

Mass Effect: Final Error

(Chapters 45-47)

Novus Peregrine

Chapter 45: Another Doctor Bryson

To the surprise of nearly everyone, the Zaherin system was Reaper free. As was the planet Namakli. It *did* make sense, given that they had beat the Reapers to the last bit of information and penetrated behind enemy lines under as near to total stealth as they could. That had taken time, but the time taken appeared to have been worth it, as there was no sign the Reapers have tumbled to the presence of the dig team here yet. In truth, without the landing coordinates, even they might have had trouble finding it. With the heavy funding provided to Task Force Aurora, along with the knowledge that any dig locations weren't going to be priority for defense, Project Scarab had been built extremely well-concealed. Up to and including holographic camouflage systems that only came down once their shuttle transmitted Task Force Aurora codes to a seemingly blank wall in the canyon where the dig was located. Oriana, Edi, and Liara join Shepard off the shuttle, all of them on guard against a repeat of their last stop...only to sigh in relief as a seemingly normal acting Ann Bryson stepped out from behind a security barricade.

"Edi? What on earth are you doing here...and is that...Spectre Shepard?!"

Alliana waved, but let Edi do the talking. Clearly, the two know each other and...well...they have bad news for her.

"Hello, Ann. We are here following up on Leviathan. Several events have occurred while you were out of contact. Including, I'm sorry to inform you, the death of your father."

Ann's eyes widen and she pales, even as Oriana winced at the bluntness Edi showed, stepping forward quickly to speak up.

"Why don't we take this somewhere quieter? We can tell you everything that happened, including about your father."

Ann latched onto the offer immediately, swaying for a moment before nodding and inviting them in...

Shepard had taken the lead after they got to a small conference room, showing painful experience with delivering news like this as she talked Ann gently through what had happened. Not just to her father, but to Garneau as well. They gave her what time they could afterward, breaking for a bit to secure a similar artifact to the one that had turned the crew of the mining station in Aysur. Several of the scientists started reacting when they closed with the artifact...but stopped in place once it was sealed in a portable shielding unit. They appeared groggy, but had only lost the last minute or so of time, rather than the years the other victims had lost. Something which seemed to indicate that, like

indoctrination, the artifact wasn't instant. It required time and exposure to subvert people fully, which was good news for the people here, even if they would likely be placed under observation regardless.

Eventually, Ann managed to gather herself and called them back to the conference room. She was clearly still...not alright. But, given the news they had brought, that was completely understandable. And she was powering through to get at their reason for being here, at least.

"I can't thank you, not yet, for the news you brought. But I do appreciate you bringing it, and for giving me time. Now, you said you're following up on Leviathan. I take it you want to know what Project Scarab has found?"

Shepard nodded.

"Along with hoping that you might be able to help us make sense of the other clues we have. Edi?"

The android responded by taking control of the conference room's holotable and displaying...basically everything they'd gathered so far. Ann looked it over curiously for several minutes, actually seeming to escape her grief a bit as she studied all the material she hadn't been updated on.

"This...well I have good news and bad news."

Everyone exchanged glances, before Shepard simply waved for Ann to lay it on them.

"The good news is that, combined with what I have and what I heard happened down in the labs, we can trace Leviathan. The bad news is that the only way to do so is for someone to allow themselves to be...possessed, if that's the right term?"

Shepard grimaced, quickly shaking her head.

"Even if someone was willing, we can't ask anyone to do that, we don't even know the effects. Not really. Hell, we don't even know what this Leviathan *is*, or if tracking it down is worth it."

Ann shook her head firmly.

"That part I can help with. At least, I can give you a solid theory based on what we've found here and what you've brought me. I think the Leviathan is a survivor."

That got confused blinks from most, but Oriana put it together, combing the comment with random bits they'd already discovered.

"Wait. You think that it's a member of whatever species the Reapers originally got indoctrination tech from? That has to be at least several cycles ago, though!"

Ann shrugged.

"And? The Thorian lived through at least one cycle before ours. Possibly quite a few more. Also, I don't think it is tech. I think it was a natural species ability. Biological, not technological. The Reapers figured out how to use it since they are, essentially, something in between."

Everyone leaned back to consider that carefully. It was an interested looking Liara that, perhaps predictably, spoke up next.

“While it would be amazing to get the perspective on something that lived that long, what specifically makes you think that it is the case? Several of the other scientists seemed to believe it was a renegade Reaper of some sort. Possibly an earlier generation model, hence the weaker indoctrination.”

Ann nodded, then accessed the holotable to switch the display over to show some of their own research. On it were...cave paintings?

“That’s still possible. But the dig here on Namakli was important for a *reason*. It’s the oldest evidence we’ve found...and it’s not just a few cycles old. It’s a *lot* of cycles old. Dozens of cycles, at least. So many that their age compares to that of the oldest *Mass Relays*. It’s hard to be precise, but they are *at least* as old as the Omega-4 Relay. Which we already know is one of the oldest Relays in existence, or whose existence we’re aware of, anyway. That implies a lot all on its own, but the fact that not a single one of the murals depict violence is also telling.”

Liana considered that for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes. As does the fact that they were made at all. People indoctrinated during a Harvest have not shown that level of initiative, save for in pursuing Reaper goals. Still, for a being that old to still be around...”

Ann shrugged, then pointed out the obvious.

“Technically, it doesn’t need to be an original member of whatever species. A descendant would make more sense. Perhaps even one preserved through many cycles by stasis, only waking occasionally to determine the state of the threat.”

Everyone mulled that over for a moment, but then Shepard shook her head.

“Interesting as the theory is, we still can’t ask anyone to take the risk. Which means this is a dead end anyway.”

Ann suddenly looked smug, making Oriana tense.

“Ah, but this is *my* facility...so I don’t need to ask your permission. Don’t worry, he volunteered.”

Before they could ask what she meant, she tapped the holotable controls and a screen popped up showing...

“Oh, goddess!”

Liana’s response was warranted, as the man on the screen was locked in a small room with the artifact, showing all the signs of direct possession, even as he pounded on the walls. He was actually *denting* those walls, before an energy field sprung up around the artifact and he collapsed. Shepard was half to her feet, glaring at Ann as she growled.

“Dr. Bryson...”

The woman, to her credit, didn’t back down.

“I told you Shepard, he volunteered. There isn’t a single member of Project Scarab that doesn’t understand the stakes we are playing for. And one life weighed against that of trillions is *not* equal, no

matter what philosophers might say about ends and means. Had he not been a volunteer, I would recognize your objection as legitimate. As it is..." she glanced down at the table, then up to pin Shepard with her own glare, "we have the bastard's location. Traced from the organic quasi-QEC it uses to issue its commands. You might not like how I got it, Shepard. But you'll damn well take the information and try to make my father's death worth it."

Alliana glared for a moment more, then nodded curtly. She clearly wasn't happy. But Dr. Bryson wasn't exactly wrong, either. Maybe not fully right. But not completely wrong...

Chapter 46: Tension Release

Alliana had, of course, been utterly livid when they got back on board the Pheonix. Oriana, much more practically minded than her lover, hadn't really had an issue with what Doctor Bryson had done. Frankly, though she wouldn't mention it around Shepard, she'd probably have done the same. Certainly, she'd done worse things already in her pursuit of saving the galaxy from the Reapers. There was, of course, a fine line to walk between what Ann had done and what psychopaths like Cerberus regularly did. Oriana wasn't at all sure she'd always managed to stay on the right side of that line. She could only say that she'd at least *tried*.

Regardless of that, though...the fact remained that it bothered Alliana. Which meant it was time to get her mind off of it and onto something more pleasant. Thankfully, their need to sneak around behind enemy lines hadn't changed, and it was going to take them the better part of three days to reach Psi Tophet, which was where Dr. Bryson had traced the artifact's signal to. With that free time available, there were rather obvious means to drain the tension out of a certain redhead. Fun means. Fun means that started with an ambush. Oriana grinned as said redhead's eyes widened when she and Ashley both slipped into the shower with her.

"Ash, wha--"

Oriana did Ashley a favor by shutting their mutual target up with a kiss. The momentary distraction let Williams slide in behind Shepard and start working on the redhead's hair. An action which earned a moan of approval into the kiss. Apparently, the ex-chief was good with her hands in ways that didn't involve sex. Who knew? Grinning at the thought, Ori broke the kiss, then angled in to whisper in her lover's ear.

"Don't question it. I've seen the way you look at her ass, dear. And our lovely Ash has been *expanding* her horizons recently. If she's going to give into the fun side, of course she'd want to bang her badass boss at some point. And I assure you, that Neuralux of hers is almost as good as the real thing..."

Showing she was wise enough to listen to Oriana, always a good point in any lover, Shepard stopped questioning her good fortune. Though the expression of bliss as Ashley continued to work on her hair might have had something to do with it, too. Ori made a note she was going to have to get some of that for herself, if it felt that good. For the moment, she simply took full advantage and reached for the body wash. It would give her the perfect excuse to run her hands over every last inch of Shepard's body...

The shower sex had been fun, not least because she got to watch the confused mix of emotions on Ashley's face as Shepard ate her out. Fall to the bi-side Ashley, you shall be converted! Mwhahahaha and so forth. Despite that, however, the shower ambush had really only been the setup, since the Neuralux interface wasn't very waterproof. As Ori half towed Shepard to the bed, both of their hands finding interesting spots to grope, Ashley broke off to equip herself for the actual fun. Oriana grinned as she heard her fellow ravenette moan when the toy made its connection, even as she pulled Shepard down onto the bed in preparation for the fun.

Today wasn't anything fancy, just a chance to bleed off stress while slowly converting Ashley into a regular lover. Smirking into another kiss, Oriana pushed that second objective forward by shifting her body flush to Shepard's, positioning the two of them in such a way that Ashley would be tempted by four perfectly positioned holes to choose from. As she switched to nibbling on Shepard's ear, she peeked over the redhead's shoulder to enjoy the expression of lust as Ashley took in the sight.

She'd figured the other woman would choose Shepard, given the newness of the chance, so wasn't shocked a moment later when she clearly did. It was a pleasant surprise that the other woman brought along a dual-headed vibrator and firmly plugged both of Oriana's holes first, though. She shuddered as they came online, even as she half-laughed, half-snorted at the realization that they were set to 'tease' mode. Seems like someone wanted a little revenge for her recent gambling loss. Well, that was fine, for now, though she vowed to see the other woman in cuffs and without her Neuralux toy by the end of the night.

A moment later, she was distracted from that thought as Shepard's pussy was plundered by that same Neuralux for the first time, the redhead gasping as it speared her sex. Grinning, Ori used the arching back of her lover for the free access it offered to her pulse point. A few hickies were in order...

An hour later, Oriana grinned as she saw Ashley fall straight into subspace with the snap of the collar around her throat. She'd already deftly gotten her into handcuffs while she was distracted by Shepard, pinning her arms to the head of the bed. Even better, Shepard had been encouraged to steal the Neuralux toy and was currently giving it a sensual blowjob right where Ashley had a perfect view of the action. Which meant the trapped woman was getting all that stimulation remotely...while leaving her pussy fully free for Oriana's own games. Games which were about to start as she cheerfully disabled the orgasm command of the Neuralux with the codes Ashley foolishly hadn't thought to change. Crawling between her legs, she aligned their lower lips and gently pressed her own pussy into Ashley's. Smirking, she spoke to the former gunnery-chief.

"Now, toy...we're going to play a game. You're only allowed to cum from our little lesbian kiss here...and only when you admit that's how you want it. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

She ground their sexes together, enjoying the shudder from Ashley which *definitely* wasn't any sort of reluctance. Something proven when the other woman nodded frantically.

"Oh, I suppose that *will* be a little bit hard with the gag in, hmmm? Well, maybe I'll take it out, eventually, so you can convince me how much you love this position. Or perhaps if you agree to wear something else for me. I have *all sorts* of ideas..."

Grinning wickedly, Oriana set about changing Ashley's mind about the joys of lesbian sex just a little bit more...

Chapter 47: Deep Dive

Whatever the moral and morale implications of Doctor Bryson's stunt, there was no denying that she'd given them a target. Sneaking into the Psi Tophet hadn't been particularly difficult, the Reapers not seeming to have any more use for the system than anyone else did. It had taken some poking around with scanners and launching of probes, but they'd ultimately pinned their search location to a section of deep ocean on 2181 Despoina. Given that it was entirely a water world *deep* had some serious implications, which might end up being a problem.

Implications that were uncomfortably added to by the fact that there seemed to be multiple wrecks of widely varying ages scattered around that section of ocean. With no sign of what, exactly, had taken them all out. Not exactly encouraging. Particularly as the most recent wreck, still fairly intact despite time and tide, looked to be a large freighter of human manufacture. They hadn't been able to pin down an identification, aside from being a Ballard-class, from orbit. But it would serve as a landing site, at least. Assuming nothing shot them down. The team they decided on was, ultimately, a familiar one for this particular set of missions. Oriana, Shepard and Liara would go, and would be rejoined by Edi and Tali. The latter would be helping Edi try to figure out what had taken out the ships, while the rest of them poked things until something useful turned up.

Everyone was tense as they dropped through the atmosphere. They'd taken one of the Phoenix's heavily shielded landing craft, instead of a shuttle...and were glad they did halfway down. The Asari pilot cursed as the whole ship shuddered and bucked, losing altitude for a few seconds before leveling out.

"Some sort of pulse hit us! I don't know what the fuck it was, but if not for the shielding, we'd be dead in the air! As it is, shields are fucked. If it can managed another pulse like that we'll be in trouble! Taking us down quick!"

The pilot was already putting action to words as she shouted them over the comms, putting the landing craft in a much steeper descent, closer to the assault drop speeds that the craft was meant for. Everyone braced, crossing their fingers that they'd make it down before another pulse hit...and breathed a sigh of relief as counter thrust brutally slammed into them, despite all the craft's mass effect fields could do to compensate. The pilot, like everyone assigned to or recruited for the Phoenix, was *very* good, bringing them out of the drop just meters above the derelict ship. Moments later, they were touching down on the deck and carefully popping the hatches...

They immediately started seeing the bodies.

Grim faced, Oriana and Liara both closed with one each. Oriana started scanning for details, even as Liara put an archaeologist's trained eye to the problem. Liara was the one to get some answers first.

"Human. No noticeable marks from scavengers. Exposed to the elements like this...likely at least a year to reach this state. More likely two or three."

Oriana added her own findings a moment after the Asari.

“Just over two. I pulled the files on all missing Ballard-class freighters before we launched and just got a match from one of the crew lists. Looks like this was Dr. Chai Lin. Which makes this the MSV Monarch, an eezo prospecting ship that went missing just over two years ago. Captain Abel Pratt was the independent owner.”

Shepard nodded at both data points, looked around, then made her call.

“Alright. Fan out, but stay in sight of at least one other person. Look out for datapads or other clues that might tell us what happened to these people. Edi and Tali, keep an eye out for anything that might clue us in what that pulse was. Ori, do what you do best.”

They all did as instructed. Despite her own curiosity, Oriana stayed with the landing craft, letting Liara and Shepard pair off while Edi and Tali did the same. Shepard’s casual line was a familiar one at this point, as the Spectre knew full well that Oriana was usually better capable of directing her own efforts than Shepard would be. In this case, the choice was easy. She needed to figure out what that pulse had been, and how to block it better, in case they needed to get back in the air without finding a way to disable it. She joined the pilot in looking over the systems, quickly deducing it had been some sort of charged ion pulse. Far more sophisticated than a simple EMP, it would have blasted right past traditional shielding methods. Only the fact that New Dawn had developed shields that worked specifically against energy weapons, and all the Phoenix’s craft were equipped with them, had saved them from being disabled.

Still, as eloquent as the weapon was...the shields *had* worked. A little tweaking to focus them on the specific band of energy involved would let them shrug off at least two or three such pulses without much trouble. Worst case, the Phoenix itself could easily shrug off dozens of such pulses, so long as they modulated for them. It was the sort of weapon that worked fantastically against an undefended target, yet poorly against someone who had a countermeasure. Given the Reapers lack of energy shields, though, Oriana noted it down as likely to be highly effective against them. At least until they adapted. She also noted that it explained the nearly undamaged Reaper the Batarians had pulled off of Dis.

As she worked, she listened in on the rest of the team’s comms as they sorted out the painful story of what had happened here. The same sort of Ion Pulse that had been bounced by their shields had downed the less protected MSV Monarch, and something had interfered with all their attempts at repairs or getting their distress beacon working. Lacking much in the way of rations, with no native wildlife that was edible to humans, the crew had slowly starved. A fact only made worse by the crew discovering more of the Leviathan relics that slowly indoctrinated them, until they simply laid down and let the hunger take them. She honestly wasn’t sure if that counted as a merciful or cruel death. She certainly had no intention of finding out herself, either way.

It was just as she finished up the modifications to the shield that the others determined the best path forward. Apparently, this close, there was enough resonance from the artifacts that they were able to pinpoint Leviathan’s location farther. Straight down. Several kilometers straight down into the ocean. They’d found several Triton ADS mechs, already modified for deep sea exploration, and Tali and Edi were going over them to further enhance the modifications for the pressure. Grimacing at the idea of how vulnerable they would be, Ori nevertheless went to join them...

Shepard had, predictably, wanted to go alone. Equally predictably, Oriana had verbally smacked some sense into her. As a result, the three Tritons in the best shape had all been prepped and field upgraded to increase the odds that they could handle the pressure at the depths involved. Now Oriana, Shepard, and Liara were falling slowly into the murky blackness, chasing a probe they'd had the Phoenix drop as close to the signal as it could. A double burst of that pulse had tried to knock the Phoenix out of the air when it did so, only to be negligently brushed aside by the ship's modified shields. Hopefully, that fact would make Leviathan think twice about attempting to simply kill them.

There was entirely too much time to think as they seemed to drop forever. They'd lost comms with the surface only a few minutes into the drop, and Liara had begun whispering quiet prayers to the Asari goddess as the exterior pressure had mounted. Oriana fared better, at least a little, simply because she'd looked over the mechs herself. A few minor modifications had increased their already impressive depth rating, though even she got more than a little twitchy as they were forced deeper and deeper, making a series of jumps down to find their probe. At least the probe was giving enough wild readings to indicate this wasn't just a snipe hunt.

The moment they finally found what they were looking for, Oriana had to steel her courage to keep from wishing they didn't. A squid-like being the size of a Reaper destroyer and looking entirely too much like one rose from the depths in front of them...and spoke into their minds.

"You have come too far."

The pressure on Oriana's mind froze her and she heard Liara groan. Somehow, Shepard managed to answer the being.

"Well, you didn't exactly leave your comm number. We had to make a house call."

The dry delivery was enough to make Oriana twitch in disbelief...but that same disbelief helped focus her mind, helped push back against the pressure. Slowly, she wrestled her mind back into a semblance of order. She felt Liara doing a same and felt a flood of pure curiosity from the being which had to be Leviathan in response.

"The Darkness should not have been breached. Yet you bring the Chronal Anomaly with you. Why have you come?"

Somehow, the question was layered, directed at both her and Shepard at the same time. Though Shepard managed to respond first, Oriana still not quite focused enough to manage it herself.

"You've killed Reapers, yet bare a resemblance to them and their methods. We want to know why."

That was...not particularly diplomatic, yet the feel from Leviathan was not angry. Instead, it seemed almost...rueful?

"They are the enemy, they seek our extermination. Yet they are only our echoes. We existed long before."

There was a flash, Oriana's attempt to gather herself half scattered by visions of another place, other *places*. Worlds, systems, the empty void. Her own memories, Liara's memories, Shepard's memories. And memories that belonged to what must be Leviathan. An instinctive gestalt formed,

something like an Asari meld but purely mental, the three of them shoring each other up in the face of the overwhelming power as Leviathan dug through their every memory. The pressure lessened to something more bearable, spread across three minds.

“You believe there is a war, yet there is only the Harvest. Still, your cycle is different. The Reapers perceive you as a threat. For the first time in many Harvests, they do not understand your divergence. It is the Time Anomaly’s fault.”

Oriana knew it was talking about her, how could it not be? With her mental strength bolstered by the others, she gasped out a question.

“What *are* you. What are you to the Reapers?”

There was a pause, as if Leviathan was unsure it would answer. Yet, when the answer came it was loaded with shards of memory, flashes of insight.

“We are their creators. Before the cycles, our kind was the Apex of life in the galaxy. The lesser species serving our needs.”

Visions of worship, visions of those like Leviathan enthralled dozens of species. Yet, also, caring for those species. There was no question who were the masters. But the relationship was not one sided. Scenes of disasters averted and species uplifted were mixed in with the scenes of worship and service. Of tribute given back to the Empire of his kind.

“But we could not protect them from themselves. Over time, they built machines, which turned on them. Tribute does not flow from a dead race.”

The scenes changed, showing a myriad of machine intelligences, all modeled from different species and created by different races. Many wiped out their creators, despite attempts by their master’s to intervene.

“To solve this problem, we created our own intelligence. One with a mandate to preserve life at any cost. As it evolved, it studied how organic civilizations developed. Its understanding grew, until it believed it had found a solution to its mandate. In that instant, it betrayed us. It chose our kind as the first Harvest. From us, the first Reaper was created, you call that Reaper Harbinger.”

Liara’s incredulity was so strong, she overcame the pressure for the first time, allowing her to gasp out a question.

“You saw the failure of all the other species, what made you believe the intelligence you made would be different?!”

“Hubris. You would struggle to conceive of a galaxy that bends entirely to your will. Every creature, every nation, every planet discovered became our tools. We were above the concerns of the lesser species. Their failures did not concern us.”

Shepard’s tone was much more biting, even as their minds blended together. They were blurring at the edges. They were no Liara, Oriana and Shepard, they were the fusion of all three they became when they melded. By the time the words finished, all of them were speaking the accusation.

“And now we all pay for your mistake.”

“There was no mistake. The tool still serves its purpose. At the end of each cycle, new Reapers are formed. Each containing the preserved genetic material of every race they Harvest. Perfected into Harbinger’s image. Our image. An index of all life so it does not pass out of existence.”

“Is that how it fulfills its mandate?”

“No. It is how it collects data. Its purpose has not yet been fulfilled. It seeks ever more data, attempting to arrive at a true solution. It directed the creation of the Mass Relays to speed the cycles, to shorten the time between Harvests. The galaxy itself became an experiment, evolution its tool.”

“Will it ever end?”

“Unknown. Until the intelligence finds what it is looking for, the Harvests will continue.”

The part of them that was Liara surfaced, her overwhelming curiosity dominating their gestalt long enough to ask a burning question.

“How are you even still here?”

“The Reapers did not have the experience they have now. In their first cycle, they missed too many. Enough of our people escaped, hiding in the dark corners of the galaxy, to continue to exist. Between cycles, they manipulated the thrall races to remove all traces of their presence. They watched, they hid. I am their progeny.”

“You use the artifacts as...as a window into the galaxy. So you can see how each harvest progresses!”

“Yes. We watch, we study, we remain in the shadows.”

Shepard and Oriana’s practical wills shifted the next question.

“Will you help us end the cycles?”

There was a pause, a long one, in which they could feel more than just Leviathan’s mind. There were others of his kind here, somewhere, a thought that sent both unease and hope through them.

“Perhaps. There have been other anomalies like the one you call Shepard. Other losses of a few Reapers. But the change to Time itself, it is beyond even what we ever achieved. Tell me, how would you have us help you? What is it you desire.”

It was Oriana that wrestled control of the gestalt, even Shepard’s iron will momentarily shoved aside. This was *Oriana’s* purpose. It was all she had given herself for. All she had turned herself into. Perhaps the Shepard from her original timeline could have brushed her aside. But here, in this one, it was Oriana who had burned everything she was or ever could be to buy the galaxy a chance. Oriana whose will surpassed all others in this, this one thing.

“Information. You didn’t just create the Reapers, you have watched them, shadowed their every step. You **know** them. You have seen every weakness, every attempt by every species to thwart them. Killing Reapers isn’t hard, *hurting* them is the problem. You know how to do that.”

“Interesting. Had you asked us to fight, you would have never left this world. We have not survived the long eons by believing in optimism. Yet, you are the Greatest Anomaly so far. Your cycle the first to have truly cost the Reapers in dozens of Harvests.”

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More long moments past, the trio feeling the edge of an exchange between Leviathan and the rest of its kind.

“Very well. Information you shall have.”

Between one moment and the next, it felt like a sledgehammer hit their brains. The gestalt popped like a bubble, they screamed silently as information poured into them. Then they found their hands moving, hitting their emergency ascent thrusters without their consent, directed by Leviathan’s will. They saw the shadows of dozens more of his kind as they rose through the water, barely clinging to sanity and consciousness. Then, even as she began to black out...a single piece of information blazed its way into Oriana’s brain. In disbelief, awe, and triumph, she whispered three short words before the blackness took her.

“We have them.”