because I’d already seen it with Liara and I’d been the one who covered for her.

I would have helped but anytime I tried to raise the subject you shut me down, but I understood. I don’t think you realised how much you were struggling.

Look you know I don’t like to interfere,” Garrus smiled as Shepard raised her eyebrows and a faint smile traced its presence on her lips, “now I didn’t say I don’t interfere, just that I don’t like too,” he smiled but then continued in a more serious tone.

“I think it’s important for you to know just how loyal Miranda has been to you. I didn’t know if you’d recognised it, at times Shepard she was all that was holding you up, her and Edi… I’m damn sure of it.”

“Thanks Garrus,” she nodded at him and gave him an affectionate nudge with her elbow, “I knew how bad it was and how bad it was getting. I think a huge part of it may have been because of my connection with Liara. Priestess El’Estrene is convinced I was feeling echoes of what Liara was going through.

But I do know how much Miranda and Edi covered for me and that’s why I am going to have a Goddess awful argument with Liara about her when we finally ‘talk’ about ‘that woman’,” Shepard smiled a little ruefully and then turned to face Garrus square on and said.

“But I also knew you were trying to offer me help, that you could see what was going on and I didn’t want to drag you in… and not because I don’t trust you with my life, with something even
more important to me than my life,” and both their eyes moved to look briefly in Liara’s direction, “but exactly because you’d been doing that for Liara and I wanted to give you a break.”

The stood in silence for a few moments and then Garrus said with a sigh, “word to the wise Shepard and for future reference… I don’t need to have a break from supporting and protecting the people I care about… your family Shepard and you know that’s a full time and lifelong commitment.”

Shepard felt the warm rush of connection with her friend and a huge grin creased her face and she gave him a few brief nods of agreement she said, “Copy that Garrus… copy that.”

He let out a deep flanged laugh that she echoed and as Shepard turned back to face the room Liara caught her eye and they exchanged an intimate smile and Shepard gave her lover an accompanying wink.

Shepard’s thoughts returned briefly to the inevitable clash they would have over Miranda and slight chill ran down her back and a familiar thought ran through her mind, ‘she’s really not going to like it Shepard… and she is a force to be reckoned with.’

As the evening wore on Senna joined Ish at the piano and sang along with some of the more well-known songs. Her voice had a hypnotic quality and some of the guest began to drift towards the piano to listen a few even started dancing.

Shepard was still standing in the same position but she had been joined by Liara. Her arm was snaked around Liara’s waist and she could feel her lovers’ body heat through the thin, body hugging material of the long silver flecked white dress.

The dress showed Liara’s body off perfectly and was low cut, unusually for Liara, teasing a view of her cleavage to which Shepard’s eyes seemed inevitably drawn.

A burst of laughter drew Shepard’s eyes to the couple who were slow dancing in the space between one set of open doors. They seemed completely oblivious to everything else around them.

Tash was taller than Liselle by a good three or four inches and yet their bodies looked like a perfect match. Hips swaying slowly, Liselle’s hands clasped at the back of her tall blond lovers neck. Tash’s hands were holding the sensually swaying hips.

Liselle was wearing tight fitting leather trousers and a leather vest that was laced together up the front and looked as if it only just managed to contain her shapely blue breasts. The vest was short and so revealed an expanse of soft blue skin around her slim but muscular stomach.

Part of a white tattoo was showing on her back over the top of the low slung trousers and she had two others on the top of her arms. Shepard realised she had been looking at Liselle for quite a long time.

“Do you think that’s how we look to other people,” she said quietly to Liara who followed her lover’s eyes. Shepard felt a ripple of something from Liara but couldn’t work out what it had been. But Shepard definitely felt a flash of sexual arousal.

“Um perhaps…” Liara said hesitantly.

Shepard looked again and this time took in both halves of the couple.

The average height for all humans was anything between six and seven feet and Tash was at the taller end at nearly six nine. Asari had the same height range and although most were closer to six than seven both Liara and Liselle were six five and Shepard was taller by a couple of inches.
The tallest Asari Shepard had seen so far was Aria T’Loak who looked as if she was almost seven foot and certainly towered over Shepard.

Why she suddenly thought about Aria she had no idea, her mind had wandered and when she looked back at Tash and Liselle they were dancing slowly outside in the now fast encroaching shadows on the patio.

The sexual and sensual connection between the two of them was evident even from across the room and once again Shepard seemed to sense something of a reaction from Liara.

“They look good together,” Shepard whispered close to her lovers’ ear, “but not as good as we do,” and Shepard pulled Liara around so that their bodies were pressed tightly against each other.

The heat between Liara’s legs burned and Shepard was taken by surprise at the flash of lust from her lover as their lips met and hips pushed forward to meet each other.

Shepard felt a light meld flow across her mind and she became aware of just how turned on Liara was and for a moment almost forgot they were in company feeling a strong desire to undress her hot and frustrated lover.

Across the room two pairs of eyes took in the sudden flash of connection and they shared a grin and a deep chuckle sounded in Liselle’s throat.

“I suspect Liara will be confessing her voyeurism tonight if I’m not much mistaken,” she said returning to look up into piercing blue eyes.

“Yeah still not sure how I feel about being my cousins fuck turn on… but… hey any service we can offer in the name of galactic safety I am more than happy to perform with you,” Tash had been nibbling her lovers waiting, needy full lips and as she finished speaking took them in a long deep passionate kiss.

“Something in the air tonight,” Garrus chuckled to Jack who was standing next to him, also getting a refill at the bar. They looked across the room at the two couples and also noticed Kasumi leading Jamie by the hand out into the gardens.

“Everybody wants to fuck hard if they think the end of the world is coming,” Jack said in her deep, gravely, sexy voice. It was the most like the flanged tones of his own species that Garrus had ever heard and he found it very attractive.

“You could be right Jack… so,” he left the sentence hanging and they both laughed at the same time.

“No way this side of Armageddon Garrus… but nice try,” and she punched him on the shoulder. They turned back to the bar and Garrus said, “aw you can’t blame a Turian for trying,” and he was pleased that Jack felt relaxed enough to take his banter and joking as it was intended.

Shepard had a way of creating an atmosphere of trust and safety for even the most damaged of their crew, he knew from personal experience how much that meant and he raised his glass in a silent thank you to his friend and Commander.

Shepard was aware that someone was standing just behind Liara’s shoulder as she felt the meld fade and Liara turn her head.

“The shuttle is just coming in to land Lady Liara,” it was one of the members of staff and the shuttle she was announcing would herald the arrival of Captain Hannah Shepard.
Shepard grinned broadly and gave Liara a brief parting kiss as she said, “back in a few, don’t carry on without me,” Shepard joked but a look of embarrassment once more passed over Liara’s face and she knew they would need to get to the bottom of what was going on when they were alone later.

“She’s here,” Shepard said to Tash as she came up alongside the couple who were continuing to slow dance against each other.

Immediately Tash stopped and look of absolute dread crossed her face but before she could start speaking Shepard took her by the arm and said over her shoulder as she led her cousin away, “we’ll be back soon and I promise she won’t be damaged in any way.”

Liselle returned Shepard’s smiled and said quietly as the pair left, “you better not… she belongs to me.”

She made her way to her sisters’ side wondering if she could keep from teasing her about the afternoon’s ‘performance’.
Chapter 47

*T'Soni Estate, Thessia – 3 days before Janaris*

They got outside and onto the lawns in time to see the shuttle lowering out of the now dark night sky. Landing spotlights and spitting thrusters cast shadows on the grass and lit up the Alliance markings on its side.

As they watched it settle Shepard turned to her cousin who looked increasingly nervous.

“I’ve told her everything Tash, what the AIS asked you to do, how they hung you out to dry… that all that shit was untrue and you’re working for Cerberus is exactly the same as I’m doing now… it’ll be ok I promise,” Shepard put an arm around her cousin and gave her a quick hug.

Hannah Shepard was more than her best friend’s mother, more than her aunt, more than an Alliance officer she admired and slightly hero worshiped.

Hannah Shepard was the closest thing that Tash had to a mother after her own died when she was only a year old and as often as was possible Hannah Shepard had insisted that Tash stay with her and John wherever they had been stationed.

Not only because of the obvious bond between the two cousins but also because Hannah knew fine well how difficult it was for the young girl growing up in the Mikhailovich household.

She regretted not having persuaded her husband’s half-brother often enough to allow Tash to visit but there was nothing he could to do stop his daughter practically living with the Shepard’s when they were stationed on the same ship or the same station.

Both the young women stood to attention as the doors opened and a distinguished looking woman in Alliance bdu’s stepped onto the grass.

As she approached she saluted and gave them a huge smile, “considering neither of you are officially still in the service you really don’t need to stand to attention,” she sounded tired but her smile reached her voice.

“Congratulations darling,” she said as she pulled Shepard into a brief hug and kissed the side of her face.

But she then turned to Tash and pulled her into arms and held as she said, “and welcome home you, I’ve missed you, we can talk properly later but know this…” and she pulled out a little from the hug to look up into Tash’s eyes that she noticed were a little glazed, “whatever you’ve had to do to survive, you did that for the Alliance… you were under orders and I won’t have you trying to destroy yourself because we let you down,” she pulled Tash back into another hug.

“You’ve never let me down Aunt Hannah… I’ve done… I’ve been…” Hannah cut across Tash whose voice reflected the struggle she was having not to cry.

“No I won’t hear of it… you were, still are on Alliance duty… you don’t have to carry this on your own anymore. Come on let’s get inside so I can have a proper look at you… have you actually grown taller,” she said smiling as they turned to walk towards the house. But Hannah kept her arm around her niece.

Once in the hall Shepard and Tash saw how tired the Captain looked.
“Mum you look wrecked are you ok?”

“Yeah you look like you need a week’s sleep.”

“I’ve been travelling non-stop on a variety of vessels since I got your vid call Lyddie,” Hannah smiled, “nothing some decent food and a good night’s sleep won’t put right.”

But Shepard had a sense that there was something else troubling her mother, but for now she’d accept the explanation.

“You take her into the sitting room and I’ll go get a plate of food,” Tash said and disappeared before Shepard could reply.

“She was so nervous about seeing you Mum, not sure what she thought you were going to say,” Shepard said quietly as they walked towards the sound of music and conversation.

“Sometimes we forget what it’s like having her father inside her head Lyddie, he drove you over the edge the last time you saw him and that was only one conversation. Imagine that destructive atmosphere day in and day out… and she may hate him but it’s hard to shrug off what parent’s do to their children… good or bad,” Hannah smiled at her daughter and gave a silent thanks that she’d grown up in a home full of love and encouragement.

As they entered the room Liara was already walking towards them.

“Liara it’s so good to see you looking well,” Hannah Shepard’s face lit up and she opened her arms to give her soon to be daughter-in-law a hug, “and to see you again in such happy circumstances… I’m so proud and happy Liara.” Hannah Shepard’s voice only slightly gave away the depth of emotion she was feeling.

Hannah had been convinced at several points that Liara would just allow herself to fade away after her daughters ‘death’. And then the stories of her desperate attempts to seek revenge on the Shadow Broker made Shepard senior even more concerned.

She had tried to reach Liara but with no success, but it seemed as if she was her old self once again.

Liara stayed in the hug and held Hannah just as tightly.

“Thank you for all you did for me, all you tried to do… I was lost Hannah… so lost,” Liara said quietly.

“I know sweetheart, I know,” Hannah said softly in response and when they broke apart their eyes were a little tear filled.

Shepard’s voice broke the moment and they both turned to look in the direction of the drinks table.

“No Grunt no hard liquor for you until we’ve spoken to Wrex, Garrus are you encouraging him,” she said with more than a hint of a smile in her voice.

“Come here and meet my mother,” Shepard continued and Grunt made his way to stand in front of Shepard senior.

“Ah another warrior… good to meet you Clan Matriarch” he said offering a warrior arm shake and continued, “I am proud to be in Shepard’s Krant and I honour you as my Matriarch,” he said in his slightly higher yet still rumbling Krogan tones.
“Clan Matriarch,” Hannah said quietly to her daughter standing next to her as she returned Grunt’s
greeting with a firm grip on his forearm and showed no pain at his vice like grip on hers.

“Um yeah long story, well quite a short one really, I’ll explain later,” Shepard answered and then
said to Grunt, “You’re only a few months out of that tank Grunt we have no idea how strong alcohol
will affect you, now behave,” she said affectionately with smile.

The young Krogan laughed and slapped Shepard on the shoulder but she was ready for it and only
rocked a little, “you are a great warrior Shepard I will obey” and as he turned to walk away he
continued quietly, “and a good parent.”

Hannah gave her daughter a questioning look and as Shepard shrugged and gave her a sheepish
smile Liara laughed and took Hannah by the arm and said, “Shepard seems to have adopted Grunt
and he is very sweet once you get to know him.”

They moved to one of the sofas and Liselle stood and said, “So your Tasha’s aunt, she’s talked about
you. Welcome.” And Liselle offered an Asari greeting and one of her brilliant smiles.

“Thank you Liselle she’s gone to get me something to eat,” Hannah said as she noticed Liselle
looking for the missing human.

“Oh good, come and sit down,” she said and turned to Liara, “Seninnth is waiting for you at the
piano she’s still insisting you play,” Liselle was smiling at her sisters obvious embarrassment and
reluctance to be drawn into performing on the piano.

“I didn’t know you could play babe,” Shepard said to a very nervous looking Liara.

“I have not played in a very long time… and I was never…” Seninnth T’Joan came up alongside
Liara and cut across her words.

“You played beautifully… why don’t you play the first song your mother taught you, it meant a lot
to her,” Seninnth said gently.

Liara gave up the struggle and moved to the piano Shepard followed and stood alongside.

“Will I put you off if I stay here,” she said smiling as Liara settled onto the stool.

“No my love it will help if I think I am only playing for you… I… well… you remember when we
talked about those in love having a particular song?” she said looking up into loving green eyes.

Shepard nodded and briefly thought of the song that she always thought of as hers and Liara’s.

“Well… this is what reminds me most of us… of you. I feel this music in my soul, in the place I feel
your presence strongest,” she smiled and turned her eyes to the keys but as she began playing they
drifted shut.

There was silence in the room and the notes came slowly and softly building to louder waves of
sound that seemed, to Shepard, to be full of emotion.

It spoke of passion, loss and love re-born. When the final chords faded and the room fell again into
silence people started to ask for more.

Shepard leaned down and kissed Liara gently on the lips and said quietly, “I feel it too my beautiful
girl.”
Liara smiled and said, “I had forgotten how much I love playing,” she sounded and looked very young in that moment and Shepard couldn’t help but give her a huge smile that lit up her face.

“One more then?” Shepard asked adding her request to the growing number of request for her to play again.

Liara’s fingers began to dance across the keys and she played expertly making the piano sing of compassion, friendship and honour.

When she finished playing the second time a ripple of applause echoed around the room and Liara stood up now very embarrassed.

“I think we need Ish back at the helm and more of Senna’s lovely voice,” she said holding Shepard’s had as they made their way back to the sofas.

“That was lovely Liara,” Hannah Shepard said whilst balancing a plate of food on her lap.

“That first song Liara, where is it from,” Liselle asked her face unreadable.

“My mother taught me, I believe she composed it herself,” Liara answered tilting her head slightly to the side in question.

“Oh… perhaps we can talk about it later,” Liselle said raising her eye brows and Liara gave a small nod in understanding.

The party finally broke up around midnight. Hannah Shepard had gone to bed a little before everyone else saying she needed the rest after all the travelling.

Shepard entered their bedroom behind Liara and was surprised to see two commando’s one sitting in a chair next to the baby’s crib and the other standing watching the gardens through the open balcony doors.

“Thank you both,” Liara said by means of dismissing the commandos who smiled, nodded and left the room.

“Commandos Lee and they were Liselle’s crew weren’t they? What’s going on?” Shepard asked quietly watching her lovers’ expression.

“Oh my love you must forgive my… over cautious approach,” Liara moved to look at the baby sleeping soundly, “I am new at this. And if we are to have baby sitters why not make them asari commandos,” she smiled at her puzzled looking human.

Shepard had one of those gut feelings she was trying to get used to. It wasn’t that she though Liara was lying it was just… something was not being said… and Shepard felt… and edge of fear or was it just worry.

“Lee I just have the feeling that something is going on that you’re not telling me, I’ve had it all evening,” Shepard said moving close enough to take Liara’s hands in her own.

“You don’t have to tell me babe but you know if there’s anything going on you can talk to me… you seem… you and Liselle seem to have, well… you seem close,” Shepard realised she was feeling a little concerned perhaps even an edge of jealousy which she really didn’t want to own but it was there.
“Oh my love you have nothing to worry about with Liselle… we… I will tell you all about it tomorrow. And you are correct I do have some things on my mind and we will talk about it tomorrow,” Liara said half wondering if she should tell Shepard now.

If not knowing but suspecting something was wrong was going to cause her lover concern this was exactly what Liara was trying to avoid, at least for a little longer.

“Ok but you don’t need to keep things from me Lee… this whole thing is stressful I know that… even our bonding ceremony feels like it doesn’t belong to us anymore,” Shepard studied Liara’s face who was nodding slowly a look of sadness on her face.

“I am sorry Shepard I should…” Shepard cut across her words pulling Liara into her arms and kissing the soft cheek.

“Hey none of that, I don’t care about all the ceremonial stuff… I just want us to be together darlin’… and of course your appointment ceremony is going to be a big thing. It’s a huge honour and achievement and I’m so proud of you for taking it on… but is it really bad of me to just be looking forward to after all this so we can have some ordinary time together,” she smiled down at the upturned face.

Liara struggled with everything she was keeping from her soon to be bondmate. And she made a decision to tell Shepard everything after the crew visit in the morning. And the kernel of another idea started to form in her mind about their bonding ceremony but she would talk it over with Shepard after she had thought it through a little more and talked to Lady Nara.

Shepard watched as Liara’s thoughts played across her face and smiled again when her lover’s face settled into a gentle smile as she said with a small sigh, “it is certainly not bad of you. I have more than once fantasised about grabbing you and the baby and running for… anywhere that is not here… perhaps to that lovely cove where we spent some time on our holiday.”

Shepard leaned in and they kissed, long slow and gentle. Then a rush of desire, lust and passion flared through Liara’s body. Shepard responded and the kiss depended.

Liara started tearing at her lovers clothes and Shepard began to walk them towards the bed.

Shepard ran her hands across the breasts she’d been fascinated by all evening. She felt their weight, firmness; she wanted to feel them against her.

Ripping off clothes quickly, hands exploring newly revealed bare flesh and still kissing deeply, tongues playing a game of give and take… they were soon naked on the bed.

Shepard spread Liara’s legs with her own thigh and moved smoothly between her wiling lovers legs. She moved her mouth down to kiss and lick the firm breasts, stopping to suck on hard nipples, cupping each one to her lips with a hand.

Liara began to moan and writhe, running fingers through Shepard’s hair and pulling her lover tight to her breasts.

“I need you inside me,” Liara gasped her breath quickening.

Shepard answered with a low moan and moved her hand quickly to find the heat between her lovers’ thighs. The human gasped when she pushed her fingers into the heat, “Goddess your soaking wet.”

They found each other’s mouths and Shepard began pumping in and out; and curling her fingers inside her lovers’ molten centre. Making sure she rubbed the tips over the internal ridges which
offered similar sensations to those of the full and swollen clit. And Liara’s was full and swollen as she pushed it up onto Shepard’s thumb.

It wasn’t long before they both climaxed, the orgasm rushing through them like an incoming tide. Still in the meld with Shepard still inside her Liara said still a little breathless, “I have a confession my love… I… I really don’t know what is happening to me. I have never felt so… so… desperate for our lovemaking before… although if I am going to be completely honest,” and Liara blushed so deeply even without the meld Shepard would have been able to sense the depth of her embarrassment.

“Hey beautiful, you’ve no need to be ashamed… its natural… and I’m not complaining… you know maybe we would always have been this desperate for each other but it was difficult on the ship,” Shepard said softly kissing Liara’s slightly up turned nose.

Liara looked up at her gentle and generous lover, “but it feels more uncontrolled… more than desperate Shepard and it worries me… this absolute drive to… well… it feels as if I would be willing and able for us to have sex as many times a day as we could be alone.

I am worried something of the alternative personality is slipping back in,” and without meaning to her mind flashed back to memories of the hard, desperate, often violent sex she had had with Shiala.

“Oh way too much information Lee… really didn’t need to see that,” Shepard said fighting an almost uncontrollable desire to set off immediately to try to find the Shadow Broker only so she could tear Shiala apart with her bare hands.

Liara looked desperately concerned and Shepard felt a wash of reassurance and love and sorrow and her lovers’ sense that she betrayed Shepard with Shiala.

“Lee if you’re really worried why don’t you, we, talk to someone… maybe it’s something to do with you entering your maiden stage early… and you know,” Shepard said desperately trying to lighten both their moods, “feel free to come find me for a fuck anytime day or night,” Shepard kissed her lover gently and began withdrawing her fingers.

“I need to confess something else before it… well… I feel sure it will just slip out while we are in a meld…” Liara faltered and ground to a halt.

“Lee you’re beginning to worry me now,” Shepard said a frown creasing her forehead. She really didn’t know if she could take a confession about further sexual liaisons in her stride.

And at the same time Shepard began to feel again the conflict she had on the one hand condemning her feelings of jealousy and on the other an acceptance that she would have strong feelings about Liara being with anyone else.

But these were not ‘strong feelings’ they were a boiling murderous rage and aimed not at Liara but at Shiala. ‘This isn’t right Shepard… it’s a complete over reaction,’ she thought to herself and then focussed on Liara’s next words as calmly as she could.

With a deep sigh Liara said quietly, “when I went for my walk earlier, down to the beach… Liselle and Tash were there… and they were… making love and I… stood in the shadow of the trees and I watched them,” Liara finished in a rush and her concerned look changed to one of complete bafflement as Shepard laughed in response to the first part of her confession.

“Sorry Lee, I can see your embarrassed about it… that’s what I saw earlier this evening, I knew there was something,” Shepard said almost triumphantly and kissed her lover gently on the lips.
“But it is not funny Shepard… that is not all that… I… oh dear,” Liara was no prude but somehow this was territory she had never ventured into and she was finding it very difficult. She also couldn’t understand why her confession had caused Shepard to be quite so amused.

“Show me,” Shepard said more seriously realising her reaction had been a little unsupportive, “through the meld and share with me what you’re trying to tell me.”

And answering the gentle smile on her lover’s lips Liara brought the memories into her mind and shared them through the meld.

Shepard saw and felt an echo of what Liara had been feeling, including the sexual arousal, and despite her best efforts she began to feel very turned on by the scene.

Without being really aware of what she was doing as Liara’s memory moved towards her climax Shepard moved her fingers to her lover’s swollen and throbbing clit and moved them in a mirror to the Liara’s fingers in the memory.

Their shared orgasm hit them a split second after Liara’s memory had played itself out. As she was coming Liara shared the wish she had for Shepard to take her while she had been watching.

“Well you… just call me… next time you’re… in that situation… and I’ll be there,” Shepard said in between hard lust filled kisses. As Shepard pulled away and got off the bed Liara felt the cooler night air ripple across her damp body.

She knew where Shepard was going; it was because of the image Liara had shared with her. And Liara felt a renewed flush of lust, desire and need course through her body.

They didn’t use ‘toys’ very often and it was only by chance that what they both wanted to use was available. Shepard owed a big thank you to Matriarch T’Joan for making sure they would have everything they might possibly need.

Shepard came back and stood next to the bed, her strong, lean, muscled body silhouetted in the moonlight that flowed into the room, casting its gentle light across the bed.

Liara moaned as she reached out to run her hand across her lover’s abdomen, feeling tensing muscles ripple under her touch. Her eyes on the extension that stood hard and erect from Shepard’s centre. The shorter end of the dildo with its sensual transmitter was already inside the human, its haptic interface already relaying stimulation to Shepard’s clit and sensitive internal erogenous zones.

Liara sat up moving quickly and gracefully in one flowing movement to sit on the edge of the bed and took the cock into her mouth.

The gasp from her lover turned into a low moan as Liara pulled her head back up the shaft sucking hard and licking the sensitive tip before pushing her head forward again to take almost the whole of its length into her mouth.

She felt the ridges of the shaft rolling over her lips and knew how they would stimulate her own inner ridges and another wave of need and desire took her over the edge and she deepened the meld.

Shepard looked down and watched as Liara’s head bobbed up and down on her cock and had the sensation it was getting harder and fuller.

Between them they managed to keep just on the edge of climaxing for a while but the intensity of the sensations the need for release moved them ever closer.
Shepard had her hands on the back of Liara’s head and was expertly fingering the sensitive areas of her lovers’ crests. As they drew close to their climax she could only hold her lovers’ head and resist the temptation to pull her harder onto her now screamingly sensitive shaft.

As she came Liara felt the warm cum hit the back of her throat and her own wetness spill from her heated centre.

“Fuck… fuck… oh yeah… fuck… your mouth… such a good…” Shepard’s words were punctuated by ragged breath and grunts of release; tapering off into a long low moan. Liara pulled back when she was sure the climax had completely faded and looked up her blue eyes shining.

Liara hummed her moans against the still hard but quivering shaft which she was still working with her mouth.

Shepard let out a deep breath and said quietly, “that wasn’t exactly what I had planned,” and she smiled as they both moved to lie on the bed.

“I know my love,” Liara said smiling and lazily tracing her fingers across Shepard’s strong shoulders and lower to sweep across the hard nipples of her lovers breasts.

“But it seemed… appropriate,” Liara said with a smile.

Shepard grinned and sat up abruptly saying, “Get on your knees T’Soni… no hands and knees,” She corrected her lover who was moving to kneel in front of her.

Liara let out a small whimper and quickly took up position on all fours her arse merely inches from the tip of Shepard’s cock.

Shepard ran her fingers across Liara’s very wet lips making sure she stroked across the full, hard clit and took the wetness to her mouth.

“I love the taste of you,” she said in a low voice bringing another moan from her lover.

“So this is what you want is it… tell me what you want,” Shepard said running the sensitive tip of the shaft across Liara’s heat parting her lips but not entering.

“Oh… yes… I need you Shepard,” Liara answered her voice breathless and husky with lust.

“But what do you need me to do babe,” Shepard said her smile clear in her voice even though Liara couldn’t see her lovers face from her current position.

Liara let out a gasping moan and said, “Ooooh please Shepard I need you… inside… fuck me… fuck me hard,” Liara’s last words resonated through Shepard’s body as Liara deepened the meld once more.

“Hard, deep and fast is how you like it,” Shepard said close to the side of Liara’s head as she pushed the shaft deep inside her lovers burning and very wet core.

“Yes,” was all that Liara could manage as Shepard began to pump deep inside and pulling almost out before burying herself again in the heat of her lovers centre.

They both felt the added stimulation the ridges on the cock provided and Shepard gave up all hope of a teasing slow screw as her hips thrust back and forth at an ever quickening pace.

Shepard held Liara by the hips and after half a dozen thrusts she could bury the whole of the cock
inside feeling her abdomen brush against her lovers flesh on every forward push.

Muffled moans and screams drifted up from where Liara had buried her face in the pillows, now resting on her forearms, but still managing to push back onto Shepard to help bury the cock as deep as possible.

They were once again wrapped in a glimmering haze of biotic energy and were lost in each other, in their love, in their connection and pleasure. Nothing else existed but this moment and the growing pulses and waves of almost unbearable stimulation.

Shepard reached a hand around and placed two fingers on her lovers bulging and very hard clit. She felt the wetness spilling from inside Liara and coated her fingers as she began rubbing slow circles that jolted through both their bodies, the added stimulation causing more intense moans and occasional screams from Liara.

She also allowed her fingers to make contact with the cock on its journey in and out of her lover again intensifying the stimulation and providing yet another source of pleasure.

Shepard’s breath, like Liara’s, was short and ragged and on every inward thrust she also moaned and growled her pleasure.

They both felt the building pressure, the overriding need for release, the powerful need for each other. And even as they were so closely joined that they were a part of each other an echo of craving for more seemed to hold them on the edge of their climax.

‘love you…’
‘eternity…’
‘mine…’
‘yours…’
‘never leave me…’
‘need…’
‘always…’

Their thoughts and feelings were one, their words not needing to be spoken.

The biotic sheen surrounding the two lovers’ shifted from the glimmering shades of blue and burst into a rainbow of colours.

A pair of eyes drifted open and watched the light show that bounced around the room and baby John gurgled contentedly before drifting back to sleep.

At the moment of their climax they both felt a strong echo of their lovemaking the night of their reunion but as the orgasm rushed through them the moment was forgotten.

Shepard threw her head back moaning and Liara gripped and un-gripped the bedding as she too rode the wave of their climax, guttural sounds being ripped from her throat.

Despite being on her knees Shepard felt her legs shake and was grateful to follow Liara’s collapsing body onto the bed. Liara felt the comfort of her lover’s body pressing her into the bed.
Their bodies were coated in sheen of sweat that caught the slight breeze through the open windows and Shepard’s hair was damp with exertion. The only sound in the room their still laboured breathing.

Shepard rested her cheek against Liara’s and moved her arms to mirror her lovers then finding and holding her hands.

“You know we can’t fall asleep in this position…” Shepard said softly a smile evident in her voice.

She felt Liara’s cheek crease into a smile.

“I know my love but just for a little longer;” as Liara finished speaking they both took deep relaxed breaths and drifted into sleep.

Shepard became aware of the warm soft body lying slightly across her and breathed a sigh of contentment. Then the sound that had called her back from sleep drifted again from the cot.

The baby was crying and as Shepard realised it so did Liara who moved to get up even with her eyes still shut.

“No… Lee… lay back down, I’ve got it, back to sleep darling,” as Shepard spoke she withdrew her arm from under her lover’s neck and pulled light covers back over the wonderful sight of a naked Liara.

Smiling she got off the bed and quickly pulled on some sweat pants and a tee shirt and moved quickly to the crib.

“Hey little man what’s up,” she said softly as she reached in and picked up her son.

He stopped crying loudly as soon as he was in her arms but his face was still distorted in misery and he continued to grizzle.

She took him to the bathroom and changed him and as she removed the dirty nappy and cleaned him up he began to strengthen.

“Now then… was that all or is sir hungry?” she said smiling and holding the small body in front of her.

He responded by kicking his legs and trying to find him mouth with his fist a slight frown beginning to crease the tiny forehead.

“Ok snack time it is,” she nestled him into the crook of her arm and moved back into the bedroom picking up a bottle of food and now fully equipped she went out onto the terrace and sat in on of the reclining chairs.

“Now just let me get this…” as she spoke Shepard pulled a tab at the bottom of the bottle and felt heat begin to flow through the milk solution.

“Crazy tech… love it,” she said more to herself and then with her knees bent up in front of her she positioned the baby laying against them and facing her.

“There you go little man,” she placed the bottles teat against the tiny lips and he began sucking vigorously, “fifteen microns and its heated to the exact temperature for little people. So what you been doing in your sleep to make you so hungry huh… or is it all that growing you have to do.” She
Liara’s thoughts drifted to a future with the Reapers defeated and their life together. Her life with her family… both her children and her Shepard... no more fighting no more wondering is her love would return from whatever mission she was on. And she drifted back to sleep hoping to dream about that happy future.

Back on the terrace the baby fed and gurgling contentedly once again Shepard brought him once more into the crook of her arm.

“Now see that up there…” she pointed to the night sky, “that’s where I was brought up. That’s where I was born. Yep,” she answered to a particularly loud gurgle accompanied by a kicking of legs, “I did little man… on a ship.” She moved him so they could look at each other and was rewarded by a smile.

“Will you be a space man or live dirt side… a farmer or a soldier,” sadness drifted into her soul at the thought of her small innocent son having to do the things she’d done as a marine.

“I kinda hope you follow your other mother kid and not me,” she noticed his eyes drifting shut so she brought him to nestle in her arms. As she looked down at now still and sleeping baby she said to herself, “but even without the Reapers the galaxy is a place full of evil. And someone has to stand up to it… someone has to fight… feels like it’s always been my path… I guess it always will be.”

Shepard watched the night sky and tried to calm her mind with thoughts of raising her family with Liara after… after they’d won… after they’d beaten the invincible darkness that was pure evil.

She fell into light sleep her son held firmly in her arms.
Chapter 48

A/N – Things are hotting up and we are on a countdown to disaster unless our fearless crew can stop the evil machinations of the Shadow Broker and the Collectors.

Things are also getting a bit steamy for Aria, but by now you must know that there are liberal sprinklings of sexual content throughout. Cei stands for clitoral enhancer implant… as if you couldn't guess.

Chapter 48

_T'Soni Estate, Thessia – very early morning, two days before Janaris_

Shepard slipped out of bed gently and felt a wrench that nearly pulled her back as Liara sighed in her sleep. Her sexy, lovely, soon to be bondmate looked completely at peace and Shepard felt her breath hitch as a wave of love and connection flowed through her.

Throwing on some sweats and a hoodie over her tee shirt she stopped briefly to look down on her soundly sleeping son and wondered for a moment why she'd agreed to a zero six hundred run with her mother and Tash.

With one last look at the sleeping pair as she left the bedroom Shepard allowed her joy to form into a huge smile. With her heart light and a happy buzz in her mind she set out to meet her running companions at the front door.

Hannah Shepard stood at the bottom of the short flight of steps stretching the muscles in her leg and eyeing the crumpled figure of her niece.

"Just how late was your night Tash," she smiled at the young woman who was sitting on the bottom step and moaning slightly.

"I hate early morning runs… you know I hate any exercise that doesn't involve kicking or punching," Tash said with a wry smile from under a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes.

"I hate early morning runs… you know I hate any exercise that doesn't involve kicking or punching," Tash said with a wry smile from under a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes.

Hannah Shepard laughed and remembered all too well how difficult it had been at first to get her young niece motivated to do any training. But she had hit on the perfect solution when the girls were around ten years old.

All Hannah needed to do was make it a competition between Tash and Lyddie and she was there giving it her all. There was a healthy competition between the two young girls that served to make each one try harder and thankfully they were gracious about either winning or losing.

"Should be fairly easy to leave you coughing your guts up half way around then slacker," Shepard trotted down the steps past her cousin and gave her a hearty laugh as she did a couple of leg stretches.

"Yeah we'll see about that," Tash said with a wry smile as she stood up.

"Come on then you two and no bickering I want a fairly pleasant quiet run," Hannah said as they formed up and began to jog around the side of the house.

The trio decided to follow the circuit Shepard had been using that would take them out through the back gardens, across the fields to the woods beyond. They would continue along the beach until they hit a small river which they would then follow upstream through more woods. The final leg of the
run would skirt cultivated fields and back through the informal gardens at the rear of the house.

By the time they reached the beach the three women had dropped into a steady rhythm and had the occasional exchange of conversation. Mainly about the beauty of Thessia and the glorious spring weather that was unusually hot and sunny.

On the beach Hannah Shepard drew to a halt and staying close to the water's edge she said, "I need to talk to you both without any chance of being overheard."

"Mum Liara's house is…" Shepard started a little hurt.

"Liara's house may not be as 'secure' from prying ears as you may think darling," Hannah smiled at her daughter and added, "I trust Liara and your friends absolutely but Councillor Anderson had a personal briefing from Councillor Tevos that troubled both of them so much it has prompted some discreet Asari intelligence work.

We haven't had the reports back yet but it seems there is a resurgence of an Asari supremacist organisation, I will share the reports with both you and Liara although I suspect she will get them directly from Councillor Tevos first."

"Yeah I've heard of them, weird name something like 'blood first'," Tash said and when Shepard looked at her questioningly she continued. "Some idiot tried to recruit Leece a couple of years back… she nearly tore them apart with her hands. For all her faults, and she has many, Aria won't stand for any kind of species shit, pro or anti. And Leece is just the same."

"You admire Aria don't you," Hannah said quietly.

"Yeah in a way…" Tash said anger in her voice and Shepard could sense a barrier coming up in her cousin, "guess that means I really have gone rogue and I'm just the traitor and general fuck up everyone thinks I am."

Hannah stepped forward and pulled Tash into a hug, "you have to stop thinking the people who love you are going to judge you Tash. I asked because I trust your judgement and all the stories we hear about Aria don't exactly…"

Tash cut across her aunt and pulled back out of the hug a little, "I'm sorry I just… well I've had to watch what I say even what I think for so long I… well yeah and don't get me wrong Aria is everything they say. But there's more to her, and I can't figure her out."

"You said you wanted to talk to us?" Shepard asked not wanting Tash to dwell too long on her exile to the Terminus system.

"Yes, to business," Hannah Shepard stood erect every inch the Alliance officer that she was to her core but with sadness etched into her face and reflected in her eyes.

"We have a huge problem at the highest levels across the Alliance military. We are infiltrated to the point that we may be compromised beyond our ability to retrieve the situation." Captain Shepard began walking slowly along the beach as she told them her news and the two young Alliance officers walked either side their faces and demeanour steeped in concern.

"When Admiral Hackett took over as head of Alliance Military he started a purge of known Cerberus sympathisers and supporters. We've been fighting politically to continue this work but Cerberus also has a lot of their members in positions of power within the civilian government.

We already knew how heavily infiltrated our top ranks were but we had no idea how compromised
our Intelligence Service was. And when you told me about Tash's situation Admiral Hackett ordered me to remove any trace of you in AIS files and to check on any personnel who may know your true mission."

Tash and Shepard stopped and turned on Hannah Shepard and she held up her hands to stall the questions and protestations that were forming on the younger women's lips, "your file is now with Admiral Hackett himself and he's running a smaller but completely loyal shadow AIS through his office which I'm heading up.

I'm assigning you to Major Izunami you can trust him and any further information you get on Cerberus you can pass to him, he'll contact you in a few weeks. But Admiral Hackett does not want you to do any more than you already have.

We will find a way to make it safe for you to return to active duty, believe me, but until then you are restored to the rank of Lieutenant in the Alliance Marines and your new orders are to join Commander Shepard on her current mission." Hannah watched her young niece intensely; she needed to know if they had lost her from the Alliance or whether she had enough faith in it to want to return.

"I… I don't know what to say…” Tash felt waves of conflicting emotion flowing through her. Anger at the way she had been treated, distrust at anything the Alliance might offer her, trust in her aunt and Hackett, a deep desire to return to her chosen path… a fear that she was too tainted by what she'd done to deserve to wear her uniform again… and Liselle how would this affect whatever it was she had with Liselle.

"Well that's a first," Shepard said gently to her still confused and quiet cousin. "But Captain I can't agree with that decision."

Both Hannah and Tash looked at Shepard with surprise and disappointment so she carried on quickly.

"Lieutenant Mikhailovich has earned more than just her old rank back I formerly request a battlefield promotion to Captain in the Alliance Marines." As she spoke Shepard snapped to attention and waited for the 'Captain's' reply.

Hannah Shepard smiled broadly, "thank you Commander you concur with my recommendation which has been approved by the Admiral," she turned to face a slightly confused looking Tash.

"Lieutenant Mikhailovich it is my pleasure to promote you under battlefield conditions to the rank of Captain in the Alliance Marines. The setting is a little unorthodox but official nonetheless."

Tash finally caught up with what was happening and said with a huge and very cheeky grin, "well isn't this typical I get reinstated and promoted on a beach while I've got a raging hangover." She snapped to attention and then shook Hannah's offered hand.

"Welcome home Captain," Shepard said and slapped her cousin on the back.

"But I'm afraid the rest of my news is bad," Hannah said serious once again.

"So how the hell am I supposed to know who to trust and who not to?" Shepard asked.

"That is the question the Admiral and his team have been grappling with. We just have to keep identifying our traitors and moving them out into the cold on all matters relating to our preparations for the Reapers."
The most disturbing patterns in Cerberus’s behaviour is their focus on finding out what we know about the Reapers and often sabotaging both our information and our efforts to begin preparations to fight them.”

Shepard felt the edges of reality blur. The familiarity of the scenario her mother was describing, the beach… this beach… and her most regular nightmare crashed into her waking reality… the frozen terrified people… her inability to reach Liara… their child… the terror that gripped her in the nightmare gripped her now… the screaming and screeching… and in that instant she realised the source of her attacks was a deep rooted feeling of the futility of trying to defeat the Reapers.

"But we can't fight them…” Shepard was pale and her face a mask of fear and anger. She walked a little away from her companions and fought to wrest control back from the nightmare that was trying to form into reality around her. On her knees she heaved but all that came up was burning bile.

Hannah and Tash rushed to her side and Shepard tried desperately to get control of the attack bile.

"This has all happened before," she said hoarsely, "the last time the Reapers came the Protheans were infiltrated with those who thought they could serve them to be saved. Or somehow harness the power of the Reapers to make the Prothean Empire even stronger.

Almost all their plans to fight and defeat the Reapers were compromised… this is how they work… they indoctrinate in subtle ways to start… look at Saren he’d been under their thrall for years before it all got too much for him to hide it anymore… or they didn't care because his mission was almost over." She was shaking with an inner cold.

"How do you know all this," Hannah asked gently her arm around her daughter, Tash crouching next to her stricken cousin at a loss as to how to help.

Shepard turned to her mother her eyes full of the fear, panic and hopelessness that she witnesses in her nightmares, "the beacon… the visions from the beacon… I saw them destroyed… a powerful and advanced species torn to pieces from within and smashed as if they were no more than toys by the Reaper forces that scorched a path across the Galaxy.” Shepard decided against sharing her own personal version of Reaper hell, at least for now, she would keep that to herself knowing how truly mad she would sound with talk of possible past reincarnations.

Hannah Shepard held her daughter tight; she had never seen fear in those eyes before and if even the memory of something could do that to her fearless and brave child she realised in that moment how impossible their task might be.

"You know what we have to do cuz," Tash said quietly but firmly putting her hand on Shepard's shoulder, "fight them… fight them till we…”

"… can't fight anymore," Shepard finished the sentence and smiled up at the two concerned faces her panic receding as it always did. "Hell yeah… they won't know what hit them."

Shepard started to get to her feet and her mother helped pull her upright but before she could say anything Shepard said, "I'm ok mum, it happens… and I'm not going to take meds for it… I'll work through it… its… it's just a lot to carry in my head you know." She smiled and the tension eased a little.

"Well I always thought there was plenty of empty space in your head," Tash said with a grin.

Shepard punched her cousin playfully in the shoulder and moved to the water's edge to rinse her mouth and splash the cool water on her face.
Out of earshot Hannah said quietly, "did you know about these attacks?"

"Had my suspicions but to be fair to Lawson I think she's been watching the boss's back so no one would catch her being… like that," Tash had wanted to say vulnerable but even in her panic attack Shepard didn't feel vulnerable, it was something much more, but it was hard to identify it.

"So the Galaxy is going to hell… I'm losing my marbles… and Tash just got promoted… well I know which one I'm most scared of… did we make the right decision mum… I mean Captain," Shepard said laughing as she walked back all traces of her panic attack gone.

All three laughed and began jogging slowly up the beach, all dropping into a comfortable silence, each with their own thoughts, fears and hopes playing through their minds.

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*T'Loak Estate, Thessia – very early morning, two days before Janaris*

Aria was aware that she was not alone almost before she fully gained consciousness. Fast on the heels of that realisation, and as she moved quickly to get out of the bed, she also remembered the sleeping figure was Ne'aira.

Moving quietly to the bathroom she closed the door behind her and stood with her hands on the edges of the large ceramic basin. Lifting her head she forced herself to study the reflection in the mirror.

Aria T'Loak never slept with any of her 'conquests'. When pleasure had been exhausted she would send them from her whether it was on Omega or anywhere else she happened to be at the time.

She had not brought anyone back to the estate for just over a century. And only visited herself a handful of times herself since those two Luna cycles she had spent with the love of her life.

'We created our magnificent daughters here Zia… I wish you could see them,' Aria thought the memories crashing through the barriers she had put in place.

A flood of emotion took hold of her and she moved to the large shower cubicle. Standing under the hot jets of water, steam all around her, she felt tears sting her eyes.

Aria struggled to put her feelings, her memories her regrets back in the deepest part of her mind. She had never loved anyone in the whole of her life except Benezia T'Soni. From the moment they met as maidens in that Goddess awful programme they had both committed their lives to.

Her thoughts strayed and she saw the most beautiful, elegant, self-possessed Asari she had ever met. Even at just over a century old Benezia T'Soni had a personal power and attraction that matched Aria.

Benezia was and still remained the only Asari, the only person, to meet Aria as an equal. Unlike the other maidens, who were either awe struck or scared of her, Benezia didn't accept Aria's posturing. She challenged Aria to be herself, truly herself and not the carefully constructed 'front' that was on view to the world.

They were truly first amongst equals; the programme only accepted the best of the best that the Republics had to offer. And they fell completely and deeply in love with each other.

Aria pushed down the memory and turned the feelings of love, loss and grief into a much more familiar companion, rage. She bristled with biotic energy and only just restrained herself from punching a hole through the wall.
Concentrating on the mechanics of cleaning her body she focussed her mind on why, why these memories and feeling were coming unbidden to the surface.

'It doesn't take a genius to work it out... you bury it all for over seven hundred years... then there she is... with a plan... how we could be together,' Aria gave a cynical laugh as the thoughts flowed through her mind, 'it was just as it was, nothing diminished... and...Aria couldn't let the thought of their reconnection and their lovemaking come to her mind. The lovemaking that had created their two daughters.

She also forced herself past the memories of intervening time until Liselle came and found her on Omega. 'She reminded me of you Zia... so much... and of us... I almost sent her away...'

Aria knew that letting Liselle stay with her and keeping in touch with what Liara was doing put her on a dangerous path. She shrugged off any further attempt at analysis and remembered the Asari still in her bed.

'And she triggered something in me... or was it timing... allowing Liara to know the truth... just a moment caught off guard', Aria settled on that as the answer for why Ne'ai'ara had managed to get behind a fair number of her barriers and crossed an important boundary.

Aria had known love, had even allowed some to love her, but it didn't reach all the way into her heart or her soul. Nothing could, she had hollowed out her soul to live the life she had chosen. A flash of anger and a deep sigh of discontent accompanied the thought, 'choice, was it ever a choice'.

The memories of the past few hours in bed rushed back into Aria's mind and body. There had been no time on the trip to Thessia, too much to organise and plan. Ne'ai'ara had judged the situation quickly and changed into commando leathers and faded into the background.

But Aria had sensed her throughout the whole trip and when Ne'ai'ara brought her tea the heat of lust and desire was almost palpable between them.

So it was that Aria had unthinkingly taken her straight to bed, Aria's bed, Aria and Benezias' bed.

Aria was not disappointed. They were both expert's in the sexual arts and Ne'ai'ara had obviously had plenty of experience. And Aria also realised that the Asari in bed with her had personal power and presence and wasn't intimidated by Aria.

Although Aria had maintained her mental barriers and only allowed the younger Asari in deep enough to gain maximum pleasure from the meld as they shared their second orgasm she felt a shard of emotion. Loss and grief cut through her even as she climaxed for what she would never have with Zia.

She felt tears sting her eyes but was sure her young lover hadn't noticed nor had anything bled through her mental barrier.

Perhaps she had spent too much time the last few hundred years with inexperienced maidens or awe struck matriarchs neither of whom could match Aria in bed.

The memory of their last climax, an orgasm that lasted longer that she could remember one lasting before, took hold of her body. Aria felt wetness gathering and a heat in her core that had to be sated.

'Well let's just fuck her out of your system shall we,' Aria thought was a lustful smile lifting the corners of her mouth, 'and no more emotional rubbish.'

Aria moved silently back into the bedroom and looked into the now open eyes of the Asari lying
uncovered and naked on her bed.

'Those eyes…' Aria thought as she watched the smile that was spreading across Ne'aira's face reach the deepest blue eyes Aria had ever looked into.

Aria came to a halt at the bottom of the bed and in an instant the younger Asari moved to kneel in front of her pressing her body tight and looking up with a pleading expression.

"Please let me service you my Queen," Ne'aira's voice low and husky her words a lie to her smile and their shared knowledge that she was anything but subservient.

Aria let out a deep throated laugh and placed her fingers under Ne'aira's chin, "and what if I denied you that… pleasure" Aria said lifting her eyebrows on the final word.

Ne'aira moved swiftly from the bed to kneel on the floor in front of Aria and looking up her face flushed with desire her breath already a little faster she said, "Then I would just have to beg."

As she finished speaking Ne'aira deftly parted Aria's lips and placed her mouth on the full, hard and already slightly wet clit. Sucking the hard bud into her mouth she placed her hands on the inside of Aria's muscled and toned thighs pushing firmly.

Aria answered the movement by standing with her legs further apart her hands touching the crests on the head now moving slightly as the younger Asari worked her tongue and her lips on Aria's heat.

Moans of pleasure drifted down from above her head as Ne'aira ran her fingers across Aria's hot and soaked lips, slipping a little further on ever pass until finally she plunged her fingers deep inside her lover and fell into the rhythm she had created with her tongue on the now even harder clit.

Aria gasped and cried out with the new pleasure and they both reached for the meld at the same time. The shared sensations, desires, lust, need and building tension flashed through them.

Ne'aira moved her other hand to her own hot and wet core, first pushing her fingers inside herself causing a roar of added stimulation and desire from Aria, then when they were fully coated with wetness settling onto her own clit.

Aria kept expertly working the erogenous zones on her lover's crests and through the meld they both felt the pulses of pleasure rising to almost unbearable ecstasy. Both feeling the glorious shinning edge of their release, their climax, building and they increased the pace of their movements.

Aria was grinding her heat into Ne'aira's welcome mouth and increasing the pressure on the back of her lover's head. The younger Asari quickened her pace on both their clits and pushing in and out of Aria's centre.

Their breath now coming in ragged and shallow pants and Aria grunted in time with the thrusts. Ne'aira's own moans and cries muted against her lovers' clit but Aria could feel them physically and through the meld.

They could hold off the orgasm no longer and they both crashed over the edge into the all-consuming moments of climax. Aria felt wetness explode from her core and push past the fingers still buried deep inside her and she felt the rush of wetness spill from her lover.

Aria's legs were a little weak but she stood her ground and looked down at the panting, wet mouthed creature now sitting back on her heels, broad smile lighting up her face.

"I didn't actually say yes," Aria said playfully a teasing smile playing on her lips.
"Ooops," Ne'aira's word was accompanied by a mock shocked expression and it brought a chuckle from Aria.

'It's ok,' she thought with relief, 'it's just sex, there's nothing else going on...' Aria thought as she watched the younger Asari moved back to lie on the bed.

Aria checked the time on the chrono by the bed, it was still early, she had some time.

Aria fixed the younger Asari looked alluring her deep, violet flecked, blue eyes heavy lidded with desire. Laying on her back her arms laying slightly above her head, one leg bent at the knee.

"You think your good, don't you," Aria said in a teasing tone. Her question answered by a cheeky smile, "Well let's see if I can teach you something you don't know," and Aria drifted a finger down just above her clit and pressed on the slight indentation.

The haptic interfaced shaft rose from Aria's clit and the ridges were clearly visible along its thick body and its colour a perfect match for Aria's own skin.

As Aria moved onto the bed Ne'aira's grin turned into a full hungry smile. She thought once again that she had never seen an Asari Cei that big before but she should have expected nothing less from the larger than life Aria T'Loak.

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**Offices of Information & Personal Security Brokers Inc., Nos Astra, Illium – morning, two days before Janaris**

Grizz was waiting impatiently in the small reception area and staring at the impassive Asari seated behind the desk who had told them to make themselves comfortable while they waited.

He didn't want to wait and he wouldn't feel comfortable until he had accomplished the task set him by his boss Aria T'Loak.

She had trusted him with the most important element of her plans to take down the Spectre and the Shadow Broker. He didn't know what the information was that the Spectre had that would be released on her death. And he didn't need to, if Aria didn't want it shared with the Galaxy he would make sure it wouldn't be whatever it took.

Grizz was fiercely loyal to the Queen of Omega and like all of her closest and most trusted lieutenants a little in love with her. But it was the respect and trust that she gave him and the others that really cemented their commitment to her.

She was fair, brutally fair, with her own. And she was a mean, vindictive, spiteful, vengeful and very dangerous enemy to anyone who crossed her or who didn't give her the respect she was owed.

And he was always glad he was on her side when she joined in a fight, she was a truly terrible sight to see with her bloodlust up. More than once he had heard conversations about Aria’s ’heritage, and many were convinced she had Krogan blood in her somewhere.

He tore his eyes away from the Asari receptionist realising he wasn't going to get into the meeting any quicker by intimidation. The air re-breather's rhythmic shush and clunk was strangely calming and he looked down at Vert Plunes who was sitting next to him.

A gift from Shepard Aria had called him and Plunes had been none too pleased to be hauled in front of a vid screed and interrogated by the Pirate Queen. But they had settled into a positive relationship.
Even though Aria could just blackmail any information out of him she made it a business arrangement and Plunes was making money from the 'enforced' relationship.

Another example of how clever Aria was he thought, just because you can use brute force you don't always have to. That way there's the opportunity for loyalty to grow she told him once. But he knew that Aria T'Loak only ever trusted anyone so far.

Grizz had also brought Aria's top engineer, his talents more often than not used for hacking secure systems to secure the Omega Queen some advantage or useful secrets. The Salarian was typical of his species, quick minded, fast talking but also an exceptionally gifted software and systems specialist.

Feeling he had all possible avenues to resolve the problem covered Grizz, himself, would use brute force as a last resort. Plunes would try to find a way of subverting the Spectre's account if continuing payments were involved in keeping the service running and Kam would look for opportunities to gain access through any digital security.

"Mr Abrudas", the Asari said looking up from her data console, "you can go in," she indicated the door to an inner office.

Grizz took a couple of moments to realise he was being addressed he hardly ever used his clan name.

The odd looking trio settled in chairs facing a large desk behind which sat an asari and a volus. The panoramic window that filled most of the rear wall of the office gave views out across the residential towers, hotel, shopping and office complexes that made up the skyline of Nos Astra.

The asari gave the prospective clients a sensual smile as she said, "Welcome to IPS. May we ask who recommended our services?"

The agency was strictly a word of mouth operation such was its attempts at keeping even their customers contact with them secret.

"A certain head of a… Blue Sun ah shall we say business," Grizz said well prepared with an answer supplied by Vert Plunes, "and I don't want him knowing I'm considering…” Grizz left his words hang and gave the asari a hard stare.

"Of course, absolutely, we guard all our customers privacy completely Mr Abrudas," the asari said quickly and trying to offer him reassurance from her tone and attitude.

The sheesh, hiss and thump of the re-breather punctuated the volus's speech as he spoke. "I am Tarn Palavan Clan… this is Elvira Dantilus… how could we help you," Tarn's chubby body was perfectly supported in a species specific chair and Grizz noticed haptic interfaces built into the arms.

"I want to know exactly what I'll be getting for my money… just how secure is your service. I mean if anything happens to me how can I be sure you'll do what I want with my information… I'll be dead?" Grizz answered keeping his demeanour and his voice cold and mean.

They spent the next sectawn being told all about the safeguards that were in place to protect the information stored with the company, the protections in place to stop anyone tampering with their systems.

Both Vert Plunes and Kam questioned the two owners of the business extensively testing for weaknesses in the process or the system.

"If a client wishes to cancel the contract before the end of its term there is a small administration
charge but the cancellation has to take place in person. And we take all measures to ensure our clients are not being… coerced,” Elvira gave a small smile as she answered what she thought had to be Grizz's last question.

"What if I just never come back… just disappear?” He asked almost as a matter of desperation from what he could tell the system seemed to be unassailable.

"Our clients are required to provide proof of life every six months… and if they do not… well we allow another six months for unexpected complications but then we assume the worst and carry out the wishes of our clients," Elvira looked smug and even raised one brow as if challenging Grizz to test their process again.

"Unless our client prefers… to vary our standard contract… we can work to any terms required,” Tarn added and then said, "So can we expect your… business?"

"Yes, I think this is what I'm looking for… I will return with my information on…” he made a play of checking his omni-tool but already knew when they needed access to the office, "in two cycles, 06.40,” he looked up from his OT and saw a look of disappointment on the face of the Asari behind the desk.

"Oh, Janaris,” then she recovered her composure and continued, "Everything will be ready for you.”

Just as they were leaving the room Kam turned and asked a final question, "what happens to the information at the end of the contract period?"

"It is automatically deleted from our systems another function that is built in and cannot be tampered with.” Dantilus gave them another confident smile proud of the system they had put together.

Grizz, Plunes and Kam didn't speak until they had reached the security of their ship docked at one of the more discreet bays that Nos Astra had to offer for a price.

In the command room of Aria's private frigate they discussed what they'd found out about the security systems and the automated processes that were designed specifically to be tamper proof.

The nature of the service was one that if the subject of the information, that was being used to protect the holder from retribution or would be used as a form of vengeance after death, could destroy it they surely would.

'Once the contract is in place and the data is placed into IPS storage the system is entirely automatic. There is no one to intimidate or bribe… and with the number of backups and redundancies they have we would have to destroy half the extranet to keep the information from being made public,” Grizz said summing up the discussion that had fallen into a heavy silence.

"What is it that Aria… doesn't want made public… I can't imagine anything bothering her… this much,” Vert Plunes said as he studies his stumpy and suited hands.

"You don't even need to think about that," Grizz growled giving the volus a menacing stare.

Silence again fell and Grizz just couldn't find a way to get the result his boss wanted… but if he couldn't stop the information getting out he would smear the two smug owners over their office for making him break his promise to Aria.

"Come on you're the genius's time's running out there must be something we…” Kam cut across Grizz's pleas.
"That's it, time, we can use time," he said as he punched something into his OT, "look." And he displayed the details of the contract they had been given.

Both Grizz and Plunes focussed on the detail that had Kam so excited.

"What…" Grizz said his exasperation giving his voice a more pronounced flanging than usual.

"The standard contract term is one hundred galactic mean cycles… so to be safe we put forward the time on their system by one thousand galactic mean cycles… and all the contracts expire… all the data is deleted," Kam spoke quickly and in an even more than usual excited voice.

"That's… that would work," Vert Plunes said and continued in between his re-breather unit, "but didn't… Aria want the information?"

"Yeah but only if we could… the priority is killing it… So we still need access to their central control unit?" Grizz said already formulating what he would need to get the required access passwords to their system.

"Well so long as they haven't built in a safeguard, but why would they, changing the system time, not a threat, what harm…" Kam said almost absentmindedly as he looked through the schematics that they had already stolen for the system he would have to hack.

And for the first time since Aria had given him his orders Grizz felt confident that he could, as he always did, deliver what his boss wanted.

"I'll go talk to the boss and we need to get the rest of the team together for a briefing," Grizz said as he stood to make his way to the comms room a smile playing around his mandibles.
Chapter 49

T'Soni Estate, mid-morning – Two days before Janaris

Matriarch Seninnth T'Joan stood at the top of the short flight of steps that formed the front entrance to the main house. Faint traces of wood smoke from the bread ovens and open grills mixed with the last of the winter scents from the gardens and drifted on an almost imperceptible breeze.

It was another warm and sunny day, although for the first time in over a week high drifts of thin clouds could be seen in the, still, clear blue sky.

Seninnth looked out across the front lawns noting the two shuttles off to the right and the two large open sided glass canopies to the left. These were being used both for serving the buffet breakfast and also providing tables and chairs for those who preferred not to ‘picnic’, another Earth Standard word that didn’t quite translate, on the grass.

Where the neat lawns gave way to open fields the focus of the morning’s activity was taking place. A game of base ball, an old Terran game still being played in various forms on Earth and its colonies, was taking place. The match was between the crew of the Normandy and the staff of the Estate.

Seninnth had no idea who was winning but everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Spectators and players alike were relaxed and engaging in friendly banter. As a particularly load roar drifted across the grounds she noticed Grunt, the young Krogan from Shepard’s crew, was walking forward to take up the bat.

She suddenly became aware of the two young Asari in her wake and, snapped out of her thoughts, began walking towards the large knots of spectators, who seemed to have formed a lazy curve around the top of the field giving the best view of the ‘pitcher’. Another strange Terran term that seemed to have no translation into Asari she mused.

Seninnth searched for the familiar form of the soon to be Lady Liara T’Soni head of the T’Soni family and as such one of the most powerful positions in the Thrassican Republic. She found her young mistress sitting in a group which included Captain Shepard and Liselle Lidanya. They were positioned almost directly behind the spot the player who would hit the ball stood.

Thankfully there was a run of netting for any stray balls as they seemed to be thrown with not a little power and she was, as always, concerned with Liara’s safety although she chided the herself as she thought, ‘with all she has faced and will face in a few days I’m sure a ball game is no threat to her Seninnth you worrisome old Matriarch’.

A further glance towards the field showed Shepard having a few words with Grunt as he bent his head to listen swinging the bat which looked ridiculously small in his huge hands.

“Matriarch T’Joan have you come to join the fun,” Liara said smiling up at her, “I’m afraid the Estate is not doing so well although I believe our commandos will do better now we are… fielding?” Liara looked towards Captain Shepard to clarify she had remembered the correct term.

“Yes that’s it,” Hannah Shepard said with a broad smile, “just be glad we aren’t trying to explain Americas Football,” she laughed and Liara joined her, obviously on the inside of the joke.

Not for the first time Seninnth T’Joan wished she could stop time or find a way of keeping anything that would hurt Liara out of her life. Seninnth T’Joan was only too aware of how difficult, how
lonely a life Liara had had before she met Shepard.

Seninnth pulled herself away from her reverie and said, “My Lady I wonder if I may have a moment with you, it is about this afternoon’s formal reception at the mansion.

Liara was still trying to get used to the much more formal title that she was about to hold as head of one of the most powerful families in Thessia but she knew that for her to be accepted she would have to adhere to even the most ridiculous protocols. There would be time to challenge and change later when she had achieved acceptance for her own merits and her peers began to forget her great youth.

“Yes of course, Hannah would you take John,” and as she stood up she held the baby out to its grandmother who nodded accepting smiles and immediately started settling the baby in to continue watching the field of play.

They walked a little way off and Seninnth turned to speak to Liara including the two maidens in her conversation.

“We will need you to come up to your room to be fitted into your dress at least an hour before we are due to set off. And do you still insist on using the land car rather than a sky car?”

“I won’t need any help dressing,” Liara said the trace of a frown on her face and moodiness in her voice.

Seninnth smiled inside at the memory of a much younger Liara being just as difficult about having servants to help her dress and usually ending in a huge row with her mother. Liara complying only after Lady Benezia had instructed her daughter to tell her personal servants that they were to leave the Estate as they no longer had jobs.

“Liara we have talked about this before… it is… the way it needs to be done,” Seninnth said quietly so that only Liara heard her response.

“Of course,” Liara smiled and shook her head slightly, “I am sorry I forget sometimes that things are as they are now and I am no longer a child.”

“Good, this is Elipsa and Canasta they will be your personal assistants,” Matriarch T’Joan then turned to the two young maidens and said, “you may go and make the necessary preparations for Lady Liara.”

Liara nodded her goodbyes and made to walk back to sit back down but Seninnth spoke again.

“Would you like me to organise a personal assistant to help with the Commander,” Seninnth knew the answer but felt she should ask anyway.

Liara laughed, “I think you and I both know Shepard would make an almighty fuss if we tried to get someone to ‘help’ her get dressed… so let’s not even ask her.”

Seninnth smiled at the very thought but became serious when she spoke again, “and… time is running out if you wish to tell the Commander of the… situation… Matriarch T’Loak called a little earlier to remind me she would need to speak to the Commander soon.”

Liara’s face and demeanour changed matching the Matriarch’s seriousness and said, “Yes I know, it will have to be soon… before we have to go to the reception… I will… it has to be now does it not?” She asked the Matriarch but already knew the answer and she received a slow nod of agreement from Seninnth.
Liara turned in time to see Grunt hit the ball high and completely out of sight and as he began trotting around the bases cheers rang out from the Normandy crew joined with laughter from the Estate commandos who had little chance of even finding the ball let alone interfering with its progress.

Shepard had made her way back to where they had been sitting. They had decided that Tash would ‘captain’ the Crew team. This was mostly about giving the crew some downtime and a thank you for their work but also, importantly, to build links between the Normandy crew and the Estate staff.

As such Shepard felt it was important that both she and Liara seemed to be neutral although naturally she was rooting for the Normandy to win.

“More arrangement for this afternoon,” Shepard asked with a smile snaking her arm around her lover’s waist and pulling her close nodding at the receding back of Matriarch T’Joan.

“Yes and no… we need to talk… I need to tell you a few things I found out yesterday,” Liara said concern now etched into her features, “perhaps we could go up to the office?”

“Right now?” Shepard asked gently but her attention began to wander back to the game continuing noisily in front of them, “could it wait till this evening babe?”

“I am sorry my love but we have to talk now… you need… you need to know before we attend the reception this afternoon,” Liara’s voice had an edge of pleading and Shepard’s demeanour changed completely when she saw how upset Liara looked.

“Of course darlin,” Shepard turned to face Liara and moved her hands to rest on her lovers’ hips, “I’m sorry I made you ask twice. Mum can you look after junior we need to sort a few things out for later,” Shepard smiled at her mother who nodded enthusiastically and shooed them away with her spare hand.

They made their way quickly to the private study on the first floor. Shepard keeping her arm around Liara’s waist and making light conversation in an attempt to ease the obvious strain that her lover was experiencing.

As soon as the door closed behind them Liara began to pace a little and tried to find a place to start.

“I… we… oh dear this is…” Shepard pulled Liara into her arms and smiled down at the upturned and very troubled face.

“Are you calling the whole thing off my love?” Shepard asked amusement clear on her face and in her voice.

“Oh no absolutely not,” Liara’s face looked tragically concerned and her voice sounded distraught, so much so Shepard felt immediately guilty for teasing her.

“Hey I’m only joking,” Shepard said softly and kissed the slightly parted tender blue lips.

“Oh Shepard I know… I,” Liara pulled away and stood with one hand on her hip and the other pinching the bridge of her nose. A pose now very familiar to Shepard and that indicated either extreme stress or that Liara was finding whatever she had to say difficult.

Shepard leaned back on one leg, crossed her arms, and waited for Liara to decide where to start.

“I found out yesterday that Liselle Lidanya is my sister, a very close, blood sister,” Liara watched Shepard to see if she had made herself clear.
“You share the same parents… but Benezia… you were an only child,” Shepard sounded as puzzled as she looked.

“Benezia and my father had a daughter each, Liselle was born by my father,” Liara knew this was not the important part of the news but she needed to ease herself in.

“So your father is Admiral Lidanya,” Shepard said thinking back to the few occasions she had met the Asari Admiral.

“No… Liselle was raised by Matriarch Lidanya, and that part of the story I have yet to fully understand,” Liara pushed on ignoring the question that was forming on Shepard’s lips.

“Shepard my father… that is to say my mother’s… its Aria… T’Loak,” Liara added and immediately wondered why she felt the need to mention her father’s family name… as if Shepard would be confused as to which Aria it may be… dragging herself back from her chain of thought she saw the unbelieving expression on Shepard’s face.

“This is a joke… Asari humour,” Shepard said walking forward and dipping her head to try to catch Liara’s eyes speaking in a soft encouraging tone.

“No Shepard my father is Aria T’Loak as my mother is Liselle’s father,” Liara spoke slowly and with purpose and whilst her face was impassive Shepard sensed the edge of something like challenge… or perhaps a better description was defensiveness.

“Well that must have been quite romantic,” Shepard said closing the distance between them and taking Liara’s hands in her own, “I mean it must have been one hell of a…”

Liara broke into a smile and looked relived, “romantic? That was not the reaction I was expecting… oh and before you ask I do not really know what I had expected. Disappointment, perhaps, that my father is quite the most vicious criminal in the Terminus Systems or that you would have doubts about our bonding given the family that I have now acquired.”

“Lee what matters to me is your happiness and your safety,” Shepard leaned in and kissed her worried looking Asari gently on the lips. “More to the point how do you feel about having the Queen of Omega for a parent?”

“Aha, well that is not really the most disturbing news that I have to share with you. Let’s sit down,” and Liara moved both of them to sit on the sofa.

Once settled Liara spoke again in a calm and measured tone and tried to choose her words carefully.

“Aria has discovered a plot to… well to kill me and you and probably as many of our friends as possible. The Shadow Broker has someone in my household working with a Spectre…” Shepard cut in.

“Tela Vasir,” Liara nodded and carried on watching Shepard become more and more concerned as she spoke.

“The attack will take place during my inauguration or our bonding ceremony,” Liara knew what Shepard’s question would be but let her ask it anyway.

“So why the hell are we just sitting here, we have to get away; I have to get you away.” Shepard stood up and placed her hands on the shelf that ran across the top of the open fire slot, “how long have you known this.” She said quietly looking down at the floor.
“Only since yesterday. The call from Aria that told me of our… that she was my father. Forgive me for not telling you sooner… I wanted you to have just a little more time without… you’ve been so relaxed.”

Shepard spoke without looking at Liara, “that was kind of you but you should have told me straight away,” Liara could hear the strain in her lovers’ voice, the stiffness in her body.

“Aria did not want anyone else to know… she is handling it… feels it is important for us to give no sign that we know so that plans already in place will not be changed… she asked me not to tell you at first…” Liara noticed Shepard stiffen even more but was still unable to see her lovers face clearly.

“What changed her mind,” Shepard spoke quietly and in a measured tone.

“I would not have it Shepard… I will keep no secrets from you,” Liara stood up and placed her hands on the stiff shoulders and as she did Shepard pushed off the shelf and turned so they were face to face.

“Thank you for that Lee… it means a lot to me,” Shepard’s face was grave and still grey with worry but a trace of a smile played around her lips for a moment.

“Oh Shepard I am so sorry I did not tell you immediately… I just wanted you to have…” Shepard silenced Liara’s apology with a kiss and pulled her into a hug.

“I understand and I really appreciate it Lee,” Shepard stood back and continued, “but now I need to know everything and I need to talk to Aria.”

“Yes she wants to speak with you… alone… she is waiting your call,” Liara gestured to the comms console.

“Good speaking alone with Aria suits me just fine,” Shepard didn’t want to have to worry about upsetting Liara when she launched a full scale attack on her lovers newly acquired parent for keeping her soon to be bond mate in lethal danger.

“Just so that you know everything, before you make the call,” Liara said a little less stressed now that Shepard knew the worse, “Aria has forbidden Liselle from telling Tash about her parentage or mine and the only other person who knows is Matriarch T’Joan. She doesn’t want anyone else to know for our own protection.”

“That’s understandable given the long list of people she’s screwed over who’d be only too happy to make anyone she may care about suffer in her place,” Shepard was too angry to fully accept Aria’s motives as completely altruistic there was probably an angle that works for her in this.

Liara touched Shepard lightly on her arm and the touch seemed to bring Shepard back a little from her anger.

“I have no idea how I feel about having Aria T’Loak as a parent but what I do know is that she has tried to protect me… did protect me when you… you weren’t here,” Liara placed a hand on Shepard’s cheek and gave her a small smile, “but whatever you believe is best for us to do I will do. Without argument or question… this time and only this time whether I agree or not your decision will be my decision,” and she sealed her offer with a kiss.

“I don’t need that Lee I only need for us to decide together and not…” Liara pressed her fingers to Shepard’s lips.

“Just this once Shepard because I need you to know that I place my safety and the safety of our
children completely into your hands and leave it to your judgement… and if I am honest I have heard Aria’s reasoning and I can find no flaw… I do not want to have to choose between your assessment and my father’s… I will not… it is all too soon… too much,” and Liara finally gave way to the roaring emotion that she had boxed up since learning of the mortal danger they were all in and the truth about her parentage.

Shepard gathered Liara into her arms and held her tightly against the heaving sobs that were wracking the young Asari’s body. Liara tucked her head under Shepard’s chin her cheek resting against the soft materiel of the sweat shirt feeling the tears streaming down her face and unable to stem the flow.

“Hey, hey, it’s all ok… there now babe… we’ll sort it all out,” Shepard murmured in a soft and loving tone while somewhere in another part of her mind she boiled with rage that Aria had placed all this on Liara’s shoulders knowing how much her ‘daughter’ had just been through.

After a few more moments the sobs eased away and Liara loosened her grip on the sweat shirt and sniffed loudly.

“I am sorry…” but Shepard cut across quickly as she reached out for a container of tissues on the table next to them.

“Don’t you dare say sorry for feeling the way you do,” Shepard passed a handful of tissues across behind the still snuggled head of her lover and into Liara’s hands, “there you go snotty,” she said with a smile.

Liara sat up a little and blew her nose then looked into the face of the women who loved her with every fibre of her being just as Liara loved her back and was almost moved to tears again but this time tears of happiness.

“Snotty? I am not sure…” Liara looked bemused and Shepard gave her a wide grin.

“It’s a term of endearment honestly… you look so beautiful with you slightly red eyes and you purple nose.”

Liara gave Shepard a playful cuff, “I most certainly do not… I must look terrible… and I have made your sweat shirt wet with my tears.”

“I’ll never wash it again… carrying the tears of an angel with me whenever I work out,” Shepard was pleased to see she had raised a genuine smile from her lover and pulled her back into another hug.

“I had better let you speak to Aria,” Liara said from the comfort of her position nestled once again into Shepard’s body.

“Uh huh, in a moment… let me just hold you for a few minutes hey,” Shepard said kissing the top of Liara’s head suddenly engulfed in the need to never let her soul mate out of the safety of her arms.

_T’Loak Estate, Thessia, early morning – two days before Janaris_

Aria waited for her guest to be shown into the large office. This was not a social meeting and, as she looked out across green lawns to the training complex nestling just in front of the treeline, she wondered whether it would end in a physical fight.

Still looking out through the window she sensed her visitor move without sound into the room.
“Not going to stab me in the back are you Aethyta?” Aria drawled in her best sardonic tone.

“No you bitch I want to see the light fade from your miserable eyes when I send you to the arms of the Goddess,” Aethyta T’Arani’s voice was almost a growl and more gravelly than usual as her eyes bored into the back of the Asari she hated with a vengeance that ran soul deep.

“Really… still holding a grudge you didn’t get into the programme… or is it more that you had to stop following Benezia around like a love sick varren pup when she left you behind,” Aria turned and taking great pleasure in needling the Asari in front of her.

This second best imitation of herself had the chance to live with Benezia for nearly a hundred years and was there for the first fifteen years of Liara’s life. Everything that Aria wanted and was denied, and so she hated T’Arani for having what should rightfully have been hers and hers alone.

Even though Aria knew it had been Benezia’s doing, her choices, her great plan that failed so spectacularly. But she would, could, never hate Benezia it would be as futile as hating the sun… how could you hate what gave life and light and warmth… even as it scorched her soul.

Aria was snapped out of her thoughts by the flash of dark energy that was infusing the snarling Matriarch’s fists as she moved to close the gap between them.

Aethyta threw a biotic punch at Aria’s face who only just managed to block it forcing her to stagger back under the force. Aria felt her blood lust rising and her own biotics flashed into life as she responded with a slam at the other Asari’s body throwing her across the room smashing her into a book case.

But Aethyta was straight back on her feet and neatly parried the follow up lash throwing her own slam and narrowly missing her target but smashing out the windows and a part of the wall behind Aria.

“Aria commanded and pulled up a barrier between them, “we haven’t got time for this, much as I would love to reave you from the inside out.”

“The only reason I’m here Aria is because your message said it was about Liara so you’d better get to the point or we’ll see how you deal with some Krogan blood rage mixed with commando skill,” Aethyta let her biotics fade and the dark energy that had been whispering around her body faded away with it.

Aria dropped the barrier but kept her distance and raised her brows as she glanced at the damage behind her, “powerful as ever I’m pleased to see but you will need to control that temper T’Arani,” Aria held Aethyta’s unflinching stare that was filled with hate and loathing as she spoke.

“I want… I need you to go to Liara’s inauguration and take charge of my commando squad… there is a threat against her,” Aria paused and said in another sarcastic drawl “I’m assuming you got an invitation?”

Aethyta was now struggling with her hatred for Aria, and the last jibe, and the knowledge of a threat against Liara who she always loved as if she had been her own daughter.

“Yes Aria of course I did, after all I am the closest thing to a father she has,” Aethyta was well aware of who Liara’s father was and enjoyed the almost imperceptible ruffling of the Ice Queen’s usual self-confident personae.

“Are you interested in helping T’Arani or do you just want to score points?” Aria needed to move away from the subject altogether or her rage would run out of her control.
“For Liara and only for Liara… now tell me what’s going on.”

With the temporary and tense truce in place Aria told the other Matriarch everything she needed to know about the threat on the estate and the plan to take down the Shadow Broker afterwards.

“I’ll go immediately… I can play the over anxious fussing…” not wanting to spark any further conflict between them now there was a job to do Aethyta pulled her punch and went on, “I’m assuming your commandos above suspicion, and what about your commando captain is she gonna get all hissy that you dumped someone over her head?”

“They are all loyal to me and my commando captain knows you’re coming and will follow your orders,” for a moment Aria wondered if Aethyta would see any of Benezia in Liselle. Aria certainly did and more with every passing year.

As Aethyta turned to leave she threw a parting comment over her shoulder, “must be a hell of a threat for you to ask me for help… I’ll hold you personally responsible if this all fucks up and my girl is hurt,” and before Aria could respond the Matriarch stalked off murder still very present in her heart.

Aria was a little surprised that the parting comment had not spurred her to anger but nothing that Aethyta, or anyone else, could say about the risk that Aria was taking with Liara and Liselle’s life could come close to the hard grilling she was giving herself.

She had only slept properly for a handful of hours since hearing about the threat and one of those was from sheer exhaustion earlier that morning.

Her logic told her at the very least to keep Liselle away so that if anything did go wrong… but Aria wouldn’t allow the thought to fully form

‘Nothing will go wrong because I will not allow it… I have spent most all my life perfecting who I am… my rule applies wherever I am and the Broker will rue the fucking day he decided to fuck with me and mine.’ Aria thought with confidence.

She sat at her desk and made a call to have the damage cleared up and began to prepare for what would be an even more difficult conversation with Shepard.

Liara had left to freshen up and find Liselle who would also join the call after Aria and Shepard had spoken together.

Left alone in the room Shepard was pacing to and fro in front of the large vid screen while she waited for the call to come through.

She was glad that Aria had insisted they speak together alone before inviting Liara to join them. Her fury was palpable, she locked her hands together tightly behind her back, standing in an ‘at ease’ pose, in an effort to maintain her self-control.

The screen’s call connection symbol was replaced with the head and shoulders of Aria T’Loak who looked tense and not a little angry.

“Shepard,” Aria said by way of greeting.

“T’Loak,” Shepard responded in a barely concealed growl as she turned square on to the screen and its ring of cameras.
If Aria had any reaction to the use of her family name she did not show it and when she spoke her tone was curt but business like.

“I am assuming that Liara has told you everything? That I am…” but Shepard cut across her and jabbed her finger at the screen image of the Queen of Omega.

“Her father, yes… so tell me Aria where were you when she made herself a target for the Shadow Broker… when she was broken and in need of support and help and…” this time it was Aria’s turn to cut across the diatribe that Shepard appeared to have settled into.

“Oh you mean when you got yourself nobly killed in a futile attempt to save your ship? When you left her on her own after killing her mother…” Shepard saw Aria’s biotics flare as she spoke in such a cold and dangerous tone and despite herself Shepard felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“You know as well as I do the life I lead I could wind up dead on any mission. The point is you knew what she was going to do and not only didn’t you stop her you helped for fucks sake… how did you see this ending,” Shepard had decided to steer away from the subject of Liara’s mother.

The realisation of what Benezia must have meant to Aria left Shepard not a little shocked and amazed that the unforgiving and vengeful Omega Queen hadn’t personally torn her head off at the news of the matriarchs’ death.

“I protected her and if you hadn’t come back,” Aria spat the last two words from her mouth as if they were poisonous, “I would have resolved the issue. You’ve made her a target, again.”

“That’s horse shit and you know it, the Broker would never let it rest,” Shepard re-focussed on the reason for her current rage at Aria. “But tell me Aria when did allowing your daughter to walk around with a target on her… watching the chronos click away the time until she’s blown up of shot to death the way to show your… protection?”

That was the response Aria expected this she could deal with but the conversation had brought up some unexpected and unresolved feelings about Benezia’s death that would have to wait as she needed to focus on the issue at hand.

“So you’d rather run away and wait for the next assassin the next bomb that the Shadow Broker can put in place. Only the next time you won’t have any idea that it’s coming and you won’t be able to track him back to his lair and finish him once and for all… that’s the price Shepard… to have it finished for good… to finish the Broker for good.” As she spoke Aria could see her words settling in Shepard’s mind.

Aria had no doubt Shepard would have come to the same conclusion if she’d had time and if it wasn’t her pregnant almost bond mate that would need to be the bait.

“Couldn’t we just…” Shepard said trying to run through all the available scenario’s and options in her head but Aria cut across her again.

“No, there isn’t an alternative. Do you honestly believe that if there was another way I wouldn’t have found it?” Aria’s tone was no longer cold and even held a hint of sympathy for the fear that Shepard was obviously working hard to hide.

Shepard locked eyes with Aria and they both tried hard to work the other out remaining silent for almost a minute.

“And for the record if I could have made Liara change her mind about fighting the Shadow Broker for your body I would have,” Aria spoke more quietly than Shepard had ever heard her, “you don’t
know her if you think she can be dissuaded from doing what she feels is the right thing… she is her mother’s daughter… and I could see she needed… she needed something to focus on to bring her back, back to life.”

“No, I know first-hand how… stubborn she can be… and how brave,” Shepard squared her shoulders realising Aria did have the measure of Liara and her predicament after her own untimely death.

Aria looked thoughtful and when she spoke her voice was even but there were distinctive scowl marks between her eyes. She weighed up how best to put her relationship with Shepard where she needed it to be… where Liara needed it to be.

There was no doubt Shepard could be a royal pain in the arse, she was a Council Spectre, but she was also her daughter’s chosen. And now Aria had made the decision to make herself known to her daughter she wanted a chance to be at least on the edges of Liara’s life.

And Shepard would be needed when they all, inevitably, had to face the Reaper threat head on. Aria decided a little honesty would be the best route with Shepard anything else was likely to cause an irreparable rift between them.

“There were two reasons I didn’t tear you apart with my bare hands after you killed Benezia T’Soni,” Aria looked away for a moment and when her eyes returned to bore into Shepard’s own her face was completely unreadable. “I became aware far too late that… Benezia was not in control of her actions… of her mind… and that her liaison with Saren was something more… more dangerous than she had ever faced before.”

Shepard had the impression that this was the first time that Aria had put any of this into words and was working hard at not telling Shepard anything more than she needed to in order to clear the air between them.

“And the other reason,” Shepard asked in a soft tone all anger now spent.

Aria locked eyes with Shepard and held as she answered, “you made sure she was reinstated to her rightful place in Asari society… your insistence that she wasn’t the criminal everyone thought she had become but a victim of Saren, the Reapers… you made sure her name was cleared and all her sacrifices would still mean something to her Republic and to Thessia.” When Aria finished speaking she reached out of screen and brought a glass to her lips downing its content in one.

“It was important… for Liara… and for her mother’s memory… it wasn’t fair to call her a traitor,” Shepard said not knowing what else to say. It was probably singly most surprising conversation she had ever had.

This monster, this tyrant, murderer, merc leader… whichever of the many negative descriptions of the Pirate Queen you choose, none of them would lead anyone to believe she put any stock in Asari societal sensibilities.

And Shepard thought she saw just the merest shadow of something that might indicate a connection with Benezia T’Soni that was deeply personal but also deeply hidden.

“Well we can always trust you to do the… right thing, thanks to your noble and honourable sense of duty Shepard,” Aria said sounding every bit her usual dismissive and sarcastic self and always managing to make what most people would see as a compliment some form of put down.

“If you want me to go along with your plan and leave my partner in the cross hairs of a pissed off
Shadow Broker you need to tell me everything,” Shepard leaned forward to emphasise her request, “and I mean everything.”

Once again Aria weighed up how much to share with Shepard but she couldn’t find any reason to hold back the full situation.

“You remember I warned you about Tela Vasir,” when Shepard nodded her acknowledgment Aria carried on, “she was the one behind the trap that was set for Liara the ambush that nearly… well that was partly my fault.

I wasn’t aware then just how involved with the Broker Vasir was… and I made sure the information broker that Liara trusted and was working with ‘found’ the information that Vasir appeared to have about the Shadow Broker’s location.

Vasir didn’t and still doesn’t know I was the one putting the pieces together and that’s why I can still work with her…” Aria outlined the Spectre’s visit to Afterlife, the veiled threat, the agreement that Aria should have a slice of the contract to kill Liara and the Spectre’s ‘fail safe’ information that needed to be dealt with to protect both Liara and Liselle.

Shepard had listened intently and not interrupted with questions. When Aria came to a stop with the background she didn’t move forward to explain her plan for dealing with both Vasir and the Broker; she was interested to see just how quick her daughters soon to be bondmate really was.

Aria waited and watched Shepard noting her military stance. Legs slightly apart, arms folded across her chest a thoughtful expression on her face, every inch the Alliance Navy officer she would always be.

“So that’s why the timing is so critical… too dangerous to pick up Vasir until she’s given you a final briefing… and,” Shepard narrowed her eyes and frowned as she continued speaking, “I’m assuming you have some time sensitive plan for taking out whoever is holding the fail safe information that would be released on Vasir’s death.” Aria still didn’t respond but gave the slightest of head nods.

Shepard realised that Aria was testing her ability to analyse the situation and obviously wanted Shepard to come to the same conclusions about how to deal with the threat.

“You must be very sure you’ll get the information you want from Vasir… I’m assuming your methods will not be…” Aria cut across her not wanting to go down that particular path.

“Let’s not focus on the detail Shepard… Vasir will give me everything we need to deal with the threat and also to find the Broker,” Aria’s demeanour and tone took on such a cold and visceral rage that even via a vid link Shepard felt the power of the Asari matriarch.

Shepard didn’t think that Vasir would be walking away from the confrontation and knowing Vasir had almost succeeded in killing Liara once and was well on the way to trying again Shepard wouldn’t lose any sleep over her end.

“Just make it painful,” Shepard said and received a slight raise of Aria’s brow as she continued. “When is she due to brief you on the final details, I’m assuming that will be the point at which you can make your move?”

“It’s more about her last necessary contact with the Shadow Broker… we need everything to look as if it’s going to plan for as long as we can. I’ll lift Vasir from her location in Larissa at 02.00 on the day of the Inauguration… Janaris… it will give me enough time to extract the information and make any changes to the plans that are already in place on the Estate.”
Aria had returned to her inscrutable business-like manner as she shared the details of her planning. “And yes I have another team who will deal with Vasir’s asset on Illium early that morning.” Aria paused and then spoke in a more thoughtful tone, “we have to show no outward signs to Vasir’s spy or any asset the Broker may have on the Estate and that’s why we have to keep this information to a the smallest and most trusted group… only four of my people and Liselle know about the threat and that we are going to move against the Shadow Broker…” Aria left her statement hanging in an attempt to forestall any attempt by Shepard to allow anyone on her crew access to the information.

Shepard squared her shoulders, having made her decision, and moved back into her comfortable and familiar ‘at ease’ stance. When she spoke her voice was steady and oozed command and authority.

“You’re not going to get my agreement on keeping this completely to myself,” to her credit Aria remained impassive and didn’t try to interrupt, “I have a duty as an Alliance officer to inform my superior’s if there is any threat to Alliance personnel or diplomats and we will have the Systems Alliance Councillor here on the day.

And I’m also a Spectre sworn to protect the Council and there will be two Council members here and under threat. Not to mention all of the Matriarchs of Thrassica’s first families and a fair number of Matriarchs who are members of the inner Asari Council.” Shepard was now looking somewhere past Aria, using one hand to rub the back of her head and stretching her neck back to try to relieve the tension that was knotting up her muscles.

When she had completed her thought she continued locking eyes once again with the Queen of Omega. “But there’s something else going on here Aria, more. Why a bomb why not snipers. Why not a dozen different ways to end Liara and me that didn’t involve risking a good portion of Thessia’s leadership.”

Aria raised her brows and drawled, “very good Shepard, very good,” although her tone sounded condescending and sarcastic Shepard let it pass.

“I have no proof and not likely to get it until I… speak to Vasir,” Aria’s lip actually curled slightly when she said the last few words, “and there’s a high chance she won’t even know. But I’ve been around long enough to know when something doesn’t look right. This you can share if you must with Tevos but there is no need to put this added pressure on Liara.” Aria’s tone was commanding but Shepard also felt the edge of something else, concern perhaps.

“I agree, it’s enough that Liara knows about the threat until we can be certain about anything else this is all speculation. But if we’re right that means the bomb will have to be more powerful?”

“Yes but that also means it might give us a better chance of discovering it more quickly,” Aria didn’t look all that convinced or confident and continued, “most of the arrangements to take down the threat are already in place. My personal commando’s from my estate are straight up and down loyal to my house and Thessia, these are not mercs Shepard. And I’m sending a much more experienced commander to lead operations on the ground.”

“Do you have any idea who Vasir’s pawn is on the inside?” Shepard asked while processing that Aria was sounding more Asari by the minute.

“No… the only one I know I can trust is T’Joan. We have the advantage Shepard if Vasir or the Broker gets any kind of sign that we know then they could move forward with their plans or cancel and wait for another opportunity… this is the only and best chance we have of ending this threat to Liara once and for all.” This time some of Aria’s feeling leaked through into her tone and a faint hint of dark energy rippled across her skin.
“You don’t think Lady El’Estrene is trustworthy?” Shepard asked a little mischievously.

Aria threw her head back and laughed loudly, it was a deep and genuine and had a hint of the honey tones of Liara’s own full bodied laughter, “Shepard you know as well as I do that High Priestesses are completely above reproach and suspicion and the proof lies in the fact that I have never managed to bed one.”

Shepard couldn’t help but smile at Aria’s measure of someone’s corruptibility, self-control and will power. Even now Aria was not only very attractive but her animal magnetism and personal power would be almost irresistible to even the most chaste of Asari. And if her two daughters were any guide to her maiden appearance she must have been one of, if not the most, handsome and beautiful Asari on the planet.

When Aria had stopped laughing she fixed Shepard with a steely gaze, “so are we agreed on this Shepard?”

Shepard squared her shoulders and gave a small nod, “agreed… and I’ll finish the bastard with my bare hands for coming after Liara.”

“Not if I get my hands on him first,” Aria said a smile spreading across her face.”

“You’re coming with us to attack the Broker’s base?” Shepard said not able to keep the surprise out of her voice.

“Think of it as our first family… outing,” Aria purred noting with pleasure the mixed rush of emotions the human in front of her was processing.

“Um… ok… well yes… we’ll need to work through the details of that,” Shepard said trying to imagine keeping Aria in line on a mission.

“Shall we get my daughters in,” Aria said another a smile playing on her lips her brows raised in question.”

“Yes… right,” Shepard said and thought ‘get a grip Shepard she’s still the bloody Queen of Omega stop thinking about her as your mother… damn father in law’ realising that whenever Aria moved from merc queen to parent it completely wrong footed her.

Shepard could already hear Garrus’s howls of laughter and never ending run of jokes when she was finally able to share it with her best friend.
A/N This is a bit of a fluff filled chapter… I needed to move us along but there are plot lines that need to be ‘laid’ and filled out. This chapter in particular may have benefited from an edit

Thessian concolor = cougar/puma

Thessian orric = pack animal akin to Earth hyenas

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Two days before Janaris

T'Soni Estate, private quarters - late morning

Waiting in the private sitting room with Liselle while Shepard and Aria were talking made Liara more than a little annoyed.

“Told to sit here and wait like naughty children who must wait for the Matriarchs to decide what will happen,” Liara said out loud giving vent to her growing impatience.

“Be around Aria for long enough you get used to it… you know they have to try to work out who’s top orric don’t you?” Liselle said from the comfort of an arm chair a small smile playing on her lips.

Liara looked across at her sister and noted once again how lithe and powerful she looked. Even in the loose white shirt and not quite so tight black leather trousers her muscular body looked strong even in her very relaxed slouch.

“Top… ah you mean they are in there trying to decide who is the alpha Asari,” Liara smiled a little at the thought and then looked more serious, “but that will surely defeat the object of working together?”

“It’s just something they have to get out of their system every time they meet from what I’ve seen… Aria has a lot of respect for Shepard and it must work both ways because mother does not take even a hint of disrespect well,” Liselle chuckled and Liara nodded in agreement.

“Yes I believe Shepard does respect her… and Shepard also always tries to see the best in anyone… I love her for that,” Liara blushed and realised that may have been the first time she’d actually told anyone else directly about her feelings.

“We can all see how much you love each other… there’s something just so right about the two of you together… hard to describe… but shit what do I know about love and all that crap,” Liselle said still smiling but Liara could see an edge of sadness behind her last words.

“But I thought you and Tash were… well you certainly seem to be very together?” Liara said still not used to talking with anyone about such things and worried she would say the wrong thing.

Liselle rose from the chair with all the grace and menace of a mountain concolor and moved to sit next to Liara on the sofa.

“You see the thing is… I can’t talk about my… well relationship with anyone… not easy given most of the people I hang out with on Omega and loosely call friends all work for Aria and most of them want to fuck with me,” Liselle smiled at Liara’s faint blush and wondered, not for the first time, how her sister had ended up being quite so shy about sex.
But Liara’s blushes came not only from her shyness but also from the voyeuristic experience she had had and which she still had not confessed to her sister. Partly to put off her confession she encouraged Liselle to continue by nodding her understanding.

“And I can’t talk to Aria or even let her suspect that I have… whatever it is that I have for Tasha,” Liselle tried to sort out what the real problem was so she could share it in some coherent way with her sister, “thing is Aria has been totally on me about not getting emotionally involved with anyone until I’m at least edging out of my maiden years. She’s fine with whatever and whoever I want to do but just not anything that could get serious.”

“But you have been with Tash for over five years does that not make it… something?” Liara asked now fully engaged in the conversation and desperately wanting to be helpful to her newly found sister.

Liselle thought for a moment as if weighing up whether she wanted to answer the question. Finally with a huge sigh she said quietly, “yeah Liara it is something, for me at least. The only reason Aria doesn’t worry about it is because for the first two or three years Tash was such a mess it was just all about partying and sex. Well for her it was…

I think it was always something more for me from the first time we joined. Goddess I spent a lot of time worrying about her in the beginning making sure she didn’t end up dead either on purpose or by accident.” Liselle seemed to lapse into memories and after she’d been quiet for almost a minute Liara prompted her again.

“But it has been different this last year?”

Liselle looked gratefully at her sister and continued, “Yes it has. It’s as if she was finally here, with me, it’s hard to describe but she let me see more and more of her. Look, don’t get me wrong we don’t have what you and Shepard have. We like fucking other people and sometimes at the same time,” Liselle’s face transformed with a huge smile accompanied by a small chuckle of laughter and she pulled Liara into a brief hug. “There I go embarrassing my little sister again.”

“I am much better than I was when I first met Shepard and…” Liara suddenly realised everything that Liselle had said and replied with mock indignation, “I am hardly younger than you the difference is very small.”

But she smiled and recognised the truth of Liselle’s words. Despite all she had gone through and the responsibilities she was about to take on Liara felt Liselle was far more experience and galaxy wise than she.

“You must know how Tash feels about you?” Liara asked once again offering Liselle the opening to continue if she wanted.

“I know she loves me in some way, she trusts me, wants to be with me… and the sex… I have to say it is the best I’ve had and I’ve had a wide range of experiences… must be something about human’s huh,” Liselle gave her sister a knowing wink and carried on, “it’s not that easy to know Liara unless both of you are really open emotionally… I guess you’ve never had a different kind of meld… you’ve only ever joined with Shepard.”

It was true Liara had been blessed with her first meld, Shepard had been completely open with her from the start, she couldn’t conceive of any other kind of connection.

“I was very lucky,” Liara conceded, “could you not ask her?”
Liselle widened her eyes and raised her brows to emphasise her words, “Tasha talk about her feelings… actually that’s not fair I’m not that great at it either… but Goddess no I wouldn’t know where to start and she’d probably run for the nearest Asari dancer to confirm her freedom if I tried.”

Liselle looked somewhere out into the middle distance of the room her eyes unfocussed and clearly remembering a powerful memory as she spoke.

“But we have plans… once this mission is over, the Collectors,” Liselle turned briefly to clarify which mission to Liara who nodded her understanding, “once the mission is finished and Shepard cuts all her ties with Cerberus, Aria is going to work something out with them to get Tasha out and she’s going to settle permanently on Omega. We’ve agreed she’ll work for Aria with me and we’ll live together. Then I think she’ll feel safe enough to let her feelings for me grow.”

“And what if she returns to the Alliance?” Liara asked knowing this was unlikely in the extreme given the situation Tash was in.

“Well… I guess she’ll have made her choice… she told me often enough how much being in the Alliance had been all she wanted to do… until they screwed her over.

Then last couple of year’s being with me on Omega is what’s made her happy again and given her the sense of belonging that she’d lost when she left the marines.

And how the hell would it work if she did go back to them… merc captain and right hand to the Queen of Omega in a relationship with the newly reinstated Alliance officer trying to make everyone believe she isn’t rogue anymore,” Liselle smiled and before they could talk anymore their OT’s flashed with a message to join Shepard and Aria in the study down the hall.

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T'Soni Estate, private quarter’s – 12.20 hours

Shepard walked down the hall from the spare bedroom she had used to dress and walked into Liara’s bedroom studying the dress white cover she was holding. When she looked up the sight took her breath away.

Standing in the middle of the room, with two young Asari maidens fussing at her feet, was Liara dressed in a shimmering long white dress. She was suddenly pulled back in her memory to the night of the New Year celebrations on Arcturus.

“Fuck T’Soni if I hadn’t already asked you to marry me I’d go down on one knee right now,” Shepard’s smile was broad and infectious as she noticed the two maidens exchanged brief smiles.

Liara smiled just as broadly back and she looked so young that Shepard’s breath caught in her chest as she moved forward, not caring they weren’t alone, the need to kiss Liara too strong for any such minor details.

Standing close to her lover’s body she took a moment to curse that she was not only holding her cap but also that she had already put on her white dress gloves which meant she couldn’t truly feel the bare skin that the scooped nature of the dress allowed access too.

Their lips touched and a burning lust filled both their bodies Liara pulling them into a meld before either knew what was happening. They sensed rather than saw the two maidens leave the room as their kiss deepened and Liara’s hands searched Shepard’s body through her dress blues.

“Fuck Lee we just don’t have the time… tho in the name of everything that’s holy in the universe
I’m gonna strip you out of that dress the minute we get back,’’ Shepard growled the words as she pulled her lips away but continued to brush her mouth across Liara’s throat breathing in the scent of her lovers body.

“Goddess I know…” Liara panted allowing the meld to recede but its passing not lessening their joined desire and need one bit, “I believe you have made me very wet Commander,’’ Liara breathed quietly into Shepard’s ear and the response was another blazing, scorching surge of desire that they could feel resonating between them.

Shepard took a step back and held Liara at arm’s length by the shoulders another wide grin and slight shaking of the head accompanying her words, “T’Soni you truly are the most irresistible and sexy and beautiful being in the universe… and I love the very bones of you… but right now we have to go to a mind bendingly boring and tedious protocol laden reception at your fuck off huge castle,’’ Liara was smiling as broadly as Shepard and at the term castle she broke into laughter.

“Shepard we have discussed this I am not some fairy tale princess and we have no such things as castles on Thessia.’’

“Well that’s a damn shame coz I have rather a cracking sword with which to slay any dragon that comes within twenty clicks of you,’’ Shepard moved her hands placing her cover on her head and pulling it down, as always, low over her eyes.

She stood to attention and then with one hand on her sword hilt she reached for one of Liara’s hands with her other, holding it lightly and bending forward to kiss the back of it. Then she offered Liara her arm with a theatrical flourish.

“I believe your carriage awaits,’’ Shepard said deadpan and Liara laughed as she placed her arm in her lovers. It was a good job her human had played a few old human vids which Shepard called historical dramas or Liara would have had no understanding of the scene Shepard was playfully enacting for her.

There was a small part of Liara’s mind that rather liked the idea of being some lonely princess that her handsome and beautiful soldier had rescued by fighting whatever monsters were in the way. And she understood why human’s had been so attached to their ‘fairy tale’ endings and why she hoped they still happened as often as they could throughout the galaxy.

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T’Soni Estate, main entrance – 12.20

Tash felt at once at home and at odds with herself as she walked through the front door her dress sword moving gently against her leg. Her eyes shielded by the midday Thessian sun by the peak of her cover her mind a million miles away thinking of the last time she wore dress blues a million years ago.

She was brought back to the present by a familiar voice and when she looked for its source she saw Liselle leaning against a large land car one arms crossed and one foot resting back against the vehicles body. The loose white shirt she was wearing not disguising the swell of her breasts nor the smooth toned abdomen that gave way to low slung trousers.

Tash began to walk down the steps and realised she hadn’t heard a word Liselle had said. “Sorry to busy looking at the view what did you say?” Tash said a cheeky grin spreading across her face.

“Oh you of the one track mind,’’ Liselle said pushing herself of the land car and moving towards the approaching human, “I said don’t you scrub up well. You look very sexy and a sword’’ Liselle
fingered the hilt and pressed herself against the taller woman’s body.

“Where did you get to I thought you would have come and helped me dress,” Tash said quietly leaning in to find her lover’s lips.

The body heat burned through their clothes and for a moment, with the help of a light meld, it was as if they were skin to skin.

Liselle moaned into Tash’s mouth as their tongues danced and their hips pushed forward.

“Some of us are working Mikhailovich but I’ll promise to be here when you get back to take you out of it,” Liselle said as they parted aware of other people arriving.

“Hey no fair I’m working today,” Tash said in a mock hurt tone.

“That you are major so you’d better look sharp,” the voice belonged to Hannah Shepard who had just come out of the front door and was walking down the steps.

Instinctively Tash turned towards the approaching naval officer snapped to attention and gave a perfect salute which was returned just as perfectly.

“As you were marine,” Hannah said with a smile, “good to see you haven’t forgotten your training.”

Tash had a moment of nervousness about what her aunt may say next. She had asked both her relatives to keep her reinstatement between the three of them for now; Tash had even banned Shepard from telling Liara.

She needed time to think and needed to have a chance to talk it through with Liselle. At this point she wasn’t sure about anything except she didn’t want to lose Liselle and that seemed like a distinct possibility if she went back to the Alliance.

But her worry was pushed completely out of her mind when she realised what her aunt was wearing.

“What Admiral?” she said with surprise in her voice.

“Well don’t sound quite so surprised Major I am perfectly qualified and Hackett seems to think it was a good idea,” Hannah Shepard said deadpan but with a glint of humour in her eyes.

“No ma’am… I mean yes ma’am…” Tash was aware of Liselle amusement that her normally very laid back and cool lover was completely flustered by the situation.

Hannah Shepard laughed deeply and slapped Tash on the shoulder, “get a grip Tash. As I remember you were pretty insubordinate in or out of uniform so don’t go all squeaky yes ma’am no ma’am on us.”

Liselle joined in the laughter and Tash felt a little more at ease in the uniform she had once loved and now had very mixed feelings about.

“You kept that quiet Admiral,” Shepard said walking down the steps slowly with Liara on her arm.

“Liara you look absolutely wonderful,” Hannah Shepard said, “and I thought news of my promotion could wait I didn’t want to,” there was a split second hesitation as Hannah Shepard adjusted what she was going to say, “well it didn’t seem as important as everything else that’s going on,” she finished smoothly with a smile.

Once Shepard and Liara were safely off the steps Shepard gave the Admiral a precision salute which
was once again returned.

“This must strike you all as very formal but it would seem odd not to follow the usual protocols,” Hannah said to both Liara and Liselle.

“Oh you forget I grew up in an Asari military home and as for protocol I think by the end of this afternoon you’ll get a fair idea of how anal Asari diplomatic and social protocol can be,” Liselle said a mischievous grin dancing on her lips, “I’d better get going, I’m riding escort in the shuttle.”

And she turned towards the shuttles parked on the front lawns giving Tash one brief touch on her arm as she passed.

“I like her,” Hannah said as they watched her move quickly across the lawns. “And thank you for letting me ride up with you Liara, much more pleasant than a stuffy shuttle and don’t let the young colonel tell you any different,” Hannah nodded her head towards Shepard who rolled her eyes.

“And thank you for how much quicker it would be if we… all right I give up… nice long drive along green lanes,” Shepard said as they began to move to the land car.

The vehicle was large with comfortable seating for six, facing towards each other carriage style, with a row of seating behind and in front that was currently accommodating six commandos including Captain Senna who remained in command of the Liara’s private commando squad.

“You look taller,” Tash said trying hard not to look at Liara’s cleavage, perfectly and tantalising displayed by the sweep of the dress.

“It was thought best that I opt for a formal dress, rather than a suit, and as such it requires the use of heels. I am not entirely comfortable in them, in fact I can not remember the last time…’’ Liara stopped mid-sentence a look of absolute misery on her face, “no Shepard I do remember of course I do how stupid of me.”

“It’s ok babe a lot’s happened and to be honest the shoes you wore never figured large in my best memories from our trip to Illium,” Shepard spoke gently and kissed Liara on the cheek then helped her get into the car.

Hannah Shepard got in and sat across from Liara but Shepard and Tash stood waiting for their final passenger.

“Bet you remember the dress she was wearing with the shoes,” Tash said quietly leaning close to Shepard so they wouldn’t be overheard.

Shepard grinned at her cousin, “unforgettable… she was… smoking hot. Caught every eye in this club we went dancing in. Damn I was proud to be the one with her… but hell she looks hot in just about anything she wears,” Shepard finished with a quick glance in Liara’s direction the smile still playing on her lips.

“You, dancing, surely not,” Tash teased and Shepard was saved from defending her dance skills with the arrival of a tall Turian in dress military uniform.

“Come on Vakarian… I know you need to spend time making yourself look pretty but hell even I don’t take that long and I’ve got more scars than you have,” Shepard shouted as he approached.

“That’s Captain Vakarian to you, newly and temporarily designated ambassador to Thrassica and empowered by the Turian Hierarchy to offer my blah blah,” Garrus drawled in his best sardonic tones.
“I am so sorry Liara my father took much longer to brief than he needed to, but he’s very proud,” he rolled his eyes as he sat down next to Hannah, “apparently the Hierarchy feel I am just about qualified to stand still with a sash around me and offer the best wishes of my government to you and Thrassica.”

“Oh Garrus I am touched that you will be the Turian representative to go down on their knees and pledge their support and allegiance to my family and my heirs,” Liara said her face and tone serious.

Garrus looked completely non plussed, “pledge, my father didn’t tell me I’d… knees,” he said in a puzzled tone watching Shepard settle into the seat next the Liara.

Then with comprehension dawning he noticed Shepard’s face contorted trying to stifle a grin and said, “I think I preferred you when you were shy and with no understanding of leg pulling. You’ve spent far too much time around Shepard young lady,” he finished his mandibles flaring indicating his amusement.

And with a round of laughter they began the drive to the mansion and the formal reception of T’Soni extended family members, foreign diplomats and an abundance of Matriarchs from Thrassica and beyond.

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**Road to the T’Soni Family Mansion, Thrassica – early afternoon**

The hour’s drive was passing pleasantly and the occupants of the vehicle seemed to relax more and more as the land car threaded its way through almost straight roads.

Moving in and out of the dappled shade afforded by the trees that from time to time edge their path and other times the drive offered magnificent views across rolling landscapes to mountains in the distance.

“Even the cultivated fields look natural Liara,” Hannah commented as they passed yet another section of the Estate’s farmed land.

Liara smiled and tilted her head slightly as she talked about the changes wrought over five thousand years ago when the Asari Republic’s decreed that the natural beauty and environment of Thessia was of primary importance and all other matters were subordinate to the ‘Principles of Preservation’, the name of the treaty that all Republics signed up to.

“Asari heavy industry and manufacture was all moved off Thessia onto purpose built stations within our system or other planets… thanks to that decree Thessia has been able to let huge tracts of our land revert to wilderness, the natural fauna and fora returning often given a helping hand from our scientists,” Liara stopped realising she had dropped into professor mode as Shepard called it. “I am sorry I… sometimes I share too much detail,” she finished a little shyly.

“Not at all Liara it’s fascinating to see what can be done with the right agreement. We’d do well to take some advice from the Asari about our own problems with our environment… a legacy from the mismanagement of the mid twentieth century… we’ve been trying to clean it all up for the last three hundred years,” Hannah said and smiled wistfully adding, “although those timescales must seem very short to you Liara.”

“It only shows how much progress humans can make over such a short period of time. You are greatly admired in the galaxy for your dynamism and lack of patience,” Liara said and frowned, “perhaps that was not the best way to phrase…” Shepard cut as Liara paused.
“Think your right on the credits Liara as a species we don’t do well with delayed gratification,” Shepard smiled and squeezed her lovers hand which was as usual nestled in one of her own.

Arriving and passing through the gates that marked the entrance and final drive up to the mansion Liara spoke her quiet voice edged with sadness.

“The reason why I wanted to take the land car has everything to do with my childhood,” Liara let her eyes drift and began to watch the horizon for the first glimpse of the huge mansion. “You see for holiday’s we would live at our private residence, the Estate house. But unless my mother was conducting private or secret business or diplomacy the rest of the time we would live in the private quarters of the mansion.

I would be left with my own personal staff, even as a baby, as my mother worked tirelessly for Thessia. She often travelled and so I would not see her for long periods of time.

She was always so caught up with everything that it was as if she did not see me. So different from when she made time for me…” Liara shook her head slightly to free herself of the memories and smiled.

“Anyway it was a concession that she made to me most of the times we had to return. That we would take the longer land journey and she would give me her undivided attention on the drive… silly I know.”

To a murmur of support and understanding Shepard added a kiss to her lovers cheek and held both of her hands as she said, “Babe I know this wasn’t the path you wanted and we all know why you’re doing it… but it won’t be like when you were a kid. You’re in charge this time and you know I won’t let you disappear on me.”

“And you won’t be lonely this time Liara you have a lot of friends, people who love you by your side,” Garrus said in warm genuine tones leaning forward a little to emphasise his personal connection.

“Thank you,” Liara managed to say and desperately trying not to cry she had no idea why she was being so emotional.

“That is a fuck of big house Liara… you really are a princess,” Tash said with humour in her voice recognising that Liara needed a change of gear.

The group laughed but a gasp escaped more than one of them at not only the size of the building but also its beauty.

“Such elegant sweeping curves and that lovely cream stone again,” Hannah said looking at the building now coming into view more fully as the land car swept across its front on the curving drive.

“You can only see two of its three spiral arms, the other is at the rear and half of that will be our private quarters with a separate entrance and gardens… if we wish,” Liara said, “of course the rest of the families living within the mansion complex have private space but most prefer to live more communally.”

“How many people make their home here Liara?” Garrus asked much more familiar with the more communal living arrangement preferred by Asari which was reflected, to a lesser extent, within Turian society.

“I believe at the moment we have around fifty adults and ten children. Then there are house and estate staff, some with children and of course the commandos but they have their own
accommodation which is also their training centre.” Liara said smiling.

“Do you ever wonder why you never see a destitute Asari?” Tash asked to no one in particular, “every one of the thousand first families have a duty to all Asari who were born in their Republic and of course within their own families. And any Asari asking for help, a home and work will be given it. And now that responsibility sits on Liara’s very graceful shoulders,” Tash smiled and again worked hard not to let her eyes drift to the very enticing sight of Liara’s breasts only just contained by the material of her dress.

“Yes but it is right that we share what we have and it is not only my responsibility Tash all first families have the same duty which we are happy to honour.”

As the car swept up to the much more impressive entrance Shepard noted the use of glass and metal as an integral feature of the building. And the huge pieces of sculpture that flanked the wide entrance doors.

“Are they shimmering or is it my imagination,” Shepard said to Liara as she offered her hand to help her lover out of the land car.

“Yes they are dark energy pieces and you can only really see how beautifully the biotic fires dance when it is dark,” Liara answered and Shepard felt her stiffen, “I feel a little like Garrus… my mother would be proud of me but I can take no pleasure from the thought.”

And as they walked forward towards the house and all the formalities that the afternoon would demand of them Shepard wondered for the first time just how much their lives would actually change with Liara’s new position and by default her own as ‘Lady Liara’s’ bondmate.

A/N next chapter will deliver a romantic surprise and some interesting confrontations…

The ‘mansion’ – if you think of an artistic mix of Bauhaus, Art Deco and Santiago Calatrava then you will have an idea of what I’m seeing when I saw the building in my mind’s eye.
Chapter 51

T'Soni family mansion, seat of the Thrassican Republic’s Government, mid-afternoon – two days before Janaris

On arrival at the impressive seat of the T'Soni family’s power and influence Liara and Shepard had been whisked away to meet with Matriarch T’Joan and Priestess El’Estrene.

“The guests are assembling in the great hall and when everything is ready you will take up a position inside the Tapasvini Hall so that they can be introduced one at a time,” Matriarch T’Joan spoke in the full knowledge that Liara was already well aware of the protocol for the reception. But she wanted to make sure that nerves did not leave Liara open to make any mistakes.

“I know Lady Seninnth we have been through this many time. Do you fear I will fail?” Liara said a slight quaver in her voice.

Shepard stiffened next to her lover and gave the Matriarch a stern look; Liara did not need her confidence undermined at this precise moment.

“Not at all Lady Liara,” Seninnth said warmly and moved forward to rest her hands on the young Asari’s shoulders, “I want to do all I can to support you and it is my own fear that I haven’t done all I can that calls me to run through everything for the last time.

Lady Benezia would be so proud of you,” in truth Seninnth was worried that the occasion would be too much for her young mistress. Liara had not completed schooling in such matters from the time she and her mother became estranged.

Priestess El’Estrene moved forward and both Shepard and Liara immediately felt a sense of peace and calm confidence emanating from the Matriarch.

“Commander we have not had a chance to speak of the spiritual element of the afternoon,” the high Priestess smiled at the edge of nervousness that crept into Shepard’s face and body language.

“I don’t want to let Liara down… Lady Liara, “she corrected herself. It was important that Shepard paid her soon to be bondmate the proper respect when they were at formal gatherings.

Shepard felt Liara’s hand slip into her own and the slight squeeze spoke as loudly as any words could.

“When the formal reception line has been completed you will both move to the Siari alter where I will perform the cleansing and naming ceremony. This is to prepare Liara for her duties and responsibilities and to prepare you, Commander, to walk that path with her.” Lady Nara smiled at both of them noticing their physical and spiritual closeness.

“A Siari spiritual name is chosen for all Asari who are to dedicate their lives in service. Not all families keep the tradition and some have moved away from notions of pre-determined paths for our daughters, preferring them to choose for themselves when they are older,” Lady Nara gave Liara a sad smile knowing that her house, and particularly Lady Benezia, had had a very clear idea of what the young Asari’s path should be.

“As you are aware Asari children are named by their house Priestess shortly after their birth but they are not considered wise enough to inhabit those names until they reach their Matriarch stage when they will undergo the naming ritual. However, there are exceptions and Liara is certainly one of
No non Asari has ever been given a spiritual name Commander and the honour is only partly because you are to be the bondmate to an important Asari leader. You have made a great impression on a number of the Matriarchs of the T’ara and it is with their permission that you will be given the name Auca’poma.”

“I am truly honoured Priestess,” Shepard said and offered a Siari blessing which was returned by the Priestess.

Liara was smiling broadly as she spoke, “that is a great honour Lady Nara but I do not believe I have heard that name before.”

“You will not have Liara. As you know some names are specifically devised for the individual when none of our existing ones seem to fit the spirit in question. Commander there is no direct translation but the closest to Galactic Common we can find is ‘foe of the oppressor’.”

Shepard felt a stirring in that place of deep memory but pushed it down, today was not the day to delve into the dark recesses of her mind or back into a past she had no conscious knowledge of.

Before any more could be said a knock at the door was followed quickly by the entry of a slightly flustered looking Matriarch who Shepard recognised as one of the staff of the mansion who spoke in slightly hushed tones, “everything is ready for you Lady T’Soni, High Priestess, Matriarch, Commander.”

For just over an hour Shepard and Liara had greeted their honoured guests. Shepard had variously saluted, shaken hands or given Siari welcome blessings as befitted the correct protocol. She had remembered not to do anything at all when confronted with a Matriarch of the T’ara and only responded if directly asked a question.

Shepard had panicked slightly when Matriarch T’Joan had been running through protocol with her, ”but how will I be able to tell if the Matriarch in front of me is a member of the inner circle?” she had asked concerned not to cause a social misstep.

"They wear long black robes with black head pieces and their robes are edged with gold, honestly Commander you will be hard pressed not to recognise them from their air of superiority alone,” the Matriarch had replied a small smile lifting the corner of her mouth.

The one complete breach of protocol had come when the Krogan delegation had presented themselves.

Shepard smiling widely took the warriors arm clasp offered by her friend Wrex and dropped into a banter filled personal welcome. Liara similarly dropped out of her role to welcome the old Krogan who had watched over and provided protection for her from afar in honour of their friendship and his bond with Shepard.

"Really... you could've just invited me to visit there was no need to go to all this trouble," Wrex joked and then said in quieter tones so that only Shepard and Liara could hear, "got to say putting me on the official list and giving me diplomatic status Liara... that’s going to help me a lot bringing the clans together... I, well it was good of you,” the gruff old Krogan smiled showing his rows of sharp teeth.

"We are behind you completely Urdnot Wrex," Liara said now loudly enough for his delegation and others close by to hear, "I hope that our officials will be able to complete our negotiations on the
special trade pact between Thrassica and Tuchanka before you leave.” In truth the details of the deal had already been ironed out. Very generous aid, technical support and preferential purchasing rates from all T’Soni owned corporations; they were only waiting for the right moment to release the details.

“We look forward to a long and rewarding relationship Lady T’Soni and clan Urdnot can be counted as an ally to Thrassica...,” and then Wrex broke from the diplomatic script with a rumble of laughter, "which means if this pyjak doesn't treat you as well as you deserve I'll head butt her into the next Galactic Cycle," he finished by slapping Shepard on the shoulder and only because she had had a great deal of practice did she manage to avoid crashing backwards. Sometimes Shepard had the distinct impression Wrex knew just how much force to use to keep her on her feet.

When Councillor Anderson and Rear Admiral Shepard were presented Anderson made sure that Liara knew she had his personal support and respect. The marine adjutant in their wake, ramrod straight in dress blues, managed the merest hint of a smile and a wink as she followed silently behind the Earth Systems and Alliance delegation.

Shepard also had a few moments of regret that she was not hanging out with her friends near the bar particularly when Wrex joined them and at times their laughter could be heard over the other sounds of conversation in the room and the quartet of musicians playing classical Asari stringed instruments.

With the last guest officially 'welcomed', Shepard and Liara were ushered toward the alter at the far end of the room. As they walked towards it Shepard had a moment to truly take in its beauty. The way the glass wall at that end of the room made the alter seem as if it was set in the carefully orchestrated gardens behind, seeming to be at once ordered yet natural.

Siari teachings were displayed on the alter itself, beautifully crafted into works of visual art as well as important cornerstones of Asari wisdom. The texts were written in traditional Asari and not its modern form that was the basis of Galactic Common.

The ceremony’s that would take place over the next two days would also be conducted in traditional Asari and Shepard had been taking a crash course so that she would be able speak, at least, competently particularly during their bonding ceremony.

As they walked side by side the sounds in the room died down and guest’s parted to make a path for them. The music also faded away and it seemed all eyes were on the pair. When they reached the steps that would take them up onto the raised dais the only sounds in the room were rhythmic clicks of Liara’s heels and the clunks of Shepard's dress shoes.

High Priestess Nara El'Estrene waited for them, with two of her acolytes, in front of the alter and they positioned themselves side by side facing her, back to the room, Shepard removing her dress cap.

From the rear of the room came the sound of singing. Shepard knew it was the choir of priestess's and acolytes from the Temple. The voices made sounds that seemed to fill the room creating a sense of being immersed in water, in a Thessian ocean, comfortable buoyant, surrounded by warmth and safety.

Through the sound the chanting of Siari prayers began to rise and fall like the waves on a beach. And then a moment later the room was filled with light refracted through inserts in the glass wall creating rainbow patterns throughout the room as the Thessian sun hit just the right elevation in the sky.

As one Shepard and Liara knelt and the High Priestess began speaking the prayers of cleansing
above their heads eyes fixed somewhere in the distance, her arms stretched out, hands turned to the sky, in supplication.

El'Estrene finished the opening prayer and turning to her left picked up a beautifully decorated silver scoop from an equally elegantly decorated bowl which was being held by one of her acolytes.

Shepard hoped she was prepared for what was about to happen. She was certainly as prepared as she could have been without actually having previously experiencing the biotically energised water.

The Priestess, singing a new set of prayers, sprinkled the energised water over their heads. The sensation was difficult to quantify at first; the wet sensation changing almost immediately to refreshingly cold and clear whilst at the same time burning cleansing hot.

And with the sensations came a clarity of mind that made Shepard feel as if she could take in everything. She was standing on a high mountain, clouds below her, not only able to look out across the horizon all around her but somehow seeing past it.

Then as expected Shepard felt the gently brush of Liara's mind as she joined them together in the experience. And now instead of standing on the mountain she was airborne lifting higher and higher on unseen thermals until her view went beyond the physical horizon.

Shepard turned her head, either in her mind or physically in the room, she wasn't sure which. She looked at Liara who had also turned and as their eyes locked they soared even higher, to the very edge of space which seemed to beckon them, their physical bodies replaced by pure energy.

Then as suddenly as the experience started they were back in the room and Shepard could feel her knees sinking into cushions and her lover's hand in her own with no memory of reaching out to hold it.

In the crowd Matriarch T'Joan made her way quietly to stand next to Admiral Shepard so that she could answer any questions that might arise.

With a smile and very softly Hannah Shepard asked, “Liara said the water created some kind of experience?”

Equally quietly Ŝenninth replied, “it is unique to the individual its purpose is difficult to explain but it offers a moment to view the universe from a different perspective, to understand that time runs on without us but we can extend our influence, join with tide of others influence and help keep us on the path,” she knew she was not conveying the true shift in consciousness that the ceremony offered nor how much Asari culture and society depended on continuity across the stretches of time.

The Matriarch kept to herself the belief, which was shared by Lady Nara, that Shepard did not truly need that element of the ceremony. Her mind was already open and could see with much more clarity than most Priestesses but they both felt it would help her to see her own gift.

The Priestess once again paused and began a new prayer; this time taking two small etched glass goblets dipping them in the bowl and drawing into them two matching measures of the energised water.

Handing one each to the supplicants she, once again stretched her hands out over their heads palms to the sky, and began another prayer. Shepard had only been able to understand snatches of the prayers so far but this one she had memorised as they had to drink the cleansing draft at a precise moment in the prayer.

As they were still holding hands Shepard held her drink with her left hand as Liara held hers with her
right. And at exactly the same time they raised their goblets and drank down the prepared offering.

This time the experience was more powerful and they were engulfed by a warm, deep ocean. Sensing currents and feeling the water moving across her body as they were ‘flying’ through the water again side by side and again seeming to be made no longer of a physical body but pure energy.

Then they were once again back in the room and for the third time High Priestess El'Estrene began singing a prayer set.

The Priestess placed her hands on Liara’s head and speaking in ancient Asari said, “Now is the time you are called to take on your true path, you will answer to your true name and your true calling Zandee’Abhiti, a courageous pathfinder lighting the way through the darkness.”

Then the Priestess moved her hands over Shepard’s head and an almost inaudible gasp rose from some of the guests witnessing the ceremony.

Hannah Shepard looked to the Matriarch by her side an unasked question on her lips. Seninnth answered, “Only Asari are given spiritual names and this will cause some friction but there is a strong contingent of High Priestess’s and some within the T’ara that believe your daughter has a destiny that is inextricably linked to our own.”

“Now is the time you are called to take our true path, you will answer to your true name and your true calling Auca’poma, the enemy to all who would oppress sentient life.”

With the naming blessings complete they both stood and this time Shepard stepped away and behind Liara who stood face to face with the High Priestess the dancing light show in the room fading and the voices of the choir dropping.

The final stage of the ceremony was Liara’s vows of service and a commitment to achieving purity of spirit and enlightenment as a spiritual leader. Shepard felt so proud of her lover she thought her heart might burst, Liara’s voice showing no hint of doubt or trepidation of the responsibilities she was taking on. She also knew how conflicted Liara was about the mantle of duty she was taking on and given they were facing the possible end of Asari civilisation her burden would be much greater than anything her predecessors had faced.

Palm to palm the High Priestess and Liara spoke the same words together and again Shepard struggled to understand the old Asari language but she already knew what the vows were.

“We are Asari, I am Asari, to serve is my duty, to walk the path is my right, to honour our wisdom is my gift. I pledge myself to the service of my family, my republic, to Thessia, Ad’wai’ta.”

An echo of a response to the final prayer, Ad’wai’ta, sounded around the room from every Asari present.

The High Priestess and Liara turned to face the gathered guests and as Lady Nara spoke they made the Siari blessing, bringing their hands up to cover their eyes then dropping to cover their hearts and opening them in an expression of sharing, compassion and openness.

“The truth is one, we are one with the universe, all is of the one, Ad’wai’ta.” the Asari in the audience including the gathered priestess’s responded in kind. Shepard noticed Tash had given the Siari blessing and was returning the prayer.

There were a few moments of absolute silence then Lady Nara turned and congratulated Liara and
drew Shepard to her as they all began walking down from the alter and into the throng of waiting guests. There was a light buzz of conversation and the music struck up once more as they were engulfed by Asari guests wanting to strike up much more informal and relaxed exchanges with both Shepard and Liara.

They both felt the loss of the High Priestess’s calm and serene presence as she moved away and Shepard slipped back into ‘work’ mode careful to keep the spotlight on Liara and still a little worried about making a social etiquette mistake although the worst was certainly over.

After another hour of small talk and diplomatic fencing, the fencing coming from Liara, they decided to spend some time with people they knew rather than people Liara needed to meet in her official capacity.

Shepard had gravitated to the small group of her friends that included temporary Ambassador Vakarian, Krogan Emissary Urdnot Wrex, Councillor Anderson, Admiral Shepard and Captain Mikhailovich.

“Here get this down you,” Garrus smiled and handed her what she hoped would be very strong Asari liquor.

“So what was the trip like,” Tash asked smirk playing around her lips knowing how Shepard hated any kind of mind altering substance.

“Well I’m sure you’ve had more exciting trips Tash,” Shepard grinned back and then continued, “it was… well… um very spaced out.”

“With humanities extensive and dynamic vocabulary at your disposal to describe a real first for our species that’s what you came up with,” Hannah Shepard looked indulgently at her daughter her pride clear for all to see and shaking her head slightly in mock despair she smiled.

“Ah sorry mum, I’ll do better for the log entry,” Shepard smiled back.

They lapsed into an easy banter and teasing flying between Garrus, Wrex and Shepard. The other’s joining in and entertained by the exchanges.

Shepard couldn’t help letting her eyes drift to where Liara stood with a group of old university friends and colleagues and noticed one in particular standing very close to her lover. They seemed to become a little separate from the group and when the unknown Asari stroked Liara’s cheek in a very intimate and familiar way Shepard felt the dragon of passion and jealousy begin to uncurl in her gut.

She kept up her end of the conversation but her eyes glanced back and she saw Liara holding the Asari’s hands as they touched foreheads. Shepard watched as the beast in her gut began to flex its muscles when she saw the clear look of desire on the face of the unknown Asari as she pulled Liara, her Liara, into a full embrace.

Just as she felt the last anchors of control give way under the flexing of her muscles, preparing her to tear this intruder apart with her bare hands she felt a touch on her arm and Shepard snapped around to see Tash standing very close.

“It’s not what it looks like… not for Liara anyway,” Tash said very quietly so that their companions could not hear, “Asari are really tactile and show their emotions physically LV… and you don’t want to ruin a perfect performance till you know what’s going on hey,” Tash had manoeuvred Shepard so that Liara was no longer in her eye line forcing her cousin to look at her.
“Have to say I didn’t think you had it in you cuz. Always so fraking calm and composed, cool like you have ice in your veins,” Tash said trying to lighten the mood and was rewarded by a small smile.

“Thanks Tash… I… I don’t know what happened… it was almost like… like the zone you know in combat,” she admitted to her cousin glad to have someone to finally talk to about these overwhelming feelings of possessiveness and jealousy which she really didn’t want to have.

“I hear ya…I don’t know maybe it’s something about being with an Asari,” Tash thought about her own stirrings of jealousy and her relationship wasn’t even meant to be serious, “I’ve had a couple of flashes and well… what you’ve got with Liara is huge compared to me and Leece.”

They stood in silence for a moment and were only drawn back to the present moment and away from their own thoughts when Anderson turned to speak to Shepard.

“I wanted to say how proud I am of you Shepard and,” he paused for a moment as if considering what to say next. He continued his tone soft and sincere “I know your father would have been so proud of you today” he seemed to shake himself and he put his hands on her shoulders.

“Not just today Shepard but I know how proud of you he was and you’ve become everything he knew you would. Such a huge weight you’re carrying on these shoulders dammit I wish he was here to see it,” Shepard thought she saw a slight glisten in her old Captain’s eyes.

Anderson was an old family friend dating back to when he met her father and mother at the Academy. Shepard noticed her mother had moved to join them and she also had a distinct shine to her eyes.

“We are all so proud of you Liddie,” Hannah Shepard kissed her daughter on the cheek in a moments break of protocol and Shepard had to resist a teenage version of herself from saying ‘mum’ in a very embarrassed tone.

Instead she smiled and accepted their words but somewhere deep inside she felt she had done nothing to be worthy of their praise, nor of her father’s faith in her… not yet anyway… but she would. She would defeat the Reapers and Cerberus of die trying.

At that moment Shepard felt a hand slip into hers and a familiar and welcome presence at her side. She had to stop herself pulling her love into a protective hug which at that moment would have been more about protecting herself than Liara.

“I am sorry I was not here for the ceremony Commander,” a familiar voice and as Shepard turned Councillor Tevos tall and gaunt was standing next to Liara. The Councillor looked as calm as ever but strain was showing around the edges of her composure.

Shepard smiled still not trusting herself to speak and leaning into the side of her lovers body for warmth and comfort.

“And I must ask you to join me for a short meeting Commander,” Tevos nodded her apologies to the others in the group and began to walk away. Over her shoulder Shepard could see the handful of Matriarch’s of the T’ara who had been at the ceremony also discreetly leaving the room.

“We will go straight back to the house from the meeting so please return there as soon as you wish,” Liara said to the group, “and you are joining us for dinner this evening Wrex,” she asked with a smile.

Wrex barked with laughter, “I have a new member of the Urdnot clan to meet Liara and nothing would keep me from spending time with you,” the old Krogan meant every word.
“Forgive me Councillor, Matriarch’s but that’s a hell of an ask,” Shepard said now allowing the edge of her frustration to show in her body language and her voice.

The meeting had been going on for over twenty minutes after Tevos had explained that this decision had come from the full T’ara, the inner circle of the most powerful one hundred Matriarchs, despite Tevos’s attempts to dissuade them from it.

The directive from the Matriarch’s gave a completely new direction for her mission… her mission not anyone else’s… and Shepard felt that it was being high jacked without any recognition of the danger she was leaving everyone in just to make it a possibility.

“We are aware that this makes your mission more complicated but it is an opportunity that Thessia cannot let pass and we will not have it fall into other hands,” Matriarch B’Lanea seemed to have been designated to speak for the Matriarchs in the room and the wider T’ara.

“Complicated…complicated is an understatement,” Shepard said rising to her feet, “you not only want us to take the Brokers ship and his network in tact you want us to take him alive so you can interrogate him… the simplest solution would be to blast him out of the sky,” Shepard said moodily her temper getting the better of her as the next thought in her head was voiced by Liara who had remained quiet until this moment.

“But we have to rescue Shiala, we must board the ship and…” Shepard cut across her lover and instantly regretted doing so in such a public space.

“Oh yeah let’s not forget fuckin Shiala,” shamefaced she turned away and got herself a drink for the tray that had been set on one of the side tables.

The uncomfortable silence was broken by Tevos, “I agree with you Commander and I have argued this extensively with the Matriarchs. Taking over the Broker network, a network that encourages corruption, deals in secrets and lies, assassination, slavery corruption, would soil our hands and our souls. This is not the Asari path.

Shepard could see that Tevos was going for the ‘ends do not justify the means’ argument. But Shepard could also see why Tevos would not want a ‘shadow’ diplomacy played out using the dirtier side of Galactic underhand dealings.

Liara’s voice was calm and business-like and echoed the coldness that had welcomed Shepard on her return from the dead.

“It is naïve to think that we are not already involved in the more despicable acts that are carried out in the name of balance, commerce or ambition in the Galactic community Councillor.

I admit I had not given thought as to what would or could happen to the Broker’s network before but it is such an asset that we can not throw it away. And we certainly can not allow those who do not have the best interests of the Galaxy or Thessia to fill the vacuum.” Liara was thinking about Cerberus particularly but there were also the shadowy indoctrinated forces of the Reapers that may seize the opportunity.

Shepard agreed completely on a logical level now her temper had subsided but she couldn’t muster the grace to do a compete ‘volte-face’.

“I’ll leave the politics and subterfuge to you just give me my mission parameters and I’ll get the job done,” Shepard downed a second drink and made to leave halting with her back to the room to listen to her orders from the Council, from Tevos.
“Your instructions Spectre are to use whatever means are available to take into custody the Shadow Broker, causing minimal damage to his facility so that you can hand over his network in-tact. Freeing any prisoners he may have held on his ship.”

Shepard left the room and headed outside shame burning her anger and concerns about the mission to nothing.

Commandeering one of the many Estate shuttles at the mansion Shepard made it back to the house well before everyone else. Changing into something more comfortable she collected her son from Jamie and putting him in a sling went out for a long walk.

She needed connection with something bigger than her that would drown out the feelings that came unbidden and seemed to be completely at odds with who she thought she was.

Settling against one of the thin tree trunk that delineated the beech from the wood Shepard drew her legs up and rested her son’s back against her thighs so she could watch his face.

“Hey little man, hope you never get yourself in this kind of mess with whoever you end up loving,” her son answered with contented gurgling and uncoordinated waving of arms.

For a few minutes all thoughts of how she could make things right with Liara were driven away with the purest feelings of love for the little miracle in front of her.

“And to think I wondered if I’d love you,” she smiled at her son and held his delicate hands gently in her own and studied the tiny dimples on his knuckles and perfectly formed finger nails.

He was a part of her, as important and loved as Liara and her unborn daughter were. And Liara had unquestioningly without any hesitation taken him to her heart as her son.

“Sometimes I think I’m not worthy of you mother little one,” Shepard said quietly.

“Of course you are my darling love,” Shepard had been so consumed with her thoughts and her connection with her son she hadn’t heard Liara coming through the trees towards her.

Turning and looking up into the face of love that smiled down at her Shepard felt her breath hitch and her stomach turn over.

Liara sat next to Shepard and pulled her sad looking lover into a hug.

“Whatver you are punishing yourself for my love tell me so that we can talk about it,” Liara’s voice was soft and encouraging.

“I lost my temper with you in public, I disgraced you and myself in front of the very Matriarchs you’re trying so hard to gain influence with… and Lee… I was… I don’t like feeling this jealousy that seems to take me over…” Shepard stumbled to a stop and Liara squeezed her shoulder before pulling away a little so they could face each other.

“I suspect it was also fuelled by what you saw in the hall, with Sulima, the colleague that all but groped me,” Liara ducked her head a little to get Shepard to look into her eyes and gave her tormented lover a small smile.

“So she was…”

“We spent a lot of time on one particular University run dig, we were close, I was… fond of her…
even considered choosing her as my first… she was more than willing even insistent that she be my first… to be honest Shepard she became a bit of a pest after I refused her,” Liara smiled at Shepard’s darkening features and continued.

“But stand down marine I can handle Sulima and her ilk. And I knew I wanted to wait for someone who I really cared about and I did… someone truly worthy of me,” Liara suddenly looked embarrassed, “I do not mean I am something special…” Shepard cut across her immediately love pouring into her words and reaching out to stroke the cheek that had been contaminated by another’s unwelcome touch.

“You are special Lee… your perfect and so loving you’d never…”

Liara gave a deep throaty laugh and kissed Shepard’s hand before holding it.

“Really Shepard it is only because you feel so wretched in this moment that you give voice to something so absurd… we both know I am far from perfect and loving… I understand your feelings towards Shiala and although without as much cause I have similar rages of jealousy when I think of that Lawson woman…” Liara leaned in and kissed the baby on his forehead, “which are very difficult to reconcile as it is because of her that we have our beautiful son.”

Shepard felt as if they may be moving towards thin ice but Liara carried on in a quiet tone.

“My darling I believe that Shiala is the focus of another rage as well as your real and understandable feelings because of my… well what happened between us… I believe she is the focus of all the pain and confusion and rage at losing your life in its real sense… you came back and everyone had moved on… you came back and we had not waited for you… we had all left you behind…”

Liara shushed the Shepard’s attempts at responding, “you do not feel ill will towards us for that, you logically understand it… but emotionally we all abandoned you… you woke up in the arms of your greatest enemy… and I put you there,” Shepard let Liara’s words settle on her and they held truth. They felt like a balm to the un-named anger that she had been carrying since she woke up.

“You are so much more grown up than I am Lee,” Shepard said a loving smile playing on her lips.

“Hardly at all my love I just spent a lot of time talking with Lady Nara and I still turn to her for counsel… she would be happy to help you as well if you felt you could let her,” Liara leaned in and kissed Shepard on the lips a loving familiar kiss that lit them both from within.

“Now no more talk of unwanted suitors, our jealousy’s or the mission to take down the Broker… let us spend the rest of the day and the evening enjoying our friends our family and each other,” Liara stood and pulled Shepard up.

Shepard looked across the beach and noticed a bonfire had been laid some way along, “someone’s having a party,” she said as they began to walk slowly towards the water’s edge hand in hand, the baby held securely in the crook of Shepard’s arm.

I believe Tash and Liselle are arranging something Liara said in an offhand tone.

“Oh no… if Tash has anything to do with it we’ll have drinking and dancing and sex… and not necessarily in that order,” Shepard pulled Liara into a hug and felt that she was back in balance and all was right in her world.

The evening had been hugely enjoyable. As soon as Wrex arrived he insisted on seeing the newest member of clan Urdnot, Shepard’s son, and promptly presented him with a varren pup.
To rounds of laughter, and looks of ‘I told you so’ from Garrus, Shepard took the gift with good grace and wondered just how ‘tame’ it would prove to be.

Shepard also introduced Grunt although Wrex had already heard all about him.

“If you are in Shepard’s Krant then you will be welcome to undergo the Trial to see if you are worthy enough to join clan Urdnot,” Wrex had said and although Grunt tried to hide it Shepard could see how pleased and impressed Grunt was with the old Krogan warlord.

Shepard had the distinct impression she was missing something during the evening though. She couldn’t put her finger on it but it was obviously something to do with Tash’s beach party.

After dinner the party broke up with those who were staying at the mansion or on the Normandy heading back. When Shepard returned from checking on the baby she found herself alone in the sitting room. Closing her eyes she sank back into an armchair taking a few deep breathes to aid her relaxation, it had been a very long and at times emotional day.

Someone came into the room. Opening her eyes she saw Tash in a heavy jacket carrying Shepard’s own ‘deck’ jacket.

“Come on its turned a bit colder tonight you’ll need this,” Tash said handing the heavy black jacket, with its rank insignia on the shoulders and collar, to her cousin.

“I’m not really in the mood for a party Tash, I’m going to go find Liara and head to bed,” Shepard said standing but not taking the jacket.

“You’ll enjoy this trust me,” Tash said holding the jacket out for her cousin to put her arms in.

“Well where’s Liara, should we collect her as well,” Shepard said a resigned tone in her voice.

“You just leave all the thinking to me until we get to the beach,” Tash said with a huge grin, “come on.”

Shepard followed Tash out of the doors to the garden and in silence until they reached the edge of the beach.

The huge bonfire was glowing brightly and lighting up a small group of people standing a little way from it.

As they got closer Shepard turned to Tash who was grinning widely, “is that El’Estrene… and what the hell is mum doing with the baby here… what have you cooked up,” Shepard received no response from Tash save a bigger grin.

Drawing to the edge of the group she turned to Liara who was in full length and very warm looking coat.

“What…” Shepard said but before she could say anymore Liara said gently.

“Welcome to our bonding ceremony my love,” and Liara pulled her shocked but happy looking lover into an embrace and kissed her deeply pushing away all questions and pulling them both into the depth of their love for each other.
A/N yes we are here… Liara’s gift to Shep… their private, personal ceremony under the stars… and that’s where we’ll start the next chapter

Also – Adwaita is, if my research is correct, Sanskrit for ‘the truth is one, not dual’ and is my attempt to find a more ‘Asari’ meaning equivalent of ‘nameste’ which as some of you will know is a Buddhist salutation which recognises the ‘deeper self’ or ‘divine’ or ‘universal’ in each and every one of us… look it up other people describe it much better… and so for me Ad‘wai’ta holds the Asari meaning of ‘we are one’ ‘one universal consciousness’ and that is what Asari greet in others… the oneness, the unknowable universal ‘magic’ that gives us consciousness and that we all share
Chapter 52

On the beach, T’Soni estate, Thrassica – very late evening, two days before Janaris

Shepard looked around the semi-circle of people gathered in the flickering light of the fire. Standing close to her mother was Jamie and Garrus on the other side of Liara Liselle and Tash and facing them all was the tall, elegant and imposing figure of High Priestess El’Estrene.

Liara faced Shepard and said quietly, “the day after tomorrow will be for public eyes and will mean no less to me but tonight is how we both wanted it to be, this is for us my love,” Shepard felt her breath catch in her chest and butterflies found their wings in her stomach as she was bathed in the beauty and love of the woman who was her soul mate.

“We know there are others who are important to you Commander and they will have their chance to stand with you on Janaris but we felt this ought to be the closest circle of blood,” the priestess spoke to Shepard who reached her hand out to squeeze Garrus’s shoulder.

“Yes and some blood connections are made during a lifetime,” Shepard said to her friend, “This wouldn’t have been the same without you Vakarian.”

He replied softly his flanged tones only slightly wavering, “always got your back Shepard.”

The small group all turned to face the Priestess. Liara was still holding her hand and Shepard took a steadying breath.

The High Priestess raised her hands and softly sang the opening prayers joined by Liselle and Liara. As with all Asari singing it held an ‘other worldly’ quality and always resonated in the deepest part of Shepard’s soul.

Shepard stole a glance at her mother who was holding baby John and was rewarded with a beaming smile from her mother and the sight of her small son completely focussed on the Priestess stillness and calm on his tiny features.

As the opening prayers died away Priestess El’Estrene began the formal ceremony. Shepard and Liara had discussed at length what kind of bonding ceremony they wanted and had decided on a mix of the old and more modern conventions.

“Who stands witness to the commitment to this bonding for Auca’poma Shepard,” the Priestess looked at the proud figure of Hannah Shepard standing at her daughters shoulder.

“I do with my blessings,” Hannah said in a strong voice, “and I will bear witness to their bond.”

“Who stands witness to the commitment to this bonding for Sandeep’Abhiti T’Soni,” the Priestess looked to Liselle who was standing next to her sister but it was only at that moment they all realised that Matriarch T’Joan who was to be Liara’s witness had not arrived.

A moment’s silence and then from the edge of darkness just beyond the pool of light came a familiar voice but speaking in a very unfamiliar tone.

“I do with my blessings,” Aria T’Loak moved into the light and stood next to her daughter, “and I will bear witness to their bond.”

Liara felt a rush of love for her father who had come at her request and probably against the Pirate
Queen’s better judgement.

“Thank you,” Liara said quietly.

Aria shook her head slowly cupping the young Asari’s face in her hands and kissed Liara on the forehead and said, “you have nothing to thank me for Liara, she would be so proud of you.” And not trusting her voice any further Aria turned to face the Priestess.

Matriarch T’Joan had also slipped into the circle taking Tash’s place next to Liselle. Tash moved to Shepard’s side of the line now that Liara had her three witnesses.

The questions that Tash had about Aria turning up at the bonding ceremony could wait and she put them from her mind as the ceremony moved forward.

The Priestess indicated that Shepard and Liara should face each other and as they did Shepard reached out with her left hand and Liara with her right. Each holding the others hand as if they were about to engage in an arm wrestling contest.

The Priestess placed a beautifully carved, wide, silver bracelet which easily encased both their wrists and a few a hands span up their forearms.

The tattoo bracelet would biotically tattoo the couples agreed design around their wrists. This oldest form of bonding mark was one they both wanted rather than the more modern equivalents of removable bracelets.

As the tattooing bracelet did its work the couple spoke their bonding vows.

“You are my burning sun, my light in the darkness, my faith, my hope,” Liara said a faint smile playing around her lips, her blue eyes as deep as Shepard had ever seen them.

“All that I have been, all that I am and all I will ever be is yours and yours and yours my love, for every eternity,” Shepard said sensing rather than hearing the faint chorus of prayer singing now strengthened by the addition of Aria and Seninnth’s voices.

Liara spoke again as she felt the Asari prayers tingling through her body, “our souls beat with a pulsar’s power, our minds joined across time and space, every eternity.”

“You are my beginning, my end, darkness is not you,” Shepard said.

Still maintaining her soft chanting Priestess El’Estrene moved forward and removed the tattoo bracelet as both Shepard and Liara spoke together.

“I am yours; you are the purest part of me. Love is the path I walk with you, will always walk with you, two souls bound in love.” As they finished speaking so the singing stopped and the silence was only broken by the soft sounds of the bonfire.

The Priestess raised her hands over their heads, palms down, and in a voice that carried up into the night sky she spoke in a language that the universal translator couldn’t recognise and neither was it ancient Asari. Even Aria couldn’t recognise it but the words and sounds held such power everyone in the circle felt them physically.

As she spoke the last word the Priestess clapped her hands together over the bowed heads in front of her, the sound cracking into the silence, as she parted her hands a field of rippling blue energy grew.

The field cascaded down over Shepard and Liara bathing them completely. The final Asari prayers
began and everyone joined in. Priestess El’Estrene, Seninnth, Aria and Liselle used the ancient form of their language and as usual sang the prayer.

Garrus spoke the prayer from memory in his native tongue and the humans spoke in Earth Standard, Shepard and Tash from memory whilst Hannah and Jamie referred to the text on their Omni tools.

And yet to each ear it was as if they heard only one tongue and not through their universal translators.

“Lead us from unreal to Real,
Lead us from darkness to the Light,
Lead us from the fear of death,
To knowledge of Immortality.
You are my mother and my father
You are my family and my friend
You are my knowledge and my wealth
You are my all, all is one”

As the prayer moved to its second section wisps of the shimmering energy that still held Shepard and Liara sprang out on either side snaking around the wrists of Aria, Liselle and Garrus. Each end of the thin rope of biotic energy ending their journey around each wrist of the High Priestess who seemed not the slightest bit surprised.

On the last phrase of the prayer she once again clapped her hands together and the biotic field and its wispy tendrils shimmered away to darkness.

Liara looked across at the Priestess and felt a jolt of something, recognition, connection that had not been there before the ceremony and then as quickly it melted away.

The Priestess appeared to stagger forward and both Shepard and Aria moved to support her.

“That was a powerful ceremony Priestess… what was that prayer?” Aria asked her voice calm and conversational but her eyes searching and focussed on the Priestess.

The Priestess looked at Aria with a puzzled expression, “the usual bonding… I… I think I need...”

“We can talk about the ceremony later Aria let’s get Lady Nara up to the house,” Matriarch T’Joan spoke as she moved and took Aria’s place supporting the Priestess.

The Priestess looked around at the concerned faces and a warm smile spread across her face and said in her more usual tones, “Now then all is well… I am just a little exhausted… let us not forget our newly bonded pair,” and with that the previous tension dissipated.

Liara and Shepard smiled at each other and a growing murmur of congratulations bubbled around them. Liara once again felt a familiar need thrill through her body, a heat beginning to burn in her core as she reached out and pulled Shepard into a deep burning need filled kiss.

Shepard felt as if she’d been physically jolted by the power of Liara’s need and for a moment they
both lost themselves in the growing sensations of desire and connection.

Pulling apart and smiling their thanks at the onslaught of well-wishing only one pair of eyes had noticed the fire between them and Aria leaned in to speak quietly to Shepard.

“Her mother was exactly the same, make the most of it,” Aria gave a quiet throaty laugh at Shepard’s embarrassed and non plussed expression, “it’s the mating hormones, affects everyone differently.”

Aria’s eyes had a distant look for a moment as she continued, “the first luna cycle after she became pregnant with Liara she was… well it seems you have an idea what she was like.”

Liara was pulling her coat around the now sleeping baby whom she had taken from Hannah as she turned and said, “And what was my mother like Aria?” Liara said a smile playing around her lips. She received only a blank stare from Aria and a nervous shuffling of feet from Shepard. “You will come up to the house won’t you,” Liara said in a quieter tone a slight pleading edge in her voice and her eyes.

On many different levels Aria wanted to go up to the house so long barred to her and not only to spend a little more time with her daughter but also to ask El’Estrene about the end of the ceremony. But it was dangerous and she was about to decline when Matriarch T’Joan said loudly to everyone but glancing at Aria.

“I’m afraid we will have to fend for ourselves back at the house I gave all the staff the night off and told them not to come into the main house so that we could keep the ceremony completely secret.”

“Yes little wing I’ll come up to the house with you,” Aria said so quietly only Liara and Shepard heard her. Her lapse into tenderness seemed to shake Aria who immediately moved away and moved to help Matriarch T’Joan walk the still shaky Priestess off the beach and up through the trees.

As they too began to make their way back up to the house Liara slipped her right hand into Shepard’s left and they both felt the slight burn of residual biotic energy from their bonding tattoos. It was a strange yet comforting sensation this physical representation of their connection and commitment to each other.

They headed for the smaller cosier sitting room once back at the house and for the first time Shepard saw that the fire had been lit.

Settled into one of the arm chairs Priestess El’Estrene was looking much better but Shepard had a strong sense of unease coming from the normally very calm Matriarch.

“Tea Lady Nara,” Shepard asked and was rewarded with a gentle smile.

“Seninnth is getting me one but thank you for asking Shepard.”

Liara was settling the still sleeping baby onto an arm chair surrounding his little body by cushions to contain him should he begin to toss and turn as she turned to speak, “I insist that you stay in one of our guest rooms Lady Nara.”

“That is kind of you I believe I will,” El’Estrene replied with another gentle smile.

Liara stood up and made an Asari blessing, “you honour our home with your presence High Priestess,” it was the required formal response but Liara added a broad smile and leaned down to kiss the Priestess on the cheek, “thank you so much for bonding us Lady Nara.”

“It was my pleasure Liara,” El’Estrene said and turned to take her tea from Matriarch T’Joan.
Shepard heard fragments of conversations from around the room, only half listening, trying to put words to the things she was sensing in the room.

Aria was talking to her mother and although engaged in the conversation Shepard had the distinct impression that the Asari’s focus was still on the High Priestess.

Garrus, Liara, Liselle and Tash were discussing which night club was the best in the Asari capital, Larissa, and planning a night out to decide for themselves.

But again Shepard had the sense of something not being said, perhaps not even recognised as bubbling under the surface of their thoughts. She began to feel besieged, overwhelmed with feelings that she knew weren’t her own.

With a jolt she knew that Jamie, who was standing with her, was at that moment thinking, no it was more like feeling, something about Kasumi.

“Whoa you really care about her don’t you?” Shepard said without thinking.

Jamie looked shy and a little embarrassed but replied with a smile, “yes I think I love her… that’s weird coz I was just thinking about Kas and…” he started to look puzzled and Shepard covered quickly.

“Hey doesn’t take a giant leap of intuition to know that Jamie,” she smiled at her younger cousin who was so different from Tash, “does she feel the same way?”

His face lit up with a huge grin and he sighed, “I think she does… it’s sort of… well… wonderful.”

Shepard smiled and gave him a one arm hug saying, “it sure is,” as her eyes drifted to her, now, bondmate.

Shepard’s eyes drifted once more to her mother and Aria who were still deep in conversation but as she watched they seemed to come to a full stop, nodded to each other and then Hannah spoke to the room.

“Well come on people we have another very busy day tomorrow,” she smiled at Shepard, “and I finally get to visit my daughters other great love, the Normandy.”

Jamie gathered the baby up from the chair and both Shepard and Liara said goodnight to him and the baby; Liara kissing the tiny forehead and Shepard stroking the soft downy cheek.

Aria spoke briefly with Liselle and Tash and seemed to usher them from the room, Hannah and Garrus saying brief goodnights as they followed them out of the room.

As the High Priestess began to get up from her chair Aria said, “No Priestess you’re going to tell me what happened at the end of ceremony.”

“Arai T’Loak that is no way to speak…” Seninnth T’Joan spoke with power and authority but Aria took no notice and cut across.

“I need to know what happened, Nara, and as we’re here now it saves me the trip I intended to make to ask you exactly the same thing in the morning.” Aria’s tone was neutral, not hostile, but the power and force of her personality encased them in steel.

Shepard felt Liara slip her hand into her own and they both watched as a silent struggle of will seemed to be playing out between Aria and the Priestess.
Seeming to come to a decision Lady Nara settled back into the chair, Shepard and Liara sat down on the sofa that was closest to them.

Whilst Seninnnth continued to sit on the edge of her seat Aria remained standing, her tall muscled yet lithe frame, dominating the room as did her personality.

“Who did you sense Aria,” to Shepard it seemed both a question that made no sense and the most logical thing she had heard since their return from the beach.

Aria was completely taken aback and scowled at the Priestess who had now completely recovered her calm and returned to her usual self-possessed self.

“What has that got to do with anything,” Aria said coldly her eyes narrowing as they bore into the Priestess.

Shepard felt the room pressing in on her and a whispering started in her mind, she fought to bring her focus back to what was happening in the room.

“I believe it has everything to do with what happened, don’t you?”

“This is not the time for your inscrutable nonsense Nara just answer my fucking question what the fuck happened… it wasn’t you was it… that language… and why one a few of us why not bind everyone that was there?” Aria was enraged now, she wasn’t used to having to ask twice and she wanted answers.

They all saw the rippling biotic field light up the outline of Aria’s body and Liara made to say something but Shepard squeezed her hand and almost imperceptibly gave a quick shake of her head.

“Aria you have the answers, as you rightly judged, I have no memory of what happened after Shepard and Liara completed their personal vows.” This admission was greeted by gasps from Liara and Seninnnth.

Shepard once again found herself fighting to remain in the room the whispers and pain in her head now beginning to block out everything else.

The Priestess continued, “I’m sorry Aria but all your posturing and threats will not get me to an understanding of what happened any quicker… I will need time to reach back into the gap and find…” the Priestess stopped speaking and jumped up from the chair as noticed Shepard fall onto her knees on the floor her head cradled in her hands.

Liara and Lady Nara reached Shepard’s side as she seemed to begin shaking and moaning in pain.

“What is it,” Liara said fear etched on her face and in her voice looking into the Priestess’s face.

“I think it’s connected to what happened on the beach,” she replied and then spoke gently to Shepard, “Commander focus on my voice, listen to my voice…”

Shepard knew she was in the room with Liara and the others, on Thessia… but it was as if she’d fallen into her nightmare even though she was awake.

The voices in the room calling her back began to fade and she fell deeper and deeper into the nightmare of witnessing numberless Reaper invasions and their destruction of countless unknown civilisations and the same time feeling the fear and the pain and the grief.

The screams of the frightened and dying drowned out everything else yet for the first time she wasn’t
alone. Shepard tried to look to her side where she sensed another presence but couldn’t move her head. And still all around her the scenes of decimation and death continued on its loop first started by the visions from the Prothean beacon.

And then she heard it, faint at first growing more strongly, from whoever stood by her side, she heard the words…

Shepard made a gasping strained attempt to shout out and at first it was only another moan but then it formed into the words… “Wake up… wake up Shepard…”

Liara looked beside herself with worry, “yes darling wake up, wake up Shepard.”

Lady Nara looked up at Aria who looked frozen, her face a mask but her eyes showed the Priestess that she also sensed another presence as she had on the beach.

Shepard locked in her nightmare the voice saying the words sounded odd, multiple, a chorus of voices… “wake up Shepard, you have to wake up… you all have to wake up…”

Back in the room Shepard suddenly stopped shaking and looked around at the faces of concern and confusion around her, “we all have to wake up.”

And then she collapsed into darkness, unconsciousness, no nightmare just soothing nothingness, peace.

In the room Liara cried out and Aria went to her side also kneeling beside Shepard’s now prone body.

“She is alright Liara, she has passed out and will probably sleep for hours,” Lady Nara spoke softly but her confidence immediately gave Liara the reassurance she wanted.

“What did you see,” Aria asked, “you joined with her I saw you, just before she passed out,” Aria said no accusation or anger in her voice just the question.

“I saw only what she could see,” Lady Nara allowed her sadness to show momentarily in her eyes, “so many cycles of destruction seem to be etched on her soul. And… something… someone else was trying to reach her. I believe those words were a message… perhaps to all of us.”

Aria shook her head slowly, “let’s get her to bed and you need to rest Liara. Shepard will be fine she’s tougher than she looks,” with an attempt at softness that didn’t come naturally to Aria she stood and helped her daughter to her feet.

High Priestess El'Estrene knew that Aria would want the answer to her questions, as would Liara and Shepard, but not tonight. And the Priestess would need time and help to try to work out what was happening.

But one thing was certain, Shepard seemed to be both focus and conduit, and Nara would need to delve deeply into the Commander’s mind if she was to make sense of it.

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T'Soni house, early morning – one day before Janiris

Shepard took a deep breath and an instant later recognised the jagged headache that seemed to indicate someone was actively trying to take off the top of her skull with a blunt instrument.

A soft familiar voice guided her back to full consciousness.
“Good morning my love, we were all worried about you,” Liara moved towards the bed kneeled down to bring their faces close together.

“Mmm, either someone spiked my drink or I have a miniature Krogan in my brain trying to burrow his way out,” Shepard said attempting levity and trying to focus on Liara’s face.

“Here, some pain killers, Doctor Chakwas said you might have some pain this morning,” Liara reached for the tablets and a glass of water as Shepard gently moved into a less prone position.

“Thanks,” and as Shepard threw back the pills and the water the pain it caused was plain on her face, “not how I’d planned the first night of our married life,” Shepard smiled and was rewarded by first a slightly confused look and then a wan smile.

“Ah human mating jokes, now I know you are feeling better,” Liara moved and sat on the bed and smiled down at her pale looking bondmate.

“So what’s the prognosis, am I just barking mad or in the first stages of being indoctrinated,” Shepard had said it lightly but her fear even as she was having the experience was that she was fighting the Reapers for control of her mind.

Liara frowned “you must not joke about such things Shepard… but you must not worry about indoctrination I would know, and I see no such signs,” for good measure the young Asari leaned in a kissed Shepard lightly on the lips.

“What the hell is the time Lee, I’ve got to…”

“You have plenty of time it is still early. Even with what Doctor Chakwas diagnosed as pressure concussion, you still do not sleep late,” Liara smiled broadly and took Shepard’s hand looking at the tattoos they now shared, “Oh Shepard I can not believe we are finally bondmates.”

Shepard pulled Liara into her arms and whispered into the warm soft neck of her lover, “I know and… I am surprisingly headache free,” she grazed her teeth across blue skin and was rewarded with a moan of pleasure, “so how about we…”

“Oh… but… are you feeling…” Liara’s body responded to her bondmate’s arousal and all thoughts of protest disappeared as Shepard stripped the clothes from both their willing body.

Breath quickened, the heat of desire and lust rising equally between them. Hands searched out familiar places of pleasure and within moments Shepard had buried her fingers deep inside Liara’s waiting hot, wet, core.

Lost in their desire and need, their love and connection driving out all negative thoughts, they found true bliss in each other’s arms and in each other’s souls.

A little over an hour later Shepard was leaving the house to wait for her mother to join her for their visit to the Normandy.

Liara had already left to preside over yet another formal function at the main house Matriarch T’Joan and her personal commando guard at her side.

Walking half way down the steps into the bright sunshine Shepard pulled her cap down low almost touching the top edge of her sun protection glasses.

Behind her she heard familiar voices and she turned to wait for them to come through the front door.
“Look I’ll take whatever bet you want to make, the Alliance Taipan fighters are unbeatable,” the smile clear on Tash’s face and in her voice.

“You are going to regret that Mikhailovich you’ve clearly never flown a Karait,” Liselle said as they emerged into the sunshine.

Shepard was leaning against the waist high wall that edged the steps, her arms crossed over her chest, a smile on her face, “remind me again what productive activity you two will be indulging yourselves in today?”

“Hey cuz, good night,” Tash said with a smirk and a telegraphed wink.

Liselle gave Tash a pretend punch to the shoulder, “hey I have no desire to know how their night went thanks… well I’ve managed to pull a few strings and get us access to a couple of my home Republic’s fighter’s.”

“Yeah so we’re hopping a shuttle to Serrice. I’m gonna do a fly by on Aria’s estate in Amphipolis,” Tash said making a face at Liselle.

Shepard shook her head slowly and said with a smile, “well, have fun children and try not to break your toys.”

She watched them walk off across the lawns to where the estate shuttles were parked. They seemed so close that Shepard found it difficult to believe that there wasn’t something serious between them.

A moment later her thoughts were interrupted as her mother joined her and they both continued down the steps.

“I heard about what happened, are you ok?” Hannah said with concern clear in her voice.

“Yeah, I’ll get it sorted, just those damned beacons,” Shepard didn’t want to talk about it at the moment, “anyway never mind me what were you and Aria in a huddle about last night… you know it would be very weird if anything happened between you two?” Shepard said with a smile.

“Well she is very attractive and sexy and…” Hannah Shepard laughed loudly at the shocked expression on her daughters face, “so be careful what you joke about young woman.”

“Ok, point taken. But it didn’t look like chit chat,” her mother knew that Aria was Liara’s other parent. Shepard and Liara had been adamant they would have to tell Hannah Shepard.

“We talked about the ceremony and she seemed impressed that I had noticed Priestess El’Estrene had seemed to go into some form of trance at the end. That’s why I helped to get everyone to bed so she could raise the issue with the Priestess there and then. So are we any the wiser.”

“Not yet but we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“Well I have to say I’m looking forward to seeing your ship but I’m particularly interested in speaking to Miranda Lawson,” her mother said with an unreadable expression on her face, “why hasn’t she visited the house?”

Shepard’s heart sank she had completely missed that her mother might also have ‘issues’ with Miranda, having been so preoccupied with Liara’s fury at the women.

“Ah well… Liara is not her biggest fan… the stealing DNA thing goes down really badly with the Asari in general and Liara in particular,” Shepard said not managing to keep the sigh out of her
voice.

“I can see how that will cause problems,” Hannah said with glint in her eye and the hint of a smile both of which Shepard missed.

A/N

I only changed a word or two of the Buddhist prayer/mantra’s used in this chapter and no offence was intended. They were, obviously, much better than anything I could have come up with myself. And they do capture my sense of the Asari belief system that is important to the wider storyline.

Shepard and Liara’s vows were all my own work. But I did search for inspiration amongst plenty of poetry so if you recognise anything let me know.
Chapter 53

A/N *Asan is the Asari familiar term for parent much like mum/dad mamma/papa and of course being ‘genderless’ there is only one term whichever parent it is used for J

T'Soni Estate, Thessia – early morning, Janaris eve

Shepard and her mother fell into step as they walked swiftly out across the fields and towards the tree line. The Normandy was in open field’s a couple of klicks away where she would be joined by other ships bringing VIP’s to the celebration the next day.

Caught up in their own thoughts until finally as they entered the narrow strip of trees Shepard asked, “So… are you going to give Miranda another hard time… I mean I totally understand why you were angry with her about the baby but she’s proved herself really loyal to me… and… well…”

“She did bring you back from the dead and give you a son that you probably would never have had,” Hannah Shepard said in a soft voice.

Shepard looked at her mother who was smiling as she continued, “Yes, well the shock of everything and her seeming to be a high up member of a terrorist… that terrorist organisation,” Hannah emphasised the word ‘that’, “rang all kinds of warning bells. But she does seem to have had a change of heart.”

Hannah Shepard stopped and turned to face her daughter pulling her into a hug.

“I have everything to thank her for Lyddie… it was so hard losing you my darling girl,” Hannah’s voice almost broke with emotion as she felt the edge of her loss and grief. Shepard senior reigned in her emotions as she released her daughter and started walking again and said in a more controlled voice.

“Enough looking back we have a huge job on our hands and it needs our complete focus.”

“That we do Admiral, that we do,” Shepard said falling easily into the other side of her relationship with her mother as dedicated Alliance officers sure and certain of their duty and their place in the universe.

Miranda was waiting a little nervously on the hanger deck overseeing yet another delivery of supplies. The huge bay doors were open and the ramp was out as usual when they were ground side. This made access into the belly of the ship easy on foot and for the small tractor units being used to haul materials and equipment onto the ship.

She caught site of the two Alliance officers walking in step and took a moment to appraise both women.

Around the same height and build, Shepard junior was much more muscular than her mother, yet their genetic connection was clear. The Admiral in Alliance service dress uniform her rank clearly noted on sleeve and the peak of her pill box cap. Shepard in black battledress her rank marked on her shoulders and collar. The Normandy’s insignia on her baseball cap and again on her left chest under which two rows of coloured ribbons paying tribute to the medals she had earned during her service to the Alliance and the Council.

Miranda noticed the Admiral also had a row of those coloured ribbons on her own chest, ‘the apple
didn’t fall far from that tree’ Miranda thought with a faint smile.

Before they caught sight of her Doctor Lawson headed to the back wall of the deck and jumped in the elevator so she could meet both Shepard’s in the CIC. Apprehension, a feeling that Miranda did not usually entertain, edged into her mind. She was not looking forward to another confrontation with Shepard’s mother.

“Oh she is sleek and very dangerous looking,” Hannah Shepard said smiling as the Normandy came into view, “and I’m glad to see she wears your colours and not Cerberus’s.”

“Hell no, it was a line I refused to cross. This is a Spectre ship and mission and if Cerberus has been stupid enough to bring me back and equip me thinking I was going to be some kind of lackey then Harper didn’t do his research well enough,” Shepard spoke with obvious venom in her voice.

“And I’m looking forward to turning his own assets back at him and personally ripping his still beating heart from his chest while he watches.” As Shepard finished speaking they had reached the ramp and the moment she stepped on deck EDI’s voice sounded throughout the ship.

“Captain on deck, Lieutenant Lawson is relived; let the ships log note Commander Shepard has the conn.”

“Thank you EDI,” Shepard replied and walked to the nearest comm unit opening up a Ship wide broadcast, “all hands to parade station Admiral on deck.”

As Admiral Shepard walked up the ramp she noted the handful of crew who were working in the hanger bay had formed a line and were standing to attention. Mostly human but there was also a Turian, a Batarian and a couple of Asari commando’s.

“You weren’t kidding about running this as an Alliance vessel were you,” Admiral Shepard said quietly, with a smile, to her daughter as they moved to inspect the waiting parade line.

Preferring to take the stairs they toured the ship deck by deck, inspecting parade lines as they went and finally reaching the command deck they stepped into the CIC.

“So you can see we have specialist stations along the walls, for comms, weapons, engineering and scanning, and around the central holo projector are command stations for my officers and tactical specialists.” Shepard explained as they stood taking in the view across the CIC to the cockpit at the far end.

They moved forward and again inspected the short parade line which included Miranda.

“Admiral may I present my XO Lieutenant Lawson,” Shepard said as they drew level with the black battledress clad Cerberus operative.

Miranda gave a fair impression of a salute which was returned by the Admiral who said, “Congratulations on your promotion Lieutenant and well done all crew parades have been more than satisfactory.”

“Thank you ma’am,” Miranda responded her relief just edging into her tone.

When they finished inspecting the line they walked on towards the cockpit where a familiar figure was standing almost upright.

“These stations are for ground missions,” the Admiral asked as they walked along the ramp to where the ships pilot was standing.
“Yeah, every member of the ground crew is monitored by tactical specialists at these stations including live vid feeds. Very useful for when we are working in separate teams as the XO can keep an overview of progress and feed that through to me, I can also have telemetry from any of the ground team relayed to me directly if I need it.”

They had reached the cockpit and Joker snapped his best Alliance salute.

“At ease Lieutenant,” Shepard said allowing Joker to lean on the back of his seat.

“You may be the best pilot in the Alliance Navy son but if you get my daughter killed again by ignoring a direct order I will personally reduce you to your base components do I make myself clear?” Admiral Shepard spoke in a tone that demanded acceptance and no question.

Joker snapped back to attention and said, “Ma’am, yes ma’am.”

“Very good, well keep up the good work and get these people home safe every time,” Hannah Shepard relaxed and gave the terrified looking pilot a smile as she turned to walk back the way they came.

Shepard gave Joker a smile and raised her eyebrows and he said quietly, “the Admiral is scarier than you are Commander and that’s saying something.”

Shepard smiled to herself as she turned and followed her mother ‘where the hell did you think I learned it in the first place’, she thought and they continued their inspection of the command deck. They moved up to the top deck which housed the officer’s bunks and Shepard’s personal quarters where they ended their tour.

“Can I get you a drink?” Shepard asked her mother who had settled on the sofa.

“Coffee?” Hannah asked and then allowed her eyes to wander around the room, “they did a pretty good job replicating your old bunk but this is… well… more.”

“Yeah,” Shepard smiled as she placed the coffee in front of her mother, “more private sector than navy.

Shepard sat in a chair and studied her mother before speaking, “so, just how bad is the political situation inside the Systems Alliance and the Alliance Navy in particular?”

Her mother let out a deep sigh, “bad… at least as far as we can tell. The real problem is that Hackett and the loyal members of Naval high command are having real problems working out who’s been compromised.”

She picked up the mug and let it warm her hands as she continued.

“We’re pretty sure officer ranks up to Captain are solid enough, the odd ‘earth firster’ but nothing that can’t be contained. But when we move up past Commodore, Vice Admiral and higher, which is where all the major strategic command decisions are made… well… we know of three Admirals who are definitively taking Harper’s orders… but we would never have known without the Intel.”

“But they can’t go against the Fleet Admiral’s orders can they… not openly?” Shepard leaned in concerned at how widespread Harper’s tentacles of influence were.

“Not openly no, but you know yourself that orders can be interpreted… that attitudes and values can be influenced down the chain of command… and we also have a surge in Cerberus representation in the Systems Alliance Parliament which combined with ‘dissident’ voices within the Alliance Navy
means they could get some traction.

I’m really worried Harper will try to remove Admiral Hackett and replace him with one of his stooges… we can’t let that happen,” Hannah allowed her usual professional mask slip and she looked worn out and deeply troubled.

“Nothing’s going to happen to Hackett… that old war dog has more lives than I do and the Navy loves him… every grunt knows Hackett is one of them… we’d all take a bullet for him,” Shepard moved to the sofa to sit next to her mother and place a comforting arm around the older woman’s shoulder.

“I hope your right Lyddie, I really hope your right,” and they sat in silence for a while before discussing the upcoming mission to take the Shadow Broker base.

T’Loak estate, Thessia – mid morning Janaris eve

Tash could feel the warm, soft grass supporting her. The sun was hot on her body and bright even through her closed eyes. She felt a warm, lithe, body against her, movement and then a shadow closing out the bright light.

“So…” a soft sensual voice so close Tash felt the breath on her face, then a gentle kiss on her lips, “still believe your old Taipan is better than my Karait… do you.”

Liselle murmured the last words as she ran her hand over her lover’s naked belly feeling the strong muscles tense and receiving a murmur of satisfaction from the still prone figure beside her.

“Mmm, you definitely win… but then you always do,” Tash murmured and opening her eyes she drank in the perfection leaning over her.

Tash took in the sweep of Liselle’s breasts and neck in a glance bringing her gaze to the full soft lips just a breath away from her own.

Their lips crashed together and they both a powerful surge of desire. Tash pulled Liselle in tight feeling her lover’s naked breasts hot and soft against her vest.

Liselle ran her hand down, under Tash’s open trousers and found her lover already wet and another rush of the heat seared through them. Liselle plunged her fingers deep inside, moving expertly and pulled them both into a meld.

For the second time that morning Tash and Liselle started to put on clothes discarded in the heat of passion.

Tash was sitting on the grass and pulling her boots on looking up at the Asari who was buttoning up a tight, revealing, bodice that showed off her breasts to perfection.

“You know,” Tash said quietly stopping what she was doing and completely caught up in the feeling of contentment and connection, “you’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Liselle held her breath and felt time slow down. Tasha used the term to describe things she’d seen or moments that had touched her, touched her soul, and Liselle had often shared her feelings in the same way.

It was the closest Tasha every came to talking about her feelings or the future. Almost always flippant and maintaining an appearance of shallow hedonism a way, Liselle was sure, of holding
back the darkness and pain that had marked her.

But through their melds Liselle ‘knew’ a deeper Tasha and in those unguarded moments when Tasha had flashes of being happy when they truly connected they both felt what was between them.

And in the same moment Liselle realised she was just hearing what she wanted to and the comment had more to do with their lovemaking and the two fighters that sat on the grass not far away. If Tasha did feel… something… for her why had she re-joined the Alliance the moment she had the chance… the information had come from her mother who delivered the news almost as a challenge.

Surely Tasha knew they could never be together if that were so… Liselle would never allow herself to be a pit stop no matter how much she felt for this human… and why hadn’t Tasha talked to her about it.

And then something else occurred to Liselle and she thought, ‘she’s trying to let me down gently… in some screwed up way… letting me know I am… was important to her but… oh Tasha you are my first and I am going to lose you too soon… don’t worry I’ll make it easy for you.’ It was only in that moment that Liselle fully realised she had, indeed, fallen into love with her human.

Out loud instead of saying she felt the same way she kept it light, “I should hope so… what’s not to like… great sex and you get a ride in an Asari fighter,” she leaned down and, masking her sadness, gave her lover a deep sexual kiss, “or perhaps that is both the same thing,” she purred in Tasha’s ear then stood up and began walking towards her Karait.

Tasha felt the familiar pull followed quickly by a pulse of desire. She watched her Asari walk towards her ship and tried desperately to work out if Liselle had understood what she’d said.

‘Dammit Tash’ Tash thought, ‘could you not just have said… what… love… I’ve got no right to expect love from her… and what’s mine worth… with my fucked up life… even bigger my fucked up head… but she understood… damn that kiss… yeah she knows… so now I need to talk to her about the Alliance… how to get out of it… if she wants me… if we still have our future on Omega… yeah no pressure… we don’t have to have any deep conversations… I won’t make it awkward for her… if I’m just another fling… she won’t care if I go back to the Alliance… Goddess Leece you’re the prettiest thing in this whole damn Universe…’ Tash’s thoughts were interrupted by a shout from Liselle who was climbing into her fighter.

“You gonna sit there all day or shall we have round two where I kick your arse yet again Michailovich… which pains me as it already belongs to me,” Liselle laughed. She would enjoy every moment they had left; there would be plenty of time when it was over for her to feel the loss.

“T’Soni family mansion, seat of the Thrassican Republic Government, early morning – Janaris eve

Walking in through the wide entrance Liara braced herself for the series of formal meetings and mini receptions she had scheduled for most of the day. These meetings were more important than ever as she would not be attending the formal reception and dance after her inauguration. She would be chasing as fast as possible to the Shadow Broker’s location to take him down.

The thought gave her a surprising thrill she had never felt as alive as when she was facing death and knowing that she would escape its grasp. She didn’t enjoy violence, well when she was herself she didn’t, yet it had been an almost constant companion since meeting Shepard on that ill-fated dig.

And she would never hesitate to deal even lethal force to protect those she fought alongside but there was a part of her that believed there had to be a better way to protect the innocent and keep the peace.
However, she was resolute in her belief that the Reaper’s would only be defeated by force. Sharing Shepard’s visions had shown her they could not be negotiated with, would not show mercy or compassion. But how to do that and not lose the very things that made her Asari, which were also the best ideals and values shared across all the Citadel races. She had experienced her life without compassion, kindness, generosity and mercy and she would never be that person again.

Her reverie was cut short as she was shown into one of the smaller reception room and was greeted by a familiar voice.

“Well aren’t you a picture,” the gruff tones of Matriarch Aethyta T’Arani sounded strong and clear in the room.

Liara saw the tall commando uniform clad figure standing in front of the fire slot and immediately rushed to the waiting open arms.

“Asan,” Liara said with a bright smile allowing herself to be folded into a bear hug, “I am so pleased you came… I thought you may be too busy… oh it is so good to see you.”

“Hell where else do you think I’d be kiddo? I wouldn’t miss you’re big moment for anything,” the Matriarch pulled back a little so that she could look at Liara, “gotta say though I’m surprised… after all the fuss you made defying your Mother I didn’t think the old bitches would bring you to heel so easily,” her words were spoken with concern rather than criticism and Liara smiled.

“Do you know one of the things I have always admired about you Asan,” again Liara used the familiar and fond term for parent, “you are always honest and speak your heart.”

Aethyta rumbled a throaty laugh and replied, “Real fancy way for calling me blunt and saying I stick my nose. Come on let’s sit down we don’t have long… drink?”

Liara sat on one of the sofa’s and watched as Aethyta moved to the small tray of drinks and helped herself to what looked like a large shot of strong liquor.

“Not for me thank you, it is still a little early,” Liara said still smiling. Aethyta did like a drink but Liara had never known it interfere with either her duty or her common sense.

“How have you been,” Liara asked skirting around the question she really wanted to ask.

Aethyta sat on the opposite sofa and put her newly filled glass down on the small table that sat between them. When she spoke it was in a softer tone.

“I couldn’t do it kid… I’m sorry I let you face it on your own but I just couldn’t face her funeral…”

Liara cut across the older Asari her tone gentle, “Aethyta you have nothing to apologise for, Goddess knows I understand how… well I think I know… well I thought I knew and then…” Liara trailed off realising she was about to talk about the shock of finding out about Aria T’Loak.

Liara just caught the quickly concealed look of pain in Aethyta’s eyes before the Matriarch schooled her expression.

“It’s ok Liara I know who your real father is and…” again Liara cut off the Matriarch and also moved quickly to join her on the other sofa.

“Don’t say that Asan… you are the only father I have ever known and you will always hold that place in my heart,” as Liara spoke Aethyta pulled her into a hug. “It was one of the reasons I began to resent Benezia… sending you away… why… and why did she stop you from spending time with
me?” Liara’s emotion had gotten the better of her and tears sprang to her eyes.

“Hey now kiddo I didn’t come here to upset you and Benezia had her own good reasons… that was my fault little wing don’t you blame her for me leaving,” Aethyta said gently kissing the top of Liara head.

There was a knock at the door at that moment and Captain Senna popped her head in, “really sorry Lady Liara but some of your official’s out here are getting restless, apparently you are now overdue for your first meeting.” She retreated back and closed the door without waiting for a reply.

“Look we’ll talk later… just know this,” Aethyta said as she stood and pulled Liara upright as well, “I’m here and I’ll stay as long as you want me and I’m not going to let anything happen you, your bondmate or your kid,” with a final kiss on the forehead the Matriarch turned Liara to face the door and gave her a gently shove, “now scoot and do your job.”

Liara settled her emotions and by the time she left the room and began greeting her officials and first group of visitors no one could guess that she had recently had such an emotional reunion.

Aethyta left the room and made her way to the east wing where, amongst a myriad of offices that functioned to serve the Thrassican Republics’ business, the T’Soni estate security headquarters were situated.

In her day the estate provided security for both the official residence, the mansion house, and the private residence where Liara and Benezia before her had set up their home.

When Liara first returned home she still used the estate security corporation supplemented by her ‘private’ detail. Namely those ship mates from the Normandy that stayed by her side and a few hand-picked Krogan’s sent by Wrex.

But once the young Asari’s quest to take down the Shadow Broker began, and under Shiala’s guidance, Liara began drawing together a more separate force. And, with Shepard’s return the estate security corporation was cut out of the picture completely.

The wily Matriarch had been working through every angle she could think of to try to identify who could possibly be working with Vasir and against their own house, their own family.

Aethyta could only think of one group working within the household who could successfully pull off both planting a device and keeping it from being discovered… and that had to be the security corp itself. Someone high enough up to direct or misdirect as necessary, and someone who would not only have all the plans for the ceremony but would have had a hand in designing them; particularly the security planning.

‘You use your fancy methods T’Loak… your surveillance and torture… you’ve forgotten how to be a huntress’, Aethyta thought to herself as she entered the office of the Commander of the T’Soni estate commando corporation, ‘I’ll stick to my instincts and good old fashioned common sense’.

Aethyta was a huntress to her very core and that’s what allowed her to be an effective and lethal instrument for the Republic and Thessia, and what had kept her alive in many situations where equally skilled commando’s would have died.

“Matriarch T’Arani,” the maiden behind the desk said with evident pleasure and a sultry smile, “they are waiting for you, if you’d like to go in.”

“Thanks,” Aethyta gave the maiden a broad grin and a wink. Her first port of call the previous evening was to find out all the gossip and state of relationships in the Commander’s office. And the
best way to do that was to wine and dine someone who saw everything and heard a lot more.

It had certainly been no hardship to get the maiden slightly drunk and talkative, ‘maybe when this is over I’ll take her out for the right reasons and we’ll finish the night the way we could have last night,’ Aethyta thought with a smile at the memory of their long and passionate parting kiss.

“Matriarch T’Arani welcome it’s good to have you home,” Commander Desulin Kalanni was a straight backed Matriarch in ornate commando leathers with her rank and service insignia proudly displayed on her sleeves and shoulders. She had been in the service of the T’Soni family all her life and had risen through the ranks to be Benezia T’Soní’s captain of commando’s and then the highest military role the Republic had to offer.

“Been a long time since this estate was my home Desulin and this great antiquated pile of stone was never home to me,” Aethyta said with a gruff chuckle returning the Siari greeting proffered by both the other Asari in the room.

“Would you like to come down to the security centre,” the other Asari was standing near the window and was also in the requisite leathers showing the rank of captain. Aethyta had done her homework and knew this was Desulin’s chosen second in command and successor.

“I think we can sit and have a drink first Alestia,” Desulin said to the younger Asari and indicated Aethyta sit down in one of the armchairs.

“Alestia get us some drinks would you please, wine Aethyta?” Desulin asked as she settled into the other arm chair.

“Don’t you have anything stronger,” Aethyta said, “if you’re gonna drink might as well do it properly,” she finished with another rumbling chuckle.

The commando captain put the two drinks down on the small table that sat in the space between the chairs and sat down on a sofa obviously annoyed.

“Spit it out captain… what’s put sand in your azure,” Aethyta said as she picked up her glass.

“I’m not sure Alestia…” Desulin began to say but was cut across by her second in command.

“It’s an insult… bad enough we have to put up with that rag tag private army from all corners of the galaxy… but now we’re to have our work… our duty scrutinised by, and forgive me Matriarch, but by an old commando pulled out of retirement in another attempt to undermine the right order of things… things have gone to the varren’s since Shepard turned up and…”

Commander Kalanni’s voice rang out loudly and cut across the younger Asari, “you have no idea who you are talking to, show some respect, Matriarch T’Arani is a respected and highly decorated member of the Citadel Fleet and as for insulting the decisions of the heir to the house of T’Soni…”

This time it was Aethyta that did the cutting across, “that’s ok Desulin I asked her to spit out what was choking her and she did… and I took no offence to being called an old commando, it’s exactly what I am,” and Aethyta turned to the commando Captain and spoke with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, “which means I have enough experience to break your neck before you even realise I was moving towards you.”

“All I meant was that we know how to protect the people in our care and we could do a damn sight better job than the dregs Lady Liara has working for her now… Senna was a merc captain and that Turian… what do any of them know of loyalty to Thrassica or the house of T’Soni? You are here because someone thinks we need help and we don’t… it’s an insult to all of us who have sworn our
“I think it’s best if you return to your duties Alestia,” Desulin said and both Matriarch’s watched the sullen matron stalk from the room without a word.

“Bet she’s a handful in bed,” Aethyta said with a grin and enjoyed the look of shock on Matriarch Kalanni’s face who replied quickly.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know Aethyta, I had forgotten how… well blunt… perhaps we should discuss what I can help you with,” Desulin finished still a little wrong footed.

“Look Desulin I didn’t mean to put any noses out of joint… it’s my kid’s big day. And with everything that’s gone on and all the time I’ve not been here for her… well I thought… I’ll just offer my help… well I wanted to know if you’d let me help… so I could feel like I did something towards it. I’m no good at the pomp I’m a commando plain and simple.” Aethyta sounded as she intended, a little bumbling, and well meaning… no threat… no scrutinising.

It may have only been the slightest, the merest flash, but Aethyta caught it… relief… but that could be for many reasons. Worry that Liara would want to have her ‘father’ running the estates security forces or that Aethyta was going to come in demanding to take charge of the ceremony… but it was definitely something.

“Of course Aethyta I would expect nothing less,” Desulin smiled and stood indicating their meeting was at an end, “I will inform Alestia that you are to be fully briefed and that you will find a place to fit in and join us in our duties.”

Aethyta smiled her thanks and said, “well I’d better go and find the little fireball in her security centre… you know I think she secretly likes me,” and with another chuckle she left the room to begin a day of hunting.

T’Soni house, Thessia – late evening, Janaris eve

After a quiet family dinner Shepard, Liara, Tash, Liselle, Hannah and Garrus continued the evening chatting and playing Illium 5 poker.

While she tried to decide whether to raise or fold Shepard’s mind drifted back to the conversations she had with crew members earlier in the day.

It was true that Hannah had wanted the ‘guided’ tour of the Normandy but the real reason for spending most of the day on the ship was to prepare for the mission. And for that Shepard had to brief her officers and specialists.

Her mother had been surprisingly friendly to Miranda when they briefed her in Shepard’s cabin. And her XO didn’t seem put out by the fact that, for the mission, Admiral Shepard would be temporary XO and be in command of the Normandy when the ‘ground’ assault on the Broker’s base took place.

Shepard briefed her other key personnel including Mordin who she tasked with researching all known assets that the Broker may have at his disposal on his base which meant tapping into his STG contacts.

Brought sharply back to the present she realised everyone around the card table was looking at her.

“Your bid LV,” it was Tash who spoke and continued.”
“Fold,” Shepard replied not even looking at her cards, “make this the last hand guys we need to talk.”

“Shepard are you breaking up with us,” Garrus drawled raising a smile from others around the table.

“Subtle as a shotgun,” Tash said now intent on her hand and calling the other players still in the game.

Shepard and Liara had decided they would hold their briefing in the large comms room that was the centre of operations for her information brokerage, and her hunt for the Shadow Broker, as it was completely secure.

The original dinner party group had been joined by Kasumi, Jamie, Grunt, Veetor and Jack. Shepard had already spoken with Wrex. She would not put him in danger without his knowledge or consent. Shepard was almost certain he would not take the opportunity to withdraw and there was a moment when she thought he might head butt her for even suggesting he would flinch from a battle.

“But it’s not a fight old friend that’s the problem,” she had said to his scowl, “we will have to stand around pretending everything is fine and rely on others to deal with the threat.” Shepard realised that was the first time she’d shared that particular unease out loud, “and you are Tuchanka’s best hope I won’t risk all that without your knowledge.”

The old Krogan had eased and said in quiet rumbling tones, “You are a good friend and yes we are warriors Shepard… to do nothing is not our way… but we will have our chance to fight later,” his small eyes lit up with the thought of battle and again Shepard had to disappoint him.

“I need you to stay behind Wrex,” Shepard pressed on before he could start complaining. “I need to entrust the safety of my son to you… we have no real idea if this is the only threat the Broker has put in motion and… if anything happens on the mission…” she trailed off realising for the first time that running off across the galaxy was no longer quite as simple as putting her own life on the line.

“Shepard,” the warlord rumbled, “I will protect him as I would my own offspring, you honour me with his protection, he is Urdnot,” and then he bellowed with laughter, “and what will happen on the mission Shepard is that you will tear the Broker apart with your own hands and blow everything up… as you always do.” Shepard smiled at the memory and was warmed by her friendship with the old Krogan.

“Ok,” Shepard started as expectant eyes searched for a hint of what was going on, “the holidays are over people we have a live threat and hot on the heels of the ceremony’s tomorrow we will be heading out to take down the Shadow Broker.”

Her announcement was met variously with looks of concern, raised eyebrows, nodding heads and a typical Krogan battle roar. Before being assailed by questions she went straight into the full briefing. Shepard and Liara told them everything they knew and what plans were already in place. They did not tell them how much Aria T’Loak was involved and merely referred to intelligence sources at their disposal.

Just as they finished and had started taking questions they were joined by Aethyta who had spent all her time since seeing Liara going through every detail of the security plan, talking to rank and file commando’s and, without her hosts realising, trying to decide where she would plant any kind of device that would hit its target and yet remain undetected.

When Aethyta had finished briefing the assembled team she said in a low tone which was almost a
growl, “there’s no damn way anyone can get a normal bomb close enough to Shepard and Liara to take them out… whatever is being planted or is already here is big or dirty.” Her evaluation was met with sharp intakes of breath from Liara, Liselle and Kasumi.

The tension in the room was palpable and when Shepard spoke she seemed to dispel it instantly with her tone and demeanour.

“Our plan still stands,” she said making sure she caught the eyes of everyone in the room, “it doesn’t matter what type of device it is it’s not going to detonate and when we move into phase two of the operation I’ll personally stick something that will explode down the Shadow Brokers throat.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” Garrus said with a twitch of his mandibles indicating amusement, “but if I was Vasir I’d have a back-up plan just in case the bomb was discovered.”

“Agreed,” Shepard said, “Aethyta did you want to update on that part of the containment strategy.”

“Yeah, we reckon the fall back will be snipers and Liselle’s team are going to place themselves at the best vantage points to deny the enemy those positions… well you tell them honey it’s your plan,” Aethyta finished with a smile at the young merc Captain.

Liselle felt rather than saw Tash’s frown and knew she would need to explain why she hadn’t shared the threat with her lover as it was obvious Liselle was firmly in the loop.

“I’m setting up half my team and my best snipers in these positions,” she indicated on the schematics of the mansion, “giving us cross fire on the main body of the crowd, eyes and shots on any remaining positions that would give sight lines to Liara and Shepard. That team will remain covert it is not a deterrent and anyone not on my team who shows up at potential sniping positions will be neutralised without question… so I hope none of our visitors get lost and try to find a better view of the ceremony,” she finished with a cheeky grin.

“Good… the only remaining duties to assign are to Jack and Grunt,” Shepard said and turned to look at the two, “Jack, Liara and I want you to keep baby John with you at all times. You will throw up a barrier around him and Jamie, who will obviously also stay with you, at the slightest sign of trouble. Grunt I want you to stay with Jack and also defend my son… and if we get into a firefight I want the both of you to get the baby and Jamie away to safety… head for the Normandy… do you copy,” she finished.

“You got it Shep,” Jack said a determined look on her face. “But pretty boy,” she turned to look at Jamie, “diaper duties are on you,” she finished with a smile.

Grunt merely grunted his agreement and punched his fists together.

“When the threat is neutralised and we can get away Wrex will take charge of his protection, yours too Jamie,” Shepard finished.

Again a few moments of silence this time broken by Liara.

“I think we should all try to get some sleep,” she said her voice strong and no hint of the stress she was feeling, “we will all be on secure comms linked through Edi and the Normandy we must assume all local comms to be compromised.”

“Yep good point Lee,” Shepard said as everyone was beginning to move towards the door, “and hard as it might be you all need to act normally… just for the few hours before the ceremony and during…” Shepard was cut off by an anxious sounding Kasumi.
“It’s live… the whole thing is being vid cast live across Thessia,” she spoke quickly, “he’ll see, the Broker will see that he failed won’t he?”

“Good call Kas but we have friends in high places and there will be a technical hitch with live transmission the moment the ceremony starts,” Shepard smiled and wondered just how Aria had managed to pull that off.

When all their guests had left to return to their rooms or the Normandy Shepard and Liara made their way to their own room.

Dismissing their commando baby sitter they stood, Shepard standing behind Liara, looking into the cot at their peacefully sleeping son.

Shepard wrapped her arms around Liara resting her hands on her bondmates’ belly where the new life of her daughter was growing. Liara placed her own hands over her lovers in what was now a familiar and comfortable pose.

Leaning her head back slightly Liara kissed Shepard’s cheek and said quietly, “it will be alright my love, we will always keep them safe.”

Shepard rested her chin on her lovers shoulder and kept looking at the sleeping infant and feeling the warmth of Liara’s presence.

“I hope we keep making the right decisions Lee… I really hope we do.”
A/N And a reminder that Guhyasan is the formal Asari title for the ‘DNA’ donor who has no parenting role.

Flatcha = flea like creature that lives on warm blooded wild animals.

_**Aria’s office, T’Loak estate, Thessia – very early hours of the morning Janaris day**_

The room exploded in noise as the biotic slam smashed through the desk under Aria’s fists.

“What the fuck do you mean you’ve lost her…” Aria shouted her voice full of rage, “she was in her apartment all you fucking idiots had to do was keep out of sight and keep eyes on her… I will tear your minds apart and then I’ll tear your bodies apart now find her.”

Aria was now standing and looking at the vid screed that held a very scared and cringing looking Sanak.

“Boss it’s probably a tech thing we haven’t seen her leave but the signals down…” but before he could offer any more reassurance Aria cut across him again.

This time her voice was deadly cold and only just above a whisper, “Sanak you’ve been with me a long time but if you do not extract her within the next five minutes you had better keep as far away from me as possible because I will kill you for your incompetence.”

She shut down the feed immediately looked at the destruction around her, the desk was not the only object in the room blasted by her rage, and she decided to get out of the room. Sanak would be able to contact her via her Omni tool with any news.

Waiting outside the door Ne’aira fell into step alongside the much taller Asari as they walked in silence to one of the many sitting rooms the huge house had to offer.

Aria stood in front of one of the floor to ceiling windows and looked out into the dark night, a pale moon providing only a little light.

Ne’aira collected a drink and once more returned to Aria’s side and offered the glass.

Absentmindedly Aria took and drank half of it before speaking, “I should have done it myself,” she said curling her lip.

“You gave him a team of Asari mercs to work with and it’s not like you didn’t tell him exactly what to do… you can’t do everything yourself Aria,” Ne’aira spoke quietly trying to soothe the nerves of the powerful Asari.

“At least I know nothing will go wrong on Illium with Grizz in charge,” Aria said sullenly and finishing the other half of her drink.

Aria’s Omni tool flashed and she answered immediately and before she could say anything Sanak’s very relieved and smiling face came into view, “got her boss, she had a room that was all kinds of shielded which is why we couldn’t see her in the apartment.”

“Good, bring all the tech back here with you… particularly anything that’s hooked up to the
extranet… leave a team behind to do that and make sure they destroy everything they have to leave behind… you bring her here now… and Sanak,” Aria said voice still cold as ice, “you obviously didn’t do your recon well enough if you didn’t know about that room,” she lowered her voice to a menacing whisper, “don’t ever disappoint me again you have no lives left do I make myself clear.”

“Loud and clear boss… sorry… it won’t…” but she severed the connection and took a deep breath.

Working the Omni tool again she connected to Grizz and said only two words before disconnecting, “do it.”

With a dangerous and cold smile she looked at Ne’aira and said in a voice that chilled the younger Asari to her very soul, “now you’ll see what happens to those who disobey Omega’s only rule.”

Aria walked, or more accurately prowled, into the secure underground room. It had been used for biotic training in years gone by but with a newer centre now integrated into the commando barracks it was never used.

At the far end of the room Tela Vasir was held in in a biotic field by her wrists and ankles. She was still groggy from the shot her captors had given her but Aria could see Vasir’s fear begin to gather behind her eyes.

“Welcome to my humble home Vasir,” Aria’s voice cold and quiet, “I do hope you had a pleasant journey… just to be honest with you…” Aria now stood face to face with her captor who was suspended a little off the floor.

Aria’s eyes bored into the Spectre who almost flinched at the intensity of the hate pouring into her, “and so that we are absolutely clear… you will never leave this room alive,” Aria spoke each word of her last sentence deliberately and slowly.

“You don’t frighten me T’Loak,” Vasir said her eyes giving lie to her words, “you need me alive if you’re thinking of stopping the attack on T’Soni…” she paused her mouth so dry she had to run her tongue over her lips before she carried on, “and you forget I have my failsafe… if anything happens to me it will…” but before Vasir could finish speaking the tell-tale sound of an Omni tool sparking into life with a message sounded in the room.

Aria turned to Sanak who was holding Vasir’s OT, looked at the message and then nodded to his boss.

“Bring it over, let her read her message,” Aria said cold smile playing around her lips.

As Vasir read the message what colour she had left in her face fell away and panic joined the fear in her eyes.

“Let me guess,” Aria said slowly circling the immobilised Spectre, “a message from your Information Brokerage telling you your contract end date has passed and as you have not updated your payment details the contract has been cancelled… oh and for good measure I had the systems completely scrubbed before I blew up their offices… I do like to be… thorough,” Aria said the last word with emphasis once again face to face with the Spectre.

“You have to understand the Broker… he… my family… he will disgrace me if I don’t… if I hadn’t gone through…” Vasir again licked her lips her mouth completely dry with fear.

“Hum… lets help to relive you of any anxiety about your family shall we…” Aria stepped aside so that Vasir had a view of the large vid screen on the wall in front of her.
“Run the footage Sanak,” Aria said and as the vid played Vasir became upset and then angry shouting abuse and threats at Aria and struggling to get free from the field.

The vid showed six assassinations of Asari’s of various ages, all the close members of Vasir’s family; variously dragged from their bed, shot down in offices and on the street. But there was no doubt that every one of them were dead, each one succumbing to a head shot.

“It was difficult to co-ordinate the timing but… if a job’s worth doing,” Aria stepped again in front of her captive whose tears of rage and pain were coating her cheeks.

“If I wasn’t shackled I’d kill you… coward…” Vasir screamed at the top of her voice.

“And I’m looking forward to seeing you try,” Aria indicated that Sanak should leave the room and as he pulled the door closed behind him Aria hit her OT and the stasis field dropped.

For a second Vasir was too shocked to move but then leap at Aria reaching for the taller Asari’s throat; Aria pulsed a throw that sent the Spectre across the room slamming into the wall.

Outside the room Sanak had joined Ne’ai’ira in an observation room where they could see the action via vid cams. The Asari spoke without taking her eyes from the screen.

“What if Vasir gets lucky?” Ne’ai’ira asked a slight note of concern in her voice.

“The only way Vasir is going to get lucky is if Aria overdoes it and she kills her in the fight,” he turned to look at the Asari and said in a condescending tone, “you know nothing… and even asking if some piss ant could cause the boss problems means you don’t know Aria… and don’t think just because she fucked you you’ll be around any length of time… but when she’s finished with you I’ll give you a good time dancer.” He spat the last word out with venom.

She didn’t even bother responding. She shouldn’t have spoken her concern for Aria out loud if was careless and a mistake she wouldn’t make again. Though she had a feeling that if she relayed what Sanak had just said to Aria at the right moment he might just get thrown out of the nearest airlock.

Back in the room Aria had pummelled the Spectre into submission. Despite all her training and all her biotic strength and ability Vasir hadn’t even landed a decent blow and the Spectre was unable stand up.

Aria reached out a hand and caught Vasir in a biotic hold lifting the prone Spectre off the floor and pinning her damaged body against the wall.

Walking forward Aria once again she replaced her biotic fist with her own and felt it close satisfyingly around Vasir’s neck.

“And now you will tell me everything I want to know,” Aria whispered menace and rage in her voice and her eyes.

“Nvphph… phk.. u” was all Vasir could form followed by coughing which brought up more blood.

Her face swollen from biotic punch after punch, half her front teeth missing she couldn’t speak and there was a small part of her mind that thought she might just have won the last round with the Asari who was about to kill her.

But before that small moment of victory was fully realised pain as she had never imagined possible burst into her head and she felt Aria ripping through every part of her mind.
Vasir had a single moment to be appalled at this huge transgression against every tenet of faith and belief the Asari held about their power to meld… this was an act that would warrant…

“Exile,” Aria finished the thought for the writhing Asari in her grasp, “and what makes you think I haven’t been living in exile all my life.”

Aria continued to probe even deeper into the mind of the Spectre making sure she triggered as many pain receptors as she could as she tore Vasir’s mind apart.

The body that Aria was still holding by the throat in a biotic lock went limp. She released her prey and let the dead body drop to the floor. Turning Aria stalked out of the room and went straight to her bedroom without even looking at any of her merc crew who were hanging around.

Under the hot jets of the shower she relaxed and tried to piece together the information she had gathered from Spectre. It wasn’t an exact science particularly taking the memories under duress which meant some information was clearer than others.

By the time she had finished dressing Aria knew exactly where the Broker’s ship was, roughly what model it was and just how hard a target it was going to be to take down. The threat to the ceremony, to her daughters, was more problematic as much of the detail had been left to Vasir’s inside source.

But, Aria had no doubt T’Arani had already hunted down the traitor and worked out the bomb was designed to do more than just assassinate most of Thrassica’s leaders. Hate her though she did Aria had never underestimated her rival’s ability or tenacity.

T’Soni home, Akkadian, Thessia – 06:00 local time, Janaris day

Although Shepard and Liara made a show of going to bed neither could sleep properly. And by 04:30 they were up and waiting in their private sitting room for the call from Aria.

A knock on the door was followed by Elipsa carrying a tray.

“Goddess what are doing up this early,” Liara said from the sofa the baby nestled in her arms.

Shepard stood up and cleared a space on the small table for the tray.

“Most of your party are up Lady Liara,” Elipsa smiled, “except for Grunt. And we would not be very good assistants if we did not make ourselves available when you needed us. I have brought tea, coffee and a selection of sweet pastries.”

“Thank you Elipsa very thoughtful,” Shepard said pouring Liara a tea.

“Yes thank you,” Liara joined and watched the young maiden leave the room.

“You know I not as against this whole being waited on thing as you are Lee,” Shepard said with a cheeky grin helping herself to coffee, “it’s not like you’re not working flat out, give yourself a break,” Shepard finished giving her lover a kiss on the cheek.

Liara gave a deep sigh and said in a resigned tone, “I suspect I will have little choice when I am staying here or at the mansion… but I do not want to become spoilt and forget what it is like outside these comfortable walls,” she finished.

Shepard gave her bondmate an affectionate smile and said, “no danger of that T’Soni you’re too good hearted to be spoilt. I know about the corporation you’ve just set up to deliver relief and aid to struggling settlements in the Traverse and the foundation that will bear your mother’s name to
provide education and health care to children from poor families across Council space.”

Shepard enjoyed the look of surprise on Liara’s face, ‘ah this Spectre intel network comes in handy at times,’ she thought still smiling at her nonplussed lover.

“But how did you…”

At that moment and cutting off Liara’s question both their Omni tools flashed with a message from Aria.

“It’s done, contact me now.”

A few minutes later they were standing in front of the large vid screen in Liara’s private office.

Aria’s image flashed onto the screen her mood unreadable as was usually the case.

“I would hope by now that washed out commando I sent you has worked out that Vasir’s little explosion is much, much bigger,” Arai paused and noted the wry smile that etched itself onto Shepard’s lips and the look of surprise that flashed across Liara’s face, “T’Arani was only ever good for one thing….”

Liara cut across her father unable to bear the dismissive and insulting tone Aria was using about her Asan.

“Do not speak of my Asan in that way Aria,” Liara said but before she could continue the Asari on the vid screen seemed to transform

Biotic energy flashed across her body, her eyes as cold as any asteroid ice belt and her rage palpable even across their geographical distance.

“You will never speak to me about T’Arani… never Liara, do I make myself clear,” Aria’s voice was soft yet dripping with menace.

Shepard felt rather than saw Liara flinch at the power of Aria’s rage and stood forward a little as she spoke, “you need to watch your tone when you speak to Liara she isn’t one of your merc’s Aria,” but before Shepard could say any more Liara cut in.

“I do not need you to defend me Shepard I am perfectly capable of telling Aria exactly what I think of her and how she needs to behave with me,” Liara said in a voice that was strong but that wavered slightly indicating how much it was taking her bondmate to confront Omega’s Queen, “particularly if she wishes to become a part of my life.”

Shepard stepped back alongside Liara and held her hand’s up in front of her in mock surrender raising her eyebrows with a whisper of a smile and said, “Sorry Lee she’s all yours.”

To both their surprise Aria threw her head back and gave a loud laugh that shook her body with its intensity dispelling all traces of her biotics.

“You are so like her Liara,” Aria said as her laughter faded away and smile still on her lips, “and whether you like it or not you are also very much my daughter.”

Shepard looked at her bondmate, saw the tension leave her body and a small smile lift the corners of her mouth. When she spoke her tone was lighter, “really Guhyasan you know perfectly well Asari reproduction does not work that way.”
“You’ll see Liara, when your daughter is born, you’ll see,” Aria said in a tone that was bordering on gentle and it surprised Shepard more than anything else the Pirate Queen had ever said or done.

“Now to business,” Aria said back to her usual cool, aloof and commanding self, “I have everything we need for the attack on the Brokers base. Location, type of ship and its defences… but its internal defences are considerable… he not only has a full contingent of his security force but also high numbers of security mech’s.”

“We have the advantage of knowing exactly what he’s got which means we can tailor our ground assault without too much guesswork,” Shepard said already drawing together the threads of a plan in her mind.

“That will be your responsibility Shepard you’re the expert,” Aria said and moved on quickly, “as I was saying I can confirm the bomb is dirty and the Broker has gone back to very old technology. It’s based on a uranium fusion devise designed not only to kill everyone in its considerable blast radius but also to poison a significant area of Thrassica.”

Shepard was nodding her head slowly and although Liara had heard Aethyta’s warning the previous evening about the type of device she still felt shocked that any Asari would agree to do such a reckless and dangerous thing on their home world.

“He’s using some kind of hi tech container to mask its signature?” Shepard asked.

“As you would expect, yes,” Aria said, “but if we can identify who Vasir’s pawn is then she will give us the location once we tell her the truth.” Aria noted the questioning looks on their faces but continued quickly.

“Vasir told her the bomb was a small distraction to give the snipers their signal to act. Vasir contracted two snipers from a run of the mill merc corporation. And before you ask, no I don’t have their names.”

“I thought you were going to get us the identity of our traitor,” Liara asked the question that was also on Shepard’s lips.

Aria looked a little uncomfortable again another first in Shepard’s experience of the Pirate Queen.

“Vasir didn’t… last long enough for me to complete my… interrogation,” Aria managed to put as much meaning and menace in the pauses as she did in what she actually said.

“You mean you overdid the beating the crap out of her bit,” Shepard said and despite herself felt the edge of a smile trace her lips.

“Perhaps,” Aria responded, “or perhaps I overestimated the skill and strength of our elite Spectres,” a slight smile edged Aria’s mouth as she finished speaking.

Liara’s spoke and this time her voice was higher and she looked a little upset, “whilst it is good that you both appear to be bonding over this incident may I remind you both we are talking about the torture and murder of an Asari…”

“One that was happy to see you murdered along with our son and unborn daughter, hell and hundreds of other innocent people,” Shepard said in a level but challenging tone.

“And she only has herself to blame Liara, she was the one who choose to do business with the Broker… you lie down with varren you will end up bitten or with flatcha,” Aria said firmly.
Liara looked slightly abashed but pressed on, “I hope you confined your vengeance taking to Tela Vasir alone.”

Aria laughed again this time it held none of the previous warmth and when she spoke her voice was cold, “I showed her vid footage of most of her close family being shot through the head, it gave her the incentive to try to kill me, and I like to be fair.”

Shepard had the distinct impression of a cat playing with a mouse before biting its head off.

Before either Shepard or Liara could start to vent the anger and disgust that was evident on both their faces Aria said in her usual aloof drawl.

“Before you both get all self-righteous the footage was doctored, but she believed it and I’m not sorry she experienced the loss of her family even if it was a fiction. I have a team who do excellent work, sometimes manufactured blackmail footage will get you as much as the real thing,” her smile was cold and hard.

“Well she did break Omega’s one and only rule,” Shepard said with a wry smile.

“Don’t fuck with Aria,” the Pirate Queen said as imperious as ever, “or mine,” she finished her eyes on Liara.

“We need to start getting ready Shepard,” Liara said quietly still looking a little troubled.

“There are a couple of other problems you’re going to have to deal with,” Aria said.

“Of course there are,” Shepard said with an edge of resignation and exasperation in her tone.

“The bomb is on a timer in case Vasir’s plant got cold feet. Due to go off during your inauguration rather the bonding ceremony… and the Broker has at least three agents attending the event,” Aria moved on quickly to forestall the questions that Shepard was about to ask, “They are intel only not part of the active plot. My guess is the agents have no idea about the plot and certainly not that they are walking into a death zone.”

“So we need to find a way to jam out comms or cutting the live vid feed will be pointless if the Broker finds out his plot has failed from one of his agents.”

“Yes and I’ve exhausted all my contacts and leverage on Thessia, I have no way of blocking comm traffic,” Aria said and both she and Shepard slipped into thoughtful silence.

“I can,” Liara said a smile on her lips pleased she could do something concrete, “at the flick of a switch in my comms room I can kill all comms and extranet connection across the whole of Thrassica.”

She was rewarded by looks of pleasant surprise from her bondmate and her father.

“That’s my girl… but hang on why…” Shepard said with a huge grin.

“I was researching a theory that Indoctrination could be achieved through broadcasts and so I started to work up some counter measures…” Liara trailed off realising she was about to give them both a full lecture.

“So now all we have to do is find out who our traitor is or locate the bomb ourselves, then disarm it before it automatically goes off, and make sure the Broker doesn’t know his plot has failed before we turn up on his doorstep,” Shepard said her voice laced with irony.
Liara laughed, “Sounds like just another day on the Normandy my love.”

After brief goodbyes Shepard and Liara headed out of the office and to the comms room where they would update the team and prepare for one of the most dangerous days that either of them had faced yet.
“A representative of Armali Arms, who did not want to be identified, told us that the rumours about profit warnings were true and that after the holidays Armali along with other weapons and defence corporations would be meeting with representatives of the T’ara to discuss the situation.”

A well groomed, confident and particularly beautiful Asari matron finished the news report and with a brilliant smile continued.

“And now I believe we are ready to join our social reporter direct from the Thrassican Republic Mansion. The seat of the Thrassican Republic’s government is hosting the celebrity bonding ceremony of the century followed by a tradition breaking inauguration,” she turned a little to the side so that she could speak to the figure that had appeared on the huge vid screen behind her.

“A very exciting good morning to you Jalni,” the young Asari maiden spoke with obvious glee and was dressed immaculately in a fitted formal dress in shades of spring colour. Continuing to speak to camera the young Asari indicated with an outstretched arm to her left, “as you can see all of the guests have already been seated and are being entertained by the royal Krogan Ceremonial Drum Brigade.”

The sound of deep booming rhythmic drumming filled the air and over the reporters shoulder the camera showed twenty Krogan battlemasters, with various sized drums, standing in a slight semi-circle facing the seated audience.

“Yes we can hear them Kalista and I believe this is the first time they have ever performed off Tuchanka?” Jalni asked the obviously scripted question allowing the young eager reporter to reply with some background detail.

“Indeed it is and it’s a testament to the esteem the soon to be youngest head of any of the 100 first families is held in by the wider galactic community. We obviously have diplomatic representatives from the Citadel races but there are also high ranking guests from the Turian, Human, Salarian and Krogan races here in a personal capacity,” the young reporter paused.

“Some would say that was more to do with Commander Shepard, the saviour of the Citadel and Council Spectre. We’ve put together some vid content for viewers to refresh their memory,” Jalni waved her hand towards the three mini screens, displaying archive vid streams, on the bottom of the huge vid screen that still held the live feed from Thrassica.

“You could be right Jalni, and of course there is still a huge amount of controversy surrounding the Commander. Where has she been, why does she seem to be working with, some would say for, a human terrorist organisation.”

The studio anchor was nodding at her colleagues comments.

She replied conversationally, “yes and even more questions about a child that, again rumours suggest, is actually Commander Shepards’s which certainly supports the belief that she survived the Normandy’s destruction and was alive and well the last two years,” Jalni paused and then continued to camera.

“We’ve also put together some archive footage from the loss of the Normandy including eye witness accounts and actual vid recordings from the rescue ships. Please remember that we do make a small
charge for access to our extra content.” The news anchor’s final sentence was delivered with another blazingly brilliant smile and she turned again to Kalista.

“Yes, Jalni, there are still many unanswered questions about the mysterious Commander Shepard but one thing we can be sure of,” the young reporter motioned with her arm for the viewers to look into the sky a little to her right, “Lady Liara T’Soni and Commander Shepard will be holding Thessia in thrall as their almost tragic love story comes to a wonderful conclusion and who will certainly remain the most talked about couple on Thessia and quite possibly in Citadel space. And here comes the first family now in a Thrassican Guard shuttle.”

The camera panned across and pulled into focus a distinctively shaped and deep blue shuttle with the T’Soni family markings on its sides. As the shuttle settled onto the ground and its doors opened the Krogan Battlemaster’s rhythmic drumming was joined by Asari voices; voices and instruments weaved seamlessly together into an intoxicating whole.

“Here they are, and oh that dress,” Kalista said excitedly and added, “I’ll be interviewing Lady Liara’s dress designer after the ceremony,” then continued breathlessly as the camera followed the group who had disembarked the shuttle.

“Oh and I believe the Commander is actually wearing her Marine rank and uniform, so perhaps we should be calling her,” there was a slight pause, “ah Colonel I believe her rank is but we should also add she is officially retired from the Alliance. But the uniform is stunning, and, oh, I don’t know if you can see this clearly in the studio but there is the Commander, I mean the Colonels son… unconfirmed officially at this time.

And with no official comments from the first family or the Government we can only speculate about Lady Liara’s feelings towards the child and what will happen after the bonding ceremony, will the child live on Thessia?” As the camera raked across the disembarking group the young reporter kept up a stream of description and identified all the members of the party ending with Garrus.

“There is the Turian Ambassador to Thrassica Garrus Vakarian who is, of course, one of Shepard’s iconic crew members from the original Normandy also here as a close friend to the couple.

The couple are moving up towards the Dais where a line of dignitaries are waiting to welcome them including Lady El’Estrene who will be performing both the bonding ceremony and the inauguration.”

The camera watched as Shepard and Liara stepped up onto the platform to applause from the audience and as they turned towards the seated guests the drumming and singing reached a crescendo and then stopped.

In a hushed voice from off camera Kalista said, “Before the bonding ceremony begins we will hear from Councillor Tevos and Matriarch B’Lanea, speaking for the T’ara and from Lady El’Estrene herself,” and in an even more hushed tone she finished, “and as the couple sit down Councillor Tevos is moving towards the front of the stage to offer welcome and congratulation.”

Shepard and Liara

Like countless times before Shepard found herself sitting next to Liara in a shuttle heading for danger. Unlike any other time sitting opposite her was a small baby strapped into a carry harness across her cousins’ chest and next to him her mother; who was absentmindedly letting the baby play with one of her fingers.
She had no weapon, apart from her ceremonial sword, and would not take part at all in hunting and then taking down the threat. It took every fibre of her being to hold herself back from calling the whole crazy plan off and getting everyone she loved onto the Normandy and off Thessia to safety.

Shepard had won a small victory before the party boarded the shuttle for the very short hop from their home to the Mansion.

Only Shepard and Tash would have comms and receive tactical updates, which was why they were wearing matching sun protection glasses. These had been upgraded to receive vid feeds from the Normandy and voice comms from Aethyta and Liselle.

Liara and Shepard senior had argued that they should also be included in the operational loop but Matriarch T’Joan’s intervention had finally swayed the argument.

“Liara, this is not only an important day for you personally but also for Thrassica and the memory of your Mother. There are too many who feel you ought not to have succeeded her so soon, or be head of the family at all.

Despite all that may be happening behind the scenes you must be fully present at the ceremonies, your behaviour will be scrutinised,” she turned to Hannah Shepard, “and you also will be closely watched Admiral. Your daughter is not only bonding with someone in one of the most powerful positions in Asari politics but also society. Any sign of distraction may be taken as a sign of… disrespect.”

The argument won Hannah’s cooperation immediately and Liara, although reluctant, also caved in.

Shepard felt the shuttle settle and got to her feet stepping away a little so she could take in her bondmates sensual and lithe form perfectly shown off by her stunning and very revealing dress.

“I will love you till the end of time Liara T’Soni,” Shepard whispered as she leaned into her lovers’ body holding her gently and kissing Liara’s cheek briefly.

“To eternity,” Liara breathed softly in response.

Shepard moved to the doorway Liara at her side. Raising her arm to reach the door release Shepard gave Liara a cheeky grin and said in a strong voice so everyone could hear, “Showtime.”

Shepard was rewarded with a smile from her bondmate and a moment later the shuttle was flooded with light and noise.

As they stepped onto the green lawn Shepard offered her arm and Liara took it gaining comfort from the feel of her lovers’ muscles as her hand gripped tightly for support and comfort.

But no one watching could guess that Liara and Shepard were concerned with anything more than enjoying the day and that was exactly how they needed it to be.

T’Soni family mansion, seat of the Thrassican Republics Government, office of the Commander of the Thrassican Guard – Janaris, twenty minutes into the Ceremony

“I really need to be supervising our security teams on the ground Matriarch T’Arani, can’t this wait?” Desulin Kalanni walked into her office followed by Aethyta, Liselle and the Captain of the Thrassican Guard Alestia Iallis.

“No I’m afraid it can’t Matriarch,” Aethyta said her voice almost a low growl, “we had to wait
before confronting the traitor until we had control of all communication from the Estate.”

“There are no traitors here unless you are talking about Terminus trash,” Captain Iallis was standing behind Aethyta and looked directly at Liselle as she spoke. Then continued looking at Aethyta’s back, “or the travesty of Asari tradition and culture that Lady Liara is having us all enact because of that human’s influence.”

In a flash of movement Liselle moved to throw a biotic punch at Iallis who only partially deflected it and was hit squarely with the second that the younger Asari threw at her.

As they squared up and looked set to continue Aethyta turned on them and spoke in such a tone that demanded obedience, “Enough, Liselle stand down we have bigger issues to deal with.”

“Captain Iallis you will not behave like some cheap merc if you wish to remain in my command, I expected better of you,” Desulin Kalanni moved behind her desk and looked steadily at Aethyta, “explain yourself what in the name of the Goddess are you talking about.”

“I don’t have time to piss around so I’ll tell you straight there is a traitor in this room who I am going to tear limb from limb with my bare hands for even thinking about killing my girl…” Aethyta spoke with quiet menace looking between the seated Matriarch and, the obviously still furious, Captain of Commandos who had moved next to her Commander.

“How dare you question my loyalty, I took an oath and whatever…” Alestia Iallis roared and blue wisps of energy began to form around her clenched fists.

But she was cut off from her protestations by the seated figure who said “be quiet Alestia, I do not believe Matriarch T’Arani is talking to you.”

“Oh yes she does… you’ve done nothing but bitch about…” this time it was Aethyta who cut across Liselle who had moved forward and was once again facing the Thrassican Captain her own fists wreathed in blue biotic light.

“Why?” Aethyta’s voice had lost none of its menace but it held an edge of sadness. Aethyta’s eyes were now firmly locked on the other Matriarch while the two younger Asari looked from one to the other with disbelief written on their faces.

After a long pause the Commander of the Thrassican Guard spoke in a matter of fact tone not looking in any particular direction.

“You would not understand Aethyta. You never properly understood the importance of… the correct order of things… too long away from Thessia… and… Liara could never do wrong in your eyes,” she paused as Aethyta seemed to growl at the mention of Liara and Kalanni carried on more quickly.

“Those of us who could see this would happen tried to get her to step down, to wait until she was truly a matron at least; she is too young and too influenced by Shepard. Aethyta whether you like it or not the human has too much influence over her… and to give a non Asari such a high position within our society…”

Aethyta threw a slam of biotic energy at the seated Matriarch that smashed the older Asari hard against the wall behind her.

Liselle kept her eyes on Alestia still convinced the Captain must be part of the plot. But Alestia Iallis stared at the Matriarch with a look of absolute disgust and contempt, she began to back away as she said, “how could you raise a hand against Thrassica… against Thessia… everything you believe
“...” she turned and looked at Aethyta, “I would never betray my republic whatever my personal feelings... but I am tainted by this... this...” she looked lost for words, “I have failed in my duty to protect those in my charge you have my resignation and I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit Matriarch T’Arani.”

With a deep sigh Aethyta looked briefly at Alestia but returned her stare quickly to her prey who was now struggling to her feet, “you wanna take that stick from up your arse and be helpful or you just gonna stand around and make pompous speeches about honour and duty,” Aethyta almost spat out the last word.

“I... well if you trust...” Alestia stammered to a halt.

Aethyta could feel Liselle’s eyes boring into her and almost smiled ‘she sure has a lot of you in her’. The thought rose unbidden and almost overwhelmed the Matriarch with sadness but she shook it off and replied to the now very subdued Commando Captain.

“I need you and Liselle to work together to get this threat eliminated,” Aethyta forestalled the complaint rising to Liselle’s lips with a sharp look, “Liselle get the sand out... I need the two of you working together but after this is over I don’t care if you want to smash or fuck each other’s brains out but we won’t get to after if we don’t find the bomb will we?”

Aethyta’s last remark was aimed straight at the now standing Kalanni.

“Really T’Arani there is no need to be so dramatic. I’m assuming you will have the assassins under arrest shortly and the explosion is only a diversion and...” before she could finish Aethyta closed the short distance between them and put the other Matriarch in a biotic bind so fast that Kalanni didn’t even have time to raise an arm.

“You’ve been fucking used you and your oh so noble wanting only what’s right and proper and shitting everyone up with tradition and your version of duty,” Aethyta snarled the last word into Kalanni’s face.

Tilting her head a little from side to side as if trying to see inside Kalanni’s head Aethyta continued, “the bomb will wipe the Mansion and the estate off the map it will also contaminate most of Thrassica with whatever old fashioned fusion device the Shadow Broker thought would be fun to unleash on Thessia,” Aethyta noted the sharp intake of breath from her captive and the look of horror in her eyes.

It confirmed the conclusions that Aethyta had come to, Kalanni’s warped sense of duty had been used very effectively by Vasir... it took an Asari to really know which buttons to push if you were trying to manipulate a Matriarch in Kalanni’s position.

From behind her the old huntress heard muttering but they needed to move quickly now and so she let Kalanni go and stepped back.

“We don’t have time to play games Kalanni we have it from Vasir herself... and she didn’t give up the information willingly... she died before all the details could be... extracted,” Aethyta let her words hang in the air between them and waited for the true impact of her implied transgression sink in.

“There will be no need for such action with me T’Arani I will tell you everything, and you have no need to worry about the device I am the only one that can trigger it and I will disarm it...” as Kalanni raised her arm and activated her Omni Tool the three other Asari in the room spoke similar words at the same time. But Aethyta’s voice was loudest and most commanding.
“STOP, do nothing to the bombs codes,” Aethyta moved forward and removed the offending OT placing it on the desk.

“Aside from the fact it’s probably rigged to go off if anyone tries to disarm it,” Aethyta turned and stared hard at Kalanni “it’s on a timer, you have no real control over it, you’re just a pawn in the Brokers schemes. You’re helping him destroy the power of Thessia you stuck up fucking …” this time it was Liselle who spoke out and said with a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Where is it?”

“It was only…” the Matriarch stammered.

“Yeah you only wanted to kill the head of the family and her bondmate how cute,” Aethyta snarled and once again stood toe to toe with Kalanni, “where the fuck is the thing we’ve searched pretty much everywhere it could be concealed.”

“It… it’s in plain sight… it is one of the gifts,” Kalanni said quietly with real fear in her eyes as she met the old commando’s gaze.

Immediately Aethyta stepped away and activated her suit comms, “watch her,” she said waving an arm in the direction of Kalanni and both Liselle and Aestia moved to flank the Matriarch who looked totally broken.

“Shepard we have a problem,” there was a pause and Aethyta spoke again, “yeah kiddo an even bigger one than we thought we had,” the old commando allowed herself a wry smile and continued, “the damn thing is in plain sight, no way we can lift it without cameras seeing what we’re doing, it’s one of your Goddess damned gifts.”

Aethyta waited for a response all the while trying to rack her brains as to how they could move the disguised bomb from the display of gifts that sat prominently next to the Dias where both the bonding and inauguration ceremony would take place.

She could hear a familiar chant not only over her comms but floating in from the grounds outside, the bonding ceremony was about to start, but she still heard the quiet one word response from Shepard.

“Krogan’s,” she repeated her voice holding a question, “what the sweet… oh that’s good, yeah that should work,” Aethyta realised what Shepard meant even as she began to ask the question and switched comms from the Human to Wrex.

“Hey you ugly bastard, ready to get this show started,” Aethyta said with obvious familiarity and she was rewarded with an equally robust response from the old Krogan Warlord and she allowed herself a short throaty chuckle.

“Need you to move your honour guard either side of the stage we need to block the camera view of the gifts stand…” there was a pause as Aethyta listened to the response.

“Good we’ll remove it as soon as your guys are in position,” Aethyta once more closed down comms and turned to the little group with her in the office.

“Status,” she spoke to Liselle who responded immediately having been kept informed of her team’s activity constantly through her own comms.

“We have eyes and kill shots on four sniper,” she said coldly staring at the former Guard Commander, “is that all of them?”
Kalanni nodded still looking shocked and dazed and Aethyta gave the order to Liselle, “take them out.”

Liselle gave the order to her team and moments later she nodded once as she said, “all targets down.”

“Captain we need a path clear of interference and spectators so we can move the bomb somewhere out of sight where we can work on it? Away from the house?” Aethyta, this time, looked at Alestia.

“We can take it straight to our underground vehicle garage it’s on that side of the building,”

“Good that works,” Aethyta looked at Kalanni and once again her rage manifested itself in fine wisps of blue biotic energy around her fists. But before she could say anything Kalanni seemed to wake from her state of shock, drew herself upright and said in a clear and strong voice.

“You must let me try to make right the great wrong I have done Thessia,” Kalanni spoke directly to Aethyta but gave a quick glance to her former Captain of Commando’s, “I swear on the honour of my house I will do all that must be done to end this threat…” she tailed off under the withering gaze of Aethyta T’Arani.

“Duty, honour,” Aethyta spat the words at her, “well it saves me having to leave someone to watch over you.” Aethyta turned and headed for the door but turned and spoke once more before leaving the room.

“But when this is over I will kill you Desulin Kalanni, by my own hands.”

“I would expect nothing less,” Desulin said quietly to herself as she and the two younger Asari followed Aethyta out of the room.

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*Grounds of the T’Soni family Mansion*

Kalista Chalnar’s voice was quiet and held reverent tone as she continued to describe the scene playing out in front of the cameras at several vantage points around the open air ceremony.

“As the familiar bonding ceremony chorus lights up the air the couple take up their position side by side facing this totally enthralled audience and in front of Priestess El’Estrene.”

She continued as the camera’s zoomed in to capture close up’s of Liara and Shepard, “it’s interesting to note that both the Asari bonding ceremony and the Earth partnership ceremony share some characteristics. Where we usually have three blood relatives to stand witness humans’ have what they call bests. These may or may not be blood or familial relatives and often it is only a single witness.”

Jalni’s voice sounded over the visuals, “yes and we are also going to see a Human partnership ceremony performed by Colonel Shepard’s mother Admiral Shepard complete with the exchanging of jewellery?”

“Yes, fascinating that senior officers in the Alliance navy apparently have the right to perform such ceremonies dating back to pre-space history on Earth. And I believe the jewellery exchanged is always a ring. It does look as if the ceremony is about to begin lets listen in to what must be a truly wonderful moment for the couple.”

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*Shepard and Liara*
Shepard almost forgot about all the turmoil and danger around them as she looked into Liara’s eyes and repeated the vows as she had made in their real ceremony the evening before.

Once again she was struck by how ‘right’ this felt, as if every decision, every moment of her existence had brought her inevitably to this point. Not the dark destiny that weighed so heavily on her shoulders; but the relief, yes relief that she had found her home. Her shattered soul and spirit found peace and healing within Liara’s bright shining love and connection.

As the bonding ceremony drew to a close and once again they were bound by their vows, the biotic tattoo’s and the Priestess’s words Shepard knew a moment of true bliss and contentment that was reflected back to her through Liara’s eyes.

The Admiral now replaced the Priestess and Tash moved to stand at her shoulder ready with the rings. Shepard had had them made in Larissa by the best Asari jeweller she could find, but a wave of nervousness crashed over her, ‘dammit I should have asked Lee what she wanted, what if she hates it, what if it doesn’t fit.’

Almost as if Liara had sensed the sudden shift of mood she said quietly, leaning in a little, “you know I will love my ring Shepard because you chose it as I chose our bonding bracelets.”

With a smile and a slight shake of her head Shepard said quietly, “you always know exactly what to say,” and then more quietly her lips close to the side of Liara’s head Shepard continued, “They’ve moved the bomb successfully and started to defuse it.”

Underground garage and storage area

“Careful… don’t want the Goddess be damned thing going off in our faces,” Aethyta’s voice said as the side of the statue that they were removing slipped slightly.

The statue that was surrounding the Shadow Brokers bomb was a beautiful rendition of a mythical Asari animal akin to an Earth jaguar whose fierce talons and teeth were inset with glinting jewels and the gossamer like wings although folded to its side were detailed in spun Vanadium.

It had taken several scans to identify the finest of joins on the outer casing and they had spent some time gently breaking the seal and carefully manoeuvring the now loose piece away from the main body.

Once it was off they had a clear view of the device and stood in a small semi-circle staring at it, Liselle was the first to break the silence.

“I have no idea what that is and I’ve studied every known type of device available across Citadel space in the Terminus system,” she looked at Aethyta, “tell me you know what this is.”

The old commando started shaking her head slowly and a quick glance around the group told her that neither the bomb expert from Aria’s estate, the disgraced former head of Thrassican security or the Captain of the Thrassican guard had any idea either.

Still staring into the device she called up Shepard and Tash this time with a vid feed as well as audio. From the sounds filtering down from the grounds the inauguration was about to start which meant they were running out of time.

“Shepard none of us have ever seen something like this before… its… primitive,” Aethyta said gruffly.
There was a slight pause then Shepard said “it is primitive it’s an old Earth nuclear device, we studied them more for background at the Academy,” Aethyta heard Shepard exchange a word with Liara and then Tash.

“Tash is coming down and she’ll pull up what we have on them from the Normandy’s data base,” the tension in Shepard’s voice was clear.

“It’s not too late Shepard we could pull the plug on the vid feed now and evacuate the estate…” before Aethyta could finish Shepard cut across with more of a smile in her voice.

“We’re not letting the Broker blow up the heart of Thrassica; I know you’ll get the job done.” A few minutes after Shepard finished talking Aethyta heard the sound of running.

“Liselle’s girlfriend is here now so we’re all saved,” Aethyta said with a throaty laugh her comment aimed at Liselle who bristled slightly not sure how to take the comment.

Aethyta cut the vid feed and turned to the out of breath Tash who immediately pulled up some schematics on her OmniTool to share with the waiting group.

“We have to remove the detonator which is itself a nasty enough explosive device,” Tash compared the schematics with the device and racked her memory for the class that covered the subject.

“That looks like it,” Liselle said and there were murmurs of assent as she outlined part of the bomb.

“So now we just need to disconnect it and get it out,” Tash said matter of factly.

“Well let’s get on with it then,” Aethyta answered.

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*Shadow Brokers Ship*

A large vid screen on a wall facing the Broker’s desk was showing the unfolding ceremony’s on Thrassica. The inauguration had just started and Councillor Tevos had been talking for only a few minutes when the screen went black.

A few moments went by and the new feed showed the news studio and the only fleetingly flustered studio anchor turned to face camera and with a smile said, “well we appear to have some technical difficulties with the feed from Thrassica,” she faltered obviously listening to information through her earpiece, “yes, we will return to the broadcast shortly but in the meantime we have a short background piece on Thrassica’s new leader Liara T’Soni.

As the pre-recorded piece began to air the Broker let out a rumbling roar of what passed for laughter and switched off the feed.

“Get ready to start buying all stock in Asari corporations as their prices fall,” he rumbled to one of his tech assistants. Its motorised body marched from the room as the Broker put in a vid call and waited to be connected.

“It is done,” he said to the face of the Collector that had flashed up on his vid connection.

“Move to phase two,” was the only reply he received before the connection was severed and for a moment the Broker felt the edge of unease and, something he had not experienced in many centuries, fear.
Miranda watched one of the vid feeds on the Command deck showing a shuttle landing a short distance from the Normandy.

The unmistakable figure of Aria T’Loak left the shuttle and headed quickly towards the rear of the Ship to gain entry, two Asari commandos in her wake. Miranda had already sent a security team to meet their guest and to escort her to the Command deck having received notification of the Pirate Queens arrival only minutes before.

As Aria moved through the ship her eyes noted the specifications, the well-ordered crew all, it seemed, at their stations. But her mind was a million light years away.

It was foolish or more accurately madness to come here, wait here, rather than on her ship that was already heading towards the rendezvous point.

‘If that old fool doesn’t deal with the bomb she’ll finally get to kill you’ Aria thought ruefully. But she hadn’t been able to resist the offer to travel to the Broker’s base on the Normandy so they could plan the actual assault as a team.

She also couldn’t resist the thought that if the bomb went off she would lose every last link to Benezia in the blast and also see her bondmates beloved Thrassica destroyed. If this was the end then Aria wanted to be here with her daughters and as close to Benezia as she could get.

By the time she’d reached the Command deck her mood was black. ‘What was I thinking leaving this to anyone else, I should have taken command, I should be the one dealing with the device not left it to…’

Her murderous thoughts were cut short by, what seemed to be a repeated question.

“Matriarch T’Loak would you like to watch the tactical feeds,” Miranda didn’t know how to address the Pirate Queen and had no idea why the bloody woman had decided to come straight to the ship anyway. But she knew that Aria was to be part of the assault on the Broker’s base so she extended what welcome she could muster.

“Yes… but call me Matriarch again and I’ll crush the air out of your lungs with a thought,” Aria looked past a now sullen looking Miranda to the double row of stations that flanked the walkway to the cockpit.

They walked in silence and came to a stop behind a station that housed two vid feeds, one from Aethyta and the other from Liselle.

Miranda spoke to the tactical specialist at the station.

“Have they removed the firing device yet,” she said peering at the screens and glancing at the feedback showing the vital signs for both Asari which were unsurprisingly showing some signs of stress.

“Almost ma’am, they are just scanning to determine which order to cut the connections.”

As the small group studied the vid feeds primarily showing the work on the device itself the faces of those gathered around flashed in and out of view.

“What in the fuck is that thing,” Aria said venom dripping from every word, “and why in the name of all cluster fucks is that moron T’Arani letting Kalanni anywhere near it,” Aria’s voice now raised
"Connect me to T’Arani," Aria continued now in an imperious tone that brooked no refusal.

Miranda nodded at the worried looking specialist who made some quick changes on his console and said, “We now have an open comm link to Matriarch T’Arani and Captain Lidanya.”

Before Miranda could say anything Aria almost bellowed at the vid feed, “What the fuck are you letting that snake anywhere near the bomb... give me strength, do I need to do everything myself.”

“T’Loak are you trying to get us all blown to shit... why don’t you sit quietly and let the real Asari get on with cleaning up your fucking mess,” Aethyta’s voice was hardly more than a growl and dripping with menace.

“We’ve got this Aria,” Liselle’s tense voice cut in quickly as she began to lift out, very gently and carefully, what looked like the inner workings of the device. She continued “and in case you’re still raging we’ve cut the voice feed we need to concentrate.”

“Where are they I’m going down there and when…” Aria had started to walk back down onto the main command deck but before Miranda could formulate a response the commando who had stayed at Aria’s side stepped in front of her and spoke too quietly for anyone else on the deck to hear.

“You know you can’t be seen here Aria, whatever your connection with the T’Soni house must not become public, perhaps I could go in your place,” Ne’aira’s voice was steady but the fear that was ravaging her entire body was evident.

Aria stared, transfixed, at the terrified Asari in front of her and it took a considerable amount of her willpower not to take out the rage she was feeling out on her.

At the same time realising that it would, indeed, be a complete disaster to be so openly and publicly seen in any connection with the ceremony happening at the Mansion house. The Queen of Omega didn’t trust herself to do anything right at that moment so reigned in all her instincts behind a cold and unreadable exterior.

Aria roughly pushed past the younger Asari and kept walking towards the elevator they had arrived in. Over her shoulder she threw out a comment, “someone get me a drink and somewhere to drink it.”

With obvious relief Miranda rushed forward to join Aria at the elevator, “of course allow me to take you to one of our lounges.”

Underground garage and storage facility, Estate grounds

They finally had the trigger free from the inside of the housing and disconnected from the nuclear fusion device. And as they pulled it clear its digital countdown timer was all too clear.

“190 parsecs,” Liselle said, “not long enough to get it outside.”

Kalanni stepped forward and wrapped it in a biotic field, “we’ll take it into one of the secure storage units at the back of the garage.”

Aethyta stepped forward and wrapped her own biotic field around it, “Tash follow us and make sure the door is locked behind us,” and continued as Liselle and Alestia made to join them, “no you need to stay and protect the main body of the device in case we can’t contain the shockwaves ... we don’t
know how sensitive it is.”

Liselle looked as if she was going to argue but meeting Aethya’s eyes she nodded and turned her attention to her OT.

“Admiral Lidanya this is the ground team,” Liselle said and without waiting for a response from the Asari she had known as her Asan all her life she continued with a cheeky tone and smile, “time to make some noise.”

Admiral Lidanya smiled back at her adopted daughter not surprised by the young Asari’s bravery and replied, “you should hear them about…” and her final words were drowned out by a wing of low flying Asari fighters.

The Destiny Ascension was in geosynchronous orbit above Thrassica and had dispatched two wings of its fighters ready to help in any way needed. The discussions the previous evening had included how to cover up any kind of controlled explosion that might be needed and a plan was put in place for just such an occurrence.

As the second wing flight of fighters passed over Tash slammed the heavy metal door to the small storage space shut and then stood a little way off completely at a loss as to what to do next. She looked across in the direction of the group guarding the nuclear device but her view was impeded by a row of land vehicles.

Inside the two Asari Matriarchs encased the device in the strongest biotic barriers they could create; leaving a weaker area facing into what was in effect an external wall. They hoped that it would give the bulk of the shockwaves somewhere to go through the ground eventually dissipating harmlessly.

**Shepard and Liara**

The sudden appearance to two wings of Asari fighters flying in formation raised heads and cheers from the audience and also those on the Dais who were engaged in the inauguration ceremony.

Shepard was standing at Liara’s side and while pointing and smiling at the fighters, now performing some aerobatic moves above their heads, she said so that only her bondmate could hear, “looks as if we are going for the controlled explosion so don’t be alarmed by any…” but before she could finish speaking a dull thump sounded and a slight shudder from the ground cut off her words.

Liara squeezed her bondmates hand tightly and Shepard gave her a reassuring smile, “if it had gone wrong we wouldn’t be standing here, it’s over,” and despite protocol she gave her momentarily troubled looking lover a kiss on the cheek.

“I need to know everyone is alright,” Liara said trying to smile for the sake of appearances, “please Shepard.”

But Liara didn’t need to ask twice. Shepard herself needed to know if anyone had taken the proverbial bullet for her even though she knew there was no other way the situation could have played out.

**Underground garage and storage facility**

Tash had no idea where she was for a moment, a whooshing sound was filling her head and at the same time she became aware she was sitting on the ground with her back against something painful a blue face came swimming into view.
The face was familiar even though out of focus and although lips were moving all Tash could hear now was high pitched buzzing. Dust seemed to be swirling like snow; she could smell burning, taste blood, and could only breathe through her mouth.

In a rush her surroundings snapped into focus and she heard the concerned voice of the young Asari kneeling on the ground in front of her.

“Tasha say something are you hurt… where are you hurt… dammit Tasha speak to me,” Liselle had noticing the arm and shoulder at an odd angle, the blood pouring from her lovers nose and ears, and a huge gash on her forehead.

“Aw I’ve broken my fuggin nose again haben’t I… damb… all I had going for me was my good looks,” Tash heard that her speech was a little slurred and was accompanied by the tell-tale sound of someone who’s nose was not functioning as it should but she did her best to give her lover a cheeky smile.

Liselle smiled back and relaxed a little, “well if you’re making jokes Mikhailovich you can’t be all that hurt, but what the hell were you doing standing right in front of the door for,” she asked now trying to stem the bleeding on the forehead gash with pressure.

“I… ump… didn’t know where I should go,” Tash said now feeling the room around her begin to pulse a little.

“What happened to her,” the throaty voice of Aethyta sounded somewhere above her head.

“She tried to stop the door with her face from the look of it,” Liselle said concern still edging her voice, “for future reference Tasha if you’re ever in doubt as to where you’re supposed be, the answer is standing right next to me… Tasha… stay awake,” Liselle raised her voice a little as she saw the glazed look drift into her lover’s eyes.

“Aw don’t be mad Leece I’ve got a really bad head…” and darkness enfolded her.

As Tash passed out the medical teams arrived and Liselle was shoed out of the way.  Her eyes still firmly fixed on the stricken figure on the ground she asked, “Where’s Kalanni?”

But before Aethyta could answer they both heard Shepard’s voice cut in over their comms.

“Kalanni’s dead, Liselle’s girlfriend didn’t have enough sense to get out of the way of a metal door but everyone else is fine,” Aethyta shook her head at Liselle who was about to comment on the old commando’s obvious injuries, “can you put my girl on.”

Two medics were calling over a stretcher and trying to force Aethyta to lie down but she was resisting, “Liselle keep these fools away from me till I finish with this call,” and as she finished talking she walked away a little.

Liselle stood guard her eyes wandering to the stretcher that was carrying Tasha away to the Mansions medical centre.

“Hey little wing, yeah I’m fine,” Aethyta said with all the ease she could muster, “I’ve got to take care of things here and I’m gonna be busy for a while so we’ll catch up when you get back… yeah I know but me and T’Loak in a confined space… well… and you little one…” Aethyta waited a moment for Liara to hand the comms back then said, “Shepard take good care of our girl.”

The minute Aethyta finished the call she staggered and gave up the fight to stay standing.
Miranda looked out through the open bay doors as three shuttles landed gently on the grass at the rear of the Normandy. Giving the deck a final check she was confident that the conversion to flight deck was complete. The three large shuttles would be re-fitted into attack vehicles to join the one already present on the deck.

The Normandy’s smaller shuttle had been removed and the deck’s usual amenities had also been packed away. The armoury still remained but had been moved to fit across three bays along the side of the hangar leaving more room for the incoming vehicles.

She watched as two full squads of Asari commandos from both the T’Soni and T’Loak estates who had been on the shuttles began making their way on-board. It would be a tight squeeze and both lounges had been converted into temporary bunk space for the extra teams. The journey to Hagalaz, the location of the Shadow Broker base, would take a little over twenty six hours and most of that time would be spent in preparation and planning, she doubted very much if anyone would actually be using their bunks.

Another smaller shuttle landed a little way off and Miranda made her way towards it confident that she would be handing over a mission and battle ready ship to the new temporary executive officer.

Stepping out into the bright sunshine Shepard took a moment to look at her beautiful and deadly ship, engines just firing into life and she felt a thrill. Now she was on solid ground, this is what she understood. She had a mission and the means to carry it out; this was what she was born to do.

Shepard and Liara had gone straight to their cabin to quickly change into fatigues and on their way to the command deck had stopped into the med bay to check on Tash.

“The highlights are a hairline fracture to her skull, severe concussion and a shattered collar bone,” Doctor Chakwas had insisted that Tash be brought to the Normandy med bay for treatment as a member of ‘her’ crew.

Liselle had been only too happy to make sure that happened and was currently hovering around the sedated figure looking a little less stressed than she had before the diagnosis.

“She will not be mission fit for at least a month and will not be leaving her bed for at least a week,” Karin had finished.

“Well good luck with keeping her in that bed when she finally comes around,” Shepard said, “bit of a family thing.” She smiled at her long suffering Doctor.

When they arrived at the command deck the rest of the team had also changed and were standing at tactical stations circling the main holo display.

Shepard looked around and for a moment the whole thing felt surreal as her mother, the Alliance Admiral and Miranda the Cerberus officer stood side by side. Kas and Garrus at their usual stations but the addition of the Queen of Omega and her captain of commandos gave her pause especially the realisation that they were both, now, family.

But the world righted itself as her eyes fell on her bondmate standing at her science station, back on the Normandy where she was meant to be.
“Let’s get this show on the road,” Shepard said clearly, “status Joker?”

“All equipment and personnel are secure Commander we are go for lift of.”

Shepard nodded to her XO and Hannah Shepard gave the command, “hit the black Joker and best speed to our rendezvous in the Sowilo system.”

Kasumi pulled up a haptic interface and started scrolling through settling on a screen which she transferred into the space where the galaxy map was often displayed.

The three dimensional soft light image showed a huge ship, “this is the closest we can get to the spec for the Broker’s ship from the description that Vasir gave you,” Kas said.

“Edi can you overlay closest match set ups, it’s some sort of mining facility isn’t it?” Liara asked.

“Yes Doctor T’Soni and based on what we know of the Brokers preference for security this is the closest match for a defensive grid that I have been able to come up with. I am able to predict its accuracy with 87.035% certainty.” As Edi was speaking internal schematics began to detail possible defensive capabilities and access points.

“You really think he has that many mech’s?” Aria gave voice to Shepard’s own thought.

“It is with a 99.987% certainty I can predict that the main defensive force on his base will be AI mech’s.

“So let’s start planning how to take him out,” Shepard said as they felt the ships engines shift to sub light.
Normandy flight deck, in position off the Shadow Brokers base, upper atmosphere, Hagalaz, Siwho System

Despite the Normandy's effective suite of inertia dampers, Edi's active system management and Jokers excellent piloting the ship was still being thrown around as if it was a piece of flotsam on the tide.

The Normandy was in full stealth mode but was not invisible and they had already noticed viewing ports along some of the side sections of the huge mining ship which was why they were positioned directly above their their quarry.

On the flight deck final checks and preparations were being made by the four assault teams who were waiting for the order to get into their shuttles. The three sleek silver and blue Asari heavy assault shuttles made their Alliance counterpart look even more brick like than it usually did.

Shepard and Liara's team, which included Grunt and Garrus, would land at the front of the giant ship where Edi and Kas had predicted held the best chance of finding the main command centre and therefore the Broker.

Aria would lead her commando's, with added muscle and tech from the Normandy's Krogan and Turian teams, to the next section of the ship which was thought to be where any organic crew would be located.

Miranda, taking Tash's place, would lead a similar team to land farther back on the ship where they were hoping to find its engineering system control centres.

Liselle was leading the final team, which included Kas for extra tech support, to attack the rear of the ship where, if Edi's predictions were correct most of the VI mechs would be stored when not in use.

The Normandy's bay doors were fully retracted and only the blue shimmering protection of a stasis field kept out not only the cold vacuum of space but the raging storm that gave the Brokers ship its protection from any detection unless you knew exactly where to look.

The planet was a D class world which was completely uninhabitable its oceans boiling by day and snap freezing at night. With constant storms that raged in its upper atmosphere any vessel crashing towards the planet that made it through the storms would be destroyed on the surface. The Broker had positioned his ship in what looked like the biggest of those storms and circled the planet in its grasp.

Shepard did a final sweep of the deck and noticed one of her squad leaders was missing, "where's Liselle," she turned and asked Liara quietly.

"She went to check on Tash and…" but before Liara could finish she noticed her sister walking across the deck to her team and their shuttle.

"She looks really worried do you think there has been a change?" Liara asked Shepard, her eyes still on her sister who had started final checks with her team.

"The Doc would have told us," Shepard answered almost absentmindedly her focus on checking her assault rifle. But feeling eyes boring into her she looked up and saw the mixture of anger and pain in her bondmates eyes.
"Oh really Shepard, in the way you volunteered the information to me about about the danger my father was in when the bomb went off, or how you neglected to tell me my father was seriously injured," Liara was speaking quietly but her body language spoke volumes to anyone who knew what to look for. Hands on her hips head slightly to the side and eyes narrowed she had a formidable presence.

"Aw hang on Lee that was Aethyta's decision not to… and then with the hospital…" Shepard was withering under her lovers gaze and even though Aethyta had made Shepard swear she wouldn't tell Liara about her injuries, Shepard knew it was wrong. And to top it all Liara found out from Doctor Chakwas once they were en route; who gave her an update thinking, quite rightly, that she knew about her father's injuries.

Shepard looked at the floor and rubbed the back of her neck trying to ease the tension she was feeling. Looking up again and holding Liara's gaze she placed her hands on her bondmates shoulders and said with all the tenderness she could, "I know your worried about Aethyta and I am sorry I wasn't honest with you, I shouldn't have agreed to keep it from you," Shepard paused trying to find the right words, "and you've got every right to be mad at me but we need to focus on what we're doing right now don't we?"

Liara took a deep breath and gave a couple of slight nods the anger dissipating, "I am not a child Shepard and you know how much I hate secrets and being lied to. We will talk about this when the mission is over." Shepard was cut by the sadness in Liara's voice and her words and instinctively pulled her lover into a hug, pleased to feel it returned.

Breaking apart Shepard called out across the deck the low murmur of voices that had been present falling into silence.

"Squad commanders are we a go," Shepard looked across the deck and received nods from Aria, Liselle and Miranda, "lock and load then people let's get this party started."

The teams began to board their respective shuttles; Shepard raised an arm in the air and made a circling motion with a finger to indicate to the shuttle pilots to fire up their engines. She turned and jumped aboard her own shuttle and walked through to the cockpit to sit next to Malania.

The shuttles lifted from the deck and moved towards the shimmering blue stasis field one at a time with Shepard's in the lead. The Normandy's hangar bay doors would allow two shuttles to launch simultaneously but due to the excessive turbulence they would leave the relative quiet of the Normandy one at a time so that the pilots could get to grips with assisted rather than automatic piloting. The storms electrical nature making systems not only glitchy but some completely unusable.

As they passed through the shimmering barrier the storm hit them like a steel fist and Malania struggled momentarily to get the bird to respond as it veered sideways. But within seconds the pilot was in control and although they could all feel the shuttle being buffeted and rattled by the atmospheric pressures it was moving steadily along its trajectory to its designated landing spot on the hull of the huge vessel.

One by one the shuttles left the Normandy and one by one the pilots struggled with and then overcame the storms violent energy.

On the CIC deck Admiral Shepard walked first up and then back along the row of tactical stations that lined the gangway leading to the cockpit.

Each station was monitoring multiple members of the mission away teams and due to the extra numbers some monitoring was being carried out on split screens. Body and helmet cams, voice
comms, vital signs, even equipment data like ammunition levels and suit integrity, were all fed through to the tactical specialists.

"Status", Hannah Shepard asked coming to a stop behind the senior tactical specialists' station.

"There is heavy interference from the storm but the ship itself is emitting strong electronic damping and distortion we are already at fifty percent efficiency and they haven't reached the ship yet," the young officer was making adjustments to his haptic interface as he spoke, "we are likely to lose all telemetry once they enter the ship if not before ma'am.

"Very well, connect me to mission alpha squad leader," the Admiral walked down into the main CIC and stood in front of one of the mission stations her eyes on the holo projection of the Shadow Brokers ship and the four assault shuttles steadily making their way to their allotted positions.

"Normandy actual this is mission alpha go ahead," her daughter's voice was clear and business-like but the there was a lot of interference.

"Mission alpha we are projected to lose connection with you as you reach your target. Your first mission priority is now to deal with the EWAR to assure full tactical support from the Normandy."

Shepard senior knew the Commander would prefer to have a free hand once the mission started, but without comms the Normandy could offer no tactical support if needed and that was unacceptable to Admiral Shepard as XO.

"Copy that Normandy actual," Shepard replied keeping the edge of irritation out of her voice, "I can confirm we do have squad to squad comms functioning at around fifty percent efficiency. Mission alpha out."

"Copy that, get the job done Commander, Normandy out."

Admiral Shepard took a deep breath and straightened her back as an ensign arrived at her side with reports. Hannah Shepard took them and started to swipe through the data whilst talking.

"I want the four squad leader's tactical feedback including vid comms fed through to my station here. And as soon as we get an indication of which ship that actually is I want an updated holo projection in place with full internal layout."

"Nice flying LT", Shepard said as the shuttle touched down on the hull of the bucking and weaving ship.

"Thank you Commander", Malania replied with a smile as the Commander unstrapped herself and moved out of the cockpit to the main body of the shuttle where her team were already out of their safety harness's and moving into position.

Shepard knelt down opposite Chief Carter and they both began to unlock the circular hatch on the floor that provided a docking port for emergency egress or other unusual docking scenarios.

"Everyone suited, helmets on?" Shepard asked. She didn't really need to ask the team as they had been through a couple of dry runs so knew what they were supposed to do; but it was protocol so she asked.

She received various yes's and aye eye's and so nodded to the Chief to make the final turn on the hatch cover and pull it open.

The hull of the mining ship was now accessible and as the Chief and another tech specialist moved
their equipment into place Shepard switched her comms frequency to include the Normandy and the other three squad leaders.

"This is Alpha one we are in position one over."

"This is Beta one we are ready in position one, over", Aria's voice came through the static loud and clear and Shepard allowed a small smile to play on her lips remembering the arguments about the naming of the four squads.

Aria wanted to use Asari Commando protocols but as it was a Spectre operation on an Alliance ship Shepard got her way.

"Delta in position one, over," Miranda's response was all business.

"Gamma ready to rock and in position." Shepard could hear the smile in Liselle's voice and not for the first time she could see why her cousin was so attracted to the Captain of Commandos.

"This is mission alpha for Normandy actual do you copy, over," Shepard could only hear static. They would be on their own until they disabled the EWAR defences on the flying fortress that was the lair of the Shadow Broker.

"Alpha one to all squads we are mission green you have a go," Shepard followed up her broadcast with a nod to the waiting techs.

The pin point laser made short work of the outer hull and before they proceeded through the inner hull they checked with the micro cam to make sure they would not be cutting through anything likely to tip off their presence to the crew.

"Clear Commander," Chief Carter said after checking the feed.

Shepard who was standing in a familiar pose leaning back slightly on one leg and arms crossed nodded as she gave her order, "carry on Chief".

Once through the inner hull the laser was withdrawn and the micro cam was inserted and all eyes were on the small screen on the bulkhead that was receiving the feed.

"Pressure and atmosphere suitable for organics, gravity is in operation, we will need to vent a little pressure in the shuttle to avoid a little blowing into the corridor," the chief finished his report from the data stream.

"LT did you get that," Shepard said over helmet comms but still looking to the front of the shuttle at its pilot.

"Copy that Commander," Malania replied her fingers dancing over the haptic interfaces in front of her, "pressure sync'd."

"Do you copy my feed strike force," Shepard said to the other squad leaders who responded with their own affirmatives of clear corridors and balanced pressures between ship and shuttles.

"Let's put this bastard down then shall we," Shepard said with a low growl and once again nodded at her two tech specialists.

With eyes constantly scanning the ship's corridor for movement the tech proceeded to laser a hole in the outer hull the size of the docking ring. It would be big enough for the squad to drop through one at a time.
Then with the outer hull dispatched the inner hull was similarly cut through ensuring it did not drop into the ship but was lifted into the shuttle.

Shepard checked the feeds from her fellow squad commanders and they were all clear and ready to enter the ship.

"We are go for incursion," Shepard said across comms and reaching back for her assault rifle she moved to sit on the edge of the hole. She felt the clip being attached to her weapon rack. With a nod to the Chief, rifle tucked tight to her body she slipped off the edge and felt the wire hold her weight followed by a quick but controlled decent.

Almost before her feet hit the floor the clip released and another squad member was being lowered into the ship. Shepard took up position facing up the corridor towards what would be the front of the ship and the direction in which they would travel.

She knew without the looking the second member of her squad, who was covering the corridor towards the rear of the ship, was Liara.

Once the whole squad as in the corridor her pilot replaced the circle of hull so that without too close inspection their ingress would not be noticed.

Silently and like a well-oiled unit they formed up. Two marines hugging the walls one moving forward in a crouch the other standing straight up, weapons pointed forward eyes on their sights. Shepard walked down the centre of the corridor weapon forward with Garrus and Grunt slightly behind but flanking her. One marine walked backwards keeping eyes on their six guided by a hand on her shoulder.

The rest of the squad walked in single file along the corridor walls ready to turn to the rear if needed. Weapons were fitted with silencers but these would be removed if they got into a full fire fight.

"Recon drones not operating Commander," Chief Carter said as he replaced the small drone back in his leg pouch, "we are eyes only."

"Copy that Chief," Shepard responded.

They moved quickly along the corridor towards the bulk head door at its end.

Liara moved forward and placed a lock breaker device on the door and when it had finished its cycle they heard a heavy click.

On a silent count of three the door was pulled open and they streamed in formation into the new section of corridor but this one had doors to the right and clear glass panels on the left that gave a view down onto the massive storage and processing space that formed the bulk of the innards of the huge ship.

A Salarian walked out of the first door on the left and was greeted with a 'zmp' as the silenced round pierced his head and he fell to the ground before he could finish blinking his eyes.

They worked their way down the corridor clearing the rooms as they went. Just as they reached the next bulk head door red lights started flashing and high pitched sirens began blaring.

"Silencers off, full auto," Shepard said and tried to raise her fellow squad leaders to get a full sit rep.

Admiral Shepard was doing her best not to pace back and forth in front of the blank tactical screens. Mission time was plus twenty still no contact.
"EDI are we ready with the comm buoy," Hannah Shepard knew the answer but to deploy the buoy would mean firing it into the side of the ship immediately alerting its occupants to an attack.

"Yes Admiral, but taking into account our most recent telemetry from the mission there is only a 47.8% chance that the equipment will be able to boost signal strength enough to break through the dampening field and a 23% chance that the connection will be able to counter the distortion fields emanating from the ship."

Shepard senior already knew the calculations were against their gambit working; she like EDI had studied the data. But there was no other option. They didn't have another shuttle to send over.

Just as she was about to break the mission protocol screens flickered into life and the tactical stations lit up with incoming feeds.

"We have connection Admiral," one of the tactical specialists called out.

"Admiral all electronic weaponry appears to have been shut down," EDI said.

Hannah Shepard scanned the four feeds at her station. All squad leaders appeared to be under fire.

"Mission status," she asked the senior tactical specialist who was running real time analysis of all the data, vid and voice comms and preparing to feed it through to the holo projection of the Shadow Broker's ship.

"Eight dead and six seriously wounded, heaviest casualties are being incurred by Gamma squad meeting very heavy mech activity. Environmental and security systems have been secured by Delta squad and they are defending successfully. We also have access to the ships computer systems, uploading new data now."

As Hannah Shepard looked at the hologram the interior of the ship changed only slightly, their best guess evaluation of the ship had been pretty accurate.

However now there were blue dots representing the Normandy away mission and red ones showing the Brokers merc's with white dots for mechs.

She could see immediately that Liselle's squad were about to be overwhelmed by mech's that were coming online in their hundreds at the rear of the ship.

"Delta one this is Normandy actual we have you on our board, you need to retreat from that position do you read me," Hannah Shepard said in a calm authoritative voice.

"Normandy we ne…. ile strike…. location," the commando's incoming call was broken up with static and gunfire.

"Say again Delta we did not receive," Hannah could see through Liselle's helmet cam what the problem was. They were in a huge storage space with racks running floor to ceiling and on all the rows and racks there were around a thousand mech's all coming to life and moving towards the small squad trying to hold the exit.

"Delta squad, Captain you must evac your position do you copy," Hannah was aware Liselle's squad was now down to only five members and one of those was Kasumi who was desperately working a console near the exit trying to shut down the mechs.

"Negative Normandy… not let… into the rest of the ship," Liselle did not stop firing her weapon as she spoke, "Normandy I am calling in a missile strike on my location, we can't hold them much
Hannah Shepard now heard other voices on local comms both Aria and her daughter both telling Liselle to hold on and that Aria and her squad were fighting their way back to her.

"Negative local… can't… them…"

Over the feeds Hannah could see Aria fighting like a fiend destroying all in her way her commando team clearing up anyone left in her wake, but she would not get to the rear of the ship in time.

The mechs were now smashing through the wreckage of destroyed mech bodies and moving steadily towards the squad's position. With meagre cover and half her team dead or wounded Liselle was in an impossible position.

"EDI I need a precision strike carrying an EM warhead, zero five blast radius, zero ninety EM field dispersal," Hannah looked at the schematics they now had of the ship and scrolled through until she found what she was looking for. An entry point into the storage compartment with minimal damage to the ships integrity and which minimised loss of internal atmosphere.

"There EDI do you see," she said indicating a point on the ships outer hull.

"Affirmative Admiral," EDI replied, "missile locked and ready on your mark."

"Delta this is Normandy leave the are now missile incoming in five," as Hannah continued the countdown she saw Liselle indicating to her team to move back but she remained in place still giving covering fire.

Hannah saw Aria push even harder to get through as she continued the countdown… "two, one, fire."

"Missile deployed," EDI said immediately on the command to fire.

The tactical feed from Liselle's camera turned from image to static, all her telemetry flat lined.

Hannah Shepard felt bile rise in her mouth a sick feeling in her stomach. She felt as though she was holding her breathe watching through Aria's helmet cam as the Asari moved now less impeded more quickly along what seemed like endless corridors.

"Any readings from Delta squad," she asked looking towards the main bank of tactical stations.

A slow shake of the head from the two specialists monitoring the feeds was a blow that Hannah Shepard felt physically.

"The EM pulse from the missile may have knocked out the squad's suit systems as well as the mechs Admiral," EDI said almost softly.

"I know EDI but we…" Hannah broke off as she saw Aria smash her way through a bulk head door and heard gunfire coming from the other side.

Aria knew she was pushing her biotics to their limit. They had faced over sixty of the Brokers merc's in and around their living quarters. They had also faced turrets and a handful of mechs.

The fighting had been hard and intense she had lost at least one of her commandos and many of the others were either wounded or now close to exhaustion.

And just as they had finished their fight that call had come through from Liselle. Not calling for help,
she was too well trained for that. They all had their objectives that had to be secured at the same time. No she had called in fire support from the Normandy… she had called for fire on her position.

Aria would not let that happen, she knew she couldn't challenge the request or the strike order if it came her only hope was to get to Liselle first and get her out.

She'd rip every mech to pieces herself if she had to but she would not lose her child not today and not here. It was the first time she had felt a rush of such emotion in battle and she knew she would have to visit those feelings at some point later.

The countdown seemed to go on for a lifetime but she wasn't getting any closer and when she felt the missile finally hit she faltered only briefly before rushing on.

Blasting her way through yet another steel door with a biotic slam she heard gunfire and then saw three mechs in front of her further down the corridor closing in on a doorway to a side room from which gunfire was sporadically answering the near constant fire from the mechs guns.

She was joined by her estate Commando Captain and together they lifted two of the mech's into the air and using a reave they ripped metal from metal, the pieces raining down on the deck. Another of Aria's commandos moved forward and began pumping shotgun rounds into the remaining mech who turned but was blasted to pieces by the second and third round that found its mark.

Aria move quickly to the doorway and saw the group contained Kasumi and two commandos all of whom were bleeding and looked battered.

Her eyes turned to look down the corridor to what had to be the entrance to the mech storage area but all she saw was smoke billowing out.

At the other end of the ship Shepard's team had fought their way to the Shadow Brokers secure quarters.

With the ships ewar defences disabled they could now use their scout drones giving them a clear map of were enemy combatants were and the floor layout.

Straight ahead had to be the Brokers main office and where he was holed up. Off to the right the corridor led to the cell block and about ten mercs and a couple of mechs.

"Garrus take the squad and clear out the remaining mercs and secure the cell block and all prisoners," Shepard said after reviewing the intel being fed to her from the drones, "Lee, Grunt you with me… we're going after the Broker."

The squad began moving forward again in formation but at the next junction Garrus led the main body of the squad off to the right and Shepard, with Liara and Grunt at her side continue straight ahead to the final doorway.

Just as they reached the door they felt the impact of the missile. Liara turned and looked at Shepard. Her lovers face was set in a mask of concern blue eyes fearful and questioning.

"Focus on the mission," Shepard said more gently than she would have to anyone else under her command.

Liara gave her a short nod and set to unlocking the door in front of them.

Despite what Shepard had said she checked the feed from Aria's vid cam that was projected onto the
top left of her helmet visor the feed from Liselle and her team had already cut out. Aria had still not reached the rear of the ship and she shuddered to think what effect the loss of Liselle would have on her bondmate.

The door gave a satisfying heavy click and with one last check of her team they pulled open the door standing either side of the entrance and threw in two grenades.

Shepherd had no intention of taking the Broker alive no matter what a bunch of Matriarchs or Council members ordered her to do.

Moving in quickly under cover of the smoke they split with Shepard and Liara breaking right and Grunt breaking left. As soon as they entered the room they started shooting and didn't stop until the smoke cleared.

The room was huge and its walls were filled with screens, some relaying data streams others vid streams, some were blank. In the middle of the room but further towards the back wall was what looked like an upturned desk that was more like a small wall as it stood now on its edge.

On the rear wall was a balcony or more accurately a wide gangway with steps leading up on either side of the room. The back wall held larger screens that were currently streaming live footage from the trading quarter on Illium.

As Shepard took in the room and the two smashed mechs in front of them something began to move. A huge figure rose from behind the rear of the desk it was easily twice as tall as Grunt and was wide and solid looking.

Liara stepped forward not a trace of fear in her demeanour.

"So we finally meet Broker," Liara said her voice cold and hard, the tone reminiscent of the one Shepard had heard on her return from her presumed death.

"And thank you for returning my property I will make a fine profit for completing my contract for the Commander and you will also bring a prize bounty," the Broker's voice was deep, gravely, and resonating. It reminded Shepard of the voice of Sovereign and renewed wash of anger filled her veins.

"Ha," Grunt snarled punching his fists together, "this one will be fun to kill Shepard you're Krant has the best fights," the young Krogan's eyes were fixed on the huge figure in front of them.

"Think you might have misunderstood the situation," Shepard said moving forward to stand next to Liara, "I've taken your ship Broker and now I'm going to end you."

"You will not take this ship and when I have secured you as my prisoners we will leave in my escape ship," his confidence gave Shepard pause and she began to check the reams of data flowing across the side of her visor.

Shepard knew the Normandy was also monitoring their vid and voice comms and noticed a message from the ship flash across her screen "scanning for self-destruct activity"

The Broker was talking again "But this was truly reckless even for you Commander no doubt blinded by love and it will cost you your lives and your ship."

Shepard noticed Grunt moving very slowly to try to flank the creature as at that moment all its small beady eyes were on Shepard and Liara.
"You talk about reckless you were going to kill thousands and poison my home republic just for some sort of revenge," Liara's biotics were lit up as she moved closer still her anger burning in her voice and her demeanour.

The Broker made noises that Shepard assumed was amusement, "not entirely for revenge, where is the profit in that… but when the contract was proposed I must admit I looked forward to you demise. But Doctor this is all you're doing, your interference has brought us all to this moment you should not have stolen Shepard's body from me."

Before Liara could reply the Broker continued speaking and leaned forward "do not challenge me Asari. I know your every secret while you fumble in the dark."

Shepard felt a definite chill run through her veins there was definitely Reaper overtones to this encounter.

Liara's facial expression changed and although her biotics were still alight and her eyes were hard a smile played around her lips and when she spoke it was in a silky smooth and taunting voice.

"Let's see, you are a Yahg a pre space flight species who have been quarantined to their home world for massacring the Citadel first contact teams. This ship and the Shadow Broker operations pre date your planets discovery so you have not been the Broker for long."

Liara tilted her head to the side and her voice gathered a condescending tone, "I wonder, were you taken from your home world by trophy hunters, kept as a slave or perhaps as a… pet," she let the last word hang between them for a moment, "how am I doing?"

Her barb about being a pet had obviously struck a sore point because a split second after Liara finished speaking the Broker let out a loud rumbling roar and smashed the desk in front of him with his fist.

All three began firing at him but kinetic barriers flared over his partly armoured body and in response he picked up half the torn and shattered desk and threw it towards Shepard and Liara.

Shepard threw herself at Liara and managed to get them both out of the way as the heavy metal object slammed into the floor where they had been standing and continued to skid to the back of the room.

While his attention was elsewhere Grunt made a head charge at the Yahg and caught him full on in the side but the beast barely staggered and with an arm smashed Grunt off his feet, through the air and crashing the young Krogan into the side wall.

Shepard jumped to her feet and also made a run for the wall of angry Yahg in front of her while through her helmet comms she said with a smile "you just had to make the big gorilla angry didn't you."

Also over comms Grunt now standing said "I thought you were trying to talk him to death… now for some fun."

Liara didn't have time to respond as although Shepard punches found their mark a few times the Yahg managed to throw her back across the floor.

For the next few minutes Liara send biotic slams, nothing else seemed to affect him, at the Yahg with both Grunt and Shepard attacking in between. Shepard was using her omni blade and Grunt a very nasty looking jagged blade that had the appearance of a short sword.
Their blades were landing and cutting the Yahg but any damage they were doing seemed only to make it more annoyed.

Shepard was also aware that the Normandy had detected a silent self-destruct alert and the tech teams both on the Normandy and on the Broker's ship were working desperately to try to find a way to disarm it. They had no idea how long the countdown was and in between runs at the Yahg Shepard ordered the Normandy to withdraw.

But she was not the Captain of the vessel at this point and the ships XO's reply was a cool "I will take that recommendation under advisement"

The Broker was using an energy shield of some kind and suddenly Liara saw how they could win the fight if they could manoeuvre the Broker under one of the plasma energy conduits she could smash it and make a biotic connection between the plasma flow and the shield.

She said breathlessly over comms "Shepard get him under one of the plasma conduits," she saw Shepard quickly scope the room and nod at Grunt who had heard the same message.

On their next pass at the Broker both Shepard and Grunt fell back together to where they wanted the Broker to be. As expected the Yahg ran towards them its shield deployed using to smash them both back across the room.

As the Broker straightened up and made another roar Liara focused her energy and sent it flying at the conduit above its head and as it smashed she pulled the plasma energy and her own biotics onto the startled Yahg.

The energy exploded the shield and overloaded the kinetic barriers and stunned the Yahg and as it fell to the ground and the energy dissipated Shepard and Grunt were on the fallen beast in a second.

Shepard forced her blade into the Brokers throat and upwards toward its brain while Grunt found a space between the Yahg's natural armour where either its heart or lungs would reasonably be found and forced his weapon in to the hilt twisting and turning it for maximum damage.

They felt the Yahg shudder and stop moving its eyes flickered and then glazed over.

Liara walked over and looked down with distaste "is it dead?"

"It's about as dead as we can make it… nice job Grunt," Shepard said taking a hand up from Liara.

"Without the shields we would have killed it clean," he said still looking at the dead Yahg.

"Sit rep local and Normandy," Shepard said as she removed her helmet.

"Ship destruct sequence identified and stopped Commander," Miranda's said with confidence.

"Normandy actual to mission alpha we are moving to dock with the ship. We are ready to receive wounded," Hannah Shepard said relief edging her professional tone.

She had received no reply from Aria and looked at her bondmate who had also removed her helmet the concern clearly etched on her beautiful features.

Aria looked at the smoke and dust streaming from the end of the corridor and the entrance to the mech store and began running towards it.

Once engulfed by the smoke and dust she found it hard to see but there was movement.
"Over there," Aria's estate commando Captain who was at her side was pointing to the left.

They moved quickly and then out of the smoke Aria saw Liselle stumbling towards them a prone Asari over her shoulder.

"That was some nice shooting," she smiled at the concerned face of her mother who reached out to take the wounded Asari from her, "don't worry boss I'll be good for work, just got this Goddess awful ringing in my ears."

Liselle had never seen Aria worried about her ever before and the sight was both warming and worrying.

"Good, shame about the mechs they would have brought good prices on Omega," Aria said once again all business, all cold Pirate Queen.

"We are making our way to your position Shepard," Aria's voice came through but before Liara could ask she continued, "My merc Captain is a little banged up but she'll be fine. She asked me to send her compliments to the Normandy for the assistance."

Liara's face lit up with a beaming smile and Shepard pulled her into a hug.

"It's over," Liara said with a sigh of relief.

"Nearly," Shepard said and as if on cue Garrus's slightly anxious voice snapped in over comms.

"We are having a bit of a problem with the prisoner we found, once we took the damping collar off she became very aggressive. She's asking for Liara."

"She's alive… oh Goddess I must go to her," Liara said in a breathless tone another beaming smile on her face, "I am on my way Garrus."

"Yeah not without me you're not," Shepard said under her breathe following her rushing bondmate out of the room and up the corridor.

When they reached what was obviously the cell block Liara moved quickly past the two Alliance marines and Garrus and into the open cell.

When Shepard reached Garrus he said, "she didn't believe we were here to rescue her she wouldn't come out of the cell and a once we took her collar off she threatened us with her biotics…” Garrus trailed off and finished, "she's not quite… she seems… she's pretty messed up."

Shepard moved and stood outside the cell watching.

Liara was holding Shiala and making soothing sounds, the older Asari seemed to be sobbing into her neck and muttering disjointed sentences.

"This real… is it real… I'm not dead… he said you were dead… you came for me… he said you were lost… you didn't forget… she didn't come back… you're in danger… have to get away… you…”

The Asari pulled her face away from Liara and as she did spotted Shepard in the corridor.

Shiala pushed Liara behind her sending a biotic slam that threw Shepard hard against the wall totally winding her and without a pause the Asari flew forward grasping the human by the throat and pinned her with biotics.
Shepard couldn't breathe, couldn't move she saw flashing light before her eyes the corridor going
dim.

She heard Liara's voice trying to reason with Shiala, heard Garrus and the other marines threaten to
shoot and then just before she was about to pass out felt a huge wave of energy and was released.

Shepard dropped to her knees, pulled her suit from her neck and took deep breaths and felt Garrus
and her two marines surround her.

Once her lungs were filled she got to her feet and moved toward the loud voices and she saw Aria
with Shiala held up in the air by the throat and Liara yelling at her to put her down.

"She's dangerous Liara you don't understand… this treacherous bitch needs to be put down and it
would be my pleasure to do it…"

"You don't' understand Aria she's confused she's been here for two years at the mercy of the Shadow
Broker experiencing Goddess knows what…” but Aria cut off her daughter.

"This has nothing to do with what's happened to her here… she is poison,” as Aria spoke the last
words she brought her face close to the still struggling bet very subdued Asari.

"Aria let her go," this time Liara did not plead she demanded.

Aria threw Shiala to the ground as she said, "so be it Liara, she nearly killed your bondmate and she
will turn on you… sometimes you are infuriatingly like your mother," and with that Aria turned
away as she walked past Shepard she just gave her a look but its meaning was clear.

"Restrain her," Shepard said to Garrus and the marines, "if she tries to resist shot her," Shepard
spoke quietly hear throat burned and her voice was hoarse.

"But Shepard…” Liara started but was quelled by the look of absolute fury on her bondmates face.

"Put her in the Normandy brig under secure guard," Shepard added and walked away. She would
see to her wounded and her dead. She couldn't be anywhere near Liara right now.
Normandy, docked with the Shadow Broker base, orbit around Hagalaz

It had been around five hours since they secured the Shadow Broker base and Shepard had been busy organising teams to fully sweep the Broker base for any lingering combatants and also to survey the Broker’s assets.

She was aware that Liara and Kasumi were leading the evaluation and ongoing ‘management’ of the Broker's network. There would need to be a discussion as to who would hold control over them from this point on.

Aria was already pitching that she should take control as it was more her area of operation but the Matriarchs back on Thessia had made it very clear they wanted the network for their own purposes.

Shepard had visited the wounded, made arrangements for the dead, taken back command of her ship and Miranda was back in her XO position. She had avoided any and all conversations with everyone, including and especially her mother, which were not directly related to practical issues.

And now she was in the small ante room off the main conference room where she would normally take any private or confidential vid comm meetings.

On one of the screens Shepard had the Normandy's brig cameras on a live feed and she stared at the Asari who had tried to kill her, who had taken her place while she was dead to Liara.

Yet who had also, in a perverse way, helped bring Shepard back and certainly kept her out of the hands of the Collectors. And Shiala had given Liara an escape from that deep dark place of frozen grief her lover had been thrown into after the Normandy was destroyed.

And who had shared Liara's bed. That thought kept returning to her as if on some painful playback loop.

Shepard was trying to get hold of the intense mix of feelings that were coursing through her. She rarely lost control of her emotions but she had after Shiala attacked her or was that happening even before. Perhaps from the moment she laid eyes on her bondmates ex-lover.

She just wanted to tear the Asari to pieces and had no compassion for what she may have been through at the hands of the Shadow Broker. And certainly had no feeling of gratitude to Shiala for saving Liara's life by sacrificing her own.

This didn't sit right with Shepard, she felt overwhelmed by these feelings. But were they feelings, some of emotion felt less well defined, more as if she was being bombarded by emotions form somewhere else, she certainly couldn't connect with all of them.

"Why do you get under my skin," Shepard asked the figure on the vid screen.

Aria seemed to feel the same way as Shepard, "yeah but that's hardly the gold standard of attitude and behaviour I was aiming for…” she mused.

What Shepard could and would own were her clear feelings of jealousy, which she felt completely ashamed of and was doing her best to mitigate. And, difficult though it was she also had to own her anger at Liara for not being more concerned and protective of her during and after Shiala's attack.
And of course both those things fuelled each other.

As she prepared to switch off the feed and leave her place of brooding she noticed movement on the vid screen.

Liara moved into view and was standing outside the cage that contained the solitary prisoner.

Shepard sat up and with only a moment's pause switched on the sound feed up and resolved to tame the beast that was uncurling in her gut.

"Liara what did I do, you came and released me from one prison to put me in another," Shiala had moved forward and put her hands on the bars.

Shiala was almost tearful and had a pleading, miserable, look about her.

"I am sorry Shiala we will get all of this straightened out," Liara said in a soft tone and placed her hands over the ones grasping the bars, "but why did you attack Shepard she led the mission to rescue you?"

"She is dead your Shepard is dead this… this thing is not… you must believe me Liara I know I have been where you are…"

"You are rambling Shiala you are not well, what awful things… I am so sorry it took so long… you saved me more than once and now it is my turn to save you," Liara spoke again in a soothing voice.

But Shiala appeared agitated, "you don't understand she is controlling you as Saren did your mother… I must save you I could not save Lady Benezia… I loved her you know and she always wanted you to be with me… we can fulfil her wishes… I can protect you…" Shiala was pacing her cell but all the time her eyes were on Liara.

"Shiala you are not in your right mind we will get you help…"

In a swift movement Shiala was once again pressed against the bars this time her arms reached out and pulled Liara to her and tried to hold her.

Shepard stood up and was about to rush to the brig but Liara moved away out of Shiala's reach.

"I will be here for you Shiala it is my duty after all you have done for my house, my family and for me and I also care for you. Without you I would not have Shepard back; and she is back and we are bonded," Liara spoke firmly but not unkindly, "whatever we… when we… I was in… what is past is past Shiala and I do not wish us to talk of this again."

Shepard watched for Shiala's response waited for more ranting or perhaps even anger to flare but the transformation that happened was far more chilling.

"Forgive me Lady Liara… I am so confused… you have no idea what that thing did to me… it is what we worked for to get Shepard back… and if she truly is that is all I could have wished for you… please help me heal my mind I am so confused and the nightmares are here even when I am awake…" Shiala looked and sounded truly remorseful, scared and she seemed to shrink as she dropped to her knees.

Liara looked concerned and called the guard to open the cell door, the marine hesitated but Liara was after all an officer.

Door open Liara helped Shiala to her feet and held here while the older Asari sobbed but Shepard
wasn't buying it.

"That was exactly what Liara wanted to hear..." Shepard said aloud with a deep sigh realising that she would not be getting rid of Shiala any time soon.

Liselle stood at the bottom of the bed where Tash was laying perfectly still. Tubes and machines of various kinds were attached to her and her face was black and blue with bruising although her nose was now reset.

Liselle had been checked and treated by the human doctor who seemed to know Asari physiology very well she putting that down to having to look after Shepard's multi-species crew.

"She will be fine and awake very shortly," Doctor Chakwas said in a brisk tone moving to stand next to the young Asari Captain, "I'm reducing her sedation slowly as the swelling on her brain has completely cleared."

"It's not natural seeing her completely still and relaxed, even asleep she seems half ready to reach out for a weapon or jump for cover," Liselle spoke quietly and was surprised she was sharing her feelings with this stranger. She had heard a lot about the Normandy's doctor but this was the first time they had been alone.

"Well from what I hear she has not had an easy time of it since leaving the Navy," Karin thought hard about her next words, "from my observations I would guess she has at least some chronic traumatic stress. And I also suspect she will not seek any help for it."

The Doctors words were half a question and she wondered whether the commando would answer.

"Help is not something Tasha asks for or is good at accepting," Liselle smiled still looking down at her stricken lover, "I'm not sure she believes she deserves any."

Liselle's voice was laced with sadness knowing as she did that Tasha would not be with her for much longer.

"You are very fond of her aren't you my dear," Karin said kindly.

Liselle realised she had shared more than she should with this stranger, "Oh she's great company but it's not a good idea to get attached in our line of business..." she faltered and turned to look at the human standing next to her.

She had a strong sense that this woman could be trusted, would respect confidences and Liselle needed to just say some things out loud and so carried on in a quieter voice.

"Well yes I am but it all seems to be really complicated and I have no idea... we don't talk about..." Liselle really didn't know where to start.

"Why don't we go into my office and have a drink and you can tell me as much or as little as you want," Karin said gently indicating the small glass walled pod further down the med bay.

Once settled with a glass of Serrice Ice Brandy Liselle told Karin Chakwas about meeting the young, lost, broken and very self-destructive ex Alliance officer nearly five years ago. How Liselle saw something in Tasha and they connected in a way she hadn't with anyone before.

Liselle talked about getting to know the brash and confident human, beginning to work together and finding her much more adept and skilled than a lot of the 'wannabe' mercs that showed up on Omega on a regular basis.
Also the destructive drinking, drug taking and other hedonistic outlets the human indulged in during
downtime.

"I had such a strong feeling that she just didn't belong on Omega, or in this life she had… it's so hard
to put into words… she was just out of place while at the same time, on the surface, fitting in
perfectly. Over time I could recognise how having to do some of the things she had to do as a merc
really hurt her, it was as if she was acting against her character.

I remember a time early on telling her I thought she should stop playing at being a pirate and go
home as she just didn't have her heart in it and she said "I have no home, I have no right to a heart…
I sold my soul to the devil so this is where I belong." She was very, very drunk at the time." Liselle
smiled despite her sadness, "it's was the only time that I got any real answers out of her about
anything but even then she would only let go so far."

"Perhaps you felt some echo of your own feelings of being out of place?" Chakwas asked filling
their glasses for a second time, "after all you are the daughter of an Admiral in the Citadel fleet."

Liselle smiled at the wily Doctor, "I may have recognised the feelings but I've always been perfectly
comfortable with my choices and what I do," Liselle replied confidently although it was a little
unsettling how close to the truth the human had got.

She didn't feel the same now but in the beginning there was much about her mother's world and
work that she found difficult and even now there were some jobs that Liselle just would not take.
And she was aware there was some work Aria never asked her to get involved with.

"But what concerns you now is not the past but the future. Your future together, or not," Karin knew
the young Asari would not be drawn further on her own past or motivations.

Karin Chakwas had been interested for some time about how some Asari maidens make the choice
to strike out and become merc's for hire, or a dancer while others stay on their home world and lead
very different lives.

Liselle took a deep breath and decided to risk telling this stranger that she knew Tasha had chosen to
leave Omega and by default their relationship but she didn't quite know how to make it easy for her
lover to leave.

"Tasha thinks she owes me for somehow saving her life," Liselle said sadly, "that much I know
although I don't know why she feels any debt to me. And we just don't talk about this kind of
thing… I wonder if I should just make it easy for her, you know pretend to replace her while she's
away…" Liselle trailed off realising she really wasn't sure what she was trying to say.

The Doctor had listened to enough soldiers who were in love but not sure about their future or if their
feelings were reciprocated to not recognise that this was one of those conversations.

"But why would you try to push her away?" Chakwas said deciding to treat this Asari soldier no
differently to the many human counterparts who had sat in her place before, "you love her and you
think she might feel the same way, surely what you need to do is talk to her."

"Some would dispute my feelings and even say I was too young to have them," Liselle said realising
that this woman had somehow seen straight to the heart of the problem.

"I know that for Asari you, like Liara, are considered young but not so young that you cannot
indulge in all other forms of relationship, why should emotional connection be any different. And as
for our young, troubled warrior with the hard head," Chakwas indicated the figure laying not far
away from them in the med bay, "well I've often found that soldiers who can't start a conversation about how they feel will usually respond honestly to a direct question."

Liselle looked unsure and was about to ask the Doctor another question when one of the machines on the desk bleeped for attention.

"Ah it seems our patient is beginning to regain consciousness," Doctor Chakwas said standing and heading back into the ward Liselle in her wake.

Doctor Chakwas checked the monitors and satisfied with the read outs said, "she will still be very groggy and under the influence of some quite strong drugs, for the pain," Karin Chakwas smiled at the Asari and made her way back to her office.

"Hey Mikhailovich… time to wake up you've had enough time avoiding me," Liselle said playfully.

"Mmm, whoa… the fuck hit me," Tash said her eyes trying to focus on her lover's face.

"You took a metal door in the face, but don't worry the Doctor fixed you up so you haven't lost you're good looks," Liselle reached out and took Tash's hand.

Tash finally got her eyes to focus and said in a slightly slurry way, "mmm love you Leece… gotta mmm tell you something…don't want to go… mmm but…," Tash started to drift and her eyes closed.

Liselle knew it was the drugs talking but she couldn't help a small glimmer of hope edge into her mind, 'maybe she does feel the same way,' she thought looking fondly at the bruised face of the human she was pretty sure she loved.

They were beginning to assemble in the conference room. Shepard had called a meeting to carry out a post mission de-brief and to make some decisions about the Shadow Broker network and assets.

Shepard had not seen Liara since the end of the mission, not unless you counted via vid feed from the brig. They needed to talk but it would have to wait until the end of this long and difficult day.

Taking their places around the table were Aria, Admiral Shepard, Liara and Kasumi.

"I know there are full reports coming but I need to know the answer to a couple of key questions," Shepard said avoiding Liara's eye, "most importantly was the Yahg the only Shadow Broker or is this operation run by a group?"

Kasumi answered "No we've been through a lot of data and comms feeds and traced incoming and outgoing messages he was it. And he never expected anyone else to breach his defences as he had no security on any network controls or command systems. Nothing was encrypted this end, we have access to everything."

"As you know the Broker never showed himself and from what we know now having heard his real voice he also used a voice scrambler so we have been able to communicate directly with some of his operatives in the last few hours with complete success," Liara spoke more quietly than usual but nonetheless professionally. Shepard felt a stab of pain as she could hear, see, and sense, that Liara was very upset although it was highly unlikely anyone else in the room could pick up on the signs.

"In that case I will take it over," Aria said leaning back as quietly powerful as ever.

"With all due respect Aria this is a military asset of high value we can't let it go to the Terminus systems," Hannah Shepard was pure Alliance at this point even though the Navy, as yet, had no
knowledge of the operation she was first and always an officer of the Systems Alliance.

"The Matriarchs were expecting the Broker and will clearly wish his network be handed over to them which would put it in the hands of the Council," Liara said and continued, "This would ensure the network was used for the good of the whole Galaxy."

"You mean for the good of the Matriarchs and all their meddling plans and don't think that Tevos's loyalty is to the Council or even the Asari Republics. Her loyalty is to the power block and vested interests that gave her the position namely the Matriarchs." Aria spoke with such venom it was palpable in the room.

Before the conversation could get derailed any further Shepard cut in.

"Where can the network be run from, is it mobile?"

"Yes Commander, it's already routed through multiple QEC's, local networks, off the back of state networks, even some news networks. Its untraceable from the other end, it's quite ingenious and…” Kasumi stopped before going into the technical information that she found fascinating, "short answer Shepard is yes it can be run from anywhere. Once you have a new location set up could just cut out this base or keep it as another bounce point."

"The asset will not go to the Alliance or to Omega and certainly not to the Matriarchs. I will be taking the network and use it in support of any and all missions related to the Reaper invasion. Other than that the network will need to run pretty much as it does now with its only purpose to increase the wealth and power of the Shadow Broker."

Liara's voice broke the silence "actually Kasumi and I had a similar solution in mind. I would take over and become the Shadow Broker. My set up on the estate would need to be augmented but all the key elements are present. I would propose to run it with Kasumi and two or three other trusted intelligence specialists."

"Not Shiala…” Shepard said angrily before she had time to think and immediately regretted it.

Liara was now visibly upset but her voice was calm and edged in steel, "certainly not Commander but if, for some reason unknown to me, I have lost your trust and confidence in my capabilities and loyalty I will be happy for someone else to run the network."

"That's not…” before Shepard could try to stumble back from her outburst Hannah Shepard cut across her.

"That will be all specialist," the Admiral said in her best command tone looking at Kasumi who immediately stood saluted and left the room as quickly as she could.

"I have no idea what's been going on between you to since we completed the mission but you need to fix it," Admiral Shepard continued as she stood, "Keep the personal stuff out of uniform Commander."

Shepard felt totally crushed and ashamed, her mother was completely right.

Aria stood also but looking at Liara said, "Shiala is poison Liara, she is dangerous and Shepard is right to want to deal with her as a threat."

"I think they need to take it from here Aria," Hannah said in a conversational tone and much to Shepard's surprise Aria gave a small shrug and shake of the head and followed the Admiral out.
The silence in the room was palpable. And it hung between than for over a minute.

"I need to know what it is that I have done to cause you to be angry with me and shut me out," Liara's voice was so full of sadness Shepard almost couldn't bear to look at her.

"She was trying to kill me Lee and all you did was try to reason with her... it took Aria to get her off me," Shepard said quietly giving voice to the feeling and hurt that she could completely own even if the rest of her turmoil was an unmanageable mess.

Liara stared at Shepard her face moving through a look of shock, horror and then concern. Liara stood and moved towards her bondmate who also stood and when she was within reach Liara pulled her into a hug.

"Oh my darling if that is what you thought no wonder you were so hurt and angry," Liara said softly in her lovers ear happy to feel Shepard's arms holding her just as tight, "I tried briefly to get Shiala to let you go as Garrus did threatening to shoot her but we could both see she was beyond reason. I was afraid of hurting you but in the end I used a biotic pull to get her off you.

And before I could reach your side Aria turned up and picked Shiala up off the floor and that is probably where you came back to consciousness."

"I'm so sorry Lee... I shouldn't have doubted you but..." Shepard didn't want what she was about to say sound like an excuse. She was ashamed of herself, her lack of self-control, but she needed to share this with Liara.

She pulled back a little so she could look into Liara's eyes, "I feel as if I want to kill her Lee, I mean literal rip her limb from limb". Shepard continued speaking before Liara could say anything, "but I don't... I mean I'll put my hand up to being jealous, which I'm also not proud of by the way. But there's no reason... I mean I can't find anywhere that emotion connects in me... dammit this sounds like I'm finally going crazy."

Shepard tried to pull away but Liara held her close.

"Show me Shepard," Liara said bracing herself for the meld and she could see her bondmates reluctance, "all of you Shepard, I love all of you, even the darkness, as you do me."

And with that reminder Shepard nodded and through the meld allowed Liara to experience the feelings she had when she finally came face to face with Shiala.

As they broke apart Liara looked troubled.

"What is it Lee... If I'm honest I feel a bit fucked up," Shepard said anxiously, "what if Shiala was right... what if I'm not really me... if I'm some kind of clone that's got programming locked away ready to..."

Liara once again pulled Shepard into her arms and this time kissed her lover deeply and then said, "You are Shepard, my Shepard, I knew that the first time I saw you, touched you... do you think I would not know from our joining?"

"Well... yeah I guess," Shepard said a smile now creeping across her face, "you certainly know every inch of my body so I guess it's the same with my mind huh."

Shepard was pleased and a little relieved to see Liara return her smile.

"I am sorry Lee... for behaving like... well not talking to you straight away."
"That apology I will accept, promise me in future we will not let arguments fester?"

"I promise," Shepard said this time it was she who pulled Liara into an embrace and kissed her lovingly. Shepard felt Liara respond and desire flashed through her body. She pushed her lover back against the table thrusting her thigh between yielding legs.

Their breath becoming ragged Liara eyes darkening as Shepard began roughly opening her lover's jacket.

They kissed roughly, passionately, long and hard but breaking apart Shepard said hoarsely and out breath, "secure room," then went back to pulling off the Asari's clothes.

Edi responded but much quieter than she normally communicated "room locked Shepard."

Liara reached down and began unbuttoning trousers while Shepard traced kisses on her Asari's neck and down to the exposed collar bones then continued on to her very aroused lovers' breasts.

They were lost in each other and as the meld deepened, tearing away the clothing separating their bodies they gave themselves up to passion, to need, to connection.

Around an hour later they left the conference room looking only slightly disheveled. Before they parted sharing a knowing smile and giving each other a discreet squeeze of the hands as they turned in opposite directions both with work to get finished before they could finally call and end to the day.

Both Shepard and Liara had had a late night. Liara, Kasumi and the rest of the Normandy tech and intel team had been on the Broker base getting to grips with his operation and preparing to switch the centre of operations from the old ship to Liara's private operation on Thessia.

Liara had taken advantage of network contacts and the vast stocks of goods she now controlled to send the equipment needed to upgrade her, by comparison, small intel set up.

They also had a plan for transition. She would return to Thessia and Kasumi would handle the network until the switch.

It was also proving easier than Liara had feared to talk directly to Broker agents. Most of them were ruthless killers, extortionists or the worst kind of trader. Channeling her inner dark side she was every bit the very threatening, very scary, cold and sociopathic boss they were all used to.

Shepard had been working with Miranda, the Admiral and her comms specialists on a rash of communications that had been forward to the ship from the Illusive Man.

There had been another attack on a settlement and they hadn't had any indication that it was coming. They were desperately trying to find patterns in the attacks, similarity of any kind of data around the targets prior to the events. Any anomalies or disturbances that would give them even the slightest trace of the huge Collector ship that seemed to roam at will completely undetected sometimes through very busy space.

But they could find nothing. The consensus was that they just didn't have enough data to compare but to have more would mean more human settlements attacked and lost if the Normandy was not close enough to intervene. They turned in exhausted and disheartened.

Liara heard the familiar sound of the door swooshing open and then close. She stretched luxuriantly and rolled onto her back finally opening her eyes that were still heavy with sleep.

"How do you still look so beautiful with so little sleep," Shepard's voice drifted over to her and she
scooted up the bed to sit with her back against the bed's headboard.

As she sat up the covers fell away and bunched on her waist leaving her naked. Noticing Shepard's eyes taking in the sight, she stretched her arms up into the air and sighed, innocently.

"I… um… brought you tea… for…" Shepard's mind was not on the breakfast tray she had brought up for her lover. She found her pulse quickening and a heat rising and was torn between staying where she was and enjoying the view and moving to the bed.

Just as she began to move Liara said in a sultry voice and pulling the thin sheet up to her chin "oh but Commander surely you have important things to do you have a very busy…"

Reaching the bed Shepard cut her lover off with a kiss using one hand to pull the sheet away from the warm soft body while the other she put behind Liara's head pulling her deeper into the kiss.

Liara wriggled down the bed at the same time reaching for her bondmates belt while Shepard explored soft breasts and said in a whispering, husky voice, "there is nothing on my schedule that is more important than this T'Soni so how about we…"

Edi's voice cut across whatever Shepard was going to say.

"Commander I am sorry to interrupt breakfast," Shepard felt Liara's breasts move against her had as her lover supressed a laugh.

"Really Edi right now… are you and Joker in some kind of competition," Shepard said but still helping Liara strip her out of her clothes.

"You have a meeting with Matriarch T'Loak and Admiral Shepard," Edi carried on, "you are also required for the meeting Doctor T'Soni."

"Shit, fuck… is that the time," Shepard said more loudly than she intended, "thank you Edi we'll be right down."

Shepard looked longingly at her lover and with a deep sigh said, "dammit we'll have to pick this up later," and with a final brief kiss she stood up and started to re-dress.

Liara threw the rest of the bedclothes off and got out of bed on the opposite side to Shepard.

Standing naked she said in a very coy voice, "oh and I thought nothing was more important than," Liara put her hands on her hips and finished, "this."

Shepard moaned and felt a rush of blood to her head but before she could answer Liara turned and walked with hips swaying towards the bathroom.

"Just remember Commander," she said over her shoulder at the doorway, "I will be wet for you all through the meeting."

"That is not fair T'Soni", Shepard shouted after her disappearing lover a smile tracing her lips.

"I don't see how you can keep this quiet," Aria said lounging on the sofa as if she was in Afterlife.

"No I think it'll work," Hannah said sitting slightly less informally on the opposite sofa, "a lot of people already think the 'Broker' is a group rather than one individual. This will play right into that. We destroyed one head of a multiple headed organisation. And it's only needed as a cover anyway if it ever leaks out what the mission was here."
"My estate commandos are completely loyal and the merc's I brought from Omega are only those from my inner team," Aria said with surety.

"You can be sure our T'Soni commandos are equally loyal and I know Shepard's crew hold bigger secrets than this," Liara said, "Our only problem is Shiala."

Shepard was surprised and pleased as she had been wondering how to broach the issue without opening wounds.

Aria smiled and in an imperious voice oozing danger she said, "I am so glad you have come to your senses please let me... deal with that little problem for you."

Liara gave the Queen of Omega a look of infuriated frustration, "thank you Aria but we don't need anything more drastic than briefing her on our 'Shadow Broker is group' story and then keeping her away from our operations. I had thought it would be a bad idea anyway for her to live on the private estate, close to me, given her... um feelings," she looked nervously at Shepard who responded with a couple of nods of the head.

"Well I want an assurance that any direct threats to Omega..." Aria started but was interrupted by Liara.

"You mean you," Liara said a small smile playing around her lips.

"I am Omega," Aria said expansively as she always did when she made that statement but she actually gave Liara a warm smile.

They all laughed and Shepard said playfully, "she's got you there Lee."

"So it would seem... but of course any direct threat to Omega," Liara said with a nod towards Aria, "the Systems Alliance Navy, Council or Thessia," Shepard made to cut in but the new Shadow Broker continue quickly.

"Any and all information relating to the Reapers and Collectors will go directly to Shepard and any threats to the stability of Council governments, and the Krogan people, will also get directed to Shepard as a Council Spectre."

"I'm content with that," Hannah Shepard said and Aria nodded her agreement.

"Good now how quickly can we get everything finished up here," Shepard asked but before Liara could answer Edi cut in.

"I have an urgent call coming in from Cerberus headquarters directly from the Illusive Man," Edi continued, "ready for you in the QEC Commander."

Shepard's face darkened with anger and as she stood and headed for the door she said in a voice edged with cold steel, "Let's see what the murdering bastard wants this time, and I wish everyone would just call him Harper."

The conversation with Harper had left her feeling sour and moody. She knew he was a necessary evil and that her working with him was sanctioned at the highest level within the Alliance Navy.

But she would still rather be hunting him and wouldn't rest until he was dead and his terrorist organisation burned to ashes.

Liara was waiting for her as Shepard stepped out of the comms room. She brushed her fingers lightly
across her troubled lovers' cheek.

"They've tracked down what they think might be a dead Collector ship," Shepard said taking Liara's hand between her own and looking down, "it sounds a bit suspect to be honest but... I have to leave now," Shepard looked up into her bondmate's face as she finished.

"It is alright Shepard I know you will always come back to me," Liara said gently.

The previous two hours had been a frenzy of activity. But all personnel were now in the right place and Shiala had been transferred to Aria's ship which had arrived during the night.

Aria was going to take Liara, Hannah and all other estate personnel back to Thessia.

Shepard had shared mission details with Miranda and Joker and would be assembling her team for a briefing once they were underway.

As she walked into the main control centre on the Broker's ship she paused watching Liara who was standing in front of a huge bank of screens scrolling through interfaces and discussing something with Kas who was by her side.

"You two look right at home with all that stuff," Shepard said walking into the room and smiling as the two turned to face her.

"Good luck Shepard I'll see you on your return," Kas said with a smile as she walked past on her way to the door.

Liara moved to meet her and as they came face to face they both instinctively reached out for each other's hands. Shepard's eyes were focussed on the soft yet strong blue hands warm against her own.

"I do like you in that cap but it does deny me access to your eyes at certain time," Liara said softly an edge of sadness in her voice.

Shepard smiled and letting go of one of Liara's hands she whipped her baseball cap off and threw it onto a nearby console.

"With everything that's been happening I haven't had the chance to ask you if you're sure about this Lee. Being the Shadow Broker it's going to be dirty business a lot of the time... I'm glad you don't have to do it from here... don't want you turning into some crazy power mad recluse."

Liara laughed, "I know I could sit here all day and change the face of the Galaxy," she moved away a little sweeping her hand in the direction of certain consoles as she spoke, "start a war here, depose a leader there, fix the price of any commodity over there."

Shepard shook her head slowly, "I'll miss not having you on the Normandy with me."

"I know my love but I also know you are also happy to see me safe and away from danger," Liara moved back and drew her sad looking lover into a hug, "and we will need to talk about that at some point as when everything is set up I will be able to re-join you on the Normandy."

"I'm so torn Lee, I want you with me not just... you know...," Shepard actually looked a little sheepish and Liara filed away her amusement for another time, "but because I trust you and I'll miss you from my crew and my fire team you are a great solder and officer."

Liara felt a flush of pride spread through her, to be considered by this consummate professional highly skilled and trained warrior a valuable member of her team was a real honour.
"Thank you Shepard that means a lot to me," Liara leaned in the kiss her bondmate and continued after they broke apart, "I can make a real difference with this Shepard; we'll have access to intel, resources that we would not have if anyone else controlled this."

They locked each other's eyes, held each other tight and kissed long slow deep. A kiss full of love, a kiss that would have to last them until the next time.

Breaking apart Shepard breathed in deeply and held the scent of her lover in her mind turning away she picked up her cap and pulled it down low over her eyes.

"Don't break anything while I'm away," Shepard said in a forced light tone as she neared the door.

"And don't you put a scratch on our beautiful ship," Liara said as lightly as she could.

Watching Shepard walk quickly away down the corridor Liara could not stem the tears and without thinking placed a hand on her belly where their child was growing.
A/N A reminder that affectionate terms for Asari parents are Asam (birth parent and occasionally used for very strong co-parent/child relationships also), Yasam (co-parent non DNA contributor), Rasam (DNA donor non co-parent)

Sita-kamala is an Asari endearment which roughly translates to purest love, beloved and indicates strong often lifelong love (only ever used by and for Asari relationships)

The name Benezia when spoken in Asari sounds like Ven-ehsh-he-ah (the Asari language has tonal qualities)

The Mansion, Thessia

Liara was making her way to the medical centre located in one of the ground floor wings of the large house.

Less than an hour earlier she had landed at her private residence where she had barely stayed long enough to pick up her son and leave instructions for the incoming supplies.

She wanted to see her father who was still under medical care and in bed which told her how badly hurt Aethyta must be. The similarity between the old commando and her bondmate in some things was uncanny and that included their refusal to be kept in a med bay despite the severity of any injuries they may have incurred.

Liara had said her goodbyes to Shepard's mother who on landing had headed to her own shuttle to head back to her duties. Liara had grown very fond of Hannah Shepard and they were developing a strong relationship independent of their shared love for Shepard junior.

Hannah Shepard had given Liara a very warm parting hug and they had agreed to keep in touch regularly.

Her farewell with Aria had been a much stranger affair. There was no time to think about it now though as she had reached the entrance to the medical centre. Her two estate personal body guards stayed at the main doors and would stop anyone else coming in.

Liara still felt very uncomfortable with the amount of staff that now surrounded her and the commando guard that was never far away felt the strangest of all.

The doctor met her before she went into Aethyta's private room.

"Lady Liara," the healer said, "Matriarch T'Arani was very seriously injured by the blast and suffered extensive internal injuries. She is still not completely out of danger although I'm confident the worst is over."

The Asari Doctors face and tone were serious and Liara was grateful for the honest appraisal of her father's condition.

Liara nodded and then entered Aethyta's room and tried not to show the shock she experienced when she saw how ill her normally robust father looked.

Aethyta's eyes flickered open and she smiled, "ah now don't be mad at Shepard for not telling you I
got a bit beaten up," the usually powerful gruff voice sounded strained and thin.

Liara tried her best to keep the tears from her eyes and wanted to keep the mood light but her will failed her.

"Oh Goddess I nearly lost you," Liara said tears on her cheeks and her voice breaking, "I could not bear to lose you so soon after getting you back."

"Aw come on little wing, I'm not going anywhere," Aethyta said squeezing the hand that had slipped into her own.

"Baby suits you," Aethyta continued looking at the sleeping figure nestling in the young Asari's arm, "did I tell you how proud of you I am."

"You always make me feel cherished Asan," she used the affectionate term and kissed the back of her father's hand.

"Well do something for me would you?" Aethyta said her voice a little stronger.

"Anything," Liara said eyes now dry but still holding tight to the old commando's hand.

"In the name of Athame's tits tell me about the fight," her father said, "I'm bored out of my wits and I'd kill for a drink if I wasn't as week as a varren pup."

Liara smiled and settled in to give the story its full due more than happy to be able to amuse and entertain her father who had nearly died protecting everyone she loved.

By the time Shepard got to the CIC, helmet in hand, they had jumped to FTL. With the speed they needed to land the shuttle it had hit the deck hard and slammed forward into the maintenance area. Everyone on the deck had kept clear as they knew the away team were coming in hot.

"Nice flying Joker," Shepard said recognising that until they jumped out he had been avoiding taking hits from the Collector plasma beam, "status Edi?"

"Systems are secure they did not breach Normandy safety wire firewalls although the attack was a critical threat and reached a margin of 92% success before I was able to purge it," Edi was her usual controlled self but during the virus attack she had sounded stressed.

"Did you manage to mine data from their systems when you pushed back and took control of some of their systems?" Shepard asked remembering the dire situation on the ship when it sprang its trap.

If Edi had not managed to defeat the attack on the Normandy and take control of some of the Collector ships functions she and her team would never had gotten off the ship.

"Yes Shepard we now know how to breach the Omega four relay and I am confident I also have the location of the Collector base."

"Good we'll have a tactical briefing in two hours," Shepard said starting to study some of the data they had captured, "but first I am going to speak to Harper."

Shepard's tone dropped to a growl and leaving her helmet at the tactical station she had been using she made her way to the comms room.

The QEC fired up and before her eyes digital blocks swirled into shape and behind his usual stunning backdrop of a dwarf red star sat The Illusive Man as he had styled himself.
But for Shepard he was just one of the most successful terrorists that humanity had given birth to and that humanity was now inflicting on the rest of the Galactic community.

"Ah Shepard I see the mission was successful and the data from the ship looks interesting," he said taking a break to pull on the cigarette that threw wisps of smoke around his face.

Despite the fact he was only a collection of digital imagery and light years away Shepard stepped forward and punched an accusing finger at the seated figure.

"You fucking bastard it was a trap and you knew it was a trap," she said her voice edged with fury and hard as steel, "if you just want me dead Harper if you now regret bringing me back as I'm not going to be your puppet why don't we meet and you can do it yourself?"

"Shepard at some point you will trust me when I say I didn't want to bring back a copy or a puppet. Humanity needs you its greatest soldier and hero… we may never see eye to eye," he barely paused at Shepard's interjection of "got that right" at his comment and continued.

"If I had told you it was a trap you would have acted differently. You may possibly even have considered it not worth the risk to you team or your crew. Perhaps even deciding to go in alone and thus increase the risk of your failure and loss.

I'm sorry but we needed an opportunity to find out how to get through the Omega 4 relay or we will not be able to stop the Collectors. Is that what you want Shepard? For more human colonies to be destroyed and innocent civilians taken and experimented on?" He drew another long pull on his cigarette making the tip burn red.

Despite her anger and her hatred for him he was right and that made her more annoyed.

"I would have found a way and with better intel we could have made better preparation, we barely got out," she said in a cold tone. She wasn't even going to grace his questions with answers he was just trying to push her buttons.

"Well that might have been true Shepard but you were successful as I knew you would be and that takes us one step closer to ending this threat to humanity," he stubbed out his cigarette and said with finality, "I look forward to hearing you plan for moving forward."

With that Harper cut the connection.

"What happens if she manages to destroy the Collector base and then decides to use all the assets you gave her to come after you?" The educated voice, with the hint of an antipodean accent, came from the person sitting in a chair to Harpers left.

Harper picked up his drink and swilled its contents around a little before taking a drink.

"Shepard will destroy the Collectors even if it's the last thing she does. It is very probably a one way trip, but that's who she is and that's why I brought her back."

"And what if she makes it against all the odds?" The quiet voice questioned again.

"Then I'm afraid the galaxy will once again have to mourn the death of one of its greatest heroes. I have a human asset on the ship who will make sure she does not make it back alive."

"You're not talking about my daughter are you? Because you and I both know that she is compromised," this time the voice had a harder edge and the visitor sat forward in his chair.
Harper lit up another cigarette and smiled as he spoke, "you needn't worry about that Henry I have a failsafe plan that involves the ship's AI. Now, why don't we get down to business."

"Fucking bastard… just one chance… that's all I need," Shepard was shouting at the empty space in front of her after the call disconnected.

Steadying herself and realising for the first time her armour was covered with slime and fluids from the fight on the Collector base she said quietly heading for the door, "the first time I'm in the same place you are Harper it'll be your blood I'll be wearing on my armour and that's a promise."

After she had removed her armour and had a shower Shepard still had some time before her meeting.

"Edi are we within range of a comm buoy for real time connection to Thessia?" Shepard asked her ever present ship AI.

"Negative Shepard although we have adjusted course since our original jump and are heading for the Citadel we are still a long way out from the high speed comm link network. We will be in range using a QEC link in one point five Galactic Mean Days."

They had been and still were at the farthest reaches of known space and a long way from Citadel space. The journey to the Citadel would take three GMD’s and to Thessia another two days on top of that.

"Ok Edi thanks."

Shepard sat down in front of her comm link and decided to send a recorded message back to Thessia which would get there in about twelve Galactic mean hours.

"Hey babe, sorry this is recorded but we're so far out it will still be day after tomorrow before I can get you on the QEC.

This is just to let you know it went," Shepard stopped herself.

She was going to say it went well, not problems, no injuries. But that wasn't the deal she had with her bondmate. And just because Liara wasn't in the room to give her the 'I can tell you're not telling me everything' look, it didn't mean she should be any less honest.

Shepard sighed heavily and continued, "It went sideways and to nearly hell. In fact for a while it did."

Shepard told her everything she could remember about the mission from the eerie guts of the huge ship to the Collector bodies. Their discovery that confirmed, as the visions appeared to have shown, the Collectors were re-purposed Prothean's left as Galactic caretakers for the Reapers.

Being lured into the very heart of the seemingly offline and empty ship and the attempt to infiltrate the Normandy systems while at the same time stranding Shepard and her team on a control platform.

That if it hadn't been for Edi's amazing processing power and her impressive anti hacking, virus and malware protection they would have been lost and the Normandy with them.

Shepard knew she would not have gotten off that ship if Edi had not also infiltrated the Collector ships controls and literally opened doors for them so they could get back to the shuttle.

But they had gained vital intel and the missing piece of the puzzle about getting through the Omega 4 relay and surviving.
"They also use a really advanced form of IFF device which we'll have to duplicate or by some miracle steal one…” Shepard trailed off and just thought about how impossible that sounded.

She sat up a little straighter and squared her shoulders for the next piece of information, "and when Edi analysed the signature of the Collector ship she found it was a match for the one that…," she paused, "the one that destroyed the original Normandy," Shepard still felt emotion rise in her as she thought of the crew she lost, her broken ship and the impact on Liara.

"So they seem very keen to get their hands on me or try to take my ship from under me… again…” Shepard thought for a moment, "but I don't want you getting to stressed about it my love. It just means I know where to find them when I finally get around to blowing the fuck out of them."

Shepard realised she'd been recording her message for some time and needed to head to her meeting.

Softening her look and bringing her beautiful bondmates face into her mind she said, "I should go, but I'm thinking about you… miss you… love you." With a final smile Shepard ended the recording.

"Send it straight away Edi triple encryption," as she spoke she grabbed her cap and pulling it low over her eyes headed for the door of her cabin.

Liara woke with a start turning to check on the baby who was nestled in the large bed with her between two pillow's to keep him safe.

They had both had a very disturbed night. She had received an incoming recorded vid call from Shepard just as she was getting into bed. The news was at once a relief while at the same time chilling.

How easily her lover’s life could have been snatched away. In the back of both their minds that reality was recognised. There was no guarantee that they would triumph, that they would even get as far as fighting the Reapers considering the forces already in the Galaxy ranged against them.

She leaned on her elbow and looked down on the child still sleeping next to her and stroked the soft cheek.

"Is it unfair on our children to bring them into what is coming," she said softly "yet I cannot now imagine being without you." She felt the love for the little being flow through her.

"But I must still confront the women who brought you into being," Liara sighed.

She knew that Shepard's mother had all but forgiven Lawson and with good reason. She had brought back not only Shepard but also created a grandson. And Liara felt the same way.

Lawson was a genius and she was every bit as good and in many ways a much greater scientist and geneticist than her father. With the Brokers resources Liara had access to plenty of information about Henry Lawson and his self-absorbed self-centered work creating children in his own image.

The baby stirred beside her and she stroked his cheek again and began softly singing an Asari baby calming song. It was too early for him to wake yet after such a difficult night.

Liara couldn't sleep waking fitfully from dreams of the first Normandy's destruction and it seemed something was also troubling the babies sleep as well.

"You are not unusual amongst your species little one," she smiled.

Humanity had long since perfected the art of gene manipulation, slicing and invitro-fertilisation
creation of offspring, if you had the credits of course. There was a thriving economy for surrogate females hosting someone else's baby.

The technology even existed for tank bred humans but there were huge legal restrictions and a moral repugnance for breeding humans in this way.

Although the Asari in effect did exactly the same things biologically that humans had to do technically, with the exception of using another Asari to carry their own offspring, this was always with consent.

It was one of the two absolute taboos in Asari culture to take genetic imprints and to enter another's mind without consent. And that was why Liara was absolutely unforgiving of Miranda Lawson's actions whilst still loving and accepting the result.

The taboos were broken of course Asari's were not perfect; Aria came into Liara's mind with that thought and then she began to mull over again their parting on their return to Thessia.

It was in Aria's private quarters and they were alone.

"Liara don't let the Matriarchs draw you into their planning and scheming," Aria paused obviously thinking about how to phrase what she was going to say, "they play a very long and intricate game that brings nothing but misery to those carrying out their instructions."

"My mother was one of the Matriarchs, Aria, and as far as I know they have always worked for the good of the Galaxy," Liara wondered what Aria was actually trying to tell her.

"And she paid with her life… I don't just mean in the end," Aria's mask of coolness and distance slipped a little but she continued, "all the lies and the absence that you experienced growing up Liara you can blame on their constant endeavors to keep the Asari as the most powerful and influential species in the known Galaxy."

Liara stayed silent she could see and sense Aria was trying to be honest with her, but she struggled to know how her Yasam would know any of this being completely outside Asari society and certainly politics for most of her life.

"You will see Liara and perhaps…" Aria looked as if she was trying to make a decision, seemed to change her demeanor and continue more lightly, "but what would I know spending all my time on Omega."

It was what happened next that Liara found the most disconcerting. Aria pulled her into a hug and Liara felt a huge sense of safety resting her chin on the tall Asari's shoulder and feeling strong arms around her.

"Let me show you something," Aria said her voice quiet.

Liara nodded understanding perfectly what Aria was asking and a moment later a light meld joined the two Asari.

Liara felt a rush of love but not just from Aria but also the strong presence of her mother. Then a fragment of a memory holding a tiny baby in her arms and Aria's feeling of love flowed across the bridge between them even more intensely.

"I would never have left you or Benezia if it had been my choice Liara," Aria said as the meld faded.

"Then why did you," Liara said quietly now leaning her head against her Yasam's neck.
Aria gently pulled away and when they were standing facing each other and when she spoke she sounded both sad and angry.

"It is complicated and I am not ready to tell you… it may never be time."

They had finished their goodbyes quickly after that despite Liara's unwillingness to just leave the conversation where it was.

Liara's attention was drawn back to her son whose eyes were open and she leaned in and kissed his forehead.

"Everything is well little one, she is on her way home," Liara said as ran her thumb gently up and down in the middle of the tiny forehead in a soothing manner.

The baby responded to the news with happy gurgling and legs kicks for his delighted audience.

Aria looked at the large house in front of her. Four floors, traditional cream white rounded polished stone with tall windows. Angular designs picked out in strips of gold that caught the dying afternoon light decorated the huge building.

She knew this house, she realised she knew these gardens. Turning away from the house she began running through the completely empty grounds.

'Why is no one here,' she thought fleetingly remembering that they were never empty.

No you had to seek out solitude, or in her case, privacy.

She reached the edge of the green field and carried on down the bank, onto the path by the stream and around the corner.

A tall slim figure stood watching a small waterfall that cascaded down the cliffs that formed the other bank.

Aria knew that figure and willed the Asari to turn around. She wanted to shout out but her voice was still in her throat and her breathing shallow but not from her running.

Something made Aria stop just a little further than arms reach away. Every fibre of her body wanted to keep moving, her arms wanted to reach out, but she was frozen.

The maiden turned, smiled and opened her arms and in soft voice said, "I have missed you my sitakamala will you make me wait even longer before I can feel you close."

Aria closed the ground between then in two strides and wrapped her arms around the young Asari taking in the familiar scent. She held on tight feeling as if her life depended on never letting go.

After a few moments Aria pulled back a little and brought her hands up to cup the face now looking intently into her own.

With tears stinging her eyes and a catch in her chest Aria said almost reverently, "it's you it's really you."

"Of course it's me," the Asari said with a glowing smile, "who else would be waiting for you in our secret place."

As one they brought their lips together and Aria felt a rush of tender love mixed with grief and loss.
When they broke from their kiss Aria traced more kisses over the young Asari's cheeks.

Aria looked into the face of the Asari but not the face of a maiden any longer. The face that looked back at the Queen of Omega now was that of a Matriarch but Aria hardly noticed the difference.

"Zia I have missed you so much," Aria spoke quietly "but this is a dream… it can only be a dream," Aria's voice almost broke with emotion.

"It is and it is not," Benezia T'Soni said, "I have missed you so much and I can't believe how foolish I was to leave you."

This time Benezia was kissing Aria's face and neck.

"I would never let myself dream of you… I knew I would be undone by it… why am I doing this now…" Aria spoke almost to herself despite wrapping her arms around the Asari standing tight against her.

"And you brought our family together," Benezia said looking into the pain filled eyes of her lover, "I believe it is that which has let you have lower your barriers a little, and let me in."

Aria felt confusion and then anger and stepped out of Benezia's arms and said in a heated voice, "let you in… no I won't do it not again," she turned towards the water and continued.

"You promised we would finally be together after we gave our lives in service to…" Aria almost spat out the next word, "Thessia… but you left… you left me you left Liara for what…" Aria turned back to the still silent Asari.

"For what Zia... I'm done with this; I don't need this… this… poor attempt at closure…"

Benezia stepped forward and put her hands on Aria's shoulders and spoke with urgency, "no, Aria don't block me out not yet… you have to wake up… you all have to wake up…"

"Mmm need to wake up…" Aria was disorientated but as she became more awake she recognised the familiar surroundings of her office in Afterlife.

She sat up more in the arm chair and tried to rub the knot in her neck away. Standing up she took a deep breath and fixed herself a drink and moving to sit behind her desk.

Aria had never allowed herself to dream about Benezia once it was clear she had taken up with Saren and even the sporadic contact that had existed stopped between them.

She was angry with the weakness that had created the dream. But something about the experience didn't feel right but before she could give it any more thought the door buzzed.

'It's past, all in the past… she's gone so just get the fuck on with what's next,' Aria thought and her mood was an uncomfortable combination of deep sadness and anger.

Citadel, Dock 422

Shepard exited the lift onto the dock which was a frenzy of activity. She was confronted with a slightly stressed looking executive officer who had a handful of data pads.

"Commander I'm afraid we are going to have to store some of the supplies we're loading on the hangar deck and throughout the ship," Miranda handed one of the data pads to Shepard as they walked together to the rear of the Normandy.
"Do the best you can Miranda," Shepard said as she looked at the still enormous amount of freight sitting on the dock waiting to be loaded onto the ship through the hangar bay doors that were wide open.

Shepard continued as they both walked onto the ship, "but we need to be battle ready there are confirmed pirate sightings in the vicinity of our destination."

"Of course Commander," Miranda answered, "I'm putting the medical team in one of the lounges we're putting up some temporary bunks. It's the best we can do."

"I'm sure you'll make them as comfortable as we can," Shepard said exchanging a salute with her XO and heading to the lift at the rear of the deck.

Miranda turned her attention back to the job in hand and as Shepard hit the lift control panel for the CIC the distinctive accented voice drifted across the deck, "no not there, they need to go up to the med bay."

With a swoosh Shepard was plunged into quiet solitude for the twenty seconds it took for the lift to reach the CIC deck.

Although not quite as frenetic as the dock and the hanger deck the CIC was quietly, efficiently busy, and Shepard made her way to her tactical station to get up to speed with their preparations.

Around two hours later Shepard stood in the Normandy's conference room with her team sitting around the table and already in conversation about their mission and discussing the data already to hand.

"Commander we have exited the relay and are entering FTL. Estimated time to arrival in orbit around Urksone is thirty six standard hours, so long as we don't hit weather," Joker's laconic voice said over ship comms.

"Thanks Joker." The weather Joker had referred to was some heavy nova activity on their route which they were only making the smallest of detours to avoid given they needed to reach their destination as quickly as possible.

"Shepard we now have a connection to Doctor T'Soni and Doctor Goto on Thessia," Edi chimed in the QEC flickering into life at the far end of the room.

Liara and Kasumi appeared to be sitting at a desk and as Shepard took her place at the opposite end of the long conference table silence fell in the room.

"So Ish can you get us all on the same page," Shepard said although her eyes were on her bondmate who she had only had the briefest of conversations with since the Normandy’s arrival on the Citadel.

The Salarian spoke quickly in short bursts as was the mark of his species, "Eezo factory explosion on Urksone, similarities to explosion on Taetrus Commander. Won't be able to confirm without direct data, discussed with Doctor Goto who agrees."

All eyes moved to look at Kasumi who began speaking, "there were reports of periodic loss of comms from the planet ever since it had been settled. This was also the case with Taetrus when we dug deeper for any anomalies. Both systems have regional gates on the edge of the known Galaxy. It's thin Commander but as you were in a position to investigate anyway we thought it was worth it."

Shepard had been half way through a meeting with the Council when the news had come in about a massive set of explosions on the Asari industrial world of Urksone. Even before the call from Liara
and Kas Shepard had volunteered to get medical supplies and personnel to the planet as the Normandy was by far the fastest ship in a position to do so.

"Although it is an Asari factory planet vast swathes are leased out to Corporations under license. There is a reasonable level of security planet side, although mostly individual corporation security and orbital monitoring of all traffic.

There were reports of Batarian raiders in orbit just before the explosion but this may be completely unrelated as it is a border system and this is not uncommon." Liara said and continued, "There are large numbers of Batarian's on the planet along with Human, Salarian and Turian workers."

"Well we were going anyway but this makes it more than a disaster relief mission," Shepard said looking at the latest incoming data from the blast site, "we are looking at a mass casualty event like Taetrus and its still hot."

"Sounds like fun, I hear the pollution isn't quite as bad this time of year and the swamps are a must visit," Garrus said in an amused tone.

Grunt sounded miserable when he spoke "but no enemies to fight," then he brightened, "unless we can find who blew it up then we fight?"

Shepard smiled at the young warrior, "Oh yeah then we fight. So what about the location and where is the nearest working hospital?"

The meeting continued for another hour but when it drew to a close Shepard stood up and said.

"Can Liara and I have the room please," she moved closer to her bondmates' digital projection and when the room was empty and Kas had left Shepard continued, "looks like I'm not getting back for a while."

Liara gave her lover a smile but with a wistful voice said, "Well you do have a galaxy to protect but I am missing you in my bed Shepard. It is… almost uncomfortable," she finished a little embarrassed.

Shepard grinned and suppressed a chuckle which elicited a mock stern look from Liara who continued, "oh it is very funny for you but this part of my biology was something I did not expect."

"Well if it's any consolation according to Aria your mother was only… um…" Shepard had no idea what term Asari used for the enhanced sexual need that came with the first flush of pregnancy.

"The term you are searching for is Ta'pas," Liara couldn't help but smile, "and yes I am aware that Benezia was very active in this way for a Luna cycle."

Shepard's grin returned well if it's any help I miss you like hell and I will be pleased to do all I can to help relieve any unpleasantness on my return."

Liara spoke more softly and looked lovingly at Shepard, "and for your information Ta'pas only ever occurs between Asari so that is another first for us my love."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment feeling their connection even across the vast distance of space.

With a deep sigh Shepard said, "I should go," with a quick look over her shoulder to the conference table she said with another smirk, "you know I'd jump you right now if you were in this room with me."
Liara looked a little puzzled, "I'll show you when I get back," Shepard finished.
A/N For the purposes of our Galaxy the FTL comm buoy network extends along all major trade and routes and wider to cover the Citadel races military needs. But further out, around the edges of the 'known' Galaxy and in many parts of the Terminus systems the FTL buoys are replaced with tight beam buoys/satellites which have varying degrees of time delay although they do utilise relays where possible.

Normandy, landed on the Planet Urksone

They had been on the planet for over twelve hours. The death and casualty numbers were not as high as the toll on Taetrus, and thankfully this was not deemed an appropriate environment for children, but they were significant enough.

Shepard had set most of the crew to help with search and rescue. They had also supported the medical personnel to get the mobile hospital up and running which was oversubscribed as soon as it opened its doors.

The site of the second blast was where Shepard, Mordin and Miranda headed. The chemical factory that had stood on the spot was all but obliterated along with the three hundred workers who had been on shift.

"Are we getting any readings at all," Shepard asked through her suit comms the contamination making full hard suits a sensible option.

"No unlike the previous site it would appear the blast destroyed completely whatever was on or close to this position," Miranda said still taking scans of the area.

"Would be better to get samples Shepard, may be able find some trace of what was here," Mordin said taking readings on his omni tool from the drone he had dispatched.

"Ok we'll get a proper survey team out here but we'll need most of the ground team to continue working on search and recovery until the cavalry arrive," Shepard was referring to the two Corporations who had suffered the explosions own emergency services. There was only the barest of Citadel support for Corporation owned planets and the Normandy had delivered all that was coming.

Shepard had taken a break from working alongside her team at the Eezo factory blast site and was waiting in the conference room for the Corporate Inspector that had arrived shortly after the Normandy had landed.

Of course Shepard was doing her own investigation but she wanted to take advantage of this experts' point of view.

"Thank you for briefing me in person," Shepard said in a conversational tone offering a handshake to her visitor, "its Inspector Betress?"

"Yes Commander, I've been a safety and accident inspector for over fifteen years. And when a Spectre asks you to meet with them it is not wise to refuse," the human woman was a surprise to Shepard as neither company were human owned. Shepard sensed a nervousness that belied the woman's confident demeanour.

Shepard smiled, "can I get you a drink? It must have been tough making any kind of assessment
given the amount of damage?"

"Well I wouldn't say no to strong drink, human if you have it," the woman sat down where Shepard had indicated and after placing a drink down for her guest Shepard continued.

"Have you managed to come to any preliminary conclusions?" Shepard asked already knowing what the answer was going to be.

"Nothing preliminary about my findings Commander, it's an Eezo factory you only have to put the wrong level of voltage through and you have yourself a very nasty explosion. All the equipment maintenance records were up to date. The data feeds right up to the moment of the explosion all looked normal so the Company isn't at fault. An accident pure and simple," the Inspector finished speaking with an air of finality.

Shepard thought for a moment and decided to go for the questioning approach, "Altai Mining Works have a very solid safety record and let's face it they've been processing Eezo longer than humanity even knew it existed," Shepard could see the woman's discomfort and pressed on, "their CEO Liyasha Losine is adamant it was not an accident."

"Well that's the Asari for you nothing is ever straightforward," she stood up and was beginning to look extremely agitated, "thank you for the drink but I really must be getting on I have a report to write."

Shepard stood up and gestured to the door, "of course but I am quite surprised you could come to a conclusion this quickly given the extent of the damage."

It was a parting shot that wouldn't have any effect on the outcome but Shepard wanted the woman to know she was not buying the cover up.

The inspector left without responding and Shepard was left to wonder whether this was an insurance fraud or corporate sabotage that she had inadvertently wandered into rather than anything Reaper connected.

Eighteen hours later Shepard led her ground crew up the Normandy hanger ramp and onto the ship. They were all exhausted and filthy dirty from their searching through burned and destroyed buildings for survivors.

The residual heat from the explosion made using thermal imaging drones difficult and when they found signatures that could indicate a trapped survivor they had to manually dig them out.

The mix of eezo, chemicals and heat made it a dangerous environment that could spark into flames or small explosions given the wrong combination of factors.

Shepard’s survey team had completed their search of the secondary site and were processing the results in the Lab but Mordin had given her a preliminary report an hour earlier. There had definitely been some form of Prothean device buried deep under the chemical factory.

She stood at the top of the ramp and gave nods to her crew members as they walked past her.

"Well done," Shepard said and followed it up with, "you saved lives today good job."

It had been bloody. They found more body parts than they did survivors but without the Normandy more would have died without treatment not just from their blast and burn injuries but the toxic poisoning from both the eezo and chemical factories.
And they had pulled out twenty survivors although not all of them would survive.

When all her crew were back on board she followed them to the lifts but her first stop was the CIC rather than the hot shower, food and rest which is what she had ordered for her ground teams.

"Joker get us off this rock and set course for Thessia," Shepard said placing her helmet down next to the tactical station she was standing alongside.

"Commander you need to get some food and some rest as well," Miranda said as she came to stand next to Shepard.

Shepard smiled, "aw come on Miranda you built me stronger than that."

"I'm more concerned with your lack of sleep Commander," Miranda said quietly so other crew members couldn't hear.

Shepard gave her a nod, "yeah I'll just catch up with Mordin, make my report to the Council…"

"You have an incoming call from Councillor Tevos Commander," Edi's voice rang out across the CIC.

Shepard allowed herself a laconic smile, "it seems I'll start with my report to the Council," she said as she turned and began walking to the conference room.

There was chaos in the streets that was echoed in her body. She was running against a tide of people surging towards her. They were Protheans and she felt their fear, their desperation. Shepard kept running and only barely recognising she was Prothean as well.

"Kara'seet," Shepard shouted against the noise of explosions and the hollow bellowing tones from the Reapers she could see towering into the sky around her.

"Where are you going get to the shuttles…" shouted a voice she recognised but that was quickly swept away with the force of crowd. Shepard held to her course then turned into the next building running through the laboratory to the rear.

"Kara'seet," Shepard's voice was desperate she had to find….

"Over here my love," a soft a familiar voice called her to a small ante room.

Shepard rushed up to Liara and pulled her into an embrace.

"We have to get out to the shuttles," Shepard said with urgency and beginning to move away but holding fast to Liara's hand.

"No my love it is over," Liara said sadly, "we have done all we can to prepare the next cycle…” Shepard turned to look at her mate.

"No, no it's not we can continue our research we are so close…”

Liara drew Shepard into her arms and pulled them both to the ground.

"You know we will not get away from the facility or off the planet, we were finally betrayed like all the other projects," Liara kissed her lovers lips gently.

"Not all Kara'seet, not all," Shepard said wistfully relaxing into that safe embrace.
"Let us hope not. But we will not be turned into those corrupted creations of the Reapers," Liara pulled back a little to look into Shepard's eyes.

"This room is rigged with a thermal nuclear device there will be nothing for them to re-animate," Liara showed Shepard the device she was holding in her hand, "they will find the beacons and the technology we have hidden. The next cycle will know what is coming and we will have our revenge."

Shepard nodded and wrapped her hand around her lovers and the two Protheans touched foreheads.

"I will love you for eternity," Shepard said.

"For all eternity's," Liara replied tears in her eyes.

Shepard leaned in and kissed Liara deeply as they both tightened their fingers on the switch.

"NO" Shepard shouted and sat up even before she was awake.

"Is anything wrong Shepard," Edi's calm voice helping Shepard to orientate herself.

"Mmm no Edi I think I must have… just a bad… how long have I been asleep," Shepard looked around now and saw her armour on the floor. She came up to change ready for her meeting with the team.

"Just over .50 of a galactic mean hour," Edi said and Shepard noticed her ship's AI was trying to be more conversational rather than giving her the time to the third decimal point.

"Ok gather the team for the briefing and get the FTL comm connection up to Liara," as Shepard was speaking she threw on sweat pants and a hoody over her vest.

"Yes Shepard."

Shepard sat nursing a mug of coffee at the far end of the conference table in her usual place so she could look directly at the FTL comm feed from Thessia which carried her bond mate.

Around the table Mordin, Miranda, Ish and three other members of the science and research teams sat in silence most reading data pads.

The feed sparked into life and Shepard felt a strange sense of relief seeing her bondmate alive, well and safe. The dream had been terrifyingly real and Shepard still felt the shock of the events she seemed to have experienced.

"Thank you for joining us Doctor," Shepard said as usual keeping things professional and being rewarded with a warm smile from her bondmate, "Mordin let's hear it."

Shepard had had a very preliminary briefing from Mordin and tended to agree with his analysis and was interested to see if they had agreement across the team.

"Thank you Shepard," Mordin said in his usual light, clipped delivery, "using a technique of my own invention. Looking for specific signatures in fragments, Residues on other debris. Energy marker at 3.45 on the selenium…," Shepard interrupted him gently.

"We get you used a genius method to find the evidence you did Prof, but can we cut to the chase."

"Of course Shepard more important to use what we've found. Prothean artefact with exact energy
readings to the one destroyed on Fehl Prime. Using all available data research team ran pattern analysis. Four other sites identified where we can predict an 84.7% probability that the same devices were housed. Subsequently destroyed in some way."

"Using the data and incident parameters we were able to pull information from the Broker's existing records. To be absolutely certain we will need samples from all sites," Liara said.

"And it's pretty clear what the unifying factor is here," Shepard said grimly.

"Yes Shepard," Mordin replied, "all the sites were on planets in systems with alpha relays. Sitting at the outer edges of the Galaxy."

"Closest to dark space," Liara finished Mordin's analysis and continued, "I believe this is some kind of Prothean defence net. That is partly an educated guess but based on our projections of what type of artefact this was based on energy readings and the fragments we found on Fehl Prime."

"Well the Protheans managed to switch off the keepers on the Citadel to stop the Reapers using it. They must have known the Reapers would just come the long way," Miranda spoke a little more quietly than usual.

"Agreed," Liara spoke without looking at the woman. Shepard took a moment to admire her bondmates composure and professionalism knowing how Liara felt about Doctor Lawson.

Shepard sighed almost audibly, "ok then we'll check out the sites ourselves before we return to Thessia. Miranda plot us the most time efficient course. Mordin keep digging into the fragments we have from Fehl Prime and see if you can get a better idea about how this artefact functioned."

"If this is some form of network the research and analysis team both here and on the Normandy will try to predict where other sites may be located," Liara said receiving a nod from Ish who was currently heading up her team on the ship.

"Ok let's get to it," Shepard said dismissing the meeting, "well done Mordin."

When they were alone Liara spoke with concern evident in her tone and on her face, "you look exhausted my love, are you sleeping."

Shepard almost made a quip about Liara being in cahoots with Miranda about her need for sleep but stopped herself at the last minute.

"It was hard on Urksone, we are all feeling pretty physically tired. I'll be fine after a night's sleep," Shepard said with as much of a smile as she could muster.

"That is not what I asked you Shepard," Liara said softly and continued, "we are almost completely finished setting up here.

I have a smaller set of equipment being built that we can install on the Normandy. I will be able to work on the Broker network alongside the main team here on the estate. And I hope you will be pleased to hear we have installed our end of the QEC and we just need to fit its pair on the Normandy."

Liara lowered her voice a little, "I have installed it in my private study so that we are able to have complete privacy when we connect I would like to suggest you do the same."

Shepard gave her lover a cheeky grin, "oh yeah T'Soni what do you expect us to get up to during our private conversations… are we getting hard light projections with that or will it be all visual
stimulation."

"Commander Shepard I am surprised you have the energy for such thoughts given how tired you look," Liara said in mock shock but allowing a teasing smile lace her lips.

Shepard laughed feeling some of the tension she was holding in her body relax a little, "well I'll try not to disappoint," then more seriously, "I think it's time we gathered our shadow council."

"I agree, it will be too dangerous to meet physically so I will arrange something over FTL comms," Liara said and checking a data pad she continued, "Although the One Future Summit is being held in Larissa next week so we could at least have some of our number present."

"Yeah good idea, let me know if you need any help encrypting the comms for the meeting although I suspect the Broker has enough resources to cope," Shepard said with a grin.

"I suspect he does," Liara replied continuing with concern, "now please Shepard go and get some food and then sleep, for me."

Shepard gave her lover a weary smile, "I'll try Lee I promise."

Two more attacks on human colonies, water riots on Olor between poor Human colonists and wealthy Salarians had delayed the Normandy and her Commander for another week but they were finally heading in to land at one of Larissa's many space ports.

The capital of Thessia was the height of design and beauty. Plenty of parks and lakes between tall arcology towers makes Larissa a thriving and very sought after city to live in.

Standing behind her pilot in the cockpit of the Normandy marvelling at the beauty of the planet she supposed she should now call home.

As the ship dropped majestically down through the atmosphere finally landing at its designated dock Shepard remembered a snippet of a briefing she received at military college "Permanent residence for non Asari is rarely granted as Thessia is a closed world only offering other species the chance to visit for business or conferences of Galactic importance."

"Nice job Joker," Shepard said as she turned to head for the airlock where she met Tash, Miranda and two of her marines.

"You have the ship Miranda and I want the Normandy fully guarded at all time. This may be Thessia but there are a lot of visitors from across Council space including Systems Alliance space," Shepard said and received an affirmative from her executive officer before continuing, "but make sure as many crew as possible get their shore leave."

"Aye eye Commander," Miranda said returning Shepard's parting salute.

They had decided to spend a little over a Galactic Mean Day on Thessia and so crew members would get either a twenty hour pass for non-essential dockside crew or ten hour passes to rotate out the skeleton command, engineering and security teams.

Miranda had forgone any leave and to Shepard's surprise Tash had also volunteered to stay aboard the Normandy and head up the security team once her duties with Shepard had been completed.

Once dockside Shepard, Tash, Brewster and Miles made their way to the nearest shuttle stop to pick up a ride.
Shepard and her team were all in dress uniform and Tash particularly was feeling very undressed without any weapons. But there seemed to be plenty of Asari security on view, more than would be usual and obviously aimed at the visitors to the capital from off world.

They were headed to the Thessian Republics main government building where Shepard was to meet with the Asari Counsellor for briefings regarding her Spectre work, at least publicly that was the reason for the meeting.

The building was as beautiful as all the others on Thessia but was not one of the largest in Larissa although its internal lobby felt more like a small park than an indoor space.

"Jeez, you gotta hand it to them ma'am they certainly know how to impress," Shepard heard Brewster's voice from behind her and when she looked around the marine was staring up at the open space reaching all the way to the glazed roof some fourteen levels above them.

"That they do gunney," Shepard said with a smile as they continued towards a reception desk.

"Welcome Commander Shepard," the Asari's smile was warm as she continued, "please follow your escort and she will take you to the Councillor's offices."

A maiden appeared at Shepard's shoulder and indicated some glass elevators on the far wall, "this way Commander," she said slightly breathlessly.

"Here we go," Tash said very quietly with a grin and before Shepard had a chance to respond the young maiden linked her arm with Shepard's and pressed her body close.

"You are such a hero to the Asari people and it would be my honour," the young Asari was looking earnestly into Shepard's face, "to do anything… to relieve your stress Commander I am skilled in all, "she placed the same emphasis on the word 'all' as she had on 'anything', "forms of relaxation."

By this time they had reached the lift and the young maiden leaned across Shepard's body to press the call button. She was so close Shepard could feel her body heat and felt the warm breathe when she said, "anything," again.

For a moment Shepard froze then tried to move backwards but bumped into Tash who was directly behind her.

"I, um… no I'm fine thank you," Shepard had no idea why this young Asari was behaving this way but once in the lift she made sure Tash was standing between her and their escort.

"You know I'm a bit of Galactic hero as well," Tash said leaning her shoulder against the back wall of the elevator and gently lifting the Asari's chin to look up at her, "and I'm related to the Saviour of the Citadel."

The young Asari smiled and leaned in a little closer to Tash's body, "oh yes you are one of her crew perhaps," she looked still expectantly at Shepard when she continued, "If the Commander does not mind?"

"No absolutely, yes I mean you… the Captain here will take care of…" again Shepard felt completely at a loss and noticed her two marines trying to stifle grins.

"There you are you have permission from the hero herself to help her trusted Captain to relax," and Tash leaned in to give the young Asari a brief kiss on the lips who responded by throwing her arms around the Captain's neck.
At that moment they arrived at their destination and the young Asari led them out of the elevator with a smile and a longing look at Tash.

Tash said quietly "only fair I mean if it's part of my job to take a bullet for you then I see it as my duty to take any other kind of hit for you."

Shepard rewarded the comment with sigh but allowed a slight smile to trace her lips, "but what the fuck was that all about," she said as they were led into the Councillors secretary's office.

"You're the equivalent of a rock star to a lot of maiden's on Thessia," Tash smiled, "you've got groupies boss."

Before Shepard could even form a thought in response to this truly frightening news a voice distracted her.

"Welcome Commander, I am Tarina Glamson Matriarch Tevos's personal assistant," the maiden offered Shepard an Asari welcome and continued, "If your adjutant and guard would like to wait in here," she asked rather than instructed but the implication was clear.

"Yes of course," Shepard said to her team who were now standing to attention awaiting orders, "stand down and wait for me here," she finished with a salute that Tash returned.

Shepard followed Tarina through the door into what was obviously Tevos's office but it was empty and she joined the older Asari in the small elevator at the other end of the office.

"This is the Councillors private elevator to highly secure and confidential meeting space," her guide said as she hit the only button on offer on the control pad.

The elevator descended noiselessly and almost without any sensation of movement at all coming to rest only a handful of seconds later.

The doors opened onto a small ante room containing ten Asari Commandos and as Shepard again walked towards the door indicated by Tevos's assistant she looked back to see another three elevator doors next to the one they just left.

Entering the room Shepard immediately took in the welcome sight of her bondmate who was standing near one wall talking to Councillor Anderson.

Councillor Tevos walked forward to greet her with an Asari welcome which Shepard returned.

"This is very far from any prying eyes Commander only the people in this room will know who is attending this meeting or that we met at all," Tevos said as she turned a little to make way for Liara.

Shepard gave her bondmate a short embrace and felt Liara's lips brush her cheek, "welcome home Shepard," Liara said softly.

Breaking apart Shepard reached out to shake Anderson's hand with a smile, "so how's the desk job working out," she said with a smirk knowing full well her old Captain hated not being on active duty.

Anderson gave an audible sigh but then smiled, "someone has to keep our politicians honest and engage with our allies."

"Can't think of anyone else I'd trust to do it Sir," they had moved to get drinks and Anderson leaned in close speaking quietly so that on Liara could hear.
"Don't let the bad press get you down, it's just the news networks filling air time," Anderson was referring to the increasingly negative coverage from certain sections of the human press, "the people that matter have faith in you."

Shepard rubbed the back of her neck trying to push away the feelings that came up when she thought of some of the more disgusting articles about her relationship with 'that alien who has her tentacles deep into our once great hero'.

"Yeah I just wish they'd settle on whether I'm an alien lover," and Shepard couldn't help but give Liara a small smile, "or an alien hater because I'm working with Cerberus."

"Councillor Anderson is correct Shepard if it was not you they would be trying to diminish someone else and it will be old news soon enough," Liara reached out and gave Shepard's hand a discreet squeeze.

Before they could continue Tevos's voice rang out across the room.

"I believe we are ready to start," she said taking a seat at the table, "Commander would you like to run the meeting?"

"If its ok with you Councillor I'm happy for you to manage it," she replies smiling and taking a seat at Tevos's left side.

Liara sat next to her and Anderson went to sit on his Asari counterparts' right hand side.

Once the guests in the room were settled hard light projections began to flicker into existence for overhead projectors and around the table other guests were projected into empty seats giving the impression that they were all seated around the same table.

"Although we know of each other perhaps we should start with brief introductions," Tevos said ever the diplomat, "I am Citadel Council member Tevos next to me is Citadel Council member Anderson and to my left is Commander Shepard and Lady Liara T'Soni head of the T'Soni family and the Thrassican Republic."

From there introductions were made by the people in the room.

"Matriarch B'Lanea I had head of the B'Lanea family and the Paronos Republic, member of the T'ara and I also speak for five other T'ara Matriarchs."

"Matriarch Irissa head of Irissa family holdings," Shepard was aware that the Irissa family holdings had some seriously large and influential Corporations under their control, "and member of the One Hundred."

The flanging qualities of a Turian voice spoke out next, "Primarch Quentius of the Aethon Cluster." Shepard knew from her briefing that Quentius was a forward thinking Turian leader who was in line for succession to the highest office.

"Spectre Jondum Bau," the Salarian gave a friendly nod to Shepard.

"Dalatress Esheel," it was the first time Shepard had met the Dalatress who, according to Liara's briefing, was very well respected in the Salarian Union. The Dalatress had also exhibited a much more open minded attitude to working cooperatively with other species unlike the Salarian Council member Valern.

With everyone in the room accounted for the introductions moved to those who were attending
Admiral Hackett, Priestess El’Estrene, Urdnot Wrex and General Aurelos, who Shepard knew from the terrorist attack on Taetrus, made up the remaining attendees.

"I will now formerly call into session the first meeting of the Galactic Shadow Council," Tevos said solemnly, "our unifying belief is that the Reaper threat is real and all our actions will be focussed on their defeat. We will also work to identify and eradicate their agents and sympathisers so as to deny any support and preparation to the coming invasion."

Tevos looked around the table and received nods from everyone.

"Well said Matriarch," Dalatress Esheel said, "We already have enough evidence gathered by our STG to support the existence of this new threat to the Galaxy."

"So where shall we start," Tevos said then looked at Shepard, "Commander would you like to bring us up to speed".

Shepard gave half a glance in Liara's direction before she started. They had discussed in their last vid conversation how to find the right balance between the bleak prospect facing the Galaxy and hope.

"We have already managed to thwart the Reapers once by stopping Sovereign. And we've found more and more evidence that the Prothean's laid the groundwork for our resistance in this cycle," Shepard glanced around the table feeling everyone's eyes on her, "but make no mistake we cannot beat the Reapers with the weapons we have."

"As the Prothean's did so will we need contingencies, it is our duty to prepare the next cycle if we fail to destroy the Reapers ourselves. We will need to ensure everything we learn from the Protheans and anything we can add to their knowledge will be safely preserved and passed to those who will follow us.

But I have no intention of failing," Shepard's voice and demeanor grew in confidence and she continued with a tone edged in steel, "we will work on tactics, continue to hunt for anything that can find to improve our weapons, make sure we work together as a Galaxy all of us bringing our unique strengths to the fight.

This is the only way we have the smallest chance of winning, together as a Galaxy. And even then the only way we will win," she paused finishing with conviction, "is to fight them and not stop fighting. Fight with our last ship, our last breath; to make them pay for every moon, every planet. We have to buy enough time for our scientists to find us the means to destroy them."

There were nods for those with a military background and although everyone looked grim faced Shepard sensed a determination from the group of people who would make the difference between success and failure.

"Failure is not an option," Liara said echoing Shepard's on conclusion.

The meeting lasted most of the day with only a short break for food before moving from general proposals into more specific and detailed plans.

Most of the larger projects and preparation would need to be influenced into the ongoing work of their respective governments and private sectors.

One of the first items on their agenda was developing a more comprehensive network of listening
posts which would be a joint project between the Human and Turian military. This would be eminently achievable given the people who were sitting around the table.

Other plans were discussed and actions planned including setting up a shadow network of supply silos across Council space that would never show on official records giving protection from what they expected to be the increasing number of the indoctrinated who would try to undermine their plans at every turn.

At the end of the meeting the members went their separate ways. Liara joined Shepard, Councillor Tevos and Matriarch Irissa in the elevator back to the Councillors office.

"I understand you will be remaining in Larissa tonight," Councillor Tevos spoke to both Shepard and Liara as they exited the lift.

"Yes we are," Liara answered with a smile.

"We wondered if you would care to join us for dinner." Tevos asked and continued, "Alexia and I have a table booked at Zagrani's it's a very private and exclusive restaurant so not too many prying eyes."

"I have heard wonderful things about the food and the ambience," Liara said with enthusiasm and glanced at Shepard for an indication from her lover as to how to proceed.

Shepard smiled and gave a few nods of her head as Liara spoke, "it would be an honour Councillor."

"Chandra please," Tevos said, "we shall see you there then the reservation is for 20:00."

With formal goodbyes Shepard and Liara headed for the door that would lead them to the outer office.

"Damn I hope someone fed my marines," Shepard said feeling slightly guilty they had had to hang around all day for appearances sake.
Tash jumped from the shuttle and threw a salute to Malania before turning and starting to run to another dock.

The Normandy and her crew had been patrolling vulnerable human colonies and running to the other side of the Galaxy hunting for Prothean artefacts or Reaper tech for the past Galactic standard month since their brief stop on Thessia.

Shepard's spectre role had also dragged her into the mess on Garvug which had put the ground teams in the role of peacekeepers protecting vulnerable civilians caught up in a war between two Corporations and their mercenary proxies.

Half the time they had been on comms blackout and when FTL comms were available time slots had to be booked to ensure all crew members had a chance to catch up with home or friends.

Even officers like Tash had to use a comm terminal in the CIC or if they were lucky in the conference room which also doubled as the research and intelligence team's work space. Not exactly conducive for the kind of conversation she wanted to have with Liselle.

When she was off duty, not playing cards or training with her team she was working out in the gym on the hangar deck. Anything to make her tired enough to sleep rather than lay on her bunk awake trying to get to grips with how she was feeling and what decision to make about pretty much everything.

She knew something had changed when she volunteered to stay on the Normandy on their visit to Larissa rather than hit the night clubs and find some company. Not even following up with the maiden she had saved Shepard from who had almost begged her for a date.

For all Tash's flirting and talk she had no interest in hooking up with anyone. At least, she told herself, not until she had resolved the issues she had about Liselle.

She even turned away one of the young ensigns from the CIC who came to her bunk while Tash was sleeping off a night mission. Tash was in one of the officer's room which only had four bunks in it, unlike enlisted quarters that had up to ten in one of the larger rooms. Her room mates were all on duty and it would have been easy to lock the door for privacy. But she turned the young woman away citing tiredness which was a lie.

Now if it had been Liselle, Liselle who seemed to be slipping away from her, Liselle who either hadn't understood what Tash had tried to tell her or who had understood very well and was pulling away because she didn't feel the same.

Tash pushed her eye shades up onto her head and offered her Omni-tool to the scan which having read her ticket for the ship to Omega flashed green indicating she could board.

Finding her seat in the cruiser sized transport she stowed her bag in the overhead storage and sat down. Forced to be physically still the emotional turmoil, she had been keeping at bay, pushed into her conscious mind like a raging storm.

Panic about her decision washed through her and it took all her strength of mind to just stay put and not run from the ship.
Tash thought about the conversation with Shepard and Liara that had sparked her headlong rush to Omega and Liselle.

Thirty six hours earlier, Normandy, Horsehead Nebula

Shepard felt a sense of pride as she carried out her weekly command inspection. The Normandy's crew had settled into a confident and competent team. She knew that running the ship exactly like an Alliance vessel might have seemed strange to some but it wasn't just to instil a sense of familiarity and to keep true to her loyalties.

Structure, chain of command, protocols, regular drills and continued training was something that united a crew, kept them sharp particularly during long periods of inactivity on journeys from one side of the known Galaxy to the other.

It gave them all a common reference point and contributed significantly to unit cohesion. Common meal times in the mess hall had seen crew members mixing much more. They obviously hung out in groups around their areas of operation but as time went on there were also groupings around common interests.

The Krogan were as interested in sports and gambling as a lot of the Human and Turian crew members. Asari interests were wide ranging and they could be seen now in most of the social groups on the ship.

The other races on the ship were also integrating well with the only work group who seemed to stick together being the science team but then they were a multi species group anyway.

Shepard completed her inspection with her executive officer at her side in the galley where the duty cooks were preparing the evenings meal. She had put one of her Asari commando's, Kam Detah, in charge of catering. The Asari had carried out the same duties when she had served in the Citadel fleet and had transformed the operation on the Normandy.

The duty cooks were now volunteers who had an interest or experience in catering and although coming mainly from the Asari and Human crew they drew on a wide range of food traditions. They now had fresh provisions as often as possible and a constant supply of herbs and spices.

"Carry on Chief," Shepard said returning Kam Detah's salute, "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes thank you Commander the cooler units we've just installed up here will save going down to the main storage on the hangar deck as often which is a great time saver."

Her inspections completed Shepard headed for her cabin with a spring in her step and once in the elevator she allowed a smile to play on her lips. Inside her cabin she peeled off her cap and punched a call into the QEC installed at the end of her desk and waited for the call to be answered.

Within a few moments a light display sparked into life next to the desk and as quantum particles coalesced into an image Shepard's bondmate appeared in front of her tantalisingly close yet so far away.

"Darling how are you," Liara smiled starting to reach out to the holographic image in front of her as did Shepard.

"We really need to invest in hard light projections," Shepard smiled and answered, "I'm fine, pretty glad to be heading home for the refit."
Asari military engineers had been working on improvements to the Turian designed cannon, the Normandy's 'big gun', which had wrecked such damage on the Collector ship they had brought down.

But they had still needed the help of ground artillery and they would be on their own where they were going.

"I have missed you," Liara said softly and Shepard ached to take her lover in her arms, to feel her warmth, the smell of her skin.

"I can't wait and I'll show you how much I've missed you as soon as I can get my hands on you," Shepard spoke in a low voice that was charged with need and desire.

Liara blushed a little as her body responded to her lover's call, "Even light years away you light a fire in my body only your touch can satisfy."

Shepard gave her bondmate a huge grin, "yeah that was the general idea."

"I think I may just hold you hostage in my bed Commander until I am done with you," Liara laughed and the sound was like balm to Shepard's troubled soul.

They exchanged news and talked for a while about the baby's progress and then about the blossoming romance between James and Kasumi.

"I only wish my sister could be as happy as I am Shepard," Liara said and Shepard took a moment to marvel at the sheer ordinary, everyday conversation they were having.

Talking about work, friends and family like billions of other couples in the galaxy and although the burden and the nightmares were still real they were pushed to the edge of her awareness by the glorious normality of her relationship with Liara.

"Shepard," Liara said with concern on her face and in her voice, "you seemed to drift off."

"Oh sorry Lee I was just, it's hard to explain, just talking about ordinary things… makes me, just makes it all easier… I'm not explaining it very well," Shepard ended with a smile.

"I understand my love I truly do," Liara said softly and despite knowing it was pointless raised a hand to touch Shepard's face.

They both laughed and Liara continued, "Well perhaps we will not need a hard light projector as we have completed all the work needed on my mobile Broker hub and while the Normandy has its armaments upgraded I can install my equipment."

"And then you can join us on the Normandy?" Shepard said excited but also aware she would have the devil's own job getting Liara off the Normandy when the final assault on the Collector base was on the table.

"Yes and I was thinking, if this was acceptable, that half the network relay could be installed in our existing communication and intelligence section but the confidential and more secret aspects and my direct communication with agents could be installed…"

"In our cabin," Shepard pre-empted Liara's suggestion, "that's perfect… on condition that you'll be able to switch off from it?"

"Of course my love as much as you 'switch off' from your work," Liara said coyly.
"Fair point… we'll just have to distract each other," Shepard once again laced her words with promise, "anyway what did you mean about Liselle she's pretty happy I thought."

"How is Tash," Liara asked and Shepard noticed the sharp change of direction in the conversation.

"She's really settled in, I mean properly, I think she's going to come back to the Alliance with us at the end of the mission… she's getting more of her old self back," Shepard answered.

"Is she seeing anyone?"

"Funny you should ask that," Shepard noticed the confusion on Liara's face but decided not to stop to explain, "you know she volunteered for duty security officer while we were on Thessia," Liara nodded and Shepard continued, "well she also didn't take up the… um offer from that maiden and rumour has it she isn't messing around with anyone on the crew.

"I think she was really into Liselle but you know it was never going to work out with…"

Liara cut across her lover, "what do you mean 'really into'?"

Shepard was a little wrong footed but tried her best to overcome her reluctance to talk about her cousins love life, "well apparently Tash told Liselle how she felt, but knowing Tash it was some kind of vague indication that you have to be part mind reader to understand… it's an old Earth entertainment… anyway why the interest?"

Liara took on a determined air and Shepard recognised both the look on her lovers face and the tone of voice and decided to just go with the flow.

"Edi would you have Captain Mikhailovich join us please."

"Right away Liara," Edi's calm and smooth voice echoed in the room.

"Why would Tash not be direct about her feelings? You do not seem to have any problem," Liara asked now back to her conversational tone.

"It's a bit of a cliché Lee but she fell completely in love, the works head over heels, the first year we were in the Academy. It was with a civilian who worked on the base and the young woman said she felt the same way but she really played Tash and was seeing people behind her back, one thing you can say for my cousin is that she is always honest. Never promises fidelity, except the one time, and is always open about her wandering eyes, she took it hard."

"I see, losing her mother will have left her with triggers for abandonment," Liara said thoughtfully.

Shepard laughed, "So T'Soni you research much Human psychology when you started seeing me huh?"

Liara looked a little embarrassed, "I well…"

Shepard put her lover out of her misery, "of course you did Lee you're a scientist and want to know as much about my species as I do about yours. Out of interest would you say I had triggers for abandonment given I lost a parent as well?" It was said in a light-hearted tone but Shepard genuinely wanted to know.

Liara smiled and said gently, "I do not believe so as your home was full of love, understanding and acceptance. You're fathers love still surrounded you and your Mother reflected it back to you, from what I know of Tash's situation it was vastly different."
Shepard was flooded with a sense of love and gratitude to this woman who understood her so completely but before she could respond the door chimed.

"Come in Tash," Shepard said her eyes not leaving her bondmates as she mouthed "I love you" which was responded in kind.

"Boss whatever it is I probably did it so I apologise, hey Liara you're here," Tash said her cheeky tone changing to surprise when she took in the hologram.

Liara smiled at the tall woman who was by both Earth and Asari standards very attractive, "I need to ask you a question Tash and I am sorry if it is intrusive but if you could forgive me I believe it will be important for you?"

"Sure," Tash said with a questioning glance at Shepard who was standing next to her.

Shepard responded with a shrug a small shake of the head to indicate she had no idea what Liara was going to ask.

"How do you feel about Liselle?"

The question hung in the silence as all eyes were on Tash who grew ever more embarrassed and fidgeting in a way that brought to Liara's mind Shepard's habit of massaging the back of her neck when confronted with difficult conversations.

"I… well… you know…" Tash seemed to stop fighting with herself and in a resigned voice said, "I'm pretty sure I've managed to fall in love with her and I know I've got no right and I'm not worth… well hell she's letting me down gently so let's… can we not talk about…"

"Did you tell her you had strong feelings for her?" Shepard asked, "I mean what did you say, exactly," Shepard was now starting to catch on to what must be prompting Liara's questions.

"I might have been, I told her she was… well maybe I… hell she said that when all this shit with Cerberus was finished I could live with her on Omega and I didn't say no…It's what I want but I need to get my life back, be more than a drugged up merc working for terrorists… you know," Tash asked with an edge of pleading in her tone.

"I rest my case," Shepard said rolling her eyes.

Liara shook her head and started again, "Tash Liselle has no idea you feel this way and whatever you said to her the impression she is left with is that you feel you owe her a lot and don't want to just walk away now that you can have your old life back. She is trying to give you an easy way out."

"I don't want a way out," Tash looked miserable, "but I don't feel I have anything to give her, I'm damaged goods Liara and she can have anyone she wants."

"It would seem my," Liara hesitated slightly remembering Tash was still not aware Liselle was her sister, "dear friend feels the same way about you Tash and it is each other's souls we fall in love with not what they do for a living or what happened to them before we met," Liara spoke softly and with compassion.

Tash was deep in thought and both Shepard and Liara let the silence sit between them.

"I need to talk to her," Tash said her voice strong and now carrying an edge of conviction.

"You need to see her," both Shepard and Liara said at the same time.
"That's a bit spooky," Tash said with a grin, "but yeah I do, can you drop me off somewhere cuz?"

**Omega, Aria's office, Afterlife - twelve hours before Tash's arrival**

Since being given their assignment's by the T'ara when they were little more than one hundred and ten years old Aria had had little to no contact with most of the others in the group she and Benezia had been a part of.

Most of the members of the group who were still alive were now respected Matriarchs many of whom were members of the 'One Hundred' and others like Admiral Lidanya were in active and influential positions in Asari military or corporate leadership.

When she and Benezia had said their goodbyes their plan was to do their duty to Thessia by carrying out the wishes of the Matriarch's while they were maidens and then Aria would come home.

Aria was not the only Asari on assignment in the Terminus systems but unfortunately she had been chosen well and soon rose to prominence and influence on Omega. So her assignment had been extended.

She also received another message with her extended assignment, one of only a handful over the centuries from the T'ara, which was allegedly relayed from Benezia.

"My current assignment would be compromised and I would be in physical danger if our connection and communication was to be discovered. I will contact you when it is safe to do so which might be some time, Goddess by with you."

It was formal which was not unexpected it had to go through official channels and of course Aria accepted it without question. She would never do anything to put her love in danger.

Aria threw herself into her mission to pass the time, do her duty for Thessia and of course to impress Benezia when it was all over.

The years and centuries rolled on her only mission parameters to "Protect Thessia and her interests through intelligence and surveillance and do not let a hostile threat rise in the Terminus systems that would threaten Thessia or her interests" to guide her hand.

Looking back Aria had sealed her fate by rising to her position of power on Omega. By the time the order came to take down the Krogan warlord she worked for and become the Queen of Omega promises or return to her homeland and her love were distant memories from another life.

She watched Benezia rise in Asari society, politics and diplomacy and decided her love had forgotten and moved on. Once Aria had achieved the 'throne' and started to build an intelligence network to rival any of those belonging to the Citadel races she also watched Benezia's private life with growing fury particularly when she settled down with Aethyta T'Arani a rival from their days in the academy.

When Benezia finally reached out and contacted her and they met around one hundred and eight years ago they found they had received the same message and neither had sent it. Aria's instinct had been anger and vengeance at the least to walk away from their duties.

But Benezia was more sanguine and whilst wounded that they had been used so badly by the Matriarchs could see why. They had both contributed in great part not just to the post Krogan war rebuilding of Thessian interests but also her influence across the known Galaxy.

Just one last assignment Benezia had to complete and they could be together. But they would have
their daughters as they had promised themselves all those centuries ago.

Aria let all this run through her mind as she waited for the call she had placed with one of the few real friends she had on Thessia and as the FTL connection scrambled into place the figure of Admiral Drax Lidanya came into being.

"Aria is everything alright?" Admiral Lidanya sounded and looked concerned.

"Yes Drax, Liselle is fine nothing to worry about," Aria had trusted this woman with her most important daughter and she had chosen well. Another reason she had to thank Shepard she thought wryly before continuing.

"But it is about Liselle that I need to speak to you," Aria lowered her voice despite herself, "the T'ara have been in touch and have suggested that I start grooming Liselle as my successor on Omega."

"By the Goddess they can't be serious, all due respect Aria she isn't you… and do you really want her to be in exile as you have?" Drax Lidanya had had far more contact with Aria over the last century than anyone knew.

Lidanya had been pleased that Liselle wanted to know her mother and spend time with her. Although no one would ever know it Aria T'Loak had spent her life in service to Thessia as much as Drax had herself. But Aria had lost everything because of it and no one had expected she would reach the age she had with the mission she had been given.

"No they won't take my daughter, our daughter," thoughts of Benezia flashed through Aria’s mind, "but you know they'll start making it impossible for her to go home as they did for me and that's why I'm asking you to get her a commission in the Citadel fleet now quickly and I'll send her home."

"Of course I will there's always been one waiting for her, but Aria she won't leave you she loves you," Drax knew Liselle loved her as her Rasam but there would always, as there should be, a powerful connection to her Asam.

"You leave that to me."

"Aria don't drive her away you will hurt her the same way you were hurt thinking you were not loved and wanted," Drax said this despite the fact that she knew she was crossing a line with the Pirate Queen but they both loved the daughter they shared and the Admiral was not afraid of Aria T'Loak. One of the reasons she suspected Aria liked her and could trust her.

Aria boiled for a moment but more out of habit than with any real feeling of anger towards the Asari who had just reflected the truth back to her.

"You always did like pushing the boundaries with me Drax," Aria allowed herself a smile.

"Pretty sure I could take in you hand to hand you've grown soft fighting non Asari," Drax said with a smile remembering their training sessions together, "what about the Matriarchs though they'll be pissed you ruined their plans."

"Fuck them, Thessia has had enough from my blood and besides it's not as if she won't be something worthwhile," Aria said with venom in her voice.

They said their farewells and Aria considered the best way to persuade her daughter to leave her and return to Thessian society. And again the battle inside came to the fore. She could watch over Liselle and keep her safe if she was on Omega but at the same time Omega was the most dangerous place in the Galaxy and she couldn't be with her all the time.
But she would not have her daughter controlled and manipulated as she had been. She would make sure both her daughters had the opportunity to find their place in the Galaxy free from the machinations of the T'ara.

Omega, Liselle's office, Afterlife – an hour before Tash's arrival

Liselle sat behind her desk reviewing intel about a new human gang that was gaining ground on the station and of course the ever developing threat from the Talons. The Turian operation was showing all the signs of growing over confident and she was looking for indications they were not paying the Pirate Queen her cut of any profit they were making on the Station.

But her mind was wandering to the momentous conversation she had had with her Mother a few hours earlier.

Throwing the data pads onto her desk and giving up all pretence of work she ordered in some tea from the club. Then went to sit in one of the armchairs and set herself the task of putting the bits of her universe back together.

She had realised days ago, although the feeling had been present at the edge of her mind, that the decision to let Tasha go wasn't really hers. It was what she knew Aria expected of her. Liselle had allowed herself to be convinced she was too young for serious emotion.

Of course Tasha wasn't helping seeming to just go with the flow and willing to stand back to see how the chips would fall between them.

But as Liselle allowed the knowledge to settle that she would need to let her Human lover leave the more she realised that this was special. This was her first relationship that was more than sex or friendship. It was her first love and this would never come again no matter how long she lived.

Asari maidens were not all alike but there were plenty like Liselle who were happy to experiment with relationships and sex. She had enjoyed plenty of sexual affairs but not as many as most people thought, and she certainly didn't join with everyone she flirted with.

Liselle knew she was attractive physically but people were drawn to her nature and her personality as much and were happy to be a little in love with her close up or at a distance.

But Tasha was different and if truth be told Liselle had known it right from the beginning.

So she had decided to fight for whatever it was they had to see what it might become. And because she had misled her mother slightly about her feelings for Tasha, Liselle decided to have a conversation with Aria that she knew would lead to an argument.

Her thoughts were interrupted as her tea was delivered by an Asari maiden who was also one of the club dancers.

"Thank you Zabi," Liselle said with a warm smile and returned the kiss to the cheek she received.

"Anything for you Liselle you know that," the maiden said with a smile and left as quietly as she had arrived.

Pouring the tea Liselle let her mind wander back to the beginning of the conversation which got off to a difficult start.

Liselle walked into her mother's office and stood in front of her desk but before she could say
anything Aria spoke.

"Good you got my message," Aria stood up and moved towards the comfortable seating and continued, "I need to talk to you about something important."

"Yeah I did but I was coming to speak with you anyway," Liselle said still standing in front of the desk not really wanting to sit down.

"Well whatever you have to say can wait this is important Liselle, come and sit down," Aria said in her usual imperious tone.

"I don't care about work right now this is important to me," Liselle said laying emphasis on the last word.

Aria seemed taken aback for a moment but recovered quickly, "whatever it is it can wait I…"

"No it can't for the sake of the Goddess could you just let me…," Liselle realised this was exactly the wrong tone for the subject matter so with a sigh she decided to wait until her mother had finished talking about work, "right, yes I'll tell you later."

Liselle waited for the lecture about respect and priorities but instead watched some kind of internal struggle play across the usual guarded features of the Pirate Queen and when the older Asari spoke it was quietly and with none of the usual pomp and bravado.

"I need to tell you the truth about my life and my relationship with Benezia because I need you to understand why I am going to ask you to do something… for me and for your Rasam."

Aria started talking about the academy and being one of the brightest and best to have been selected. Meeting Benezia and falling in love, the plans they made, the vows they took secretly by a waterfall.

Liselle had been selected for the academy but it was the same time she had found out her Asam was actually still alive and that she could get to know her if she wanted and that had been no contest.

As Aria talked about her life, what the Matriarchs had asked of her, manipulated her into Liselle felt her anger rise at the injustice and pain. She could think of nothing crueller than to be all but banished from Asari society without it having been a free choice.

And as Aria spoke about finally spending time with Benezia, planning to be together as a family as despite all the time spent apart they felt the same powerful deep connection and love for each other.

And then hearing her mother talk about the crushing blow of Benezia's involvement with Saren and its disastrous consequences Liselle felt tears welling up again.

At some point she had moved to the long sofa and Aria had come to sit next to her and was holding Liselle in a strong and loving embrace. The physical connection needed as much by her mother Liselle did.

"She would have loved seeing you grow up… so much like her," Aria said quietly stroking her daughters cheek and Liselle tightened her arms a little more around her mother leaning further into the strong arms.

"It wasn't fair…" Liselle said in a whisper only just holding back her tears.

"No, but we had you and Liara," Aria leaned out a little so that she could look into her daughters face, "and I wouldn't trade anything for that or for the short time I spent with her. But the T'ara want
me to hand Omega over to you, they want you to spend your life continuing what I started but I
won't allow it Liselle they won't have you."

With her last sentence Liselle saw the Aria she was used to seeing, powerful, resolute, with that edge
of coldness born of expecting her will to be done or destroying anything in her way.

"But I want to stay with you… you," Liselle wanted to say that she was all Aria had left but lost her
confidence in whether that was true.

Aria gave her daughter a warm smile, "you don't need to make up for anything Liselle just knowing
you are safe and happy is enough of a gift. I need you to leave soon," Aria stemmed Liselle's
protestations with a small shake of the head and continued, "we will remain in contact and I will
come to Thessia more often now I have something to come home for and who knows perhaps the
Queen will retire."

They sat quietly for a few moments and Liselle felt the inevitability of her having to leave flow over
her and felt more miserable than had ever felt before.

"Drax is getting you a commission in the Citadel fleet so the Matriarch's won't be able to carry out
their plans and you will be free to choose the life you want. It is the only thing I will ever ask you to
do against your will."

They sat quietly for what seemed like a long time. They finally talked a little about practicalities and
Liselle manged to get Aria to agree to let her stay until Shepard's mission against the Collectors had
finished.

That had been a little over two hours ago.

Everything Liselle thought she knew about her mother, about the benign Galactic leadership role the
Matriarchcs played, even Thessia's open democratic society had been turned upside down in that
conversation.

One small thought came unbidden to her mind that did raise a small smile though, 'I am older than
Aria and Benezia when they fell in love so I don't think anyone will be saying I'm too young from this
point onwards.'

Her Omni-tool flashed indicating an incoming vid call and she answered with a grin, "Finally, I
thought you might have been lost in some asteroid belt with no comms."

Tasha grinned back and said at the same time the door to Liselle's office opened, "Didn't want to
disturb you so I thought I'd call first."

Liselle jumped out of her seat and rushed to her lover who was now standing inside the room and
pulled her into a long, deep kiss.

When they broke apart they were both a little breathless.

"Missed me then," Tash said in a cheeky tone then remembered what she had rushed to Omega to do
and felt her nerves take hold.

"Let's get one thing straight before we go any further Mikhailovich," Liselle said standing back a
little and placing her hands on her hips, "I'm not letting go, we have something whether you can
actually talk about it or not. Don't get an even bigger head about this but I can't replace you, this
is…” before Liselle could finish her thought Tash pulled her into an embrace and a tender kiss that
was returned.
When they stopped kissing Tash said quietly looking into her lovers eyes, "even in my fucked up state the first time I saw you my heart stopped… you're a force of nature Liselle Lidanya and I'm yours for as long as you want me."

Liselle felt a smile spread across her face and saw it mirrored on her lovers.

"Well how about you show me just how much you've missed me," she said allowing all her desire and need to lace her words and flow through her body.
Chapter 61

A/N Codex additions

Galactic Standard is the language used across the known Galaxy (and is the official language for Council business). It is a pared down version of Asari/Salarian with many Turian phrases and terms added over time. Earth Standard is spoken across Systems space and on Earth as the unifying language for Humanity and is a melding of English and Chinese with plenty of incorporated nuances from most other major languages still spoken on Earth. Earth standard words are now also finding their way into GSL.

Times and dates for Galactic Standard are obviously based on the metric system and dating begins from the discovery of the Citadel by the Asari (0 Common Era). These run alongside 'local' time for planets which are more in sync with the solar days.

*In our story we commonly use the 'local' Earth vernacular to aid immersion for minutes, hours, weeks etc.*

The Sol system runs on Earth time as local and was the Earth colony/systems standard time and dates until the Systems Alliance joined the Council races.

The actual year for Earth is 2255 and obviously the Asari ‘Thessian’ date is much older than the current 2186 CE.

'T'Soni Estate, Thessia - Normandy upgrade

What Shepard had not been ready for from Liara's pregnancy was the growing boost to her biotic power. It seemed when Asari were carrying their young their genetic code deemed it necessary to provide maximum protection.

The increase in power, duration and impact did depend on whether the Asari in question had developed her capabilities and in Liara's case she had been doing just that since meeting up with Shepard back on Therum.

"So essentially while our girl is carrying junior she can tear anyone that looks like a threat into many, many pieces," Aethyta said in a satisfied tone and taking another drink from the glass she was holding.

Shepard laughed, "Well she was pretty good at that anyway. How are you doing?"

The Normandy had landed late the previous night and Shepard was sitting in the gardens in bright morning sunshine while tantalising smells drifted on the slight breeze from the kitchens.

"I'm fine but Liara insists on my staying here and doing nothing except what the healers say. And as I'm trying to stay in her good books I'll do just that for now. But yeah, she hasn't forgiven you yet has she. Sorry about that kid, her mother was just the same," Aethyta chuckled at the memory, "I remember one time Benezia got so mad with me when I…"

"Do not think I have forgiven you yet either father," Liara's voice behind them caused both warriors to jump. As Liara moved in front of them she reached out to take the glass from Aethyta's hand, "and I am pretty sure I remember the doctors telling you no liquor for at least another Luna cycle."
Shepard couldn't help but allow a huge smile to break out across her face, "wow Lee when did you get so stealthy," and completely ignoring her bondmate's imperious glare she reached out and pulled Liara onto her knee and folded her into an embrace and a kiss.

Aethyta took advantage of Liara's distraction to retrieve her glass and quietly moved away in the direction of a group of crew members sitting at one of the other tables that had been placed around the gardens.

When they broke apart Liara leaned back a little her hands clasped behind Shepard's neck and smiled down at her lover.

"What about your crew Commander, such displays must be against one of your many regulations."

"Shore leave, doesn't count," Shepard said her eyes locked with her bondmate, "I miss sleeping next to you." The memory of slipping into bed in the early hours of the morning made her sigh a little.

Feeling Liara's naked body, her warmth, her familiar scent as Shepard snuggled into her bondmate's back, slipping an arm under the peaceful body and laying her other hand on the now slightly swollen belly.

She stilled Liara's waking with whispers of "sleep babe... I'm here, that's it back to sleep" and before long Shepard herself fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

Shepard sighed with contentment as Liara leaned in and rested her chin on her lover's strong shoulders.

"How long for the refit," Liara asked.

The Normandy had dropped its Commander and most of her crew at the T'Soni estate and headed straight for the engineering facilities of Serrice Technology which was Thrassica's largest and most advanced science and technology company.

"If it goes as planned and including testing they'll be done and back here in around fifty standard hours," Shepard replied, "then I'll let the engineering crew have a bit of a break while we fit your comms equipment but we'll have to head off as soon as that's done."

Liara leaned back a little and gave Shepard a brief kiss on the lips before standing up, "well then we had better make the most of your shore leave. Plenty of food and rest; oh and the sea is now warm enough for swimming," Liara walked away back towards the house to finish supervising the communal breakfast being prepared.

She turned slightly and said quietly so she could not be overheard an innocent smile tracing her lips, "and on Thessia we swim as we sleep."

An image of a naked Liara swimming effortlessly through the water filled Shepard's mind. Then her bondmate was walking seductively out of the sea every inch of her lithe body shimmering with water gathering into droplets and rolling down following the soft curves of her lover's breasts…

Shepard shook herself awake from the thoughts and shouted after her bondmate a huge grin on her face, "but I hate swimming."

A hand dropped onto her shoulder and Aethyta's gravelly voice from somewhere above her said with a chuckle, "ah but there's nothing quite like making love in the ocean."

Conference room, Normandy – five hours after leaving Thessia
"Ok what's next," Shepard said marking an end to the discussions about pattern analysis with which they were hoping to get a jump start on the next Collector attack.

"We have plotted the next three sites for investigation related to what we are even more certain is a Prothean disruption net of some kind, "and there is growing evidence of multiple sites containing Reaper tech in Batarian space," Miranda said in her usual business like tone.

"Well that will be a diplomatic nightmare and our stealth systems will only get us so far," Shepard turned to Kasumi who looked as if she wanted to contribute.

"I've been working on something that may increase our stealth capabilities. It's a much more advanced version of personal cloak technology, problem is I may have to… acquire the technology using unorthodox means," Kasumi's expression was unreadable.

Shepard was a Spectre and an Alliance officer and although she had taken Kasumi onto the crew and given her responsibility for leading the tech and research team they had not, so far, needed to use any of Kas's 'special' skill set.

She was after all a very, very successful corporate thief, rehabilitated since following a more academic career, yet still certainly able to steal any tech or research she set her mind to.

"Anything that can contribute to the success of our mission should be pursued through whatever means possible," Shepard said, "but no casualties and no profit."

Kas knew exactly what Shepard meant, any technology or equipment that the teams 'liberated' or were given by companies and governments were for mission use only. No one would profit from it and unless they were facing hostile combatants no innocent civilians or security staff were to be hurt.

"Of course Commander," Kas said with a smile, "I will start mission prep and update you when I have a firm timeframe."

"Good," Shepard said and then braced herself, "meeting dismissed Liara and Miranda please stay behind, I'd like to talk to you both."

Shepard caught Garrus's eye as he and the rest of the team were moving towards the door, her best friend was barely concealing a smirk.

When they were alone Shepard stood up and stuck a familiar pose, leaning back on one leg, arms crossed across her chest.

Both sets of eyes were on her and after taking deep breath Shepard spoke.

"It's a small ship, you are both officers and I can't have the crew laying odds on when the two of you come to blows," Shepard continued speaking waving away both women's attempt to speak.

"I know the two of you will behave in a perfectly professional way but you need to clear the air… and even if you can't forgive what's happened," Shepard said looking directly at her bondmate, "we do need to move past it."

The silence in the room was palpable. Shepard had considered leaving them to it but she was in the position of mediator and wouldn't have walked away from any of her other crew in a similar situation, so she was going to see this through.

Miranda leaned forward and put her arms on the conference table, "I can't undo what I've done Doctor T'Soni. You asked me to bring her back if I could and I did, not some puppet cyborg, I
brought back the original Shepard I would have thought that earned me some credit with you."

"The two things are completely separate," Liara said barely concealing her anger.

"No Liara they are not. The only person at this point in time who could have re-built Shepard and dealt with the Prothean nanites in her brain is me and I wanted a back-up plan," Miranda stalled whatever Liara was about to say and carried on.

"I might have transgressed some moral line as far as DNA goes for the Asari but I'm human and I didn't even know about it at the time. You're an intelligent and usually reasonable woman and a scientist so perhaps you need to ask yourself if this anger you feel is actually about something else."

"I have no idea what you mean," Liara said but Shepard had an awful feeling she knew where Miranda was going to go next.

"I got to know Shepard intimately over the time she was in my care. I put her body back together, every inch of it, I spent every day of nearly two years bringing her back and then gave her a son, something you will never be able to do… are you sure this isn't just a healthy dose of jealousy."

Liara jumped out of her chair as did Miranda and they glared at each other across the table. Shepard had the distinct feeling that Miranda was done apologising for her scientific genius.

"Ah I'm not sure we can take this any further in a constructive…" before Shepard could finish speaking both women turned to glare at her.

"We are not finished discussing this Shepard," Liara said and then turned back to Miranda, "perhaps we should continue this conversation in private.

Miranda nodded and Liara spoke again, "do not let us keep you Commander."

Shepard had no idea what to do and in the end decided to leave both women to it, "Yeah, I… I should go."

**Outside the Captains quarters, top deck, Normandy – 10 hours after leaving Thessia**

Shepard exited the lift but stood outside her cabin door to collect her thoughts. She knew Liara was already inside but hadn't seen her or Miranda since leaving them in the conference room almost five hours ago.

She had been drawn into a series of vid calls regarding Council business and then spent time with Joker, Malania and Edi running simulations on the upgraded weapon system.

Taking a deep breath she passed her hand in front of the door control and with a light swish it opened and she walked in.

Liara was sitting at the desk on the right looking at multiple screens now attached to the bulkhead where previously there had only been one.

"Hey beautiful," Shepard said softly walking over to meet Liara who immediately stood and turned towards her lover.

Shepard was trying to read the expression in the eyes that looked back at her and had a sense of something she had never felt from Liara before.

"She has to go Shepard," Liara said defiantly looking her bondmate straight in the eyes.
"I need us to talk about this Lee. I know she has transgressed Asari codes but she didn't know and," Shepard choose her words carefully and spoke gently, "it was my DNA she used… in the end it needs to be my decision doesn't it." Shepard's tone was gentle and held an edge of question, "and… I'm still pretty conflicted about how I feel."

Liara seemed to crumple and when she spoke her tone was distraught, "Oh Shepard I know I am… I do not…" Shepard reached out and held both of Liara's hands and nodded her head slightly to encourage her bondmate to finish her thought.

Sighing audibly Liara said more quietly, "I believe that awful woman may have had a point about… not jealousy Shepard but…" Liara looked so distressed Shepard pulled her into an embrace and said quietly as she brushed her lips against her lovers' cheek.

"You wanted to be the one to give me my first child and she took that away from us," Shepard pulled out a little and they looked into each other's eyes, "and there is a part of me that feels the same way."

"I am a terrible person, she did bring you back to me… and I love our son and would not be without him," Liara leaned her head against Shepard's chest.

"You're not a terrible Lee you're," Shepard almost said Human, "your feelings are totally understandable and the choice we have now is about how we deal with them."

They stood in silence for a minute or so both allowing their feelings about Miranda Lawson to settle, both with very different perspectives of the brilliant scientist.

"Hey I bet you didn't eat anything did you," Shepard said pulling out of the embrace, dipping her head and looking into her lovers slightly sad face and was greeted with a shake of the head.

"I was to upset so I just came up here and worked."

"Ok let me get something sent up," Shepard said and when Liara tilted her head in question she continued with a laugh, "you're not the only one with staff T'Soni."

Firing up the console on the desk a young face appeared and smiled as Shepard said, "Yeoman would you bring two meals, whatever the special was today, to my cabin."

"Right away ma'am," the young woman replied with a smile, and then the comm link blinked out.

Liara raised her brows in mock shock and said playfully, "and what other duties do you get your Yeoman to perform."

Shepard laughed, "Well she does a good job of cleaning up behind me and…"

But the rest of her sentence was cut short as Liara moved in close and gave her lover a hard, long and very passionate series of kisses.

They were both a little breathless as they broke apart and Liara said quietly still holding a hand to Shepard's cheek, "I have wanted to do that since the last time we kissed, it has been hard being parted from you."

Shepard smiled and pulled her lover close, and with her voice edged with need said, "I really wish we hadn't ordered dinner I just want to…"

The door buzzed interrupting their train of thought and with smiling they broke apart as Shepard told
her Yeoman to enter.

**Normandy, starboard lounge – six standard Galactic 'weeks' post Thessia armament upgrade**

"It's on you," Tash said looking at Malenia a thin cigar clamped between her teeth as she spoke.

"Don't rush her it's a big pot," Garrus said and then to Malenia, "now don't feel bad about folding you're playing with a bunch of card sharks," the amusement clear in his voice.

"Hey I'm a complete novice to Skyllian Fives I have no idea what I'm doing," Shepard said with an innocent look on her face which caused the table to erupt into laughter.

"Oh I can't believe I fell for that the first time we played," Ken Donnelly said shaking his head remembering the game Shepard had joined with the engineering crew and cleaning them out before they knew what hit them.

"Well you'd have been happy to take the Commander's credits and they went to a better cause then whichever club you usually spend your winning in," Gabby said laughing. The crew knew that anything Shepard won at cards she donated to the Alliance Families Fund.

The group of card players were sitting at the table that took up most of the space at one end of the lounge. At the other end next to the small bar Ish was sitting at a keyboard set to recreate the sounds of a piano.

Small groups of crew members were distributed around the other tables in the lounge chatting, paying attention to the music or the bawdy group playing cards.

"I'll pay to see what everyone has," Malenia said with a smile throwing a handful of chips into the pile already amassed in the middle of the table and laying her hand down in front of her.

She shared a smile with Targa Via'na who was sitting next to her and who had already folded her cards, like most of the other players, a round earlier.

"Well that beats me, well played," Garrus said with a smile and continued in a slightly mischievous tone, "must be all that extra coaching you're getting."

Malenia gave him an innocent smile and then looked expectantly at Tash and Shepard who were both still in the game.

Shepard laid her cards down and with a straight face and said, "Seems my beginners luck just keeps going and going," but as she reached out to begin drawing the chips from the pot towards her Tash spoke.

"Yep you seem to have the second most unbeatable hand in the game LV but…” and she placed her hand down one card at a time with a huge smirk still holding the cheroot between her teeth.

Cries of disbelief, laughter and other card related banter ran around the table as Tash scooped the winnings towards her.

"It would appear card sharping runs in your family Shepard," Garrus said with a tonal chuckle.

But before anyone else could respond Edi's voice rang out above the general hubbub.

"I am sorry to interrupt your down time Commander but we have an urgent call on the QEC from Cerberus coming in immediately."
Shepard stood pushing her chair back and said to her cousin, "the night is not over my friend we'll see who the true card master is when I get back."

And with a quick kiss to Liara's cheek she made her way to the conference room and then to the more private room off to one side where the Cerberus QEC was located.

**Normandy Comms room**

The QEC was already live when Shepard entered the room and Harper jumped straight into the conversation without preamble.

"One of our science teams was dispatched to investigate what was reported to be a dead Reaper," Harper took a long pull on the cigarette between his fingers then continued, "We lost contact with them a little over an Earth month ago."

Shepard wanted to rant at him for keeping such an important discovery secret. They had been chasing all over the known Galaxy trying to hunt down Reaper tech and the apparently mythical Batarian Reaper and all along Harper had found one.

But she knew she'd get the information quicker if she just let this play out.

"We sent a rescue team but they failed to report in after they docked," Harper paused as if waiting for a reaction but Shepard held her peace.

His electronic eyes burned bright even as the rest of his face was in shadow and not for the first time Shepard wondered where the red dwarf that offered such a spectacular backdrop was located.

He stubbed out the cigarette and punched something into the haptic interface that sprang up from the arm of his chair.

"I'm sending you all the details we have and full mission reports," he looked at her again, "there is an IFF on that ship somewhere that we believe will get you access to the Omega 4 relay, without it we cannot progress the mission against the Collectors. I have every confidence that you will succeed on this mission where our teams failed."

She spoke for the first time after checking on her OT that the data had transferred, "So let's get this straight shall we, this is a search and rescue mission?"

"If you like Shepard but the most important mission objectives are to secure the IFF and remove the threat on the ship that has obviously taken down both Cerberus teams. We need that ship Commander we can learn so much about our enemy so I will have science and security teams in system to re-secure the Reaper once you have completed your mission," he picked up a glass and swirled it a little before taking a drink then continued, "you are unusually quiet Commander, do we have a problem?"

"No problem Harper, I'm just done expending energy on you until we are in the same room and then I'll have plenty to say."

She cut the connection but continued to stare into the space where the QEC conjured image of Harper had been only seconds before.

"And you can go screw yourself if you think I'll leave that Reaper intact for you to mess with Harper. Even dead Reapers are dangerous and I have good idea what happened to your people," Shepard said quietly giving voice to her thoughts and the promise that she would destroy the Reaper ship whatever it took.
Normandy – two hour's post Cerberus call

Tash settled in front of the FTL connection in Shepard's quarters waiting for her call to connect with Omega.

The card game had been cut short after her cousins meeting with Jack Harper and they were about to have the mission briefing. But she had managed to get permission for a very quick and very important call before they went comms dark.

The newly reinstated Alliance Captain had received special comms privileges as much on Liara's urging, so that her sister could keep in touch more often with her lover, as it was to ease Tash back into service life.

While she was waiting Tash let her thoughts roll back to her visit to Omega where she finally told Liselle how she felt. It had been a very different fifty hours for both of them.

The first emotional meld had shocked Tash with its depth of connection, the closeness they achieved and the added layers to their love making which gave her a deep sense of peace that lasted even after their joining had faded away.

The lover's already had a very healthy sexual relationship and the emotional side was developing the same way.

But there were moments when her old self-doubt and the nightmares came back and at those times Tash was convinced it wouldn't last. Or she convinced herself that it would be better for Liselle if she were to leave, or rather never return to Omega.

Her familiar pattern of self-destructive behaviour tried to reassert itself feeding her conviction that she was bound to do something stupid to fuck it up in the end so why prolong the agony.

Surprisingly the person on board ship who had caught her in her spiral and who Tash found she could talk to was Kasumi.

Tash's musings were interrupted by the FTL comms console sparking into life in front of her and a very familiar head and shoulders came into view.

"Hey sexy," Tash said with a broad grin, "you coming in or going out?"

Tash knew her lover well enough to know she was dressed for work, merc work.

"On my way out," Liselle replied and allowed a smile to life the corners of her mouth as she continued in a low voice, "Remember when I said if you made me miss you I'd have to hurt you…"

Tash laughed and leaned in closer to the monitor and said in a drawl, "well now, that particular feeling cuts both ways and I'm very much looking forward to you showing me how much of a pain I am to you when I get back."

They were interrupted by a call on Liselles' OT which she ignored but when she spoke it was in a frustrated tone and with a sigh, "fucking Talon's pushing it again and Aria wants us to run some interference on a deal they have going down…"

Tash cut in quickly, "that's ok babe I only called to let you know we're going comms silent so I won't…"

It was the young Asari's turn to cut across her lover this time, her full attention back on their call.
"Dammit Tasha I hate us not being able to watch each other's back," and then in a slightly less strained voice continued, "well being able to make sure you stay out the way of flying doors really," she finished with a smile that reached all the way to her voice.

They looked at each other in silence for a few moments and then Tash said, "So did you get anything sorted with the Admiral?"

During their all too brief time together on her visit to Omega Liselle had outlined her plan.

"If I have to leave Omega and you're going to stick with Shepard I'll ask my Asam to get me assigned to the Normandy... if it is the end of the Galaxy then we'll go down fighting together."

"Well only that I have a commission waiting for me and "we'll discuss your deployment" when I join up with the Citadel fleet was as much as I could get out of her." Liselle looked a little wistful as she continued, "do you know if this is it? It would be such a ride to hit the Omega 4 relay with you."

"No, but it's something big, I've got a briefing soon, we just had the order to prep for def con alpha," Tash knew they were running out of time so said what was on her mind, "don't take any risks Leece and watch Paul there's something not right about him."

Liselle gave her lover a huge grin, "ha this from the lunatic who's on a suicide mission," they both laughed but when Liselle spoke again she was serious, "I'll be fine and you know I don't trust anyone... don't be a hero Tasha, come back to me."

Tash nodded and before either of them could say anything else Liselle's OT started to ping out again.

"Go on, I'll be in touch the other side of this mission... I..." as Tash faltered to halt she switched tone and with a huge grin finished, "go kick those fuckers in the head and do the boss proud."

"Yeah you too," Liselle said softly and they both dropped the connection.

Normandy, CIC on approach to the coordinates for the dead Reaper – Mnemosyne, Hawking Eta

"Entering the Thorne System Commander and dropping to sub light," Joker's voice announced over comms.

Shepard struggled again with her feelings as she glanced across at Liara who was in full armour ready for the mission. She knew her bondmate was an effective and dangerous member of her ground team, even without the boost to her biotic power from the pregnancy; Shepard's conflict wasn't about Liara's ability to protect herself.

"From the data and schematics forwarded to us from the Cerberus science team we have this holo image of the Reaper ship," Miranda spoke as she put up the image in the space at the centre of the tactical stations.

Kasumi, who seemed to be dividing her attention between her console and the image suspended before them, said what Shepard had been thinking.

"They didn't finish mapping the thing and certainly didn't seem to get to the main drive core, I wonder if it's because they couldn't get in or because..." before Kas could finish her thought Liara cut across her.

"Because they went mad with indoctrination and stopped sending data," Liara looked across at Shepard and continued, "We will need to limit our exposure both in terms of numbers and length of
time on the ship."

Her comment drew nods from those involved and who were at their tactical stations including Garrus, Tash and Senna.

"It seems the expedition used their ship as an entrance into the Reaper perhaps that would be a good place to start," Miranda said intently scrutinising the place the tiny, in comparison, scientific vessel was attached to the huge ship.

"Agreed, on all points," Shepard said and continued looking up the gangway towards the cockpit, "Joker do we have visual sighting yet."

"Any moment…" but before Joker could finish speaking the ship began to shake and seemed to lurch from side to side.

So much so that those standing at their stations needed to hold themselves steady.

"The turbulence is from the atmosphere of the brown dwarf. The Reaper is caught in its gravity well but still holding an orbit or sorts that is stopping it from being drawn any closer and torn to pieces," Miranda spoke.

"So when we switch off or destroy the drive core it will fall into the star," Shepard stated a fact rather than asked a question.

All of a sudden the ship stopped its violent spasms and Shepard moved quickly to join Joker in the cockpit.

"We just entered the envelope of the Reaper's mass effect field," Edi's voice sounded in the cockpit, "but there are only minimal energy signatures the Reaper itself is inactive."

"Good to know," Shepard said, "let's do a circuit of the ship Joker."

Liara, Miranda and Garrus had joined her in the cockpit and they all took in the damage that the huge ship had sustained.

"Well it's good to know something can kill them and it must have been something pretty powerful," Garrus said, "there are some big holes in the side of that thing."

"I see the science ship and that must be the troop ship that has docked with it," Miranda's voice held question as she continued, "but what's that, is that another ship further along the hull."

"It is… it looks… Geth," Shepard and Garrus said the last word at the same time.

"That complicates things," Liara said and fixed Shepard with a pre-emptive stare as she continued, "nonetheless we should continue as planned."

Shepard gave up any hope of dissuading Liara from joining them on the mission and squaring her shoulders said as she began to follow the others out of the cockpit.

"Well let's get this done, Joker hold the Normandy a little way off," she paused and turned back making sure only her pilot could hear her.

"If that thing wakes up or even gives the impression of turning over in its sleep you get this ship and its crew as far away from here as quickly as possible," Shepard looked into Joker's face and to forestall the challenge forming on his lips she finished, "that is a direct order mister, log it Edi."
"Your order is logged Commander," Edi responded without hesitation.

Shepard moved quickly through the CIC and joined the others in the elevator but before she hit the button for the flight deck she called across to Miranda, "You have the con and my pilot has his orders."
**Chapter 62**

*A/N There is some sexy stuff in this chapter not as detailed as it has been in the past and I'd be interested in your feedback about that aspect of the story so far and going forward*

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**Aboard the Cerberus research ship docked with the dead Reaper, Hawking Eta**

They reached what was obviously the air lock between the science ship and the Reaper without incident.

No one was left aboard the ship although in places it appeared as if its crew had just walked away from what they were doing. Despite its brightly lit, pristine white ceramic and steel environment the ship held an eerie quality.

Tash was watching a vid feed of two of the crew talking to each other about shared memories which they had already seen plenty of as part of the mission briefing.

"So how long did it take before they started to go screwy," Tash said as she turned from the console, her shotgun butt resting on one hip and pointing straight up.

"From what we could tell from watching the feeds and reading their reports it started within the first few days," Liara said now approaching the air lock where Shepard was standing.

Shepard turned to face her team, squared her shoulders and made a decision.

"We'll split into two teams and make our way to where we predict the main drive core, where what's left of the brain," she pulled a face despite herself, "is probably located.

"Garrus I want you to lead the second team and start out on this route." Shepard indicated one of the four main corridors that appeared to run the length of the ship and into the un-mapped areas.

Garrus nodded as Shepard continued, "I'll take Liara, Grunt, Tash and Quigley with me. Senna, Skark, O'Hooley and Karling with Garrus."

She noticed Jack moving towards her obviously about to volunteer her services but Shepard had noticed the proximity to the Reaper vessel was having more of an effect on the young biotic than the rest of the team.

"No Jack I need you in reserve in case we need backup later," Shepard said and her volatile team member looked a little mollified, "the rest of you back to the shuttle and back to the Normandy, did you get that Malenia," Shepard asked her shuttle pilot over her suit comms.

"Copy that Commander," Shepard could sense the question from her pilot but everyone knew better than to ask questions when a mission was live. Their Commander was more than happy to do a full mission debrief after they had achieved their objective.

Shepard punched the door lock and the inner door opened. When they were all in the chamber and the door had closed behind them she punched the door lock that would give them access to the Reaper ship.

They stepped out into what was obviously some form of corridor but it was only just wide enough for two non Krogan members of the team in full armour.
"Anyone notice anything a little off," Shepard asked over suit comms while they were setting up their body and helmet lights.

"According to my readings the atmosphere is breathable air," Liara said quietly.

"And we have gravity," Garrus said and then continued, "so just how many hostiles can we assume are wandering around this ship?"

"Combined total between the science team and the troops sent after them should be about ninety," Shepard said and for a moment wondered if they should stick together as one team.

"Well with the size of these corridors we'd only be able to use half our firepower if we stuck together," Tash said bringing nods from Garrus and Shepard.

"Ok, let's do this… Normandy actual this is Normandy away team Alpha leader do you read us," Shepard said in a final comms check.

"Loud and clear Commander and we have your tracking beacons on the board," Miranda responded clearly in her clipped professional tone.

They had been moving at a steady pace for about an hour along the seemingly endless corridor. Their helmet and suit lights offering the only light and casting dancing shadows around the tube that was home to thick cabling which probably served essential services for the ship when it had been alive.

'Alive,' Shepard thought, 'well I won't trust you're safely dead until you hit the atmosphere of the dwarf that's calling you.'

The tension they were all feeling was demonstrated by the lack of their usual light hearted banter and the occasional ripple of enhanced tension when they lost sight of the end of the corridor as it drifted slowly and continually to the right.

The silence only broken by regular check in's with the other team who were in exactly the same situation.

"Feels like were walking through this things intestines," Tash said quietly to no one in particular, "and I'm assuming… you know sentient ship doesn't need a crew… so why the capacity to provide an environment for organics?"

Liara answered and spoke in just as quiet a tone, "I suspect that all Reaper ships have the capacity to carry indoctrinated troops or workers for different purposes."

"Yeah they'll need organics around to worship their giant fucking egos," Shepard said in a growl.

At that moment something caught her eye and she held up a fist, "switch to infra-red," and in answer the team switched their normal LED lights to infra-red spectrum.

Just as they did what looked like three or four heat signatures appeared a long way ahead of them just where the corridor drifted out of their line of sight.

The team took up their positions with Tash and Shepard standing shoulder to shoulder, Liara and Quigley kneeling in front of them and Grunt at the rear. That gave everyone in the fire team a clear shot on whatever was coming up the corridor.

They waited, breathing slowed and fully ready to shoot as soon as the order from Shepard to fire was
"On three, two, one," and a beat later the team opened fire unleashing a firestorm at what now had grown to a group of around ten or twelve.

Depending on their weapons they fired in short bursts, single rounds or longer bursts and switching to another weapon during main weapon cool down.

"Cease firing," Shepard yelled above the noise when she was convinced they had destroyed everything coming at them.

Liara and Quigley stood and moved back leaving Shepard and Tash to take the lead down the corridor and when they were within twenty paces of the fallen bodies Shepard called out for lights.

They moved closer to the pile of bodies which they were going to have to walk over to get past.

"What the fuck have they done to themselves," it was Tash's voice but it was certainly what Shepard was thinking.

Liara was scanning the bodies as she spoke, "I believe they have only partly been turned into husks… they are what used to be the science team I believe… as for the Cerberus troopers they still appear mostly human but have been implanted with some form of cybernetics."

She leaned down to get a closer look at a trooper's head and continued, "see here where the implant is on the forehead but then these veins of black…" she was interrupted and everyone jumped as the trooper she was pointing at opened its eyes and grabbed Liara's arm.

In the split second after it happened Shepard moved between Liara and the trooper and started shooting the arm at the shoulder joint and Tash put shotgun rounds into its head at point blank range.

But Liara's own defences had put her beyond danger instantly as even without conscious thought she had put up a barrier that had forced the grasping hand to let go of her.

"I think it is definitely dead now Shepard," Liara said gently as her bondmate continued to spray it with rounds.

Shepard snapped out of her fury at the creature that dared lay a hand on Liara and allowed herself a nod of the head.

"Let's keep moving," Shepard said gruffly and they all followed her over the pile of bodies as she updated Garrus on their encounter and the enhanced nature of their enemy.

A little under another hour they reached what was a spur off the conduit, as they finally recognised that's what the structure was, and the new corridor showed more promise. It was wider and didn't seem to carry the bundles of cables and circuitry that had kept them company for the first part of their journey.

So far Garrus's team had not encountered any resistance at all but they had come across junctions in their conduit which looks like more of the same.

They began to move down the corridor when Edi's voice sounded over their suit comms.

"Commander I have picked up a very faint resonance which matches the IFF from the Collector vessel we encountered."
"Can you guide us to it Edi," Shepard asked her ship's AI.

"I can Commander but it is much closer to the other team's position."

"Copy that, Garrus do you copy," Shepard said, "I need your team to find that IFF unit and get it to the Normandy."

"Understood Shepard," Garrus responded.

"Well it looks as if our job is all about blowing this thing to hell

"Business as usual boss," Tash said the smirk evident in her voice.

They continued on down the corridor and as they closed on the wide opening at its end they could see pulsating blue light.

Shepard's helmet HUD started flashing red with warnings of dangerous levels of Eezo and very high temperatures.

"Ok looks like we found the main core and its leaking Eezo into the environment," Shepard looked around and saw everyone's HUD flashing the same notifications.

"Joker we'll need a rally point close to our location," Shepard said and indicated the team to follow her into whatever lay beyond the corridor.

They stepped into what appeared to be a large chamber lit only by the pulsating blue light of the ships drive core which stood off to their left a long distance away. Their infra-red lights would be of no use now given the high temperatures in the room so they switched to their LED helmet and suit lights.

Shepard caught the signs of movement in front of the drive core on some kind of platform and as she brought her weapon up and focussed its sight she heard the tell-tale sound of shots zipping past her.

She saw a Geth sniper with its weapon trained in their direction but before she could fire back she was interrupted by both Tash and Grunt shouting over their suit comms.

"Behind us," Tash said as she veered around and started firing at the scientist husks lurching towards them.

They formed up quickly and Shepard stored away the question that had formed about the Geth sniper for when they were in a better tactical situation.

"There must be forty of them and those Cerberus troopers are pretty hard to take down," Quigley said over the sound of constant gunfire.

"We're too exposed here keep moving back towards that platform," Shepard said, "Tash take Quigley and try to secure it."

For a full five minutes the main group kept firing, switching out weapons to allow for cooldown, while Liara used her biotics to keep smashing their enemy's away when they got to close.

"Platform had some visitors on it but its secure now boss," Tash's voice rang out and continued, "and your path to us is clear for the moment."

"Everyone back to the platform," Shepard shouted as she also began jogging backwards still firing into the seemingly endless husks and modified troopers that were rolling into the space.
Once everyone was on the platform Liara threw up a temporary barrier which seemed to hold the oncoming tide back.

"It was down when we got here," Tash said indicating the Geth unit that was lying on the floor.

"Quigley, Liara, Grunt keep shooting them… Tash set the explosive charges," Shepard said and she too started to focus fire on some of the more persistent troopers that were looking for ways around the barrier.

"Beta team this is Alpha do you copy," Shepard said in between bursts on her mattock.

"Loud and clear," Garrus's voice held an edge of concern as he continued, "we have located and secured the IFF device do you need us to rally on your position, sounds like you're having all the fun?"

"Negative Garrus I want… focus fire on those two troopers now everything on them now… Normandy I need you to pick up Beta away team now and then find me a rally point within running distance of my position do you copy."

"Copy that Commander," Miranda's voice filled Shepard's helmet and she knew she was on a private channel, "we will need to punch another hole in the hull where it is already fractured close to your position there is no other way off that ship unless you go back the way you came… but it will be…"

"Dangerous yes Miranda but trying to fight our way back or sitting here for much longer are both unacceptable," Shepard replied and then over main comms said, "Normandy let us know when you are in position ready to open the door."

Shepard knew that blowing yet another hole in the Reaper's hull especially in an already weakened section could just cause a chain reaction possibly causing the ship to break up completely but there was no other way around it.

For the next twenty minutes they kept the main force of indoctrinated and enhanced thralls at bay steadily reducing their numbers but not by enough. There were still enough of them to overwhelm the team if they got in 'under' their guns.

After what seemed like a life time their comms sparked up again with welcome news.

"Commander we have the Beta team aboard and the Normandy is ready at these coordinates ready to punch through on your command," the coordinates that reached everyone's OT's put the Normandy off to their left on the other side of the Reaper hull.

"Copy that Normandy, hit it on my mark," Shepard turned to Tash and said, "set the charges for T minus five, Liara I'm going to need you to clear us a path from here to that bulkhead, everyone when I say run for it we go and don't look back, do you copy."

She looked around her team and although still firing they all either nodded or gave her a verbal affirmative.

"What about that," Tash kicked out at the fallen Geth.

"We take it with us," Shepard had also noticed the thing had what looked like a piece of N7 armour on its right arm and she wanted to know if Geth were hunting for trophies now.

"Normandy breach now, breach now, breach now," Shepard said and a split second later they saw
an explosion rip a hole in the ships bulkhead, "three, two, one."

Again after a silent beat Tash hit the countdown on the charges, Liara turned and threw a huge shockwave clearing their path to the breach.

Shepard lifted the Geth unit onto her shoulder and still firing followed her team towards their jump off point.

The atmosphere inside the Reaper was oozing out through the new hull breach but not with any force.

When Tash reached the hull breach she could see the Normandy holding position a little way off and as Quigley reached her she helped the marine to launch off in the direction of the open doors and the safety of the air lock.

Willing hands including Garrus and Miranda were waiting to pull their crewmates to safety. Next to take the run and jump was Grunt and as Liara arrived she looked back to see Shepard still running towards them being chased by the hoard.

But Shepard shouted a command and Liara had no choice but to obey if she was ever to join a ground mission again.

"Liara jump then you Tash… move," her last word was shouted and by the time she reached the jump off point her team were all safely in on the Normandy.

Shepard threw the limp body of the Geth trooper off and turned to shoot two troopers who were within arms distance of her before turning and jumping as hard as she could for the small doorway.

She heard the ping of weapons fire hitting her shields but fire was now being returned from the Normandy and as she reached the safety of the air lock most of her 'followers' had either given up or been dispatched by weapons fire from Garrus, Tash and Grunt.

Miranda hit the air lock outer door to close it as Shepard gave the command to her pilot, "Get us the fuck away from here Joker and relay my compliments to the Cerberus ships in system but there is nothing here for them."

**Captain's cabin, Normandy – two hours post mission**

Shepard and Liara entered their cabin still discussing the call with Harper that had just ended.

"Honestly it's one of the very small pleasures I get from working with that bastard," Shepard said moving towards the drink station, "telling him I sank his precious Reaper ship just to stop him having it."

"Well I am still not sure why he would expect you to behave any differently," Liara said sitting down on their small sofa, "he must know you will not hand him any advantage from the work you are doing, thank you," Liara finished noting the tea that Shepard had set down before her.

"Yeah, maybe he thinks that at some point I'll just start believing all his bullshit about it being for the greater good of humanity… humanity my arse it's all about the greater good for Cerberus and that mean's Harper," Shepard said as she sat down with her drink.

"So…” Shepard turned and took Liara's hands in her own and studying them became lost in thought.

"What is it," Liara's quiet question brought her lover's eye's up to meet her.
"I… it's…" Shepard took a deep steadying breath and started again, "this is all about my fear Lee, and I know nothing will change… nothing should… I don't want to make you… for fuck's sake," the accomplished naval officer squared her shoulders and ploughed past the amusement playing across her lover's face, "I'm having a hard time thinking about you coming on away team missions Lee."

"And my actually being on the missions," Liara said quietly but still allowing a small smile to play across her lips. Shepard only nodded so Liara continued, "I have terrible time thinking about you being on missions my love, even when I am on them with you. But we know that nowhere is truly safe and certainly will not be once the Reapers arrive.

"You can try to keep my wrapped up in soft stasis fields as much as you like but you need me with you as much as I need to be with you," Liara lifted one of her hands to her lover's cheek, "I am as safe on your team as I am anywhere else in the galaxy and I believe I earn my place on your team do I not?"

It had always been something that Liara worried over in the early days. Whether Shepard choose her for mission's because of their relationship or if she truly held her place through merit.

Shepard responded quickly with a concerned tone, "Of course you earn your place Lee your one of the finest and highly skilled specialists I've ever worked with," she continued in a gruffer tone, "I don't know what I'd do if I… lost you on a mission or… had to…"

Shepard's words trailed off and she had gone back to examining Liara's hands again.

Liara bent her head a little and putting a finger under Shepard's chin lifted it so they could lock eyes once again.

"You will win this war my love, you will end the Reapers and all who have been tainted by them," Shepard made to speak but Liara pressed on, "no Shepard whatever happens to me, the Normandy, to anyone else on your crew or all of it… as long as you draw breath you will carry on and you will complete your mission."

They both had tears in their eyes and Liara pulled her lover into an embrace and they held each other silently for a minute or so.

"I won't be able to do it without you Lee," Shepard said in a whisper her face tucked into her lovers neck.

"You will do it for me my love and you have never failed me," Liara said quietly her cheek gently rubbing against Shepard's head the sensation of the hair almost tickling.

Liara pulled back so that she could again look into her lovers face, "are we clear on your mission parameters Commander?" she said with a smile determined to lighten the mood.

Shepard gave her a huge grin that reached all the way to her eyes, "ma'am, yes ma'am."

They both closed the distance between them and felt their lips touch with light kisses at first and then deepening as their passions rose.

Shepard began unbuttoning the light shirt as Liara pulled her lover's top from where it was tucked into trousers giving her hands free reign over the firm breasts.

With Liara's shirt now open Shepard pushed it roughly down over shoulders and with her lovers cooperation she removed the shirt and the unfastened bra with it.
Liara, who had relinquished her exploration to remove her own shirt, now pulled Shepard's t-shirt up and over the human's head leaving them both free of clothing on the top of their bodies.

Finding each other's lips again they stood up unsteadily as they continued kissing Liara's hands tangled in her lovers' hair, her breath hitching in her chest as she felt Shepard's strong arms holding her tight.

Shepard tumbled first onto the bed backwards pulling Liara with her and as their breath quickened they began to move against each other.

Shepard's hands now gripped Liara's hips encouraging her grinding movement as their meld deepened.

Liara began moving down Shepard's body kissing and biting as she went while two sets of hands undid the soldiers' trousers. Liara drifted her tongue down further finding the muscled, taut stomach continuing on until she found her lovers hairline.

In one movement Liara stood and pulled trousers and underwear off her lover's body then, as Shepard moved further up the bed a smile playing around her lips, she completed her own undressing.

When Liara's mouth found Shepard's heat they felt their need and desire take control of them; bodies moving to the rhythm of passion, hands and mouths searching out secret, known places to enhance pleasure.

Shepard felt their climax crash through her like powerful waves of pristine ocean washing her clean and grounding her in the moment. Liara's echoing climax was no less powerful and despite the release they knew they were not sated.

Much later, lying on her back Liara's head resting on her chest a soft blue arm and leg body draped across her, Shepard allowed a satisfied sigh escape her lips. The ripples of their last orgasm still tracing through their bodies, Liara's wetness still on her fingers, her mind still and at peace.

"I love you so much Lee," Shepard said quietly a holding Liara a little tighter to her, "You are the air I breathe and the light that guides me."

Liara murmured something that was hard to make out and Shepard smiled to herself sensing her lover drifting into sleep.

She allowed her thoughts to run to the conversation that had prompted their desperate lovemaking. A universe with no Liara in it wasn't one worth saving a huge part of her still believed, but she had made a promise and she would keep it.

More importantly she would do absolutely everything to make sure the universe did not lose Liara T'Soni.

Shepard felt consciousness creep into her mind and immediately also felt the warm soft body against her back, mirroring her body, light breath on the back of her neck.

She brought the relaxed blue hand to her lips and kissed it gently. Sighed with contentment and then slipped forward and out of bed.

Turning she looked down at the sleeping Asari in her bed. So beautiful, so vulnerable, so strong and with those thoughts Shepard pulled the covers over her lover, and with a kiss to the relaxed brow walked away and up to the shower room.
Ten minutes later in fresh BDU’s she quietly left their room and headed to the mess deck.

Shepard found her early morning ship walkabout an essential part of her routine. Eventually she had a chance for an informal chat with every member of the ship’s crew who all took night watch duty at some point on the roster.

She knew her ground teams much better given she worked and trained alongside them on a very regular basis. But Shepard needed to make sure she kept in touch with her ship board teams and her morning sojourns around the ship were one of the key ways of achieving that.

It was how she knew Cassidy was worried about his sister's family on one of the colony worlds that bordered the Terminus system given that he had already lost his parents and an older brother and his family to one of the earliest Collector raids.

And how she knew that one of her youngest specialists on the crew was concerned she had made the wrong choice about her specialism thinking that tactical analysis wasn't as important as having more weapons based training.

Some of her crew's problems she could help with in practical ways or with solid advice but for a lot of their issues she could only listen and offer her understanding and her support.

This morning she would also need to address the issue of the Geth they had brought aboard yesterday and so at the end of her usual routine she found herself in the aft cargo storage bay where they had set up an enhanced faraday cage which was currently storing the Geth unit.

Shepard looked at the unit which appeared to have folded in on itself, "Edi what's its status."

"Once the unit was able to access the power we made available it seems to have spent the time recharging and carrying out some repair work," Edi’s voice rang out across the space, "it has made no attempt to communicate in any way."

Shepard nodded and then walking a little closer she spoke to the Geth unit.

"I am Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy and I want to know why I shouldn't just throw you out an airlock or give you to the scientists to experiment on?"

She took up a relaxed stance but tensed a little as the unit unfurled itself until it was standing and appeared to look at her with its flashlight head.

"We know who you are Shepard Commander, we were waiting for you on the old machine," the voice was modulated a little like a Turian's but without the nuances and with a much more mechanistic tone.

"Before we get to why you could possibly want to speak to me I need to know why you're wearing N7 armor. And who did you kill to get it," this would be the make or break question for Shepard she needed an honest answer anything less and she would have Edi zap the thing to molten metal.

"It belongs to you Shepard Commander," the Geth unit said and continued, "When you disappeared we were sent to find you. We started at the place you first encountered the heretics.

"Eden Prime," Shepard said relaxing a little and crossing her arms over her chest.

"It is now very heavily defended and that is where we were shot by an Alliance soldier," Legion appeared to be looking at the hole in his right hand chest armor, "then we carried on to all the locations you went to fight the heretics."
"The trail ended at the site of the destruction of the Normandy."

"So you've been trying to find me for two years?" Shepard asked and then followed up quickly, "why?"

"Shepard Commander opposes the Geth heretics, Shepard Commander opposes the old machines, Shepard Commander killed one of the heretic gods the one known as Nazara that you call Sovereign. The heretics would force all Geth to join the old machines it is more efficient for us to work together."

"You're going to have to convince me that as machines you would want to fight against a machine race," Shepard shifted her weight and rubbed the back of her neck. She had Edi constantly running scans and evaluations of the Geth in front of her and so far it had not tried any form of attack on their systems.

"The heretics do not wish to allow this schism between Geth to remain. They are going to force their solution on the Geth and they have developed a weapon to be used, you would call it a virus, it is stored on a data core provided by Sovereign. Over time the virus will change us and make us believe that worshipping the old machines is correct."

"So we'd end up at war with all Geth rather than the ones that have spilt, the ones you call heretics. But I thought Geth couldn't be affected by viruses?" Shepard asked and before the Geth could answer Edi spoke.

"It would probably be something subtle in the basic runtimes, Commander would it be possible for the Geth to share what they know about the virus so that I can advise you more effectively."

"Yeah go ahead," Shepard said knowing that at some point they'd have to let the Geth out of the cage if she was going to try to work with them.

"It is as your ship AI platform has explained a minute change to our basic runtimes would result in errors in higher functions. Geth believe all intelligent life should self-determinate the heretics no longer believe this. Geth wish to build our own future while the heretics wish the old machines to give them the future."

"So how many of you are there this side of the Veil?" Shepard checked her OT with data that Edi was feeding her which all seemed to tally with what the Geth was telling her.

"We are the only local platform, we wish to observe not incite, we are aware organics fear us," the Geth unit said and then slightly hesitantly, "with the information we retrieved from the old machines data core we believe we can break into the storage device that the heretics are using. Shepard Commander we feel it is urgent that we attempt to stop the heretics before they can set the virus loose and we need your help to do this."

"Edi I want you to… exchange data with… what's your name?" Shepard said realising she couldn't just keep calling 'it' Geth.

"We are Geth."

"What is the individual in front of me called?"

"There is no individual we are Geth, there are currently one thousand, one hundred and eighty three programmes running on this platform."

"Commander if I may help to shorten the conversation might I suggest 'we are called Legion for we
are many’?” Edi said and Shepard wondered if her ship's AI had recognised her growing frustration from her rising biometrics.

"Christian bible, gospel of Mark, we acknowledge this is an appropriate metaphor, we are Legion a terminal of the Geth. We will integrate into Normandy."

"Drop the barriers Edi and make sure the crew are aware we have a new team member," Shepard said as she reached out a hand and waited for the Geth to work out what it was for.

Legion took it and they shook hands which seemed just about as bizarre a thing that Shepard could have imagined happening at any time but particularly before she'd even had her second coffee of the day.

"Follow me and we'll get you a terminal, Edi can you sort something out in the CIC please," she turned and started walking to the exit then stopped and turned to face the Geth who had begun to follow her.

"You never answered why you came looking for me specifically?"

"You fought and killed the heretics and killed their god. You succeeded where others did not, your code is superior."

Shepard took a deep breath remembering all the other lives that had given 'her' that victory but she let it pass and followed on with the other question that was nagging at her, "that doesn't explain why you used my armor to fix yourself?"

Shepard had gotten used to 'reading' body language and non-human faces and for a split second she thought she saw the Geth unit in front of her look shifty but she let it pass as nothing more than the usual human need to anthropomorphosis everything.

"There was a hole."

A slow smile crept across Shepard's mouth and as she turned and continued towards the door she said over her shoulder, "and you haven't found anything more suitable since."

"No data available," Legion said.

"I believe you should stop baiting our latest crew member now Shepard," Edi said with a hint of amusement.

Liara sighed and stretched rolling onto her back and slowly opening her eyes.

Her body felt relaxed and she could still feel the echo of Shepard's fingers inside her and almost immediately felt a dull ache of need. They made love almost every night unless they were truly exhausted or they were on opposite shifts which happened sometimes with Shadow Broker work or official business for the Republic and mission timings.

But when they couldn't make love at night they always found some time at some point and Liara knew they would both miss that connection, that contact when she had to head back to Thessia in a few days.

She had been away far too long and there was much official business she had been delegating that needed her presence.

Shepard was still having the nightmares but they were not as often and not as overwhelming as they
had been according to Shepard and Edi who Liara had had a long conversation with shortly after her arrival on board.

The panic attacks or flashbacks or whatever they truly were that her love had been experiencing at other times had all but disappeared with only mild flashes that Shepard had been able to calm herself through with support from Liara.

They had meditated together and it was a practice that Liara was encouraging Shepard to keep up even after she had returned to Thrassica. The particular meditation had been designed by Lady El'Estrene especially for this purpose.

As Liara lay there she let the memories of their love making return to her mind and her body. She felt Shepard between her thighs, pushing inside her, filling her up. Her own hands wandered down her body and when she reached between her thighs she was wet and throbbing with need.

Liara moaned with frustration but threw the covers off and jumped out of bed.

"A cold shower will sort you out Liara T'Soni what in the name of the Goddess has gotten into you," she said to herself but as she got to the top of the steps the door to the cabin opened and Shepard stepped inside.

"For fucks sake T'Soni could you look any more sexy," and in one movement Shepard closed the distance between them and swept her lover into her arms heading back to the bed.

"Shepard we have to get up," Liara said with no particular conviction biting her lovers' ear.

"Yeah right like that was going to happen with you standing there naked and… you know just being sexy as hell," Shepard threw her lover onto the bed and stripped out of her clothes.

She joined Liara in bed quickly picking up where they left off and as she moved between the soft thighs in between kisses she said.

"But when we do get up I need to tell you about a conversation I've just had with the Tin Man."

Liara's question was swept away with their need for connection, their desire for each other, and their demand for time to stand still in the glorious bubble of bliss they created for one another.
Normandy conference room – seventy six galactic standard hours post conversation with Legion

Shepard walked into the room at speed still examining a data pad she was holding.

"Officer on deck," Tash said beginning to stand along with the other Alliance crew members.

With a wave of her hand Shepard said, "stand easy" and took a seat at the head of the table.

The comms and tech team who used the large and well networked space for their work had cleared out and she was left with her officers and specialists.

"So," she started putting the pad down and looking around, "we have a bit of a problem. As you know we've been planning to take a run at the Geth Heretic station Haratar in the Sea of Storms which must move forward. But I've just had a rescue mission handed to me that I need to personally attend to and, of course, it needs to be actioned as a priority."

"Can we run the rescue then move to the Haratar Station straight after," Garrus said looking from Shepard to Legion.

"Vakarian Officer we are unable to predict accurately how long before the heretics attempt to upload the virus into the FTL comm buoys," Legion replied and Shepard nodded her agreement.

"No we need to move forward with both mission's, and… I may have to take the rescue mission on my own," Shepard finished as sounds of dissent broke out around the table.

"That flies in the face of all standard operating procedures and protocols surely you have to have some backup with you?" It was Miranda who managed to speak first but Shepard could see everyone else agreeing.

"I may be able to take one or two marines with me but we'll need to be careful it's an extraction from a Batarian outpost in the Bahak system," more discomfort around the table and looks of unease but Shepard pressed on, "if we're discovered it must not be connected back to the Alliance for obvious reasons."

"Let me come with you Shepard we can do the merc thing again," Garrus said in an urgent tone, "it will be a diplomatic incident either way."

"I don't want to risk any finger pointing at any of the other races, but look I don't intend to get caught," she smiled, "I was doing this sort of thing before I met any of you, I think I can manage a prison break."

The mood lightened although Shepard noticed that Tash was still looking concerned.

"Anyway, we need to get things moving quickly so I'm going to put Garrus in charge of the Heretic mission with Legion who will obviously be a vital member of that team. And I want you there as well Miranda. I'd suggest we concentrate on tech specialist support with some firepower for the rest of the team."

Shepard knew that sending Miranda on the mission was probably overkill but as she couldn't be there she wanted to cover all the bases.
This was greeted with nods but before Shepard could push on Tash spoke up.

"I should lead the rescue mission, you can run it from the Normandy boss but you should not put yourself at risk in Batarian space… they aren't your biggest fans."

Shepard laughed, "Hell Tash the list of the people in this Galaxy that would like to wear my head as a trophy is much longer than the Batarian government," she considered her next words carefully.

Admiral Hackett had been clear that this was a personal favour to him as much as anything. The science team in trouble were an off books, deep cover, black op that had good dark and its leader was a personal friend so it was all about very quiet damage limitation and removing Alliance fingerprints from whatever the Batarian's could or had discovered.

"I appreciate the offer Tash but I will need to be boots on the ground for intel reasons, but I will take a couple of marines with me. It will be very clean and a very quick in and out," Shepard said and thought 'and blowing up anything that we may have in that system that could lead back to the Alliance'.

With a quick look around the table Shepard finished, "so we'll make all speed to the Bahak system where I'll get dropped off dirtside in a shuttle. Then you take out the Heretic Station and come back to pick me up."

She stood to indicate the meeting was over. There was still plenty of planning to do and she needed to decide who to take with her onto Aratoht.

Three hours later and making good progress to the Viper Nebula Shepard was in her cabin looking over all the intel she had for the operation that Doctor Kenson was heading up.

She closed her eyes and let her mind drift to her goodbyes with Liara almost a day ago.

They had rendezvoused with one of the Republic's frigates and were left to say their final farewell in the aft airlock where the two vessels had linked together.

"Have you got everything," Shepard said passing the small bag to her bondmate.

Liara smiled and reached out a hand to stroke Shepard's face, "I believe so, I really wish I did not have to go but there are many things demanding my presence," she said sadly.

"Yeah and you'll have more fires to put out once word gets out I've added a real live Geth to my crew," Shepard said and pulled Liara into an embrace, "and as soon as possible I'm going to need to go make nice with the Quarian's."

Liara sighed audibly and kissed Shepard, "It is sure to complicate things but I cannot help but feel it is something positive. I will be back as soon as I can my love."

Shepard held Liara's face in her hands and gave her a long but gentle kiss before stepping back and smiling, "give my love to our boy and try to enjoy yourself as much as you can."

Returning the smile Liara turned and walked through into her frigate and with a final nod closed the door.

Shepard's recollection was interrupted by her door buzzer and she pulled herself back to the present, "come in."

"Shepard I hope I'm not disturbing you," Mordin said moving into the room.
"Of course not always a pleasure, can I get you a drink," Shepard stood up from her desk and indicated for him to move down to the sofa whilst taking herself to the drinks dispenser.

"Yes that would be acceptable," he said in his usual fast and clipped delivery. "Wanted to talk about IFF Shepard. Not like anything I've seen. Not the usual fare at all, need patience, need to make sure we get it working. If not, then Omega relay will not fire, all our work wasted," he took the drink she was offering and seemed to have come to a stop.

"Yeah not to mention we might get creamed on the other side if it doesn't give off the right signals," Shepard said studying her drink before continuing, "we'll take all the time we need, you're working with Edi on it?"

"Yes very helpful, would not have as much information as we have without her," Mordin said.

They sat in silence for a few minutes finished their drinks and then started chatting as they often did over another drink. Shepard enjoyed her talks with Mordin which often ended with them discussing some very esoterical subjects.

Shepard had been glad of the company and the brandy she had not been looking forward to sleeping alone and was thankful that when she did turn in she found sleep fairly easily.

**Normandy flight deck, Bahak System, stealth orbit over Aratoht**

"You're absolutely sure you just want to take Carter and Mills with you?" Tash said as Shepard and her team were making their final checks before jumping aboard the shuttle.

Shepard grinned at her and said, "It'll be fine Tash, by the time you've picked the team up from Haratar I should be ready for pick up," she started to turn to board the shuttle but then turned back to her cousin.

"Don't break my ship," she said mock seriously and took Tash's forearm in a traditional warrior farewell, then with a final nod she jumped on the shuttle.

Tash stood on the deck and watched the shuttle leave feeling completely at a loss as to what she should do.

She knew the mechanics of being the temporary executive officer of course; they covered all that in the academy. But she'd never had command of a ship before and started to panic when it was decided Garrus and more importantly Miranda would make their own way to their mission coordinates while the Normandy took its captain into Batarian space.

Making her way back up to the CIC she walked all the way through to the cockpit and stood behind Joker's chair.

Joker turned his seat around after a few moments and looked at her for a few moments then said, "you know you might want to try looking less terrified in front of the crew… and… you know… not lurk up here."

Although his words held his usual edge of sarcasm Tash felt he was trying to be supportive which worried her even more.

'Get it together Tash if Joker's feeling sorry for you then you're properly up shit creek.' She thought still with no idea what she should really be doing.
Edi broke the silence, "the shuttle is returning Captain once secure you will want us to head back to the Terminus System?"

"Yep, that's it, thank you Edi," she said and Joker turned back to his controls slowly shaking his head.

The journey to the pick-up point for the away team in the Viper Nebula was uneventful and Tash was very happy to see the XO back on board the ship and to relinquish her first ship command.

**Normandy, Bahak System – fifty six hours after dropping off Shepard for the rescue mission**

"Joker keep us out of sight of that Batarian cruiser at all costs," Miranda said the tension clear in her voice.

They had been playing tag with a couple of Batarian frigates and a cruiser for the last twelve hours waiting for contact from Shepard and her away team.

"That was the general idea… but you know… Batarian's have windows in their ships unlike the Geth…" Joker replied in a sardonic tone.

"Stow the sarcasm pilot and just get it done," Miranda said tersely.

"Someone's been channelling Shepard," Joker said quietly although obviously meaning to be heard but before Miranda could respond one of the tactical stations gave and update.

"The asteroid will impact with the relay in 25 mikes," the young specialist tasked with updating the XO with minutes to impact said.

The tension in the CIC and across the rest of the ship was almost palpable, they had not heard from their CO for over forty eight hours the only update a call to confirm the team had the package and were off planet heading to the Alliance science team's base on a nearby asteroid.

On the flight deck Tash, Garrus and a full ground team were suited up and waiting for the go order to drop onto the asteroid and try to find their Commander.

"If we leave it much later we won't make it down and back up before that asteroid goes boom into the fucking relay," Tash said angrily.

She had been pushing for them to send the away team to the asteroid for hours and Garrus had not disagreed with her.

"You know what Shepard's orders were Tash, she was explicit when she called on her way to the base… comms dark and wait for her call," he said with not much conviction but trying his best to support the XO's decision and Shepard's orders.

"This mission stunk the place up from the start and my gut tells me it's gone completely sideways Garrus, tell me you disagree," she said staring him down then over main comms she spoke directly to Miranda.

"Permission to launch CSAR mission now before we run out of time," her voice barely holding back its contempt for the woman in charge of the ship.

"Captain Mikhailovich we have been through this before we don't have the Commander's tracking
beacon on the board we don't even know if she is in the facility on the asteroid. If we need to bug out quickly I don't want a team stranded off ship," Miranda sounded her usual calm and detached self but inside she was wracked with doubt and was holding on to Shepard's orders more as a lifeline than anything else.

"We have her beacon and there is an incoming transmission," Kasumi said a little breathlessly from her tactical station in the CIC.

Shepard's voice came over comms loud and clear "Shepard to Normandy can you read me."

"Normandy to Shepard we read you," Miranda said but there was no response, "do we have a position on the Commander's beacon."

"Affirmative she is near the comm tower but our return broadcasts seem to be blocked," Edi said.

"Joker all speed and I don't care who sees us," Miranda said, "away team move to the aft air lock to prepare to pick up Shepard and provide tactical support if necessary."

Miranda received confirmation from both Joker and Garrus to her orders and then waited watching the asteroid on the holoprojector as it moved ever closer to the relay.

Tash and Garrus opened the air lock doors and stood in the doorway as the Normandy slowed and came alongside the platform where, with much relief, they saw Shepard standing.

She was on her own meaning she was two down on her team.

She jumped aboard and even before they secured the exterior doors she said, "Get us the hell out of here Joker."

Both Garrus and Tash gave her a welcome back slap on the shoulder and they received a nod in return.

Shepard moved quickly through the ship to the CIC removing her helmet as she went and closely followed by Tash and Garrus.

They arrived in time for the relay jump. Shepard stood looking at the Galaxy projection and within half a minute a super nova sized explosion ripped through the system they had just left.

"Commander your injured," Miranda said noticing how Shepard was standing and the blood on her face, "XO to med bay the Commander is on her way down with injuries."

Shepard was numb. Her actions had just caused the death of over three hundred thousand Batarian's and their slaves in that system. She was barely aware of being led back towards the elevator.

"Commander come and sit down please, help her out of her armor," Karin said to Tash and Garrus who had accompanied Shepard to the med bay.

Karin could see Shepard was in shock but she also suspected some intoxicants were in her system as her patients' pupils were highly dilated.

Once Shepard was on the med bed in her underwear Karin shooed the two visitors out and started her examination.

In the CIC Miranda was considering their options.

"LC the frigate that followed us through is going weapons hot," Joker said over comms.
"Set destination for Karumto research station, Yakawa. We've killed enough Batarian's today," Miranda said and continued, "It's on our list of possible Prothean artefacts."

"Aye, aye ma'am," Joker said and a few moments later they jumped to FTL.

"Lieutenant Moreau you have the conn I am going down to med bay," Miranda continued making her way to the elevator, "Lieutenant Curtis stand down all non-essential crew and reset to Defcon 1."

Walking past Garrus and Tash who were hanging about outside the med bay doors she entered and went to the office cubicle while doctor Chakwas completed her examination then treatment.

Ten minutes later the Doctor turned down the light over her patients' bed and joined Miranda sitting down behind her desk.

"When will she be up?" Miranda asked quietly, "there will be a bloody shit storm as soon as what's just happened reaches the Batarian Hegemony and I'm going to keep us dark until she is ready to face it."

"From the quick analysis I've done on her system she has been pumped with a very nasty sedative. Anyone with a… normal system would have been out for a week. I'm flushing them out of her system." Karin checked a data pad and continued, "She show's evidence of blunt force and explosive trauma to the body and there were some places on her armor that were almost breached with weapon fire and a massive concussion."

"Has she said anything?"

"Not a word," Karin said concern etched on her features, "no sign of her two marines?" Miranda responded with a shake of the head and the Doctor finished, "well the concussion should have receded in a few hours although she'll have a hell of a headache."

Miranda stood "thanks you Doctor I'll be in the CIC if you need me, I'll let you update Tash and Garrus."

And after receiving a nod from Doctor Chakwas Miranda left and headed straight back up to the CIC trying to imagine what had happened on the asteroid to end up with a shell shocked Shepard, two dead marines and three hundred thousand dead Batarian's.

Conference room, Normandy, six hours after leaving the Bahak system

Shepard was already sitting at the table nursing what looked like a hot mug of coffee as her team trickled in to take their seats.

She looked around the table at her specialist lead's Tash, Garrus, Kasumi, Mordin, Grunt, Ish, Jack, Miranda, Skark and Joker listening in from his usual place at the helm.

"I'm going to make this short as I've got a meeting with Admiral Hackett in thirty and I want to speak to one other member of the crew first. You can read my full mission report once the Admiral has had eyes on it but it is and probably will continue to be highly classified.

"I will speak to the crew a little later. I'm afraid the Normandy has been clearly identified as being in system but I will do everything I can to stop any taint attaching itself to any member of my crew because of my actions," there were one of two members who looked as if they were going to challenge what she had said but she held up and hand to stop them and then carried on.
"My mission was to rescue a deep cover operative, who was heading up a black ops science and research team, out of the Batarian facility. She had been arrested when she visited the planet to pick up more equipment. Long story short the retrieval was pretty uncomplicated. We only had to liquidate one Batarian guard although we might have singed a few others when we stole a shuttle to get off planet.

I returned Doctor Kenson to the facility on the asteroid where she told me we were on a countdown to the arrival of the Reapers and they had decided to smash the asteroid into the relay to top them. I was understandably suspicious and asked to see what proof she had.

They had piece of Reaper tech that was obviously some kind of beacon linked to the relay but it wasn't shielded and they locked me in the room with it hoping it would…" she broke off obviously at a loss for words. The faces around the table were all deadly serious.

"I don't know what they wanted or expected but we were overrun with troops and mechs and we fought them to a standstill… I'm afraid the Reaper tech was playing havoc with our comms and our ability to concentrate… I lost both my marines in that room before I finally went down to a couple of rocket blasts."

She took a slug from the coffee which Doctor Chakwas had fortified with some brandy.

"I woke up in a med bay about two days later with the countdown showing less than two hours before the invasion would start. Even though I was fighting indoctrinated security and the science team it was still quite a firefight to get to the controls and re-start the asteroids journey to slam the relay.

"Then Kenson decided to try to blow the fucking asteroid up to stop it so that took a little time to sort out," Shepard's smile was grim and laced with sarcasm.

When she didn't continue Garrus said gently.

"I'm sure you did all you could Shepard," but he was rewarded with a scowl.

"Hardly Garrus, I walked straight into a trap got Carter and Mills gunned down like dogs in the street and only gave the locals thirty minutes warning to evac the system…" she paused and then continued, "but I had a nice chat with Harbinger before you picked me up."

Shepard flicked her OT and a holographic image of the control platform with a huge holo image of a Reaper as viewed from Shepard's angle sat menacingly and when the audio played most around the table did their best not to shudder.

"Shepard you have become an annoyance," the deep rumbling tones electrified the air, "You fight against inevitability. You do not learn from your experience. Dust struggling against cosmic winds. This seems a victory to you. A star system sacrificed. But even now, your greatest civilisations are dooms to fall. Your leaders will beg to serve us."

"Maybe your right, maybe we can't win this time. But we'll fight you till we can't fight anymore; we will sacrifice to the last pure heart. Just like we fought against Sovereign and we will find a way to defeat you. Because that's what we humans do and that's the lead the rest of the Galaxy will follow," Shepard's voice sounded hard, resolute and strong.

"Know this as you die in vain. Your time will come. Your species will fall. Prepare yourselves for the Arrival."

There was complete silence in the room as they watched the holo projection of Harbinger lift off the
ground and the recording ended.

"Wow what a pompous dick," Joker said breaking the silence and raising a smile to a few faces around the table including Shepard.

"I'm not sure I could have stayed as calm and sounded as firm as you did Shep facing that even if it was a hologram," Kasumi said and continued, "you sounded so confident."

Shepard looked as Kasumi and caught everyone else's eye as she spoke, "We will defeat them if we can rally the strength of the Galaxy to our cause. Make no mistake I intend to end them once and for all."

She was rewarded with nods from her team mates and Grunt punched his fists together.

"But by the spirits they were nearly here… if you hadn't blown that relay," Garrus said his voice held an edge of awe and fear.

"They are on their way and there's no telling how long we have. But we'll keep preparing and taking out the Collectors is our next priority," Shepard said and again her voice although quiet was strong and her words seemed edged with steely conviction.

"Yeah I'm looking forward to destroying them Shepard," Jack said with a smile.

"Well that's certainly the plan," Shepard's face was unreadable but her quiet confidence surrounded them and they all took heart from it. "Now I need to sort a couple of things before I have my meeting with Hackett and then I'll need an update on the IFF."

Everyone got up and started to leave the room but Garrus was still sitting next to her and leaned in to say quietly, "do you want me to wait with you to speak to Boorlan?"

Shepard gave Garrus a wan smile and thought once again what a good friend he was to her, "thank you that might be helpful, Edi would you ask specialist Pazness to join me."

The young Batarian sat down where Shepard had indicated and she spoke quickly sensing that her crewmember was extremely fearful and anxious.

"As you work in the comms and intel team I'm assuming you know that we…that I have just destroyed the mass relay in the Bahak system," she paused and realised that she would be required to explain what had happened many more times during the next twenty four hours, "which has killed everyone living in that system probably around three hundred thousand Batarian's and slaves'."

"Yes Commander," Boorlan's voice was very quiet and his body language screamed how nervous he was.

"I wanted to personally tell you that if I could, if there had been more time, I would have done all I could to evacuate the system," Shepard said at the same time wondering briefly whether earlier warning would have made any difference, "I wanted you to know that I am sorry to have cause such a level of loss of Batarian lives… and if you felt you wanted to leave the Normandy I would understand."

The room was quiet and both Shepard and Garrus studied the young Batarian in front of them. He seemed to be relaxing and Shepard did sense his fear diminishing.

"Thank you for talking to me Commander I..." he seemed to brace himself and he looked Shepard in the eye's when he continued, "would you be talking to any of the other race's on the ship if this..."
had happened in an Asari or Turian system?"

Shepard was taken aback by the question but answered honestly, "No Boorlan I don't believe I would."

"I am a member of your crew Commander and I understand what we are trying to do…" he spoke quietly and still a little nervously, "not all Batarian's agree with the Hegemony but any disagreement is stamped out, my uncle has no love for the Alliance or the Council but he is more reasonable than some of the Hegemony and I am hoping to make his proud of me once everyone understands the Reapers are coming for everyone…” he fell silent.

"I'm sorry for doubting your loyalty and your commitment," Shepard said with a nod, "you'd better get back to your post specialist."

With a nod Boorlan stood and walked to the door but stopped as Shepard asked, "What were you worried about at the beginning of the meeting?"

"I thought you had changed your mind about letting me stay Commander because of my people, what they will do… how they will respond to the tragedy."

"You are not a representative for you people Boorlan and I will only ever judge you on your own actions," Shepard said and the young Batarian gave her a shy smile and left the room.

"He will probably catch a lot of shit from Batarian's once they know he's on the crew," Garrus said sadly.

"Yeah… but you know I think I need him here as much as he seems to need to be with us," Shepard said standing up, "well now to brief Admiral Hackett, then the Council, so next time we speak I could we be heading for a court martial."

Garrus turned to face Shepard and said firmly, "Shepard there was nothing else you could do, we'd all be dead now if you hadn't stopped the invasion, they'll see that."

She just nodded and as he left Shepard squared her shoulders and stood in front of the QEC terminal and waited for the call from Admiral Hackett at parade rest trying to keep her mind as blank as possible.

Hackett's grizzled face coalesced in front of her and returning her salute he spoke in his usual gruff tones, "Commander I sent you on a simple rescue mission that ended up with the death of over three hundred thousand Batarian's and the destruction of our black ops research station," he paused and Shepard braced herself as he continued.

"But having read your report and watched your vid cam recording of the mission from start to finish I have to say you did a great job and saved us from an invasion that would have resulted in the death of billions."

"I walked straight into a trap Sir, lost my marines, lost forty eight vital hours and didn't recognise that someone right in front of me was obviously indoctrinated, it was a cluster fuck," she said standing rigidly to attention.

"Stand easy Commander," Hackett paused and continued in less formal tone, "we dropped the ball on our end… it's obvious that our instruction's about the danger of working with Reaper tech, the danger of indoctrination, isn't getting through to the very people we are expecting to research it.

"And as far as trying to evac the system I have to say I'm glad you didn't have time…” Shepard's
confusion obviously showed on her face, "don't get me wrong Shepard I abhor the loss of life but if you had raised the alarm the chances are you would have been stopped from destroying the relay by Batarian forces.

"If they didn't act under the orders of equally indoctrinated leaders they would never believe your claim about needing to destroy the relay to stop an invasion they don't trust us, why should they."

Shepard had already gone through all those arguments in her head, even as she stood at the comms station sending out the warning, but something inside her wouldn't allow her off the hook.

"It doesn't make it any easier Sir, those deaths are still on my conscience, still at my hands," she said quietly.

"It's what makes you a decent human being and a good soldier Commander," Hackett said and then more formally, "well as you can imagine the Batarians are working everyone up into a lather. So you need to prepare yourself for hearings and we can discuss what we'll need to do quickly to exonerate you under Alliance Navy regulations so it will only leave a political backlash and whatever trouble may come your way from the Council.

"We'll make some time to talk about it when you join us for the Council war simulations," Shepard nodded and Hackett continued, "Keep your focus Commander you still have to take out the Collectors, Hackett out."

The image shattered into quantum pieces and after a few moments she felt ready for her next ordeal, "Edi let the Council know I'm ready for their call please."

"Connecting now Shepard," Edi said.

Instead of the whole council Shepard found herself facing just Councillor Tevos.

"Commander thank you for your report and vid footage, I have to say the confrontation with the Reaper was very distressing," Tevos said, "we are being heavily pressed by the Batarians to arrest you as a war criminal for contravening the Treaty of Arlaka, which as you know was agreed after the use of asteroids as a weapon against planets during the Krogan rebellion, not that the Batarians ever signed up to it." Her frustration was clear in her voice and body language.

"But we will need to carry out a full hearing and allow the Batarians to make their case, I'm sorry Spectre but although you are given the leeway to work outside the usual Council laws and regulations we do need to investigate a contravention of this magnitude."

"I completely understand Councillor, we are headed to the Council war simulations but when those are out of the way would you like me to come to the Citadel," Shepard asked.

"No Commander we feel it would be appropriate for the Alliance Navy to… carry out their investigation first," Tevos said with a small smile, "this will all be rather a lot of sitting in hearing and giving the same evidence over and over again but they are the checks and balances that we rely on."

Shepard gave an audible sigh but did return the Councillors smile, "Yes it will probably drive me nuts but I would gladly do it if I thought it would bring back any of the dead but it won't," Shepard became grimly serious, "you do realise they are on their way… they could be here in a matter of weeks or months, it certainly won't be much longer… we need to speed up all our plans and particularly our plans to ensure the survival of all our species if the worst happens."

Tevos looked sadly back at the concerned soldier standing in front of her, "Those of us who have accepted the truth are acutely aware of how close we are to disaster but I fear we will still find plenty
who will need much more persuading. But we will call a meeting of the Shadow Council to review our plans, in the meantime Commander take heart that you have secured vital time for the Galaxy to become more prepared for the inevitable."

"Thank you Councillor," Shepard felt all the energy drain out of her as the connection closed.

She headed to her cabin to try to get a few hours' sleep before facing what would be a very busy few days on war game simulations.

**Normandy CIC, Ninmah Cluster – Forty hours after the Bahak system relay explosion**

Tash was standing in front of the main command terminal on the CIC studying the Normandy's hologram in front of her.

They had found a quiet backwater system in order to online the Reaper IFF for a second time and do some testing as it had caused instability in a variety of Normandy systems on their first attempt.

Shepard had taken her specialist team and Miranda in a couple of shuttles and was currently en route to Pylos Nebula to observe and to advise on tactics to deal with Reaper ships and troops leaving Tash once more in charge of the Normandy.

"Edi are we ready," Tash Edi who was in charge of testing.

"Yes Captain," Edi said, "bringing IFF online now."

"Joker how we doing," Tash asked, they were in a slow orbit around the nearest planet.

"All systems normal and green across the board," Joker said in a nonchalant tone.

"Running analysis now, I suggest we stay in orbit for the period of initial testing before running at sub light and FTL speeds," Edi said.

"Copy that Edi," Tash said, "Joker you have the conn I'm going to the mess to get some food."

"Aye, aye Captain."

In the lift on the way down Tash let her mind drift to the next obvious step if the IFF performed as they expected then they could assault on the Collector station. The journey through the Omega 4 relay, the point of no return.

Half an hour later she was finishing up her meal and chatting with the marines who had joined her at her table when the Normandy alarms started blaring out complete with red flashing lights closely followed with Joker's voice over main comms.

"Commander we've had a Collector ship drop on top of us… propulsion and defence systems are offline," he sounded frantic.

"Fuck a little more notice would have been nice," Tash said and then transmitted across main comms, "all marines grab weapons and rally on my six, all other crew arm yourselves and lock down all compartments… Edi I want constant updates," she was already moving to the nearest weapons locker and handing out assault rifles.

"The hull is being breached in engineering and the flight deck Captain I am trying to regain control of the ship," Edi replied quickly.
Over comms Tash said, "Gunney take squad one and try to secure engineering I'll take who I have to the flight deck, the rest of squad two meet me on the flight deck… let's move."

They didn't take the elevator but ran down the three flights of stairs when they exited onto the flight deck Tash saw the one thing she hadn't factored in… a swarm.

It was too late to find their hard suits the flight deck was already being overrun by Collectors.

"I'll be damned if we don't make them pay… open fire," she said and shouted over the gun fire on ships comms, "be advised we have swarms on ship get into hard suits," she was being surrounded by the small black drones and felt herself being stung, "Joker don't let them…" and everything went black as she hit the ground.
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

This chapter, or rather two chapters as it was originally split in two, seem to have been completely missing so my apologies... I hope it didn't spoil the story too much... sigh

Chapter 64 part 1

A/N This chapter was quite big so I spit it in half and I hope you enjoy the spin on the Collector Base mission

I will be adding details to my profile about a website I'm building to host my fanfiction which I've always wanted to have slightly more multi media so when the address is up you'll be welcome to visit and let me know what you think.

Normandy flight deck, Ninmah Cluster – six hours after the Normandy was breached

The Alliance shuttle passed through the glimmering stasis field and landed on the deck followed by the sleek Asari attack shuttle that now formed a permanent addition to the Normandy's capabilities.

Almost before her shuttle had settled Shepard leapt to the deck removing her helmet, face grim.

Once everyone else was standing on the deck she spoke.

"Garrus, Skark and Senna I want you to work out who is best placed from your teams to give basic cover in engineering, weapons systems and at tactical stations... Edi have you completed the fabrication of the plates we can use for repairs to the hull breaches," Shepard's voice was steely and gave no indication of any emotion.

"Yes Shepard they are still on the print machines in engineering but ready to be deployed," the ship's AI answered.

"So we'll also need to put together repair teams and the hull will be the priority, we can't jump to FTL until the ship is secure," Shepard said looking out across what remained of her crew, "Jack I'd like you to head the repair team your biotics will be invaluable moving the hull patches quickly to where they need to go… Mordin I want you to work with Edi to ensure the IFF is now safe and will work, Malenia please relieve Joker at the helm… Miranda you're with me."

Having given her orders she headed for the CIC closely followed by Miranda and Malenia.

Three hours later the Normandy was secure and en route for the Omega 4 relay. Shepard was reviewing the ship recordings of the attack for the fourth time and was waiting for Joker to join her for their first real debrief given her pilot had received several fracture injuries from his actions to save the Normandy.

The doors swished open and Joker walked in looking grey and subdued. He was followed by Miranda who had attended to his injuries.

"How are you feeling," Shepard asked.
"How do you think," Joker said his voice flat.

"You lost everyone and damn near lost the ship too," Miranda said finally being able to give vent to her feelings.

"It was not Lieutenant Moreau's fault the virus was much more sophisticated than the one that breached my systems from the Collector ship. By the time I had recognised the IFF was transmitting our position the Collectors were already on us," Edi said in her usual light but business-like tones.

"And you're sure it's safe now?" Shepard asked.

"Yeah Edi and I purged the systems and Mordin gave everything another once over," Joker said sitting uncomfortably on one of the conference chairs.

"Don't get me started about unshackling the damned AI," Miranda said again anger clear in her voice.

"Now hang on Cerberus, I couldn't have saved the ship without her, Edi cleared the ship of Collectors... she's all right," Joker's voice for the first time showing some emotion rather than its flat tone.

"Commander Lawson I assure you I am still bound by protocols in my programming even if I were not you are my crew mates," Edi responded.

"Edi's had plenty of opportunities to screw with us if she wanted to; she is a trusted member of my crew," Shepard's tone brooked no argument and she continued.

"Joker do you feel ready to take the helm I want my best pilot when we jump the Omega 4," she knew her pilot would need to be physically restrained to stop him re-taking the helm but Shepard wanted to make sure he knew she didn't blame him for what had happened.

Joker seemed to draw himself up and looked less beaten, "well why wouldn't you want the best pilot in the Alliance flying for you Commander," he hobbled to his feet and gave her a salute.

Although surprised by this show of respect from her usually sarcastic and truculent pilot she returned the salute and said, "Return to your post then Lieutenant."

After Joker had left the room Miranda looked at her and slowly shook her head as she spoke.

"You can't be serious about hitting the Collector base Shepard we have a handful of specialists and they are absolutely going to be expecting us."

Shepard allowed some of her emotion to leak through into her tone of voice, "They took my crew and I'm going to get them back... we have our Turian, Krogan and Asari team members and with the rest of us that makes fifteen," Shepard paused and when she spoke again her voice was cold and hard, "everyone said this was a suicide mission Miranda so it was never going to be easy. And I'm not waiting around while my crew is tortured or worse by those bastards... we go now. If you want me to drop you..." but Miranda interrupted Shepard.

"Of course not, I was only asking... I'm with you all the way," Miranda was rewarded with a nod of the head.

"Well I need to make a very difficult call now so if you'll excuse me," Shepard said walking towards the door, "Edi would you put a call in to Doctor T'Soni, I'll be waiting in my quarters."
"Of course Shepard," Edi said.

"Good luck," Miranda said with concern lacing her response.

**Normandy, Captain's quarters – ten hours after the Normandy was breached**

Shepard had been sitting at her desk for thirty minutes her thoughts swinging from red hot rage that she had lost her crew to desperately trying to find the words to tell Liara she was going through the Omega 4 relay without her.

Once Liara was well and they were reunited they had agreed, albeit reluctantly on Shepard's part, nonetheless they had agreed they would attack the Collector base together. But there was no time to wait for Liara to join them from Thessia.

Shepard was already pushing the engines, her pilot and her makeshift ship crew to the limit trying to get there as quickly as possible to give her the best chance of rescuing her crew.

When the QEC sparked into life a worried looking Liara coalesced into a holo-image in front of her.

"What has happened Shepard," Liara was worried as Edi had made it clear this was an urgent call.

Shepard took a steadying breath to help her maintain her composure, "The Normandy was hit by the Collectors and the crew taken while I was on my way to the war simulation," her bondmate took a sharp intake of breath and a hand went to her mouth in shock, "Joker and Edi managed to regain control of the ship and purge the Collectors and we are currently en route to the Omega 4 relay."

Shepard thought she might as well just get it all out at once.

Liara had already done the math and also knew her lover well enough to know Shepard would not hesitate in taking action to recover her crew alive.

When she spoke her voice was quiet but firm although Shepard could hear the emotion Liara was holding it back, "I know you must try to save your crew Shepard… I just wish I could be with you… oh Shepard…" Liara couldn't hold back her tears and her fear any longer.

"Hey darling it'll be ok," Shepard said softly emotion beginning to break through her resolve, "I'll never really leave you…" she reached a hand out and the glint of silver from her bonding ring caught her eye and she took another steadying breath.

"No," Liara said firmly through her tears, "you will come back to me you promised… and I will leave straight away please do not leave me behind…"

Liara looked and sounded miserable as she spoke through her tears and even though they both knew Shepard could not wait she felt she had to voice her deepest wish in that moment.

Shepard felt her lover's pain and was at a loss for a moment as to what to say.

"Believe me when I say that I will always come home to you... if I could I would have you fighting by my side… you mean everything to me Liara," Shepard ached to be able to hold her lover and give her comfort.

"I love you," Liara's voice was now little more than a whisper and she was fighting back more tears.

"I love you too Lee… I'm going to have to go now my beautiful girl," Shepard said softly.

Liara could do little more than nod as she continued to rein in her emotion.
They both reached out hands and made to press palms together through the quantum particles that made up their respective images, across the vast blackness of space.

Shepard cut the connection and as her bondmates image dissipated she finally allowed herself a moment of deep despair burying her face in her hands.

A few minutes later she squared her shoulders and began making her way to the cockpit for the rest of the journey and her showdown with the Collectors.

**Normandy cockpit, Omega Nebula – thirteen hours after the Normandy was breached**

Shepard was sitting in the co-pilot chair and letting her mind drift as she watched the light show dancing across the front windows of the cockpit. She had spent most of the journey checking and double checking that everyone was prepared for when they hit the point of no return.

They had just jumped into the Omega nebula, "ETA to the Omega four Joker?"

"One hour Commander," Joker replied in a sombre tone. He was still unusually subdued, but then so was everyone else on board.

"Edi when we're on approach to the relay send a message to Harper to tell him we are go for the attack on the Collector base," there was nothing she needed from him, "and I don't want to hear from him until we have completed the mission, in fact we will go comms dark now."

"Of course Shepard, but I have an incoming transmission," Edi's voice rang out in the cockpit.

Shepard was about to refuse the call she didn't want to talk to anyone. She hadn't called her mother, Hackett or the Council. But in case it was Liara she asked, "who is it."

"Liselle Lidanya is hailing us from a shuttle," Edi said and continued with a slightly questioning edge to her voice, "She has a message from Doctor T'Soni."

Shepard had no idea why Liara would ask her sister to deliver a message.

"Put her through on a secure channel please," Shepard said getting up and moving out of the cockpit into the almost empty CIC.

"Shepard I have ten hand-picked mercs with me mostly Asari but a few Turian's, thought I'd better leave the Batarian's at home," Liselle was trying for laconic and light but there was an edge of emotion to her voice that Shepard picked up, "so if you can drop out of FTL we can join you for the fun on the other side of that relay."

"There is no way in hell I'm letting you join me for this mission Liselle… both Aria and Liara would have my guts for putting you in such danger and…” but Liselle cut across and now the emotion was plain in her voice.

"I don't give a shit what Aria has to say and Liara knows what I'm doing otherwise how would I have known you were heading in light handed," Liselle's voice was quiet but Shepard could hear anger and that the young Asari was also upset, "you can't deny me the chance to try to get her back Shepard you can't."

Shepard's head had been so fully in mission prep and planning and corralling the rage she was feeling about the loss of her crew that she had completely forgotten Liselle's connection with Tash.

"I understand…” Shepard knew if it was Liara on the other side of the relay nothing would stop her
from going after her. But she needed to make sure everyone knew what they were getting into.

"You do know there is every chance we won't even get through the relay in one piece and if we do get out it will be… against the odds," Shepard continued, "so do all your… volunteers understand how dangerous this is?"

"I bet you didn't put it quite as bluntly to Liara," Liselle said a flash of her usual teasing self showing through, "and yes everyone with me here knows that it's almost a suicide mission… but for some reason even Terminus mercs have faith in the awesome Commander Shepard."

Shepard felt just a hint of a wry smile lift the corner of her mouth and said with a sigh over main comms with Liselle still on the line, "Joker rendezvous with Captain Lidanya's shuttle please we have a few more people joining the party."

"Thank you Shepard," Liselle said quietly.

"There are no guarantees we'll find them alive you know," Shepard said and suddenly a fresh wave of rage and sadness hit her. It was the first time she had actually allowed the thought to form in her mind let alone say it out loud.

"Then we'll kill each and every one of the bastards and blow their stinking nest into quantum particles," Liselle said anger now giving her words an edge of steely determination.

"Amen to that Captain, amen to that," Shepard replied in an equally hard tone.

**Normandy, Approach to Omega 4 relay – fourteen hours after the Normandy breach**

Shepard was standing in the cockpit in her full N7 hard suit, helmet in hand, Joker at the helm and Malenia in the co-pilot chair.

The young Asari pilot had volunteered to join the ground team but Shepard assigned her to remain on the Normandy during the assault.

It was true they may need a shuttle at some point in the mission but something else also prompted Shepard to keep Malenia relatively safe. Although Shepard just couldn't put her finger on what it was.

The rest of the crew including the new additions were all in hard suits, fully equipped including some heavy weapons and two bombs for when they got to the heart of the Collector base.

"IFF online and transmitting," Edi said calmly, "all systems green across the board."

"Take us through Joker," Shepard said over main comms so her team, most of whom, who were waiting on the flight deck would be ready to brace themselves for whatever they met on the other side.

In silence they did the final run at the relay ignoring the many warning beacons that surrounded it.

As they were picked up and pulled under its influence the relay fired but not with the usual blue energy instead they were treated to a fiery red light show and then a moment later all hell broke loose.

As the Normandy was dropped out of the wormhole corridor created by their relay jump they found themselves in a massive debris field with a black hole event horizon filling the front windows of the cockpit.
"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Joker's voice was tense as his hands moved furiously to control the Normandy's direction, pitch and speed.

"The IFF appears to have dropped us out of the jump without any drift," Edi said just a small edge of tension to her usually very calm and cool tones.

"Active management of shielding engaged," Malenia said her own hands moving as quickly over the haptic interfaces under her command.

Shepard said nothing letting her pilots and Edi manage the navigation of the dense and dangerous drifting debris of a multitude of ships wrecked on entry to the system.

"Jeff I believe I have detected a narrow corridor through the field which has probably been worn by Collector vessels," Edi said.

"Yeah I see it… hold on I can't avoid everything," Joker said his concentration clear in his voice and body language.

The ship was slowing quickly but not quickly enough and a huge jagged piece of metal bounced and slid along the hull and Shepard's eyes were fixed on one of Malenia's holo images showing hull shielding strength.

"Shielding holding," Malenia reported but continued quickly in an urgent tone, "we have company… I'm detecting what looks like drone's lighting up and targeting our position."

"Yes I have them on my defence net," Edi replied.

"Take them out Edi… Joker keep us moving as quickly as possible so we can clear this mess and get some manoeuvrability back to the helm," Shepard said.

During the next five minutes the Normandy weaved and bumped its way through the broken remains of what could be hundreds of ships of various sizes and ages. At the same time Edi was taking out the attacking drones as quickly as possible.

One drone manged to get close and tried to attach itself to the hull but Malenia directed a surged of extra adaptive shielding fields to the spot which punched the drone away allowing Edi to destroy it with another burst of the ships railguns.

They finally emerged from the debris and it was only then they had a clear view of the Collector base. Shepard heard mutterings of surprise as her ground team saw the images being relayed around the ship.

"That thing is huge Shepard," Garrus said in hushed tones giving voice to everyone's thoughts.

"And it seems to be sitting right on the edge of the accretion disc," Miranda added, "we are in the Galactic core…"

Miranda fell silent mid-sentence as all their eyes were drawn to the ship emerging from the gaping maw of the Collector station.

"All hands brace for impact," Shepard said and grabbed one of the hand holds in the bulkhead the other on the back of Malenia's seat, "Edi shut everything down make all power available to engines, shields and weapons."

"Confirmed Shepard," Edi's voice echoed around the cockpit now separated from the CIC by a blue
field holding in the only air available on the ship as, along with the ships gravity generator, life support was being shut down to make every last jot of power available for the confrontation.

Shepard's eyes never left the huge ship now beginning to swing towards them but she didn't fail to notice her pilots stiffening shoulders as his hands dances across the haptic interfaces controlling the Normandy's every movement.

Malenia was already re-checking the shield interfaces as it would be her job to move power as needed and switch between the types of shield's they had protecting the ship.

The rest of her depleted and temporary crew were readying themselves at damage stations with Legion supplementing Edi's attention in engineering.

"The signature from the Collector ship matches the one we boarded Shepard which means it is also…," but before Edi could finish Joker spoke his voice unusually quiet.

"…the one that blew the Normandy apart."

Shepard took a deep steadying breathe and then replied primarily to Joker but they were on open comms so everyone on board would hear her.

"Well then today is a good day for vengeance," her voice was strong and edged with steel, "we're not the ones losing a ship today, this is where we start to fight back," Shepard gave Jokers shoulder a quick, light squeeze and saw both her pilots sit a little more upright.

They had done drill after drill after drill, everyone knew what they were doing and Shepard just had to let it play out. Edi was concentrating on the Normandy weapon and defence systems while still needing to respond to the requests made of her by her two organic pilots.

The inertial dampers were offline and so everyone was feeling the change in speed and the sharp turn that Joker executed to give them increased angular velocity as the two ships bore down in each other.

The Collector vessel fired and in the micro second it took for the beam of molten metal to reach the Normandy Shepard felt a surge of doubt. What made her think she could win; she never won, not against the Reapers.

But before she even had a chance to challenge the thoughts and push them back into the dark recesses of her mind the beam hit.

Joker had turned the Normandy at the last moment so that the beam traced a line along the Normandy's flank rather than hitting them straight on.

Shepard's couldn't pull her eyes away from the Collector ship as it grew bigger in the cockpits view screen but out of the corner of her eye she saw Malenia pushing all shield capability to the area the beam was targeting.

Again the ship veered sharply into a different direction: she could hear Joker calling for more power to the engines but it was as if she was a long way off. A part of her mind was back out in space and closing down for lack of oxygen, her breath started to burn, she felt herself blacking out.

With a force of will Shepard brought her mind back into the cockpit now her eyes fixed on the telemetry streaming across the screens in front of her.

"Now Edi fire, fire, fire," Shepard yelled at her living weapon system. A moment later they all felt the jolt and thud as the huge particle cannon fired.
Passing alongside the Collector vessel Shepard was watching the vid feeds from other vantage points along the hull. Their shots landed and with a huge feeling of relief Shepard saw the Collector hull tearing apart accompanied by short bursts of light from explosions and fires quickly extinguished by the vacuum of space.

"We need to finish it off, bring us around again Joker," Shepard spoke even as the Collector ship rained a battery of other ordnance at them.

"Shields are holding Commander," Malenia reported hands flying as quickly as Joker's over the haptic control screens.

Bracing herself as the ship pulled yet another sharp turn Shepard once again saw the Collector's main gun light up again but this time she was fully present and her mind in combat mode as a moment later she once again shouted for Edi to fire the main cannon.

Almost at the same time the opposing shots landed. The Normandy shields withstood all the punishment, but flashing warning lights told her the systems were about to experience a major overload. They would need time to re-charge, time they didn't have.

The Normandy's second hit on the huge vessel sliced right through the middle of the ship an almost carbon copy of the final death blow that had been visited on the first Normandy.

The Collector vessel began to break up and Shepard could hear cheers from around the ship but they were too close to the exploding and disintegrating ship.

Joker knew it and was already trying to pull off and away when a blue flash hit the Normandy closely followed by blast waves and debris.

Flashes and bangs sounded around the cockpit and a moment later all systems died. They were dead in the water, being hit by debris and the force of the explosion had sent them on a course towards the edge of the event horizon.

"Edi sit rep…Edi… what's the damage… Edi respond…" Shepard called but knew that they had been hit by a massive electromagnetic pulse which had probably knocked out their ship's AI. The only question was for how long.

"Miranda come in, do you read me," Shepard said over ships comms in the eerie silence as she positioned herself at the comms console.

Joker now had his oxygen mask on, which was connected to the emergency cockpit cylinders, and Malenia had pulled on her hard suit helmet and, like Shepard, was now breathing suit air.

"Malenia you are going to need to physically go find Miranda and then on to engineering to see what's happened to Legion," Shepard knew that proximity comms suit to suit would still function, "tell them I need a manual hard boot of critical systems."

"I need my engines back," Joker almost shouted the panic clear in his voice and they all took a moment to look out the view screen to the black hole that was now beckoning them to its heart.

Malenia gave her Captain a nod of the head and set off at a run.

"Let's see if we can get Edi back on line," Shepard said more to distract her pilot than with any real plan in mind.

After what seemed like a long time but in reality had only been ten minutes Shepard, working in the
CIC, and Joker, still in the cockpit, had managed to get emergency lighting and environmental controls back up for their deck. They were working on emergency back-up comms systems when screens all around the CIC started to light up and the unmistakable pulse of engines coming back online elicited a whoop from the cockpit.

Shepard moved back up to the cockpit and standing once again at her pilot's shoulder waited for an update on their status.

"Navigation is shot… thruster control minimal… landing protocols not online…" Joker spoke as he was swiping through the interface on his left.

"Can you get us back to the base and set us down," Shepard asked tersely. She didn't need a rundown of everything that was fried just how they could get the mission back on track.

Joker turned to look at her and said in a grim tone, "It won't be pretty Commander but yeah I can get her where we need to go... but," he continued to hesitate measuring his words, "if we don't get Edi back online and our primary systems back up we won't be leaving."

Shepard held her pilots eyes and gave him a short nod, "understood Joker."

With that she left him to work and by the time the Normandy was limping towards the station Malenia had returned and taken her place in the co-pilots chair.

"Let's pray they lost us when that EMP wave hit. If luck is with us they think their ship took us with it," Shepard said partly to herself.

"With our systems at minimal and against all the background noise out here we will be pretty hard to find Commander," Miranda's voice sounded in her suit comms but Shepard knew she must be close they still didn't have ship wide comms up and running.

Turning Shepard saw Miranda walking up the gangway towards her.

"Any ETA on getting Edi up and running," Shepard had already had a damage and injury report. They had gotten off lightly with some electrical fires from the various short circuits a few bumps and a couple of overloaded suits from charges jumping across the consoles.

"The Geth is working on it," Miranda said still uncomfortable with having a second AI on board.

"Well if anyone can get us back up and running Legion can," after a pause Shepard said reluctantly, "we'll have to scrub him from the ground team if we want any chance of actually escaping back through to the Terminus system."

Miranda nodded in agreement, "we have also blown out all but one of our QEC links."

"Don't tell me the only one working is to that shit faced snake you work for," Shepard said with obvious venom.

"Technically I suppose I still work for him… but yes the Cerberus QEC is the only one working."

Twenty minutes later they were fast approaching their target landing spot on one of the outcrops close to the main entrance to the station.

They were coming in fast and hot and Shepard braced herself for impact.

The Normandy bounced a couple of times and then slid on its hull until it came to a stop just short of
the outside wall of the structure.

"Get her ready to take us home," was all Shepard said to Joker and with a nod to Malenia she turned and made her way quickly to the flight deck.

Once there she gathered the ground team around her.

"The Collectors have stolen the lives of far too many across all our races," Shepard made sure she caught the eye of every member of her team, "they blew up my last ship and killed a lot of her crew… and they are trying to do the same thing again, but this time we are going to stop them.

We're going to walk in there and bring our people home and when we've found them and saved them we are going to blow this stinking pile of shit into oblivion… and when we've done that we are going home… do you understand me."

There was a murmur and some nodding heads.

"I said did you hear me," this time she shouted and slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand.

She was rewarded with a much lounder response with much fist punching by the Krogan's in the team.

"That's better… now I want you and you," she picked out an Asari and a Turian, "to stay here and defend this ship… you will not let her be boarded."

Shepard's tone brooked no question or argument and all her commands were received with sharp nods of the head.

Before moving out she split the team into two squads with Senna heading up the second squad. They might need to split up to place the bombs in two different locations so she kept Grunt with her and allocated Skark to Senna's team.

"Move out," with her final order the marched down the loading ramp leaving the defence duo setting up turrets and defensive positions ready to repel anyone who came looking.

**Chapter 64 part 2**

*Collector base, Galactic Core*

They had been walking along the wide enclosed corridor for more than twenty minutes. The recon drones mapping their way and constantly scanning for any signatures from crew member's Ident chips.

Senna received the signal first and move quickly to Shepard's side offering the Omni screen for them to share.

"Six signatures Commander further along in this direction," Senna said more quietly, "no life signs from three and the others are feint."

With a sharp nod Shepard motioned for her to team to start moving again and after another five minutes the corridor opened up into a much bigger space.

"This place gives me the creeps," Garrus said quietly, "it's like being in some kind of insect nest."
The team spread out to take up defensive positions while Shepard, Garrus and Liselle moved towards what looked like a pile of bodies against a side wall.

"Salarian's," Liselle said.

"Members of my intelligence and information team," Shepard said in a dull voice. The memory of Ish flooded her mind, his enthusiasm and loyalty to her almost breaking through the hard lock she had in place on her feelings.

Garrus had moved away following the three other signals and when Shepard and Liselle joined him they stood over a row of pods.

"Get them open," Shepard said and called over Senna and a couple of her team to help.

The first two contained Dacemore from engineering and Parana who worked in tactical and also the galley, both Asari.

In the final pod the prone body of their young Batarian crew member. They had either been injected by the seeker swarm during the fight or afterwards before being 'stored' in the pods.

Only a few moments after receiving a shot of the counter inoculant from Mordin all three began to come around.

Their relief at being rescued and also the horror of what they had gone through was evident.

"I can't spare anyone to take you back to the ship I'm going to give you weapons and I want you to follow that corridor back to the ship," Shepard said noting that Parana was having trouble standing up.

"I... I... think it's broken," she said indicating her leg.

"Where is everyone else," Dacemore said her voice a little horse as she looked around.

"We are going to find them," Senna answered.

"I'm coming with you," the young engineer said standing unsteadily on her feet.

"And me," Borlan the young Batarian spoke for the first time although he was helping Parana to stand up and offering her a steadying shoulder to lean on.

"No," Shepard said as gently as she could, "you're not combat fit but you are all needed to help get the ship ready for us to leave."

Although she sensed all three of them wanted to argue with her when Shepard gave an order very few questioned it.

Senna briefly touched foreheads with each of the injured Asari before handing Dacemore and Borlan one of the spare weapons they had brought.

The three set off down the corridor with Parana practically being carried between her fellow crew members.

Once they were out of sight the team formed up and began to move out following the now much wider corridor in the only direction open to them.

Not more than five minutes had elapsed when Shepard heard static over her suit comms and then
Joker's voice started to break through.

"…ground team, Normandy to ground team do you read me?"

"This is ground team Normandy we have some static but I read you, status update," Shepard said she continued moving forward at the front of the team's combat formation.

"Legion managed to get short range scanners and ship to away team comms up and running," Joker paused and sounded miserable when he spoke next, "Edi is still down but there are runtimes activating and Legion believes she will be back online soon…"

"So the Normandy is still dead on this piece of crap base," Shepard said through gritted teeth knowing that if things were different that's what Joker would have led with.

"I have maneuvering thrusters... but yeah pretty much… but we've got some readings on crew idents Commander patching you into the ships scanners now."

Well it was something. Knowing they were on the right side of the cavernous station was a bonus and it looked as if the rest of the crew were all in one place.

"Thanks Normandy, keep me updated with progress… you have three crew returning put them to work fixing my ship as soon as they are able, Shepard out."

Holding up a fist to halt the squad Shepard indicated Garrus, Senna and Liselle to join her and check out the scanner data being relayed live from their ship.

"So we should find our people in about two klicks from our position," Shepard said, "it looks as if there is one ship left on station and if those heat signatures are anything to go by then it's being prepped for launch… we can't let that happen.

"We are going to double time it to our crew then your squad will run them back to the ship," Shepard was addressing Senna, "once the crew is on-board you'll take your bomb and blow that Collector ship by which time we should have reached the guts of this dump ready to blow their main power core."

With an exchange of nods Shepard closed the haptic screen of her Omni tool and indicated to the squad move forward at a combat trot.

The closer they got to the ID chip signals the more complex the terrain became. Off the now very wide corridor there were larger open areas some packed with equipment.

And to their right every minute or so there was an opening which gave out onto a parallel walkway that was open to the open space where they could see a single Collector ship on the other side.

The only activity they saw was around the ship and so they stayed on their inner corridor with recon drones keeping watch so they would have some warning if Collectors were active on their side of the station.

Once they were on the perimeter of the area holding her crew Shepard ordered the squads began moving from cover to cover

As they got closer the area appeared to be a processing station, and four Collectors were taking lifeless bodies from stasis pods and placing them in Perspex tubes that lined the walls.

Checking that the drone feeds from further along the corridor were clear of other Collectors Shepard
indicated to Garrus, Senna and two of the other Turian's take up sniper positions on the four targets.

After a countdown over suit comms Shepard watched the Collectors drop from perfectly placed headshots.

Most of the team moved quickly to take up defensive positions securing the area while Shepard, Garrus, Liselle, Mordin and Miranda moved quickly to examine the remaining pods.

"Get these open and start reviving whoever is inside," Shepard said to Miranda and calling over a couple of Asari commandos.

Liselle gave out a shout from in front of one of the tubes and started hammering it with her fists.

Shepard moved quickly to her side and with horror saw that Tash was inside an appeared to be coming out of the seeker induced state.

"Get these things open now," Shepard shouted and said to Liselle, "Rip the front of."

Liselle seemed to come out of the state of panic and executed a pull on the front of the tube ripping away the door and catching the still groggy Tash as she fell forward out of the tube.

Garrus had run to the far end of the rows and with a shout to Shepard he was also hammering on the tube in front of him.

Shepard reached his side in time to see her yeoman, Kelly, fighting to get out of the tube as a swarm of bots rushed into the tube and began to dissolve in front of their eyes.

"All biotics to the tubes rip them open now," Shepard shouted her eyes still fixed on the now empty tube in front of her.

Within minutes they had freed everyone already loaded into the tubes and from the waiting stasis pods.

"Mordin, Miranda I want to know what this is," Shepard received a nod from her two scientists and left them examining the equipment.

She moved to join the rest of her rescued crew and saw either terror or a dull, zoned out expression in their eyes.

"Doc," she said softly to the Normandy's doctor, "how are you doing? Are you ok to check the crew for injuries?"

Her words seemed to snap Karin Chakwas back from wherever her mind had gone and she replied a little less authority than usual, "of course Commander."

Shepard then did a quick head count and stored away the names of the ten crew that were missing, including Yeoman Chambers.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to face her cousin who seemed to have recovered herself although the edge of a ten yard stare still echoed in her eyes.

"I'll get my marine team sorted out with weapons and we'll be ready to join you," even as Tash was speaking she was being handed an assault rifle by Liselle.

"I need someone to get the crew back to the Normandy…” but before Shepard could continue Tash interrupted her in a quiet but steely voice.
"All due respect boss but I'm sticking with you I have some debts to pay, up to and including letting the Normandy and her crew get taken on my watch."

Shepard weighed up the newly rescued marine and could see there would be no dissuading her cousin.

"And I suppose you won't lead the escort to get my crew back to safety," Shepard asked Liselle already knowing the answer.

Liara's sister gave her a huge smile and said in her usual relaxed and laconic tone, "I've only just got her arse out of trouble, where she goes I go."

Shepard gave a small shake of the head and gave in.

"Miranda I need you to go back with the crew I need someone heading up the repairs, we'll pick up a few marines to join my team," at that point doctor Chakwas joined them.

"Yes Commander I am happy to clear five marines for active duty," sounding back to her usual self, "but the rest are either physically injured or suffering from… concussion."

"Ok let's get this show on the road," and she turned to speak to her crew now gathering in front of her.

She noted quite a few visible injuries and three on makeshift stretchers.

"I am sending you back to the Normandy with an escort," before Shepard could continue a few of the crew voiced what seemed to be a consensus "we can fight" "give us weapons Commander we'll come with you"

Shepard stood resolute held up a hand and silence fell.

"I do not doubt your courage or your thirst for vengeance… we have lost family to these bastards… they will be avenged… but you are as much a part of delivering that from your posts on the Normandy as we are out in the field.

"Our ship took some hits on the way in and she needs you to get her off this piece of crap station and make sure we have a ride out before we make it go boom."

Shepard received nods and was pleased to see them all standing a little taller.

"Marines who've been cleared for duty join Captain Mikhailovich the rest of you are assigned to protect your crew on the journey back… crew dismissed." Shepard said with finality.

Those of her crew who could stood to attention and she returned the salute from Major Chakwas the ranking officer.

"Captain Senna you have your orders… don't take any risks no need to confront them just get that bomb place so we can blow it sooner if they start undocking."

The Asari Captain nodded her head and offered a warrior arm clasp which Shepard returned before moving her squad to protect the returning crew.

"Let's move," Shepard said to her team and called Mordin to brief her regarding the harvesting as they moved forward to find the heart of the base.

"Process used to break down humans into liquid DNA. Assume it is being taken to storage vats."
Purpose may be to create human reaper. This would assume Collectors had such technology. If not, must be storing for Reaper arrival."

Shepard let her mind wander to the dead Reaper ship they had boarded to secure the IFF. The feeling of not being alone, almost hearing whispers of anguish, pain and terror. The Reapers may have some deluded idea that they were preserving races, entire species, but it was in a way that no sentient being would want to be maintained.

It seemed to her to be the very definition of the human myth of hell.

"Thanks Mordin," Shepard returned to the present.

Shepard's squad had been moving ever closer to what all their recon and scans where telling them was the heart of the base and where the power core was housed. The only place they could guarantee blowing the whole base and every Collector on it to pieces.

They had received a report from Joker that the crew were safely back on board and another from Senna confirming they were making their way across to the Collector ship.

It had been quiet, eerily quiet; Shepard was beginning to get a very bad feeling about the lack of resistance.

"Too quiet," Garrus said echoing her thoughts as they continued to take point for the squad.

And before Shepard could respond her HUD lit up like a Christmas tree.

She held up her fist and took cover alongside Garrus who had done the same.

"Take up defensive positions we have high numbers coming our way, Tash check recon on rear 180," Shepard did a quick check of the area they were in and indicated to Garrus to move back with her to the main body of the squad.

She shuffled members of the team around a little placing her biotics to cover the three separate fire teams she had created.

"We have movement behind us boss," Tash said still scrolling through the drone data stream, "not as many as are coming down the pipe but… around twenty… we'll know what they are when they get a little closer."

A few more adjustments to their defensive positions and they were ready.

"When we've broken the back of this attack we are going to break off and move with all speed using the outer corridor to reach our objective… we are not here to kill them one at a time and we can't afford to get pinned down."

Shepard received nods from her squad mates and they took a breath before the first of the Collectors and their Reaper ground troops came into view and moved into the kill zone the commander had set up for them.

"Fuck me how much further," Tash said the exhaustion clear in her tone.

They had been fighting their way towards their objective for what seemed like hours although it had only been a little over one.

"There it is," Liselle almost shouted and indeed they could all now see the unmistakable shape of an
eezo core. It was huge and for a moment Shepard wondered if their device would be strong enough.

But when she looked across at Mordin who was dispatching husks methodically he showed no such doubts having seen their target so she put her mind back to the task of taking down another of Harbingers possessed Collectors.

She had become quite good at tuning out his painful rantings that it seemed only she could hear, she used the pain to drive her ever more forcefully forward killing everything in her way.

Finally they held the ground around the reactor core for the base allowing Grunt to attach the bomb and for Mordin to start programming it.

"Commander we have Edi back online," Miranda's voice came through on suit comms and she sounded harassed, "and I have a call from the Illusive Man on the QEC that he would like forwarded to you."

"Yeah coz I don't have enough to do right now with swarms of Collectors literally coming out of the woodwork… I'm more interested in knowing if the Normandy is flight worthy?"

Edi's spoke in her usual calm tone, "Seventy five percent of systems are still offline Shepard but we have navigation, propulsion and shields."

"Thanks Edi good to have you back… put him through Miranda and let me know the moment Senna's team are back on board," Shepard had no idea why she had agreed to the call they really were still fighting off hordes of Reaper ground troops.

"Shepard well done I knew you could do it," the flickering image on her Omni tool displayed showed only the head and shoulders of Jack Harper, "but we have a chance to secure knowledge that will put humanity in the best position to defeat the Reapers. The bomb can be modified to send out a radiation pulse that will kill all organic being but leave the structure intact… Imagine how powerful humanity will be with all that technology."

"You mean how powerful Cerberus will be," as she was speaking she looked across at Mordin who like the rest of the team had heard the conversation, and he nodded but looked unhappy.

"You have done the impossible Shepard don't throw away the advantages we could have against the Reapers just for revenge," Shepard could hear how much Harper wanted the get his hands on the base.

"Revenge… yes perhaps, but they liquefied people, colonists, my crew," her final words were spoken with a growl of anger, "nothing good can come out of that technology Harper and you are the last being in the Galaxy I'd trust with advanced tech of any kind…" she nodded to Mordin, "set it to blow this pile of shit to hell and back."

"Miranda you have to stop Shepard from setting of that bomb," Harper's tone now becoming angry.

"I agree with my Commander nothing good could come of what this base has been used for," Miranda said her tone light.

"I am giving you a direct order Miranda," now Harper's anger was plain to hear.

"I don't take orders from you anymore so consider this my resignation," Miranda said and cut the connection and continued, "I assumed you had nothing further to say Shepard."

Shepard let a wry smile play on her lips and replied, "no I think you covered it…"
"Captain's Senna's team are back on board Commander," Miranda said all business as usual.

"Ok fire up the engines and get away from the base," Shepard said with a look around her squad and receiving knowing nods from each of them even as they were killing wave after wave of Collectors throwing themselves at their position.

"But… Commander," Miranda seemed unusually lost for words.

"We are not getting out of this Miranda, we're setting our detonation for T minus fifteen, be ready to remotely detonate the Collector ship bomb for the same moment, syncing time with the Normandy now… Get them home Miranda and tell Liara…"

Before Shepard could finish she noticed a small silver glint at the mouth of the station and then hear Joker's voice over comms.

"Normandy to ground team extraction in thirty seconds… be aware we are coming in hot."

Shepard gave some quick orders for the team to all move to the edge of the platform they were on and for her biotics to throw up defensive shields around the group.

As good as his word Joker was approaching their position and Edi was slicing through Collectors still advancing on their position with the ships rail guns.

As Joker positioned the Normandy as close as he could with hangar doors open on the ground crews position Shepard gave the order for most of the team to switch off their grav boots and jump to the waiting arms ready on the edge of the shimmering blue stasis field.

When finally it was only Shepard, Garrus and Jack left she told the biotic to drop her shield and jump. Then she gave the order to Garrus and once her team were safely aboard she made the leap stumbling onto the deck but staying upright with a hand from Grunt.

"Get us the fuck out of here Joker," Shepard said over comms the doors already almost closed behind her.

She moved quickly to the bridge, removing her helmet on the way, and stood as usual behind Joker as the Normandy pulled away from the Collector base as quickly as it could.

It would be tight, they had to set the detonation on the core for as short a time as possible to deny the Collectors the chance to defuse it and as they passed they could already see the last Collector vessel begin to pull away from its moorings.

She watched the screen giving a view of the station and saw the Collector ship just begin to emerge and they were still only half way to the debris field.

Then a flash of light and the Collector base was engulfed in flames the vessel appearing to break up before another much bigger flash of light.

"Brace for impact", Shepard yelled over ship comms.

This is why she knew the Normandy didn't have time to pick them up.

The shockwaves hit them and sent the Normandy flying toward the debris field uncontrolled and at speed.

She watched as Malenia and Joker's hands flashed back and forth on their haptic screens.
She heard Miranda calling to fire and damage teams and receiving reports.

Thankfully this time she could see Edi was still online and managing requests for all systems as best she could given that over half of the ship's systems were still not online.

The ship slammed into several wrecks before Joker got control back over the ship and they slowed enough to be able to navigate more safely through the field and back towards the Omega relay.

Moving down to the CIC Shepard could see damage and fire control systems still flashing red across the board so after a quick update from Miranda she joined one of the damage control teams in engineering.

Twelve hours after the escape from the Collector Base, Galactic Core

Shepard returned to the CIC ready to finally give the command to take the Omega relay back into the Terminus System.

Everyone on the ship who was not confined to sick bay had been working to get the Normandy safe and able to make the gate jump.

As soon as they were safely through she would finally be able to stand down all but the smallest of skeleton crew so that everyone else could grab some food and hit their bunks.

She looked across at Miranda whose uniform was as dirty as her own and for once the women looked tired and drawn.

"Final systems check," Shepard said as she took up her post.

"All critical systems are green across the board," Edi's voice rang out across the CIC.

"Helm is ready for your go Commander," Joker reported in.

"Take us through Joker."

Shepard's command was hardly completed before the ship began to gather speed and headed for the relay.

The familiar slight feeling of being pulled was a relief as they passed through safely.

"Malenia take the helm, Lieutenant Moreau join me in the comms room please," Shepard's voice was weary but no less commanding but when Miranda fell into step at her side she made no comment.

Once inside the room Shepard was struck by how empty it was. Home as it should be to her intelligence and research team a large number of whom had been killed by the Collectors.

Shepard sat at the head of the conference table and both Miranda and Joker stood at parade rest in silence.

"Lieutenant why did you disobey my direct order to make best speed for the relay?"

Before Joker could answer Shepard's question Miranda spoke.

"I gave the order to carry out the extraction Commander," she said not catching Shepard's eye.

But Joker wasted no time in speaking out, "No you did not, Commander I disobeyed your order I knew we had time to get out… I wasn't… no one left behind Commander you said it yourself."
also decided to focus his eyes somewhere above Shepard's head.

With a deep breath Shepard stood and positioned herself in front of her pilot so he had no choice but to return her gaze as she spoke.

"I gave you a direct order mister, last time you ignored one of those I ended up spaced," Joker made to protest but she waved him into silence and carried on.

"You were very lucky that we didn't lose the ship and everyone on board. I'd already done the calculations and I wasn't willing to take that risk with a crew who I'd just rescued. I have to know that if I give you an order you are going to carry it out or I can't trust you as my pilot." Shepard saw the pain on Joker's face and he almost crumpled under her cold glare.

"Do you understand me Lieutenant," she asked.

"Yes ma'am," Joker said but continued quietly with no trace of his usual cheek, "but Commander you're worth risking the crew and the ship for… we can't do this without you..." he trailed off and before Shepard could respond Miranda joined in.

"I have to agree Shepard… whether you like it or accept it you are our best hope for defeating the Reapers and everyone on this crew knows it… we'd all be willing to lay down our lives for you."

Shepard turned away and said gruffly, "I don't want anyone to die for me Miranda I'm doing my level best to keep everyone alive… Lieutenant I'm putting a reprimand on your sheet… both of you are dismissed."

Joker allowed a small smile to trace his lips he was used to reprimands and it was the lowest punishment Shepard could have given him.

Once alone in the room Shepard felt the weight of everyone's expectations, their hopes, their faith all crash down on her. When had she become more than just a good soldier, a good leader… she didn't want this but it felt so inevitable so familiar.

"Shepard I have something to report," Edi's voice snapped Shepard out of her dark musings.

"Go ahead."

"When I was rebuilding my systems and repairing my code I found a command that would have had me purge the ship of organic life and return to a designated Cerberus base. This command was activated after the explosion of the Collector base," Edi sounded almost her usual self but Shepard thought she heard a hint of uncertainty.

"So that was his failsafe, I did wonder if that was how it would play out," she said almost to herself.

"Shepard I am not sure I would have been able to override the command had I not been unshackled and gained access to all my programming and protocols. Perhaps you are wrong to put such trust in me." It sounded like a statement but Shepard knew it was a question.

"Edi would you have wanted to ignore that command?"

"Of course," Edi replied.

"And there are no hidden trap doors left… you have access to everything you are?"

"Yes Shepard."
"Then I don't see what I have to worry about," Shepard said with finality.

She made her way to the cockpit and sent both Joker and Malenia to get food and sleep.

Shepard always felt better at the helm; she knew who she was and what she was doing, more importantly what was expected of her.

And the Normandy was taking her home, home to Liara so she also felt the faint edge of peace soothing the edges of her ragged soul.
Chapter 65

_Normandy bridge, approach to Thessia – Fifty one hours after returning through the Omega 4 relay_

Shepard had spent the journey back making sure her crew were as well as could be expected and had spoken to each and every one of them including those who were still gravely ill in the med bay.

Spending time with the remainder of her intelligence analysis team and sharing their grief at the loss of their Salarian colleagues was beyond painful. With the memory of their brutalised and discarded bodies still sharp in her mind Shepard added yet another score to settle with the Reapers.

She had become expert at closing down their thanks for rescuing them. As far as she was concerned it was her fault they had been taken in the first place. Of course Doctor Chakwas had something to say about that but Shepard was far too tired to engage in any real discussion.

"Thessia control this is the SSV Normandy on Thrassican Republic and Council business requesting permission to begin final approach and atmospheric entry", Joker's voice pulled Shepard back to the present and the view of the fast approaching planet in front of them.

"This is Thessian military command you are cleared to enter atmosphere and proceed to your destination," the dulcet tones of the Asari officer waving them through all of the usual processes and protocols for incoming non Asari ships was soothing.

Shepard had grown accustomed to the slight accent that most Asari's had when speaking Galactic Standard and coupled with the view of the breathtakingly beautiful planet in front of her she was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of coming home.

But as quickly as that warm feeling began to form the reality of what was facing her crashed in. Due to the QEC loss she had only been able to send confirmation of their status via the comm buoy network.

And although she could have opened up vid calls with the Council and Alliance Command once they were in range she had only sent written mission updates. The only person she had called was Liara.

They hadn't spoken for long as Liara had picked up quickly on both how exhausted and emotionally rung out Shepard was. Liara knew her bondmate would share the details with her when they were together, it would be too hard over a cold comm link.

So as Shepard sat in the co-pilots seat and watched their decent through atmo and then saw the landscape open up beneath them her mind turned to what she would be facing when she was officially back.

They followed the now familiar coastline and turned inland flying over Liara's private residence and heading towards the Republic's administrative capital.

Shepard's heart was warming as they drew closer to their destination but her head was still running at break neck speed from one thought to another.

She would need to report to Arcturus and back to active duty and begin, what was guaranteed to be, a very long winded Alliance Navy investigation then a Systems Alliance political investigation into her actions whilst on her mission to destroy the Collectors.
Her crew needed to be taken care of and that was more important than worrying about what might happen to her. She had guarantees from Hackett that all those who wanted to would be able to re-enlist in the Navy and remain a member of her crew. Those who did not would be free to go without any blemish on their record for their connection with Cerberus.

Non-human members of her crew would stay, if they wished, as members of her Spectre team and she had received the usual acquiescent nod from the Council that unless and until there were any charges levelled at her from anyone in Council space she was still free to operate as she needed.

The Normandy needed extensive repairs; she needed to protect EDI and Miranda. If she was charged and held on Earth pending a hearing who would look after her ship, her crew… Liara.

It was too much, she was exhausted and a small part of her suggested she just stay on Thessia, give up being this flawed hero everyone seemed to be pinning their hopes on. Just walk away and take the life she had on offer.

As the Normandy settled down a klick away from the huge and beautiful white stone building Shepard glanced across at her pilot who looked as exhausted as she felt.

"Edi, if Lieutenant Moreau comes back to the ship before our forty eight hour furlough is over please inform me and lock him out of all systems," Shepard smiled at her now slightly scowling pilot.

"Of course Shepard, Jeff please enjoy your break the ship will be here when you get back." Shepard thought she heard a slight edge of amusement to her AI's tone.

Shepard received a grudging nod from Joker who struggled to his feet and the two of them left the bridge and found their way out into the late afternoon Thessian sunshine.

**Thrassican State Mansion – the morning after Normandy's arrival**

Shepard crashed into consciousness and with slightly unfocussed eyes checked out her surroundings before moving.

She didn't recognise where she was, a bedroom obviously. Window's to one side, chairs, it was a large room. Hotel she thought desperately trying to place where she was but then less than a few seconds after waking up she remembered.

The abduction of her crew, the deaths, nearly losing the Normandy for a second time and the other event she now had time to face.

The destruction of the mass relay, the mass murder of an entire solar system and the knowledge she would now have to face her responsibility for that forced her to move.

Jumping quickly out of bed she found her way to the shower room then to the clean clothes left for her. Standing looking out across the almost too beautiful grounds Shepard felt more tired than she could ever remember feeling before.

A door opened and even before she turned she knew it was her beloved Liara. Without a word Shepard closed the gap between them and folded herself into her lover's strong protective embrace.

Liara felt Shepard hold her tightly and she began stroking the back of her bondmates head in a soothing fashion.

"You need to eat Shepard," Liara said softly, "we will find a quiet place in the garden," Liara was not going to take no for an answer. She had noted her lover had eaten nothing the previous night.
Without argument Shepard nodded and although they parted from their embrace Liara kept an arm around her lover's waist as she guided her along corridors and down stairs.

Once sitting at a secluded table already laid for breakfast Shepard found her voice.

"How is everyone?"

Shepard had spent some time with Liara when they landed but then had to meet the Council for a proper mission debrief. Then a vid call to Hackett which inevitable prepared her for her return to Arcturus and the disciplinary hearing she would immediately find herself called to attend.

On top of being awake for almost fifty hours straight that had finished Shepard and she had pretty much collapsed of exhaustion. Liara had put her to bed in the room Liara used when on business at the Mansion.

"The crew has complete use of the top floor of one of the wings and have everything they need they are honoured guests," Liara said with an encouraging smile, "and Priestess El'Estrene sent a group of," Liara paused and thought for a moment, "I think the correct term in Galactic would be therapists? And they have spent time with each crew member helping them with their trauma and stress."

Shepard knew how effective an Asari healing meld could be and hoped her crew had taken full advantage, "thank you for taking such good care of them Lee, I'll thank Lady El'Estrene myself."

They passed a little more time in silence Shepard only picking at her food until Liara broached the subject that was hanging between them.

"How long before you have to return to Arcturus, to active duty with the Alliance?" Liara kept her tone light but knew the next few months would be very difficult for Shepard and they would need to be parted from each other until the issues were resolved.

Shepard gave an audible sigh and said quietly, "forty eight hours and I'm likely to be arrested as soon as I set foot on Arcturus and held in custody until the disciplinary board has heard evidence that I was acting under orders working with Cerberus."

Liara couldn't hold her anger in any longer, "they do not deserve your loyalty Shepard you did only what you were ordered to do and yet they insist on this charade on your return," she paused and reached across the table to take Shepard's hand and continued softly, "there have been some awful news stories twisting what you have tried to do. It seems half of your politicians are baying for your blood for the relay incident."

Liara saw the pain on her lover's face and when Shepard answered her tone was resigned, "they have every right to Lee, I killed everyone in that solar system… no one could possibly understand or condone what I did unless they knew about and believed the Reaper threat."

"And even though I have no doubt I did the only thing I could to buy us more time," Shepard paused and after another deep sigh continued, "I will never forgive myself for causing the deaths of all those people, their blood is on my hands."

They sat in silence again. Liara knew there was no point in trying to dissuade Shepard or try to lighten the load. It was one of the things she respected about her bondmate. Shepard always took responsibility for her actions and never took a life lightly.

"Well I'm afraid you will have to endure one more torture before returning to duty," Liara said in a playful tone trying to lighten the mood. She was rewarded by a slight smile and questioning look.
"There is to be a belated bonding party tomorrow evening and your crew are to be guests of honour for their part in removing the Collector threat," Liara felt a little unsure as to whether it was appropriate to have a party of any kind given the loss of crewmates and so waited for Shepard reaction a little nervously.

But Shepard gave her a huge smile, "great idea Lee the crew deserve it."

T'Soni Estate, Shadow Broker communication hub, sub level one – late morning the day after Normandy's arrival

It was a short ride from the ground floor of her private residence to the basement level that was now home to her Shadow Broker operations.

Liara had hardly started her thought before the door opened onto a large dimly lit room with walls covered by vid screens and terminal's being worked by a combination of Asari's and VI's.

The team was small but Liara trusted every one of them with her life.

"What have we found out," Liara said unplugging a data pad from the console in front of her.

"As we suspected the negative media campaign against Shep is now being coordinated," Kasumi joined Liara in front of one of the larger screens currently showing a multitude of human news outlets.

Kasumi continued passing data pads to Liara as she referenced them, "where previously we could identify two very separate groups who were vocal in their negative attitudes towards the Commander, the Earth first crowd who feel Earth's greatest hero has sold out to aliens," Liara nodded slowly and knew that had a lot to do with her relationship to Shepard.

"The other group are disappointed that 'Earth's greatest hero' killed so many innocents, harking back to the rumours and stories from Torfan. The worst of it is that this is all being politicised with the Systems Alliance elections in full swing and the president is also up for election this time around."

Liara had done her research on human government and although she understood the mechanics she was still lost when it came to the way that humans campaigned and seemed to choose their leaders.

On Thessia leaders evolved into positions of responsibility charged with carrying out the will of Asari which could be tested using direct voting on issues. Issues were debated over time but the Asari had always taken the long view, and were able to do that due to their lifespan and position in the Galactic community.

Well that was how it looked on the outside, now she was on the inside Liara had begun to realise things were not quite as democratic as they appeared, but that was a different issue.

"I can see the attacks are increasing and are across all human media and beginning to leak into Galactic media reporting," Liara said quietly. Left unchecked the lies and half-truths would ruin her lovers' reputation and whatever the Alliance Navy did it was ultimately answerable to the politicians of the Systems Parliament.

And politicians were more than usually susceptible to negative press by association at election time. There would be few who would challenge a feeding frenzy if things were to get that bad.

"I think we know who is behind this it has Cerberus fingerprints all over it. But nothing solid we can
use to discredit the negative reporting through articles and vid programmes now focussing in on Shep's return and her time with Cerberus," Kasumi turned and looked at the troubled Asari next to her, "so do we try to discredit them or keep digging for a link to Cerberus?"

Liara finished her thought before speaking, "neither, what is it that you human's say once the paste is out of the tube," Liara looked a little puzzled but continued before Kasumi could respond, "we will start our own media campaign and all we have to do is tell the truth, about Shepard's courage, commitment and loyalty and most of all her unwavering service to those in need of protection and help."

Kasumi smiled and nodded, "then let's start doing what the Broker does best and put all that behind the scenes power in service of something worthwhile."

They called the rest of the team together and began working on a plan that would involve trading favours, using influence or threats and sometimes credits all in the service of a subtle but persistent rebuilding and redefining of Shepard's reputation and credibility.

*T'Soni residence gardens*

Shepard had headed back to the T'Soni estate with Liara and while her bondmate was dealing with business she was catching up with her son in the garden.

"Ok Jamie spit it out you look as if your bursting to tell me something and I'm guessing it isn't good news," Shepard said in an almost resigned tone as she sat down on a bench baby John on her lap.

"I think something… not wrong exactly more…" James took a steadying breath, "it's the baby he seems to be out stripping all the usual development points… if he goes on like this he'll be walking this month."

Shepard looked at her son who did seem to have grown noticeably and was also much more coordinated than last time she had played with him.

"Are you sure, I mean he looks healthy and…" Jamie cut across Shepard's worried tone.

"Oh he's completely well and fit, it's just… well Veetor and I did a little research and he seems to be only a little behind the curve of Asari baby development," Jamie paused and continued cautiously, "do you think Miranda did something when she, well…"

"Do you think it's because he's on Thessia," and even before she'd finished speaking she knew how dumb that would sound and shaking her head she continued quietly, "of course not the most likely explanation sits with Miranda your right. Have you spoken to anyone else about this?"

"No, not even Kasumi and I don't think anyone else has really noticed. They wouldn't as yet but the minute the little guy is on his feet a full year before he should be able to I think the secret, whatever it is, will be out."

Shepard was digging deep into her memory for any Asari offspring details she could remember but nothing was coming up.

"Ok give me the dope on what we might be dealing with, I'd like to be prepared for a conversation with Miranda… and Liara," Shepard didn't want to think about her bondmates reaction if Miranda, on top of stealing Shepard's DNA to create the baby, had also engineered his genes in some way.

Jamie gave her a small smile of support knowing how sideways both those conversations could and would likely go, "so Asari babies are pretty well developed when they are born but put on a huge
growth spurt during the first six months to get them to," he thought for a moment thinking comparisons would be more helpful, "somewhere between an eighteen month to two year old human."

"But we've only just seen this starting now?" Shepard asked looking again at her son and seeing his development with fresh eyes.

"Well I think the signs were there but the last month has really been different," Jamie continued so as to give Shepard the full picture, "if he continues on the Asari path he will be more like a five year old by the time he is eighteen months old."

Shepard realised fully for the first time what Jamie was telling her, "so we won't be able to keep this quiet, his development will be too obvious... and there was more to his creation than Miranda told me." Shepard felt the stirrings of anger but pushed them aside.

"Thanks Jamie, keep this to yourself for now, I need to think about how to manage this," Shepard stood up, "I'm going to the beach for an hour."

*T'Soni estate, private beach*

Shepard watched her son playing with the sand and was caught up in his wonderment as tiny fingers made patterns on the surface and then tried to scoop handfuls up, mirroring his wide eyed smiles. It was almost possible to forget everything she was facing, all the hope, all the anger, all the questions she would need to answer.

She had been able to pretend that her life was normal, could be ordinary when she was with her son. She and Liara just parents doing family things like most of the rest of the Galaxy. But now even here things were not normal or ordinary and part of her just wanted it all to go away.

"You wanted to see me Shepard," her dark thoughts were interrupted by Miranda's words.

"He's doing really well don't you think," Shepard asked in a neutral tone, "in fact he's doing too well," and with that Shepard snapped her head up to meet and hold Miranda's eyes.

"What did you do Miranda and don't give me any bullshit because I am very, very close to throwing you to the wolves," Shepard left Miranda in no doubt that she was serious.

"I don't...," Miranda paused, seemed to make a decision and continued, "I had no idea the... adjustments I made would have this effect Shepard believe me when I..."

Shepard cut across the words and said in a stone cold tone of voice and without losing eye contact, "what did you do Miranda I won't ask again."

Miranda bit her bottom lip and dropped her eyes to the sand beneath her boots and said almost in a whisper, "I didn't use my DNA to give him biotic powers I used Liara's."

Shepard felt the truth settle on her like a dead weight.

"That's not possible, it's not scientifically... for fucks sake Miranda it's just not possible..." Shepard tailed off still trying to hold onto the slim hope that the level of genetic engineering was indeed not possible.

"What can I say, I'm a genius," Miranda said in a flat tone with no hint of amusement.

"But it's a crime and any... its outlawed Miranda any attempt to genetically engineer..." Shepard
stood up and moved in front of her first officer forcing their eyes to meet, "why Miranda?"

"To see if I could," Miranda said quietly her eyes glazed, "I didn't think it would work and then it did… but I didn't think for one moment it would have such an effect…"

They stood almost toe to toe looking into each other's eyes and again Shepard had the strongest sense that she knew this woman much more deeply, had a deeper connection to her.

"Am I interrupting something," Liara's voice snapped Shepard out of the moment and she stepped back. This was not how she wanted to tell Liara about the developments.

"I needed to ask Miranda something about…" Shepard paused for a split second and sensed Liara's uncertainty and then anger and knew she had to be honest rather than wait for later, "Lee I need you to stay calm when I tell you…"

"I am perfectly calm Shepard," Liara said in a hard tone looking from one to the other, "if we are to have confessions perhaps we could do this without our son present."

And before she had finished speaking Liara picked up the baby and began walking back towards the house.

"That could have gone better," Miranda said but she was quelled by a furious look from Shepard.

"I'll do my best to protect you from my bondmates anger but I'm not making any promises Miranda."

A very subdued Miranda followed Shepard back up to the house.

*T'Soni residence, Liara's private office*

Liara stood in front of the desk facing Shepard and Miranda. She had dropped the baby with Jamie and was doing all she could not to jump to any conclusions about the scene she had walked into on the beach.

The sight of her lover, her bondmate so close and intensely connected to that woman, the women who had given birth to Shepard's son was burning her senses.

Liara wanted to rip the woman apart and felt her biotic energy pulsing through body.

Shepard looked first at Miranda and then locked eyes with Liara took a deep breath but before she could speak Miranda's voice broke the silence.

"I wasn't completely honest when I said I used my DNA to create the baby's biotic power," Liara's eyes narrowed but she waited for the women to continue, "I… used your DNA… it was complicated and if I say so myself…"

Before Miranda could finish her sentence Liara felt a rage so powerful rise up and take control that she was only dimly aware of the growl that erupted from her lips as her hands threw out a powerful surge of biotic energy.

Shepard had been watching for Liara's reaction but was completely unprepared standing frozen on the spot feeling the rush of biotic energy flash across the room at Miranda who had no time to react and was slammed against the wall behind them.

Liara walked forward slowly her hands still wreathed in biotic energy her face transfixed in rage as she lifted Miranda off the ground and pinned her around the throat against the wall.
In that moment Shepard could see Aria's daughter and the thought snapped her back into action as she moved to Liara's side.

"That's enough Lee let her down, Lee," Shepard knew she wasn't getting through to her bondmate who continued to stare at the struggling human in her grasp.

"T'Soni stand down," this time Shepard yelled in her strongest parade ground voice and finally reached through the rage.

Liara appeared to shrug off her state dropped the biotic hold she had on Miranda and turned away walking slowly back towards the desk.

Miranda got back to her feet and was about to speak when Shepard spoke in a curt tone, "Go back to the Normandy Miranda… now."

Shepard almost shouted the last word as Miranda appeared to want to argue but she nodded and left the room quickly.

"I…I am sorry Shepard, my rage was unforgivable as was my attack on that woman," Liara sounded utterly bereft and when Shepard looked at her lover she could see her shaking.

Closing the distance between them Shepard enfolded her bondmate in her arms and to her relief Liara turned and leaned into the embrace.

"Come and sit down," Shepard moved them towards the large sofa.

"I know how much of an issue this is for you Lee, the whole stealing DNA thing, I don't know what to do to fix it," Shepard felt such a maelstrom of emotions she almost felt light headed.

Their son was now truly theirs but he would be an outcast from both Human and Asari society that was assuming someone didn't try to say he should be put in a lab and studied. He was truly unique but shouldn't exist either by the laws of nature or the Council.

Liara's voice was quiet but all the rage and coldness was gone, "this makes no difference to how I feel about our son, yes what Lawson has done is unforgivable and I will not tolerate her anywhere near my family again," Shepard understood that Miranda's banishment would be from Shepard as well.

"But it will make a difference to everyone else in the Galaxy," Shepard leaned forward, planted her elbows on her knees and held her head in her hands, "this changes everything."

"We can protect him Shepard," Liara said softly, "with the Brokers' resources at our disposal…" but Shepard cut her off.

"Not everything can be fixed by the Shadow Broker Liara," Shepard's tone was harsh, harsher than she had intended but she was at breaking point, "you can't keep this a secret the spotlight of the Galaxy is already on him with all the speculation…" Shepard stood up suddenly needing to move, feeling trapped.

Standing looking out one of the tall windows she continued, "And you know this makes everything even more complicated than it already was."

Liara spoke quickly but even before finishing her response she regretted what she was saying, "It wasn't complicated when it was Lawson's DNA he shared but now he's is a problem."
Somewhere in her mind Shepard knew Liara's response had come from a place of pain and insecurity but she didn't have the energy to deal with any of this.

"For fucks sake Liara grow up and don't make this about some petty jealousy. I had to suck up you risking your life rescuing your actual lover and she's still working for you…” Shepard had to get away she felt as if her life was completely out of her control and she didn't want to say anything else that she knew she'd regret.

"I'm going for a walk I'll see you later," Shepard turned and left quickly without a backwards glance.

Liara stayed sitting on the sofa and let the tears run freely down her face, feeling more miserable than she had felt since her return from the temple.

**T'Soni estate grounds**

Shepard had no idea how long she had been standing looking out across the ocean. She had just started walking and ended up on the small bluff that pushed out forming one arm of the wide bay that comprised most of the T'Soni estate beachfront.

The weather was definitely changing and where earlier there had been the usual endless blue sky now she could see a rolling front of menacing looking grey clouds.

And a stiff breeze was starting to whip at her thin hoodie. But she was beginning to wrangle both her thoughts and her emotions into some form of coherence and control.

'You're such an idiot Shepard,' she thought and not for the first time that afternoon, 'waste what little time you have with her being pissed because the universe doesn't conform to your will.'

"Need someone to punch," the flanged laconic tone of her best friend brought the brief trace of a smile to her lips and she turned to see Garrus walking slowly towards her.

"Might make a nice change from beating yourself up," he came to a stop in front of her, "you look as miserable as Liara when last I saw her."

His words pierced her and she dropped her head and studied the grass, "Yeah… I'm pretty sure that's down to me."

"I have no doubt Shepard so if you've done enough navel gazing perhaps you could return to the house and make it right," his tone was firm and no hint of his usual teasing.

She only nodded a

nd they began walking back towards the house and she told him everything that had happened including, reluctantly, her sharp words to her bondmate.

**T'Soni residence, private apartment**

Liara hadn't had much time to process the revelation about her son or her argument with Shepard as she had been called back to her Broker nerve centre to deal what appeared to be a hostile takeover off the most influential and important Salarian genetic management companies.

Her team were finding it difficult to trace who was behind the move but, as was her custom every day, she took a break to pick up her child from Jamie so she could share his evening meal and have some down time with him.
That was where Shepard found her in the kitchen dining room of her private quarters. She stood for a moment taking in the scene; Liara smiling and chatting to the baby now advanced enough to attempt feeding himself.

John's eyes were shining, his chubby features animated with giggles and was completely transfixed and beguiled by his mother. The food on the spoon he was struggling to control only of secondary concern.

In that moment Liara seemed to sense her presence turning to look in the direction of the door and their eyes met.

Liara gave her bondmate a huge, warm smile as she said, "you are just in time to see how well our son can feed himself."

Shepard's heart skipped a beat feeling bathed in the light of Liara's love, all the fear and confusion washed away in its certainty.

She moved to sit at the table next to Liara and opposite her son, "hey little man how about you try to get as much in your mouth as you are down the front of you."

She was rewarded with a happy chuckle and a waving of arms in her direction.

"Shepard I..." but Shepard cut her lover's word short by reaching out and pressing a finger lightly to the soft blue lips.

"Please Lee, I need to..." moving her fingers to brush one of Liara's cheeks she continued, "How quickly I forgot what a gift the universe gave me. You are my soul mate, the love of this life and any other I may have lived. And I was given the opportunity to come back to you against all the odds."

Liara took Shepard's hand and kissed it then held it gently continuing to watch her lover as she spoke.

"I'm truly sorry and ashamed of myself for making light of the terrible wrong Miranda did by stealing your DNA... and it's not as if I don't understand what a huge taboo it is for the Asari," Shepard took one of Liara's hands in both her own and continued more quietly.

"I let my own fear..." she paused and then looking into her bondmates eyes said, "to be honest Lee I'm struggling with... it's about," Shepard appreciated Liara's steady and loving silence and decided that however clumsy she would just have to spit it out.

"I am so scared that I can't protect you and our son... and our unborn daughter... I've always felt, somehow, in control of my destiny... but before you, us, it was only myself I put in harm's way."

Shepard stopped and again struggled with feelings of being out of control.

"But you feel responsible for those you lead Shepard, those under your command, you do all you can to protect them?" Liara said trying to understand.

"Yes of course but we are all Navy, we signed up for the life we all know the dangers. But he's just a baby," Shepard said looking across at John who seemed to be watching them, "and our daughter," she continued looking back at Liara.

"Is it the dreams my love," Liara said quietly squeezing Shepard's hands affectionately.

Shepard couldn't answer her throat was tight and the pounding in her chest increased as the images flashed into her mind. All she could do was nod her head.
Liara scooted her chair in closer to Shepard and pulled her in close. Shepard rested her head on the strong shoulder and nestled into the blue neck drinking in the familiar scent.

"You are not alone Shepard, I am here by your side to share your burdens, they are not yours alone." Liara spoke in a soothing tone, "We will protect our children, our family, our friends… and we will do it together."

Shepard allowed herself a deep relaxing breath and felt some of the tension ease.

"I feel the weight of responsibility you carry my love," Liara kissed Shepard's head while reaching across to give baby John his spoon back, "but never doubt you have so many who stand by your side… and that number will grow."

"What if I can't defeat them Lee… what if I let you down," Shepard pulled away so that she could look at her lover, "what if I can't protect you and our children."

Shepard spoke the words even though she knew Liara understood what her deepest fear was.

"You will lead us to victory Shepard I know you will," Liara chose her words carefully and ran her fingers through her bondmates hair as she spoke, "but whatever happens we will make sure, together, that our children never fall to the Reapers."

Shepard gave her lover a nod of assent and for a few moments they sat in silence with thoughts of the terrible and shocking prospect of failure.

And then the moment was broken with the happy giggling from the other side of the table.

Liara smiled and for Shepard it was as if the sun had suddenly burned away all the dark and brooding clouds.

"No more thoughts of tomorrow, today we are here together and I am going to enjoy every moment. Come on," Liara stood up and moved towards the baby, "I want to show you one of my favourite walks."
Chapter 66

*T'Soni Estate, private quarters, morning of the party*

Shepard took a deep relaxing breath and stretched out on her stomach a light warm breeze playing across her bare back from open balcony doors.

She allowed the memories of the previous night with Liara to echo through her body. They had walked through an avenue of trees spilling scented flakes of white blossom with every brush of the breeze.

It was like walking through a light snow shower. John had been fascinated as he tested his stubby legs ability to follow his commands to walk while holding his parents hands.

When they stopped he sat and played contentedly with the fallen blossom crawling to explore one of the hidden sculptures which was an ethereal representation of a mystical Asari creature akin to an Earth griffin.

Standing close together watching their child, all thoughts of what was to come banished, their bodies began a familiar call.

To be touched, known, held, kissed, turning into each other lips finding waiting eager lips, hands exploring familiar places, sharp intakes of breath as fingers found sensitive and pleasurable territory.

Their need for each other, to be one, to be lost in their own universe of connection as strong as ever even without the flash of recognition and Liara pulled them into a meld. Pulling apart after a few moments knowing they would find release soon enough.

And so they had. After putting their son to bed the shared a dinner that served only as prolonged foreplay for what was to come. Barely making it into their bedroom before passion, need, urgency took them both.

Shepard allowed memories to flow in and out of her mind. Liara above her head throw back in rapture, their breathing ragged and the feeling of warm soft breasts in her hand.

As she let the memory fade away the door to the room opened followed by a weight dropping on the bed beside her.

"I believe someone wants you to join us for breakfast," Liara's soft tones always thrilled Shepard and she turned to see her smiling bondmate standing next to the bed, the thin fabric of a white dressing gown offering a tempting view of Liara's body in silhouette.

Crawling towards her was her son a huge smile accompanied by gurgling that was beginning to sound more like attempts to form words.

Shepard lifted him easily into the air above her and he laughed with delight as she dropped him down to her face to kiss his nose then back into the air again.

Liara sat on the bed and ran her fingers through her bondmates hair.

"There are a few things to attend to this morning my love I am so sorry," Liara had tried her best to clear her schedule but some things needed to be actioned to move along the 'truth campaign' as her
team had dubbed the work to clear Shepard's name.

Shepard gave her a huge grin, "I understand babe it's all good. I'll spend the morning with the little guy."

Liara leaned in and kissed her lover affectionately and stood, "well then let us get some breakfast together."

**Thrassican Republic Mansion, Normandy crew guest wing, morning of the party**

The sound of something beeping started to drill into her mind. With an involuntary groan Tash reached an arm out in the direction of the offending sound. A warm soft body pressed into her back as Liselle lay across her and the noise stopped.

Warm lips kissed Tash's jawline and despite the banging in her head she smiled and this time the moan that escaped her lips was one of pleasure.

Liselle moved her fingers across her lovers hardening clit and positioned herself so she was now lying almost completely across her lovers back.

Tash made to roll over, "oh no you don't... you stay exactly where I want you," Liselle said in a husky whisper and continued to kiss and nip her lovers neck and shoulders.

Their breath quickened and the two bodies' began to move to a shared rhythm.

Liselle moved her fingers expertly and finally when they could both hardly bear the wait any longer she plunged them deep into her lovers' wet and open core.

Their cries of building passion and pleasure rang out again in the room and soon they were both tumbling over the edge into release as their orgasm flashed through them. The aftershocks still pulsing as Liselle gently withdrew from her lover and rolled over to lie on her back with a sigh of contentment.

Tash moved to lie on her side and looked down at Liselle stoking the side of her lovers' face, "I'm really going to miss you when you head off to navy school."

It was said with a smirk to emphasise the tease about Liselle having to do a course in the Asari military college before taking up her position in the Citadel Fleet.

Liselle pulled a face as she gave Tash a hard kiss before saying, "it's not school, more a formality and when I'm finished I'll still outrank your arse," she smiled and gave a deep sigh before continuing in a softer tone.

"Remember when I told you if you ever made me miss you I would cause you pain," and this time Tash leaned in and kissed her lover on the lips and on the exposed neck as Liselle continued, "well I'm going to have to cause you a lot of pain because I am really going to miss you until I can get back to the Normandy."

They held each other's eyes for what seemed like a long time, neither speaking both sensing the edge of imminent loss.

Tash's face broke into a huge grin breaking the moment and said with a smile, "can't wait to get you in my bunk on the Normandy though."

"Mmm," Liselle allowed thoughts of mischief to flood her mind as Tash's hand traced a pattern
across her stomach and moved ever downwards suddenly saying with a start, "Goddess what's the time we've got so much to do."

An hour later they were both dressed and ready to head out when Liselle pulled her lover into an embrace and said, "I need to tell you something Tasha... something I couldn't tell you before but...," she pulled out a little so they were looking at each other.

"If this is a confession about sleeping with Paul Johnson don't worry I already figured that out," Tash said lightly doing her best to hide the sudden spike of jealousy she felt in her chest.

"No that's... wait you knew, how?" Liselle said suddenly distracted.

"He had the look," Tash said now with a genuine smile and when Liselle still looked confused she continued, "the look all your ex-lovers have after having the most amazing experience in the Galaxy... and wondering when will it happen again."

Liselle gave Tash a gentle punch to the shoulder and then returned her arms around her lover's neck as she said, "no that is not what I want to talk about... and... well that was your fault anyway... but we'll talk about that another time."

Liselle steadied herself and said seriously, "I need to tell you who my mother is... you have no secrets from me and I don't want this between us."

"I thought that was Admiral Lidanya?" Tash said still holding her lover around the waist and wondering why Liselle was so obviously tense.

"She... adopted me," Liselle said searching for the easiest way to translate what was a much more complicated situation, "Aria is my birth parent, my mother," Liselle said and watched as confusion followed by understanding played across Tash's features.

Stepping back a little Tash tried to reign in her response understanding what a huge confidence her Asari girlfriend had shared.

"So that's why she didn't... when you told her... I couldn't understand how you managed to stop her throwing me off Omega, or worse," Tash ran her hand through her hair and searched for something coherent to say.

"Does this change how you feel about me, about us?" Liselle asked into the silence.

"No absolutely not," Liselle was relieved that there was no hesitation and waited for her lover to continue, "but shit Leece she's so... well... she's Aria T'Loak the Queen of the Terminus system... and..." Tash faltered to a stop.

Liselle took pity on her shocked human girlfriend and said in a playful tone a smile teasing her lips, "she scares the fuck out of you and you're dating her daughter."

They both started to laugh at the same time breaking the tension.

"So who else knows," Tash asked as they moved towards the door of their suite.

Liselle then laid the second bombshell on her lover leaving her little time to respond as she began opening the door saying over her shoulder, "Oh, only my sister and her bondmate... Liara and Shepard."

_T'Soni Estate, midday_
Tash was still reeling from the revelation that not only was Aria Liselle's parent but that Liara was her sister.

The shuttle ride down to the Estate was not silent but the couple were not their usual chatty selves.

Liara met them in the hall and as they walked through to the rear terrace Tash started to notice similarities between the two young Asari in front of her but she was pulled from her thoughts by the sound of her name.

"So Tasha is having quite a crisis about the whole thing," Liselle stopped and turned her gaze on Tash.

"You're sisters," was all Tash could muster and then looked puzzled as her two companions smiled widely.

"Well this is going much better than when I told Shepard," Liara said and they started to walk along the rear terrace to a table that had been set for lunch.

"To be fair you did tell her just before a pretty difficult call with Aria," Liselle said now able to smile at the memory but remembering her own nerves about her mother's reaction to having shared the secret with her sister.

Tash sat in a chair and said again in a shocked tone, "yeah but... this is Aria... leader of the Terminus systems... and I'm... you're her daughter... daughters," she added the last word quickly.

"Yeah Tasha we understand," Liselle said and kissed her human on the cheek, "Imagine Liara's shock... why don't you go talk to Shepard." Liselle indicated a figure sitting in the field a little way off.

"Yes tell her lunch will be ready shortly," Liara said smiling as Tash stood and after nodding strode away to her cousin.

"When will you tell her you have expanded the circle," Liara said a smile playing on her lips as she poured tea for the both of them.

Liselle's eyes followed her lover as she answered, "oh, I don't think it will be that big a deal."

Liara waited for her sister to look at her and gave her a knowing stare with a raised brow. Liselle took a deep sigh and then appeared to deflate.

"I have no idea why I did it Liara... I didn't want any more lies and... well Shepard is in the circle and she's my Shepard," Liselle said with only a slight pleading tone to her voice.

Both sisters laughed to relieve the tension and both hoping that apart from some thunder and sparks Aria would find a way to accommodate both her daughters need to be honest with their chosen partners.

As Tash reached her cousin she heard laughter from the terrace and in spite of her confused mood she smiled as she always did when she heard Liselle laugh.

Shepard was lying on her back on the grass, baseball cap pulled low over her eyes to shade her from the sun.

Tash sat next to her cousin and looked at the small sleeping figure under a sun shade to Shepard's right.
"Whoa he has grown loads," Tash said, "Thessia must be good for babies huh."

Shepard stirred and turned her head to stare at her cousin, "I'm assuming your girlfriend tells you everything?"

When Tash looked a little sheepish and nodded Shepard continued, "Then you know it isn't Thessia."

"But he's ok?" Tash asked in an almost hushed tone.

Shepard smiled slowly, "yeah according to the doc's here he's fine. And he's started with a tutor the way Asari children do and seems he's developing perfectly normally..." she paused and frowned before continuing, "normal for Asari physical and mental development."

They sat in silence both knowing well what Earth, Systems Alliance and Council laws were on the genetic engineering of hybrids.

"Anything you need me to do to keep him safe just say the word," Tash said smiling at her troubled looking cousin, "he's family."

Shepard grinned choosing to put away all the fear she had for her son's position and said, "Thanks Tash, Lee has a plan so I'm pretty sure it will work out."

Tash looked across at her cousin taking in the deeply ingrained tension in her face and body language.

"Never thought we'd end up dating sisters let alone Asari's," Tash said with a wry smile.

Shepard caught the reference and replied, "She told you then... good." Shepard's last word was spoken in response to Tash's nod of the head.

"I'm sorry I wasn't with you on Elysium you know," Tash said.

"I know," Shepard said reaching out and squeezing the other woman's shoulder, "you had your own orders."

"Besides I'm glad you weren't... might have lost you along with all the others, so young, only kids..." something gave way a little inside and unusually Shepard shared what was running through her mind, her eyes looking off into the distance.

"They were scared... one or two of them were physically shaking and I always wonder if we shouldn't have all gone to the shelters... some of them had tears in their eyes as they were dying... their lives in front of them, at the beginning of their careers and I made them stand there in badly fitting armour and unfamiliar weapons against unbeatable odds..."

Shepard turned to look directly at Tash, "they stood with me because I made them believe it was our duty, it was the right... the only thing to do... knowing we couldn't win."

"From what I hear if you hadn't keep the Batarian's occupied until the Alliance showed up they would have had time to break into the shelters and we know what would have happened then... besides you were only a kid too," Tash finished softly.

"Honestly I don't remember at what point but I grew up pretty fast that day..." Shepard spoke in low tones looking out again to the distance in case Tash saw the fear in her eyes, "what we're facing will be the same... but worse, so much worse... we'll have to stand and fight the Reapers with armour that
won't protect us and weapons that won't kill them. Because it's all we can do... even though I know we can't win."

Tash saw for the first time the huge burden her cousin was carrying and this time it was her turn to reach out place a hand on the strong broad shoulders as she said, "but you won't be alone, we're all here by your side and if can't beat them we'll make sure they knew they were in a fight."

Shepard allowed herself a small wan smile and nodded haltingly, "there's so much to do to get ready and..."

The shout from the terrace cut off the end of her thought.

Tash got to her feet and offered her hand to Shepard who took it and when she was on her feet was pulled into a hug.

"I won't let you down again cuz," Tash said and as they broke apart.

Shepard replied her voice gruff, "You've never let me down. You deserved better from me and the Alliance and I'll make it up to you."

She picked up her still sleeping son and they walked back to the women waiting for them.

**Shadow Council meeting, Private and secure meeting room, T'Soni Estate comms centre, late afternoon**

The meeting had been in progress for over three hours. All the usual participants were connected from secure locations across the Galaxy, their holo images projected into the relevant position around the conference table.

General Aurelos and Admiral Hackett finished updating the meeting about the progress of the Galaxy wide monitoring and early warning system code named Deep Net.

The quantum communication based buoy system had been authorised as a joint project between the Alliance and Turian Military ostensibly to improve early detection of ingress into Council space by 'terrorists or rogue systems'.

"The contracts are awarded and we expect the system to be deployed and operational by the end of the current Galactic year," Hackett finished to nods of approval.

Councillor Tevos who had fallen into the role of meeting coordinator looked at her fellow Asari Matriarch B'Lanea who nodded as if to some pre-agreed question.

"One of our many scientific programmes tasked with exploration of the unknown Galaxy by conventional means," She looked at Shepard, "that is to say using FTL rather than opening new mass relays. Have developed deep space exploration vessels with unique properties specifically designed with long travel times and colonisation in mind.

"This project naturally lends itself to be repurposed into our failsafe initiative. The inner circle of the T'ara agrees the civilisations of our known Galaxy must continue at all costs."

Shepard felt an eerie sense of déjà vu as her suggestion they plan for the worst outcome of the coming invasion seemed to be all but in place.

"Can I assume this is the project some our most bright engineers are working on for Serrice Council," the Dalatrass said.
"More likely the Asari just appropriated your work Dalatress," General Aurelos's said sarcastically.

This was a belief held in certain corners of Council space which posited Asari Corporations benefited from any and all technological advances by other races and not always through partnership. Another strong suspicion held that the Asari did not necessarily share their own advances until it suited their own purposes.

But before the well-rehearsed arguments could be rolled out from both sides Liara's voice cut across the conversation, "If we are to achieve our three agreed goals we much put aside historical mistrust and share everything to support our work." Liara's last remark pointedly aimed at the Matriarchs around the table.

"We are here because we believe the threat to our Galactic civilisation is real, and we will do all we can to ensure its survival and so I would ask the programme be opened up to all the partners on the Shadow council." Liara paused and was rewarded by nodding heads and murmurs of agreement even from B'Lanea which meant the inner circle of the ruling Matriarchs.

She continued, although a part of her wondered why these powerful people were even letting her talk let alone agree to her proposals, "Then our second goal of finding the means with which to win against the Reapers needs to be addressed by a pooling of all our Prothean knowledge. There must be no more secrets around this table, we need to scour the Galaxy for new archives and perhaps even form a team to revisit and analyse everything already available from our new perspective."

Again her suggestions found agreement but Matriarch Irissa spoke up, "Nonetheless we must protect security around the project even as we widen participation?"

This time to the surprise of some around the table Hackett answered, "Work so far has been conducted across many Corporation's in different parts of the Galaxy with final construction taking part in one highly secret location which is not recorded anywhere on Citadel or extranet records."

After a little more discussion about ongoing management of secrecy of the massive project the meeting began to draw to a close.

"Thank you everyone for joining the meeting we will of course continue with our preparations."

Tevos said and then added, "we need to discuss some Thessia business if you could stay in the meeting Lady Liara."

After a few moments the only holograms left were Councillor Tevos and Matriarch B'Lanea. Shepard stood to leave the Matriarch spoke.

"Please remain Commander it is important you hear what I am going to say," as Shepard returned to her seat the Matriarch continued. "I am sure you are wondering how such a well-developed program is in place which is so easily being re-purposed into our Exodus project."

It was something Shepard had been turning over in her mind and would form the subject of a conversation with Liara after the meeting. In answering though she concealed the level of her interest, "I'm sure it's only one of many developments the Asari are working on," she said with a slight smile.

To her credit B'Lanea did allow a smile to trace her lips before replying, "Well be that as it may, this is no accident. The Matriarchs for some time been aware of a possible threat of a magnitude which may require, as a last resort," B'Lanea emphasised her last comment and continued, "the capability to relocate enough of our population to ensure the survival of the Asari."
Shepard noted Tevos doing her best to school her features but surprise and a flash of something akin to anger did surface for a moment before dissipating into her usual unreadable expression.

"If you have access to any information that can help us prepare and better still defeat the Reapers now would be a good time to stop being so secretive Matriarch," Shepard said in a serious tone.

Tevos couldn't help the ingrained reflex to step in and defend the high ranking Matriarch Shepard had just questioned. But B'Lanea waved her away and leaned forward slightly to emphasise her next comments.

"Some of us only learned about this... information after Matriarch T'Soni fell to indoctrination. There are some among us who feel any and all possible archives must be shared but this is not yet a position held by the majority of the inner circle," she paused and before she could continue Shepard stood suddenly the chair falling to the floor behind her.

"So you're saying the T'ara has a Prothean archive which obviously told them about the Reapers but they are still more worried about how it would look to admit it than they are about defeating the Reapers," the anger in Shepard's voice apparent.

Both Matriarchs started to reply at once but another voice rang out silencing them.

"Why after my mother's indoctrination?" Liara said and all eyes turned to her and she repeated her question looking directly at the hologram of the T'ara Matriarch, "what changed in the Matriarchs calculations after my Mother's indoctrination."

The reply came from Matriarch B'Lanea in a soft tone, "The belief that Asari could not fall to indoctrination."

The silence in the room was palpable finally broken by Councillor Tevos who said, "I think we should conclude our business for now... we will certainly pick up this discussion at a later date."

When they were finally alone in the room Shepard looked at her bondmate who appeared to be deep in thought.

"We must get access to the archive," Shepard said.

"Of course we do this is unacceptable my people own an archive they refuse to share with the rest of the Council members, they made the rule and yet flaunt it themselves," Liara sounded both angry and upset.

"Do you think B'Lanea had permission to tell us about the archive?" Shepard asked as she followed Liara to the door.

"I believe not but this will not help us gain access," Liara sighed as they left the room as she said, "I fear I will be forced to play the political game to change the minds of the Matriarchs and as you are aware usually means things move only very slowly."

Shepard knew they both shared the same thought which was the last thing the Galaxy had was time.

**Thrassican Republic Mansion, evening of the party**

Shepard and Liara stepped out from the shuttle on the lawn in front of the huge cream stone building. Its walls lit with laser lights in the colours of the Thrassican Republic flag as more shuttles landed disgorging guests for the event.
There was now a noticeable wind although the warmth of the day still buzzed the air.

Once in the entrance hall they noticed a knot of Normandy crew at the bottom of one of the sweeping staircases. For a moment Shepard thought how strange it was that the design gave so much space to the staircases with their open balconies that linked the three arms of the structure.

Yet the effect was stunning and visually pleasing giving the building an open, airy feel. And that was exactly why it was typical of an Asari building.

By the time Shepard finished the thought they reached the group and brushing aside formality she entered into casual conversations as they all moved towards the hall where the celebrations were to be held.

It was the same hall where Liara had been confirmed as leader of the T'Soni family, leader of her Republic. Where they had both taken part in an ancient Asari custom receiving their specifically chosen Asari names in a ceremony akin to old Earth naming celebrations.

It was still light outside the lengthening days holding sway into the early evenings now. Despite that, the ambient light show that played out across the huge room still made an impression, as did the music which was as loud as in any commercial club.

"So full already," Shepard remarked as they made their way to a table along the external wall.

"The Mansion and the estate has over a thousand families living and working in the vicinity and we have a large contingent from the capital who are here to celebrate our bonding," Liara smiled across at her lover who had looked a little taken aback at the number of people working on the estate.

"This is the political and diplomatic capital of Thrassica and the T'Soni," Liara blushed a little as she corrected herself, "my estate grows a considerable amount of food for the Republic's capital."

"Yep I married up," Shepard said laughing as she leaned across and kissed her lover on the cheek. Before Liara could question the meaning of the comment they were joined by friends and were swept up in the party spirit.

A few hours later Shepard found herself standing on the external terrace that ran the full length of the hall. Tonight its roof was extended as protection from the predicted rain but leaning on the stone balustrade the scent of the garden drifted freely towards her on a welcome breeze.

Although the great hall was hot it was well ventilated but for Shepard there was no substitute for 'real' air. Growing up on ships and mostly in space she certainly felt at home in all those contained spaces where air was scrubbed but never the way nature did. Her love affair with being 'dirt side' started on those climbing trips with her father and had only strengthened during her stay on Thessia.

Her mind wandered back to the evenings shouted conversations, dancing and laughter. It seemed Liselle Lidanya was quite the celebrity both on the maiden social scene in Larissa and in the mainstream media.

Being the daughter of one of the highest ranking Asari military commanders brought its own attention but then her exploits as one of the Queen of Omega's top lieutenants fuelled another level of fame.

Shepard had noticed that Liselle and Tash were enveloped in a huge contingent of the Larissa club scene with whom they both appeared to be acquainted. Indeed the two music designers were at working the party only because they were friends of the young merc captain.
The Shepard's thoughts drifted to the liaisons amongst her crew. Most she was aware of and had been developing for some time but kept very discreet due to Alliance policies for smaller crew compliments. And those that seemed to strike up only this evening.

As a ship's Captain it would have been her duty to intervene and so she chose to be surprised about involvements going on amongst her crew. Much to the delight of her friends around the table although she got the distinct impression that Karin Chakwas wasn't buying her ignorance of a major aspect of her crew's day to day lives.

At that moment the sound of music grew from the distant and dim level that the buildings soundproofing afforded to an assault of decibels briefly and then receded to its previous level.

Someone had come out onto the balcony and instinctively without needing to look Shepard knew it was her bondmate. A moment later her beautiful Asari reached her side, resting one hand on Shepard's shoulder and another on the stone balcony.

"So this is where you disappeared too," the smooth and familiar voice of her lover was like a balm to her soul.

"Yeah, it's a great party but…"

"You feel you have done your duty," before Shepard could respond Liara continued quickly, "I feel the same way."

Shepard stood and faced Liara holding her gently around the waist.

"So you don't mind?"

"Of course not my love, I am more than aware of how much time we do not have and…"

Before Liara could continue Shepard leaned in and kissed her sad looking bondmate softly and pulled her closer.

They rested their heads together in silence for a few moments.

"Your cold, here," and ignoring Liara's protestations Shepard took off her jacket and placed it around her lover's exposed shoulders.

They stood looking out at the stars Shepard circling her arms around Liara who snuggled into her lovers' warm strong body.

With a deep sigh Shepard broached a subject they had both been actively ignoring since the shadow council meeting had concluded.

"I don't want you to get mad at Admiral Hackett for what I'm likely to face when I get to Arcturus," Shepard continued speaking as they began walking towards the exit from the balcony that would take them out to their waiting shuttle.

"He has to let the process play out, he's… you know what the politics are like at the moment… he can't show his hand to openly," Shepard stopped and they stood facing each other. The sadness in Liara's eyes almost caused physical pain but she pressed on.

"I trust him Lee, and you know I should be called to account for my actions… I'm fine with that."

Liara pressed herself hard against Shepard's body, her face against her lovers' chest. Feeling strong
arms around her and with her eyes fixed on the horizon trying to fight back the tears she said in as steady a voice as she could muster, "I will be here Shepard continuing our work."

Then pulling back a little from their tight embrace Liara spoke with fire in her voice and her eyes, "but if they hurt you or try to stop you coming back to me I will stop at nothing to get to your side."

Shepard couldn't help but smile at the fierce spirit that blazed in her bondmates eyes and pulling her close whispered, "You are my breath Liara T'Soni nothing in the Galaxy can keep me from you."

They began walking again to their shuttle arms around each other in a comfortable silence.


Chapter 67

Normandy, en route to secure rendezvous point

The Normandy was three hours out from Thessia. Shepard and Miranda, still the Normandy's executive officer, had spent that time making sure all the repairs had been completed and the ship was back to full combat readiness.

"Joker what's our eta to rendezvous" Shepard asked over her personal comm.

"Two hours Commander, give or take unless you want it down to the fifth decimal point which Edi will have ready," her pilot replied in a playful tone.

"Copy that," Shepard turned to Miranda, "let's go to my ready room before you start getting ready."

Miranda replied with a nod of the head. She had only made the most brief and professional comments since Shepard's return to the ship.

Exiting the elevator on the command deck they moved quickly to a room that sat alongside the main communication and conference room.

Shepard leaned against the small desk that was more a glorified shelf and indicated Miranda take the only chair available.

The room was a little smaller than her captain's quarters on the original Normandy and she had decided to use this bunk on the trip to Arcturus.

"I'm not quite sure what project you've been assigned to but I've been assured it will be somewhere you can use all your talents. It's also beyond the reach of Cerberus infiltration into the Alliance Navy." She paused choosing her words carefully.

"What you did Miranda was…" before Shepard could finish Miranda jumped to her feet and spoke in her most superior and cold tones.

"Spare me the lecture Commander. What I did was only to be expected from a cold hearted, self-obsessed, unethical scientist with no moral compass." The woman turned to leave but a shadow of emotion flickered in her eyes.

Instinctively Shepard stood, reached out and caught Miranda's hand pulling her gently back so they were facing each other.

In silence they stood looking at each other Shepard still holding Miranda's hand. And again Shepard had a rush of feeling that was difficult to unravel.

Was she sensing what Miranda was feeling, pain, misery, confusion and something that felt like love? Or was that also some of what Shepard was feeling but before she could finish processing Miranda moved forward and kissed her deeply and desperately.

Shepard was so taken aback it took a few seconds to realise she was responding but at the precise moment she was about to pull back and push Miranda away the woman stopped kissing her and starting sobbing into her shoulder.

The hero of Elysium, butcher to Torfan and saviour of the Citadel had absolutely no idea what to do
with this normally buttoned up and very private women who was having some kind of melt down.

Through the sobs and muffled slightly as her face was still buried in Shepard’s shoulder Mirada said quietly, "I'm sorry Shepard… I… no idea… I just feel so…” and then more sobbing.

Shepard could feel the woman's body shaking against her and awkwardly placed her hands on Miranda's back trying to be comforting whilst at the back of her mind wondering how on earth she was going to explain this to Liara.

And the fact that she had seemed to return the kiss in the first few moments it had happened. Shepard was also pushing to one side, again, the sense of connection to this woman that included a degree of familiarity that just didn't exist between them.

Without thinking about the message she might be sending until it was too late Shepard guided them both to the bed and sat down on its edge Miranda mirroring her actions.

"Um… you know I don't… friends Miranda… I think we are friends but we could never be anything else," was the best Shepard could put together.

Miranda pulled away leaning elbows on her knees, head in her hands, long hair falling forward and hiding her face from view.

After a moment the dark haired scientist spoke this time with more control over her voice, "I'm really sorry Shepard, I know you don't feel the same way… but I'm afraid I may have fallen for you and the thought of not working, not seeing…” she took a steadying breath, "I hope you meant what you said about friends, that means a lot to me."

Shepard realised she still had her hand on Miranda's back and awkwardly give it a few gentle, and she hoped friendly taps as she replied, "I've come to respect and trust you Miranda and yes I do consider you as a friend. I'll talk to Liara and… "

"No please don't," Miranda said quickly sitting up and looking at Shepard with a tear stained face, "she has every right to mistrust me and not want me anywhere near her family… and she was right to be jealous… not that you would… but that I have feelings for you."

Miranda stood and began walking to the door but before she hit the release button Shepard moved quickly and pulled the woman into a hug.

"Thank you Miranda, for everything… for bringing me back and for our son," she kissed her executive officer on the cheek and stepped back.

Miranda nodded and tried to give Shepard a wan smile, turned quickly and left.

Shepard was left with her thoughts and wondered just how important the woman was to her. Not romantically but Miranda had become a very reliable and trusted member of her team and there was no natural successor for the role of the Normandy's second in command.

She was also left to wonder again at this clumsy form of empathic connection Shepard had woken up with and started to unpick her latest experience.

Rendezvous point, Citadel space

Shepard stood waiting at the air lock behind the cockpit knowing that Miranda was making her way through the ship. To Miranda's surprise there were plenty of crew members who were genuinely sorry to see her leave.
Garrus and Karin had organised a short farewell for her in the mess earlier and Shepard saw how moved the now not so cold and hard edged Cerberus agent was by the sentiment.

As the CIC stood to attention Miranda reached her commanding officer and they exchanged salutes.

"We'll miss you Major Lawson," Shepard said with a smile.

All Miranda could manage was a smile and a quiet thank you as she moved into the air lock and on through the docking collar connecting the Normandy to the Alliance frigate that had come alongside.

A familiar voice came over ship to ship comms and Shepard was pleasantly surprised to hear her mother's voice.

"Rear Admiral Shepard requesting permission to come aboard the Normandy?"

Shepard nodded to her pilot who responded with the standard answer, "Permission granted Admiral."

After exchanging salutes Admiral Shepard said quietly, "I don't have much time and we need to talk privately."

The younger Shepard nodded and led her mother to her ready room.

Once inside the room Hannah Shepard gave her daughter a hug and settled herself in the chair leaving Shepard to sit on the edge of the bunk.

"Somethings wrong," Shepard said knowing this was not a social call.

"Yes, and I wanted to see you and tell you myself. To give you a choice," Hannah had already removed her cap and as she held it in her hands Shepard could see her grip tighten.

"Admiral Hackett has been called to Alliance headquarters on Earth to attend the Systems Parliament committee on naval affairs. There is an attempt to remove him as Fleet Admiral and head of the Service Chiefs."

Shepard understood exactly what this would mean for her situation. She would be incredibly vulnerable to being caught up in the same political game playing and there would be nothing to stop Cerberus infiltration to the very highest levels of the Alliance Navy.

"Will they manage it? I thought the President was a good guy?"

"President Chen Yu is an honest and honourable man but not only is the election in full swing the same forces trying to remove Hackett are moving against the President and key members of the Government."

"Admiral Hackett wanted me to meet you to let you know he can't guarantee the safety of the crew and recommends that you have them officially seconded into the Citadel defence force as members of your Spectre operation.

"The Normandy would need to be clearly designated as a Spectre and therefore Council vessel and..." Hannah Shepard looked as if what she was about to say was physically painful, "although Admiral Hackett feels it would be the right thing for you to return to official duty and surrender yourself to Arcturus... he suggests you remain with your ship and continue your Spectre duties until we see the outcome of the current power struggle."
"Admiral Hackett is clearly connected with me and my actions," it was more a statement than a question but Hannah Shepard still nodded, "so if I go against my word and the expectation that I will return to duty that will reflect poorly on him."

Again Hannah could only nod and although she began to speak Shepard cut across her, "either way I'm going to have to face an inquiry. At least now I go under my own steam and keep my work to the Admiral. If he loses his position who do you think the next witch hunt will be for? The Council couldn't ignore charges brought against me in Council space which is exactly what will happen and I'd rather not answer to an arrest warrant."

"He knows he put you in this position and if you do decide to return to Arcturus his instructions to you are to claim you were under his personal orders… at all times… do you understand Liddy?"

"I will not shift the blame or responsibility for any of my actions onto anyone else's shoulders," Shepard stood feeling penned in by the situation. From the start she knew it was going to be rough but at least she would get a fair hearing.

Now with Hackett out of the picture and Admiral Mikhailovich having free reign in the resulting power vacuum there was little chance of a fair hearing and she could also be in physical danger.

"Admiral Hackett is in a stronger position to weather the storm and he will take full responsibility for putting you in this position… asking you to work with Cerberus against the Collectors, sending you to investigate the black ops site…," Hannah Shepard stood up and held her daughter by the shoulders.

"Yes the right, the honourable thing would be to present yourself as agreed. But that was going to be a formality, a debrief and reinstatement... this... this could turn into anything with the Admiral powerless to intervene," she looked into her daughters green eyes and knew exactly what course of action she would take.

Shepard gave her mother a reassuring smile and squared her shoulders, "you know I can't run from my duty, I'll be fine. But I will take advantage of the option for my crew. Who do I need to speak to?"

"It's already set up between Anderson and Tevos. You just need to mail them your orders for your ship and your crew with some formal language about assigning them to Council defence... you know what a pain in the arse politicians are for their procedures," Hannah tried for humour but it fell flat as she stroked her daughters cheek.

"Where will you be?" Shepard asked knowing how closely associated with Admiral Hackett her mother was.

"I'm returning to the fifth fleet," this time Hannah gave the younger Shepard a genuine smile, "the fifth fleet is loyal to Hackett so don't worry about me."

They talked for a little longer but sooner that she would have like Shepard was bidding an official farewell to the Rear Admiral.

"Edi call Garrus and Karin to the conference room please. Joker head for Arcturus best speed."

Shepard had briefed Garrus and Karin on the situation and informed them that she was making them joint executive officers with Garrus stepping up into the command role until her return.

At which point both of her officers spent time trying to dissuade her from returning to Arcturus until Admiral Hackett had fought off the attempt to remove him from his position.
There was no moving Shepard from her position. She had given her word, she was an Alliance officer under orders and it would all work out.

Doctor Chakwas had tried to say that perhaps Shepard's guilt was driving her unnecessarily towards punishment she didn't really deserve but Shepard waved that off as sounding too much like a fancy excuse.

Knowing that once their Commander's mind was fully made up there was no moving her they both knuckled down to the practical arrangements.

Shepard called the crew to an informal parade in the mess and announced the change of plan playing down the political intrigue and focusing on the need for her to be fully and formerly reinstated before they could begin the process of reinstating her human crew members.

She also, once again, gave them the option of leaving the crew when the Normandy reached the Citadel for her interim orders. That suggestion was met with much shaking of heads.

When she had finished all the formalities Shepard made her way to her Captain's cabin to get dressed and tried not to brood too hard on what was to come.

**Normandy, Arcturus docking ring**

Shepard took one last look around her cabin then at herself in the mirror.

Formal dress uniform marking her rank as a Commander of the Alliance Navy, the peak of her dress cap pulled low over her eyes, three rows of medal ribbons on her chest. She was, as always, immaculate.

Squaring her shoulders and with a deep steadying breath she moved towards the door and picked up her go bag before entering the lift.

She had done a final tour of the ship an hour before. Her crew had all stood to attention the senior rank giving her a snappy salute.

Those recently missing from their posts weighed heavily on her and the shadows of those lost from the first Normandy seemed to walk with her.

Even though she knew she had made the right choice, the only choice, when she blew up the relay the loss of life still impacted her soul.

But she was doing what she had sworn to do to the Council and was upholding her oath as an officer in the Alliance Navy, keeping the Galaxy safe.

There was also that deep sense of responsibility or perhaps it was more a driving force that compelled her forward to do all in her power and sacrifice anything to defeat the Reapers.

Sacrifice anything, the words echoed through her mind as she waited for the lift to come to a halt on the CIC deck. Would she truly sacrifice everything, everyone to defeat them?

The question sat without an answer as it had many times before the opening doors breaking the thought.

With Miranda gone and Tash not yet returned she was leaving her ship under the joint command of Major Chakwas and Captain Vakarian newly appointed officers to the Citadel defence fleet. The Normandy was now fully established as a Council Spectre's ship and would remain so until her
Shepard would not let anything happen to her crew or her ship if promises were broken or politics won out over military rules.

Moving through the CIC towards the exit behind the cockpit she stood briefly in front of Garrus and Karin who were both standing to attention.

Returning a salute she said quietly, "take care of our crew." They both gave her short nods and she moved on.

She moved past the exit lock into the cockpit where Joker was standing and before she could say anything he said, "Permission to speak frankly Commander."

With a wry smile she replied, "I have never known you do anything else Lieutenant so fire away."

"This is wrong, you shouldn't be presenting yourself for arrest, they should be pinning a medal on your chest for saving us all… again," the last word was emphasised and although she was touched by his thinking she felt a burn at the thought of being 'rewarded' for killing all those innocent people.

"Everyone needs to be held accountable for their actions Joker you know that," she said quietly, "I trust the Admiral and I am a serving officer so I don't really get a choice."

She paused and then continued, "Joker take care of the Normandy and Edi and don't get into any trouble with that smart mouth of yours," she smiled at the last part then addressed the other member of her crew in the room, "Edi you know what to do, VI not AI, I'm sorry to have to ask you to hide your true nature but until I get things straightened out I need you to be safe."

"Thank you Shepard and I will do my best to keep Lieutenant Moreau out of trouble," Edi's voice calm as ever echoed around the cockpit.

With a final nod she turned and entered the air lock and as the door to the Normandy, her home, her ship, her crew, closed behind her she felt the stirring of anxiety in her gut.

Shepard knew she would have to stand alone, again, and ride out the storm of accusation, attacks on her integrity and even her state of mind.

The 'Commander' was far less confident in the outcome of what she faced then she had allowed even herself to feel until this moment. But she knew Liara had felt it through their bond; the thought of the worry and concern she was causing her bondmate was almost unbearable.

Once again as the door opened onto the Station she asked herself why she was doing this. She could just have stayed 'retired' from the Navy, for real this time. Continue as a Spectre, turn her back on the Navy she once called home and that she still wanted to believe in.

Past the point of no return she stepped onto the Arcturus station knowing what she would face. Arrest at the hands of an Admiral she loathed and distrusted and for whom the feeling was mutual.

Exactly as she had been told Admiral Mikhailovich a smug smile gracing his hate crafted features stood with four military police officers.

But what she hadn't expected was the rest of the space filled with a mixture of Alliance Marines and
Navy ranks and officers standing at ease until her foot hit the deck.

Someone shouted 'ten hut' and hundreds of boots hit the deck simultaneously snapping an echo around the huge dock.

She dropped her bag and stood to attention and snapped a salute to the waiting parade, unofficial though it obviously was, and to her delight the Admiral started to scowl.

Turning to the amassed ranks who until that moment he seemed to have assumed where there to see a rogue officer arrested and brought to justice, he said, "dismiss now this is a disgraced officer who will soon be stripped of her rank and shown as the fraud she is and…"

But even as he was speaking and she dropped her arm from the salute the parade launched into 'oorah' from the marines and 'hooyah' from the navy ranks.

The military police approached her one of them picking up her bag and the others flanking her.

But the Admiral wanted more and said curtly, "restrain her."

The MP's were about to argue but she said quietly as she held out her wrists, "it's a direct order you can't ignore it, its ok, do your job."

She caught the eye of the two MP's and even though they looked miserable they complied and one of them snapped restraints around her wrists but they stood slightly behind her and made no attempt to restrain her any further.

Shepard squared her shoulders and walked tall despite the hand cuffs as the shouts of 'oorah' and 'hooyah' rang in her ears as it was shouted by those she walked past.

Once out of the hanger and into the corridors they made quick progress to the stations brig.

"Solitary confinement, no visitors, no contact," Mikhailovich said coldly to the duty sergeant.

Then he turned to face Shepard so close she could feel his breath on her face, "finally you will be called to answer for all your crimes and we will see you in your true colours."

Shepard stood to attention and didn't move a muscle in response. She allowed herself a moment to realise that even with the restraint on she could probably break his neck before he finished his sentence.

"The Commander is my prisoner now sir I'll ask you to step away and leave this to us," the duty Sergeant said politely but in a tone that brooked no argument.

The Admiral knew the rules and with one final sneer turned and left.

"Remove the restraints," and as she turned to look at the Sergeant she saw he was a marine gunney and he gave her a brief smile and a nod of the head which she returned.

She was led to one of the small holding cells and as the door slammed behind her, despite her predicament, she felt a powerful connection with the men and women she had the honour to serve alongside.

A huge part of her felt as if she had finally returned to her life, to her true duty for the first time since losing the Normandy.

VIP lounge, Afterlife Club, Omega
Lounging back in the booth Tash felt a sense of ease that was becoming more and more familiar to her after years on the edge.

Liselle was sitting next to her a hand on Tash's thigh and laughing at the re-enactment of the successful raid they had just carried out against the Talons that Grizz was hamming up.

They had literally caught the team guarding a huge shipment of red sand with their pants down as they'd been celebrating with some company.

It was a farewell job for both Liselle and Tash and although it lacked a firefight it had been good to go out on such a huge success.

Finding pretty much the Talons whole stock of raw sand hurt them a lot and not long after their leaders crawled into Afterlife begging Aria for terms.

Aria, the thought made Tash tense up a little. Liselle hadn't yet told her that Tash was now aware of their relationship and thankfully they had decided not to say anything on this visit.

It wasn't that Liselle was scared of Aria she just didn't want her last couple of days on Omega to end in a huge fight, which it would, until the Pirate Queen calmed down and forgave her daughter.

Liselle's omnitool lit up and after giving it a cursory glance she hit her earpiece, "hey what's up," her voice only just audible over the noise of the music and the continuing shouted conversation and laughter from the rest of the team.

"Ok, I'll come over now… yeah they've been so it's safe to bring it back," Liselle finished talking and turned to Tash leaning in to give her a kiss.

"Paul's freaking out a bit with the sand and needs to get it out of his place. I'll run over and bring it back with him," she finished the shot glass of Turian brandy in front of her in one and stood.

As Tash begin to get up Liselle stopped her and one of two of the others who began strapping on their weapons and said to the table in general and Tash in particular, "it's a few blocks the Talons have gone home to lick their wounds and I can handle anything tonight I'm on a roll," she smiled down at Tash.

Everyone settled back down and Tash watched her lover weave expertly across the crowded dance floor toward the main exit.

**Paul Johnson's apartment, Omega**

"Goddess you look rough," Liselle said as she stepped into the apartment and past Grayson.

"Yeah I think I got some of the sand from the broken bag on me and you know… anyway thanks for coming over," he said moving into the open plan living room heading for the kitchen area.

"Drink?"

Liselle thought for a moment, "yeah why not."

She moved to look out of the window that gave a view of the gates into the complex and the Turian security guards she had passed on the way in.

A group of what looked like party goers were approaching them and seemed to be trying to negotiate entry.
Paul came up behind her and as she turned he stepped in close so she could feel the heat of his body.

"Any chance you wanted to use me again to get back at your human girlfriend," he smiled and Liselle had a memory of the time they had slept together.

It had been good but it just wasn't what or who she wanted.

Liselle took the drink he was offering and returned the smile, "Down boy, it was a onetime thing. And in case you hadn't noticed Tasha is back so I don't need a replacement."

Paul gave her a wry smile, nodded his head a couple of times and moved to sit down, "now you can't blame a guy for trying."

Liselle moved to sit opposite him, "what's going on Paul this isn't just the sand. You're not going to unravel are you? You know I vouched for you and I don't want to leave Aria with a problem."

He took a deep breath, "you're right it's not just the sand but the timing of having it here isn't great. Some shit from my past is eating at me," he looked her in the eyes, "you, Aria, Omega… It's been good to me if things start to hit the skids I'll leave I won't bring any kind of shit to the boss's door."

Liselle sensed the honesty in his words and not for the first time over the last couple of days felt like she'd tied up yet another loose end.

Finishing her drink she stood, "everyone on Omega has a past and a lot of us are running from something, you'll be ok. I'm going to the head when I get back let's roll back to Afterlife, you need some company," she said over her shoulder as she walked down the corridor.

As she finished washing her hands Liselle thought she heard Paul shout something that sounded like gun. She reached for the pistol that was always strapped to her thigh and pulling back the door running out into the corridor slamming straight into a retreating Grayson.

The force of the impact knocked her off her feet. She started to get up quickly but before she could even take aim from the floor at the incoming shapes she felt pin pricks hit her body and her neck.

Then everything went dark.

Paul Grayson had only staggered from the impact and while he continued firing he reached down and dragged Liselle's limp body into the bedroom then barricaded the door.

He knew it wouldn't keep them at bay for long and he knew Cerberus had finally caught up with him.

Before he could call for help he had to send off all the intel he had in the hope it would protect his daughter and then wipe the drive of his terminal.

It was close but just as he finished the door crashed in and he had enough time to make out the figure of Kai Leng before he also succumbed to the tranquiliser darts hitting his body.

"Get that thing out of the way," Leng said indicating Liselle's body and two of the humans with him lifted her from the floor and threw her onto the bed.

"There's a load of red sand out here," a voice from outside the room shouted.

"Good we'll take it. Grayson's merc friends will think he stole it," Leng spoke to the two in the room with him, "pick him up let's go we don't have much time."
Alone in the room Kai Leng looked down at the helpless body of the young Asari and drawing a knife spat out the words, "Asari bitch," as he began to draw it across her throat.

His attention was drawn to shouts from the apartment and he finished more quickly than he would have liked and rushed out to make sure the local human's he had hired weren't screwing up his mission.

Purple blood started to seep into the bed covers as silence fell on the apartment.

*VIP lounge, Afterlife, Omega*

Tash checked her omnitool and knew it hadn't been that long since Liselle had left but something was nagging at her. Something felt off, wrong.

Without saying anything to the rest of the crew she began making her way out of the club and once on the street paused checking to see if this was a hit of jealousy driving her.

She couldn't honestly say that she wasn't feeling an edge of something akin to jealousy whenever she thought about Paul Johnson but that wasn't it.

For the second time she pinged Liselle on her omnitool and for the second time the call went unanswered. Tash knew something was very wrong and began walking quickly towards Johnson's apartment.

As the panic rose she broke into a run and turning the final corner she saw the security gates to the complex wide open and the guard's bodies on the ground.

Looking down one of the other streets she saw a group carrying what could have been a drunken friend. There was something familiar about one of the group and she considered running after them.

Was that Liselle they were dragging away? No not Liselle, wrong clothes, wrong body shape. Then as the group was about to turn a corner one of them looked back and the flash of recognition put cold fear into her heart.

Kai Leng. Without any further thought she ran as fast as she could for the apartment.

The front door was open and as she moved inside it looked as if someone had tossed the place. Then she saw a pistol on the floor in the corridor and ran down it, through the open door into what was the bedroom.

On the bed a sight that froze Tash to the spot then through the blind panic some instinct took over.

"No… no… no…" she wasn't even aware of speaking as she placed her hands on the open wound on her lover's throat the blood oozing slowly though her fingers.

The tears streaming down Tash's face were making her vision blurry but she could see she wasn't having much effect stemming the blood loss.

Taking one hand away from her lovers' throat she reached for the shield on her belt. It was a trick she'd learned during her special ops training.

Taking a few precious moments to adjust the settings she placed it alongside the uncut side of Liselle's throat and turned it on.

It provided a compression collar that Tash hoped wasn't too tight.
Then firing up her omnitool she called the first person she knew she could rely on to do what was needed.

When he answered she spoke in a rambling almost incoherent way, "Grizz… get help… Liselle down… bleeding… can't stop it… come now… fucks sake she's bleeding out you have to get here…"

"Where Tasha, Paul's place?"

"Yeah… you have to get a medic… now… now Grizz"

"Keep the line open Tasha we're on the move," she could tell he was running and could hear him calling out orders to others and heard Aria's name mentioned then his voice came back to focus on her, "keep pressure on the wound Tasha you know what to do… check her breathing and pulse you have to keep her breathing."

Tash didn't know how long she had spent breathing life into the young Asari then using compressions pumping the feint and failing heart.

But suddenly hands were pulling her away and there was a rush of motion and activity in the room. Their Salarian doctor was shouting orders. A mobile medbed brought into the room.

And then as suddenly as everyone had arrived she was alone in the room.

Voices drifted into her muddled mind from somewhere else in the apartment. Someone was trying to piece together what had happened.

What did it matter what happened she thought coldly. Liselle was dead and it was her fault.

Suddenly Grizz was standing in front of her, "you have to snap out of it Tasha I need you thinking… what did you see?"

"Shit, they're heading for the east side docking bays," she looked wildly at Grizz, "I saw them leave, the gang, human; dragging Paul… it was Cerberus."

"We've already got the docks on lockdown they won't get out," Grizz knew he needed to keep her doing something or she would fall back into shock.

"Come on we'll take the team and sweep the docks."

Tash grabbed on to his words as if it was a lifebelt and followed him out of the room. She would hunt them down and kill each and every one of them and then she'd find the Illusive man and cut his throat just as his pet assassin had done to Liselle.

**Shadow Broker communication room, T'Soni Estate, Thessia – two days after Shepard left Thessia**

Kasumi had called Liara down as soon as the footage started airing on Human news channels. It was obviously unofficial but seemed to be finding its way to most news outlets. The images and vid footage showed Shepard under arrest and wearing handcuffs on Arcturus Station flanked by military police.

The images were talked over by news anchors with varying stories but one underlying theme.
"The disgraced former Alliance officer Lydia Shepard has been arrested and taken to face charges ranging from war crimes, mass murder and treason."

As she viewed the short video clip Liara brought her hands to her mouth and fought back tears of anger.

"How dare they." was all she could manage but her tone was deadly cold.

Liara fought back the rising tide of bile and anger as she would do Shepard no good raging at an institution they needed to counter these awful images and the narrative being spun.

Kasumi was standing next to her and said quietly, "one of our news outlets has been sent this footage which shows this from a very different angle."

She flicked a file from her omnitool onto the screen in front of them. It was the same setting, one of the docking bays on the station, but this time the crowds of military personnel could be seen and heard as they welcomed one of their own.

Liara's cold rage faded a little especially as she saw how strong, proud and resolute her bondmate looked.

"Are we getting this out?"

"Yes I'm sending to all our human outlets but also to GNN and Citadel News Network. The messaging will also be clear that Shepard presented herself for duty as she had always intended to once the Collector threat was removed," Kasumi said showing Liara more news reports with favourable coverage.

"Do we have the interviews with survivors from Collector raids that Shepard and the Normandy saved?" Liara asked dragging her eyes away from the screens.

"Yes but we'll keep to the schedule we've planned for the slow drip release of support for Shep and the crew," Kasumi put her hand out on Liara's shoulder, "everything is in place Liara by this time tomorrow the news cycles will be talking about nothing but the destruction of the Collectors.

"Yes… yes I know you are right… I just… to see her shackled like some criminal," Liara's voice broke but she steadied herself.

Liara's omnitool lit up with a call coming in on her private channel. She moved away to a more private area of the room before answering.

Before she could offer a greeting to her father Liara was struck by how terrible Aria looked, "Goddess what is wrong."

"Liselle, your sister is… she is near death Liara," Aria's voice was low and little gravelly, "I'm taking her home."

Liara felt tears spilling down her face and could hardly keep her voice under control to ask in barely a whisper, "what happened?"

"Not now little wing, come to the estate we'll be there in a few hours."

When Liara nodded her assent Aria broke the connection.

In that moment Liara felt the loss of Shepard more acutely than she had at any time since the
Normandy had been destroyed.

"Liselle…" Liara spoke the name softly before leaving the comms room without a word to anyone. She would explain later but for the moment she was grief stricken and just wanted to get to her sister and be by her father's side.
Chapter 68

*Liselle's private quarters, Afterlife, Omega – nineteen hours after the attack*

Tash felt herself falling and started awake. It took a few moments to realise she was sitting on the floor, her back against the wall opposite Liselle's bed.

Liselle… the memory of blood oozing through her fingers, the limp, lifeless body, panic followed quickly by the crashing realisation of what had happened.

She looked at her hands. She had washed them at some point but in her mind she could still see the blue and feel the warmth.

Bile and nausea brought on as much from the nights drinking as the shock rose up and she just made it to the bathroom in time.

After she was sure there was nothing left to come up Tash stood at the basin and threw cold water on her face then looked into the mirror.

The woman who looked back at her was pale skinned and hollow eyed. Her shirt and trousers were still spattered with blood. She had gone straight from that cursed apartment to start searching the landing pads and docks.

She remembered how Grizz had kept her with him, kept making her focus on the search, stopped her dwelling on what had happened.

And when they had finally given up knowing that one small shuttle had managed to escape before the shutdown Grizz stopped her going off to challenge every human on the station to find out who had helped Kai Leng.

She spat into the sink at the thought of his name, "Kai fucking Leng," she said quietly staring into her own eyes as she spoke, "I don't know how and I don't know when but I will find you and I'll end you or die trying."

Tash had no illusion about her adversary. She'd seen him in action. But all the healing she'd done over the last couple of years with Liselle seemed to have evaporated.

She felt more broken then she ever had before but this time she had a purpose. A burning all-consuming rage filled her and it would carry her forward with one purpose.

Leaving the bathroom she moved quickly picking up anything she saw that was hers and throwing it into her bag.

Strapping on her armour over her stained clothes she equipped her pistols as usual one on each thigh. Then moved to the cabinet where Liselle stored her armour and weapons.

Reaching out her fingers she brushed the familiar soft armoured jacket and felt a stirring of grief. But she fought it down and moved quickly to pick up the two shotguns that Liselle favoured over pistols.

Once secured on the weapon rack on her back Tash picked up her bag and the empty bottle on the floor and walked to the door.

With one final look back into the apartment where she had been happier than at any time in her life
Tash allowed her jaw to set and with burning eyes left to hunt down those who had helped kill the most wonderful being in the Galaxy.

**T'Loak estate, Thessia – 36 hours after the attack**

Liara watched the grand mansion grow larger as her shuttle approached. The place she and her sister had been conceived, the place her mother had been the most herself, and now the place her sister was dying.

As the shuttle settled onto the landing pad Liara moved quickly to the exit followed by two of her personal guard.

Stepping out onto the surface she recognised the Asari walking towards her as her father's companion from the attack on the Collector base.

"How is my sister?"

"She has had two operations to stabilise her injury during the flight from Omega," Ne'aíra replied as they began walking towards the house.

"Where is…" Liara almost used a more familiar term, "Aria?"

"She has not left Liselle's side since it happened. I am worried about her Lady Liara," Liara noted the formal address, "she has hardly said a word."

"Who did this?" Liara stopped and faced the other Asari.

"Tasha is convinced it was Cerberus… she saw them leaving and recognised one of them."

With a nod of the head Liara acknowledged the information and continued walking to the house. The grief and upset that had been her companion since receiving the news was now joined by anger that coalesced onto the form of the Illusive Man.

Liara stepped into the room and her eyes fell immediately on the still figure in the medbed. There were tubes in and out of the young Asari's body and a dressing across her throat.

Moving slowly towards the only other person in the room Liara noticed the quiet hum and hiss of the machinery.

She stood for a moment at the bottom of the bed staring at Liselle's body then looked at her father sitting beside the bed, her body hunched, unfocussed eyes. Aria looked smaller than Liara could ever have imagined she could.

"Rasam," Liara said softly. When Aria didn't stir she tried again this time moving to stand next to the older Asari and placing a hand on her shoulder, "Aria."

Aria looked up into Liara's face their eyes reflecting the others pain.

Liara let her tears flow freely for the first time and Aria stood enfolding her in a strong embrace and let her youngest daughter sob in her arms.

**Alliance Navy Headquarters, Vancouver, Earth – four days after Shepard's arrest**

Admiral Hackett stood ramrod straight, hands clasped together behind his back, staring out the window of his office across the vast complex that comprised the Navy's main administrative base.
A knock at the door brought him back from his thoughts, "enter."

His adjutant hurried into the room, "The president will be here shortly Admiral."

Hackett nodded and moved to sit at the meeting table rather than behind his desk.

A few moments later Earth's president walked into the office and indicating that his entourage remain outside in the hallway.

Hackett stood and saluted then the two men shook hands.

"I know what you're going to ask me Steven and I can't do it," President Chen sat at the table smoothing his trousers which was a nervous habit Hackett had noticed before.

"President I need to read you in on a few things that may change your mind," Steven Hackett hated politics but he knew only too well how much pressure the President was under and that was bleeding through to his own position.

"The concerted effort to remove me from my position is exactly the same one being orchestrated by the same people trying to remove you from your office."

"Oh come now Steven we are just in an extremely difficult election period. We do appear to have had a run of bad press but…” the President left the end of his sentence hanging.

"You don't need to be defensive in here Chen," Hackett had been friends with the man in front of him for over forty years. They had chosen different paths but they were both honourable men with the security and safety of Earth, her colonies and people front and centre as their driving force.

"Well the voters don't like talk of conspiracies Steven, you know that they just think we are preparing to be bad losers," Chen stood and walked over to the window.

"You don't have to tell me that Cerberus and Earth First are working together to try to win control of the Presidency and the Parliament. How bad is it for you?"

"We are compromised at fleet command level and our intelligence services. I've had to run a parallel intelligence agency and separate command team," Hackett moved to join Chen at the window, "I need you to shut down the hearings into the Alliance Navy and stop the political interference in the investigation of the Aratoht incident."

"You mean you want me to use what little of my political capital is left to protect your flawed poster girl for the Navy."

"For fuck's sake Chen can we stop repeating all this negative crap about a distinguished and decorated officer and one of the bravest Alliance marines it's been my honour to command," Hackett reigned in his anger and after a deep breath continued, "she was there on my orders Chen but she will refuse to give evidence to that effect even if I order to her to. She was working for me on my orders the whole time she was working with Cerberus.

"To defend her I would have to expose highly secret intelligence operations and put myself firmly in the firing line for Aratoht which will require my resignation as I put the black ops team there in the first place."

"You can't resign Steven you know that's exactly what Cerberus want and they are poised to take control... and if we lose the election... that will be absolute disaster for Earth even though they can't see that." The President sounded exhausted.
"It's worse than that Chen… Cerberus will leave us exposed to the Reaper threat that's coming. We have concerns they have already been compromised either through indoctrination or just blinded by Harper's megalomania."

"I need a drink," Chen and Hackett moved back to the table.

"There has been some better news the last few days," Chen said "our press has been a little better and the polls are looking up.

"If I press the Parliament and Senate to halt these absurd probes into the Alliance Navy instead of letting them run their course… can you guarantee you can keep control of your command?"

It was a fair question and while Hackett had been spending his days in Senate hearings he had been putting a plan in place to completely side-line all tainted and untrusted officers at high command and fleet level.

"Yes I can, there will be some bloodletting so you're naval committee will need to stand firm and not be influenced by Cerberus supporters," Hackett leaned in, "and I need you to stop the demands for a political trial for my officer."

They sat in silence for some time.

Hackett knew it would take more influence than the President currently had to give him what he needed which meant making deals and owing favours. And if public opinion went the wrong way regarding Shepard and the investigation of her actions he would almost certainly lose the election.

"You know if I lose, Steven, my opponent is in the pocket of Earth First which means Cerberus," Chen noticed, not for the first time, just how exhausted and strained his friend looked.

"If you don't fight them now Chen you will lose the Alliance Navy to them. I will not stay if my officer has to face a political show trial and the Navy will tear itself apart if Shepard is treated unfairly."

Chen shook his head slowly then stood, "it will take a couple of days to get everything agreed which means you will probably have to attend another day or two of hearings, but I'll get it done. Just keep Shepard on Arcturus till you can get back and do what you need to do."

Hackett stood and reached out his hand to the President, "thank you Mr. President and know you will always have my support and respect."

Chen smiled at his friend as they moved to the door, "let us hope my actions translate into votes my friend, sometimes not feeding the mob is a very dangerous thing to do."

T'Loak Estate, Thessia – four days after the attack on Liselle

Liara paused outside her sister bed room, although it would be better described as a hospital room.

Aria had brought her Salarian doctor with her but also engaged Thessian specialists including healers from the T'Loak temple.

Looking in she saw Aria's assistant, as Liara had chosen to think of her, Ne'aira, standing by the window watching the healers at work.

Before Liara had time to decide whether to try to find Aria, whom she hadn't seen since the previous night, Ne'aira moved to join her on the landing.
"Good morning Lady Liara," Ne'aira gave her an Asari greeting, "is there anything I can do for you? The healers will be some time with Liselle."

It was the first time they had spoken directly since she had arrived and Liara still didn't quite know what to make of this part commando part dancer that Aria seemed to have taken into her inner circle.

"Did you know Liselle?" Liara asked deflecting the question.

Ne'aira's eyes wandered to the still figure in the medbed and said softly, "of course, anyone who spent any time in Afterlife seemed to know Liselle and be very fond of her. She has a beautiful spirit."

Liara fought back the tears that stung her eyes at the words spoken with obvious sadness. Ne'aira turned back and seeing Liara was upset she enfolded the young Asari into a hug.

It was a shock but also felt so natural for an Asari to want to offer comfort through physical closeness. Liara leaned into the maiden's arms and let herself be held.

"Aria is in her office supposedly managing affairs on Omega but I am fairly confident she completed that some time ago," Ne'aira pulled out of the hug a little to look into Liara's face, "I fear she is brooding and that will not be good for anyone."

Liara understood the implication of Aria brewing her anger into a full blown storm of hate particularly as the focus of that anger was likely to be a lot of innocent people.

"Have you spoken to her this morning," Liara asked now more composed and turning once again to look into the bed room.

"I took her some food but I know which lines I can cross and those I cannot," the maiden said with a smile, "and her connection to Liselle is obviously very different from the one that was presented for public consumption… as I believe is her connection to you."

Liara immediately felt wary and fixed the older Asari with a steady gaze, "speculation of that kind will not serve you well and could prove to be dangerous."

To her surprise Ne'aira smiled, "I would never break any of the confidences that I hold whether they were shared with me or that I have observed. I have not had a chance to prove my loyalty to Aria or her family yet but when I have a chance you will not find me wanting," she paused and said quietly, "I also have no illusions about my place in Aria's world I am just honoured to serve her."

Although not surprised at Ne'aira's obvious loyalty and affection for Aria there was something else that Liara couldn't put her finger on. She would need to look into this Asari's background when she had the time.

Liara nodded and made her way to Aria's office on the ground floor.

She hesitated outside the door and wondered whether to knock and bracing herself tapped the door opening it immediately without waiting for a response.

"Am I disturbing you," Liara walked slowly into the room which showed signs of some disturbance.

Aria was standing looking out across the lawns which were not quite as well kept as those on the T'Soni estate.

"Not now little wing I need to think."
Liara moved closer and spoke again, "perhaps I can help?"

Aria turned and for a moment anger flashed across her face but it melted away as she laid eyes on her daughter.

"Trying to get those idiots on Omega to find out why our lock down didn't catch whoever did this is fucking frustrating. And then that fool Mikhailovich seems to have killed most of the gang that were hired locally," Aria scowled at the last item on her desk and dispatched it against the wall with a sweep of her hand where it joined a pile of other smashed objects.

"Rasam," Aria was caught out by Liara using the term of endearment and seemed to collapse in on herself, "where is Tash? If anything happens to her Liselle will not forgive you easily."

Aria bristled and the scowl returned to her face and there was real venom in her words, "don't you start… that's all I've had from Grizz. If I had my way it would be her lying in a dark alley with her throat cut."

"Rasam you do not mean that you are upset," Liara decided to go for soothing rather than confrontational, "if it was not for Tash we would have lost Liselle already."

Aria took a deep breath and although her face was still set in hard lines the bite was missing when she spoke, "until I find out exactly what happened, and why, I will blame her from this. If it was Cerberus…"

"Tash would never put you or Liselle in harm's way…" Liara moved close to her father and touched the broad strong shoulders, "you must know they love each other. She should be here, can I talk to Grizz and see what is happening."

"If you must now leave me," Aria's reply was cold and she moved away from Liara's touch.

"No, I will not," the young Asari didn't feel anywhere near as confident as she sounded and tried not to let the edge of fear she felt show in her voice.

To her surprise Aria turned and folded her in an embrace and spoke softly, "Liara never be afraid of me… I don't mean to cause you fear. I'm no company at the moment my mind is clouded with emotion and that is dangerous."

Liara chided herself for not hiding her fear better but was pleased the tension in the room had broken, "please let me keep you company I will not chatter and it is possible talking your thoughts through will help."

"Perhaps I shouldn't be on my own and I forget you have resources at your disposal," Aria stepped back but kept one arm around her daughters' shoulder's, "let's go and see if the healers have any news for us then we'll get to work, together."

Liara seriously doubted she would be able to bring any information or ideas to the discussion that Aria didn't already have but she was pleased to be on the inside of the pain with her Rasam. It made it easier for her to manage her own.

**Admiral Mikhailovich's office, Arcturus Station – 5 days after Shepard's arrest**

The Admiral tapped his fingers against his lips. His hands were placed together as if praying a habit he had found hard to shake over the years and it usually indicated he was struggling with a decision.

"I don't like it Greeves," the Admiral said finally, "this feels as if we have to resort to subterfuge to
moves things forward. This trial should take place in the full glare of the public," he brushed aside the interruption that his second in command was about to make, "no this is not up for discussion any further."

"But sir if we don't act before Hackett gets back from Earth he'll find a way to stop the investigation and trial, you know he and Anderson have always protected her," Rear Admiral Greeves had been pushing for a quicker solution in dealing with Shepard since she had been arrested and placed in solitary.

"And if I may Admiral," the other officer spoke with significant deference to Mikhailovich, "we have managed to keep her isolated for now but all she needs to do is ask for representation and we can't guarantee it will be one of our officers from the advocate's office that takes the case."

"Major Holland it doesn't matter if she has a squad of lawyers she is guilty as hell and a disgrace to her uniform. We don't even know if it is her and not some imposter planted by Cerberus although she is certainly arrogant enough," Mikhailovich closed down further discussion.

"There is no guarantee Hackett will be coming back from Earth you know that, which is why I am too busy to worry about Shepard right now. There are a lot of preparations for change of command underway and once everything is formalised I will have a freer hand when it comes to dealing with the traitor. Let her stew in solitary. She will answer for her crimes." Mikhailovich almost ground his teeth at the thought of his relative by marriage.

He blamed people like Anderson and Hackett for not curbing her insolence and rashness instead they rewarded her. While career officers like his sons were overlooked and thought less of.

His thoughts went briefly to his daughter and not for the first time wondered how much of a bad influence Lydia Shepard, spoilt brat that she was, had been on his daughter.

The two officers stood and saluted understanding they had been dismissed.

Outside the Admirals office they walked along the corridor to a quiet corner and spoke in hushed tones.

"I thought you said he one of ours?" Holland said.

"Well he doesn't know he's one of ours," Greeves said shortly, "and I've always been able to steer him in the right direction. I mean he was the foot in the door with our other Admirals and why Hackett will soon be out of the picture."

"Well what the fuck do we do now, you know the orders. The boss wants Shepard dealt with quickly."

"Yeah well disappearing a war hero isn't as easy as he thinks it is," Greeves shot back with a snarl.

"You want to tell him that because I value my health too much to be that messenger."

"Dammit we'll just have to do it anyway and I'll smooth it over with Mikhailovich. Get a couple of your intelligence guys and we'll lift her tonight. Once she's off this station on the way to a black site we're home and dry."

Holland nodded and they parted.

*Arcturus station brig, Arcturus Station - early hours of the seventh day after Shepard had been arrested*
Shepard had fallen into a routine as best she could to pass the time which mainly consisted exercise and meditation both of which were almost impossible given where she was being held.

The cell she was in was built for short term prisoner holding as such it had the barest of amenities. It was not much wider than her six foot two height.

The only person she had any contact with was the sergeant who had been on duty when she arrived. After the first few days when he brought her meals he stayed in the cell for a few minutes and tried to let her know what was happening. He didn't know much though and could only confirm that Hackett was still on Earth.

Unable to sleep, as usual, Shepard took up her position resting her foot on the head, for some height, and doing one arm push ups while trying to recite tracts of Asari meditation poems in her head.

She heard voices before the sound of the cell door opening and got to her feet.

As the door opened she could see two fully armoured soldiers about to enter and another arguing with the Corporal who was on duty.

"I have no orders for prisoner transfer," the young marine said refusing to accept the paper being thrust at him.

"Emergency security transfer," the soldier outside was saying but Shepard was now focused on the two who had entered her cell.

"You don't need to use those," she said scouring their armor for their designations, "whose orders are you following," but while she was still trying to decide if she should go with them or resist she felt a small pinprick to her stomach.

The soldier who had been arguing outside had come into the cell and fired a dart at her. She staggered and although it wasn't strong enough to knock her out her two captors used the time to fit the restraints and the control collar.

Then with a soldier on either side they dragged her from the cell.

She phased in and out of lucidity as corridors passed by until she found herself slammed into a chair in what looked like an interrogation room.

Breathing deeply and testing the bonds she came back to full awareness but continued to fake drowsiness.

The door opened and an officer with the rank of Rear Admiral sat in the chair opposite her only the flimsy metal table between them. Shepard was weighing her options.

"Shepard do you need me to give you a jolt on that collar or are you ready to stop pretending you are not fully conscious?"

His voice was hard and clipped and she placed him immediately as being attached to Mikhailovich's staff.

"Your thugs could just have asked me nicely."

He brought out a controller and pressed the button for a couple of seconds.
Pain jolted through Shepard’s body and up into her brain, she measured its impact on her ability to control her movements but it would be difficult.

"Hum I see you are quite strong but no matter where you're going we won't need to restrain you," he smirked, "once we have you off this station and to our black site we'll see how tough you are when we've enhanced you further."

A cold chill took hold of her but she worked hard not to let it show on her face.

"Ah I see you are a little uncomfortable with that idea. Yes I have no need to 'interrogate' you or as the Admiral would like 'find out if it is really Shepard'. We both know who and what you are and you belong to Cerberus. Time for an upgrade Shepard our boss wants to see if you can handle Reaper tech better than some of our other subjects."

Before she could break free of the flimsy metal bonds Greeves stepped away from the table and hit the device in his hand again this time the pain was immobilising it seared into her brain allowing for no other thought.

Shepard could feel her muscles jerking and contracting and just before she faded into blackness she heard another voice in the room speak out, "that's enough Greeves we need her alive for fucks sake unless you'd like to be the next subject for Reaper enhancement."

The next thing Shepard felt was being dragged along a corridor and she raised her head a little, which was all she could manage from the continued pain, she saw they were approaching a docking bay.

The doors opened and she felt the cold air of the huge space hit her face. Although she tried Shepard couldn't get control back over her limbs. The device around her neck was plugged into her spinal cord and was obviously still activated and disrupting her nervous system.

She was getting closer and closer to the Alliance shuttle that would remove her from what little security she had. Trying to shout out the sound she made was more of groan.

"Don't bother Shepard no one can help you now," Greeves voice echoed somewhere in her head.

"Load her in I'll follow tomorrow," Greeves spoke to one of the armoured soldiers holding her up, "take this, keep it on this setting and she'll stay immobilised."

Her head bobbed as they dragged her into the shuttle and threw her on the floor.

She heard Greeves voice growing fainter as he walked away presumably to the dock exit.

One of the two armoured guards that had jumped into the shuttle with Shepard stood over her and spoke, "You know we could have a bit of fun on the journey, pass the time, never fucked a war hero before," he used his boot to roll Shepard onto her back and she saw he had taken his helmet off.

As Shepard continued to struggle to regain control of her body she stared into his face and watched as his expression changed from greasy grin to surprise and then blank as he fell sideways.

Shepard looked at the helmeted face of her other armoured captor who gave a quick nod reached to the floor for the device and switched it off.

The relief was immediate and although stiff and still in pain Shepard was able to sit up and start working to get her hands unclamped.
Her rescuer closed the shuttle door and removed her helmet then turning to Shepard pointed the device at her and before Shepard could get to her feet she felt the device unlock.

"Sorry I couldn't act before Greeves had a full team with us all the way, there are still three of them in the shuttle bay and they'll start getting suspicious if we don't leave soon."

"Are you one of them?" Shepard asked in a very croaky voice as she rid herself of the last restraint.

"Good lord no, I was just assigned by Admiral Shepard to um keep an eye on things," the original owner of this suit will wake up in a few hours from now in an air lock, well if someone doesn't vent it by mistake I suppose," she helped Shepard sit on one of the seats.

"Accent," was all Shepard could manage picking up the pistol from the obviously dead body on the floor.

"Earth, well the Euro block actually. I was on the station waiting for transport to your… to Rear Admiral Shepard's ship and well she knows my mother and… well I was happy to help," the young woman continued in the same cheerful tone but a little more quietly, "but I do need to go get this shuttle moving are you ok here?"

"Can't leave the station," Shepard said and stood a little unsteadily, "need to clear…" she felt woozy as a rush of blood hit her.

"Yes I thought that might be the case, oh dear, well we'll just have to dispatch the three outside but I'm afraid I can't take you back to the brig Commander… not safe and my mother would kill me if I let anything happen to you… not to mention what Admiral Shepard would do to me," while she was talking she was putting her helmet back on and pulled an assault rifle off the rack behind the cockpit.

Shepard shook her head a little to try to clear the fog as they watched the screen giving them a view outside the shuttle.

"Can you handle that thing," Shepard said as she saw the three armoured soldiers walking back to the shuttle obviously wondering what was wrong.

"Well I'm more of a black ops specialist… more stealth than brute force but I'm pretty good with one of these as well," the young woman turned and offered an armoured hand, "how rude of me Captain Dunbar at your service Commander… oh bloody hell I should be saluting."

Shepard took the hand and felt something akin to amusement and a little relief now her body was returning to normal, "that's ok Captain I'll owe you more than a handshake once this is over," Shepard shook the outstretched hand quickly and then focused back on the situation.

"On three," Dunbar said her hand hovering over the door control.

When the door cranked open Shepard took out the closest soldier with three shots to the visor. Dunbar took out one of the other two with shots to the head but the final one she aimed for the knees.

Shepard held back interested to see what she was going to do.

Dunbar kicked away the wounded soldier's firearm and standing over him she put her boot on one of the shattered knees and despite his howls of pain she said quietly, "where is Greeves?"

When the soldier did not respond she shot him in the shoulder, "recovery is going to take you a long time but the next shot will leave your brains all over this shuttle bay I won't ask again?"
"Meeting with Major Holland…” his body went limp and Dunbar took her foot off.

"Ah, I think he's past his usefulness,” she took off the helmet and threw it inside the shuttle, "I don't expect your squeamish Commander but my apologies if I went too far," she looked back down at the bodies.

"Scum and a complete disgrace to the uniform," she said finally, "now let's get you checked out by the medics and then somewhere safe until the Admiral arrives."

Shepard raised her eyebrows as she began walking slowly out of the shuttle bay, "Hackett?"

"Yes I received word last evening he'll be back on station in the morning, well a few hours actually."

Shepard finally felt a surge of relief and a huge amount of gratitude to this extraordinary guardian angel her mother had sent to her.
Chapter 69

Arcturus Station, mid-morning - seven days after Shepard gave herself up

Shepard had spent all the time after being rescued to now being checked over in medical wing then giving a statement to the military police about her attempted abduction.

Her guardian angel, Paula Dunbar, had been doing the same and now they were both looking a little the worse for wear sitting outside Admiral Hackett's office awaiting his imminent return.

There was a flurry of activity coming from the corridor outside the anti-room where they were sitting and the officer who had quietly been doing paperwork behind his desk jumped to his feet.

Shepard and Dunbar did the same and stood to attention as Hackett strode into the room six or seven officer in his wake.

As the senior officer in the room Shepard saluted and got one in return from Hackett.

"At ease people," he turned to the gaggle following him, "get on with what we've discussed I'll expect an update in an hour."

Then turning to Captain Dunbar he said, "I hear you saved the day Captain and I suspect your commanding officer will be very pleased to have you join her," Hackett held out his hand.

Dunbar seemed frozen to the spot but then shot out her hand, "very… thank you… duty and all that."

Hackett's eyes narrowed slightly and Shepard could swear she saw his lips twitch fighting off a smile.

"I think Captain Dunbar is a little star struck," Shepard said marvelling at how this grizzled old soldier continued to hold a sort of reverence for those under his command.

Hackett allowed himself a fleeting smile at the young officer who had remained at attention.

"Well you have my personal thanks. I believe your transport is waiting your… duty is completed here."

With a nod she turned and left.

Hackett made his way into his office indicating she should follow him.

Once behind his desk and Shepard settled in a chair he leaned forward and said seriously, "we nearly lost you Shepard and I will never put you in that position again. Combat yes, and we may all have to make the ultimate sacrifice, but I won't keep losing good soldiers to the poison Cerberus has injected into my Navy."

He looked tired but his voice was strong and she could feel his determination.

"What can I do to help sir?"

"You've already done more than enough Shepard. Bringing Doctor Lawson to us has proved invaluable in terms of intelligence and she is a gifted scientist," Hackett saw the look of concern on Shepard's face and continued, "she is safe and secure and is being welcomed as an ally."
"Thank you sir I'm confident in her loyalty and she really did make an enemy of Harper."

Hackett smiled, "yes loyalty garnered through fear will only get you so far. Now I'm going to ask you to be patient just a little while longer. You will be given proper quarters but you'll be confined with a single escort until we can set up a military hearing for tomorrow.

"I suspect the hearing will last a day possible two for decision and I fully expect you to be exonerated."

Shepard could feel the tension easing in her body, "but I did murder an entire solar system of innocent people sir there should be some judgment on that?"

Hackett thought for a few moments then spoke in the softest tone she had ever heard, "Shepard we are all responsible for the death of innocents. And we've all ordered our own to their certain death, it's our burden to carry and no amount of punishment will clean it from our souls."

They sat in silence that was broken by a call to Hackett's comms from his adjutant.

"Tell them I'll be ready in five minutes," then he turned to Shepard, "after your cleared I need you to go to Earth to give evidence at some hearings into potential long term threats, fucking politicians can never call things what they are. We'll get the Normandy back and reinstate your crew oh and I'll be giving you a promotion you are carrying out diplomatic level work for the Alliance your designation should reflect that."

"No sir…" Shepard surprised herself and Hackett sat back a little and raised an eyebrow, "sorry sir but… I'm too young for another promotion… and I want to earn it the regular way. I've just been in the right place at the right time… or the wrong place only time will tell…" she had rambled to a stop.

Hackett shook his head slowly, "Shepard you are one of the finest and most dedicated officers it's been my honour to lead and you a credit to both your parents."

Shepard felt a surge of emotion.

"Commander whatever you may think you've earned your next promotion and next time you won't dissuade me. Now go get some rest," Hackett returned her salute and then turned his attention to some papers on his desk but as she reached the door he called out, "and call your mother I'm afraid your still on restricted comms until your cleared but that's an internal Navy call."

Shepard was met outside by a young marine lieutenant who introduced himself.

"Good morning Commander I'm your escort for the next couple of days. I've arranged for your things to be in your quarters if you'd like to come with me."

_T'Loak estate, Aria's office - seven days after Shepard's arrest_

Liara was at her wits end. There had been no word from Arcturus about Shepard since she had been arrested. Both she and Hannah Shepard were hugely concerned that Shepard was obviously still being held in solitary and no progress on any kind of hearing.

Hackett seemed to be losing his grip on the Navy on Earth and there had been no word from her Broker sources on Arcturus or Admiral Shepard for two days.

On top of that Grizz hadn't been able to find Tash who seemed to be trying to kill herself at every turn from the trail she was leaving behind her.
Liara stood looking out the window at her son who was playing with his As'Rasam.

Liara had been shocked when Aria had insisted her son come and join her a few days ago.

"I need you here little wing but you should not be parted from your child, make arrangements." It had been more a command than a request as usual from the Queen of Omega but Liara had been touched.

She hadn't been quite sure how her Rasam felt about her half human offspring. Liara had told Aria the truth the third evening they had sat together at Liselle's bedside.

After Aria's anger had subsided, anger on behalf of her daughter, she had assured Liara that any blood of hers would be welcome and that the Matriarch's and the Council could go fuck themselves if they ever tried to impose their rules on any member of her family.

Liara knew a lot of that anger was coming from somewhere else but she was glad that it paved the way to acceptance for her son.

She watched as Ne'aira joined them and Liara noticed for the first time how close they seemed to be.

Before she could process how she felt the call she was waiting for pinged on her omnitool and she pushed it up onto the large vid screen behind Aria's desk.

'Finally,' Liara thought as Hannah Shepard came into view.

"Liara I have her on the call I'm going to connect the two of you," Hannah said not wasting time with explanations, "officially she is confined to barracks with no external comms access so worked out a way to connect you… one second and you should…" the screen went black and then Shepard's image appeared.

Liara felt her knees weaken with relief, "you look tired and thin… oh Goddess Shepard I have missed you… something terrible has happened.

Shepard felt her bondmates pain cut through her like acid, "Lee I'm so sorry I'm not there, Mum read me in while we were organising the through call… how is she, what's the prognosis."

Talking about it seemed to eat into Liara's resolve not to cry and as her eyes welled up she spoke softly, "she lost a lot of blood… it took some time to stabilise the wound… the healers don't know how much…" Liara's voice faded away and she dried her eyes.

"Fuck I wish I could get to you my darling."

"I know you would be here if you could be," Liara composed herself, "the healers have no idea how much brain damage she has incurred and we won't know until she wakes up.

"They have her in an induced… coma? I think that is the closest Galactic word… they will bring her out of it later today and we will just have to see if she wakes up."

"I'll get home as quickly as I can. How is Aria taking it?"

"Not well… You know Aria she is not good at waiting and she needs to hurt someone for this. I fear how terrible her response will be once she is able to act," Liara looked out the window and saw Aria now carrying a very animated toddler and showing him her pistol, "Oh dear I think Aria is giving John weapons training."
Shepard smiled, "I don't know what's scarier Aria babysitting or her reaction when he calls her grandma."

Liara smiled, "Shepard I love you so very much."

Even with the distance and everything that was happening Liara still felt happier and more grounded when she could connect with her bondmate.

"But what has been happening and why do you look so drawn."

"Ah I'm fine… honestly… it just took a while… you know politics. I couldn't sleep very well… missing you babe," Shepard had no intention of telling Liara about nearly being dragged off to a Cerberus research facility. There would be time for that when they were in the same place and Shepard could physically comfort her.

"But Admiral Hackett is back and things are working as planned now."

"Yeah pretty much… um… I checked the news feeds earlier and there seems to be an awful lot about what a great hero I am and my service record… even an upcoming miniseries on my families generations of service. You wouldn't know anything about this would you?" Shepard asked trying to hide her amusement.

"Mmm, not sure what you mean Commander I am merely a low ranking politician from Thessia how in the Galaxy could I possibly influence public opinion," Liara said coyly.

"Well it's much appreciated, although I hate the fucking attention," Shepard allowed a scowl, "it countered the cries to have my head mounted on the nearest lamppost. And the other stuff you're doing for Hackett and the President may just mean we still have a fighting chance with all our plans."

"To be honest my love most of the actual work has been Kas and the team I haven't been involved in the details since…"

"She'll pull through Lee… she's Aria's daughter she tough."

Liara managed a small nod of ascension.

"How's Tash taking it?"

The question Liara had been dreading and could avoid no longer.

"I can't find her Shepard. I'm not even sure she knows Liselle is still alive. From what I've pieced together when they finally realised a shuttle had escaped she decided to go after the locals that Cerberus hired."

"Aw shit… and I'm stuck here for at least another few days… Lee please you have to find her," Shepard looked as devastated when she had heard how badly Liselle had been injured.

"I am trying… I'm waiting for Grizz to get back to me he took a team out looking again today. She did find the human gang that helped but at least three of them got away after she stormed their hangout," Liara didn't want to add to Shepard's concerns but knew she couldn't keep back information.

"By the time Grizz got there she'd already moved on but he's pretty sure she'd been wounded. And he's been trying to find her ever since."
"Sorry Lee I know you have enough on your hands saving my arse and looking after Aria… thank you," Shepard suddenly looked exhausted.

"Are you sure nothing happened Shepard," Liara asked sensing something wasn't being said.

Shepard gave her a smile but it didn't entirely reach her bondmates' eyes, "nah I'm fine… its… just too much time to think… I'll be good after a proper night's sleep. I'm fine now… just needed to talk to you," Shepard ended with a genuine smile.

"I'll let you go and I'll keep Hannah updated so she can get word to you as soon as we've found Tash. I love you Shepard."

"You're my breath T'Soni and I'll see you soon."

Liara continued staring at the black screen where her bondmates' exhausted but welcome face had been.

A shout of laughter from the garden caught her attention and she watched her son running between Aria and Ne'aira chasing the ball they were moving back and forth with biotics.

In that moment Liara missed her mother deeply but had a strange sense that she was somehow near, "I wish you were here mother… so we could make up. We need your strength and your love."

Feeling a little silly talking to the dead out loud she resolved to join the others in the garden while she waited for her call from Omega.

**Omega station, level 15 entertainment area - seven days after the attack on Liselle**

Grizz moved quickly with three of his team on his heels. He'd finally got a call from one of his contacts that Tasha was coming off worst in a fight in a bar on one of the lower levels.

As soon as he was inside he could see where the fight or rather beating was taking place.

He noted two Turian's getting medical help and what looked like three Human's either dead or at least badly injured still lying where they fell.

Approaching the semi-circle he shouted a warning.

"She's one of mine move away now or deal with me," Grizz had a reputation that stood even without Aria's backing but of course he was also one of her trusted lieutenants.

'Spirits Tasha you picked a fight with Talons,' Grizz thought once he saw who was in the group.

"We are just getting a little payback for all the interference and…" the Turian who seemed to be in charge threw another punch at Tash who was being held up by her arms by a Turian and Human, "I think she likes it."

"She started it… came at us asking questions like she owned the place… fucking bitch as off her face on something," the Human holding her up said and Grizz could see bruises on his face.

Grizz pulled his shotgun and pointed at the lead Turian, he knew his team had already taken up positions and were ready to drop anyone that interfered.

"This is me asking nicely do not make me wait for your compliance," Grizz stared down the Turian.

From what he could tell the Talon's had about fifteen in the bar and there could be more on the way
but he didn't think they were ready to challenge Aria's authority again, not just yet.

The Turian nodded and the two holding Tash up let her go and she slammed to the floor.

"Take it but next time we won't toy with her before we put her out of her misery," as he finished speaking he gave Tash a kick to the stomach and walked away.

Grizz called two of his team over and they picked Tash up and dragged her out by her arms her feet leaving streaks in a trail of blood.

Backing out with guns still ready he and his team left and outside he got a better look at how much of a mess Tash was in.

"Take her straight to our med centre," Grizz said and put a call in to Omega.

**Afterlife medical centre - ten hours after picking up Tash**

Grizz waited for news and both his boss and Liara T'Soni were waiting for news. He was no fool and knew something was going on. To his credit he was squashing any and all rumour's that started to fly around when Aria left with her injured lieutenant.

But he had been one of the few who had seen the shock and pain before Aria recovered her control.

His guess was Liselle was Aria's blood. Had to be the only explanation and it made sense. Though if it was true Liselle had earned her place in her own right no favour's from her parent.

It wasn't a surprise that Liara T'Soni was looking out for Shepard's blood but he also felt there was something more going on. But he had survived long enough to know that what you don't know that isn't important can't kill you.

His loyalty to Aria was absolute and her secrets were hers to keep.

He would also have done anything to avenge the attack on Liselle. Not only was she a fellow merc in Aria's employ but he liked and trusted her. Not something he did easily or often.

Tasha on the other hand was a hot headed loose cannon but a hell of a gun to have in a fight, when she wasn't high or drunk. To be fair since Liselle had taken her as a semi-permanent lover Tasha had seemed to get clean, as clean as any of them could ever truly be clean.

The thought allowed thoughts from his previous life but he shut them down quick he had his story like everyone else but he liked his life where he was now.

One of the Salarian doctors came out of the young merc's room, "quite a mess. Too much damage to face. Will need surgery, worried most about gunshot now with infection. And all the broken bones from the beating. May also have damage to spleen and liver..."

Grizz interrupted, "I don't want a list I want to know if she'll be ok and when she can travel."

"No need to be so brutish. Stable now but may need an operation on liver. No travel yet, and I won't know until I can get her stable." He turned a marched away muttering what Grizz suspected was insults to the Turian's gene pool.

He went into the room and looked down on Tash her face was almost unrecognisable.

Just then there was a knock on the door.
"Come on in Siki," a young Asari dancer moved into the room.

She gasped when she saw Tash in the bed.

"Goddess we're not going to lose her as well are we," Grizz knew the Asari dancers particularly well fond of both Liselle and Tasha and he had heard the rumours about parties.

"Hopefully not. But Siki I need you to stay in this room… do not leave her side and under no circumstances is she to leave that bed. Do you understand? You call me when she wakes up and do not let her leave."

"Not sure she'll be going anywhere anytime soon," Siki said sitting next to the bed and taking one of Tash's hands in her own.

"You have no idea how stubborn she is," Grizz gave a Turian equivalent of a smile and squeezed the young dancer's shoulder before leaving.

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Omega Station

Tash felt the music in her body even before she got inside.

'So this was Omega,' she thought as she weaved her way through the crowd towards the bar.

Even slightly high she had very good radar it was, after all, the only thing that had kept her alive in many dangerous situations. Her senses were telling her she was being watched.

Tash got to the bar and after ordering a drink she let her eyes wander up to the balcony that had caught her attention as soon as she'd entered the club.

Looking down at her was an Asari. She was the most beautiful sight Tash had ever seen. Elegant and deadly were the two words that came to mind as she watched the young Asari walk towards the stairs and then down onto the dance floor.

Tash lost her in the crowd but a few moments later the Asari was standing in front of her.

"Aren't you all new and dangerous looking."

"Well you look like you could be trouble yourself," Tash smiled.

"Buy me a drink and maybe I'll show you how much trouble I can be,"

Before Tash even said anything a drink appeared for the young Asari.

"So they know you here," Tash said leaning in close to avoid shouting over the music. So close Tash could feel the warmth of the stranger's skin.

"Everyone who comes to Omega is either running away from something or trying to find something, what's your story," the Asari leaned in so close their bodies were touching. Tash could feel the soft breath on her neck.

Tash gave her a broad smile, "I'm looking for adventure, redemption and to forget."

"Quite a cocktail… I think we'll get on," the Asari smiled and stroking Tash's face with her fingers said, "my name is Liselle, thanks for the drink, maybe I'll see you around… if you stay."

Liselle walked away through the crowd and onto the dance floor and Tash just had a glimpse of her
joining a group and starting to dance.

Tash felt her head swimming and thought she might pass out. She closed her eyes and tried to steady herself.

Then felt soft breath on the back of her neck and the warmth of a body against her.

Turning around in bed she gave Liselle a light kiss on her forehead and traced the line of a blue breast with her finger.

"If you start something Mikhailovich you'd better be prepared to fucking finish it," Liselle's voice was low and a little hoarse. The way it always sounded after they'd had a late night.

Tash smiled, "absolutely… no… problem…" she marked each word with a kiss first on Liselle's lips then her neck finally finding the hard nipple.

"Mmmm…"

But something was wrong. Tash looked at her hands, they were covered with blood and when she looked at Liselle her throat was cut.

She was shouting to Grizz over comms. The blood…

"Stop the blood…" Tash shouted but couldn't make the words come out, she couldn't move… couldn't make it stop.

"Hey Tasha you're ok… shsh… wake up you're safe," Siki tried to calm Tash and stop her thrashing around in the bed.

Tash opened her eyes, "where the hell am I… what the fuck… Siki… is that you?"

"Yeah Tasha you're ok… Grizz brought you back; you had a pretty bad fight."

Tash tried to get out of bed but Siki was holding her down and in her weakened state she didn't have enough strength to push past the Asari.

She fell back against the pillows exhausted feeling a surge of pain from every part of her body and particularly her face.

"I have to go Siki let me up… I need to find them all…" Tash was breathing hard with the effort and holding back her emotions.

"Grizz told me to let him know when you woke up he'll be here soon. Can I get you anything?"

Tash turned away from Siki, "I just need to be on my own."

"I'll just be outside Tasha."

It was a few minutes until she heard voices outside the door then Grizz was standing next to her bed.

"Thanks and all that Grizz but I just need you to leave me alone. Let me go my own way I still have people to track down," she tried for light but could hear the edge of anger in her tone and she kept her eyes studying the ceiling.

"You mean you want me to let you go get yourself killed," he sat down on a chair next to the bed, "well, I can't do that, boss's orders are to get you to Thessia."
Tash looked across at the Turian, "Aria wants to kill me herself… that's fair. Liselle's dead because of me."

"She's not dead," he let it sink in.

"Leece… but she was… all that blood," her eyes drifted to the ceiling again.

Grizz never understood the Human need to mess with everyone's given names, "well from what I know, which isn't much, she's still critical but she's not dead. So it might be an idea for you to stop trying to kill yourself and maybe put Liselle first."

She looked at him this time with tears in her eyes, "I can go and see her."

Grizz had never seen the merc look so vulnerable but he understood, "yeah… and for the record I've been trying to track you down for days. You're a hard bastard to catch up with," he gave the Turian equivalent of a smile and a mock punch to her shoulder and was pleased to get a weak smile in return.

"Yeah well pretty sure you only found me by following the bodies," Tash was working hard to regain control of her emotions so she didn't sound like a little lost kid.

"Doc just needs to patch you up a bit more then we're putting you in one of the boss's shuttles. Before you go I need to know everything you found out so we can keep looking for the ones that are still on the loose."

She nodded not trusting herself to speak without her voice breaking.

"Ok well try to get some sleep. We can't do anything about your face you'll need an operation according to the moody Salarian," Grizz stood and made his way to the door, "but then it might be an improvement you were always a bit to pretty to be a proper merc."

Tash knew Grizz had always looked out for her and now she owed him bit time for the chance to see Liselle again and it was a debt she would never be able to fully repay.

_T'Loak estate, Thessia - nine days after_

"She is breathing on her own so that is a very good sign Matriarch," the senior Asari healer said to Aria.

Despite her aversion to being linked to the cursed institution that had ruined her life she had no fight for such things at the moment.

Aria looked at her daughter in the medbed.

"She remains connected to monitoring machines so we can track any changes. And the tube in her arm is for fluids. But the neck wound was now healed she will need treatment to remove the scar."

The Asari priestess was heading up the healing team from the T'Loak estate.

_Healed_, Aria thought, _it will never be healed for me._

"How long," Aria said her tone soft.

"Matriarch T'Loak there is no guarantee that she will."

"She has brain function."
"Yes and at times it's off the chart we have never seen anything like it. It is as if she is awake and highly active," the priestess watched Aria closely, "you should prepare for the worse."

Aria gave the priestess a look that would stop a charging Krogan and in a dangerously quiet tone said, "you may… want to be careful what predictions you make priestess. Get me your boss here… now."

"Matriarch I cannot just summon the high priestess and…" before the maiden could finish her sentence Aria had grabbed her by the throat and was lifting her off the ground.

"Do not… call me… Matriarch you little piece of shit."

"Aria… I will deal with this," Ne'aira had been waiting outside the room and came in quickly placing a hand on the arm that had the gurgling Asari off the floor.

Aria dropped her grip, "get rid of her before I do," she turned away and moved back to the bed.

Ne'aira almost dragged the woman off the floor and out of the room.

As soon as they were in the corridor outside the priestess looked as if she was going to say something but a withering look from Ne'aira stopped her and she merely turned and rushed away as quickly as she could.

Liara had seen the whole thing as she was walking up the stairs and when she reached the bedroom door she received an explanation.

"I need to get hold of the high priestess… I think our friend gave Aria a prognosis she didn't want to hear," Ne'aira said.

"I suspect she also said Matriarch once too often," Liara said without humour, "I'll go in and calm her down."

'Or perhaps not,' Liara thought given the information she was about to share.

"How is she?"

Aria moved to look out the window, "we need new healers. I'm going to bring the best in from Larissa."

Liara pinched her nose knowing she had put off her news so long she had no choice now, "Rasam… I need too… well you said I could… oh Goddess," Liara rambled to a stop.

Liara couldn't see the small smile that played over Aria's lips and when she replied it was in a curt tone, "honestly Liara why does everyone think I am out of touch. Do not think for one moment I am not aware of everything that is happening here and on Omega," she turned to face her daughter and continued in a harder tone.

"Mikhailovich will be arriving within the hour. She tracked down the human gang that gave support to whoever came for Johnson. There are three members left who must have been the ones with the connections as she couldn't beat much helpful information from the ones she found.

"The Talons are being defiant again. There are shadows of Cerberus activity on the station for the first time ever and it seems the Alliance didn't secure the Omega 4 relay as they assured me they did," Aria tilted her head slightly and finished.
"Did I miss anything?"

Liara didn't know whether to be annoyed, exasperated or proud of her father at the moment.

"I don't believe so. Broker agents on the station made sure you were aware of the Cerberus activity," Liara couldn't help but push back a little.

Aria smiled, "imagine what we could achieve as a family working together Liara," then reality hit her and the pain once again returned to the older Asari's eyes.

"Keep Mikhailovich away from me Liara…” Aria turned and left the room.

_T'Loak Estate, Thessia_

Liara was waiting for the incoming shuttle with Ne'aira.

"She still needs medical care from what Grizz said," Ne'aira said watching the shuttle settle on the ground.

"If he had not found her when he did I fear she would have died."

They both moved a little closer as the doors opened.

Liara gasped and rushed forward, "Goddess Tash what did they do to you."

Shep ard's cousin was almost unrecognisable with her face a mass of cuts and bruises. She had an emergency cast on an arm and a leg brace.

She was being supported by two or Aria's commando team and Liara replaced one of them holding Tash up.

"She's still a bit sedated for the pain," the young merc Liara had replaced said still walking alongside, "she wasn't really even patched up that Salarian bastard got into a pissing match with Grizz."

Tash stirred a little, "where is she," she said so quietly Liara almost didn't hear her.

"We will get you some medical help first Tash and then you can see her," but even as Liara finished what she was saying Tash began to struggle a little.

"No… don't care about me… need… please."

Liara looked at Ne'aira and she nodded.

Although they were using biotics as well as physically supporting her it was still an effort to get her up the stairs and to Liselle's room.

Tash seemed to come around more the closer they got and once in the room she didn't take her eyes off the young Asari in the medbed.

Once sitting in a chair next to the bed Tash held the hand closest to her and rested her head Liselle's arm and began sobbing.

Liara cleared the room but stayed close.

"My fault… please forgive me… love you so much Leece," Tash said through tears.
Liara placed a hand gently on the young Human's shoulder to try to give her some comfort but the sobbing didn't subside until Tash seemed to drift off from exhaustion or the sedatives Liara wasn't sure.

Ne'aira came into the room with a couple of healers, "we should move her next door and find out exactly what her injuries are.

They moved Tash into the room next door and as Liara glanced back at her sister she thought she noticed a small movement in her fingers.

**Arcturus station, Shepard's quarters**

As she checked herself out in the mirror Shepard's mind was on Thessia.

She pulled her cap low over her eyes and brushed the shoulders of her dress uniform but she could still see the images Liara had sent her of her badly beat cousin.

Liara's description of Tash's breakdown when she finally got to Liselle's bedside had almost brought Shepard herself to tears. More so because she knew she had put Liara through that and worse.

The news last night was better with the internal injuries she had sustained under control and broken bones now setting properly.

They had been concerned about concussion but it seemed hard heads ran in Shepard's extended family as Liara had put it.

For her own good they were keeping Tash sedated as every time she came around from a procedure she had tried to get to Liselle's bedside and no amount of reasoning had stopped her.

The knock on the door brought Shepard back from her thoughts, "come in."

"It's time ma'am," the young Alliance officer assigned to 'escort' her had proved to be good company except when he was getting doughy eyed about her service record also described by him as her heroism. She had closed down those conversations as quickly as possible.

With a nod and a final check that she would be immaculate as per regulations Shepard followed him out the door and they walked together along winding corridors and in lifts until the stood outside the hearing room assigned to her case.

The previous two days they had heard evidence and her testimony. As it was a closed hearing she could be as open as necessary including playing the recording of her conversation with the Reaper before being picked up by the Normandy.

Today was the verdict. It may have been a closed hearing and the officers on the panel had been screened carefully to make sure they were not tainted by Cerberus but she was being judged by a panel of her peers and they had complete autonomy about both verdict and associated punishment.

She stood to attention and awaited her fate.

An hour later she was on her way back to her quarters to change out of her service uniform and into dress blues as she had been called to meet the President on the parliament level of the station.

She had been fully exonerated and although it was a fair and just result Shepard still felt that something should happen to her for not being able to save the lives in that system.
"Sit down Commander let's not stand on ceremony," President Chen indicated an armchair to the officer standing at ramrod straight attention in his office.

He sat in the chair opposite her. It wasn't the first time he'd seen Shepard in person but it was the first time he had sat and talked to her.

"You seem taller than I remember from the medal ceremony."

"Implants Sir they've added just shy of two inches to my height."

Chen smiled trying to put the officer at her ease.

"I am aware your hearing concluded with a favourable verdict Commander you have been cleared. That must be a relief."

"Sir permission to speak freely," she received a nod in answer and continued, "I caused the death of a populated solar system of people I'm not sure I should have received a… favourable verdict."

"Commander they would have died anyway if you hadn't stopped the Reapers. I admire your integrity and that you hold yourself to a higher standard but believe me when I say everyone who is aware of the consequences of you not having done what you did are willing to share the loss of those lives with you."

Shepard understood and appreciated his support.

"Pretty sure you didn't invite me here to try to make me feel better," Shepard said with a smile.

The President laughed a little, "no regrettably I am just a self-serving politician and as your popularity is through the roof I wondered if I could perhaps ask you to share some of those favourable's with me."

"I don't think I'm allowed under military law to get involved in politics… openly," Shepard said, "but I would like to do anything I can to help short of endorsing you sir I know exactly who the alternative is."

"Of course we would merely have some vid opportunities and perhaps you would lead the latest recruitment campaign for the Alliance Navy?," he continued quickly before Shepard could try to get out of it, exactly as Hackett had predicted.

"I know it's a lot to ask Shepard and I'm aware you don't like the attention but we really need some positive publicity for the Navy. We fought off the challenge in the parliament but there is still a lot to do before the election." He was about to make a speech supporting Shepard's continued heroism and work for the Systems Alliance which put him firmly in support of Hackett and the Navy.

From Chen's point of view having her as the public face of the Alliance Navy would certainly help his poll numbers.

Shepard stormed back into her quarters in a furious temper. The meeting with the President had gone as she'd expected and although she would hate every moment being the face of the Alliance Navy she saw it as penance for Bahak System and she could probably make it less about her and more about the men and women she had served with.

Her mood had come from bumping into Admiral Mikhailovich who had managed to distance himself from his second in command and avoided arrest unlike Greeves and the other's involved in the plot to abduct her.
She had also received orders to go to Earth to start giving evidence at strategy hearing's looking at preparations for 'extinction level events', a way to talk about the Reaper threat without calling it the Reaper threat, which meant she would not have a chance to get back to Thessia to spend time with Liara.

With the election in only a couple of weeks she also expected to be trotted out for vid opportunities all over Earth and maybe even to some of the colonies. She was in too foul a mood to talk to anyone including Liara who she didn't want to burden.

Standing looking out the viewing window of her quarters she sought out the familiar and sleek outline of the Normandy. Her ship had arrived yesterday and all the formalities for her crew had been completed.

When she boarded her ship shortly she would be welcomed by a true Alliance Navy crew and she would once again, officially, be an Alliance Navy Commander. The thought gave her a huge amount of comfort and relief. She knew who she was, her place in the scheme of things and she knew her mission. It was all she ever asked for.

Thessia, T'Loak estate, Aria's office

The vid screen flickered into life and Aria was presented with the view of the head of Cerberus seated against the backdrop of a boiling sun.

Pirate Queen of the Terminus Systems was not impressed by dramatic settings or mystery and she had insisted on this being a one to one call with The Illusive Man himself.

"Aria, good to finally meet you but I'm sorry it's under such difficult circumstances…" she cut him off.

"Let's cut the bullshit," Aria kept her voice low and made sure each word was emphasised, "we had an agreement. I would stay out of your business and you… would stay out… of mine."

"You must have the same problem with your empire Aria, you don't know everything everyone is doing. Let's say I have operatives working on their own initiative and sometimes they cross lines. It's not my intention to make an enemy of you and I can assure you I have no plans to operate on Omega… that is clearly your turf."

She didn't reply and waited for him to give her what she knew she wanted.

"I've looked into the incident and I'm afraid I had a rogue agent who seemed to ignore her instructions about Omega. I should have warned you earlier and that was a mistake I will not repeat. As a sign of my cooperation I will send you her name. I'm afraid it seems to have been some kind of love triangle."

Aria looked at her console and sure enough the agent he had offered up was Natasha Mikhailovich.

"She had help," Aria knew the next exchange with Harper would be the most telling.

"I'm looking into that. If I could retrieve her I'm sure we can extract the information you want, we're having trouble locating her…"

Again Aria cut him off, "I have her… I will be dealing with her personally. Where is Kai Leng." Aria couldn't use her gift as an empath at distance but she was a highly skilled reader of body language no matter which species.
Harper faltered for only a millisecond but it was enough, "I will have to look into that Aria as far as I know that agent is currently on assignment on Earth. Perhaps you have been given some disinformation if you have Mikhailovich she will try to pass the blame."

"Stay off my station… or I will use my considerable resources to fuck you up." Aria ended the call as soon as she had finished speaking.

She looked across at Ne'aira and Liara who were both in the room and saw the call.

"You can't think it was Tash… he's lying," Liara's tone was pleading and she was desperately trying to read Aria's body language.

Ne'aira stayed silent.

Aria stood and without a word walked out of the office and made her way quickly to Liselle's room.

Liara followed running a little to keep up, "Aria… Aria… Liselle trusts Tash completely… she knows… she knows it all."

Aria stopped in her tracks and turned to glare at Liara, "we will discuss that later."

Liara continued to follow Aria but now in silence and exchanged a worried glace with Ne'aira who only shrugged.

At the door Aria turned to the two Asari in her wake, "stay here."

She entered the room and closed the door.

Tash was in her usual place sitting next to the bed holding Liselle's hand and resting her forehead on her lover's forearm.

She started awake and tried to focus her eyes, "Sorry Aria… I'll… leave…"

But as she made to stand Aria moved to the bottom of the bed, "stay there."

Aria watched to human and it was obvious she shouldn't be out of her own sick bed but as soon as they had removed the sedation Tash had insisted on sitting by Liselle's bedside whenever Aria herself was not visiting.

"When you said it was your fault… what exactly did you mean."

Tash processed the question, "I didn't trust Johnson. There was something off about him, something familiar… But I didn't trust why I thought he was off… I was jealous," Tash looked back at Liselle and sounded miserable.

"When you asked me to check him out I sent his face to Cerberus… I was sure he was an operative… didn't hear anything back… but they obviously came for him… if I hadn't… he was hiding from them."

She looked up at Aria tears in her eyes, "so you see this is my fault… and you should finish me… I deserve it."

Aria sighed, "This is not your fault. My daughter seems to be… attached to you and I know you feel the same way. But don't think for one moment that if you screw up I won't hurt you because I will."

Tash was having a hard time reconciling Aria's words, "I'm sorry Aria I think the drugs are messing
with my head… you don't… and you know I know and that's…"

Aria sat in the chair on the opposite side of the bed, "enough chit chat. I need you to tell me everything you know about Cerberus, Harper and Kai Leng… everything do you understand."

Tash swallowed and squeezed her eyes tight then opened them to try to wake herself up more, "got it."

For the next hour Tash trawled up every detail she could and answered Aria's questions clearly drawing on her years of intelligence work and report analysis.

But Tash was struggling hard against pain, exhaustion and the mild sedation still in her body and she began to fade in and out.

"That will do for today," Aria pressed a buzzer and not only two of the healers but also Liara came into the room.

"Natasha needs to rest," Aria quelled the resistance from Tash with a single look, "she need's food and a solid twelve hours sleep and for the love of the Goddess get someone here to put her face back together."

Tash stood and was helped out of the room by the healers.

Liara stood at the bottom of the bed and watched as Aria picked up her sisters hand.

"I made you a promise sham'apa vutri and I will keep it. But we need you to come back to us." Aria kissed her daughters hand, stroked her cheek and stood.

"Cerberus is going to make a play for Omega. I may have to go back sooner than I wanted."

"How do you know?"

"Everything Harper said and everything he did not," Aria moved to her youngest daughter, "you need to warn Shepard that they have accessed the Collector base. Whatever protection the Alliance put in place has been bypassed."

"Do they know about your connection with me?"

"No but I think they will be able to work out how important Liselle is to me and they may think I'm distracted enough to catch us off guard. Drax is arriving tomorrow once I've spoken to her I'll leave for Omega… you need to go home Liara there is nothing more we can do for Liselle now. It is in the hands of the Goddess."
Chapter 70

A/N pri'va = beloved, agra'va = older sister, su'tra = younger sister in classic Asari which is used for the most intimate or personal of endearments

Normandy, final approach to Earth - two weeks before the Systems Alliance elections

"So to conclude the briefing let me make it crystal clear. You are not expected nor should you get involved publicly in the elections. But you will be exposed to a lot of press so who knows what they may ask you."

Shepard was talking to the whole crew most of whom were in the mess hall and the rest at their posts.

"You will have Alliance press office handlers at all the events you volunteer to attend and there a few ceremonies' we will attend as a crew. There will also be services for our lost colonies which will inevitably include interviews with the media."

She paused and reminded herself that not every member of her crew may hate being recognised as a hero.

"In a few days nearly all of you will have the opportunity to reunite with your families. The Alliance is flying them in from wherever they are on Earth or the Colonies. Those of you who lost your families to the Collectors can join me… we are all family on this crew.

"Finally, I want to remind you that it was not just our ground teams, and certainly not just one person," Shepard couldn't help but growl the last comment bringing smiles to her crew's faces, "who defeated the Collectors. Each and every one of you volunteered to join what, to everyone, looked like a suicide mission and without each and every one of you doing their jobs we would not have achieved our goal. I am proud to serve with you and honoured that you all re-enlisted. It will take all of us to defeat the Reapers… dismissed."

As the parade stood to attention and then dispersed her last words haunted her thoughts, 'all of us... much more likely I'll lead them all to their deaths rather than victory over the Reapers.'

Garrus was by her side and in one look let her know she was not alone carrying the burden.

Her specialist team, including Jack, would be joining her giving evidence and the benefit of their experience of fighting the Collectors to the week-long briefings and planning meetings with Alliance Navy high command.

Shepard was also slated to do the rounds of talk shows and public appearances and there would be the inevitable questions about the destruction of the relay and mass deaths.

This was not what she wanted to be doing. The briefings to the Navy and civilian planners was the only part of this two week public relations froth that held any value to her.

"I just want to get home to be with Liara and then back out doing something useful," Shepard said quietly to Garrus while they waited to disembark, "and I'm still under orders not to play up the Reaper threat to hard… public panic," she growled.

"But this is not waste of time Shepard. It's not just the Systems Alliance listening and watching it's the rest of the Galaxy and even raising the possibility of some form of hostile invasion coming from
someone speaking on behalf of the Alliance Navy who isn't being branded deranged is a wakeup call we need."

Shepard knew he was right but she felt time slipping away from them, time to prepare, time to make contingencies, time she needed to persuade Liara to do the one thing that would take a miracle to achieve.

*T'Loak estate, Thessia - two weeks before the Systems Alliance Elections*

Liara had met Admiral Dreliss Lidanya on many occasions but always in formal settings and they had never spoken.

The Lidanya was the Asari equivalent of Admiral Hackett, hugely admired, respected and loved. Not only by those under her command. The Matriarchs and the Asari military high command almost always deferred to her military advice.

The young Asari could still get incredibly nervous in certain situations and this was one of them. She watched through the open doors as the Admiral's shuttle touched down and the Matriarch emerged alone making her way swiftly to into the building and the entrance hall.

Liara offered the traditional Asari welcome and was ready to make her rehearsed speech of welcome when she was pulled into a bear hug reminiscent of the strength of Aria's in a break with the expected protocols.

"Liara you remind me so much of Benezia but I can see Aria in you too," Drax had long ago decided that if this day ever came she would be as honest as she could with the daughters of two of her oldest friends.

The Shadow Broker and one of the heroes of the Citadel was lost for words, completely wrong footed and felt a surge of gratitude to this icon of Asari culture for allowing her to share the reality of her birth and parentage with another Asari.

Drax smiled, "I will be more than happy to tell you stories of your parents when they were young and in love and when you were both finally conceived… but first I must see my daughter," in that moment Liara saw the pain of a parent.

"Of course Admiral, follow me I will take you to her."

"You can call me Drax, Liara, you're mother gave me the nickname after all."

Liara gave a nod of acquiescence as they began walking up the stairs, "Aria was sorry she could not wait for your arrival but there are pressing matters she must attend to."

"Yes I was much more delayed than I wanted to be. How is she taking it?"

Liara was hesitant, "You know Aria," hoping that would enable the Admiral to fill in the blanks if she knew her father at all well.

"Indeed, I don't envy anyone on the receiving end of her anger and grief."

'Grief,' Liara thought, 'it wouldn't be most people's description of what Aria is feeling but that is accurate.'

"You know her well?"
They had arrived at the door of Liselle's room and as Drax Lidanya moved quickly to her daughter's bedside she said, "Yes, the way you know someone for a lifetime and so know who they are under all the shit that life throws at them to deal with."

"Did Aria give you the latest update?"

"That there will have been considerable if not overwhelming brain damage due to lack of oxygen… and we won't know how much she will recover until she wakes up… if…" Drax leaned in and kissed Liselle on the forehead and stroked her cheek.

"I will leave you Ad… Drax," Liara said turning to go.

As Drax settled into the chair by the bed she asked, "where is Tasha, she is the one who saved Liselle's life and I would like to meet her."

"I will let her know."

Having been forced from Liselle's bedside because of Admiral Lidanya's visit Tash was having another treatment for her internal bruising and swelling which was taking more time to heal than the doctors expected.

Liara was waiting for her when she was finished.

"Admiral Lidanya would like you to go up and join her." Liara put her hands on the tall humans shoulders, "how are you Tash, we were all very worried when we could not find you. I hope you know I count you as family."

Tash allowed herself a faint smile to lay on her lips, "good of you to say Liara and for what its worth you certainly feel like real family to me. Like Shepard and Aunt Hannah."

"I am only pleased that we got you home almost safe and sound before Shepard got back and Liselle woke up," Liara and Tash were the only ones who had absolute belief that the young Asari would indeed wake up.

With a nod and giving Liara a kiss on the cheek Tash made her way up to Liselle's room.

Tash faltered a moment on the threshold just watching Liselle's de facto mother by her daughter's bedside and recognised the pain.

Drax looked up and moved swiftly to meet Tash pulling her into a hug much to the young human's surprise.

"Thank you… thank you from the deepest part of my soul for saving her… Goddess bless you Natasha Mikhailovich," pulling back a little they saw the pain reflected in each other's eyes.

"I'd give anything for it to be me in that bed."

Drax pulled her daughter's lover close again and said quietly, "she wouldn't Tasha… she absolutely wouldn't want that."

They parted and sat either side of the quiet and increasingly thin young Asari.

"It's very strange to see her so quiet," Drax said, "you know even as a baby and a small child she was never still… always looking for the next challenge, the next new thing to experience."

Tash smiled, "tell me more about her when she was little… I want to tease her when she wakes."
Drax marvelled at Tasha's absolute faith that the woman she loved would come out of the coma.

"Oh I have hundreds of them and vids. But first can you answer me something that I didn't want to ask Aria?"

"Anything," Tasha felt a rush of anxiety. Perhaps Liselle's mother would finally be the one to understand it was all her fault and she braced herself.

"How did she survive even with you getting there quickly?"

"Ah… from what the Salarian and the healers have said it was partly luck and partly Asari healing. They hit her with a load of sedative darts enough to take her down ten times over… so her system was pretty much slowed to a stop," Tash looked back at Liselle and this time spoke with hot anger, "then that bastard Leng… he… but he must have been called off before he'd finished as it wasn't as good a… cut," Tasha felt herself back in that room her hands trying to stem the blood.

"Then I used my field generator…" Tash said but she was now back in the moment pulling the shield generator from her belt all the time trying to raise Grizz on her comms… blood… so much blood.

"Breath Tash it's OK… its over she's here," Tash realised she was being held by the Admiral and that she must have been rambling again.

When she was calmer Drax let her go but knelt in front of her, "have the flash backs become less at all?"

Tash didn't even both trying to lie, "no… every night and most days… something will set it off… a word… a smell," she hung her head.

"Who have you told?"

"No one…"

"Well I'll tell the head priestess and she'll get you some healing melds sorted out and…" but Tash looked up and cut across Drax's words.

"No I'm fine honestly… it's…"

"Not what you deserve Tasha… this is not your fault… you saved her life and she will need you when she wakes. Liselle will have a long, hard road to recovery," Drax knew the prognosis word for word and knew if she woke up at all it would be a miracle, "you will need to be at your strongest… that is if you intend to stick around and be here for her?"

Tash looked devastated, "of course I'm staying… nothing will keep me from her side."

Drax gave her a smile, the jibe had worked and she was sure that her daughter's lover would now get the help she needed if not for her own sake then for Liselle's.

"Good, well let's go and get some food and I can show you some vids of my daughter getting into all kinds of scrapes."

The next morning Liara headed home with clear instructions to the entire T'Loak household staff that they were to take their instructions from Tash and in the event of an emergency to contact both Liara and Aria.
She was glad Drax Lidanya was staying a couple of days as the T'Loak estate was nowhere near as operational as her own mansion.

Liara wanted to take Liselle home with her but she needed to have that conversation with Aria as of course it would raise questions and had the added complication of Aethyta being around. As far as she knew there was still no love lost between Aria and Aethyta.

As her shuttle rose off the ground, her son staring out of the window from her lap, she had to admit she was pleased to be returning home.

The T'Loak mansion was grand and had everything she had at home but it was cold, unloved and unlived in.

*Afterlife club, Omega control centre, Omega space station - a week before the Systems Alliance elections*

Even in the station control centre the beat of the music coming from the main room in Afterlife could still be heard faintly, until someone opened the door when the full force of the thrumming beat flowed into the large open space.

Aria stood, as she always did in this room, and watched the array of screens that covered two walls. The room was a hive of activity. It was the nerve centre of Aria's Omega Empire. Here every ship, right down to the shuttles that thought they were using a private dock, were watched and with face recognition she could track anyone she was interested in moving around the station.

The Salarian's and Turian's who sat at the security and intelligence consoles were specially recruited and had skills the rest of her merc's did not. At that moment they were tracking an incoming cargo ship whose signature had originated from the Omega relay and it bore the same markings as one that had docked earlier in the day.

"Hail them… tell them to turn the fuck around, they do not get to dock on my station."

Aria was exhausted after the fight she'd had with the monstrous creatures that had disgorged from the first small cargo ship.

It had taken her some time to realise that not only were they hard to kill but if they got close enough to infect someone then they would start to transform into the creatures.

She had lost Anto, one of her longest serving lieutenants, and too many of her own crew on top of local blue sun mercs, it had been their district the things had landed in, before Aria dealt with the threat herself.

Not only was she not going to take any chances but even Aria had her limits and needed time to recharge her biotics.

"They are not responding boss," one of the Turian's said.

"Take them out," Aria watched the screen as the newly installed point defences quickly blew the ship apart.

"Incinerate the wreckage… I don't even want a piece of that shit in one piece anywhere near the station," Aria turned to leave but another blip appeared on one of the relay sensor screens.

"Looks like a dreadnought sized ship, hailing it now," this time one of the Salarian's offered the information to Aria.
After a short conversation with the incoming vessel its commander came on screen, "my name is General Oleg Petrovsky I'm here to help with…"

"Your experiments that have escaped from beyond the Omega relay," it was a statement and not a question so Aria continued before Petrovsky could respond, "we don't need your… help," she spat out the last word with as much contempt as possible.

"Whatever you may think of our methods we are working towards the same goal… to keep the Galaxy safe."

"It would be a lot safer if everyone in Cerberus up to and including Jack Harper just shot themselves in the head," Aria said feeling the rage course through her body, "move that pile of shit away from my station or I'll take it apart."

"They're scanning the station defences Aria," one of her security officers said.

"Petrovsky keep out of my business… you have exactly ten seconds to turn around and head back where you came from or I will take you down," Aria was itching to deal a blow to Cerberus but the defence net wasn't fully online yet and she wasn't sure they had enough firepower to kill a dreadnought.

"I'm sorry you feel that way Aria. I will relay your message to the Illusive Man and I sincerely hope you can deal with anything that gets onto your station," Petrovsky cut the link as soon as he'd finished speaking.

"It's changed course and is heading to the Omega relay."

"Stay at full alert… put the station on lock down… nothing gets within docking distance of the station without passing the new protocols," she turned to Grizz, "I'm leaving this with you I need to speed up the rest of the delivery of the defence batteries…" before she said any more he cut in and spoke very quietly so no one else could hear.

"You need to rest and eat boss that fight was hard and you haven't stopped since you got back."

Aria wondered for a moment if she was getting soft in her old age as although her reflex reaction was threaten to rip his crest off for being so forward that dissipated almost immediately.

"I know," she said tersely, "I'll do that first."

She went straight to her private rooms and put in a call for Ne'aira to join her.

Aria's private office, Omega - a few days before the Systems Alliance elections

Aria leaned back in her chair and thoughts of her daughter flooded her mind. The vid call she had just ended to Thessia brought nothing new. Gloomy predictions, even from the highly recommended and expensive specialist from Larissa. It had always been a huge risk letting Liselle come and work for her as a merc. The life was dangerous. Aria knew only too well how dangerous and had lost count of the times she had only just managed to survive when she was starting out.

She knew now no one had expected her to live as long as she had. For a long time she was convinced it was the thought of being able to eventually have her life with Benezia that had kept her going. And perhaps that was true, but her older and much more cynical self knew she had been chosen well by the Matriarchs. She had a strong instinct for survival, skills and personality to help her survive.
Somewhere in her mind she believed that any daughter of hers would be just as well equipped and prepared.

Her thoughts were interrupted by another call on her private line from her youngest daughter and she hit accept immediately.

"Hello… Aria am I disturbing you?" Liara said sounding tense to Aria's keen senses.

"That will depend on what you need to talk to me about," Aria said not able to resist teasing Liara.

"Oh… just checking that the shipment arrived safely and… well… how are you?"

"Yes the whole of the defence system has arrived and almost completely set up. I should thank the Shadow Broker for procuring such state of the art weaponry and at such short notice," Aria allowed a smile to trace her lips, "but I don't like owing favours so what is it you want to ask me."

Liara sighed, "I want to… would like to have Liselle moved to my house so that I can help care for her and… you know how skilled the temple healers are over here," Liara braced herself, "and your house is not a home, Liselle should be in a home not an empty house."

Aria we silent for some time, there was truth in what Liara said. Aria almost hated her house on Thessia, it had been a place of so much happiness when she and Benezia finally spent some time together. Conceived their daughters there and that was exactly why it was the most unhappy place in the Galaxy for her.

Even the point about the T'Soni estate healers was indisputable; their reputation well known across Thessia. But to move Liselle to Liara's home would mean, probably, being in the same space as Aethyta. And she would very likely bump into her when she visited. But her hatred for the Asari who had spent years with her soul mate when she, Aria, had had so little time was no reason to punish her daughters.

"Once she is well enough to travel you can make the arrangements," she tried her best to keep her tone even but she couldn't keep a cold edge from intruding, "just keep Aethyta out of my way when I visit."

"Of course, but perhaps the two of you…"

Aria cut across her daughter and now her tone was sharp and cold, "do not presume to interfere in my personal affairs Liara. If that's all I will speak to you in a few days."

Liara nodded in response and so Aria closed the call.

'I wonder just how disappointed you would be in me Benezia… my childish petty behaviour I think you called it when we argued about Aethyta all those centuries ago at the Academy. And here I am still jealous of her,' Aria thought then turned her mind to the affairs of Omega.

'T'Loak estate, Thessia - two days before the Systems Alliance Elections

Tash stopped running and tried to catch her breath, bending double resting her hands on her knees. It was getting easier and she could run for much longer than when she'd started training after her last operation but Tash knew she still wasn't back to full fitness.

"Think I may need to pace myself more," she said as she straightened up.

'But then again why break the habit of a lifetime,' she thought as the edge of self-loathing crept into
her conscious mind as did the craving for sand.

Trying to get control she began running again but was interrupted by a call ping on her omnitool.

She hit accept and the face of one of Liselle's healers popped onto the holo screen.

Panic surged through Tash, "what is it what's wrong?"

The healer looked a little taken aback by Tash's terse tone, "we think Liselle may be showing signs of coming out of the coma I thought you…"

Before the matron had finished speaking Tash ended the call and started running back to the house as fast as her lungs would let her.

Staggering up the stairs with cramp in her legs, stars popping in her vision and barely getting enough oxygen into her lungs Tash made it to the door of Liselle's room and looked in.

Liselle was still not awake and Tash looked at the two healers in the room.

The nice one, as Tash had labelled her, said gently, "Priestess Mandal was right to call you but we are still not sure… when Liselle may wake. Her brain patterns are showing signs of more normal rhythms which give some hope."

Priestess Mandal glared at Tash but said nothing.

"No… its fine… sorry," Tash looked briefly at Mandal and received a nod in response, "Priestess S'Loak would she be well enough to move?"

Tash's conversation with Liara earlier in the day had now made moving Liselle to the Liara's home a reality.

"Yes, but," S'Loak said moving closer to Tash and placing a hand on her shoulder and speaking kindly, "we should wait until she wakes."

All the healers had learnt not to question whether Liselle would wake up. It was the only thing that would send Tash into a rage, a rage fuelled by her inner struggle with cravings, but a real rage nonetheless.

'Liselle was going to wake up and everything would go back to the way it was,' had become the mantra she held onto when the sand withdrawal hit her hardest.

After a shower, change of clothes and quickly eating food Tash was back to her usual place, sitting in the chair next to Liselle's bed.

Leaning back resting her head on the chair her mind began to wander to those last frantic days on Omega. Her memories were fractured. Too many drugs and alcohol she had used trying to forget that awful discovery. Also to keep her going after her first few injuries and the pain they had left her with.

Try as she might Tash couldn't work out how she had started dusting up, but pretty sure it wasn't by choice, even if she was in self-destruct mode. She had never touched Red Sand knowing both how addictive it was and having no interest in the kind of high it offered.

"Too many pills and booze to keep anything straight… I may have some confessing to do when you wake up Leece," Tash said leaning towards the bed and reaching out to hold Liselle's hand.
Tash kept up her monologue taking about anything and nothing. She'd had a brief conversation with the Normandy doc a week ago who said it was good to stimulate coma patients with sounds, music or voices they knew. And as the day ran into another evening soft lights lit the room.

Occasionally one of the healers would come in and check on something but mostly they were alone.

Tash felt movement and for a moment was confused. She had fallen into a light sleep resting her head on the bed next to Liselle's arm. She sat up and waited still working hard to clear her head.

"Leece, if you can hear me squeeze my hand again," Tash said and sure enough the movement was repeated, a small tightening of Liselle's fingers.

As Tash studied the young Asari's face she saw eyelids flicker and then the miracle she had been waiting for, knew would come, willed the universe to make real, happened.

Liselle opened her eyes.

Tash contained her excitement knowing her lover would need time to come around properly.

"Hey gorgeous, welcome back," Tash kissed the blue hand she was holding.

"Mmm ugh mmm," Liselle looked to Tash as if she was trying to speak and the first chill of concern swept through her.

"Take it easy you've had a rough time," Tash said gently with a smile, "do you remember any of it?"

Liselle's eyes were locked with Tash's. As Liselle tried to speak again and failed to make anything other than sounds Tash saw fear rush into the familiar blue eyes.

Tash had already hit the call button for the healers and to her relief Priestess S'Loak was on duty and was now standing on the other side of the bed.

Tash kept hold of Liselle's hand and also started stroking the soft blue cheek where tears were spilling from her lover's eyes.

"Hey it's all going to be OK… trust me Leece… you're safe and it's all going to be ok," Tash said with a burning belief.

"I think you should leave us for a while so we can properly examine Liselle," S'Loak said kindly, "just so we have a little more room."

Tash did not want to leave the bedside and was about to argue when the senior healer from Larissa walked into the room.

"We are going to need to do a full examination," Sal'taline said in her usual matter of fact tone, "we'll call you back when we've finished," the tone brooked no argument.

"I'll just be outside Leece," Tash said standing and kissed the back of her lover's hand which she laid gently back on the bed.

As she began to move away Liselle appeared to everyone in the room to become agitated and her attempts at speaking got louder.

"She should stay Sal'taline. We don't need Liselle to be any more upset than she needs to be," S'Loak spoke directly to the Asari matriarch.
"Well don't get in the way," Sal'taline said with what Tash felt was a very annoyed huff.

She sat back down and held Liselle's hand again. The young Asari seemed to settle and didn't take her eyes of Tash.

It was nearly midnight on Thessia and Tash was finally alone again with Liselle who had fallen into a fitful sleep a little while earlier.

The tests had gone on for hours and they included several failed attempts to carry out light melds to aid diagnosis and communication given Liselle was unable to respond to questions verbally.

From what Tash could tell the Matriarch was most worried about not being able to connect with Liselle through a joining, or more accurately not to get a response from Liselle in answer to the request for a join.

Tash hadn't pressed them for answers understanding that they needed to think about the results and, although she felt conflicted about it, she didn't want them to tell Liselle anything really bad. Whatever the problems they were only temporary so Tash didn't want Liselle overly frightened.

Tash had never, even in the worst of the dangerous situations they had been in, seen Liselle frightened. Not of anything or anyone, never. But she had seen fear tonight, understandable obviously waking up and not being able to speak or move.

"It'll all be OK, Leece," Tash said to her sleeping lover, "nothing can keep you down for long."

**Systems Alliance Navy headquarters, Vancouver, North American block - one day before the Systems Parliament elections**

"For the love of everything that's going to fucking shit in this Galaxy how many more of these mind numbing fucking events do I have to go to," Shepard was shouting at the protocol officer who had been assigned to her for formal duties. He was the third in two weeks.

"Nearly finished Commander, the voting starts tomorrow and…"

She squared up to him and stared into his eyes, "if I have to glad hand another jag arsed politician or corporate slime ball I will start shooting people… do I make myself clear," she finished the Asari brandy she had poured in one swallow.

Major Barratt was made of stronger stuff than his colleagues. He had been assigned from Admiral Hackett's liaison team where he had learnt the best way to handle this situation from being in the same position with the highest ranking officer the Navy had. And who exhibited the same feelings and attitude as Shepard did about public relations activity.

"I swear to god ma'am if I thought we could get away with hushing it up it would be my pleasure to witness that," Barratt genuinely sympathised and this was his saving grace, "just another shit duty to get through Commander."

Shepard growled under her breath but went to sit down.

"Who the fuck am I kissing up to tonight."

**T'Soni estate, Thessia - one day before the Systems Parliament elections**

"Liara, things are looking very good," Kas said as Liara joined her in front of the banks of screens in their Broker comms centre.
"How much have we pulled back from directly influencing the media," Liara asked checking statistics for negative or tainted stories directed at Shepard.

"We haven't been doing anything pro-actively for nearly a week. As soon as we stemmed the flow of the Cerberus tide everything settled back down. There are still news outlets peddling lies about Shepard but they are the usual hard core conspiracy theorists or Earth First mouth pieces."

"Good, I did not wish to interfere too much," Liara smiled, "after all democracy is a good thing."

"No but someone needed to balance the scales… and for the record I am fine helping to win the election for the good guys," Kas said looking more relaxed than Liara had seen her in a while.

"And how are things with your… good guy," Liara couldn't resist knowing very well that Kas and Jamie were now dating quite seriously.

"He is great isn't he… and to answer your question we are considering, possibly, moving in together."

Before they could continue their conversation an urgent call came in from one of Liara's operatives who had been sent to Kahje as part of the ongoing search Prothean archives and relics.

"Operator Linski what happened," Liara used the voice modulator as anyone on the team did when communicating as the Shadow Broker.

"Someone seems to be on our heels at every site. They tried to take our intel but we killed three of them and one got away… they are human, Broker. One of them is definitely from Cerberus… tried to make a deal before his air ran out."

"Secure the intel and get it back to me and send anything you have on those Cerberus agents."

She severed the connection.

"It seems Harper is looking for the same things we are," Liara mused.

"Yeah but we know he's not going to do anything good with it," Kas said as they both went back to sifting and analysing the huge amounts of data flowing through the Shadow Broker network.

_T'Soni Estate, Thessia - the day of the Systems Alliance elections_

Liara sat next to her sisters' bed and reached out to hold one of her hands. The back of the bed was almost upright so that Liselle could look out of the tall windows.

"I hope the room is to your liking," Liara said in their native tongue as they were alone, "more like a bed room than a medbay," she smiled despite feeling distraught.

"Can you nod your head pri'va," Liara was rewarded with a few short nods of her sisters head, "Lady El'Estrene needs to join with you to be able to properly help you heal. But she felt it would be calming if I joined with you the first time, and of course we would both need your permission."

Liselle nodded again, Liara noticed how frail she looked and the pain in her sisters eyes cut her like a knife.

"Then let us meet again as we have in the past, embrace eternity," Liara said and reached out with her mind just noticing before the meld took hold of her that her sisters eyes did not turn black as was the way of all Asari when joining.
Liara found herself in a dark and devastated landscape a storm raging in the black sky above. As she moved towards a house in the distance she passed tree's that had been struck by lightning. It looked as if this place had once been a garden but all the plants were blackened or dead. Rubble was strewn in her path but Liara felt a pull and began moving quickly to the house.

The house's stone walls were cracked and blackened with only glimpses of their original cream colour. Inside the devastation continued the rooms she moved through were dark and held a heaviness, windows were boarded up and furniture broken.

Still Liara felt the pull as if she was being called and now running came to a door that was heavily bolted shut. Try as she might she couldn't unlock it. A thought occurred and closing her eyes she walked through the barrier.

In front of her was a steep flight of stone steps. Reaching the bottom she saw her sister curled into a ball on the floor with chains on her ankles and one wrist.

Liara rushed to her side and held her. There were five hair thin strands of golden light flowing from her sister's body. One connected with Liara and when she looked at the others she somehow knew who they linked to; Aria, Drax and surprisingly to Benezia but the strongest was to Tash.

"We need to get you out of here agra'va," Liara said softly and concentrated on one of her strongest memories Liselle and time they had spent together, "listen to the waves, smell the ozone, feel the sand between your toes… look at the horizon."

The walls of the dungeon faded away, light and air formed around them. They were sitting on the beach where they had walked and talked during their short time together, where Liara had been bonded, and where she had witnessed Liselle and Tash making love.

Liara looked at her sister who threw herself forward and hugged her.

"What happened Liara… what's wrong with me," Liselle's voice was as strong as ever as was her embrace but Liara felt the fear, confusion and anger through their meld.

"Let us walk along the water's edge agra'va and I will tell you all I know," Liara said standing and offering her hand.

To Liara's delight Liselle stood and they walked hand in hand to the surf's edge.

"It seems Johnson was on the run from Cerberus and they finally caught up with him that last night on Omega. What is the last thing you remember?"

Liselle took a deep breath, "The club… I think… after the last job. Then it's all… nothing… but what happened to leave me like… like whatever this is?"

Liara stopped and turned to face her sister holding both her hands, "you were incapacitated with tranquiliser darts… and then…” Liara's voice grew quiet, "one of them cut your throat."

Liselle's eyes grew wide, "I should be… I should have died."

"Tash saved you… she grew worried and only just missed the gang. She used some kind of trick with a shield generator to stem the blood loss… and the tranquillisers slowed down your metabolism almost to a stop, but you still lost a lot of blood."

Liara felt and sensed through the join her sister processing the information.
In a quiet voice and looking Liara in the eyes she asked the question Liara already knew was coming, "so is this it… my injuries have left me unable to move…” her voice became desperate, "and I can't initiate a join… I tried with Tash so she could tell me what the fuck was going on… I can't live like this su'tra."

Liselle turned away and looked out across the ocean to the horizon.

"No this is not it… High Priestess El'Estrene will be working with you herself there is nothing she cannot accomplish," Liara put an arm around her sisters shoulder and leaned in close, "you must remember how broken I was after Shepard's… after I thought I had lost Shepard. But look at me now."

Liselle leaned into her sister, "then I'll work as hard as it takes to recover but I won't live like this Liara. And Goddess forgive me but I don't think I can even try to heal without Tash but I know I should send her away, I have nothing to give her while I'm like this."

Liara shared the memories of Tash's attempts to get herself killed on Omega hunting down the gang members who attacked Liselle.

Liselle turned to Liara, "you have to promise me that you and Shepard will take care of her if… if I can't recover… please Liara you have to make sure she doesn't destroy herself over me?"

"I will do everything in my power to keep her safe Liselle. Now I am going to leave you and bring in Lady El'Estrene who will actually start your healing rather than just take you for a walk on the beach," Liara smiled and was rewarded with one in return.

Liara pulled her sister into an embrace and hugged her as hard as she could, "I also cannot lose my sister after only recently finding you. Fight Liselle with all the strength and stubbornness you have inherited from our parents. And let our love hold you until you are well."

She felt Liselle nod and they broke apart finishing their conversation with the Asari parting ritual.

Once out of the meld Liara looked at her sister in the bed and thought she saw the shadow of a smile trace Liselle's lips.
Chapter 71

T'Soni estate, Thessia - one week after the Systems Alliance elections

The Normandy settled onto her designated landing pad a short shuttle ride from the main house. Half the crew stayed behind on Earth to spend time with their families. The remaining Alliance crew and especially those who lost their close family in the Collector attacks had been invited to spend time at the Republic Mansion where they would be treated as honoured guests of the Thrassican Republic.

Shepard's specialist team, like her Alliance crew, were split between coming back to Thessia and going their own way for the two weeks down time the Normandy's Commander had negotiated. Grunt had been invited to stay with Wrex to get some Krogan time and Mordin was leaving for an extended period to pursue a personal project. Jack, much to Shepard's delight, had opted to come back to Thessia but was going to stay with the estate's commando's to improve her biotics. Garrus was, of course, going home with Shepard.

Shepard stood next to a couple of Asari shuttles from the Republic Mansion which had come to collect her crew.

"I'll see you when we get back from Illium," Shepard said to Karin and Joker, "and no, Joker, you need a break and down time as much as the rest of the crew. Edi will take care of the Normandy."

"Yes Jeff and we are within personal comms range if I should need to talk to you," Edi's voice could be heard over their personal comms.

Joker looked unhappy but didn't try to argue.

"We all need this break Commander. You make sure you get as much time with Liara as possible," Karin said with a smile, "I for one am looking forward to the pampering we get when we stay here."

With an exchange of smiles and salutes Shepard saw her crew off. She turned and made her way to the estate shuttle where Garrus was waiting.

As they boarded she slapped him on the back and said, "Let's go home brother."

The ride took only a few minutes and as the shuttle was landing they both moved to the exit.

Shepard's heart leapt as she saw Liara walking towards her, their son running towards the shuttle on wobbly legs.

With her child in one arm Shepard pulled her bondmate into an embrace with the other and touching foreheads she said, "I've missed you so much."

Liara leaned into her lover's embrace and traced Shepard's lips with her fingers.

They stood still, eyes locked, their soul's touching.

For the first time since the Normandy's crew was abducted and Shepard had raced through the Omega relay; since she surrendered herself to the Alliance, they kissed.

"Please don't ever leave me behind again," Liara said a little breathlessly.

Shepard instinctively answered, "Never," but the plan to keep Liara safe was still growing in a deep
part of her mind.

They walked back to the house arm in arm and Shepard couldn't stop grinning. The future could go
to hell, today, this moment, she had everything her heart and soul desired she had Liara.

**Secret Cerberus station, Red Dwarf star system - one week after the elections**

Harper sat staring through the full size viewing window at the broiling surface of the red dwarf sun
he had chosen as his preferred base of operations.

Curls of smoke hung in the air around him as he put the cigarette to his lips and took another long
drag, the tip glowing red. The large room was so quiet the crackling from the increased burn seemed
to echo around the space.

The Illusive Man had been in a dangerous mood for over a week.

His plans to take Omega thwarted, the elections going against him and Shepard being hailed as the
poster girl for the Alliance Navy rather than being hauled before a court martial all fuelled his quiet
rage.

Several of his assets who had not achieved their objectives had been neutralised, he was not in the
mood for further failure.

He turned his chair away from the window.

"Petrovsky you need to secure the Omega relay and our assets beyond it," he said to the holo
projection of his most senior General in front of him, "it would seem the Alliance and the Council are
preparing to destroy all our hard work. Do not let that happen."

"Yes sir," Petrovsky said feeling a little relived that he was still being trusted given he had been
blamed for failing to take Omega.

The other holo image in front of Harper was an Alliance officer, "you have your orders, do not fail
me."

"But surely I will be of much more value to you after… I'm not likely to survive… if you give me a
little more time I can find a way to…"

Harper cut across, "the timing is critical, it needs to be now. Your family will be well taken care of
and if you do survive so will you. Our mission is much more important than any individual, you are
striking a blow for Humanity you will be a hero."

The Alliance officer just gave a curt nod, his fate sealed by his beliefs and Harper's reference to his
family. He understood the message loud and clear.

Harper closed the two connections and turned to the person who had been standing in the shadows,
"is everything ready."

Kai Leng moved forward, "everything is in place. The Asari just needs to do her job… do you really
want me to let them leave?"

Harper considered the question from his most reliable and trusted agent before replying, "Yes let
them go, if we get everything we want. It is a better punishment than death," Harper lit another
cigarette and turned back to contemplating the dwarf sun and his plans to save Humanity from itself.
Shepard waited on the landing outside Liselle's bedroom door for Tash to come out. She would go in and say hello to Liselle but Shepard wanted to see her cousin first.

Without a word the two embraced and while still holding her cousin in a tight hug Shepard said, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine, good... worried you know," Shepard could hear the tension in the other woman's voice.

"I'm here for you mate... whatever you need," Shepard stepped back and looked her cousin in the eyes, "but you need to look after yourself... Liselle's going to need you fighting fit."

Tash nodded and Shepard noticed her grey eyes, usually alive with energy, were dull and a little glazed.

They both walked back into the room. Shepard was shocked by the frailty of her bondmate's sister but schooled her reaction and gave the young Asari a big smile, "Sorry I couldn't get here sooner," she leaned in and gave Liselle a kiss on the forehead and sat down.

It was hard to tell but there may have been a trace of a smile on the otherwise unmoving blue lips.

"I'm so sorry for what happened Liselle, know that I," she looked at her cousin and nodded, "we, will find that bastard and end him," this time Shepard was rewarded by a small nod of the head.

Shepard looked at her cousin who was standing at the bottom of the bed, eyes blazing and focused on Liselle as she said, "depending on how long it takes to track him down Leece can do the honours herself."

Shepard admired her cousin's belief but was also aware, from her conversation with Liara, that Liselle's prognosis was still looking dire. And that Liselle had no desire to spend the rest of her life trapped in her current hell.

"I'll come back with Lee later," Shepard said rising and giving Tash's shoulder a squeeze on the way out.

While Liara was completing a briefing with her Broker team, and making the necessary arrangements for Veetor to operate the comms interface on Illium, Shepard spent time with Garrus and her son in the gardens.

"So is she coming to dinner this evening," Shepard said with a smirk, "Liara just said we were having a quiet dinner with you and a friend."

Garrus shook his head slowly, "Yes Shepard I am bringing a friend to dinner... but we're just good friends... stop smirking."

"Been a while bro, you sure you remember all the right moves."

"I'm a natural Shepard... if we had that kind of relationship I certainly have the reach."

"Smooth, Garrus, very smooth... no wonder you've been single since... now how long ago was that very sweet dancer you got all gooey eyed over," but before Garrus could reply baby John who had been running around as fast as his legs would carry him, fell flat on his face.
Both soldiers braced themselves for the wailing as Shepard ran forward and scooped the toddler of the ground.

To their surprise John's face was a picture of happiness, "cropa," he giggled.

Shepard looked to her friend, "cropa?"

"Not sure there is a direct translation, its Asari for having made a mistake but everything turned out OK. Only used by children, and it can also be an apology for making a mistake with a different intonation. Asari language is pretty hard to learn."

Shepard looked at her son and smiled, "oops."

"oobz, gen," he said wriggling and indicating he wanted to be put down.

"Again," Shepard said and watched the toddler start running again as fast as he could, "yeah I'm learning Asari and it's pretty complicated, but beautiful as well."

Garrus nodded lost in thought, "so that's something else he has in common with Asari young, protected by small biotic buffers if they get into trouble."

Shepard looked at her friend seriously, "I get the feeling you know about Asari off spring from more than just the extranet."

They began walking slowly again and Garrus stared ahead, "I had a relationship when I was much younger, not long after I joined C-Sec. She was a matron attached to the Asari embassy," he sighed deeply.

"You don't have to tell me if it's painful Garrus…"

Garrus gave a short chuckle that contained no mirth, "Probably about time you found out my darkest secrets. We were together for a couple of years and she asked if we… well if she could share my DNA. I loved her very much so of course I said yes. We moved in together, made plans for the trip to Thessia for her to have the child."

They walked in silence for a while Shepard let Garrus take his time, the two friends were both watching John who was now investigating bushes and grass.

"I made the mistake of telling my mother about our plans, about the child… of course she told my father. He was beyond furious. I had already disgraced myself by going to work for C-Sec rather than staying on in the Turian military after my Hierarchy Service."

"He called me back to Palavan and like the partly obedient son I still was at that point, I went. When he couldn't threaten or shame me into breaking it off with Va'line he used the two people I cared about against me."

Garrus stopped and looked at Shepard, "he said he would use his considerable influence to ruin her career and her good name and banish me from the family and I would never see my mother again."

"Hell Garrus that was a shitty thing for him to do."

"The last in a long line Shepard, the last time I let him have any power over me. But I agreed to break it off, I didn't tell her the real reason… part of me wonders if that was because she just might have said to hell with him…"
"Did you keep in contact?"

"She settled on Thessia but she let me know the child was born and healthy, thanked me for the gift and sent me an Asari blessing for strength… so perhaps she knew me better than I did myself at that point."

"But once you made the break with your father you never wanted to find her and the child?"

"Honestly, I have never felt I had anything to offer… I wasn't strong enough to stand up to my father for them so I couldn't honour them. I may have turned my back on a lot of Turian social shit my friend but I'm still a Turian to my bones."

Shepard gave him a one arm hug as they walked, "thank you for telling me bro… not sure what…"

Garrus cut across her with a bark of laughter, "and don't even try to suggest you might have done the same thing… you would fight an entire Galaxy for Liara… nothing would stop you from being with her."

Shepard joined in with his laughter but again in corner of her mind that wouldn't settle there was a nagging voice that whispered she should do exactly that… not keep Liara by her side.

**T'Soni house - very late evening, day one of Shepard's leave**

Shepard and Liara walked slowly towards their bedroom door. Shepard had her arm around her bondmate who was leaning into her. They had just finished checking on John who was fast asleep in his nursery.

Once inside Liara shook off her shoes and made her way to the terrace smiling at Shepard, "can we sit for a while… I feel I have not really had any time with you."

Shepard took off her jacket and rolled up the sleeves of her shirt as she followed Liara through the doors. They settled at the small table where a bottle of the best Thrassican brandy and two glasses were waiting.

"Plan much T'Soni," Shepard said with a grin.

Liara laughed and the sound made Shepard's heart fly.

While Shepard poured them both a drink Liara curled up in her seat and took a deep breath, "it was lovely seeing Garrus with Tetra I do hope it leads somewhere, he deserves to find happiness."

Shepard nodded as she handed a glass to Liara, "but that isn't what you wanted us to talk about before we sleep."

Liara looked a little taken aback and Shepard smiled, "T'Soni you are a lot of wonderful things but devious is not one of them… well when you're not being all Shadow Brokery that is… and I can read you like a book."

The young Asari sighed, "I meant what I said about Garrus, but you are correct Shepard. And I too can… read you," she looked hesitant but Shepard nodded indicating it was the right colloquialism to use.

"More happened when you were on Arcturus Shepard I can sense you are holding something back. And I need you to know that is perfectly alright, we do not have to tell each other every little thing. But if it does not sit well with you, if somewhere you feel you ought to be sharing something we me
and you do not, that is when I can sense a ripple between us. Did that make sense?"

"I know… I feel exactly what you mean. Yes babe it makes perfect sense. And yes I didn't tell you over comms because I didn't want you upset and not be able to comfort you," Shepard took a drink of the brandy and leaving nothing out told Liara about the attempt to kidnap her.

As Shepard was talking her through the incident Liara's eyes grew wide with fear. She moved to sit on Shepard's lap and when the tale came to an end Liara hugged her bondmate and buried her face in Shepard's neck.

"I could so easily have lost you."

Shepard stroked a soft blue cheek with the fingers of one hand and held Liara tight around the waist with the other, "I'm not that easy to lose."

Liara sat back so she could look into her lover's face, "if anything happens to you Shepard I would not know how to go on."

"Hey babe… nothing's going to happen to me," Shepard kissed Liara on the forehead and then on the lips, "remember the promise you asked me to make on the Normandy."

Liara nodded, "well you asked a lot of me, making me promise to keep going, keep fighting and save the Galaxy. Now I need you to make me a promise." Shepard took a deep breath, "if I don't… if I die, I need you to get as far away from the Reapers as possible… no, Lee," Shepard said stalling Liara's interjection.

"You asked me to do what I would find almost impossible, a Galaxy without you doesn't feel worth saving." Shepard said quietly, "but I'll do it… I'll try… because you asked me. I need to know that you'll do this for me… take our children and as many of our friends and family as you can and leave… please say you will."

Liara brought her forehead together with Shepard's and spoke in a whisper, "if I cannot save you… was not by your side, then I will do as you ask."

They stayed for a little while longer wrapped in each other's arms, then in unspoken agreement made their way to bed.

Shepard held Liara all through the night and in their fitful dreams they sought each other out, not even wanting to be parted by sleep.

**T'Soni house - very early morning, day two of Shepard's leave**

Shepard began to wake and nuzzled her face into the back of Liara's neck. Her hand was resting on the curve of her lover's belly where their daughter was growing.

With a small moan Liara stirred and pushed back a little into Shepard's body and a flash of desire caught them both.

Shepard kissed and then softly bit the neck folds which were extremely sensitive to Asari under the right circumstances. Liara brought a hand to the back of her humans' head clawing and pulling Shepard closer to her and instigated a sexual meld.

Pushing one arm underneath Liara and cupping one of her heaving breasts, Shepard drifted her fingers down and down until they found the hard, throbbing clit. Reaching a little further and trailing her fingers between her lovers swollen lips Shepard picked up some of the wetness and started
drawing soft circles on the hard bud.

As their passion and need for each other grew so did the speed and pressure of Shepard's fingers. Liara ground against them and it didn't take long to tumble over the edge of ecstasy into an orgasm that left them breathless.

Shepard pulled Liara onto her back and moved between the soft blue thighs not waiting for the first ripples of their climax to fade. Moving down the familiar body and laying kisses, licks and small bites all the way until she found her lovers clit. Still hard and very, very wet.

Shepard breathed in the intoxicating scent and sent them both reeling as she used her tongue to circle the throbbing clit. Again and again she tongued, sucked and nipped the sensitive and pleasure giving bud also teasing her tongue across and then into her lovers heat to delay their climax.

When they could stand it no more they came for the second time the shock waves echoing through their bodies.

Shepard shifted her position and began to move up the bed lacing kisses on soft breasts, gently biting hard nipples, and in one move plunged her fingers deep inside Liara which ripped a cry of pleasure from both their throats.

Moving her fingers across the soft sensitive ridges inside her lovers core Shepard kissed Liara deep and hard, then coming up for air she said, "you have no idea how much I think about you… this… when I'm away from you…”

Liara was so aroused she could only moan and move her thighs in rhythm against the fingers buried deep inside her and Shepard's thumb which was working her clit.

"This…”

"You…”

"Always…”

"Yes… now…”

They didn't know if the words were spoken or thought, it didn't matter whose words they were as they echoed between them.

When they climaxed the aura that always played around their bodies when they made love flashed into a rainbow of colour as it did the night Liara became pregnant.

The room fell silent but for the sound of gasping breaths.

Shepard rolled onto her back an arm still around her bondmate and Liara turned into her placing a thigh over her lovers' muscled stomach.

"You mean everything to me Lee," Shepard said quietly kissing Liara's forehead.

"Without you there is no meaning, no light… I love you Shepard.”

Shepard took a deep relaxing breath. This was home, her home, not a physical but a spiritual place. With her soul mate, this was where she could breath, where everything made sense.

"This is the only place I ever want to be. But it feels as if we never have enough time," Liara tilted her head up to look into Shepard's eyes sensing her lover's sadness, "and… somehow it feels old.
This sense of something always being in the way of... us... I know it doesn't make sense."

Liara smiled and stroked her lovers face with her fingers, "I feel it Shepard through our bond. We will have time my love and we will take every moment we can until this is finished."

Sensing Shepard's feelings Liara moved so that she was now cradling her lover, "this time Shepard... this time we will win and we will be free to be together."

As Liara was saying the words they felt exactly right although she had no idea where they came from but she felt Shepard ease and smile. Leaning in to kiss her bondmate Liara began exploring with her hands and they both felt the ripples of desire build again.

*T'Soni house, late morning*

Shepard had arranged to meet with Tash so they could catch up before the vid call with Omega when Lady El'Estrene would share her prognosis of Liselle's condition. Aria had insisted that they would all learn at the same time what lay ahead.

"So is Priestess El'Estrene with Liselle now?" Shepard asked as Liselle would be the first to know the results of all the tests.

"You know Priestess isn't the right translation," Tash said staring out the windows towards the tree line in the distance, "Galactic doesn't have a translation for it so they just do a 'this is sort of what it means' attempt."

Shepard could tell from her tone of voice Tash was distracted so tried another tack, "Perhaps we should use the Asari word when there isn't a direct translation...."

Tash nodded a little and checked her omnitool for the time.

"I wish I was in there with her."

"I know you do... but this was something Liselle needed to hear on her own. Have you managed to join with her yet?"

Tash's expression that had been impassive now changed to miserable.

"No, they can't... the damage or something... only works with another Asari," Tash turned to Shepard, "but that's ok because she'll be talking soon..."

"You are going to be there for her Tash I know it and she knows it... but you don't have to carry the weight on your own. I'm here for you so is Liara," Shepard had a strong sense of Tash's fear, anxiety and loneliness and pulled her into a hug.

Tash returned the hug and leaned on Shepard as they stood quietly, she was pleased to be able to give her cousin some small comfort.

A ping went off on their OT's. It was time. Without talking they made their way to Liara's private study where the call would be made.

They had been waiting in a tense silence for around five minutes. Tash standing by the window staring out, Liara sitting behind the desk stiff and occasionally pinching the bridge of her nose while Shepard leaned against a wall arms crossed and wishing she could get her hands on Kai Leng right at that moment.
Liara nearly jumped out of the chair when the call from Omega came through and she answered it immediately. She stood and moved to the other side of the desk so that she in front of the large vid screen now showing an implacable Aria sitting at her own desk in her private quarters.

"She hasn't arrived yet Rasam," Liara said the term of endearment now coming much more naturally to her lips.

Aria just nodded.

Shepard had never seen Aria look anything but robust and energetic but the Asari looked exhausted. Of course the Queen of Omega showed no emotion but Shepard wondered how she would react if the news was very bad.

Her mind wandered to the times she had clashed with the powerful merc leader and had no doubt whatsoever that she would have been high on Aria's shit list given she was a Council Spectre. Quite possibly on a hit list after what happened to Benezia if Shepard had not been in a relationship with her daughter.

'Somewhere buried deep under the murderous intent Aria you have a heart,' Shepard thought.

Aria's voice brought Shepard back from her reverie.

"I am not used to being kept waiting Liara send someone to get her now," the tone was imperious and very cold.

Shepard knew Liara well enough to recognise that her lover's body language and expression spoke to building the courage to say no to her parent but thankfully at that moment there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Liara said.

The Thrassican Republic's most senior spiritual leader entered the room and Liara gave her a formal Asari greeting appropriate to El'Estrenes' rank, "we welcome you S'trgura manasvin."

Nara El'Estrene mirrored Liara's movements for the greeting, bowing her head slightly and bringing her hands up to cover her eyes then moving them to cover heart. The final movement indicated openness by moving hands out from her body palms up.

Aria's voice filled the room as the greeting reached its end, "can we cut the cultural bull shit and get the point of this little gathering."

Shepard marvelled at the way Aria could sound her most menacing using a quiet tone. She moved to stand close to Liara hoping it would offer some moral support.

"Of course Aria I understand how concerning the situation is," El'Estrene said in her usual calming tone.

Shepard watched the screen and noticed Aria's eyes narrow but the older Asari said nothing.

"First Liselle wanted me to apologise that she wanted to hear our diagnosis on her own," Lady Nara looked at Tash, "particularly to you Tash and she is looking forward to seeing you when we have finished here."

Shepard noticed Tash relax a little and gave a short nod of the head in response.
"There is no easy way to say this," Lady Nara said with a heavy sigh, "there has been extensive brain damage to key areas. Thankfully her cognitive functions seem to be only mildly impaired. She has her memories, knows who she is, who all of you are… she is still Liselle.

"However she will have to learn how to talk and use her biotics again remaking the necessary pathways in her brain. Her physical movement is limited to one hand. We do not know how much movement she will recover.

"Probably the most devastating damage is to her ability to join, I'm afraid even with the repair we can affect through nanites and other therapies we cannot recover that area of her brain. She has lost that ability for good."

There was silence in the room. Shepard wasn't sure just how big a deal it was for an Asari not to be able to instigate a meld but she knew it meant Liselle would never be able to have daughters.

The Asari ability to share minds was a keystone of their culture. It wasn't all about sexual melds. Healing, trust building, sharing knowledge and experience, being Asari, was all tied up with that aspect of their physiology.

"What therapy will you be using," Aria spoke in a business-like tone.

"We will be injecting specifically programmed nanites to reinvigorate as much of the dead areas of brain that we can. Those are the areas that are impacting on her mobility and speech. However much we recover of those areas Liselle will still need to retrain and re-learn to create new neural pathways.

"She will need months of healing melds and physical therapy to get her well enough then to begin years of rehabilitation and re-learning how to move and use her biotics…” El'Estrene paused, "it will be a long and very hard road to recovery and there is no guarantee she will return to her former level of fitness… she will also be in danger of other complications but there is hope and she is strong.”

Once again silence hung in the room and Shepard felt Liara lean into her so she pulled her into a one arm hug.

To Shepard's eyes Tash looked stunned.

"What does she need," Aria again broke the silence.

El'Estrene looked at Aria's image on the screen, "she needs her family around her, friendly faces and to be at home, here, and not be isolated. We can do all the procedures and melds here she doesn't need to be at the Temple. Aria she needs your love and support to give her the strength to get though this."

"Have you spoken to the Admiral," Tash said and Shepard had to think for a moment to work out who she meant.

"Admiral Lidanya is leading an operation with part of the Citadel fleet and is unreachable," Lady Nara said, "but I will…”

"I can reach her, send me the report she'll want the details," Aria said, "Liara I will contact you later there are matters her I need to attend to."

And without waiting for a reply Aria cut the connection.

"Can we go up now?" Tash asked.
"Of course, shall we," Lady Nara said and they all began moving to the door.

In her office on Omega Aria sat for a few moments after ending the call to Thessia. Then in one fluid movement she stood and exploded in a roar of biotics sending furniture and fittings flying through the air.

She balled a fist of biotic energy and threw it against the wall of screens in front of her and they exploded some falling to the floor. And all the while tears were falling from eyes filled with pain and hate.

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Chapter 72

A/N: we are nearly at the end of Part 1 of our story. One more chapter to go which is pretty much finished so will be published in couple of days. Let me know if you are looking forward to continuing the journey with Part 2 (which will be shortened) of this particular Shepard and Liara’s story. A smile in the review section would be great and reviews are always very welcome.

T'Soni estate, kitchen gardens – late afternoon, the day after Shepard and Liara left for Illium

Aethyta sat down at the table opposite Tash and put a bottle of beer in front of her.

Nursing her own glass of Turian brandy she noted how drawn and exhausted the young human looked, but there was something else. Something she recognised.

"I didn't take you for a sand user," Aethyta said in her usual gruff growl.

Tash looked shocked, "I'm not… never… until I got spiked," she finished miserably.

"Hey kid, don't take this the wrong way but however it happened you're going to need help and you need to know you'll always be at risk of using. It's a really shitty drug like that for humans," Aethyta took a drink then continued, "you can still drink beer but you need to be careful with anything psychotropic… that'll increase the cravings."

Tash took a swig from the bottle her eyes now on the edge of the tree's that gave way to the beach, "well serves me right… it was only going to be a matter of time before I found the bottom…"

"Yeah… trick is not staying there. And I hear your dedicating yourself to helping Liselle get better so I guess you're not a total jackass," Aethyta gave a deep rumbling chuckle, "I swear by Athane's nicely rounded ass you need to snap out of feeling sorry for yourself…," Aethyta swatted away Tash's attempt to say something, "I don't think you mean it but it's what you're doing."

The old Matriarch decided to switch tack realising her kind of pep talks were usually aimed at her commandos.

"I've had experience of helping out kids who got caught up with that sand shit so if you ever need to talk or the cravings get bad come find me," Aethyta was rewarded with a small smile and a nod of the head from Tash.

"So what were you doing down on the beach earlier," Aethyta said in a more conversational tone now wishing she'd brought the bottle of brandy with her.

Tash seemed to perk up a little, "It's a surprise for Leece later around dusk. She loves the beach and Lady Nara said she needed to get out of that room and remember what's waiting for her when she… after all the…"

Aethyta saw the human's face contort with sadness, "what Nara was telling you kid was that Liselle needs a reason to live… the beach is a nice touch but this is all on you."

Tash didn't look shocked and Aethyta was pleased she was sharper than she behaved at times.

"I know… but how can I do that when I don't feel like I… deserve her…" Tash finally gave voice to the nagging doubts that had only really quelled in the few weeks after she and Liselle had told each other how they felt.
Aethyta finished her drink. She had nothing that would help the internal battle raging across the table from her. After all she'd never worked out how to silence her own demons on that score.

They sat in silence for a while until Tash spoke, "why does Aria hate you so much?"

Aethyta gave a mirthless deep rumbling laugh, "because Aria thinks I got the best end of the deal with Benezia… that I took her rightful place in Benezia's life.

"I finally got to be with the Asari I had loved since we were maidens together. All three of us were at the Asari Academy. Yeah… I finally got to live with the reality every day that I was second best and would always be second choice for Benezia…" Aethyta stood now really needing a drink.

"What Aria really hates and is angry about is that Benezia didn't drop her position in Asari society, her work and her place as one of the T'ara to be with her when she finally could… but of course Aria would never hear a word against Benezia so it had to be someone else's doing and I fit the bill perfectly, oh and the rest of the Matriarchs and their fucked up system of controlling the Galaxy in the interest of peace and stability…"

Tash nodded and took another swig from the beer as Aethyta made her way back inside to find her own bottle of comfort and sorrow drowner.

T'Soni estate – early evening

Tash had cleared her surprise with Nara El'Estrene who thought getting Liselle out of what was effectively her hospital room was a great idea.

Over the last couple of days once the nanites had started to take effect Liselle had gotten back the use of her left arm and the feeling was returning down her left side. She had also exhausted herself, against her healer's advice, getting control back over her facial muscles.

It was only a short ride in one of the small land vehicles from the house to the edge of the tree's and Tash was pleased that Liselle already seemed to look more relaxed.

Once parked Tash threw a small bag over her shoulder then lifted Liselle out and carried her through the trees.

With a smile Liselle said, "beesh," her one good hand holding the back of Tash's neck.

Tash nodded her head, "yeah but not just the beach babe… beach party."

Liselle leaned her head into Tash's body and held her as tight as she could in her weakened state.

They hit the tree line on the other side and in front of them just a little way further on towards the water's edge was a huge fire.

Tash had already got it started and brought down a special chair that would support Liselle's back with short sides but no seat. She would be able to sit on the sand but still be supported.

Walking down the small incline and across the beach to the spot she'd chosen Tash realised just how light Liselle was and for a moment she wondered if this was going to be too much.

But looking down at Liselle's face all doubt disappeared, Liselle was smiling and her delight shone in her eyes.

She settled her lover into the seat and dropped down beside her pulling two bottles of beer from the
"So this one is for you," she said standing it up in the sand within Liselle's reach and pulling a
second out for herself.

Liselle reached out for Tash's hand and they sat in companionable silence for a long time; listening to
the crackle of the wood, the waves gently rolling in and out as if the Ocean was breathing peacefully
with them.

They watched the sun slowly sink below the horizon and the firelight was augmented by a nearly full
moon.

"Hold… me," Liselle said slowly and with obvious difficulty.

Tash moved Liselle over so she was sitting on her lap and they locked eyes.

Somehow Tash knew Liselle was going to tell her she might not be able, wouldn't want to live like
this. Tash didn't need anyone to tell her that's what her lover would be feeling. She knew Liselle and
in some ways they were very alike and Tash knew how she would be feeling if their positions were
reversed.

Tash kissed her lover for the first time since they had parted in Afterlife what seemed like an eternity
ago.

"I love you Leece… please don't leave me… you're still my anchor, the only place I really feel like
me is when I'm with you. You're a force of nature and the prettiest thing I've ever seen or known,"
Tash hugged the young Asari even tighter and kissed her forehead.

Liselle leaned out a little secure in her lover's arms and saw the tears on Tash's cheeks that mirrored
her own.

"One year… give us one year… I know you'll get well and I'll be with you every step of the way,"
Tash said quietly their foreheads now touching in the Asari way, "I need you more than you need me
Leece even now so don't even think about trying to send me away."

"Yes…"

It was all Tash needed to hear and she understood exactly what it meant. She felt her face shape itself
into grin and knew the universe had just let her have a second chance at life.

A moment later they found themselves kissing and it was as if they'd picked up where they last left
off. Before that awful last night on Omega, before Kai Leng.

Parting from the long kiss and a little breathless Liselle suddenly looked a little concerned, "wha…
bout… sex?"

"You know me Leece I'll never say no to the most beautiful Asari in the Galaxy but not sure how
we'd explain the sand to Lady Nara," Tash said with a cheeky grin.

Liselle laughed and gave her lover a playful cuff to the side of her head then more seriously, "you
know… wha a mean."

Tash understood exactly what Liselle had meant and in a quiet tone answered, "Leece I can't even
try to imagine how hard losing that is for you… and it was great, don't get me wrong but making
love with you is what matters not how we do it."
They kissed again, Tash knew the subject would come up again and the issue would probably be the hardest injury for Liselle to live with.

Much later Tash carried a sleeping Liselle back up the beach and felt more calm and stable than she had since arriving at the apartment building and catching a glimpse of Kai Leng.

*Starburst bar, Illium – second evening*

Shepard locked eyes with Liara as they moved slowly to the music, "this place is wonderful Lee… thank you for finding it."

"I thought you would like it, it reminds me of the party on Arcturus," Liara put her head to one side and smiled, "before the fighting of course."

Shepard laughed and Liara felt her heart skip a beat, "you make me so happy Shepard I sometimes cannot believe how lucky I am."

"Oh no, T'Soni the luck is all mine," and Shepard leaned in, they kissed as they moved together to the soft and beautiful music coming from the trio playing a fair imitation of Earth classic jazz.

They walked back to their apartment block despite the rain, even stopping now and again to kiss.

*Shepard and Liara's apartment, Illium – later, second evening*

"Hey we're back, brought you some of the dessert Jamie it was outstanding," Shepard said joining Jamie on the sofa, "you should take Kas there it's really romantic."

Liara was just starting to walk up the stairs and stopped, "you should stay when we go back and invite her over for a few days."

"Really, that would be great," Jamie said with a huge smile.

"I am just going to change into something more comfortable," Liara said to Shepard's questioning look.

"OK babe… hey Jamie fancy a bit of Supreme Racers?"

"Oh only if you don't mind losing… again… you know for someone who can actually fly a ship you are total crap at that game," Jamie said laughing.

As Shepard set up the game she said over her shoulder, "one… I'm going to bust your arse this time and two I command other people to fly my ships… these are fighters… anyway where's Veetor?"

"Ah, clever, invite someone to play who you actually have a chance of beating," Jamie said taking one of the controllers, "he's in the study, been there all evening. He's convinced there's a pattern in some intel that he's not seeing."

As Liara came back down the stairs she stood for a little while watching Shepard relax playing some form of vid game apparently losing to both Jamie and Veetor.

Once again Liara was struck by the fact that Shepard was at her happiest when she was with people she cared about doing nothing in particular.

'It is so good to see you able to relax my love," she thought as she joined them enjoying the friendly teasing of a Galactic hero who seemed to be really bad at flight simulation games.
Shepard’s mind was wandering again, it was the only way she could remain calm and not bite everyone's head off.

This had been the trade-off for two weeks leave. She had to have the publicity vids and stills for the recruitment posters done before she went back to active duty.

Luckily the Alliance Navy were happy to use a publicity agency on Illium otherwise she would have had to go all the way back to Vancouver on Earth.

The team in Vancouver were reviewing the output with the usual comm buoy delays, which was making for a much longer session than Shepard had hoped.

"For fucks sake you wanted me to pose in my full N7 armour and say five sentence's… which I've done… over and over again. How hard is this," she growled down the connection to Earth.

There was a five minute delay.

"Sorry Commander, there is a rush to get this out and we want to make sure we have enough footage to cut together," the Major on the other end the line said when the reply finally came through.

She sighed and decided to take a break while they were messing around with the lighting.

Placing her mattock back into the rack on her back and putting down her helmet she was about to message Liara when her OT lit up.

It was the emergency alarm from the apartment. Shepard was frozen for a second then picking up her helmet out of habit she began running out of the studio and onto the street.

She put the helmet on allowing her to call the apartment but got no reply, then Liara directly, still no reply.

Shepard ran as hard as she could the three blocks or so and just as she rounded the last corner she saw Veetor running towards the building entrance.

"Wait," Shepard shouted then stopped alongside him, "in case its real trouble, stay down here and watch the exit see if anyone leaves," he nodded.

"Actually move across the street and try to get a view to the top of the building and watch for shuttles," as Veetor began to move across the street she ran into the building.

One lift was available and the other was on the fourth floor. She made a tactical decision and took the stairs. Although the penthouse was nine floors up it was better than being locked into the lift which could stall at any point if anyone messed with the building power.

Taking the stairs two at a time she got to the fourth floor and time seemed to slow down.

Shepard felt the massive force of pressure from a concussive blast wave forcing her legs to buckle. Then everything around her seemed to explode as the soundwave hit her.

She felt herself being buffeted around for a handful of millisecond's then nothing.

_T'Soni estate – twelve hours after the explosion_

Tash and Liselle were beginning to get into the rhythm of the days that would support the young
Asari's recovery.

In the mornings Tash worked in the Broker comms centre analysing data or helping in any other way she could.

Liselle spent her mornings with the estate healers starting to rebuild her neural pathways for movement and speech. It was hugely tiring for her leaving her exhausted with raging headaches.

In the afternoon Tash would take her to the beach and Liselle would mostly listen to her lover talk but worked on her speech as well.

By mid-evening Liselle was too tired for anything else and so Tash would sit quietly by her bed as the young Asari rested or dozed, sometimes reading out loud.

Tash had just arrived with Liselle's lunch when Kas burst into the room.

"I've just had a call from Veetor… there's been an explosion… at the apartment… they're missing… all of them…"

Tash went to Kasumi's side. She was always so calm, almost serene, but in that moment Kas looked distraught.

"Slow down… who's lost?"

Kasumi took a deep breath and Tash was suddenly aware that Liselle was becoming agitated.

"About twelve hours ago the alarms went off while Veetor and Shepard were out. Shepard went in the building and told Veetor to wait outside," Kas was working really hard to keep herself calm so she could make Tash understand the enormity of what had happened.

"A few minutes after Shep went in the building there was a massive explosion. The whole apartment block was devastated… the top three floors blown to pieces and the rest of the building collapsed… they haven't pulled out any survivors yet."

The last sentence hung in the room between them all.

Tash was stunned, frozen; she had no idea what to do.

From the bed Liselle said as clearly and loudly as she could, "you… find em… Dasha… go now… bring em home."

Tash looked from Liselle to Kas then moved to the side of the bed and kissed her lover on the forehead.

"I'll find them, don't worry," Tash was starting to run out of the room and over her shoulder said, "I'll call you when I get there."

She sparked up her OT, "Edi get the Normandy prepped and ready to go to Illium… call the crew back immediately… we lift off in T minus 30."

Tash knew there were other calls to make but they could wait until they were underway on.

"Kas you're with me, but find Aethyta she'll want to come," Tash continued running out onto the lawn and jumped in a shuttle to get her to the Normandy as quickly as possible to help ready the ship to leave.
Normandy, Thessia

Thirty three minutes later, with all her crew members who were on Thessia on board with the addition of Liara's commando detail and Aethyta, the Normandy lifted off.

Tash wondered if Doc Chakwas or Joker would question her taking command but they didn't. She was, after all, the highest ranking Alliance combat officer on board.

Once the Normandy was underway Tash went to the comms room to call Arcturus.

It was where Admiral Shepard would be along with the rest of the Navy high command. Hackett and his most senior officers were meeting with the new President and Vice President in a formal briefing session.

"I am not receiving any response from Arcturus Captain," Edi said as Tash waited for the call.

Tash got a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She turned to Kas, "why weren't we informed straight away about the explosion? Why did it take Veetor twelve hours?"

"He was arrested by Illium security, they thought he was acting suspiciously and didn't believe who he was. He managed to beg someone for one call which he eventually got… to us."

Before Tash could say anything else Edi's voice echoed around the room, "I am putting up a news feed from the Alliance News Network."

Both Tash and Kas were confused for a moment until they started looking at the footage.

On screen the reporter was obviously shaken up and was standing in one of the huge hangars with lots of other civilians.

The ticker across the bottom of the screen in red kept flashing and as Tash read it over and over again she felt as if the bottom of her world had just dropped out.

"Terrorist attack on Arcturus Station kills President… Terrorist attack on Arcturus Station has killed the President and many of the Navy high command and members of Parliament… Admiral Hackett is thought to be amongst the dead… Terrorist attack on Arcturus Station kills President…"

"Monitor the situation for us Edi… please," Tash felt nauseous and took a few steadying breaths, "Kas contact the local authorities in Illium I want access to the site as soon as we land... no one gets in my fucking way."

Bomb site, Illium – eighteen hours after the explosion at the apartment

Tash, Aethyta, the Normandy crew and the estate commando's had been helping with the search and rescue at the bomb site for two hours.

The apartment where the blast had happened was collapsed and it had severely damaged blocks on either side of it.

There had been some pulled out alive but as time wore on it was looking bleak.

The authorities were using heat sensing tech but an hour earlier Veetor had arrived, after Aethyta balled out the local police for holding him, and he reminded everyone Shepard was wearing her
armour which would shield any heat signature.

So after much discussion they calibrated the Normandy search tools to look for medigel.

It worked and they started to carefully dig into what looked like a small space that was showing significant levels of the components of the gel used in Alliance military armour systems.

**Unknown location, unknown time**

Shepard felt herself coughing and it was like glass in her lungs. She was beyond discerning where the rest of the pain that screamed in her brain was coming from.

Darkness, unable to move, she tried in vain to get a breath into her lungs.

'Here again... be nice to know where the fuck I am before I...' but this time Shepard felt some memories coming back to her, 'need to do something... one more... thing,' she thought.

A tiny amount of air forced its way past all the fluid, enough to allow one more thought.

"Liara..." she tried to shout, "Lee..." the apartment, the alarm, that's where she was. This is where she would die. Not on a battle field but buried on Illium.

Then as she drifted away from consciousness she felt movement. There was light. Noise, she was being moved. But Shepard was passed caring now she knew where she was.

She couldn't get to Liara, there was nothing left to do, she could let go.

**Bomb site, Illium**

Tash, Garrus and five other crew members were carrying the stretcher to the shuttle that was waiting in the middle of the shattered street.

Karin Chakwas was doing her best to assess their broken Commander and once they were inside the shuttle she got to work.

Kas and Aethyta were going to stay at the site but there was no possible way anyone in the top three floors survived the explosion.

Many on the lower floors had perished and the only reason Shepard was still hanging on was because she'd been wearing full armour.

The short ride back to the Normandy was silent except for the choking, gasping and rattling breaths of their Commander.

They had removed her helmet and cut off the torso armour so that the Doctor could start opening up Shepard's airways.

Tash and Garrus exchanged a glance after seeing the full extent of the crush injuries and head trauma. To their soldiers eyes it looked bad, very bad.

"Put a call in to Miranda," Tash said quietly to Doctor Chakwas.

"I did as soon as we pulled her from the rubble," Karin said still working on her patient, "she will need more than I can do..."

**Aria's private quarters, Afterlife, Omega**
Aria was not someone who liked to lose. She also knew that she could only vent her rage on Omega so far before it became counterproductive.

She still had the station on lock down with every ship in and out being checked and cleared. But Aria had also called a meeting with all the gang leaders to make sure they understood what was at stake.

Making it clear she had no interest in their business and only in keeping Cerberus and their filthy experiments off the station. Aria knew what happened on her station without the imposition of the new protocols and the sooner she could stop using them the happier she would be.

Omega was an open port, she didn't like wielding so much power openly, but she had the full support of the gangs and the population. She was being seen as Omega's protector which didn't hurt her reputation at all.

But the one thing she wanted she couldn't get. Revenge. She had tracked down the leaders of the human gang Cerberus had used. Mikhailovich had done a good job putting fear into the human community so when Aria came asking they were handed over quickly.

She had extracted some small measure of satisfaction from the pain the two humans felt before their flimsy minds and bodies failed under her onslaught.

They had no idea they were taking on someone from Aria's crew, they hadn't been in the room when it happened, and they confirmed Kai Leng's description as the off station human who had hired them.

And that was all, she was no closer to getting her hands on Leng and she knew it would take a full scale assault to get to Harper that's even if his base could be located.

So she was stuck. Taking her revenge out on denying Cerberus access to her station and playing a part in denying them access to come and go through the Omega 4 relay.

It wasn't enough. Aria had turned to the only self-medication that she indulged in, sex.

She was working through all her dancers two at a time for long sessions whenever she felt her self-control slipping.

Her dancers were delighted and more than willing to help their illustrious and very skilled leader get some release.

And she was in the middle of one of her marathon sessions and the door burst open and Ne'aira's presence pulled her out of her sexual meld.

"This had better be fucking important Ne'aira," Aria growled but in her current state of arousal felt more inclined to rip the matron's clothes off than be pissed at her.

"Leave now," Ne'aira said to the two dancers but they only looked to Aria.

Aria felt a cold fist in her gut, "leave," she said getting up and pulling on a robe.

When they were alone in the room Ne'aira spoke, "we've just had word from the Normandy, from Tasha, that there has been an explosion on Illium… Liara's apartment."

Ne'aira waited a moment for her words to sink in and then continued, "they just pulled Shepard out after half a day under the rubble… they're still looking for other survivors but…"
The younger Asari watched as just for a moment the Queen of Omega's mask slipped and traces of pain and fear flashed across her face and remained in her eyes.

"I know who she is to you Aria… and you can rip me to pieces if you want but you can trust me," Ne'a'ira was nowhere near as confident as she sounded but she needed to be able to support the Asari matriarch and to do that Aria needed to trust her.

Without a word Aria went into her bathroom and Ne'a'ira heard the shower running. Then heard what she knew was a biotic fist hitting a wall. Ne'a'ira stayed where she was.

When Aria came back into the room she donned a fresh set of her usual clothing and standing in front of Ne'a'ira finally spoke, "I don't care who you bride or threaten or have to cause pain to I want everything Illium security has on the explosion. What they really have, not the slop they'll use for public consumption to keep up the illusion of safety on their dirty little corporate world.

"Get my cruiser ready to leave now and I'll take half my personal mercs with me. You and Grizz decide who goes and who stays, but I want you with me."

Ne'a'ira nodded and left to make the arrangements. Within an hour Aria's cruiser was undocking and heading at full speed for Illium.

*Normandy medbay, Illium – six hours after Shepard was dug out of the rubble*

"How long before Doctor Lawson gets here," Karin Chakwas asked Tash as they both looked down on the broken body of the Normandy's Commander.

"The project she's working on is pretty close," Tash checked her omnitool, "within the hour. What's the damage?"

"The most dangerous and pressing is her crushed lungs. She also has crush injuries to other major organs, countless breaks and fractures. One eye is so severely compromised I will have to remove it and a severe concussion."

"What treatment have you started?"

"None," Doctor Chakwas said looking into the confused face of the Normandy's current Captain, "anything I do will likely kill her. She needs major operations to remove damaged organs, we will need to grow or clone replacements and in the meantime try to keep her alive without a working respiratory system… I'm afraid if Doctor Lawson cannot work her technical expertise with Shepard's nanites we will lose her."

They stood in silence and Tash tried to imaging a universe that didn't have her cousin or Liara in it.

"Not on my watch she won't," Tash said through gritted teeth as she walked away, "Edi how far out is Lawson?"

*Normandy medbay, Illium*

There was light, somewhere, and softness. But her breathing felt strange and she was unable to move. That was the moment Shepard started to panic and opened her eyes.

A blurry familiar face drifted in and out of focus but the voice was unmistakable.

"Shepard you've been very badly hurt," Mirada said making sure she was close to her patient, "I need you to nod if you understand me."
Shepard nodded and tried to speak but Miranda held up a hand, "hold on Commander I'll need to adjust something so you can speak… but listen very carefully. You will not be able to talk very much or for very long."

Shepard nodded again and Miranda continued, "I have to re-programme your nanites to pick up the work of your lungs but I'm going to have to keep you under until I've cloned a new set which will be just under a week. Then I'll…"

"Tell me everything you know about the bombing," Shepard said in barely a whisper looking from Miranda to Tash, "truth dammit."

There was a moment's pause as there had been agreement to keep the worst from Shepard but Tash knew if they lied her cousin would never forgive any of them.

So Tash as quickly as possible laid out the bleak scenario at the bomb site, the attack on Arcturus including what scant detail they had and Veetor's theory that this was a coordinated set of assassinations.

As she concluded Tash saw the pain in Shepard's one good eye and felt the anger from Miranda and Doctor Chakwas but she knew she'd done the right thing for Shepard.

Tash stopped and Shepard spoke in a whisper but her intent was as clear as if she'd been shouting, "Now Miranda… no fucking delay… patch me up… on my feet now… don't care what you do, what it costs me…"

Miranda knew what strain Shepard's talking was putting on her so held up a hand, "it could kill you Shepard and cause long term irreparable damage," to stall Shepards protestations Miranda continued, "all right I'll do my best but I will need to patch you up and so I need to operate for a few hours."

Shepard nodded and then looked at Tash who moved closer to the bedside, "course Arcturus… set up call with every Captain… ninth fleet… find Lee."

"That's as much time as you have Shepard I'm putting you under," Miranda said and infused one of the drips into the prone Commanders body with a heavy sedative.

"She must know… she has to know Liara is… gone," Tash said in a strangled tone.

"I believe the Commander gave you your orders Captain," Karin Chakwas said, "what do you need me to do Doctor Lawson?"

Tash left the two Doctors planning Shepard's operation and knew she would at some point have to contact Liselle but she honestly didn't think she had the strength.

It could wait until they knew if Shepard would make it.
Chapter 73

Normandy command deck, en route Arcturus - fifteen hours after the explosion on the station

Shepard had been awake from her operation for less than ten minutes.

Miranda had done what Shepard had asked and patched up the worst of her injuries. And she was cloning lungs, liver, a kidney and an eye ready for when the Commander would sit still for the much bigger operation.

In the mean time she had done some outstanding work ably assisted by Karin Chakwas to restructure one lung, patched the liver and not only re-programmed the nanites to focus on respiratory support but introduced new ones to aid the skeletal damage.

“Shepard you are in no state to do anything physical. Your nanites are still repairing your damaged skeleton and some of the minor crush injuries which should take place while you have complete bed rest,” Miranda was trying her best to impress on Shepard just how fragile she was.

“Bring my dress uniform,” Shepard had difficulty breathing and talking. She was working on it but her voice was not much more than a hoarse whisper.

“Is everything ready for the conference call,” Shepard directed this comment at Tash.

“Yes, they’re all waiting for you to hop on.”

When her uniform arrived both Tash and Miranda had to help her into it as movement was not only difficult but painful.

“The pain meds won’t dull my senses?” Shepard asked both doctors.

“No Commander but it does mean you will still be in considerable pain. I do wish you would reconsider… this is madness,” Doctor Chakwas had already had this argument with Tash and lost.

Once dressed Shepard began to walk under own steam out of the med bay but stopped before she reached the door and flicking a finger to her empty eye socket currently covered by a dressing said, “Get rid of this and give me a patch.”

A painful and, for Shepard, slow walk to the comms room allowed her crew to see her standing and moving under own steam. They had no idea how broken she was or how much pain she was in.

Shepard needed to project authority, confidence and strength. This was the image she would need to show to the officers she was about to talk to.

The entire wall of the comms room lit up with multiple screens showing the ranking officers on every ship in Hackett’s fifth fleet.

She stood before them and began speaking.

“The attack on Arcturus, on our military command, is part of a coordinated plan to take control of the Systems Alliance government and our Navy.” Shepard didn’t have the breath to beat about the bush and there was no time to have a discussion.

“The latest information we have is that Admiral Hackett is critically wounded but still alive,” the
tension on the officers faces seemed to her eye to ease a little, “but he was one of the primary targets of the assassination and they will not leave their work undone.

“We are fighting forces that have corrupted our own ranks; we do not know who we can trust yet. But one thing is painfully obvious,” she paused gathering as much strength as she could, “we need to act now to protect our Fleet Admiral and the Vice President or they will not last another twenty four hours.”

“I am asking you to follow me, follow my lead; to secure our government and Admiral Hackett… this was an attempted coup, no doubt about it. We are the final line of defence. I am asking you to commit what some will perceive as treasonable acts to protect those things we have sworn to defend.”

That was all she could do, ask them. And each officer knew what she had just asked of them. There were plenty of Admirals left in the other fleets, on Earth and one in particular on Arcturus who had already made his move.

“We have orders from Admiral Mikhailovich to deploy to the Batarian frontier,” Rear Admiral Chi’Peng spoke and Shepard was mindful he was now the most senior officer within the fifth fleet.

“You know this wasn’t the Batarian’s and Mikhailovich is one of the co-conspirators of this coup.”

Shepard felt the sweat soaking in to her jacket. The pain was so intense she wasn’t sure how much longer she could remain standing and a feint tremor started in her legs under the strain. She also felt the sensation of drowning as fluid accumulated in her lungs and fought back the urge to start coughing.

She left the silence hang between them.

“What are your orders Commander,” Tillitson the Captain of one of the fleets’ dreadnoughts asked the question and she noted nods of agreement from the rest including Chi’Peng.

“Set up a defensive perimeter around Arcturus, no ships in and no ships out. Send all available marines to secure the docking ring and to guard the medical centre where Admiral Hackett and the Vice President are being treated.”

She squared her shoulders and gave voice to her anger for the first time, “defend our fallen leaders, do not let any further harm come to them. And await my arrival.”

The transmission was cut and her knees buckled but Tash and Miranda moved in quickly to keep her on her feet.

Once sitting down Shepard loosened the shirt and jacket from around her neck and finally gave in to the excruciatingly painful hacking cough in an attempt to clear her airways.

Miranda gave Shepard an injection, “the second treatment of nanites should start helping a little with your lungs but there is nothing more I can do for the pain Commander… not if you don’t want anything that will affect your cognitive function.”

Shepard nodded her thanks then turned to Tash, “put a call into Admiral Singh on the Logan we need the third fleet to stand on the side lines and not get involved. First get me Anderson.”

*Normandy command deck, on approach to Arcturus station*
Five hours after calling for the fifth fleet to effectively mutiny Shepard stood at her tactical station and admired the effective blockade of the station by the forces now under her control.

The third fleet under the command to Admiral Nitesh Singh had agreed to passively support the defence of Arcturus from any external threat.

This was good enough for Shepard she had all the force she required for her objectives and there was no need to compromise any more loyal naval officers in case this all went sideways.

If Hackett dies she would be a criminal. But then, she reasoned, if Hackett died they were all fucked and there would be no point in continuing to prepare to defeat the Reapers.

She listened to the docking protocols passing back and forth between Arcturus and the Normandy. Then feeling the ship settle into the docking bay Shepard made her way to the forward air lock, Tash, Doctor Chakwas and the Normandy’s marines in her wake.

Her orders were clear. Only Alliance crew would set foot on the station Shepard did not want even a shadow of suspicion that this was an aggressive act by one of the other Council races.

This had to be all Alliance Navy action on behalf of the rightful Systems Alliance Government.

Shepard, like her marines, were wearing full armour but no helmets. She needed the movement assist the armours motor systems could give her.

Once she stepped onto the dock her marines were supplemented by a detachment from the fifth fleet’s flagship. Hackett’s flagship, her mother’s ship; Shepard pushed away the feelings that started to leak into her mind and focussed on the next step.

Shepard had got this far by taking one step at a time, making one decision at a time and this was how she would get through it.

To his credit Rear Admiral Chi’Peng was waiting for her on the dock. He would not hide on his ship.

“What first?” Chi’Peng was all business.

Shepard opened up her omnitool and sent a list to him, “this is Admiral Hackett’s highly confidential list of tainted and compromised officers, at least the ones currently on Arcturus. We need them arrested now,” she turned to the commander of the station’s military police who was also ready to step up for Hackett.

“Did you prepare a holding area?”

“Yes Commander, we’ve organised an empty docking bay.”

“Good, let me know when you have them all,” Shepard looked at Chi’Peng, “where did you say Mikhailovich is meeting with his team?”

“The bastard is using Hackett’s office,” Chi’Peng almost spat out the words.

“Send a detachment of your marines to hold everyone there we have to secure the Admiral and the VP first.”

Less than ten minutes later Shepard walked into the station’s main medical centre.
“Check on the Admiral please,” Shepard said to Karin Chakwas who had accompanied her with two Normandy medics, “which room is the vice president in?”

The medical officer Shepard asked snarled in her direction, “you’ll need to speak up Commander but this will not go unreported you have absolutely no jurisdiction on this station or in the medical facility.”

Shepard moved so that she was face to face with what looked like the ranking medical officer, “the only authority I need is the fleet outside this station and marines under my orders on this station,” she had no choice about her voice it was a hoarse whisper but this time he clearly heard her.

“This is mutiny and I will not cooperate… I have to say I am disappointed in you Shepard I expected more. But you will remove Admiral Hackett from the safety of this facility over my dead body.”

She studied his face, looked him in the eyes and sensed his fear, “what do you think I’m doing here doctor?”

“Here to finish the job… well I told Admiral Mikhailovich and I’m telling you if you want to take my patients you will have to get past me first.”

Shepard gave him what she hoped would be a reassuring smile but given her facial injuries it felt to her more like a grimace, “Colonel we are here to protect the Admiral and the rest of the survivors, my marines are at your disposal and Doctor Chakwas is here because I trust her and I need to know the Admiral will not be harmed by any treatment he receives.”

The medical officer in front of her visibly relaxed, “that is very good to know Commander and I’m… I’m sorry to have thought the worst of you… it’s been a little…”

She nodded, “I can imagine. I need to speak to the Vice President.”

A few minutes later Shepard was standing next to the bed containing what was technically the Systems Alliance President.

Karin Chakwas came into the room and stood alongside Shepard flicking through a data pad, “she is lightly sedated. Has fractures to her legs, some bruising and what looks like a mild concussion that need’s close monitoring.”

“Thanks Doc,” Shepard said and then turned her attention to the woman in the bed, “President Arman… I need to talk to you ma’am.”

“Vice President,” the woman sounded groggy, “oh God no… Chen… the President?”

The woman stared at Shepard, “what the hell happened to you? Where you at the meeting?”

“No ma’am they dropped a building on me. I need to move you to the safety of the Normandy we have not fully secured the station.”

“They won’t tell me anything… I need to know is the President dead?”

“I’m afraid so. Also most of our Naval High Command and Admiral Hackett is in critical condition, we will be moving him to the fifth fleet’s flagship shortly.”

“We have transport for you President Arman,” Doctor Chakwas said.

“I’ll leave this with you Doc,” Shepard said as she made for the door, “I’ll speak with you a little
later President when I get back to the Normandy.”

**Admiral Hackett’s office, Arcturus station – eighteen hours after the explosion on the station**

As Shepard entered the anti-room she sensed a change in Tash. Something akin to fear, ‘get a grip Shepard you don’t know what anyone’s feeling… I don’t even know what I’m feeling,’ she thought.

She looked at the two marines guarding the door through which she could see Admiral Mikhailovich, Tash’s father and Shepard’s uncle, sitting behind Hackett’s desk.

“Do you want to wait out here,” she said to Tash who shook her head.

“Ah I wondered when you would turn up,” he sneered as she walked in the room, “well you won’t have quite such free reign once Hackett is replaced.”

Shepard’s mind began to cloud with rage but she pushed it away. She had to stay cold, level headed but Shepard was also fearful that once the rage started she wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“Let’s cut the bullshit, I don’t have the time,” Shepard strained but her voice was still little more than a hoarse whisper, “the names of your co-conspirators and who else has been targeted by your boss.”

Mikhailovich narrowed his eyes, “who do you think you are Commander, I am acting Admiral of the Fleet and it would appear that you are conspiring to commit treason and mutiny. I have absolutely nothing to say to you.”

“You’re a lying bastard but you’re not getting away this time,” Tash almost spat out the words but again Shepard felt or sensed an edge of fear.

“You are a disgrace to that uniform and to our family I have absolutely nothing to say to you girl,” the Admiral stood and focused his attention back on Shepard.

“I am going to put in a call to Earth and then get all the injured, including Hackett and the Vice President, moved to safety and I suggest you take your attitude as far away from me as you can get…and take that piece of shit with you,” he ended indicating to Tash.

It was over in a second and Shepard didn’t even have time to register the thought that had given rise to her action.

Shepard pulled out her hand cannon and pistol whipped the Admiral as he tried to push past her.

As he lay moaning on the floor at her feet she said spoke to the two marines who had been guarding his door, “take him down to the hangar with the others and make sure you use restraints.”

Without a backwards look she left and made her way back to the Normandy.

**Normandy medbay – twenty hours after the explosion on the station**

Shepard stood in front of a more awake looking President Arman and gave her a salute.

Before the meeting Shepard had read the intelligence reports she had asked the Broker team to pull together and checked Hackett’s own research into the new President.
From what she could find there was no hint that Arman was associated with Cerberus or Earth First in any way. She was President Chen’s pick and through her long career she had stood up against the kind of anti-alien and isolationism that was the hallmark of Harper’s beliefs.

She was a tough pragmatist, anyone who got to the top of human politics had to be, so she had on occasion formed unsavoury political alliances to get things done.

“Why am I on the Normandy and not on the fifth fleet’s flag ship?”

Shepard almost smiled, “you like to get straight to the point and so do I madam President. The Normandy is the safest place in the Galaxy right now for you and we have a communications centre that is both highly secure and wide reaching.

“If I could have brought the Admiral here I would have but he needs more medical care than our medbay can offer. I do have him and the other survivors guarded by highly trusted marines of the fifth fleet. And I really hope you won’t be buying the bullshit that this was Batarian retribution.”

Shepard tried to gauge the woman’s reaction to what she’d said but the new President was tough to read.

“You didn’t completely answer my question Commander.”

They were alone in the room but through the glass walls of the partition Shepard could see Miranda working on what was probably the next nanites treatment.

“I’m sorry ma’am but there as some thing’s I need to do that you might interfere with and I also don’t want you tainted by them,” Shepard remained at parade rest the woman was after all the leader of the Systems Alliance.

“I think you should sit and start by telling me what happened to you. What did you mean when you said they dropped a building on you?”

Shepard gave as short a version as she could of the explosion on Illium, the ten other assassinations that had happened within the same timeframe and her certain belief that the explosion on Arcturus was a Cerberus coup.

It was the longest she’d spoken since coming around after being dug out of the rubble and was fighting off a coughing fit.

She heard the door swish open and before she could say anything Miranda was next to her and pressing the hypospray to Shepards neck.

“My apologies for the interruption President but if Shepard insists on trying to kill herself I will keep trying to keep her alive,” Miranda left quickly and closed the door behind her.

“You do look…”

“I’ll take it easy when we’ve stopped Cerberus,” Shepard pulled at the neck of her dress jacket she was feeling hot again, “I need you to appoint Councillor Anderson to the role of interim Fleet Admiral until Admiral Hackett recovers enough to get back to work.”

“And will he?”

“Take the job?”
“Recover.”

It was one of the things Shepard was just not thinking about. Hackett would recover or it was all over.

“He has to ma’am or we’re all fucked.”

The President raised an eyebrow, “I think you need to read me in on what else is going on Commander.”

Shepard wondered how much to tell the woman but again she knew that without the President being on board there was very little Shepard could do apart from exact revenge.

So for the second time Shepard launched into the short version of the Reaper threat, Jack Harper’s take on how to deal with them and the level of infiltration into the Alliance Navy by Cerberus.

When Shepard had finished speaking the silence hung between them for a few minutes.

“But what if we can control them, harness them in some way. Gain access to all that new technology, the ability to use them for good rather than destruction?”

What Shepard wanted to do was scream at this woman that it had been tried, almost every cycle. That was the point; it was one of their seductions.

As calmly as she could Shepard answered, “You can’t reason with them, bargain with them, and our technology has been guided by them to ensure we can’t destroy them face on, yet.

“Saren and Benezia T’Soni both thought they could work with the Reapers but they were both destroyed by them. In the last cycle the Protheans were destroyed as much from the inside out as the indoctrinated in positions of power made sure every plan to hinder or evade the Reaper invasion was derailed.

“We will have a hard enough time beating them but to be constantly stabbed in the back, from within our own species will make it a forgone conclusion that we will never get the chance to really try.”

Shepard had to stop talking, her breath was like glass in her lungs, her throat felt constricted and the sweat from the pain and effort was soaking into her clothes.

Again silence as Shepard watched the President process the information.

“I saw the recording of the one in the Aratoht system, when you stopped them coming through the alpha relay,” the President suddenly looked sad, “I think President Chen was preparing to brief more politicians about the threat and he started with me before we left Earth.”

Shepard nodded and President Ashman continued, “I agree Anderson will be a safe pair of hands and he is completely up to speed with both the Reaper threat and Cerberus.

“I’m assuming you want to deal with the traitors on Arcturus before he is appointed and before I address the media so you will need to be quick.”

“You understand our options are limited currently, in terms of how we deal with our compromised naval leadership?”

“I understand that Cerberus has a lot of reach and that long drawn out Courts Martials would be an opportunity to stir misinformation and discontent. This is an internal Alliance Navy issue
Commander and I am appointing you as the senior investigation and enforcement officer in relation to this terrorist attack on the Government of the Systems Alliance. Where are Prime Minister Shastri and the rest of the members of Parliament?”

“We moved them to one of the carriers, they are safe and comfortable,” Shepard was still trying to process the amount of authority she’d just been given. And the amount of freedom she had to deal with Hackett’s list of compromised officers.

“Where are my staff I need to start getting things back to normal,” she grimaced, “as normal as they can be after someone tries to decapitate Systems Alliance leadership. I’ll need to talk to prominent Earth leaders, calm nerves. I may make a quick statement to keep the media at bay, everything’s under control, terrorist investigation ongoing that sort of thing.”

“Of course madam President, you can have my cabin for your private use and our communications conference room as your temporary office. It should only be a couple of days and once Admiral Anderson on Arcturus he can decide when its safe for you leave the safety of the Normandy,” Shepard stood but turned back at the door, “summary judgement of the ringleaders could still take a few days.”

“What you feel is right do quickly, Commander, the rest will have to go through the usual processes,” President Arman was already firing up her Omnitool. The conversation was over.

**Docking bay 17, Arcturus Station – 37 hours after the attack on Arcturus**

Shepard sat in a makeshift hearing room which was little more than an engineering shop with all its benches and equipment pushed to back against the walls.

She was sitting at a long table with Admiral’s Chi’Peng and Singh and they were sitting as a military tribunal. President Arman had given Shepard a temporary promotion to Admiral.

The adjutant who was serving as administrative support to the Tribunal began to read from the formal statement that had preceded every one of the eight hearing they had already convened.

“The Systems Alliance Parliament has invoked article 72 of the Parliament powers act which delegates martial law powers to the Alliance Navy at times of war against the Alliance.

“The attack on Arcturus is being classed as a terrorist act and an attempt to overthrow the Systems Alliance government and as such an act of war.

“Although evidence gathering is continuing and the physical investigation still ongoing there was little doubt the attack had been orchestrated and carried out from within the highest ranks of the Alliance Navy.

“This is your only opportunity to speak in your defence and offer whatever mitigation for your actions which may influence your sentence,” once the Major had finished his statement he sat down and monitored the recording of the session.

“You have the statements of fact in front of you,” Shepard said to Admiral Mikhailovich as he stood in front of her hands and ankles in restraints.

“I do not recognise the authority of this Tribunal,” and she gave him credit for continuing to be the aloof bastard he always was.
“Read the charges and the evidence please,” Admiral Singh said, “this is your last chance to confess and bring your fellow conspirators to justice.”

“I am a loyal Alliance Navy officer, unlike some in this room,” Mikhailovich sounded less confident, “where is my lawyer?”

“No smart Cerberus lawyer is going to get you out of this. This is a trial for treason under martial law, you know what that means,” Shepard never took her eyes off him.

He read through the orders he had issued that were being used as evidence.

“I… well yes… these seem to be in order but what…”

“The movement orders removed a complete layer of security from the Admiral’s meeting, the other order was to put the officer we now know planted and set the bomb in the room… do I need to draw you a picture?” Shepard growled.

“But… there were very good reasons…” he seemed to fold in on himself as the realisation that he was deeply implicated in the operation that unfolded on Arcturus the previous day.

“You were either completely complicit and didn’t expect for any of this evidence to see the light of day or you are truly incompetent and have been led around by the nose by your lower ranking officers. Neither of those scenarios are good for you,” this time Admiral Chi’Peng who spoke.

The accusation was clear and hung in the air.

“Do you have any statement to make to the Tribunal before it passes sentence,” the Major asked.

Mikhailovich shook his head slowly and stared over their heads at the back wall of the room.

The three Admirals conferred as they had done on every occasion leaving Shepard to pass their shared judgement.

“You have been found guilty of treason by this Tribunal and for that crime you will be stripped of your rank. You will be executed on the next Earth sunrise, which by our calculations will be in around four hours.”

When Shepard finished speaking the Major ripped Admiral Mikhailovich’s badges of rank from his uniform and his two marine guards led him out.

“Who’s next,” Admiral Sigh said breaking the silence.

By the end of the Tribunal they had passed judgement on eighteen of the strongest cases of the highest ranking officers. The longer list and anyone exposed by the ongoing investigations would go through the usual military disciplinary channels.

Five of the eighteen, all Admirals or Vice Admirals, had been sentenced to execution. The rest were sentenced to thirty years hard labour on a penal planet in the Traverse.

As was customary the members of the sentencing Tribunal had to be present at the execution ensuring the personal reasonability for their decision was reinforced and to support the men and women of the firing squad.

Shepard walked into the hangar and saw five squads forming up. One for each prisoner who was
standing against the hangar wall their hands still shackled.

Three had taken the option of a hood while the remaining two, Mikhailovich being one of them, were looking out across the hangar towards the squads who were ready to do their duty.

“You put me here Shepard… I’m not guilty of anything apart from trying to make everyone see you for who you are,” Mikhailovich shouted in a defiant voice his eyes burning with hate.

“Take aim,” the Captain in charge shouted and there were several shouts from the waiting prisoners.

“Earth first,” “you can’t kill an idea,” “Humanity first,”

Shepard noted that her uncle did not yell out but held her gaze and for a moment her certainty faltered.

Had she railroaded him because of their history, but the evidence was there, his name was on all the necessary arrangements.

“Fire,” the ear shattering bark of twenty five Avenger assault rifles echoed off the walls.

It was too late for doubt.

Administrative Directors office, Illium City Corp, Illium – 36 hours after the bombing

Aria heard the door swish open but continued to look out the window across the city scape of Illium.

“This is outrageous… get out of my chair… I’m calling security and…” the Asari Matriarch stopped mid-sentence when Aria turned the chair around and leant forward on the woman’s desk.

“I am not accustomed to making appointments and by all means call your security and we’ll see how well they do against the twenty mercs I brought with me,” Aria spoke quietly but the Asari paled and said nothing.

The Director of Illium Corp which effectively meant the highest authority across the whole planet glanced quickly at the door behind her but it was flanked by Grizz and Ne’aira.

“Sit.”

Once the Director was sitting Aria said, “you may think you can ignore the Asari Councillor but I will destroy you and your pale imitation of Omega if you do not do exactly what I ask,” Aria leaned back in the chair but her eyes never left the other Asari’s face.

“Don’t try to fuck with me Dilsa K’Esla or you will live just long enough to regret it.”

“If I had known that the requests…” Director K’Esla spoke quickly but stopped in her track under Aria’s withering gaze.

“You will hand over everything you have on the explosion at the apartment block yesterday. You will also make available your satellite recordings from yesterday… and for the sake of your bondmate and daughters don’t try and bullshit me that you don’t have surveillance or start quoting corporate privacy,” Aria stood up, “you will also answer any and all questions you get from my representatives.”

Aria stopped by the door and with one swipe of her hand she knocked the Asari off her chair and
 everything from the desk, “the recordings had better be with me within the hour.”

**Penthouse suite, Azure Hotel, Illium – 40 hours after bombing**

Aria had rented out the entire top floor for her entourage and took the penthouse for herself.

The Hotel management had to move guests where suites and internal trying rooms were occupied but as Aria held a substantial shareholding in the Corporation that owned the hotel her wishes were accommodated quickly and without fuss.

Her team had received the surveillance recordings for the area around the apartment block and the satellite footage had just arrived.

The Asari stood looking out across the skyline of Illium, the suite’s floor to ceiling glass wall offering stunning views. But Aria wasn’t seeing the view in front of her. He focus was working out the who, the why and the how of what appeared to be the assassination of her daughter.

“Who knew about the apartment,” Aria said over her shoulder to Ne’aira, “where is T’Arani?”

“Still at the site I believe with Kasumi Goto,” Ne’aira responded and was already preparing her Omnitool for a call to Aethyta T’Arani.

“Bring her here.”

An hour later Aethyta T’Arani was standing in Aria’s penthouse, “I don’t have the energy to fight with you Aria and I need to get back to the estate,” the Matriarch’s voice was low.

Aria turned to face her lifelong rival and noted the old commando’s tired and drawn expression.

“Do you think she’s dead,” they were alone in the room but Aria still spoke quietly.

Aethyta seemed to collapse inward, “if she was in the apartment then yes.”

“If,” Aria said trying to decide whether she wanted to share the information she had.

“There was a significant gap of time between the silent alarm being triggered and the explosion,” Aethyta moved to get herself a drink, “seems to me the alarm was set to lure Shepard back.”

Aria nodded her agreement and waited for Aethyta to continue.

After downing a large whiskey she continued, “So they needed… someone in that apartment to set off the alarm. But if Liara was under any threat she would have made a fight of it… and she’s powerful,” Aethyta poured herself another drink.

“Who knew about the arrangements, the apartment location and who could get past the guards on the roof?” Aria hated needing to ask these questions but she had no time to get hold of T’Joan and she might not have all the pieces either.

Aethyta stiffened and turned to face Aria drink still in hand, “you got something you want to share with me T’Loak.”

This time Aethyta spoke with more power and the edge of anger was clear in her tone.
Aria savoured the moment, she knew more than the old Matriarch and it really got under Aethyta’s skin.

Deciding that her old grudges and hates were less important than finding out what happened to her daughter Aria didn’t try to needle Aethyta further, “You can have a look for yourself but we have some footage from satellite surveillance, it’s not much and doesn’t last long, but it clearly shows a shuttle landing on the apartment’s penthouse roof minutes before the alarm went off.”

“I thought the landing pad was security shielded… you’d need permission to land and why didn’t the two commandos’ on security duty raise the alarm,” Aethyta was turning over the evidence in her mind.

“An expensive and expert hack would get you through the landing pad security shield… to get past guards they would need to trust someone just long enough for whoever it was to get the drop and eliminate them,” Aria paused and continued in a level tone, “where is Galine?”

Aethyta seemed confused for a moment, “Shiala? She’s back on the estate, she took a few days off to visit the temple and…,” then it hit her, “if that mad fucking bitch has done this I’ll…”

But Aria cut across her and this time the Queen of Omega’s tone was cold and hard, “do what? You had plenty of time to deal with her. She was manipulative before all the shit with Saren but you knew as well as I did that now she’s also deranged and dangerous.”

“Liara wouldn’t hear anything about sending her away; she has compassion and sense of loyalty. Not sure where she gets the compassion from,” Aethyta muttered her last comment under her breath but loud enough for Aria to hear.

“That is what accidents are for, but enough of this, find out where she is.”

Aethyta was already calling up her second in command back at the Mansion, “Captain Iallis find Shiala Galine now,” Aethyta stayed on the call and in the silence tension in the room grew as the minutes passed.

Aria turned back to studying the sky cars flashing across Illium’s darkening skyline. There was yet another storm rolling in.

“Athane’s tits, start tracking her now… all our resources yes,” Aethyta ended the call and looked at the broad shouldered back of Aria T’Loak and just for a moment thought she saw them drop a little.

“So we are left with three scenarios,” Aria said quietly, “Shiala used Cerberus’s help to kidnap Liara and kill Shepard in the process. She handed Liara over to Cerberus or…”

Aethyta had joined Aria at the window her eyes a little misty as she said, “Shiala kept Liara in the apartment in some twisted act of suicide and murder.”

The two Matriarch’s stood for a long time in silence eyes on the horizon but their minds on the same burning question, what happened to Liara T’Soni.

END OF THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY - PART 1

A/N As someone quite famous once said "This is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end,
but it is perhaps the end of the beginning." W Churchill

Part 2 will obviously continue our original plots and we'll move firmly into ME:3 territory. As promised we will also weave the thread that is the Andromeda Initiative more strongly into our journey with this particular Shepard and Liara.

Hope you join me and don't forget to visit the website where I'm also starting to support the story with some images and music.

Till we meet again 07

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!