

## Mass Effect: The Final Error

By Novus Peregrine

### Prologue

The building shivered as the Reaper's main beam swept through it, incinerating two more lab techs even as they tried desperately to activate their prototype. Oriana Lawson threw herself out of the way of falling debris, tripping over the body of an Asari with a two-foot spear of rebar where her heart should have been. She scrambled away from the corpse in horror, purple blood on her hands. Then, the face of the Asari registered and jarred her out of her adrenaline haze.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit, shit!

The body she had scrambled away from was Matriarch Geduli's, the very Asari that was supposed to be the target of their prototype. If she was dead, then...a whine of powering machinery wrenched at Oriana's attention as the desperate efforts of the project staff paid off. Against all odds, the Parallax Machine was powering up! They hadn't even known if it *could* power up, let alone under these conditions! But...with Geduli dead, who would they send back? She glanced up at the terrified project staff, just in time to see an I-beam come down, shattering the main console and trapping everyone else, if it hadn't killed them outright. The machine was powering...and Oriana realized she was literally the only person that could reach the pad. With a deep breath, she powered up her biotics and *charged*. Then...everything went black as she struck the portal just as it powered up.

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Oriana groaned in pain, feeling like she had the night Miranda and she had gotten properly drunk, in some misguided effort to talk about their shared past. No, this was actually worse than that. Instead of nausea mixed with a pounding head, her whole body was throbbing with pain akin to a hangover. She desperately curled up and tried not to think. Words came from somewhere, the tone alarmed even if she couldn't make them out. A hand touched her, causing her to flinch and the world to lurch sideways as a result. Then, the pain became too much and she blacked out again...

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The next time she woke up, the pain had lessened, but not entirely vanished. She groaned again and pried her eyes open, finding the stark-white of a hospital ceiling above her. It took several minutes for her eyes to properly adjust, her vision only slowly giving up its meandering ways to settle down and let her analyze her situation. Had the Parallax Portal failed? Had the first time she awoke been survivors pulling her from the rubble? But no, there were no hospitals on the remote moon the project had been settled on. And this wasn't the base infirmary, the walls there had been gunmetal grey, not hospital white. As that processed, she abruptly sat up, yelping in pain as the action caused the throb of agony to return for just a moment. She heard a medical alert pinging on the machinery in the room, but ignored it in favor of looking at herself...

Son of a bitch. It had *worked*. The mad, insane, stupidly idiotic and impossible plan had worked! It must have, since her hands were smaller than they should have been...as were her boobs. Huh, she'd had her Double-Ds by 16, so she must have come back farther than that. Which was a relief, honestly. The Parallax Machine had been intended to target an Asari for a reason, as even the wild pseudo-science they were working with seemed to indicate that someone could only be sent back a percentage of their own lifespan. When she'd charged into the beam, she'd been afraid it either wouldn't send her back far enough to make any difference at all...or that it would, you know, atomize her. It had been calibrated for an Asari, after all, not a human. But it had worked, or at least it looked that way, despite all the bullshit pseudo-science they were working with.

Project Parallax had been an insane long-shot, sponsored by the Shadow Broker of all people, though Miranda seemed to have thought something was humorous about that. The idea, in crudest form, had been to skip someone's mind back through the weave of time and into their previous self, in order to try and prepare the galaxy for what was coming. Oriana had wanted to do something, *anything*, to help out, and Miranda had directed her to the long-shot project. Probably to keep her somewhere remote and safe, Oriana knew that...but the project had actually *worked*.

Oriana's whirling thoughts were cut off as the medical room's door banged open and doctors rushed in. She looked at them in confusion, then remembered the pinging of the medical alert. She opened her mouth to speak...only for a Salarian to dose her with a hypospray to the neck. She tried to protest, only to find her eyes growing heavy. The blackness took her again moments later...

## Chapter 1: Illum

2178.

That was how far she'd been sent back. Just five years before the disastrous events of Eden's Prime. Into the body of her fourteen-year-old self. Not nearly what the project had been supposed to accomplish. Worse, she hadn't been the one prepped and briefed to go back. She had only partial knowledge of events. Only her own experience, the bits she'd pulled out of Miranda since they'd met again, and the package of details she'd helped to arrange for the Asari that was *supposed* to go back. That last was the one saving grace, though much of it was useless, having been intended to be used farther into the past and mostly worthless information now as a result. But...there was enough information stuffed into her nearly-flawless memory that she could make a difference. It would be an uphill struggle...but she could at least give the galaxy an edge. Assuming she got it right.

Oriana took a deep breath and ran through the motions of a biotic singularity again. This, this was something she could do *right now*. She'd begged and badgered first Miranda, then the Asari she worked with on the project, for lessons on how to use her biotics better. Her sister had been astonished to discover that Oriana's raw power was actually higher than her own, the result of Henry Lawson's intense efforts to make Oriana even more perfect than 'the prototype' had been. Indeed, her raw power had been surprisingly close to Subject Zero's, though she hadn't had anywhere near Jack's skill at using it. And then there was what had happened to her due to Project Parallax.

The panicked behavior of the doctors had made a lot more sense when she finally recovered and learned the full details of how she ended up in the hospital. There *had* been some side effects to the Project Parallax beam, after all, though only she herself realized the cause. The doctors on Illum had been baffled when her shivering, jerking body had come in by air-ambulance. Or, rather, they'd been baffled when they discovered the cause. The eezo nodules in her body had undergone a spontaneous refining mutation, and her very DNA had twisted half a step to the proverbial left, toward something more Asari-like. It probably would have killed her...if not for the VIP flag on her citizenship documents, which Oriana had every suspicion was the result of either Miranda or Cerberus' meddling. As it was, the best doctors on Illum had managed to stabilize the changes.

So far, the only real results had been a boost to Oriana's already potent biotics, a slight smoothing of her skin, sudden lack of hair growth anywhere but her head, and darker eyes that could see a bit into the ultraviolet spectrum. If that was the extent of it, with the only negative being a need to eat even more than she already had been as a human biotic, she could live with it. Well, there were also some medical issues about not really being compatible with any blood but her own now, but that was for the future. For now, it made her current task both harder and easier. Harder, as even with her younger body she now had almost as much power as adult-her had possessed, and easier because the biotics themselves seemed to be *smoother* somehow, more natural feeling.

Either way, she was determined to succeed at her current task, that of reinstalling the combat reflexes her sister and those Asari had tried to instill in her older self. Some of it, the mental component, had carried back in time with her, but it wasn't properly integrated into her younger body. Hence her current task, hundreds of mindless repetitions of single biotic moves. She took a deep breath, wiped the sweat from her face with a towel, and reset to go again...

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Oriana cursed under her breath as she navigated the electronic lock's systems with her omni-tool. It had been two months since her return. Her adoptive parents had been concerned about her sudden changes, but she'd been able to pass them off as the result of her near-death experience and the shifting of her biology. And a 'mysterious benefactor,' probably Cerberus, had paid for her medical bills. Which was alarming in and of itself. If she proved to be more interesting to them than useful as a tool to keep Miranda happy...Oriana pushed the thought down, again, and focused on her current task, getting around the alarm on the lock. She'd already done what she could to deal with the potential issue that was Cerberus, training herself to exhaustion so she wouldn't be helpless if they came for her. Now, however, she'd made as much quick progress there as her merely fourteen-year-old body would allow, and she needed to begin acting on other information.

Money. That's what this was about.

Money was going to be the next big step. Her near-perfect recall had the specs for several important pieces of hardware tucked away, including the Thanix canon, improved kinetic barrier systems, and other improvements that might be useful against the Reapers. Those had come from Miranda, when she'd asked for things that might be useful to the project, and as a result they had been assigned to Oriana to teach to their original test subject. But bringing something like that to market, in a way that didn't just get her killed, was going to take money and time. Time to pull together the

blueprints and fill in any blanks, money to build a prototype, file patents, and grease the right palms to get it into production. She had some ideas who, here on Illium, might be able to help her...but she needed to have something solidly in hand before she went to her.

She blinked and grinned viciously as the alarm died a quiet death before ever going off, moving on to the lock itself. Her mind wandered off a bit as she worked through the various pieces of hacking software by instinct. This was something she'd always had the talent for, even before Miranda showed up in her life, even if her current limited equipment was slowing the process down. And with the alarm gone, she could afford to mentally check out a bit, reviewing her plans.

She'd mapped it out. It was going to take longer than she'd hoped to get the initial capital and contacts she needed. At least two years, during which all she could do was train, draw up as many blueprints as she could, and start spreading some information and rumors via the extranet. A few hints where certain things might be found may get a couple of things rolling early...though she'd discarded anything related to Eden Prime for the moment. She didn't know how long Saren had been seeking a beacon for, and the last thing she needed was to kick off the whole Reaper invasion early, before Shepard was available to kick their tentacled asses back to dark space. But...a few judicious hints to Doctor Liara T'soni about other places to look might bear fruit, as would a few other bits of information dropped in the right ears.

But for now...for now, she had seed money to acquire. She knew where several new eezo mines had gone up during these years, but to finance those finds...she steadied her nerve as she slipped through the door she'd just finished hacking. The scum who lived here wouldn't be missed. He was too low-ranking in the Blood Pack for that, particularly since Illium was Eclipse territory anyway. But his money would help...and she needed actual combat experience. She stepped into his living room, hands glowing and biotic barrier up...

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A year. A long year of training and vigilante work, dodging the local 'police' of Illium as much as the gangs. And now she stood over the cooling corpse of a freighter captain who had taken her out to stake her claims. He'd tried to backstab her when the sheer scale of the first find became obvious. The eezo in the small, out of the way, moon was worth literally billions. She'd known he'd try, had been grateful for the excuse to kill the creep that had been entirely too happy to let a fifteen-year-old human seduce and bed him. She wasn't really fifteen, of course, even if her body was, and she'd sworn the day she came back that she'd do whatever was needed. But, this was the first time she'd been *happy* to kill someone. She wondered what her sister would think of her, if she ever found out...

Oriana shook that thought off. It was ridiculous, given the things she knew her sister had done herself. She panned her gaze over the remaining crew. Indentured Quarrians, every single one. Unarmed and clearly terrified. She wouldn't need to kill them. Probably. In fact, one or more of them might be useful to hide her involvement a little more. She gave them a smile, making it as charming as she could under the circumstances.

"How would all of you like your contracts paid off?"

There was a moment of hesitation, then the chief engineer spoke up. “You’re not going to kill us?”

Oriana’s smile turned sardonic as she waved the idea off. “No, not unless you make me, like he did. Instead, I’m going to offer to pay off every single one of your indenture contracts, with the money from this find. As well as hire you afterward, to help organize things. Best this not spread any farther until we’re all rich, right? All you have to do is help me finish this...and testify if needed that I was defending myself.”

It didn’t take long at all for them to agree.

## Chapter 2: New Allies

Oriana smiled at her boss of six months. It was time. “Hey, Aethyta, can I talk to you? Privately?”

The Asari matriarch arched a sardonic eyebrow, then gestured her through the door behind her bar. She called out to Fallion, a youngish Asari maiden and Oriana’s sometime-lover, ordering her to cover the bar. Fallion had gotten Oriana her job as a runner for the matriarch in the first place, truth be told. Oriana was still too young to be in the bar, something that had drawn frowns from Aethyta once or twice when Fallion’s relationship with her came up, but the matriarch had never caused a problem about it. Which Oriana was grateful for. The maiden was actually a decent sort and the fun they had together was more exploratory than serious. It might have been a bit inappropriate if Oriana really was seventeen. But she wasn’t, not in mind at least, and Oriana was happy with the pressure-relief valve a little time with her Asari friend-with-benefits created.

The moment Aethyta sat down behind her desk, she pressed a button and Oriana heard a muffled ‘chunk’ from the door behind her. The matriarch’s face hardened, glaring at Oriana. “Is this where you finally tell me why the youngest self-made billionaire on Illium is working as a gopher in my bar? Not to mention fucking one of my employees. You better not just be using her to get close to me, or I’m going to have issues with you, kid. Even if I can’t help but like you, otherwise.”

Oriana flinched, then sighed and sat down across from the matriarch, trying to act casual despite the raw terror trying to overwhelm her. She’d known there was a chance Aethyta had made her, despite her efforts to keep her name concealed when the eezo mines went up. Even so, she’s hoped she might not have, Asari matriarchs were *not* someone to screw around with.

“I admit, when I first befriended her, I was looking for an introduction. But that’s got nothing to do with us ‘fucking,’ as you say. I’d have never gone that far if I wasn’t legitimately attracted to her, though both of us know it’s not a long-term thing.”

Aethyta leaned back, glare lessening. “Good, at least you have the quad to admit it. What do you want, kid?”

Oriana gestured with one hand. “The room is secure?”

“Yes.”

She ignored the terse reply, choosing to take it at face-value. She pulled out an old-fashioned data slate and slid it across to the Matriarch. She wasn't putting this on an omni-tool. "Take a look at that, it contains blueprints for something I've been working on for years." She felt a little guilty taking credit for the Turian designs...but the galaxy needed them and it wasn't time to muddy the waters. Besides, she actually *had* been working on them for years. They no longer resembled the original, crude Thanix designs very much. The basic technology was the same...but Oriana's first-class brain had refined the original rush-job to be nearly 40% better. "I even have a working prototype. What I *don't* have is the connections to not end up dead in a dark alley if I try to take the design to market somewhere like Illium."

The matriarch's eyebrows both arched and she reached for the data slate, powering it on and skimming the contents. Her first, half-dismissive glance was quickly replaced by a furrowed brow and more intense scrutiny. Minutes ticked by then, after a quarter hour, Aethyta put it back down and snorted explosively. "And your prototype actually holds up to the claimed specs?"

Oriana nodded firmly. "Within less than half a percent of designed specs, all at three quarters scale. And it's not the only design, either."

Aethyta looked interested for a moment, then sighed and reached up to rub her forehead with one hand, sliding the data slate back with the other. "Look, kid, the design is good, but..."

"You're one of the only Asari matriarchs to push for actual technological advancement and a stronger military. I'm not looking to get rich, boss. I want the galaxy to get off its collective ass and actually fix some of the problems it has." Aethyta's gaze had sharpened and Oriana pushed on, laying out her gamble. "That said, I'm smart, and I've grown up on fucking Illium. Despite being young, I know that quixotic crusades, moronic petitions and stupider marches, they won't do anything. The only way to change the galaxy is to be in a position to push with a lot of horsepower. Like, say, utterly revolutionizing kinetic barriers, ship-to-ship weapons, biotic amps, and a bunch of other shit. Someone with influence like *that* behind them, they could actually seriously push for change."

Oriana paused, letting her cold and clinical statements settle on the far older woman. Aethyta looked...surprised and a little impressed? It was hard to say, exactly, despite how good of a read she'd gotten on the matriarch in the last several months. She tried to return the gaze focused on her with one of equal strength.

"And you want me to, what? Partner with you so people take you seriously? Kid, I was laughed off Thesisa. No one will listen to you just because I told them to."

Oriana shook her head. "No, you misunderstand. I don't want to *partner* with you, I want to *give* you the prototypes and designs, as well as a few billion in funding. I'm only seventeen, I don't have the political chops and centuries of contacts needed to change things. But you? If you have all this to work with? You can *make* the matriarch's council listen by shoving their face in the fact that you were right. That a little effort could propel the Asari and the rest of the galaxy out of their rut."

For the first time, Aethyta looked surprised. "What, you don't want anything out of this? Bullshit."

Oriana shrugged. "I'll be an investor in all of this, so I'm expecting to make money, sure. But..." Oriana hesitated, then played her last chip, something that had come from funding Doctor T'soni's work on the sly and pointing her in the right direction. "There's something nasty coming. Have you heard of Doctor Liara T'soni?"

Aethyta's eyes hardened. Oriana expected that. She knew perfectly well who this Asari was to the good doctor. She ignored the dangerous stare, plowing on. "She's quietly published a few new papers, which seem to indicate that something sinister was behind the Rachni Wars, something that linked to her own theory about the Protheans being eradicated. It's a little..."

Oriana froze as a brutally quick and powerful biotic stasis hit her. She'd barely even seen the woman twitch! She tried to gulp at the angry expression on the Krogan-blooded Asari Matriarch's face, but even the muscles to do that were frozen.

"Don't you think I *know* who funded that research. You came to me, after leading my daughter around by the nose, then dare try to play on my own history for your own gain? Give me one good reason I shouldn't just kill you now!"

Oriana pushed with her own biotics, just enough to free her vocal cords. "Meld." Aethyta looked taken aback at the word, or perhaps at her biotic power and control? Didn't matter. "Meld with me. I will show you what I know."

It was reckless, a wild gamble that Oriana hadn't wanted to take, but the alternative was to be ripped apart by a half-Krogan Asari matriarch that thought she'd been screwing her daughter over. Even if she thought Oriana was crazy, it might still keep the matriarch from killing her.

Aethyta seemed to think about it for long moments, then roughly let the stasis go, stepping forward with one hand out to grab Oriana by the neck. Oriana didn't resist, simply stared defiantly into the matriarch's eyes, and Aethyta nodded. "EMBRACE ETERNITY."

The meld was rough but not violent. Aethyta wasn't quite ready to simply rip her secrets from her head. That was good...but also largely irrelevant. Oriana had melded enough with Fallion to know how to push memories forward, so she did, focusing on everything she knew about the Reapers, showing all the holofeeds of their attacks on Thessia, followed up by everything she'd known about Project Parallax...and even throwing in her own efforts after coming back, including the multiple people she'd killed. She *needed* Aethyta to believe her at this point, so she held nothing back.

The meld lasted for a long time, far longer than Oriana had even known meld's *could* last. Then, with a grunt, the matriarch dropped her hand, sagging back against her desk. For just a moment, the powerful Asari looked tired, but she shook it off quickly, staring intently at Oriana, mind visibility whirring at lightspeed behind unfocused eyes and a blank expression. Oriana herself felt exhausted, mentally more than physically, falling back bonelessly in the guest chair and trying to focus, hoping the Asari would believe her.

"I saw Thessia burning. And...Reapers, you called them? I'm tempted to call you fucking crazy...but I know some of the Asari involved in this Project Parallax of yours. Not to mention that there's simply too much detail, as crazy as it is..." Aethyta cut herself off for a moment, then nodded

slowly, eyes properly focusing on Oriana again. “As it is, I have to believe you. What have you done since coming back? Aside from murdering a bunch of scum and getting rich.”

Oriana flinched at the word ‘murder,’ but gathered herself. “Well, you know about my funding of a few archeology digs. In addition to that, I’ve...”

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Oriana ran her hand suggestively over the thigh of the stuttering Asari maiden, ignoring the slight jerk of the other woman’s body as a blush turned the poor girl’s face nearly purple. She’d had some qualms about this plan, at first...but the adorable reactions of the painfully-inexperienced hundred and fifty year old maiden had washed most of them away. She wasn’t intending the girl any harm...and it was clear the brainy physicist was in desperate need of a social skills intervention, not to mention a little confidence.

Ani’lia T’kosh was a genius. Specifically, a genius physicist who specialized in energy theory, and they *needed* her. One of Oriana’s own projects, something completely original she’d developed since coming back in time, was a series of energy-based hand and ship weapons. Since mass effect weaponry was effective at nearly any scale and generally had lower power requirements and cost for equivalent damage, no species had really developed energy weapons more powerful than GARDIAN laser point-defense arrays. Oriana, having heard from a drunk Miranda about how the Reapers had guided the entire galaxy’s tech development with the mass relays and carefully selected ruins left behind, had reached into old pre-mass effect science fiction and real R&D programs from every species, looking for something to change the equation.

Energy weapons had been one of her major decisions and she’d managed to crack some of the problems with scaling them both up and down. Unfortunately, brilliant as she was, she was stretched thin these days and had admitted to Aethyta that she needed help to hit all their goals. The matriarch’s answer had been to point her at one Ani’lia T’kosh, a brilliant but painfully awkward Asari physicist who the matriarch had heard about through old contacts.

The problem? Ani’lia T’kosh made Liara T’soni look like a gifted people person. She’d turned down dozens of offers from various companies that wanted her talents, purely because those companies were ‘scary and full of people.’ Essentially, she was a shy, mildly agoraphobic shut-in who couldn’t handle the idea of working in a high-pressure lab with lots of people. Which is why Oriana and Fallion, who’d been brought into the whole conspiracy months ago, were here, busy pouring on the charm for the pale-but-attractive Asari stuck between them. They just needed to convince the poor girl that working with them would be a...positive experience.

Which was promising to be far easier than they’d imagined, if the low moan coming from the physicist as Oriana ghosted her fingertips every-so-lightly over her cloth-covered sex meant anything. The dazed expression on the other woman’s face said she couldn’t believe this was happening, at what was supposed to be just a short business meeting. Then Fallion leaned in to nibble at her fellow Asari’s neck from the other side and Ani’lia actually shuddered through a climax!

Oriana grinned. Oh, Asari were easier to make cum than virtually any human woman, the result of having dual clitorises and an overall more sensitive body...but for this one to cum with barely any direct stimulation? She must both be even more sensitive than usual *and* desperately in need of



attention. It was really a wonder no one had managed this with her before...but that might have been due to no one considering that an Asari of all beings might be this inexperienced. That and the disarming setting of meeting in a small, quiet bar instead of an office might explain the difference in results.

Letting the maiden come down just enough to focus a little, Oriana leaned in and whispered in her proverbial ear. "Why don't we take this somewhere more *private*. No pressure, nothing to do with the job. Fallion and I simply find you cute..."

She could see the shy Asari was about to refuse...but Oriana struck before she could, cupping her palm over the Asari's sex and sending a biotic pulse of subtle purpose through the other woman's clothes. It was a trick she'd learned from Fallion and it worked even better on Asari than on humans, lighting up every pleasure node in the maiden's core for just the briefest of instants at a time...and yet utterly unable to make someone cum on its own. Oriana began pulsing the technique in a slow rhythm, watching the maiden's eyes nearly go black before backing off and whispering the invitation again in time with one last pulse. The maiden nodded dazedly...and didn't protest at all when they pulled her to her feet and guided her to one of the citadel's rapid transit pods.

Not wanting to be completely manipulative, Oriana allowed the maiden to recover in transit...somewhat. Instead of doing anything overtly sexual, she and Fallion alternated between kissing each other and making out with Ani'lia. It seemed to be enough to keep the woman's nerves from overtaking her, though they were clearly showing a little as they pulled her into their own hotel room. Oriana smiled gently and whispered to her again. "Relax, sweetie, we won't do anything you don't want..."

The calm reassurance in her voice seemed to reach the maiden, who took a deep breath and nodded, eyes remarkably sharp despite her clear arousal. Good, hopefully that meant she wouldn't regret this later. A subtle signal had Fallion pulling her fellow Asari onto one of the leather couches in the room, nibbling and petting, but making sure not to fully distract her as Oriana began to strip. It wasn't a full strip-show, even an inexperienced Asari had likely seen enough of those for them not to feel exotic. Instead, Oriana simply made sure to show off the full flexibility and strength of her body, the toned muscle and training scars as well as her ample proportions, as she slowly shed her clothing. Ani'lia's attention was glued to the semi-sensual act, likely seeing her first nude human woman in the flesh...and with Oriana's body it was almost certainly the finest she'd ever see. Her eyes followed the bounce of breasts, far more mobile than those of Asari, and lingered on Oriana's apex as her sex became visible.

Oriana idly noted that there was another difference to their approach, one that might have been a stumbling block for just Fallion. Normally, by this time, Asari would have melded with their lover...but as shy as Ani'lia was, a subtler approach was called for. Oriana joined the other two women on the couch, cool black leather sending a pleasant shiver through her as it embraced her body. She leaned in and began making out with the enraptured maiden, hands simultaneously helping Fallion strip their guest. It was only when the other woman was down to just her black thong that she seemed to even realize, pulling back with a blush...only to throw her head back with a moan as Fallion latched onto a nipple with her mouth. Oriana quickly joined her on the Asari's other breast, marveling at how sensitive Ani'lia was. That was *not* typical. It was one of the few areas human women typically had an Asari beat, human breasts and nipples being somewhat more sensitive overall. But that wasn't the case with Ani'lia, clearly, and the analytical part of Oriana's mind that never really shut off wondered if it had

something to do with the fact that Ani'lia, like Doctor T'soni, was a pureblood. She smirked wickedly at the idea of finding out by testing with Liara at some point, then blinked in momentary shock as that thought penetrated her own rising lust. Was...she developing a thing for Asari?

Shaking that thought off for now, she refocused on Ani'lia even as Fallion moved away to strip her own clothes off. Unlike Oriana, she didn't make a show of it, simply stripping quickly while Oriana distracted their mutual lover by running a fingertip along the sodden front of the physicist's thong, drawing a loud moan and a mindless attempt to hump her hand for more friction. Oriana smiled, drawing back, then going in for a new kiss when a pout sprang up unconsciously on the blue beauty's lips. Ani'lia moaned into her mouth, then whimpered as she felt Fallion return, pressing naked breasts into her fellow Asari's back and nibbling at her neck.

Miranda smirked and left the maiden's lips, trailing kisses down her body, bypassing her breasts and heading lower. Ani'lia tensed as she realized Oriana's destination, only to relax again as Fallion kissed her way along the sensitive ridges and folds of the maiden's crest. The distracted Asari maiden's thong, fairly modest by Asari standards, came loose at a tug, with an obscene sound that almost made Oriana giggle. The girl had positively *drenched* the garment, to the point it might never be useful again. Hmmm, in fact...it would be fun to convince the girl of that, making her leave commando style. Fighting a naughtier giggle this time, Oriana moved in before the maiden could tense again, spreading the other woman's legs and rubbing fingers along her dripping 'azure.' Much like a particularly smooth human woman in texture and shape, the Asari's lips were less sensitive but still enough to make Ani'lia try to buck for more, only to find Fallion had gotten ahold of her in such a way that she couldn't.

Oriana smiled at the whimper that came from her victim and move in farther, replacing fingers with tongue on the Asari's lower lips...before going for her real target, the twin magic buttons to either side of the maiden's upper folds. Though placed differently, these were the Asari equivalent of the human clitoris, and the maiden under her bucked with far more power as Oriana lavished attention on first one, then the other. She worked the girl up, not *quite* letting her peak for several minutes, then she plunged her fingers into the Asari's core, sending the shy beauty literally screaming over the edge...

They let her recover for all of two minutes before Fallion initiated the first meld, transferring her own feelings of unsatisfied lust back into the other Asari. They weren't anywhere near done with the shy physicist. By the time they were, Oriana was determined to have the young woman's blue tits pressed up against the glass of the outer wall. She wasn't sure exactly why...just that it would be fun...

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It most certainly *had* been fun. As had the dozen other positions that the three of them had worked through over the next two days of prolonged lovemaking. Some of them visited more than once. And at the end of it, after having managed to convince the physicist that both of them were legitimately attracted to her, the shy beauty had signed on with their project. In part it was the desire to stay near her exciting new lovers...but the energy-specialist was also intrigued by what Oriana had already come up with. As soon as she was properly set up, she would be taking over those projects almost entirely. Which was a huge relief to Oriana, who simply had too many balls in the air to juggle and stay sane at the same time by this point.

With the energy-weapon research delegated to Ani'lia and much of the other R&D shifted to the think-tank a certain group of ex-indentured Quarrians had set up with her help, Oriana was free to pour more work into helping Aethyta piece together as much of the big picture as the two of them could. With the far, *far* more experienced woman's connections and skills, they made huge inroads into the various military sectors on the business side and started several additional plans in motion that would farther rock the boat a bit. Such as quietly seeking out and collecting data on the Genophage, and using Oriana's own mutations to work up a new genetic enhancement package for the Alliance that would actually allow them to *make* biotic soldiers, something never done by any race before. Several dark facilities were quietly but forcefully shut down as bits and piece of Oriana's knowledge of Cerberus, gleaned from conversations with Miranda, helped them point certain individuals at the more radical aspects of that group. Justicars and Spectres were *surprisingly* easy to manipulate, when you had certain types of information to pass on. Though, there was some backlash against the former group operating outside of Asari space...

They knew they were missing things. Oriana's information was simply too incomplete. But whatever happened...the galaxy *would* be at least somewhat stronger and more prepared, assuming they didn't fuck up and trigger a Reaper Invasion early...

### Chapter 3: Eden's Dawn

Oriana stepped off the shuttle, eyes already taking in the new installation that was finishing, just barely on schedule. Aethyta followed her, eyes sweeping the private landing pad before looking the same way. It was the rough-tongued matriarch that spoke first.

"Fucking hell of a thing. You think it will actually work?"

Oriana nodded firmly. "It should. Still not 100% sure it was the right move to install them here first, but the new grav-lensed grasers are purely energy-based. Kinetic barriers don't even slow them down. They'll only get off a handful of shots before the energy banks are drained dry, their efficiency still sucks. But even a Reaper should feel it and Geth ships won't have a chance. They probably won't stand off the whole attack, if it even comes, but..."

"They'll fucking bleed. Good. Even better if this Sovereign dick gets his quad smashed in and we don't have to worry for a while." Aethyta started moving toward the exit and Oriana followed along in her wake.

"Somehow, I doubt we're going to be that lucky."

The matriarch snorted. "It happens, kid, but I doubt it too. No, this is likely to be a long slog, like you saw the first go around. Just don't get Liara killed or I'll make your insides into outsides, no matter how much I like you."

Oriana winced. "I know you're not happy that I got her involved with the dig here, but..."

Aethyta held up a hand. "Don't. I agreed with the need to both get her involved earlier and keep her off Therum, since we can't know Shepard would make the same choices in the exact same order

that saw her rescued in the nick of time. I don't like that she's *here* of all places, but that's why I'm here to make sure those little flashlight fucks don't lay a hand on her."

Oriana grimaced. "I still think we should have tried to contact the True Geth, they could have really helped."

Aethyta gave her a dismissive look. "No you don't, kid. You admitted you don't know enough about them to say which way they'd jump before the heretics even attacked anyway. You could have touched off a war or pushed their genocidal little hearts into siding with the heretics. Hell, kid, you don't even know what the fuck Shepard did to convince them to side with her in the first place."

Oriana shrugged uncomfortably, not liking the reminder of how much she simply didn't know about the Reapers, their methods, and the events that led to their invasion of the galaxy. So far as she knew, only Shepard herself had known everything, and Project Parallax had been completely black. She very much doubted Shepard had even known it existed. No one had worried about it, since their hail Mary long-shot was aimed at strengthening the galaxy as a whole over the course of decades or centuries. If things had gone to plan, the degree of butterfly effect involved would have invalidated anything more than the basics. It was only now that it had worked, yet only sent a single human back a handful of years, that the problem of not knowing all the niggling little details really hurt.

Changing the subject, Oriana brought the topic back to the new installations. "The new defensive batteries should be online in less than two weeks and the projected time for even finding the beacon isn't for another two months. Its possible Liara's presence could change that, as she's got more experience excavating Prothean ruins than anyone on the original team did. But us getting involved as the main financiers mean we can slow things down if they get too close." Oriana shot the matriarch a smirk. "If all else fails, we can introduce her to you properly. I'm sure discovering who her father is will throw her off enough."

Aethyta gave her a dry look, suggesting without words that there would be much pain in Oriana's future if she even suggested that again. Given how hard the matriarch already worked her in training, with multiple broken bones being a regular event, Oriana simply grinned, shrugging off the glare with an equanimity that few even among Aethyta's fellow matriarchs could have managed.

"Ha fuckin ha, you little shit. You just get those fucking guns working and corral the mad scientist you screwed into creating them for you. Let me worry about the fucking beacon."

Oriana's grin merely widened as she playfully saluted her partner in galaxy-saving, splitting off from her with a sway to her hips that Aethyta herself had taught her. She heard a chuckle follow her and knew that her point had been made. It had been Aethyta that had suggested how to bring Ani'lia on board, after all...

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"So...Chief Williams, right?" Oriana couldn't believe her good fortune as she observed Gunnery Chief Ashely Williams standing at attention, along with her six-man squad. She was completely aware that merely sending the Gunnery Chief instead of coming himself was supposed to be an insult on the local CO's part. The man had made it abundantly clear that he was a short-sighted fool that didn't think

much of the new hardware. But if that gave Oriana nearly two months of early access to another of Shepard's potential crew, she was happy to take the insult.

"Yes, ma'am! Dog Squad was sent to learn the basics of the system from your techs, so we can properly train the crews that take over when testing is finished."

The Chief looked apologetic, as aware of the insult as Oriana was, but Oriana just waved the unspoken apology off with a grin. "I'm glad to see you, Chief. I was half-afraid that insufferable asshole was going to insist on being here personally. He can't kill this project, the new hardware is simply too big an improvement over literally anything else out there, but he might have driven me to get locked up for murder if he stuck around and ranted about 'new-fangled over-priced gizmos.'"

Williams' face twitched, womanfully trying not to smile back at the combination of Oriana's grin and comment about her current CO. After a moment, she cleared her throat and managed to get her next sentence out with a straight face...somehow. "The CO did send his compliments, ma'am, but said he'd be too busy overseeing the upgrades to the traditional defenses." She looked around at the busy lab-techs all around them. "Uh...what do you want us to do here, ma'am? None of us are really techs..."

"That's quite alright Chief, we won't be teaching the maintenance techs for these things until testing is done. What we need now is explicitly *non-techs*, regular soldiers to give us feedback on using the system for combat air and orbital defense. Mostly, you'll be working with me personally, over at Emplacement One, which is already online. For now, though..." Oriana eyed the bored looking squad. That wouldn't do. "Why don't I buy all of you a round of beers while I talk the basics of the system? After that, we can head over and give you lot your first first-hand look at the targeting system software."

Williams blinked in surprise, clearly not used to the idea of getting briefings over beers. She hesitated only a moment, then nodded her head. "I think we'd like that ma'am," she turned to point firmly at her squad, "Just one beer, though. We need to actually remember this shit!"

Oriana chuckled in response and waved the Chief out, mind already whirling with how to make this new windfall work for her. Seduction was clearly out, both from what little she knew of the Chief's preferences and the lack of any signs of attraction from her just now. Oriana had adopted a working-day suit similar to her sister's catsuit as soon as her boobs properly came it, finding much like her sister had that her beauty was an extremely useful tool. By now, between what she had to work with and Aethyta's 'education,' she liked to think she could make even most straight women look twice. Unfortunately, Williams hadn't even blinked. Still, friendship could hopefully work just as well, and complaining about the woman's ass of a CO was clearly one way to get on William's good side. Not surprising, if some of the stories about how someone who proved to be Spectre material ended up stuck as a mere Gunnery Chief on groundside safe-worlds for years were true...

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"Ash! Over here!" Oriana waved the Chief, who was alone and dressed in civvies for once, over to her table. The woman smiled when she saw Oriana, making her way over after a quick stop at the bar for a drink of her own.

"Alone, Ori? What happened to your Asari...friends?"

Oriana winced just a bit in response, taking a pull from her own drink. Ash's last word had been said with a bit of discomfort. Exposure to Fallion, Aethyta, and occasionally Ani'lia had sanded down the edge of Ashley's mild case of xenophobia, but it wasn't entirely gone. The other woman didn't really have anything against aliens and never had, they just...weren't human. And Oriana being in some sort of three-way relationship with two Asari had always made the other woman a bit uncomfortable. Unfortunately, it also wasn't the most appealing subject at the moment.

"Ah...Fallion and Ani'lia have decided to bond." Seeing the lack of recognition on Ashley's face, Oriana grimaced and clarified. "The Asari version of marriage, Chief. They had fun with me...but all three of us knew it wasn't a permanent thing. But they unexpectedly clicked perfectly together, so..."

"Ah, so they broke off and got together with each other." Ashley's tone was genuinely sympathetic. She might have been uncomfortable with the arrangement, but she still wanted her friend to be happy.

Oriana shrugged and grinned. "Yeah. To be honest, I'm happy for them. But it still stings just a bit," her smile turned a bit lop-sided, "hence coming to the bar for a stiff drink or two."

That got a smile from Ashley, who quickly changed the subject, asking Oriana for more stories about Illum or the Citadel. Despite being very humanity-first, the Gunnery Chief was intensely curious about what else was out there. Oriana was grateful for the change of subject, so she told a few of her better stories this time, a couple of which hadn't actually happened this time around. She soon had her friend in stitches, trying not to spill her beer as she snorted in laughter...and then the raid sirens went off.

Oriana jerked to her feet alongside Ashley, who was frantically pulling up the alerts on her omni-tool. What the fuck? The beacon had only been found two days ago! And the Normandy wasn't due for another three! This wasn't supposed to *happen* yet. But...even as she and the Chief pushed their way through the crowd, out into the street...the massive new graser emplacements she and Ani'lia had designed fired in anger for the first time, lighting up the night sky even as smaller flashes could be seen in orbit...the destruction of the small frigate picket force on overwatch assignment for the colony. As the first drop ships were shot down by the more traditional anti-air defenses, also upgraded by Oriana and Aethyta's *New Dawn Enterprises*, Oriana grabbed Ashley by the shoulder before she could run off.

"Chief! You'll never make it back to base to kit up, *New Dawn's* facilities are closer. We can pull something from the armory for both of us! Besides, at least a couple of your Squad are at the Emplacements!"

Ashely hesitated for only an instant, then nodded and they set off at a jog even as the night sky lit up again, this time with the deep blue light from the heavy kinetic barriers Graser Emplacement One was fitted with, shrugging off an orange beam of fire which could only have been from a Reaper main beam. Oriana paled, then sighed in relief as the barrier held. They'd designed the things to be *far* more powerful than any dreadnaught barrier, tapped directly into the buried fusion generators installed to charge the graser capacitors. But, even so, it had never been certain that they could repel fire of that magnitude. And even if they could...it was doubtful they'd hold through more than a couple of shots. Still, as the Emplacements returned fire, Oriana grinned viciously. The Emplacements weren't going to fall without bleeding the Reaper first...

The Invasion of Eden Prime had begun...

## End of Part 1

### Chapter 4: Invasion

Oriana panted, diving behind a bit of concrete rubble as her barrier faltered. It had been almost thirty-six hours since the assault began and the final air defenses had collapsed just an hour ago. It might have been the proudest moment of her life when the graser batteries had torn into Sovereign, wounding the Reaper Dreadnaught badly enough to force it to peel off from its lightning-assault on the colony. Unfortunately, wounded though it had been, it had gotten the measure of the defenses in that initial attack, slagging Emplacement Three into a half-molten wreck. After that initial failure, Sovereign had called in Geth cruisers for the next assault waves, throwing them into the teeth of Eden Prime's enhanced defenses to grind them down. The last of the three graser emplacements had melted itself to slag trying to fight off the third assault, nearly 6 hours ago now, and with its loss the regular anti-air defenses hadn't taken long to be stripped away.

And none of that mentioned the unending waves of Geth Dropships. Dozens of them had been chewed up right along by the improved traditional defenses, and a few more had been taken out by what little heavy-ordnance the garrison had in its own right. But for every three destroyed, at least one had slipped through. Even with the warning that repelling the first wave had given the colony, even with every man and woman willing to lift a rifle added to the garrison and police forces, the colony center had been chewed to rubble. And even then...the second and third assault waves had only been pushed back by the presence of Matriarch Aethyta. For the first time since...ever...Oriana actually understood just how terrifyingly powerful a Matriarch could be. She knew that Aethyta was likely among the most dangerous of that elite caste, her temperament working against the slow degradation of her combat skills even before she'd begun actively training again. But now, after *years* of getting her edge back...

Well, she'd seen Saren Arterius personally driven back by the Matriarch during the second wave. And the Spectre hadn't turned up at all in the third. Oddly, it was in that moment that it finally clicked for Oriana how important Shepard really was. Others could have killed Saren. Skilled as he was, powerful as his cybernetic alterations made him, there were other *individuals* who could have killed him. Hell, Shepard had needed a small strike team to manage what Aethyta had done alone. For that matter, there were undoubtably any number of others who could have done any individual thing Shepard had managed. But Shepard was more than just an insanely badass soldier... she was a leader. A renaissance woman that hadn't done *one* spectacular feat, or even a won a dozen battles in her capacity as a fighter. She'd done that...plus successfully played intergalactic politics, waged an information war, and recruited and led a team of other crazy-skilled individuals. All *without* the support of the galaxy's leading powers.

But now, Oriana was afraid that she might have doomed the galaxy instead of saving it. The beacon had been pulled in by rail and hidden in an outbuilding during the first hours, most of the locals not even aware that it was likely the target. But the garrison had been whittled away to almost nothing. Ashely and a private named Nirali were the only two members of the Chief's six-man squad still alive, the later kept that way only by the potent addition of Oriana's biotics on several occasions. The last they'd heard through the near-constant jamming, there were less than three hundred members of the nearly eight thousand strong infantry division left alive and fighting. In addition, there were maybe a dozen of the special security detail brought in by *New Dawn* still alive, centered around Matriarch

Aethyta. And there were maybe two or three hundred police, hired guns, and civilian volunteers still remaining.

And that had been an hour ago, before the final collapse of the air-defense net. Before a new wave of dropships had brought in more Geth troopers. Literally the only good news was that even the Geth seemed to be running out of bodies, or platforms she supposed, as there were far fewer dropships in this wave than there had been in the previous three. But...there were still too many for the exhausted and battered defenders. As evidenced by Oriana hunkering desperately behind cover, Ashely and Nirali the only others anywhere in sight and two dozen Geth closing in on them. As she heard the crunch of rapidly approaching Geth feet, Oriana was just about to summon her faltering biotics for one, last, desperate stand...when the most beautiful sight in the entire fucking galaxy flashed overhead.

The SSV Normandy had arrived.

Grinning fit for a lunatic, Oriana dug deep and called out to her two companions. "The Cavalry is here! We just have to buy them time! Williams, take the left! Nirali, right! I'm going right down the fucking center!"

Before the other two could acknowledge or, more likely at this point, call her fucking crazy, Oriana lept *over* her cover and powered up a biotic charge right into the center of the Geth formation. She staggered on landing but turned her faltering footing into a forward roll that ended in a biotic shockwave when she came back up. Fire hammered her barriers even as assault rifle fire from her compatriots ripped into the newly exposed holes in the Geth formation. Oriana's biotics finally failed her...but that was fine. She was in close now and using the Geth themselves to shield herself from their own fire. She unloaded her shotgun into the lone Prime in the group, firing as fast as she could, not worrying about overheat. The gun wasn't even part of her normal loadout, but something she'd scavenged when her biotics started weakening, and she let it melt to scrap just to slag the prime in turn. Then she was dodging and weaving, ruined shotgun discarded and her usual Raikou pistol in hand as she broke to one side.

For the next few minutes, it was only her insanely expensive Predator light armor, gifted to her by Aethyta and modified heavily by Ani'lia, that kept her alive. Even then, by the time they killed the last Geth, her shields were gone and a mass effect round had punched a hole through the armor itself on her right side, causing a deep graze that she'd had to treat with the very last of her medigel. Ashely and Narali broke cover, racing to make sure she was alright and covering her while she tried to regain some strength after crashing from the short adrenaline spike seeing the Normandy had given her.

That was how Alliana Shepard found them when she came over the rise a minute and a half later. She was armored up, with full helmet of course, but Oriana somehow doubted there was another woman in N7 armor that just happened to be on Eden Prime with the Normandy. As she and the others raised palms and sent out an IFF ping just in case, the woman and her two escorts nodded acknowledgement, jogging up to meet them. Shepard triggered the folding mechanism on her helmet, pursing her lips to whistle appreciatively at the carnage around the three of them. Oriana took the moment that the commander used to sweep the field for threats and information to get a good look at her. Younger than then one time they'd met before, in her past life. Of course she was. But...also far less tired and with far fewer scars. She'd always been a striking woman, but here, with brighter eyes and



fewer battles behind her, she was outright gorgeous. Maybe there'd be a chance to get a piece of that along the...Oriana shook off the exhaustion-induced daydream as the redhead finally spoke.

"Where is the rest of your unit?" She looked between Ashely, with her rank patches, and Oriana. Seeming unsure who was leading their group.

It was Ashely that answered. "Gone, ma'am. Dead in the first and second assault waves. Narali and I are all that's left and we'd be dead too without Ori." The gunnery chief waved at the Geth. "Most of this was her work. Damn scary biotic, ma'am."

Commander Shepard locked her eyes with Oriana at that, seeming to finally decide the way the chief had waved a differential hand to her meant she was in charge. "Thank you, miss. Do any of you have a sit-rep?"

Oriana answered promptly. "Utterly buggered. They finally broke the air defense net an hour ago, and there were less than 300 of the garrison left by that time. The only good news is that I don't think they've gotten what they came for, yet."

Shepard's voice took on a neutral tone. "What they came for?"

Oriana gave the commander a wintery smile. "My full name is Oriana Lawson, Commander. I'm one of the primary shareholders of *New Dawn Enterprises*. I was on-planet to oversee the installation of the new defense grid. But, as *New Dawn* is also the major sponsor of the excavation that turned up a certain beacon, I knew all about it." Her smile turned grim as she continued. "Knew about it and made the choice to move it right after the graser emplacements turned back the first assault. It's hidden in a storage shed. Unless you have enough troops to take this place back, you need to get it and leave, fast. I can take you to it."

Shepard looked her over and hesitated. "You're dead on your feet. If you just mark its location, you can head to pickup and leave with the Normandy."

Oriana shook her head firmly. "My biotics are shot for now, but I can still move and shoot. And I didn't put the location in my omni-tool anyway. Didn't want to chance the Geth being able to hack it. Good as my security might be, keeping an AI out isn't a joke."

The hesitation was smaller this time, the redhead turning to the lieutenant next to her first. "Alenko, give her one of your biot-bars." As the other soldier nodded and reached for a utility pouch, Shepard turned back to her. "Fine. You three are with us. But let us take the brunt of any fighting until you've recovered a bit. Which way?"

As Oriana gratefully took the high-calorie recovery bar from the lieutenant, she pointed. "Down the street, hang a right at the burned out Grisly." Even as the commander started moving, Oriana took a gamble with the future. Well, another one. She was getting used to it. "And commander, there's something else you should know, in case I don't make it. This attack is being led by a rogue Spectre. At least, I hope he's rogue, or this just started a war with practically fucking everyone."

The redhead's forward pace slowed even as she activated her helmet again with a frown. A moment later, Oriana got a ping on her omni-tool for an encrypted com channel and Shepard's voice

came over the line, demanding she repeat what she just said. Realizing she'd probably tapped her comms into the Normandy's net, Oriana gave more detail this time.

"The second assault was led by the Spectre Saren Arterius. He was only driven off by an Asari Matriarch who was here with *New Dawn*. She was actually the one overseeing the dig-site for the company. She managed to wound him in the chaos and he hasn't been seen since, but she was absolutely sure it was him." A new voice, a *Turian* voice, came across the comm. And suddenly a spark of memory hit Oriana. That's right, there had been another Spectre on Eden Prime, but she'd never known who. Only that he'd been killed early on. His name hadn't been in the data she'd seen as part of the project.

"I find that hard to believe. Saren is the best of us, my own mentor in fact. Do you have any proof?"

Oriana's heartbeat skipped. Saren was his *mentor*? Shit. "I have recordings of the fight between him and Matriarch Aethyta. Is that enough?"

There was a hesitation, certainly, but the voice was firm when it came back. "Send them to my omni-tool."

Oriana obeyed, then had to focus on moving and giving directions as Shepard picked the pace up again. There were two short firefights, mostly handled by Shepard, Alenko and the unknown kid with them, before the *Turian* Spectre came back on the line, his voice hard and angry.

"It's Saren. No question. Not just the appearance either, his fighting style matches perfectly. And if he's here he's *definitely* rogue. I was the only Spectre assigned to this and the entire mission was kept quiet. He shouldn't even know the beacon is here, let alone be working with the Geth of all things to steal it."

Shepard had just finished off the last Geth trooper and responded smoothly, even as she got them all moving on Oriana's last set of directions with hand motions. "So, obviously that's bad. What do we do if we run into him? Call him out or just shoot?"

"You shoot, Shepard. And keep shooting, while praying you saw him before he saw you. Better yet, hope that Matriarch is there, too. That's the first time I've actually see someone beat him more or less one-on-one. Matriarch's don't usually keep their combat skills that sharp. Not outside the Justiciars, at least."

Oriana interjected. "Matriarch Aethyta is considered something of a rogue, a military development proponent. She's been training me for years and trust me, you can tell her father was Krogan. Usually within thirty seconds of meeting her." She heard Ash snort, causing a grin to tug at the corners of Oriana's mouth for a moment. Aethyta and Chief Williams had been an occasionally amusing combination in the last few months. Suppressing the temptation to smile, she continued. "More to the point, she's one of the only others on this rock that knows what he has to be after. With the defenses falling, she'll likely be either already there or en route."

A gruff acknowledgement came over the comm, then silence for a few moments, followed by a terse warning that he was about to meet up with them. Less than a minute after that, the *Turian* Spectre, who Shepard greeted by the name Nihlus, came out of an alley and joined up with them, just a

few blocks short of their objective. Oriana looked at him just a little wearily, given his admission that Saren was his mentor. But from what little she knew of the original events of Eden Prime, the Spectre assigned to Shepherd had died. Hopefully that meant he wasn't on Saren's side. And given what they'd begun hearing ahead of them...they might just need the extra gun. Sounds of heavy combat had been getting louder as they approached the hidden location of the beacon. Oriana flexed her biotics just a bit, relieved when they responded. She wouldn't be able to do much, probably, but anything was better than nothing.

They slowed down just before the last corner...and even the Spectre flinched as a wrecked Geth Prime flew right by them on a wave of biotic power. Oriana grinned and tapped her omni-tool, seamlessly bridging the encrypted Normandy Comm net with her own private encrypted channel. "Matriarch, please don't do that again, I'm coming around the corner with Alliance reinforcements and a Turian Spectre that, thankfully, isn't with Saren. That Prime almost took our heads off."

There was a bark of rough laughter over the comms. "Wasn't me, kid. Liara's got her mother's biotic strength, apparently. At least when she's pissed about someone threatening her new toy. I'll tell her to lay off throwing any of them your way. Now, get your lazy ass in here, Ori, that bastard's been making hit-and-runs with some sort of fucking powered glider. Winged it with a warp on his last run, though, so I'm expecting him to push in on foot next."

Oriana growled and threw up her Biotic Barrier. She turned to the others, seeing them staring at her. "Well, what are you waiting for? A fucking engraved invitation?" With that, she powered a short charge around the corner and dove into the back of a dozen Geth troopers...mentally considering, just for a moment as she crashed into them, that Aethyta may have been a bad influence on her...

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The fighting had been brutal...but short. Saren had made another push for the beacon but, with Nihlus and Shepard backing the exhausted Matriarch, he'd never had a real chance. If he'd had more time, he might have outlasted them with his remaining Geth forces. But it turned out that there were more differences between this assault on Eden Prime and the original than just the timing. For Shepard actually *had* brought along both more ground troops...and a small fleet. If Sovereign hadn't been damaged by the graser emplacements, the lone dreadnaught in that relief fleet wouldn't have made the difference. But Sovereign was hurt, having had to take part in every assault in order to overwhelm each graser emplacement's barriers in turn. Wounded, it hadn't been willing to fight the Alliance Dreadnaught and its accompanying cruisers. Sovereign had thrown the remnants of the Geth fleet at them to give Saren time for his final assault...but when that assault failed it had pulled out, hanging back to exchange long-range fire with the other dreadnaught just long enough to pick up Saren's fleeing assault craft.

Less than fifteen minutes later, marine and infantry assault teams from the various Alliance ships now entering orbit had begun to drop onto the burning colony world. Their own small force, which included the remaining five members of *Eden's Dawn* security forces, had stuck to the storage shed that held the beacon. They'd all been content to let the new, fresh units worry about sweeping up the remaining Geth platforms. Liara, face exhausted and streaked with soot and sweat, led Oriana, Aethyta, and the Spectre into the storage unit itself, most of them coming face-to-face with the beacon for the first time.

Face-to-face with the *active* beacon for the first time.

What? Why was it suddenly active?

Liara was the one with the explanation. When Oriana voiced her confusion, she spoke up. “We think that’s how they found it. Some sort of short-range activation protocol, then picking up the activation on active sensors. Once they broke the defenses, Geth Prime units started sweeping the colony with teams of a couple dozen regular troopers as guards. When they passed a block from here, the beacon suddenly sprang to life and...” The young Asari trailed off, actually looking frightened. It was her ‘father’ that picked up the story.

“And fucking grabbed her. Liara was the closest to the beacon and it grabbed her in some sort of field, then fucking mind-whammied her or some shit. She was out cold for almost half an hour.” The Matriarch’s voice grew a little thinner, softer. “...I thought for a bit that I had lost her.”

Liara took a deep breath, steadying herself and trying to stand tall under all the eyes now fixed to her. “I think it was some sort of message. But it was one built for Prothean minds. I don’t know what would have happened if anyone but an Asari touched it, since it nearly overloaded even my nervous system. That’s what knocked me out. But...well...I saw...” She paused, shook herself, then continued. “I think I witnessed the fall of the Prothean Empire. Worse, scrambled as it was, I’m almost certain that I saw ships just like the one that led this attack, bombarding hundreds of Prothean worlds.”

Nihlus interjected tersely. “Thought you saw?”

Liara looked uncomfortable. “Like I said, the message seems to have been made for a different biology. What I can make out of it are only fragments. Confused flashes. Like brief, warped snapshots of clear video from a corrupted file. I’m only as sure as I am about the ships because they showed up in so many of those snapshots.”

“And it wasn’t a hallucination? Brought on by seeing the one that attacked here and the nervous system overload?”

The Turian didn’t seem disbelieving. Only like he wanted to be sure. Which is probably the only thing that saved him from Aethyta snapping his mandibles off and shoving them somewhere unpleasant. Instead, she simply glared at him. “We’ll be able to determine that with a meld, once we’re sure it’s safe for her to do so. I could probably confirm it wasn’t a dream, at least, but I’ve never been all that deft a touched with melds. If you want to be dead certain, someone like Sha’ira could easily tell you beyond any shadow of a doubt.”

Nihlus looked a little doubtful. Probably at the idea of casually getting into see the Consort even for something like this. Still, he nodded. “Someone on the Citadel will be able to help, at least. If you’re certain we’ll be able to know for sure, then we can add it to the report I’ll make to the Council. Anything that could give us a hint why Saren would go rogue like this, let alone why the Geth would attack a human colony on his behalf...”

The Spectre trailed off but they all nodded. Oriana and Aethyta knew, of course, but they couldn’t just vomit up all the answers and expect to be believed. And the others were genuinely in the dark. After a few moments, Shepard clapped her hands together and spoke.

“Either way, we should get the beacon prepped for transport. Can we do that safely, Doctor T’soni?”

Liara shook herself and confirmed they could. With a sure voice that didn’t match her earlier uncertainties, but certainly *did* match her combat-stained appearance, she got them all moving to help shut down the beacon and prep it for transport...

## Chapter 5: Afterparty

Oriana had a problem. She’d eaten a ton, conked out for a solid twelve hours in a spare pod aboard the Normandy, and on the whole felt largely better. The problem? Frankly put, she was horny as hell. It wasn’t even unexpected, really. Humans often had a combat survival reaction of their own, which might have produced something like it, but it was a bit worse than that in Oriana’s case. She was, for all intents and purposes, part Asari now, and something she’d discovered early on was that heavy, sustained usage of biotics did...interesting...things to Asari nervous systems. It was, in fact, one of the lesser known details that had contributed to the entire race’s reputation for being promiscuous. Oriana didn’t quite have it as bad as a true Asari would...and at the same time, she had it worse. An Asari would have gotten the arousing effects of heavy biotic use more strongly, but they *didn’t* have the same chemical responses to combat that humans did. Meaning that the combat itself rarely contributed to their arousal, not in comparison to the heavy biotic use from said combat, at least. So, Oriana got less of it from the one source but doubled down on the issue from another.

Which left her in a relatively tiny ship, without either of her recently-former lovers who were now in a committed relationship with each other and probably fucking off their own post-battle hormone trip somewhere back on Eden Prime. She was grateful they’d both survived...but it would have been nice if they were *here* and willing to go in for one last threesome! She’d just about given up on anything more exciting and decided to take care of the problem herself, when she stumbled upon a possible solution.

That kid from Eden Prime, Jenkins she thought his name was, was sitting alone in the middle of the ship’s night cycle and was looking seriously jittery. Eden Prime was probably his first serious fight and he’d almost died like, a dozen times. At least once he’d run out where he shouldn’t have and only Oriana managing to snap a weak biotic barrier up in front of him had saved the kid’s life! So, maybe she could do a good deed and get the kid to think about something else, and if it went the way she hoped, maybe knock down her own problem while they were at it. He was cute enough, if painfully young seeming in some ways...and it had been a while since Oriana had a real cock, instead of just a strap on. Even if he wasn’t very good with his, it would probably do.

Yes. This could do nicely, she decided. She grabbed a couple of beers from the stocks, casually bypassing the lock that was supposed to keep them out of reach when the ship was technically still at alert status. She joined the marine private and slid the second beer across to him. He jerked in surprise but managed to snatch it, looking up from his study of the tabletop to see where it had come from. His jaw dropped a little as he realized who has given it to him.

“Uh, ma’am?”

Oriana chuckled. “Oriana please, or even Ori. I’m not military so no need for formalities, yes? Besides, you look like you could use that beer...and someone to talk to. First time seeing real action?”

He flinched, then slowly nodded.

“Not much like the vids, huh? Or even what they tried to prepare you for wherever you were trained.”

“Um, no ma--, um...no. I’m Jenkins, by the way, Private Richard Jenkins.”

He didn’t seem quite ready to use her name, but he’d at least caught the ma’am and stopped himself, trying to cover for it with his own introduction. She smiled gently and laid a hand on his arm, leaning forward a bit so the loose t-shirt she was wearing would fall open a bit, giving him something to look at. As his eyes tracked down reflexively, she told him something important. Self-serving at the moment? Absolutely. But still important.

“It’s never like you think it will be. Faster, hotter, slower, colder, bloodier, muddier, just plain...more. More intense. More horrible. More exciting. Just, *more*. But you know the trick to getting through it afterward, without it haunting you?” When he shook his head, she smiled. “To remember not the death but the life. What you accomplished, who you saved, who was there alongside you. A girl back home, a friend with a nice smile, a fuck buddy you’ll get to see again.”

Those last bits were over the top, but she’d seen the reaction in his eyes, which is why she’d added them. No girl waiting for him back home, not even a friend with benefits. Excellent. She steered the conversation away from that, taking the time to give him some actual sound advice from her own experiences in the last few years. Plus some things others had told her, after rough missions or lost fights. Eventually, she segued into jokes and flirty comments as he finished the beer she’d brought him. At that point, she leaned in and made a whispered offer in his ear.

He looked at her with wide eyes and managed to choke out a question. She smirked and nodded, then grabbed him by one arm and tugged him to his feet. He trailed after her like a puppy on a leash as she made her way to the closest thing to privacy they were likely to get...it wasn’t even close to ideal, but on a ship as small as the Normandy, it was the best they could do. At least it was ‘night’ aboard ship and the only people awake were likely to be on-watch. There was risk...but she was horny and didn’t care. Who knows, maybe if someone spotted them they’d join in instead of ratting them out. Though that might scare the kid off..

Once in the limited privacy of the communal bathrooms, Oriana didn’t hesitate to push Richard up against the back wall of the small shower stall. It was the only place that really had enough room for her to kneel, and would act as a slight additional shield of privacy if anyone came in. Probably not enough, but she also didn’t really care at this point. Giving the private her best smoky eyes, good enough for the kid to audibly gulp in response, she stripped off the loose t-shirt she’d managed to acquire from ship’s stores to sleep in. She hadn’t been as lucky with a bra...and honestly didn’t need one outside combat. Despite being a D-cup, the changes to her genetics both before and after her trip through time had given her unnatural support for her size. That support had also made them equally unnaturally firm and perky for D-cups, something Jenkins clearly approved of if the way his eyes were

glued to her tits as she uncovered them was anything to go by. Then again, he was young enough that he'd probably be glued to just about any pair tits he got a chance to see.

Amused by the thought, she allowed herself to smirk as she turned away from him to peel off the much-tighter pants she'd acquired. She heard a slightly pained sounding groan from behind her as she wiggled her ass out of them and her smirk turned mischievous, wandering just how tight she was making that nice bulge of his feel. Well, he could suffer just a bit longer...she was certainly going to soothe any pain. And possibly replace it with a dull ache in his balls when he couldn't get it up any longer...

When she was reduced to just the lacy thong she always preferred for panties, having run those through a quick wash cycle earlier, she slowly turned back to face him, letting him have a few moments to rake her body with his eyes before sinking to her knees in front of him. "Hmmm, let's see just what we're working with here, sweetie."

He let out an audible moan of relief as she deftly unzipped his pants, pulling them and his boxers both down in a single, smooth motion. Her eyes widened as she was almost slapped in the face with the erection that popped out. She leaned back a moment to get a good look at it and gave a low, impressed whistle when she got a proper eyeful. The kid was at least 8 inches at full mast and fairly thick to boot. No wonder he'd been groaning in pain as his pants tightened! She grinned up at him, getting a hesitant smile in return. Clearly the kid wasn't exactly a Casanova...but that's why she was on her knees. He was young enough to pop back easily for a second round once she took his edge off...

The kid jumped as she wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft, then blushed scarlet when she grinned up at him. She didn't say a word, though, instead lowering her gaze to focus on what she was doing. She leaned forward, kissing his tip gently for just a moment, then parted her lips slightly and flicked her tongue across the slit. He flinched and moaned at the same time, actually causing her to giggle a bit, but then she got serious and doubled down. Knowing she intended this to just be a warmup, and that they could be interrupted at any time, she didn't bother going slow. She slipped his cockhead into her mouth...and then smoothly pressed down his shaft until her lips met her fingers just shy of his base. He thrust convulsively, but she'd expected that from the inexperienced private, using her free hand to keep him from thrusting far with a firm pressure against his right hip and moving in time with his thrust. Despite it having been a while since she'd done this, she managed it fairly smoothly, and was quickly able to start bobbing up and down on the thick specimen, enhancing her ruthless deep throat by humming low in her throat as she went.

There was no way the kid could last long under that assault...but that's why she'd kept two fingers loosely around his shaft as she went. She felt the twitch and knew his load was coming, drawing back to just the head and flicking her tongue out again. The reaction was instant as his hips, now held by both of her hands and her considerable gene-therapy-augmented strength, tried to thrust. He was only able to push out a little as his cock spasmed, firing a load straight into her mouth. She accepted that one but quickly popped his cock out from the seal of her lips, grabbing it and pointing it down at her tits. She didn't mind swallowing and he didn't taste all that bad...but having her tits covered in cum would help her with the next step of her plan. He didn't seem to mind, mind lost to anything else as he pumped a full five additional shots onto her face and body. Then he went semi-limp and his erection started to flag. Well, that certainly wouldn't do.

She reached up to cup his dangling balls and massaged them gently, knowing his shaft would be too sensitive for the next minute or so. That got his attention, as well as a twitch from his softening cock. She pulled away with a smirk, bringing her hands back to press her tits together, gazing up at him with burning eyes as he tracked the motion. She let low, throaty moans flow from her lips as she massaged her cum-splattered tits, watching his cock twitch with a hidden smile. No, she certainly wasn't done with him.

She reached up and found some of his cum where it had hit her upper chest and spread it out, deliberately rubbing it in over as wide an area as possible. Her eyes flicked up to his for a just a moment. Oh yes, he was definitely paying close attention. One hand went up, the other down, she gathered more cum from what had landed on her face onto her fingers, then sucked them clean with a sensual moan. The other hand she slipped quite blatantly into her soaked thong, making it obvious as she plunged two fingers inside herself, moaning some more around the others in her mouth even as she locked eyes with the young marine. Jenkins gulped, already-half-erect cock springing valiantly back to full mast.

Oriana smiled and reluctantly removed the fingers from her core, slowly standing and grabbing him by his erection. She tugged and he stumbled after her as she made her way to the counter, letting go only as she bent over, her other hand moving to pull her thong aside. She looked over her shoulder with a wicked grin. "Well, kid, what are you waiting for?"

That was all the invitation he needed. He was on her in a flash, cock hilding in her in one smooth motion that ripped a gasp of mixed surprise and pleasure from her throat. Her back arched as he pulled almost entirely out and slammed home a second time, her hips pushing back to meet his by sheer instinct. She had no idea how the fumbling kid from earlier had managed to be that smooth, and with another woman it might have been too much...but for Oriana it was *fucking amazing*. Sensual was fine, sensual and slow was great. But Asari were good at both and she'd been getting it for years from Fallion and Ani'lia. And it so wasn't what she wanted right now. Between her original, artificial creation and her new Asari additions, her body was virtually built for sin and more than strong enough to take any abuse this kid could throw at her. Right now she wanted to be hammered rough, by a cock that could do the job properly, and inexperienced as Jenkins clearly was he had the right tool and attitude for the moment. All that remained was to see if he had the stamina to keep it up.

As he sped up, roughly pounding her from behind, he actually seemed to be getting deeper with every thrust, dragging wanton moans out of lips that no longer cared if they got caught. She was getting what she wanted, what she needed, and that cock was hitting her soooo deep. She bucked back into him and he surprised her again, grabbing one of her wrists and pinning it behind her back, pushing her down into the counter even as she instinctively raised her hips in response. The sudden aggressiveness and her lack of control just stoked the fire higher and she spasmed through her first climax unexpectedly quickly. But Jenkins didn't stop pounding...and she didn't want him to. She was thoroughly multi-orgasmic, capable of cumming for hours if she had even brief breaks and was allowed to...or forced to. That had been one of her more interesting adventures with Fallion...

The memory of that brief foray into bondage, one of the few she had from the bound perspective in her previous relationship, as Fallion hadn't been that into it and Ani'lia was pure subbie, simply made the situation hotter. She was almost disappointed as she felt the kid's efforts start to stutter a few minutes later, a telltale sign he was on the ragged edge. He held out for another minute, pushing her to the very edge of her next release, then unloaded deep inside her with one last, brutally



deep thrust. She cried out in turn as the gushing sensation of a blissfully large second load emptying into her set her off again, hard. She bit her lip, trying not to scream and only half managing it...then she sagged, feeling the softening cock leaving her as she did...

A few minutes of furtive cleanup later, with her having mischievously tucked her soaked thong into Jenkin's pocket as a 'thank you' memento, the two of them slipped out of the bathroom...to see an amused looking Asari Matriarch calmly holding a filmy-thin biotic bubble over the bathroom entrance. Aethyta smirked at the blushing duo, then dropped the sound-blocking biotic film and walked away without another word.

Oriana was *really* going to have to find her fellow conspirator a nice thank you gift...

## End of Part 2

### Chapter 6: The Council

Their arrival on the Citadel had been surprisingly quiet. Frankly, it was an aspect of the changes she had made that Oriana hadn't even thought of, though for now it seemed a positive change. In the original timeline, in *her* original timeline, however that worked, the utter mess that had been Saren's raid on Eden's Prime had sent shockwaves through the halls of power. Which, to be fair, was still the case this time. The difference was in the low-profile way which the Normandy, along with its passengers and crew, had been able to slip onto the Citadel. Nihlus's Spectre status had let him reach out to the Council directly, before they had even left Eden Prime's Orbit. Furthermore, his clearance had allowed the Normandy to dock at a private Spectre-only docking slip, keeping the paparazzi from connecting its arrival with the shocking news coming out of Eden's Prime.

Nihlus's report, combined with a forwarded copy of the footage showing Saren in combat with Matriarch Aethyta, had the Council taking things dead-serious from the moment the ship stopped moving. An Asari Meld Specialist, not the Consort but one of her top adherents, met them not two steps outside the Normandy's hatch. She was accompanied by others, including a second Spectre. That Spectre was one of the branch's only dedicated investigators, a Salarian named Jondum Bau, who specialized in the sort of high-level, high-stakes, galaxy-spanning investigations that called for a Spectre to be involved. Along with him was a C-Sec detective that Oriana immediately recognized. Garrus Vakarian had, after all, played a rather major role in many events of her original timeline. She was a little surprised to see him now...but Jondum quickly explained that his fellow investigator had already reported suspicions about Saren's behavior. Which meant that Garrus had a place to start from when no one else did. Since time might well be of the essence, that head start was enough to involve the detective in at least the initial efforts.

The hours following their arrival had been grueling as a result of the prep work that had been done by the Council and the Spectre office but, as those hours were also incredibly productive because of that same prep work, no one was about to complain. During that time, the Meld Specialist had confirmed the authenticity of Liara's vision, all of those that had been on the ground on Eden's Prime were efficiently questioned, the Prothean beacon secured, and information about the sheer size and toughness of the 'dreadnaught' that attacked Eden's Prime verified completely from Alliance sensor data. And...after all that, they had been let go for a few hours while the information was delivered to the Council. Once the Councilors had had a chance to be briefed fully on the data, they would be taken

directly to them for a face-to-face meeting and questioning. Until then, they'd been told to cool their heels...and immediately ignored that idea in favor of chasing down any additional information they could.

Which, as it happened, was how Oriana had ended up in her current situation...

Oriana cursed as she dove out of the way of a stream of heavy fire coming from a Krogan wielding a squad-weapon like it was a toy, using her biotic power to throw the corpse of another mercenary straight at the enemy Krogan. The heavy weapon's fire chewed the corpse to offal...but it bought enough time for the Krogan battlemaster nominally on *their* side to bull rush the younger member of his race. Absurdly, his Quarian friend had been latched onto his back and let go only a bare moment before her ride impacted his fellow Krogan. As the two behemoths bellowed, the Quarian rolled around the pair and brought up her shotgun, unloading an overcharged carnage round straight into the enemy Krogan's side. That wasn't enough to kill him...but his howl of agony and flinch away gave her partner space, and the battlemaster followed up by punching his fist straight through the new hole in armor-and-flesh before releasing a biotic warp, tearing the other Krogan apart from the inside.

Oriana grinned fiercely at the sight. She, Shepard and Alenko having finished off the remaining human and Salarian mercs during the distraction the charge had caused. Then she saw the Krogan swing back around, his own shotgun coming up toward Shepard, and she hurriedly spoke up. "Hold, Battlemaster Wrex! We have no quarrel with you!" The sound of his name and title caused his shotgun to slow...then stop short of actually pointing at Shepard, merely aiming at the floor at her feet. After a tense moment where everyone tried to pretend they weren't on the cusp of more violence, his gravelly voice spoke.

"Who're you? And how do you know my name. If you've come for Fist, I've already got dibs on him."

It was Shepard that spoke up for their side, before Oriana could. "We don't care about Fist, only any information he might have about a rouge Spectre named Saren."

That statement actually seemed to surprise the Krogan. He blinked slowly, seeming to consider something...but it was the Quarian that spoke first. "What do you want to know about that slimy, sleazy Bosh'tet! If you're one of his agents, I'll feed you to Wrex!"

That seemed to amuse the battlmaster, a bass chuckle rumbling from his chest. "Don't think humans probably taste very good, little Tali, but I'm willing to try..." He paused, grinning a bit darkly as his shotgun lowered farther. "But if they called him rogue, I doubt they're some of his."

"We aren't. He personally led an attack by the Geth on the human colony of Eden Prime. We're trying to dig up anything on him that might help us track the bastard down." Shepard's voice was cool, calm even as she deactivated her own weapon and motioned her team to do the same. "If you're not some of his, we have no issue with you. But we had a lead that Fist might know something."

Wrex snorted. "He doesn't. He sold the Shadow Broker out for Saren's credits, but Saren played him. Cut the stupid fuck off to die. Makes sense now, if the birdie can't make it to the Citadel anymore."

Shepard grimaced but went on doggedly. "We might still get something from his systems, if he's been in contact with Saren."

It was Tali that spoke up in response, not Wrex. "I doubt it. Saren's a Spectre, or was at least? He'll have covered his tracks from anything someone like Fist can do. But...I might be able to help you. Fist tried to have me killed because I found something out about Saren and tried to sell the information to the Broker. If Wrex hadn't been following a few of Fist's thugs, thinning out their numbers before he hit Chora's Den, I'd have been dead."

The Krogan snorted again, rolling his eyes over to his partner, then back to Shepard. "Don't let her fool you, she killed 3 of his thugs before I got the last one that was trying to shoot her in the back. Figured, after seeing that, it was worth letting her tag along, since she had an axe to grind with Fist after he pulled that stunt."

Everyone, even Oriana who'd never known much about Tali'zarah vas Rayya/Normandy, was suddenly blinking in shock as they looked at the girl...who stared back, half defiant and half sheepish looking. After a long few moments of silence, it was Oriana who found her voice first.

"You have something on Saren? What do you want for it?"

The Quarian's stance firmed, even as she glanced at Wrex. He nodded and she spoke. "Help us take out Fist and I'll give you what I have. Wrex had to take me to get patched up, so the bosh'tet had a chance to pull in a couple of merc groups to cover his ass. We've been trying to kill him for days, but between the mercs and C-Sec, we couldn't get to him until now. And there's still a lot of them between us and him."

Shepard nodded, sharply and decisively. "Done. If he was a human helping Saren he deserves whatever you've got planned for him, anyway."

Wrex grunted. "Practical. Good in a fight. I might just like you, human."

With that, he turned to the inner door that the Krogan merc had been defending. Without farther pause, he charged up his biotics....and smashed right through the reinforced door, immediately taking fire on the other side. As the human team scrambled to get their weapons out again, Oriana grinned in triumph. Urdot Wrex was *important*. And she'd not been able to track him down before this. She had no idea how Shepard had originally recruited the ancient battlemaster...but hopefully, she could work with this.

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As Tali'zarah played an audio file from her omni-tool, it was all Oriana could do not to gape. *Tali* had been the source of the original information about Matriarch Benezia? Oriana hadn't known how that connection had come to light in the original timeline...and hadn't known how long Benezia had been working with Saren. They hadn't dared try to reach out to the Matriarch, even as much as that fact had been a bitter pill for Aethyta to swallow regarding her old flame. Now, she was frantically trying to recall everything she knew about the Quarian, trying to slot the new information into her calculations. Should she try to make sure Tali was aboard the Normandy again? She hadn't even secured her own spot yet...and she *absolutely* needed Wrex to be. Could she...no. Don't borrow trouble. She might end up following anyway, just like she originally did. Worry about it if that *doesn't* happen. For now, focus on the Council...who were listening to Aethyta grimly confirm that it was her old lover's voice. The Councilors looked at each other for a long moment, then Tevos spoke.

“So, this plot goes far deeper than merely Saren and the Geth. Matriarch Benezia will need to be brought in as well...or otherwise dealt with. And then there’s the information the Meld Specialist was able to confirm from Doctor T’soni’s encounter with the beacon. These...Reapers.”

Valern spoke up even as the Asari councilor trialed off. “Concerning. Insufficient data to make full conclusion. But possible link to destruction of both Protean Empire and Rachni War are both obvious. Must act to get more information.”

Sparatus grunted, adding his two cents when the Salarian stopped. “More than information. We need to deal with Saren and this Reaper ship, as well as Benezia and the Geth. If not for the new weapons the Alliance was testing on Eden Prime, that ship would have wiped out the colony. As it is, the data we have suggests it could take any two dreadnaughts in the galaxy, even if one of them was the Ascension. And even that estimate is only if both dreadnaughts were fitted with the new Thanix main guns developed by *New Dawn*. It’s almost enough to make me think you could have been working with him for your own profit, Lawson. Particularly given how closely its main gun resembles your Thanix designs.”

Oriana blinked...she actually hadn’t considered how suspicious that could look. But she didn’t have to answer, since Aethyta growled at the Councilor and he hurriedly waved his hand.

“Only almost. The efforts she and you made on the ground make it clear that wasn’t the case, Matriarch. But someone else will point it out, eventually, if I don’t.”

Oriana shrugged. “I sort of doubt Saren’s going to be quiet, now that he’s failed in so spectacular a fashion, and I imagine my continued help against him will shut down anything but wild rumors.” Several gazes looked at her, uncertain what she meant, but she waved them off for now. After a moment, the Turian councilor broke the short silence again.

“And how went your original mission, Nihlus? What is your evaluation of Spectre candidate Shepard? Is she ready to be a Spectre?”

Several of the those in the room blinked, off balance at the seeming change of subject. But Nihlus responded swiftly. “From a combat standpoint, I’d say the answer is a definitive ‘yes.’ She chewed through the Geth, despite their numbers, in a way that stacks up well against any Spectre, including myself. She also made excellent use of local resources, made all of the correct calls, and ultimately was the one to secure the objective. This all speaks well of her potential. However, it falls short of telling me several other things I need to know. When we arrived at the Citadel, I had intended to recommend she take several additional missions alongside me or another Spectre before final evaluation.”

Nihlus paused for a moment, then the serious expression on his face twitched into the Turian equivalent of a smirk. “However, her actions since arrival have changed that. When told to ‘wait,’ she instead immediately set out into the station, tapping her own resources and connections for information and following up on that information when she got it. In the process, she managed to track down and obtain critical information about who is working with Saren, that may prove key to locating him. She did this entirely on her own initiative, with her own contacts and resources...and admittedly, a certain utter disregard for proper protocol.”

After a long pause to let that sink in, Nihlus's smirk shifted to a grin. "Which is, frankly, *exactly* the skill and mindset required of a Spectre. I'd argue that she has, almost accidentally, shown the best promise of any Spectre candidate in decades at least, possibly even centuries. Any farther testing would be superfluous in light of that. My formal recommendation is that she be promoted immediately to Spectre status and assigned the usual mentor to induct her into Spectre operations."

The Councilors...actually looked relieved. It was Sparatus that spoke for the three of them a moment later. "This is excellent news, as it means our best option for handling this...delicate situation...is viable." He exchanged a quick glance with the other two, then gestured for Tevos to take up the explanation. She nodded as he seemed to 'step back,' turning her gaze on Shepard.

"Later today, as soon as it can be arranged, you will be very publicly promoted to full Spectre status. Immediately after that, you will be both publicly and privately assigned to investigate Saren, Benezia, the Geth, that Dreadnaught, and these 'Reapers' that young Liara saw in her vision. You will *not* be the only Spectre assigned this task, of course, both Nihlus and Jondum Bau will also be assigned. However, where they will be assigned specific tasks, we want you to simply look into anything and everything related, feeding any and all information to the others. By all means, if you find a target to strike at, do so. However, on the whole, you are intended to be the Wild Card. You already have as much information as any Spectre to start with, since you are already involved, and you are an unknown to Saren." Tevos paused, grimaced, then went on. "Even that is, however, a justification. Your inclusion in the hunt is partially a political reality. A rouge Spectre has attacked a human colony. Providing the first human Spectre as part of the major investigations will prove that we take that seriously. Having said that, this position is *not* a sinecure. You, like any other Spectre placed in such an important task, will be expected to produce results. I pray to the goddess that Nihlus is right to recommend you so quickly, as you will be thrown straight into the deep waters in a way even most Spectres rarely are."

Shepard's spine had straightened, even as satisfied smiles appeared on Ambassador Udina and Captain Anderson's faces. Oriana herself gave a relieved sigh, glad that her meddling with the timeline hadn't *completely* derailed Shepard's future. The galaxy was going to *need* Alliana Shepard in the coming days, and becoming the first human Spectre had been what truly propelled the woman into galactic prominence. With that much achieved, she was certain she could count on Shepard's own insane combination of skill, charisma, and simple luck to do the rest...not that she had any intention of leaving it all to chance. With a last mention from the Council that Jondum Bau would meet Shepard at the Spectre offices to get her set up, as well as join her on a first mission, the meeting broke up and they all filed out of the private meeting room. Even as they did so, Oriana's mind worked on her argument. Barely outside the secured room, Udina and Anderson had begun immediately talking to Shepard about taking the Normandy and its crew...but before they could get any farther, Oriana interrupted.

"Excuse me, Gentleman, Commander, but I believe other assets need to be discussed first, before they fly away." She flagged down Tali and Wrex, who had been loitering near the trio as well. "We're going to need a couple of things for this endeavor, one of which is individuals that can help take someone like Saren or Matriarch Benezia on in a fight." Ignoring the sharp glance from Udina at the mention of 'we,' she gestured to Wrex. "Let the three of you be properly known to Urdrnot Wrex, a rather infamous Krogan Battlemaster...who is in excess of a millennia old. Though I'm afraid I don't know his exact age, despite pulling all the files on him from several different organizations."

Wrex grunted, eying her a bit curiously. "Don't know either. Don't keep track. Twelve hundred or so, I think."

Oriana nodded to him, then smoothly went on. "He's one of the handful of fighters in the galaxy I'd expect to stack up well against a Spectre of Saren's caliber...and interested in this little jaunt, I think?" She directed that at Wrex and he nodded.

"Broker wants Saren dead. I took the contract."

Before anyone could say anything about that, Oriana quickly went on. "Exactly. And we're probably your best shot at finding him. As for any security concerns," she glanced at the Alliance members, "I'll personally match the Broker's fee if you agree not to pass on anything about the Alliance, the Normandy, or anything else classified, to the Broker."

Wrex gave her a toothy grin. "You speak my language, human. Done. But you'll take the kid, too." He pointed a finger back to a surprised looking Tali.

Oriana nodded, then smirked at the slightly poleaxed looking trio of her fellow humans before turning toward Tali to confirm. "Done. Her knowledge of the Geth might prove utterly crucial. Moreover, I'll personally assure you are paid via a brand-new freighter as a pilgrimage gift, in addition to whatever you learn about the Geth during this that might be useful to the fleet. And yes, I *can* do that, as I own several shipyards."

Even as Tali stuttered her acceptance of the deal, Shepard finally found her voice. Her eyes narrowed, her eyes sharpening as she caught Oriana's with her own. "And why does all of this sound like you are planning to join us?"

"Because I intend to. I lost people on Eden's Prime Shepard. Between the crews of the grasers, which hadn't yet been taken over by the Alliance's people, plus the techs, dig team, and security..." Her voice hardened. She might have expected it. Been ruthless enough about it to put her people in anyway. But she was not *sanguine* about their deaths. "*New Dawn Enterprises* lost over 300 people. And that's a low estimate." She glanced at Udina and Anderson with a cold smile. "The Systems Alliance will be hearing about a new deal from our people before the day is up. We had intended to offer it to the Asari, first...but I convinced my business partner to sell some of our new weapon systems straight to the Alliance. And to do so at considerably lower a markup than we were originally planning." Almost no markup at all, actually. But they didn't need to know that.

Ignoring the avaricious expression on Udina's face, she refocused on Shepard. "As for me specifically. It's *not* commonly known...but I'm the single most powerful human biotic that's ever been recorded. The original, quite accidental, prototype of a certain very black project the Alliance is currently working on with *New Dawn*. I've been combat trained by one of the most deadly Asari Matriarchs currently living, have my own information network, and can bring both prototype, bleeding edge gear to your team...and the personal ability to tear apart any technical information we find on the Geth or that Dreadnaught. I am, after all, the original designer of the Thanix system and several other major improvements in Kinetic Barriers, Torpedo Designs, Engine Systems, and more."

Every single one of them was wide-eyed at this point. Even Wrex, who was blatantly reevaluating her. Oriana simply locked her gaze with Shepard's, the other woman the least effected by

her little resume statement. After a long moment, Shepard nodded grimly. "Welcome aboard, then. When I get back from the Spectre offices, we'll go over anything you can add beyond your personal skill in combat. Though, to be clear...that would have been enough, along with your desire to get some back for your people. I saw first-hand just how good you are on Eden Prime, even fighting exhausted. I imagine you're a holy terror fresh."

Oriana smiled back at the other woman, just as grimly. Outwardly, at least. Internally, she was mentally turning cartwheels at getting this chance. Even she didn't know if it was better to be on the Normandy or simply working in the background...but the part of her that had been shaped by Aethyta in the past few years was unwilling not to get personally involved. So, this is how it would be. Besides, she suspected Aethyta would never have forgiven her if she wasn't aboard the Normandy to look after Liara, after getting her daughter mixed up in this in the first place...

## Chapter 7: A Cure for Grief

Shepard had met up with her for just an hour after the Commander had gotten back from the Spectre office. After a brief overview of what Oriana could help with and setting a few plans in motion, both on behalf of Shepard and a few of Oriana's own, they had separated. There was a lot to do in order to transfer Command of the Normandy to Shepard, as well as some minor repair work to see to. Not to mention proper provisioning and crew allocation, as the ship had originally been on a Shakedown Cruise, with little more than a skeleton crew aboard. It would take at least a day for them to be ready to go, no matter how much they hurried, and Oriana had something else she needed to take care of before they left. Something...a bit more personal.

She found Ashely in the armory, field stripping and cleaning weapons that were, frankly, already pristine. She'd suspected she'd find her friend there, it being a habit of the Chief's she'd already seen once or twice when the other woman was morose. Considering that she was one of only two surviving members of her squad, with the only other survivor left back with the shattered remnants of her division, 'morose' was probably putting too light a word to the chief's thoughts. And Oriana had no intention of letting her friend wallow. Ashely jumped when Oriana laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, then tried to smile at her once she realized who it was.

"Yeah. That smile isn't fooling anyone, Chief. Least of all me. Come on, put those away and get cleaned up, we're going out."

"I don't—"

Ashely didn't get any more than that out as Oriana laid a finger on her lips. "Nope. You're going to come out with me. We're going to have drinks to toast the fallen. We're going to get utterly hammered to forget for the night, possibly find a guy or two, and *then* get back to the hunt tomorrow. There's a time and place for being stoic...but right after virtually your entire division gets shot up, along with virtually all of *New Dawn's* security people and civilian techs, isn't it. Now come on."

Ashely's shoulders actually relaxed from their hyper-tense position and she nodded. This was something she understood. A soldier's sendoff for the fallen and a cure for their own grief, no matter

how temporary. She followed Oriana to the crew quarters, where she'd already had a few basic civilian clothes and necessities delivered for both of them to replace everything they'd lost on Eden Prime.

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Oriana grinned as she pressed her naked breasts into the gunny's back, her hands cupping the other woman's tits and expertly exploring, even as the chief bounced up and down on the cock of the overly-handsome man whose name Oriana had never bothered learning. She'd never gone in for the movie-star-plastic sort of handsome...but Ashely clearly did, and Oriana had let the tipsy chief pick their target. After all, getting the clearly-a-bit-repressed chief to fall into a one-night-stand had been hard enough...and making sure she wasn't *quite* drunk enough to regret her actions in the morning made it even harder. As such, Oriana wasn't about the quibble about her target selection, particularly as she was personally more interested in the chief than some random guy. Now...she just had to make this experience so spectacular that any remaining fear of Ash being upset by it tomorrow was a non-issue.

With that in mind, she set to it will a will. She sent a tiny pulse of biotic power through the hands still playing with Ashely's tits, drawing a lewd moan from the chief as the action stimulated every nerve ending in the woman's nipples at once. Even as Ashley's back arched backward into Oriana, she latched onto one of the woman's earlobes, gently sucking and nibbling. The chief came with an explosive cry, her pace faltering as she lost control of her leg muscles. But Oriana had been ready for that, one hand already moving down the other woman's body and her biotics flaring. With the seamlessness that could only come from years of experience with an Asari lover that enjoyed threesomes, she pulled the chief free of the cock she'd been riding and flipped her down onto the high-class hotel mattress below them. The man made a noise of protest...right up until her biotics pulled him up to his knees even as Oriana dove between Ashely's thighs, her own ass rising off the bed toward him in clear invitation.

Startled but willing, the man took the hint and grabbed her raised hips, hilding fully in Oriana's pussy with a single unguided thrust that spoke, at least, of a decent amount of skill. She moaned, eyes closing for a moment at the surge of pleasure his more-than-decent cock elicited as it bottomed out, then forcing them open again to focus on attacking the chief before she could recover. She grabbed Ashley's thighs, lifting them over her own shoulders even as she homed in on the chief's soaked pussy, tongue diving it before the other woman could recover enough to realize what was going on.

Under normal circumstances, the chief probably would have rejected Oriana's attentions, not really being into women. But under *these* circumstances, with the high from cumming her brains out joined to the fading blur of alcohol in her mind, Ashely's response was pure instinct. She wrapped her legs around Oriana's head, pulling her in closer, one hand coming down to grasp the other woman's hair. Oriana managed a brief smile even as she moaned from the handsome man's efforts, a part of her cheering at getting into a straight-girl's pants. Then she had no more focus left for anything but her and Ashley's' pleasure. Her tongue darted to and fro, thrusting one moment, flicking over the chief's clit another, and teasingly tracing her lips between, when Ashely got too close to cumming again. Despite the increasingly incoherent pleas coming from her 'victim,' Oriana drew it out, driving the chief to the edge repeatedly before backing off, even as she continued to moan from the efforts of the man fucking her. Finally, just as Oriana was about to peak herself, she sent a tiny jolt of biotic juice through her



tongue and into the other woman's clit, sending Ashely *howling* over the edge in what was most likely the most powerful climax of the other woman's life. Mere moments later, Oriana lost control of the biotic trick as she was thrown over the edge into her own climax...

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The man, for all that he hadn't been Oriana's type, had proven himself skilled. He'd managed to make her cum twice before losing it himself...and he'd had the stamina to get it up again to fuck the sex-delirious gunnery-chief a second time. Oriana had no idea how many times the other woman had cum...but it was enough that the woman had passed out twice before the night was over. Now, the man long-gone, she accepted the heavily-loaded room service cart from the bell-boy. Well, bell-Asari, actually, whose wide eyes were roving Oriana's body, barely covered by a half-heartedly closed robe. Oriana grinned at the girl, gave her a nicely sized tip to go with the free show, then pulled the cart in and closed the door.

The smell of the food finally caused the chief to stir, a moan coming from the other woman as her hangover fought with the hunger cravings the smell of a Full-English breakfast was creating. Oriana grinned at the sound of half-misery. "Sober-up hypo is on the nightstand next to you."

The words, once they processed for the other woman, resulted in a slow hand creeping out from under the covers to feel around on the nightstand. It soon found the hypospray, filled with a cocktail colloquially known as 'sober-up,' that could both flush alcohol out of the body...and cure handovers with a concentrated dose of the right nutrients and fast-acting painkillers. There was a soft sound as the chief used the hypospray, then thirty seconds of quiet...followed by the still-nude chief sitting up in bed, cover's falling away from her naked chest. Oriana ogled appreciatively, then grinned and deflected a thrown pillow with a tiny bit of biotic power.

"Now, now...that's no way to thank someone that set up that hypo for you...and ordered us both room service."

Ashley huffed, rolling her eyes. "I think you got your fair returns last night. I don't normally do threesomes...or women, either."

Oriana grinned and waggled her eyebrows. "Oh? So worth it though, wasn't it?"

Ashley huffed again, she crawled properly out from under the covers, grabbing the robe tossed to her. "Thanks. And...I suppose I have to admit it was. If that hadn't been literally the best sex of my life, I'd be kinda pissed that you suckered me into a threesome just to get in my pants."

Oriana grinned hugely, but refrained from rubbing it in. Who knows, if she was gracious about it, she might even get in those pants again. Under the right conditions, of course. Like, if she got the chief smashed and horny again. Choosing to politely ignore the chief's blush at the admission, Oriana whipped the cover off the food cart, neatly wiping away any lingering annoyance from the gunny as they descended on the food...

## **Chapter 8: Sisters**

It had turned out that they couldn't get out of dock in just twenty-four hours, as Shepard had originally hoped. Not only would the repairs to the Normandy take a few hours longer than that...but

Jondum Bau needed a bit more time to crack the financial records of Saren's holdings. He'd found a link to Binary Helix but needed another day to sort through that company's various holdings for a suitable target. Meanwhile, Garrus Vakarian had disappeared, much to Oriana's quiet chagrin. On quietly looking into it, it appeared that he'd been grabbed up by Nihlus to help with his own line of investigation into Saren. Despite the fact that Vakarian had been another major name associated with Shepard in the original timeline, Oriana tried to be serene about that change. The Turian was still going to be involved in some fashion...and she honestly didn't have much idea how important he'd been, anyway. There was no use crying over spilt milk, and she'd known from the start that her changes to the timeline would have consequences she'd never be able to predict.

Unfortunately, all of that was secondary to that fact that remaining so long on the Citadel had let someone catch up to her at last. Someone who she very much wanted to meet...but was terrified of meeting at the same time. Her sister had finally caught up to her, seeming to appear out of nowhere and plop down across from Oriana at the small café she'd been enjoying lunch at. For long minutes Miranda just stared, seeming not to know what to say. Eventually, Oriana's nerves couldn't take it. As calmly as she could, she spoke first.

"Hello, Miranda. I do hope you haven't led Cerberus to me. I think I may have angered them somewhat in the last few years."

Her sister started in her seat, eyes going wide, then she slumped and shook her head. "No. I made sure no one followed me. And I'm not sure I'm going back. After all, you *have* angered them. Too much so for me to shield you any longer...but...how did you know?"

"About you? Or about Cerberus?"

"Both."

Oriana sighed, used the table-console to order drinks for both of them, then settled back in her seat to lie outright to her sister. Or, well, hopefully simply redirect rather than lie, for now. "I found out about Cerberus first, actually. They were much too heavy handed with that whole medical issue I had a few years back. I trust you know what I'm talking about?"

Miranda's mouth twisted and she nodded, but didn't interrupt."

"Well, once I found out my file had been flagged so highly...I'm not stupid, Miranda. You of all people should know that. And I grew up on Illium. I knew to be careful, lest I end up disappeared at some point, but I started digging. It took several years, not to mention befriending an Asari Matriarch, to eventually discover just who'd rigged my file. But that rabbit hole led to a lot more, including a number of horrifying black projects, and one of Cerberus' old financial backers." Oriana's expression turned hard, her voice wintry. "Did you know, dear sister, that Henry Lawson was a major investor in Cerberus? He cut ties with them only when the Illusive Man decided your *skills* were more valuable than Henry's credits. Cerberus didn't need money at that point, but a *perfect* human biotic? Oh yes, they valued that far more than the money and connections dear old dad had."

Miranda had gone bone white as Oriana watched her. Good, she actually hadn't known. Oriana had thought not, all things considered, but she'd never been able to be sure. She tapped a few keys on her omni-tool, sending the relevant files to Miranda. Her sister's bloodless face turned down as she

opened the files with shaky hands, following the old money trails. Then an expression of rage twisted her face, only to disappear under a mask of calm as she took several deep breaths.

“And how did you find out about me? From following our *father’s* tracks?”

Oriana nodded. “Yes. I never tried to make contact with you, though. Because I couldn’t be sure what your loyalties were. Cerberus is a *terrorist* organization, Miranda. A nasty one, with a bunch of horrifying experimental projects.”

“They agreed to protect you. And they did it too, you’d never have survived *whatever* happened to you five years ago, if they hadn’t. But...my loyalty was always to *you* first and they aren’t willing to ignore your actions any longer.” The rage flashed back on her face again for a mere moment before it was suppressed. “And this new information means I’ll never go back to them. Though, I’m not sure where I will go.”

“I know exactly where you’ll go.”

Miranda looked at her, cocking an eyebrow, and Oriana smiled.

“I’d like to get to know my sister, Miranda. While I’m going to be a bit...busy, helping a few Spectres follow up on Eden Prime, I know Matriarch Aethyta will gladly accept some more help running *New Dawn’s* intelligence apparatus. An apparatus which is quite a bit larger and more involved than I suspect even Cerberus is aware of.”

Miranda looked shocked. “But—”

Oriana interrupted. “But me no buts. We could use you, the *galaxy* could use you with what we expect is coming...and I trust Aethyta to keep an eye on you. I might want to get to know you, sis...but I’m not stupid.”

Miranda winced at that. Then sighed. “Part of me says I should go after Cerberus before they go after us, but...I do want to get to know you to...sis?”

Oriana smiled. “Don’t worry, we’ve got *plans* for Cerberus. So you’ll get your chance once the Matriarch is sure of you. And once *I’m* sure of you...” Oriana faltered, “sis, there’s something BAD coming at the galaxy. Worse than the Rachni Wars or Krogan Rebellions bad, I think. I don’t know enough yet, but we’re going to need every hand we can get if *any* of us are going to get through this.”

Miranda stared at her, searching her face and eyes for truth, then sucked in her breath at whatever she found there. “Fine. I’ll meet with this Matriarch of yours, at least. But for now...can we talk about something else? Were your adopted parents good ones?”

Smiling at the plea in her sister’s voice, Oriana eagerly set about telling Miranda what she could of her life. Both her lives. Even if she wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to tell her sister more than this about the first one. For now, though, this was enough...she had her sister back!

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Later in the day, Oriana was sitting in the storage area behind the med-bay that she’d managed to, along with Dr. Tsoni, take over for a mix of a lab and living space. It hadn’t been that hard a sell, given that both of them needed to bring some gear aboard to be of the most use...and Oriana may or may not

have factored in the benefits of sharing the close quarters with the cute little Asari doctor when she roped Liara into helping convince Shepard of the necessity. Even as she mentally smacked herself again for that thought, knowing full well that Shepard and Liara had gotten involved in the original timeline, her omni-tool chimed with a vid-call. Seeing that it was Aethyta, she quickly closed the work she'd been doing, connections for arranging new gear for the crew as it happened, and answered the call.

"Your sister is just as smart as you are, kid...but seriously kinda a bitch. I think I like her."

Oriana snorted. "Well, hello to you too, boss."

Aethyta smirked at her. "Oh please, we both know I'm not really your boss. Now, please tell me you have a plan for what to do with your sister? I know we spoke about it in loose terms before, but you never really made a decision."

Oriana nodded. "Yeah, that was because I really wasn't sure how loyal Miranda was to Cerberus versus how loyal to a sister she'd gone out of her way to protect, but never really met."

Aethyta shrugged as Oriana paused, making a 'get on with it gesture.'

"I'm pretty sure, after how she reacted to some of what I told her, that she's no longer loyal to Cerberus. Which, as I see it, is perfect. We've needed someone to handle dealing with them, since they've got some assets we want. Not to mention a distinct lack of caution with Reaper tech that I seriously don't want to deal with this time around. I want them shut down, hard, and anything useful they have converted for use by *New Dawn*. Put Miranda in charge of it...and assign Jack to work with her. She can keep an eye on my sister and make sure my desires aren't betraying my instincts here."

Aethyta thought for a moment, then nodded. "Jack hates Cerberus, so she'll keep a close eye on her without us even needing to ask. The two of them might kill each other, though. You know how Jack is."

Oriana grinned. "Oh, I don't know, I think it will be good for both of them. Unless, of course, they really do kill each other..."

Aethyta shook her head, even as she smirked, then changed the subject. "So, you're shacking up with my daughter, huh? Liara told me about it."

"She's keeping in touch with you? That's good! And, yeah...I wasn't about to put up with those goddess-awful sleeping pods, you know."

Her business partner snorted. "Sure, and the fact that you might get to see Liara naked has nothing to do with it? I doubt it will happen, though. My daughter is such a prude, you know."

"I admit I wouldn't mind looking...though I'll leave her be, she and Shepard made such a cute pair last time."

Aethyta rolled her eyes. "Right, bullshit. Even if you could be sure they'd click again, despite all the changes...you totally have a thing for threesomes. Don't think I didn't hear about you managing to bang Ashley last night. Congrats on that one, by the way, I never would have believed even you could get in that one's pants."

Oriana grinned but didn't take the bait, instead changing the subject to the first of several pieces of business they really did need to get sorted out. There was no telling when the next chance to communicate securely was going to be, after all...

### End of Part 3

## Chapter 9: Noveria

The Normandy, thankfully, hadn't been delayed farther. Jondum Bau had come aboard at roughly the same time Oriana had a care package of advanced gear delivered to the ship. Shortly afterward, the repair parties had finished with the damages the Normandy had taken on its unexpectedly eventful shakedown cruise, removing the last impediment to their departure. The ship had left the station with priority clearance within minutes of the last repair worker clearing the private dock, the Alliance personnel carefully escorted away by C-sec. The ship was fuller now, having been provided with its full crew complement instead of the skeleton crew of the shakedown run...and Oriana was privately relieved that Jenkins had been swapped out with another private, in what was apparently standard alliance policy. It seemed that, at least during peace time, a week of leave and a skull session with the head-shrinkers was standard policy after a newbie's first taste of real combat. As that would have been impossible if he'd remained aboard the Normandy, he'd simply been rotated out in favor of another young soldier who'd already gone through the same process. Since this meant she didn't have to worry about the kid being clingy, she was all for the policy...which just plain made unusual amounts of sense for the military, anyway.

After departing the Citadel, it had taken them five days and a number of Relay changes to reach the target Bau had found for them. Namely, the planet of Noveria. Where Binary Helix, majority stockholder Saren Arterius, had an extremely remote research facility that the Spectre had apparently visited personally on more than one occasion. As, it happened, had fellow shareholder Matriarch Benezia. It was a good lead, and Oriana herself vaguely remembered Noveria having had some importance, though the only specific thing she could remember was that Matriarch Benezia had apparently been killed there. Perhaps she would be there again? Hopefully, they were on the right track, as Oriana simply didn't know enough about the early days of the battle against the Reapers to help guide events.

Of course, landing on the corporate-owned world had been more than a bit annoying. But where Shepard might have been inclined to be diplomatic or play deal maker, Spectre Bau had simply run roughshod over the locals, actually getting an approving grunt from Wrex, of all people, when the Spectre had simply shot the administrator in the leg when he attempted to prevent them from traveling to the Peak 15 research facility. *That* had gotten the sniveling little coward's attention and they'd soon had a pass to the garage, where they loaded aboard a pair of makos, their own and a second they'd commandeered from the garage. Things had been going smoothly...right up until they went off the rails completely.

Someone, possibly the administrator, had warned the research facility they were coming. And the idiots had, apparently, tried to bury their research by activating a rather explosive failsafe...only for that 'research' to break containment and slaughter most of the research facility's people. Which was

how Oriana found herself desperately dodging acidic Rachni spit as she flung a biotic warp back the other direction, impacting the singularity Shepard had spawned farther down the hall, triggering a biotic detonation that gave all of them some breathing room. Even as her Raikou flashed up to target one of the few remaining Rachni in the hall, it exploded under precision fire from Shepard and Bau, though Oriana noted idly that Shepard had actually managed her shot faster than the older, more-experienced, Spectre. That had been par for the course from their first encounter, with the senior Spectre's approval of and respect for Shepard visibly rising with every engagement.

Not that Oriana didn't understand that. Her own outright awe had been rising in the same way. Despite all of her advantages and years of personal training by one of the most deadly Asari Matriarchs alive, Oriana was barely managing to keep up with the pair of Spectres and the Krogan Battlemaster with them. Though, she was at least soundly outperforming Ashley and Kaidan, despite the upgraded gear she'd provided both with. Not that those two were slouches by any stretch of imagination. But while they were easily in the top performance tier of regular troops, they simply didn't have that something extra that pushed them up to the next level. At least, not yet. If they survived...well, Oriana was fully aware that Ashley, at least, had made the jump and become a Spectre herself, back in her original timeline.

After a few moments of sweeping the room, checking for any hiding Rachni, Shepard posted Kaidan and Ashley at the room's two exits. A moment later, Oriana's wandering thoughts were quickly discarded as Shepard called her forward and waved her at the VI Core.

"Lawson, see what you can do with the VI core. If you can get it up and running, it might be able to tell us what's going on with the rest of the facility. Not to mention just what in the nine circles of hell was going on here in the first place."

Oriana nodded, ignoring the elevator controls and simply hopping down into the core, using a tiny spark of biotics to cushion her landing ever-so-slightly. Activating her Omni-tool, she physically jacked into the core, trusting her own bleeding-edge security programs to protect her gear from anything nasty. A quick skim and she found the issue keeping the VI from activating, disabled the security measures...and then promptly hacked the VI so that it thought all of them had Privileged Access. Less than five minutes after jumping down, she used her biotics to hop back up and addressed Shepard.

"It's online, and I hacked the database to add all of us as having Privileged Executive Access. It should answer any questions you have, so long as the VI knows the answer in the first place."

Shepard nodded, eyebrows rising a bit, and even the Salarian Spectre looked fairly impressed, though it was Shepard who spoke. "Good job. Let's see what it knows." Activating the VI, they all stepped back.

The following half an hour was *extremely* enlightening, in more ways than one. Faintly, Oriana realized that she may have just accidentally rocked the future timeline simply by changing their access level. Possibly more than any other single action she'd taken so far, as she was pretty sure some of what they learned hadn't been known *at all* in the original timeline. The fact that Benezia and Saren had found a Rachni Queen and were intending to use it to find the Mu relay was one thing...but a huge data dump about Reaper Indoctrination and how it had been used to completely control the Rachni as an

early gambit by the Reaper Nazara to gain control of the Citadel, *and why it needed to do so*. That was something else entirely. An utterly unexpected windfall that sent even Oriana reeling.

She had, of course, known that the Citadel was a Mass Relay leading to Dark Space and the rest of the Reapers. She'd even had several teams working on trying to prove that fact for the last several years. But this was actual, *verifiable* proof. Proof which she numbly helped the Salarian Spectre copy to his, Shepard's, and her own Omni-tools even as Wrex took Ashely and Kaidan to the roof to reconnect the facility Land Lines. All the while her mind was racing as she tried desperately to work out how this would affect *everything else*. With this, the council would have definitive proof of the threat much earlier, as well as the inside line on reaching Ilos first, though they'd still need a way to decipher the Beacon Data in Liara's head in order to actually use the Mu relay properly. As an anchor relay, leading to an entire sector of space, it connected to too many systems to simply scout them all, particularly without being spotted doing so. The fact that the damn thing was in the Terminus systems only made that issue stickier.

Of course, there was the other wildcard that Oriana herself had contributed to. Saren and Benezia *didn't* have some of that information. So far as she knew, they still needed to find a beacon, since they'd been stymied at Eden Prime. And if what she was beginning to suspect was the case was truth and Benezia hadn't been to Noveria yet in this timeline, then they didn't have the location of the Mu relay yet, either. Then, too, there was also the data on indoctrination and the Rachni. The indoctrination data was basic, with indications that it was being studied properly somewhere else, but the information on how the Rachni had been used should be enough to sell the council on helping this Queen, in exchange for her knowledge of the relay...

Her head was still swimming when the trio they'd sent upstairs came back down from the roof, and all six of them headed off to the rest of the facility. First reconnecting the generators, then heading off via the rail line to the Rift Station where the Rachni research had been housed. With a deep breath, she shoved all her wild thoughts and calculations to the back of her brain and focused on the here and now. They exited the tram unmolested...then all hell broke loose when they took the elevator up to the science station.

The lightning reactions of the Spectres, along with Oriana's brute power, were all that saved them as Rachni began swarming from everywhere the moment the door opened. From behind a ripped apart barricade, from the vents, from the *floor and ceiling of the elevator they'd been riding*, even from the WALLS as they ripped through wall-panels in a couple of places. A brute show of biotic power cleared the room for bare moments as Oriana dropped her pistol and screamed, eyes crackling as she Charged into the hoard and a 270-degree shockwave burst from her an instant later, flinging Rachni into the walls, ceiling, and barricades, squishing them like so many bugs under boots. Shepard swept her own biotics back into the elevator even as Wrex physically punched out a Rachni that had tackled Ashely to the floor. Kaidan kept himself free with his own biotic push, grabbing Ashely and grunting as he desperately pulled them both into the free zone Oriana had just created, Bau joined them, weapons flashing as he dodged and rolled with an insane speed that no human or Asari could have managed. For a few moments, it was all they could do to stay alive despite the moment of breathing room Oriana had given them. But then they managed to get their feet under them, Shepard and Oriana anchoring one side of the room, with Wrex and Bau anchoring the other, Kaidan and an up-on-her-knees Ashley hosing down any Rachni coming through the vents or walls.

If they hadn't fielded a six-man team, they'd have been dead. If Oriana hadn't massively upgraded all of their loadouts, including with a new less-insane version of the thermal clip system, they'd have been dead. If they hadn't had four biotics with them, one of them every bit as powerful as most Matriarchs, they'd have been dead. If they hadn't had a tough-as-a-tank Krogan Battlemaster making a virtual wall out of his own bulk on one side, they'd have been dead.

As it was, after nearly 15 minutes of brutal combat where their lines almost broke at several points, resulting in almost-unheard-of levels of melee combat for a modern engagement, the Rachni *finally* stopped coming. Oriana half-collapsed against the ruins of one of the barricades, ignoring the half-melted, chewed-on corpse of a Binary Helix security guard less than six inches from her foot. She might have a Matriarch's power...but her stamina and control couldn't match up to someone that had spent the better part of a millennia wielding their power as casually as they breathed. Even so, she had probably accounted for the single largest number of enemies in the short-but-brutal engagement, eclipsing even both Spectres. A fact which was now causing both of them to eye her as they caught their own breath. It was Shepard who broke the silence after a few moments of catching said breath and reflexively taking stock of gear.

"Lawson, I'm suddenly less sure of which of us should have been humanity's first Spectre."

The redhead's voice was so dust dry that Oriana couldn't help snorting a chuckle. "Shepard, the Council doesn't have enough money to afford me. And they barely pay their Spectres with more than the rights to do sketchy shit." The weak joke garnered more laughter than it should have, though in Wrex's case the smirk he leveled at her told her she'd probably actually made him laugh for real with the comment. Which, given his own abilities and mercenary outlook, probably made sense. With the heavy silence broken, Shepard quickly spoke again to take command of the situation.

"Alright! Best we not hang around and see if there are more Racnhi just prepping to hit us again. From the looks of the barricades, I'm not expecting to find anything other than the bugs alive in here, but check fire if you can as we move in farther, in case someone is still holing up in here."

Despite being the junior Spectre present, nominally being mentored by Bau, the Salarian Spectre didn't protest, letting his junior round everyone up into a loose formation and get them moving. Given that most Spectre's actually tended to be loners, the willingness to let Shepard manage the small team wasn't a big surprise. Though Bau's quietly accepting his place in the formation and following Shepard's lead was a bit more startling. As Oriana eyed him, in the moments before they began to move, her half-frown turned into a nod of understanding. He was evaluating Shepard and would only step in if he felt his junior was making an error. And so far, he'd apparently approved of Shepard's actions...or at least the results attained, which was really the bigger thought for most Spectres' mindsets.

As she moved through the charnel house that appeared to have been a last-ditch attempt at a defensive point, any thought other than trying to both watch for trouble and keep her gorge down at what she was seeing was pressed firmly to the back of her mind. There was no one alive here. It didn't even look like they'd held out for long, really. Which, given that the Rachni apparently hadn't revolted until they were en-route to the facility, made complete sense. It was, however, also the final nail in the coffin for the mild fear that Oriana had been nursing. Matriarch Benezia really *wasn't* here. There'd been no sign of Asari commandos or Geth units, which there should have been if events were going to match up with what she remembered reading about. She hadn't had a clue about the exact details from



her original timeline, as it hadn't been public knowledge and her sister hadn't yet been involved yet with Shepard to have her own knowledge to share. But the take down of Binary Helix and death of the Matriarch *had* been public knowledge, as had the presence of the Geth on Noveria, if all of it only in the most vague and incomplete manner.

As they continued through the corpse-strewn section, following map data that the station VI had been able to provide, everyone became increasingly uneasy as they encountered no more Rachni. Surely they hadn't *all* thrown themselves into that one fight? At the very least, their Queen was still unaccounted for. It was only as they finally, hesitantly, entered into the holding room of the Queen's holding tank that they saw more of the Rachni. Yet...those Rachni didn't attack, instead retreating to put the Queen's enormous glass prison, resting in the dead-center of the room, between them and the assault group. Puzzled, it was the Salarian Spectre that spoke first.

"Curious. Seem reluctant to fight. Parlay possible?"

Abruptly, a corpse on the raised area by the tank was lifted into the air, signs of biotic power surrounding it. An odd, reverberant voice spoke from the stumbling, half-chewed body.

**"This one. Serves as our voice. We cannot sing. Not in these low spaces. Your musics are colorless."**

They all flinched...and *stared*.

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The conversation that followed proved to be among the most...bizarre that any of them had ever borne witness to. Yet, it had also been remarkably informative. The location of the Mu relay had been shared, as had confirmation that the Rachni had been controlled by the Reapers. A debate had been had about what to do with the Queen. A debate that Shepard won, pointing out that the Queen could be a critical intelligence resource for the fight against these 'Reapers,' if such a fight was going to occur. The Queen had been released, agreeing to meet with a representative of the Council over a dead world that *New Dawn* owned the resources rights to. It would serve as a viable neutral ground, with the Council rep being brought in on a *New Dawn* corvette for the meeting, so that no trickery could be had by either side. The Queen, slightly disturbingly, seemed to have complete confidence that she could get there on her own, if given a few months in which to do so. Oriana was aware that the Rachni could populate fast and build faster...but that was almost frightening. Something that Wrex, the most disgruntled about releasing her, had been quick to point out. Still, when Oriana rather roughly pointed out that the Rachni had been used in much the same what that the Salarians had used the Krogan, Wrex had subsided. Though if he remained quiet about the subject or not would likely be up to how things went with the Rachni in the future...

## **Chapter 10: To Break Bonds**

When they had eventually gotten back to the Normandy, Bau and Shepard and gotten into their first disagreement over what to do next. Shepard had wanted to leave immediately, to return to the

Citadel and inform the Council of what they'd found. Bau had agreed they needed to do that in this case, given both the magnitude of the information and the fact that there was another Spectre on the same mission that would need to be updated. He, however, had wanted to spend another day or two, at least, on Noveria. Binary Helix had other offices here, and there were other places to look for data and financial trails as well. Places such as the corporate world's communications relay and banking institutions. The senior Spectre felt that tackling those immediately was more critical than getting the information they had already gained to the Council as quickly as possible.

It might well have escalated to an actual argument, instead of merely disagreement, if Oriana hadn't captured Shepard's attention half way through, indicating that she needed to talk to Alliana about something that would be needed in the long-run. Something which would take them the same day or two here on Noveria to handle. It was a testament to how much respect Oriana had already earned from the redhead that Shepard had merely grimaced and backed down. Bau had nodded to both of them, then strode off the Normandy to get started on his investigations, while Shepard had dismissed the rest of the team...and was now raising her eyebrows curiously at Oriana after the others had left. There was a look in her eyes that said she was willing to listen...but that this better be good.

Oriana sighed, leaned back against a wall and rubbed her eyes for a moment. This had the potential to be...difficult. Raising her head to look Alliana in the eyes, she tackled the subject head on. "Shepard, how much do you actually know about how Spectres normally operate?"

Alliana blinked, clearly not having expected the direction this was going. She made to answer immediately, then paused, frowning. "To be honest, not that much more than general briefings given during N school training about what to do if you encountered one. Plus the bits that Nihlus and Bau have told me, of course."

Oriana nodded. "I suspected as much...which means we need to correct that lack of understanding quickly, or you're going to be in for a world of struggles later." Smiling sardonically at the redhead's confused face, which she idly noted was *seriously adorable*, she went on. "It's *not normal* for the source species or government of a Spectre to give them a bloody state of the art ship, not to mention a crew for said ship. And, in the long run, it's *not viable*, either. Spectres act outside the normal channels and are, frankly, largely expected to finance themselves. They might be given some starting assets by the Council, their government, or other allies, but never a ship or crew. The Normandy and its crew are a string the Systems Alliance can use to make you dance to their tune, and the Council isn't going to put up with that for very long. Nor will they take you as seriously as you need them to if you don't address the issue yourself. You're now an essentially independent agent, which means you shouldn't be using a Systems Alliance ship and crew. And you *definitely* shouldn't have retained your rank as a Commander in the Systems Alliance."

Alliana looked stricken, but she *needed* to hear this. And she needed to hear it *now*. From what Oriana could tell, it had been a major source of Shepard's early issues in the original timeline. One that no one had ever addressed. So she plowed on, despite the obvious pain the thought was causing the redhead. "You *aren't* Systems Alliance military anymore, Shepard. You don't answer to that chain of command, *at all*. You aren't, or shouldn't be, a Commander, or an N7, or any of the other things you previously identified with. Normally, you'd have *already been stripped* of all of that. The only reason you haven't is that A, you're Humanity's first Spectre and the Alliance hasn't wrapped their institutional minds around what that means yet. And B, your being raised to Spectre status was a serious rush-job,

one that was partially made as a political move. So the Council isn't going to make waves about this...yet. But if you want them to take you seriously..."

She trailed off even as Shepard slumped into a nearby chair and put her head in her hands for several long moments. Then, with a shuddery breath of acceptance, the woman looked up with hard eyes. "Okay. You're right. I can see it now that it's been pointed out to me. Spectres can't have conflicts of interest by serving other military or species agendas, right? At least not officially." When Oriana nodded, she continued. "So, what does this have to do with us being on Noveria?"

Oriana took a seat of her own, across from the Spectre. "The good news is that you have some time. So long as the council sees you taking initiative to set up on your own, they'll take you seriously and not make waves for a bit. And we happen to be on a world where you can, with a little help, begin to build a serious financial and information network of your own. Moreover, with Bau still with us, he's bound to hear about you doing so and report it to the Council, so they'll know you're taking steps."

Shepard looked lost. "I...have zero idea how to do what you're talking about."

Oriana grinned. "Yep. I suspect that it's something your Spectre mentor would normally help you with. Unfortunately, that's not likely going to be the case with the rush-job they're doing with you. Thankfully, you happen to know someone that has all the right skills...given that she's a full partner in one of the galaxy's newest and most explosively growing military technology companies."

Shepard blinked, then groaned, eyes sharpening. "You, of course. But what, exactly, do you want in exchange for helping me with this?"

Oriana grimaced. "Right attitude, to expect that everyone is going to want something. In this case, though, what I want is what you're already going to do anyway. Specifically, for you to do your damndest to kill Saren and stop the Reaper threat." Shepard frowned, seeming conflicted, so Oriana shrugged and added a bit more to make it more believable. "If you need a more selfish reason, I also might ask you to help against a black-ops-turned-terrorist group that *New Dawn* has been quietly at war with. Does the name Cerberus mean anything to you?"

From the spark of understanding in Shepard's eyes, it clearly did. Yet she also didn't say anything, likely struggling with if she should reveal classified information. Oriana saved her the trouble a moment later.

"I can see you do. But to save you from having to pretend you don't, I'll say that they're an Ex-Alliance black ops unit that went off the rails...and they promptly got into a private war of sorts with *New Dawn* when they tried to steal some of our tech. We've been having a fair bit of luck against them, so far, but we might need a bit more muscle and official authority once we have serious targets to strike at. So far, we've not managed to hit more than individual cells or projects. The fact that those projects have almost uniformly happened to be doing horrifically inhumane experiments, or else are developing tech that *New Dawn* would be happy to cut you in on the profit for if you help us get it..."

Shepard leaned back and closed her eyes. "Better the devil I know?"

Oriana shrugged, even if Shepard couldn't see her. "To be honest, Shepard, I was telling the truth about being willing to help you just so you'd take down Saren and stop the Reapers. The galaxy being razed of advanced life would sort of suck, after all. But, if you want to give something back into

the deal and get more out of it in exchange, that's fine too. Better yet, it will help keep the Douncil from thinking you're in *my* pocket."

Shepard's eyes opened and speared her own for a long moment, Oriana not looking away from the frank assessment. "Alright, Lawson. I may not know you very well yet...but I think I can trust you. We'll worry about Cerberus later. For now, what can we do here on Noveria?"

Oriana smiled. "Well, I just so happen to have put out some feelers when we first landed. Nothing truly earth-shattering came back, but a couple of bites are worth looking into. The administrator for a company called Synthetic Insights has gotten into something of a corporate war with Anoleis and could use some help against his opponent. Oh, and we might have another opportunity as well, given that my sources tell me Anoleis's secretary is actually an internal investigator for the Noveria Executive Board..."

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Half a day later, even Oriana was a little bit baffled at just how well and quickly Alliana Shepard had adapted to her new reality. Oh sure, she'd known that the original version of Shepard, in her original timeline, had become quite adept at deal making and a sort of brute force diplomacy...but this was something else entirely. Even as Oriana stood there, quietly skimming choice stocks from Administrator Anoleis's own portfolio as the man himself was being led off in cuffs by Gianna Parasini, Oriana was only half sure she understood the whirlwind of events that had led them here. The stocks she was quietly redirecting into a shell company were the price paid in exchange for Shepard's help against the man...and it hadn't been the only such deal made. The redhead now owned almost 5% of Synthetic Insights, plus had created a couple of small-time deals that were more useful for the start of her supply chain and information network than for actual credits. Just how that had all happened had spun Oriana's head a bit, despite her own knowledge and negotiation skills having been integral to the entire process.

As she wrapped up, she turned to the annoyed looking redhead waiting on her report. "You know, for a woman that's become a multi-millionaire with less than 12 hours of work, you don't look overly happy."

Shepard flashed her a smirk. "I suppose that's one way of putting it. But the Normandy alone cost literal billions. More to the point, it annoys me more than I can express that I'm having to foot the bill for my own operations at all. This kind of shit isn't what I wanted to be doing with my life."

Oriana shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about a ship, I've already got something in the works for that issue. Crew might be a bit touchier, but I imagine a few of the Normandy's crew might be willing to follow you out of the Alliance, and I can work up some dossiers of other potentials. Joker, at least, will be ecstatic if what I have in mind pans out." It would pan out, given that Oriana had been prepping it for literally years at this point. But Shepard couldn't know that. Not yet and possibly not ever.

Shepard stared, then shook her head. "I'm not even going to ask how you think you can get us a ship. Not one that could replace the Normandy even partially. No point in borrowing more trouble than I can handle. And what we've done today should at least go a long way to convincing the Council I'm taking measures, right?"

“I’d certainly say so, yes. We’ll need to keep making progress, but I’ve got more ideas there, including the fate of the T’soni estate and holdings.”

Shepard blinked. “What?”

“Liara’s her sole heir, Shepard. Even if there are other members of the T’soni clan. I’m sure the good doctor would be willing to help out the cause by making some deals between the clan holdings and you personally...or your new assets, perhaps.” Oriana smirked at the redhead. “Or you could get access to the accounts another way, perhaps. After all, joint accounts are traditional in some marriages...and I’ve seen how our blue maiden looks at you.”

Shepard actually blushed, looking away for a moment.

“Oh-ho! Perhaps the feeling is mutual? I admit, she’s quite adorable, isn’t she? And you’ve got quite a lot to offer yourself...” Oriana let her eyes blatantly roam the other woman’s body, earning her an even deeper blush...then a slap to her shoulder.

“Stop that! Or are you planning to get into my pants by out-drinking me like you did Ash?”

Oriana laughed. “What, she actually told you?”

Shepard grinned in turn. “Not at first. I got it out of her eventually though. A threesome, really? And she’s not even glaring lasers at you after it?”

“What can I say, Shepard. I’m just that good...maybe you’ll even get a chance to find that out yourself someday. Unless you don’t think you can handle me?”

All she got in return was a headshake and chuckle. “Come on, Lawson. We’re done here and we still have a few more of your leads to hit up...”

## **Chapter 11: A Maiden’s Curiosity**

Oriana had to suppress a smile even as she let a moan slip through her lips, one finger gently tracing her lower lips, even as her other hand massaged her right breast. She arched into her own touch, playing up the sensuality of the moment for her hidden voyeur. From the way she was staring hungrily with a blush on her face, Liara clearly thought Oriana hadn’t noticed the door half-open and then quickly shut *almost* all the way. Which, to be fair, was exactly why Oriana had both rigged the door with a tiny glitch...and made sure her eyes were closed while she teased herself waiting for Liara to return.

She had caught the unusually innocent Asari maiden staring whenever Oriana changed in front of her in their shared little living space. And she’d *definitely* heard the quite moans and slick sounds coming from the other girl’s cot after she thought Oriana was asleep. Part of her felt a tiny bit bad, knowing that her constant teasing and low-key flirting over the last week had almost certainly driven the young Asari to such uncharacteristically bold actions...but only a tiny bit. Particularly given the increasingly blatant bedroom-eyes the maiden had also been leveling at Shepard as a result. Something she’d certainly been making Shepard very aware of by gently teasing the redhead during the lessons on interstellar empire building she’d been giving the woman since leaving Noveria two days ago.

She probably should have left it at that...but Aethyta's parting comment the night before they left the citadel had slowly wormed its insidious way deep into Oriana's mind, aided and abetted by the fact that she had discovered she *did*, in fact, have a type. Two of them, actually. Specifically, she was apparently into blushing young maidens...and impossible challenges. Liara was the one, even more than Ani'lia had been, and Shepard was the other. Of course, Shepard wasn't *quite* as untouchable as Ashely had been. From the Commander's roving eyes, it was clear she was into women as much or more than men, where the Chief wasn't. But Shepard was a through-going professional. Cracking that professionalism enough to get her involved with a crewmember was going to be a challenge...and the possibility of a three-way relationship with TWO crewmembers was likely going to be an even tougher sell. It was a challenge Oriana was quietly looking forward to, even if she wasn't *quite* fully committed to the idea yet.

But for now...she had a blushing maiden to tease. Knowing she'd already firmly captured her audience's attention, she began to pay greater attention to her own pleasure. The hand on her breast tweaked a nipple, a gasp escaping her lips at the first burst of serious stimulation. Eyes closing for real now, she traced her lower lips one more time before pressing a finger home, being so wet from her own earlier teasing that it sank in with virtually no resistance at all. She groaned, thrusting the finger slowly even as she tweaked her nipple again, then bit her lower lip and quickly added a second finger. Her legs spread a little wider of their own accord, both for better position...and to give her watcher a better view. She'd long ago realized she was a bit of an exhibitionist and her body was responding instinctively to being watched at this point.

The low moans that had been spilling out of her mouth all along became more numerous as her fingers began to thrust a slow rhythm, hips pressing up to meet them as if they were a lover. Her other hand abandoned her nipples, trailing down her body to join its other half between her legs. Her legs spread lewdly wide now, as her second hand found her magic button and began to circle it, not touching just yet, simply teasing...

A minute passed. Two. Her thrusting picked up pace. A third. The hand at her clit finally zeroed in, a single quick, darting flick that made a much louder, lewder moan spring from somewhere well below her belly. Then it came back for more, not a passing graze this time but a sustained effort as she let go of her slow build and reached for climax. Her hips bucked, a third finger plunged into her pussy with a lewd *squish*, a few more harsh thrusts and a tiny biotic field formed against her clit...then she came with a loud cry, not even trying to suppress the noise as her sex clenched around the invading fingers. Her back arched, hovering her above the cot for long moments, then she collapsed, panting in exertion.

After a few moments to recover, she cracked open her eyes, looking straight at the crack in the door. "You know, I wouldn't have minded if you came in to watch...or even joined in." There was a squeak then, after a long moment, the door slowly cracked open and a very flushed and embarrassed looking Liara shuffled in. Oriana grinned, "Oh, relax, would you. I won't bite...unless you want me to..." She giggled at the scandalized expression on her teasing victim's face. "Seriously, I never thought I'd meet *two* Asari in my lifetime that blushed that much at simple teasing. Don't worry, Liara, I'll save trying to see if you can pass out from blushing for another day. I never quite managed it with Ani'lia."

Oriana scooted back in her cot, crossing her legs but not bothering at all to cover herself. She wasn't the shy one here, after all, and she was enjoying the darting looks Liara was sending at her body

even as her roommate tentatively made her way to her way across the small space to sit on her own cot. She looked at Oriana, then the wall, then back again. With a deep breath, she finally said something.

“I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have—”

Oriana laughed this time, instead of just giggling. “Woah, woah! Slowly, Liara. I promise you I’m not mad.”

Another deep breath, then the other woman started again, slower. “I’m so sorry, Oriana! I shouldn’t have watched you like that, without you knowing! It’s just, I was surprised, and you’re so pretty—” Her eyes seemed to bulge as she realized what she’d just said, hands flying up to cover her mouth.

Oriana grinned, but womanfully refrained from teasing her...much. “I’m glad you think I’m pretty sweetie~.” Waiting for the predicted blush to come and go...well, mostly go...Oriana smirked and continued. “And, if it helps any, you didn’t do it without me noticing, obviously. In fact, I noticed the air pressure change when the door opened initially...I just didn’t mind you watching. In fact, it made it way hotter that I knew you were there.”

Liara gaped at her, seemingly utterly lost and confused. It was adorable...but also a little sad. Clearly, however Liara had been raised, her life had been *remarkably* sheltered from her own people’s culture. Not even Ani’lia had been quite so innocent, just enough more anti-social that she hadn’t quite fit in with the gregarious social-butterfly that was the typical Asari baseline. Trying not to frown at just how ridiculously sheltered Liara must have been, Oriana finally took pity on her companion and covered up a bit with her cot’s sheet, noting that it immediately put the other girl at ease, despite her clear fascination with Oriana’s body. Or perhaps because of that fascination? Whichever the case, she thought she was beginning to get an inkling of why Aethyta had seemed to be subtly...for her at least...pushing Oriana in her daughter’s direction. Liara was in clear need of a bit of gentle guidance, of the sort that she’d have great trouble with getting among Asari at her age, and Oriana was possibly the only non-Asari that the Matriarch completely and utterly trusted.

In those few moments of internal frowning, her plans regarding Liara and Shepard solidified. Shepard hadn’t been raised among Asari and wouldn’t be able to help Liara in the way the maiden truly needed. Not completely. So Oriana would take that task up herself. And, if the fates aligned, Shepard would be involved too. But...Liara needed this, even if it messed up the chances of the Commander and her getting together.

Decision made, Oriana moved forward with her new plan with her characteristic swift and certain manner. “Liara, forgive me if I’m prying, but...how did such a beautiful young Asari end up so body-shy? By the time most maiden’s reach fifty, they’ve usually had at least a few experimental mutual masturbation sessions with friends.”

Liara looked uncomfortable for a moment, looking away from Oriana even as she seemed to wrestle with whether or not to answer. Oriana leaned forward, crossing the narrow gap between their cots to put a gentle hand on her thigh.

“Liara, I’m not an Asari but I grew up among them, and have had Asari lovers before. One nearly as shy as you, though for somewhat different reasons. I’d like to think we are becoming friends and I *promise* I won’t judge you for anything you say, okay?”

That seemed to have been the right thing to say, as much of the tension in Liara’s body drained away, slowly. Not all of it, of course, but enough. And after a long pause, her own hand gently met Oriana’s and she began to speak.

“Because of who my mother was, I was pretty sheltered when I was young. Not for any desire to do so on my mother’s part, but out of concern that I would be targeted to get to her. It is, as I’m sure you know, pretty rare for a Matriarch to have a child...and the fact that I’m a pureblood only made matters worse. You...know how purebloods are sometimes seen?”

Oriana nodded. “Yes, one of my previous Asari lovers was a Pureblood, it contributed to her shyness quite a bit. Which sucked, since much like you she was a beautiful and intelligent maiden.” Oriana grinned, deciding to add a moment of levity. “Quite inventive in bed, too, once I actually got her there.”

Liara flushed, looking away and clearing her throat. “Yes, well...anyway. For my own protection, I rarely left the T’soni compound, where there were no other maidens my age. My mother tried to arrange for me to see a few, but I was...too bookish, I suppose. Too interested in books and science instead of biot-ball and sex, anyway.” She took a deep breath, seeming to have sort of ripped a band aid off with that admission. She glanced at Oriana and sighed in relief when she didn’t see any judgement on her companion’s face. “Well, I suppose my mother didn’t worry much, since she assumed when I raced passed everyone my age academically and got a *very* early admission to University, that I would probably make up for lost time there, with my fellow students.”

Oriana leaned back, seeing where this was going, even if her mother apparently hadn’t been able to. “Only it didn’t work out that way.”

Liara shrugged. “No, it didn’t. I was determined to prove that I earned my spot there legitimately, not just gaining it through my mother’s influence, so I was serious in my studying. Between that, being among the youngest on campus, and being a pureblood...”

Oriana sighed. “You never really got the chance to do the experimenting that other Asari do at that age.” Her companion blushed but nodded. She suspected she already knew the answer to the next question, but she might as well ask anyway. “And why didn’t you try afterward?”

Liara looked uncomfortable, shifting in her seat like a child caught with their hand shoulder-deep in the cookie jar. “Well, I wasn’t around that many Asari at first. Not a lot of Asari run digs would take me seriously, despite my credentials, because of my age and theories...”

She trailed off and Oriana grimaced. “And then you jumped up to become a major project leader, sponsored by *New Dawn*, because I read those theories and believed them. Theories which we are rapidly proving to be true.” Which meant that Liara might actually have been at least a little more experienced the first time around. She kind of doubted it, given the basic shyness that clearly contributed heavily to all of this, even if there were convenient excuses at each step of the story. But it was possible. Which meant...Oriana grinned.



“Well then, since it’s at least partially my fault, clearly it’s up to me to correct it!”

Liara blinked, looking at her in shock. “What...?”

Oriana casually shrugged off her covers again, smirking as Liara’s eyes immediately darted downward. She rolled to her feet, enjoying the deer-caught-in-headlights look on her companion’s face more than she really probably should have, even as she crossed the small gap between them. Cupping the violently-blushing maiden’s chin, she proceeded to capture Liara’s mouth with hers, causing the archeologist to freeze for just a moment...before instinct took over. When her target began to respond, Oriana deepened the kiss for long moments, then pulled back, stepping away from the now wide-eyed Asari.

“You, my dear doctor, need a certain kind of education. One that is part of your very culture. And I’m both willing and able to give that to you. Don’t worry, I won’t press you for more than you’re ready for...but I’ve seen how much you enjoy looking at me, so I’m not taking no for an answer. And, who knows? Maybe between the two of us we can get in Shepard’s panties too...”

Pulling on her clothes, Oriana left the gaping, flushed Doctor Liara T’soni behind to think about everything Oriana had just implied...

#### **End of Part 4**

### **Chapter 12: Return to the Citadel**

The very next day, the Normandy reached the Citadel, preventing Oriana from following through with much more than a bit of cuddle time and teasing with Liara. As much as she was looking forward to educating the shy maiden...there were a lot of details to handle, and the safety of the Galaxy took priority over her sex life. Sadly.

It was for that reason that Oriana found herself meeting with Aethyta, in the offices of the Citadel branch of *New Dawn Enterprises*. Shepard and Bau had split off to report to the Council, the Spectres not inclined to take anyone else with them while they briefed the Counselors, and Oriana needed to brief her partner in galaxy-saving on the new information anyway. Strictly speaking, she was probably breaking some laws by doing so, but the two of them had a clearer picture of what was coming than anyone else alive, even the Reapers themselves, and some of their plans would need tweaked in light of the new discoveries.

Which is probably why Aethyta was rubbing her forehead in the near-species-universal sign of fighting a migraine.

“Okay, so Bezzie is in the wind somewhere, that’s...bad but not anything we didn’t plan for. The information on indoctrination, as well as the data the Rachni revealed about their own side of events, are something else entirely. We weren’t planning to let slip about indoctrination until we had a way to detect who it had happened to. Still, we always knew it might get out, so we can simply move to plan B there. But the Rachni issue...” Aethyta leaned back, closing her eyes for a few moments as she worked through all the information. “...Yeah, that’s a fucking kick in the quad. In your first time around, the Rachni only ever really dealt with Shepard. But this time they’re going to have diplomatic contact with

the Citadel Council...who also have evidence that the Rachni didn't actually want to go to war with *everyone else*. Kid, the Rachni are the boogie men of our history, the reason for a lot of our exploration laws even. I don't even fucking *know* what this is going to do when it hits the news. If, that is, the Council doesn't just assassinate the damn bug to make things simpler."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen. I already made sure we'd have enough assets on site to prevent the Council from succeeding if they're feeling genocidal. On the other hand, you might be being pessimistic. Even for the Asari and Krogan, the Rachni are a couple of generations in the past, and from what little I knew in my first life, the Rachni could be—"

The door to the outer office burst open, interrupting Oriana as one of Aethyta's commando-cum-secretary burst in, startling both her boss and her boss's guest into nearly throwing dual warps at the pale-looking Asari's head. The commando paused, grimacing, but didn't say a word of apology, instead rushing across the room a moment later to flick on the holo-wall display.

"Matriarch, you need to see this!"

Aethyta frowned, letting the warp she was holding fade and staring at the display that was flickering to life, her secretary quickly switching it to a major news feed. "Trelya, this better b—" The Matriarch never finished the sentence as she and Oriana gaped in horror at what the news broadcast was showing. An image of a bombed-out and burning Temple of Athame...the MAIN temple, on Thessia itself. The commando turned up the volume of the ghostly-pale Asari anchor speaking...

*"-again, for those of you just joining us. This is live footage from the ruins of the Temple of Athame. Two hours ago, an unknown Dreadnaught of unprecedented size, accompanied by three additional Dreadnaught's that appear to have been of Geth manufacture, came through the Thessia relay and engaged the planetary defense fleet. While the defense fleet was able to fight them off, destroying two of the Geth Dreadnaught's and damaging the others, the fleet action proved to be a diversion. Rouge Spectre Saren Arterius, wanted for the attack on the human colony of Eden Prime, led a ground assault by Geth, as well as some sort of...cybernetic plague that turned some of those they killed into what are now being called 'husks.' The assault was aimed at the main Temple of Athame, which quickly revealed itself to have far more militant defenses than anyone had realized. Despite those defenses, and the resolute efforts of several Justicar's and other defenders, the raid was too well planned and quickly overcame the defenses with brute force. Much of the Temple lies in ruins...and questions are now being asked by Asari and allies alike as it was revealed to have been concealing a functional Prothean Beacon. Where did this beacon come from? How long has it been there? Why was it not turned over, per our treaty obligations, to the Citadel Council? And, perhaps more importantly, why was Saren Arterius so desperate to get his hands on it that he would raid the very heart of the Asari Republics, after already failing in his attack on the Human colony of Eden Prime."*

Aethyta, face horrified and grim, muted the still rambling reporter and turned to glare at Oriana. Who, in turn, quickly raised her hands in defense. "Don't look at me! This didn't happen before and I didn't even know there *was* a beacon there! Why didn't you tell me? I was operating on the idea that Saren wouldn't be able to so easily find another if we stopped him on Eden Prime!"

Aethyta's face was dark and stormy for a moment more before she visibly took hold of herself. She ordered her secretary from the room before making her way to a small bar on one side of her office.

She threw back a shot of Krogan whiskey, then professionally mixed her and Oriana both a drink. Finally, seeming to have calmed down slightly from the familiar activity, the former bartender plunked Oriana's favorite cocktail, a fruity Asari mixture that nevertheless kicked like an enraged mule, down in front of her. Swirling her own drink before throwing half of it back, Aethyta began to speak, slowly at first but with building speed as she got the unpleasant truth out.

"That beacon is the single greatest secret of the Asari Matriarchs' council. Given everything you've trusted me with, I suppose I should have told you about it. But keeping that particular secret is ingrained into every Asari that learns about it. Hell, even half of the Matriarchs' council don't actually know. I only knew because Bezzie told me...which means I should have realized Saren would know, as well." She paused to down the rest of her drink, closing her eyes for a moment, before opening them to look straight into Oriana's. "I fucked up kid. I should have told you. I just never considered that Saren would try for it, even if Bezzie told him about it. If I had...but no, I should have anyway, since it could have been used to help prove certain things, maybe."

Oriana wanted to be angry, wanted to yell at her partner, but she took a deep breath instead, letting it out over a slow five-count. "Okay, yes you fucking should have told me. But...what's done is done. Saren almost certainly has what he needed from the beacon in the first place. But he doesn't know the location of the Mu relay, nor does he have a way to make sense of the data yet, hopefully."

"So he'll be headed to Feros? Are you sure you don't know any more about this 'cipher' thing that Shepard apparently got there in your first go around?"

Oriana grimaced. "You know I don't, you've been over pretty much my whole old life helping me look for clues."

Aethyta grunted, then moved back around her desk. "I was going to tell you I got word from our contacts on Feros that Nihlus and that C-sec detective showed up there recently, looking into Geth sightings. You think you can use that to direct Shepard there?"

"Almost certainly, so long as the Council doesn't directly order her elsewhere."

Aethyta answered her with a dry laugh. "Kid, the Council is going to be seven kinds of fucking useless until the repercussions of that beacon and Saren attacking Thessia are dealt with. You better shake a leg back to the Normandy...and remember to keep an eye on Liara. Fuck her silly if you want, but keep her safe, right?"

Oriana grinned weakly at the comment. "Oh, don't worry, I intend to do both of those things..."

Her partner in crime laughed with a little actual, genuine humor, even as she settled back down behind her desk to try and get a handle on how fucked their plans were now. Oriana quirked a stronger grin of her own at drawing the sound from the old Asari, and the oddity of just what she was laughing off, then sighed and stood. She really probably did need to rush back to the Normandy, if she wanted the chance to guide Shepard to Feros, she'd need to strike quickly, before the redhead could go haring off after another lead. She just hoped this wasn't quite as exciting as Noveria had been...

### **Chapter 13: Comfort and Education**

It hadn't taken long to convince Shepard to head to Feros, once everyone had made it back to the Normandy. The redhead had apparently been all but kicked out of the council chambers when word of the attack on Thessia hit, leaving the Counselors only half-briefed on the information they'd discovered. When Oriana had brought up the sighting of Nihlus and Vakarian, along with the Geth, on Feros, Spectre Bau had weighed in on Oriana's side immediately. Someone needed to get the full information to the other Spectre and Shepard already had combat experience against the Geth. Bau would stay and finish briefing the Council when the worst of the Thessia disaster was taken care of, and Shepard could either back up or extract Nihlus if the Geth skulking around Feros signaled another full-on attack by Saren's forces.

The redhead had seemed to have some misgivings, likely regarding the Rachni issue that they apparently hadn't gotten to in their debriefing with the Council. However, Oriana had been quick to counter that worry by pointing out that nothing could really happen on that front until the meeting that was months away. That had washed away most of the uncertainty for Shepard, though she'd scowled ferociously at Bau when she pointedly told him to make sure the Rachni got a fair hearing. Oriana could understand her need to ascertain that, though personally she thought the redhead was actually doing Bau a bit of a disservice by doubting him on that front. Despite being a Spectre, or maybe even because of that status, the Salarian actually seemed less morally ambiguous than many of his race often were.

Regardless, they'd been headed away from the citadel again within barely a day of arriving. Feros wasn't quite as far off the beaten track as Noveria had been, but they'd still be a bit over three days in transit due to the need to hop multiple relays. Relay transit itself might be near-instantaneous, but travel between relays most certainly wasn't. Which Oriana was, currently, grateful for. Not only did it give her a little time to farther refine her plans in light of the new data from Noveria...but it also gave her some time to work on Liara's 'education.'

The first night out of the citadel, the Asari had been so shell-shocked by the attack on her Homeworld, that she hadn't even protested a nice long cuddling session with Oriana...who really had *tried* to be good. And, if her comforting embrace had turned just a *little* bit naughty after Liara had recovered a bit, the maiden hadn't seemed to mind. The increasingly erratic breathing and blushes as Oriana caressed the blue maiden's body through her clothing had certainly gotten Oriana in the mood. Sadly, she'd been unwilling to push just yet, and had settled for taking care of her own needs after Liara had eventually drifted off to sleep.

Today, however, Oriana had *other* plans. Which is why she was naked, smirking at an equally nude Asari whose pajama's she'd stolen, and holding a bottle of massage oil. Liara's face was dusted with a purple blush...but her eyes kept darting down to Oriana's breasts, even as she tried to protest.

"Now, now, Liara, I'm only going to give you a massage. Yes, you're going to be naked and so am I. But that's simply to help you get over your body consciousness, so you'll be less awkward around other Asari. You want that, don't you? Or are you saying that I'm not pretty enough? That you don't want my bare breasts pressed into your back as I—"

"Okay!" The word popped out of Liara as a squeak, causing her blush to darken even farther. Her voice was slightly more normal when she managed to speak again. "U-um, okay? I mean, you are really pretty! And...I guess I should...oh goddess, that sounds like I don't! I mean, um..."

Oriana couldn't help herself, she giggled. She knew she shouldn't have, but the poor maiden was just so utterly adorable in her floundering. Before her laughter could ruin the moment, she stepped forward and smiled gently, placing a finger softly on Liara's lips to silence her babbling. "I understand. You're uncertain, even if you totally wouldn't mind fucking my brains out, you don't know what to do and you're freaking out a little. But it's *fine*, sweetie. You're just going to get a massage and *maybe*, if you're up for it, just a tiny bit more. But I won't push farther than you can handle, okay?"

Silently, Oriana's finger still on her lips, Liara nodded.

"Good."

Oriana removed her finger, leaning in for a brief, chaste kiss on the blue maiden's lips. Then, before Liara could get over the stunned state that action left her in for a moment, she gently pushed the young-seeming woman back until her knees touched her cot. A bit of gentle pressure caused Liara to instinctively sit, then another light touch caused her to take a deep breath and lay on her stomach. Oriana tried not to squee at the near-perfect submissive response from the maiden, recognizing it from her previous experience and itching to make use of the reaction...but Liara wasn't ready for that. Not yet. For the moment, she pushed aside thoughts of the Asari kneeling between her legs with her hands bound behind her while Shepard fucked the maiden from behind with a strap on. Instead of focusing on the drool-inspiring fantasy, she joined Liara on her cot, climbing up to straddle the Asari's lithe hips, facing her feet.

She could sense the other woman's confusion at her choice of direction and grinned mischievously as she reached for a foot. The poor thing had no idea what she was in for. Oriana was smirking broadly only a few minutes later as her plan hit paydirt, the Asari under having let out her first low moan only seconds into Oriana working on her foot. She took her time, working every single muscle in the Asari's dainty foot, enjoying the increasingly erotic sounds her efforts were drawing from the girl under her. Then it was time to switch feet, performing the same slow, heavenly magic on it. By the time Oriana was finished, Liara was actively squirming under her...but that wasn't going to help her. With a mischievous smirk, Oriana simply moved up to the Asari's calves, spending almost another twenty minutes just on her lower legs before moving up to the other woman's thighs.

She'd been half-afraid Liara would balk at that point...but the maiden was clearly too blissed out to care at this point, allowing Oriana to work slowly up her thighs without protest, even unconsciously spreading her legs as if inviting a more intimate caress...but Oriana wasn't letting her off that easily. Instead, she stopped just shy of the Asari's pussy and ass, turning around to straddle her legs and work on her lower back instead. She grinned as Liara actually whimpered in disappointment. It was another half hour before Oriana was done with this part of the massage. By the time she was ready to move on, her expert hands had turned Liara into a blissed-out and horny puddle...and then she slid off the girl, kneeling to one side of the cot, and whispered in the Asari's ear-equivalent to roll over so she could do her front. Liara didn't even hesitate. Oriana grinned, knowing she had the maiden exactly where she wanted her.

When Liara turned over obedient to Oriana's order, the signs of her arousal were blatantly obvious. From the hooded eyes and hard nipples to her positively gushing sex. Even so, Oriana didn't rush, starting slowly with the Asari's hands and arms, working her way to the woman's shoulders...and then finally to her breasts. Much to the Asari's whimpering chagrin, she spent nearly fifteen more

minutes avoiding the girl's painfully erect nipples...before finally, casually, reaching to tweak both of them, hard. Her eyes widened as the Asari's hips bucked, the maiden crying out in climax. Had she been that close? Or were her nipples that sensitive? Barely letting the other woman have a chance to recover, she set about finding out...quickly discovering that Liara's nipples were every bit as sensitive as Ani'lia's had been. Perhaps it was a pureblood thing? Shaking off her curiosity in exchange for continuing to play with her soon-to-be-lover, Oriana made sure Liara was too aroused to complain, then trailed down her body. She caressed the Asari's lower lips, but merely circled her dual clits teasingly rather than going for the kill. Shifting to whisper to the Asari from close-range, she continued circling her magic buttons with two fingers as she whispered new orders.

"Now, you've gotten to cum already, beautiful. If you want me to finish you again...you have to get me off first. You only have to use your hands, if you want...but I promise you that you won't cum until I do. And I won't stop until you cum."

Liara's eyes widened, but only moans came from her lips as Oriana redoubled her efforts for a moment, fingers ghosting over the Asari's dual-clits with the lightest of touches. The maiden didn't protest when Oriana crawled on top of her, lowering her own dripping pussy right above Liara's face even as she teasingly blew a bit of air across the Asari's alien slit. Liara jerked...and a moment later, hesitant hands found their way to Oriana's ass. She smirked even as she set about 'encouraging' Liara's daring...

#### **Chapter 14: To Free the Fallen**

The Normandy shuddered as a round from the Geth Cruiser's broadside grazed her, despite all that Joker could do. A half dozen more such rounds had been dodged completely, and the kinetic barriers managed to shrug off the graze, though their integrity dipped again, as that was hardly the first shot to hit home. Normandy had been caught flat-footed just outside orbit of the planet Feros, not running in stealth as they'd not known of any need to do so. Even so, even caught out like this, the Normandy was doing her crew and builders proud, Jeff's skilled piloting resulting in multiple hits on the Geth Cruiser with the Normandy's main spinal mount, while they had taken only grazes from secondary weapons in return. Even so...no frigate was really designed to tangle with something the size and power of the Geth Cruiser. Which meant that this game of tag needed to end.

"Drop in five, Commander! Four, three, two, one. Deploying!"

Oriana's stomach lurched as the Mako deployed just barely inside the planet's atmosphere, the Normandy peeling off in a spin that put its main gun dead on to the cruiser, blasting away not only with the spinal mount but its forward torpedo launchers as well. Thankfully, it was enough to keep the cruiser occupied, preventing it from firing on the freefalling tank. For long seconds, Oriana's heart was in her throat as they dropped, only to grunt as the Mako's thrusters kicked in with the vicious power of an enraged mule slamming into the crews' bodies. The landing was a rough, bouncing affair, made all the worse by the elbows and knees of the others filling the Mako to capacity. Shepard was driving, with Tali up in the turret...but they'd also squeezed Liara, Oriana, and Ash into the back. Normally, the Mako was a three-man vehicle, with a fourth jump seat that could be used in an emergency. Without any idea what they were facing on the planet, however, Shepard had quickly crammed the smallest members of

her crew into the Mako for the drop. That had allowed them to get the greatest amount of firepower and expertise onto the ground in a single rushed orbital drop, but it wasn't anything even remotely like comfortable. Even landing head-first in Ashely's chest wasn't much consolation, given the hard shell of two sets of armor had been in the way of anything fun.

Just as Oriana managed to force down the gut-wrenching sensations of their landing, the Mako suddenly swerved, then rocked as it road out the near-miss of a rocket. Shepard's voice shouted over the comms at almost the same instant.

"Landing zone is hot! Look alive, Tali! Rocket Troopers at 3 and 5 o'clock, Armature at 11 o'clock!"

Tali groaned in response, but somehow the turret was swiveling, the Mako's machine gun sweeping one group of Rocket Troopers even as Oriana managed to get her own body free of the tangle of limbs, grabbing Ash's assault rifle from the gear rack and popping open one of the Mako's small firing slits, unloading blindly at roughly the Mako's 5 o'clock. She must have hit something, as a secondary explosion came from behind them even as the Mako jerked with the recoil of the main gun unloading toward the armature down-range. The next few minutes were a chaotic whirl of insane driving from Shepard –including when the crazy woman used the Mako's thrusters to JUMP the armature— and desperate firing from Tali and Ash, the latter of whom had quickly taken over control of the Mako's machine gun. Then, blessedly, the last Geth came apart under Ash's fire and the Mako steadied down, cruising along the Skyway toward the colony, or where they colony HAD been, at least. They could all see the smoke rising from the place...

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Thankfully, when they'd arrived in Zhu's hope, they'd found it still holding out...barely. And the reason why it had hung on so long was clear the moment the Mako was cleared into the garage, past the wreckage of multiple burning armatures. There they had found Nihlus, as well as a wounded-but-still-game Garrus Vakarian. The two of them had managed to get the survivors of the Exogeni Corporation to the colony...but not before Matriarch Benezia herself had stormed the small settlement with a commando team, using the Geth as a distraction. That had been just an hour before they arrived on planet, and now they were faced with a whole new set of issues. Starting with how Nihlus had contained the Asari Matriarch for the moment.

"You...dropped a freighter on the opening down to this 'Thorian' thing?"

Shepard's voice was a mix of incredulous and admiring. Which, Oriana had to admit, was a fair representation of her own feelings on the issue. It was a remarkably elegant solution, given that even someone of Benezia's biotic power wouldn't be able to lift a multi-ton freighter with docking clamps driven in to anchor it. On the other hand...they couldn't move the damn thing either, because of those very docking clamps, which most certainly hadn't been intended to be used this way.

Nihlus's expression twitched into the Turian equivalent of a smirk. "Yes. We couldn't handle both her at the Geth at once, so I sought to delay the one front I could delay." The smirk faded into a grimace. "Unfortunately, according to the colonists, she took the opportunity to kill the Thorian while she was trapped. All of them started howling and virtually went catatonic while you were in freefall.

That's when Vakarian was wounded, trying to hold the line alone with me for a couple of minutes until you hit the Geth in the rear. Nice timing, by the way."

Shepard's face twisted through several expressions before settling on resigned. "Well, I suppose we weren't *quite* late, at least."

"Only fashionably so, Shepard."

Oriana rolled her eyes at Vakarian's addition to the banter, even as her mind roiled, slotting in the new information from the little debrief they'd gotten. This 'Thorian' thing must have been the original source of the cipher Shepard had gotten on Feros the first time around. If it was dead...what now? Well, she supposed the solution was obvious. But it would mean needing to take Benezia alive, assuming she was the one that had gotten the 'cipher.' That, and prey that indoctrination couldn't be transferred via a meld...

Nihlus spoke again after the eyerolling and chuckles from the more easily amused were finished. "The colonists all woke up mumbling about the 'voice being silent.' We assume this to mean that the Thorian is dead...and any chance of getting the beacon translated might have died with it, according to our researcher friend here." He gestured to the nervous-looking woman he'd introduced as Lizbeth Baynham, who was apparently their only real source of details on what the Thorian was and could do.

Before Oriana could put forth her idea of taking Benezia alive and trying to get the cipher from her, there was an enormous THUNK from the freighter, causing them all to whip around to stare at it. Another THUNK came, then a third, the entire freighter shaking and shivering with each massive blow. It was Liara that realized what was happening first.

"Oh, goddess, they're using repeat biotic detonations to rip through the freighter's hull!"

They all swiveled to stare at her for a moment, then back at the freighter, then Nihlus and Shepard both began moving at once, shouting orders. Somehow, the two worked without stepping on each other's toes, Shepard leading Liara and Oriana in shifting masses of metal shipping crates around quickly for cover, using their combined biotic powers, even as Nihlus got the colonists away from the scene. He put them under the wounded C-Sec detective's command to hold the defenses against any renewed attack from the Geth, a much less suicidal use for them than as cannon fodder against an Asari Matriarch. Ashely and Tali, meanwhile, managed to deploy the portable defensive barriers from the Mako...a new technology that *New Dawn* had come up with and sold to the various militaries. The PDB's could, in sets of two, deploy a strong kinetic barrier anywhere they were placed, though without a generator to plug into they'd have limited lifespans under heavy fire. Even so, they allowed the area to be quickly turned into something moderately defendable...just in time for the Freighter's hull to give way with a screech.

Everyone braced themselves...only for nothing to happen. No commandos came boiling out of the hole, nor any of the plant zombies Oriana vaguely remembered reading about being connected to the Thorian. For a long, tense minute, nothing happened. Then, a voice called out with carrying power, an orator's trained voice cutting through the background noise like a knife.

"I am Matriarch Benezia, and I would speak with whoever is in charge out there, in order to surrender myself as well as give those terms that the Thorian would have you agree to."



The entire Normandy team, plus Nihlus, gaped at the hole. And it wasn't either of the Spectres that managed to find their voice first. Both of them were still blinking in stunned silence...when Liara's hopeful voice spoke up from her place in the defensive line, right next to Oriana.

"Mother?! What do you mean? Is this...some sort of trick?" Only Oriana heard her desperate whisper from closer range. "Please, don't let it be a trick."

"Little Wing? What are you doing h...no it doesn't matter. This is not a trick. The Thorian broke the Reaper Nazara's hold on my mind. I know I will likely be executed for my part in what has happened. However, I have information I must share before that can take place, about the nature of Saren's Ship...and about what the Thorian wanted in exchange for granting me the Cipher. Which I will need to pass on to whichever of you activated the beacon on Eden Prime."

A tickle of memory hit Oriana, something she'd forgotten despite her eidetic memory, a tiny detail buried in a single drunken conversation with her sister, about a Green Asari. Eyes widening, Oriana deactivated her weapon and stepped out from behind the barrier. Shepard hissed at her, but Oriana looked her in her helmeted-eyes and shrugged. "Only one way to find out, boss. And we know about indoctrination from the files we lifted out of the Peak 15 facility. If she was really under its influence and now isn't...she could be a priceless intelligence asset."

Shepard grimaced, but nodded, before firmly motioning Oriana back, stepping around the barrier herself even as Oriana obeyed. Hopefully, this gamble paid off, but Oriana got ready to pull Shepard back with a well-placed bit of biotics just in case...

## **Chapter 15: A Maiden's Fantasy**

It had definitely paid off. Mostly. Sort of? Okay, it had certainly paid off but there were...complications. Headache inducing complications. Such as Matriarch Benezia and every single one of her commandos being GREEN. Oh and, you know, the minor detail of them now being linked to the Thorian's hive mind, as its ambassadors to the rest of the galaxy. Which is how she'd convinced it to let the colonists go. But which was also going to add an entirely new layer of complication to the situation, particularly given that they had no way to conclusively prove Benezia and her commandos were no longer indoctrinated. Nor any way to replicate that process beyond giving people to the Thorian.

Still, it wasn't as if many of those complications weren't net positives, probably. Just for starters, the extra combat power represented by the group had let them hold Zhu's Hope for the three days it took for the Normandy to return with an Alliance task force that had taken out the Geth forces in space. A task force that they had been further reinforced by a portion of the Citadel Defense Fleet, after the two Spectre's had gotten involved. After all, Saren and his Reaper ally were still presumed to need the cipher from the Thorian. Said cipher had also been one of the things they'd gotten out of the mission, with the Consort herself having somehow been retained for overseeing the transfer, in an attempt to determine if the Reaper indoctrination was both real...and defeated by the Thorian's influence. The fact that Sha'ira had confirmed both of those facts had left Matriarch Benezia in something of a limbo. She and her commando's were currently being held in comfortable quarters as 'guests' while the Council tried to sort out what the hell to do with the pile of snakes events had turned into.

Which was, frankly, something Oriana was glad she didn't have to be directly involved with. She'd had her own few days of chaos as the wealth of new information from Benezia, much of which

was background she wasn't sure anyone had ever known on her first go around, caused her and Aethyta to adapt some of their plans, as well as draw up a few entirely new ones to deal with straws they hadn't even known were in the wind. That, however, had been a week ago. A week during which Shepard had been busily following up on both some of Benezia's leads and a few deal or contact making opportunities Oriana had forwarded to her.

Oriana herself had been forced to skip out on several of those missions, though she planned to rejoin the Normandy now that she'd gotten things back on track on her end. And the time hadn't been ill-used on a personal level, since Liara had been under observation here on the citadel, to make sure she showed no signs of indoctrination after melding with her mother to get the cipher. Oriana had volunteered to stay with her, helping explain her actions in staying behind for a few missions, and just incidentally giving her time to work on loosening the maiden up farther.

Which led to her current preparations. It was the night before Shepard was supposed to be back and Liara would be released from her daily melds with the Asari experts. One of whom Oriana may or may not have encouraged to tease her blue friend by sharing some memories of her own maiden days, when the older Asari had been a dancer and escort. Liara had been a bit withdrawn since the night of the massage on the Normandy, when her lust-addled thought process had eventually led to her actually eating Oriana out, after both of them came from 'manual stimulation.' Oriana herself actually hadn't intended to push things that far, and knew from Liara's response that she was a little lost about it all. Not angry, thankfully, just confused. Which is why Oriana had convinced the meld-specialist to share some memories, both tame and not-so-tame. She was counting on it to help the lost young maiden get a bit of perspective. Given that she'd managed to cajole the girl into a mutual-masturbation session just last night, she was pretty sure it was working, too. Enough so that Oriana was intending on pushing her companion and hopefully soon-to-be lover a bit more tonight. The way Liara had been looking at her the previous evening had made it clear she was interested in more. The inexperienced maiden was just unsure about...everything, really.

Which was perfectly okay with Oriana. She had *plans* for Liara. Fun ones. And they started with the Thessian meal she'd cooked for the young doctor personally, along with the wine...and some silk ties laying on her bed. She grinned as she heard the outer door to the small apartment open, quickly sweeping in to ambush the startled Asari who was blinking in surprise at the low lights of the main room. Oh yes, she had *plans* for tonight...

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Liara squirmed under Oriana's questing fingers, whimpering as she tried to get more stimulation from the teasing digits, only for the black silk ties holding her spread eagle on the bed to thwart her attempt yet again. Oriana had been holding her on edge for nearly ten minutes, enjoying the squirming, pleading maiden's moans. Finally taking pity on her lover, she added a third finger to the previous two and began rapidly plunging them into the Asari's core. Liara bucked again even as she howled through her second climax of the night. Oriana mercilessly kept up the pressure, extending the maiden's climax by using her other hand to rub both of the other woman's magic buttons. Liara spasmed in an after-shock climax, even as Oriana finally let up...for now. Pulling her fingers free, she took two steps over to a side-table, pulling open a drawer and retrieving a vibrator designed specifically for Asari. The species had more nerve endings inside their bodies than humans, some of them quite deep, an oddity the scientists claimed must mean there had once been male Asari. Regardless of the reasons why, they were

there, and the bulbous, knobby tip of this particular toy was designed to hit *all* of them. With a wicked grin, she returned to the bed, enjoying the way Liara's eyes widened at the sight of the toy.

"Oh, so you know what this is, huh?" Oriana turned the vibrator on 'low' and ran it along Liara's exposed inner thigh, drawing a new shuddering moan from the maiden. "I bet you also know that, delightful as the feeling of it in deep and buzzing on all the right spots is...the particular sensations it brings won't drive you over the edge, no matter how long I leave it there. I could, say, put it in," she moved it to press lightly into the Asari's sex, the toy slowly sinking in with minimal resistance, "then leave you here for a few hours, on the *cusp* of cumming but not quite able to." She delighted at the shuddering whimper Liara made, her eyes both begging her lover to do it and not do it at the same time. She was quickly discovering that the maiden was even more of a natural sub than Ani'lia had been. Still, as fun as the idea was...

"Hmmm, perhaps not tonight. I can't break your mind right before we go back on mission tomorrow. So how about this instead," Oriana pressed harder, driving the toy fully into Liara and twisting it to come into perfect contact with those deep nerve-endings, "I'll let you cum, but only after you satisfy me completely and utterly. And since your hands are a bit *tied up* with other things at the moment, you'll just have to use your tongue for everything. Think of it as a high-stakes chance to learn how to do it right..."

Liara's eyes were hungry, even as her body squirmed, and Oriana smirked as she straddled the other woman's face. She was sure this would be the proper motivation for her new little subbie to learn how to *properly* serve her mistress...both of her mistresses, actually. After all, Shepard was clearly interested, and they'd been so cute together that first time around. Thoughts of the redhead tying both of them up...or perhaps being tied up alongside Liara while Oriana had her way with them both, filled her head even as Liara's eager tongue began its inexperienced efforts. She moaned, closing her eyes even as she reached back to turn Liara's vibrator up to max, then she lost herself in her visions of a future she was eager to make happen...

## **Chapter 16: Hunting a Shadow**

Oriana stared. Then her fingers twitched as she isolated the data on her omni-tool's secure feed and replayed it. Twice.

Several disbelieving minutes later, her mind unfroze and her fingers flew. Not to act on the data, not yet, but rather to drop a massive bonus in the account of the mid-level analyst that had found this for her. And arrange a promotion. The number of leaps the young Asari maiden, barely 120 years old, had needed to make to reach the result on Oriana's omni-tool was *more* than adequate justification for both the bonus and the promotion. And Oriana wasn't about to let the woman be tempted to sell the data either. She'd assign someone to make sure that didn't happen anyway, but hopefully doing right by the idealistic young analyst would be enough to ensure the temptation didn't cost the young maiden her life. At either Oriana's orders...or those of her new target if they became aware of her.

Now, she just had to bring this to Shepard. Tempted as she was to run this as a separate op with purely her own people, this represented a major coup that she could use to quietly bolster Shepard's position. So long as the woman could be convinced to do what was necessary, at least. Well, she had an entire night ahead of her before the daily briefing tomorrow. Best start crafting her argument.

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Shepard had the same expression on her face that Oriana imagined had been on hers the night previously. It lasted for only a bare few seconds, then the Commander visually swept the room, empty save for the two of them, and asked the obvious.

“You’re...sure?”

Oriana nodded. “As sure as I can be, given who we’re dealing with. This was pure chance, Shepard. A single file at one of the failing ship builders I purchased over two years ago, a single file that didn’t get properly deleted. If not for that starting thread, my analyst would never have tracked him or her down.”

Shepard leaned back against a wall, her face blank. “So, we have an opportunity to bring in the most notorious information broker in the galaxy. I can also see why you wanted to speak to me alone, first. Wrex could be a problem.”

Oriana shook her head immediately. “First, I don’t think Wrex will be a problem so long as we don’t tell him until shortly before the raid. He’s not the type to be loyal to a mysterious employer. And, afterward, he’ll likely be happy to accept a payoff to keep quiet...which is important since it would be a *really* stupid idea to simply bring the Broker in.”

Shepard’s blank expression shifted to confused, and she opened her mouth, but Oriana stopped her with a raised hand.

“You’re still not thinking like a Spectre, Shepard. If you were still just an alliance grunt, bringing him in would make sense. But as a Spectre...Shepard, Spectre’s are *expected* to build their own intelligence network, if they can. And we’ve stumbled upon the key to the single biggest network in the galaxy. If we do this right, we can *replace* the Shadow Broker with our own agent. That gives us the best of every world. We can use his network to get us information on the Reapers, tap his immense financial resources to increase the independence of your operations to the Council’s satisfaction, and even get a ton of...useful information...to lubricate the halls of power if needed.”

Shepard had a look of understanding dawning on her face...but also visible conflict. Fairly certain she knew what that was about, Oriana went for the kill.

“Moreover, we can do more good for the galaxy as a whole by replacing the Broker than by simply turning him or her in. Think about it, Shepard. If you turn them in, it will just cause momentary chaos everywhere, followed by a dozen other power players moving into the vacuum. They’ll ignite turf wars, potentially killing millions before all is said and done, and eventually simply replace his evil with another. But, if you have your own agent in place instead, you can use the Broker’s own information network to isolate the worst of the criminal underworld and *subtly* tip various powers that be off. Thus allowing you to remove the truly horrible evils without igniting a turf war. One that the galaxy definitely can’t afford considering what it might be facing.”

Some of the conflict had faded off Shepard’s face...but it had been replaced by suspicion. Lovely. Oriana was unsurprised by the next direction of Shepard’s thoughts.

“You’re pushing awfully hard for this. And I suppose you’d want to be *suggest* someone to replace the Broker? And just incidentally get access to all that information yourself?”

Oriana didn’t flinch, instead, she put on her best smirk. Which, between Miranda and Aethyta’s influence, was pretty good as smirks go, if she wasn’t being too modest. “First, do *you* actually know anyone that could do a job like being the Broker? Even I don’t know a single person, I’d probably suggest a small team, actually. Second, of *course* I’m interested in the information. But what I’m interested in is mostly pretty tame, Shepard. Details on the best people for certain projects, who I can get the best arrangements for raw materials for my shipyards from, and so on. I have no real interest in the underworld...save in one specific area, I suppose. But I don’t think you’d have an issue with me using the Broker’s information in New Dawn’s private war with Cerberus, now would you?”

The suspicion on Shepard’s face faded and she sighed. “Sorry, Oriana, it’s just...”

“That this is huge, and you’re not used to the idea of running things like a Spectre yet. And you don’t know me well enough, just yet at least, to be sure I’m not doing all of this for purely selfish reasons. I’d probably be more worried if you *hadn’t* considered it, boss lady.”

Alliana was silent for a long moment, then gave Oriana a smirk of her own. “No, actually. I think I *am* sure about you. Though I honestly can’t say why. My gut says I can trust you, and it’s never led me wrong yet.” She paused, seeming to enjoy Oriana’s expression of surprise. “So, fine. We’ll try to replace the Broker. Get me a list of people you think we can use to replace him or her. When I’ve had a chance to look it over, we’ll sit down and plan this raid out between us, possibly with one or two of the others involved. Going to have to consider that. I think all of them are a good team...but a few, like Ash and Kaidan, might not be able to put aside the military mindset well enough to do what you’re suggesting. We might have to use a small strike team while distracting the others with a shiny mission elsewhere that seems important enough to justify splitting up.”

Oriana nodded, grateful that the redhead had suggested it herself. “I already have one other lead that could easily fall into that category. It’s not solid yet, but there’s some whispers of some Batarians planning an attack of some sort on Terra Nova. Not a slave raid, but some sort of terrorist strike.”

Shepard’s eyes sharpened immediately, but Oriana waved her down.

“From what little I’ve been able to find out, it’s not set to happen tomorrow or anything. But if I can find a solid place to strike at, and what I find is serious enough, then it would certainly justify splitting a team off to deal with it. Hell, it will even make the Alliance happy. You *are* still running around with their best ship and a bunch of loaned out crew. Using them to stop a major terrorist strike will help keep them from reconsidering that before you’re ready.”

The redhead across her thought for a moment. Then nodded. “Keep me posted. On both situations.” With that, Shepard turned to the console in the briefing room and unsealed the doors. “Now, I believe it’s just about time for our more usual briefing...”

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It was several days later, after dealing with a number of minor missions, one of which included cleaning up some of the insane Rachni the Queen had warned them were taken from her, when the

subject was broached again. Oriana sought Shepard out with updates on the situation...and a window of opportunity. The two of them were in Alliana's private quarters, which Oriana had swept for bugs again. Twice.

"So, there you have it, boss. The Terra Nova situation is serious, but as the terrorists haven't hit the asteroid yet, it's manageable without getting you personally involved. Meanwhile, I've got a shuttle, a decoy lead that will appear time sensitive enough for you to need to check out separately, and the core of a team that can take over the Broker network if this all goes well." Oriana slid a secure data slate over to Shepard. "That contains the dossiers on each member of the replacement team. I hand-picked Fallion to lead it, since she's both completely trustworthy and has some experience with helping run information-gathering ops. She was filling that role for me for a couple of years, before Eden Prime. Though she's now back under Matriarch Aethyta at the moment."

Shepard looked at the data slate but didn't pick it up. "I'll look it over, but I probably won't have any suggestions to make. You were right when you pointed out I don't have the right kind of contacts for this sort of thing. Are...you really sure that the Terra Nova thing can be handled without most of the team?"

Oriana nodded firmly. "Yes. And I've actually arranged a few *New Dawn* assets to be in the area, just in case that mission goes tits up. I'd prefer not to use them, as they'd tip my hand about a few things I'd rather not be public knowledge yet. But they have orders to act if the worst happens."

Alliana frowned at her, a whisper of suspicion floating through her eyes. "Things you'd rather not be public knowledge?"

Oriana waved her suspicion off. "Nothing illegal, or even ethically murky, Shepard. The assets in question simply happen to be prototypes of a few new military designs. We haven't solved the issues with mass manufacture for them yet, and I'd purely hate letting everyone get a look at them before we did. That's a good way to have someone steal a march on you if they figure out the design."

The flicker of suspicion that had ghosted into the other woman's mind faded. She nodded at Oriana, took a deep breath, then gave the go ahead. "Alright. Unless something unexpectedly blows up in our collective faces before we can get all of this squared away, I'm greenlighting this set of operations. I'll bring up the decoy lead, as well as the Terra Nova issue with the rest of the crew at the daily briefing in an hour." Alliana paused, cocking her head for a moment in thought, then nodded. "You just focus on making sure all the logistics for the Broker mission are ready. I'll handle planning and briefing the Terra Nova team. Making sure they're going in with a solid plan will put me more at ease with this."

Oriana nodded, stood, and headed to the door. "It's the right move, Shepard. Things could go wrong, certainly. But we're playing for stakes that include the wellbeing of every advanced civilization in the known galaxy. Worse, we're gambling against a house that's never lost before, despite playing for a hell of a lot longer than we've even been around. If we don't take some risks..."

Shepard sighed and nodded, waving Oriana off as she picked up the data slate at last. Satisfied that Shepard understood, at least well enough for now, Oriana opened the hatch and left the redhead to her planning. She had her own preparations to be about. Both those Shepard knew about, and ten times as many that she didn't...

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The assault shuttle rocked, buffeted by the extreme winds of Hagalaz. The shuttle was a custom job from the *New Dawn* inventory, far more durable and considerably stealthier than the Alliance's Kodiaks. Even so, it was all Shepard and Oriana could do to keep it on target, aiming for the maintenance areas at the back of the Broker's massive base-ship. Finally, after a near miss where a wind shear nearly slammed the shuttle into the base, the magnetic clamps secure the shuttle's skids to the ship. This close, the flying fortress' atmospheric shielding, designed to keep the storms at bay, was helping, but one look at the storm-ravaged exterior of the mammoth ship told everyone that they aren't going to have an easy time traversing the surface. Shepard grimaced, then motioned Oriana to follow her into the back. There, the rest of the small team was waiting. Wrex, who had grinned like a maniac at the reveal of this mission, despite nominally being in the Broker's employee. Tali, who was both impossible to leave behind with Wrex coming and valuable for her tech skills on this mission anyway. And finally, Liara, who was along mostly because she was trusted more fully than either of the others, at least with this.

A five-man team, well mostly *woman* team actually, come to think of it. And that was absolutely all they could risk taking up against everything the Shadow Broker might have on hand. There was a second shuttle currently hidden deeper in system, filled with the small, hand-picked team that was going to replace the Shadow Broker, but they weren't assault troops by any means. Mostly, they were techs and analysts, though Fallion was leading the team, which meant that Ani'lia was with the group of techs as well...

Well, the assault team would just have to hope that quality was enough to overcome quantity, in this case. There was no one else, after all. Ashely and Kaidan had been dispatched with the rest of the Normandy's regular marines on a sting operation against a bunch of criminals intending to ram an asteroid into Terra Nova. As the asteroid hadn't even been assaulted yet, they should be more than enough to handle that issue...and neither of them were quite open-minded enough to be trusted to keep quiet about this operation. And while Oriana could have pulled in more people, Shepard was already uncomfortable enough as it was with the fact that it would be almost entirely Oriana's people running the Broker network afterward.

Final equipment checks were quickly completed and Shepard's voice came over the comms, getting quick acknowledgement from each of them that they were on the channel. With that, the redhead hovered a hand over the door control and spoke. "This is going to be rough, with such a small team. We know next to nothing about the interior of this place, and what sort of defenses it has. We'll be hitting hard and fast, trying to bypass as much of it as we can to reach the Broker quickly. Stick together, watch each other's backs, and call out any problems as you see them." There was a moment's pause, then her voice came back far more casually. "Now, let's go fuck up someone's day."

Wrex's bloodthirsty chuckle was the last thing heard before Shepard hit the hatch release. It was oddly appropriate...

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The fighting had been brutal. Somehow, between the shuttle's stealth systems, Tali and Oriana's tech talents, and sheer blind luck, they'd made it into the ship before the alarm was raised. But after

that, it had been a constant swarm of mechs, with just a few well-equipped mercs mixed in. Despite the numbers, they'd pushed deep into the ship, managing to trash both the armory and the mech depot, buying them more breathing space as they raced on, pushing to reach the Broker before anyone outside the fortress realized there was a problem. Then they were there. And all of them stared. The Shadow Broker...was a fucking Yang?!

**"It was foolish of you to come here, Shepard. But at least you brought me Ms. Lawson. Cerberus will pay handsomely for her...unique body. Particularly, no longer breathing, given how much trouble she has been for them."**

The redhead's voice was cold as she replied, even if her face wasn't visible, still covered by her helmet like any sane person. "Brave words coming from a being with nowhere left to run. Though, that is an interesting idea. I wonder how much the Salarian's would give for another Yang corpse to dissect."

The Broker growled, standing to his full height even as the lights in the room came up. He towered over even Wrex as he responded. **"Perhaps instead, I will take you alive and sell you all to the Batarians for that comment. I'm sure the slavers would love to...make use...of you. Except for you, Wrex. You're a valuable asset. Kill them for me and I'll triple your usual fee."**

Wrex chuckle darkly, even as he charged up his massive shotgun for the opening shot of the fight. "Sorry. Lawson pays better than you do. And Shepard gets me into more interesting fights."

**"Unfortunate. You will be difficult to replace."**

The Broker stretched his arms wide and, on some unseen signal, all hell broke loose. Two carnage shots from Tali and Wrex joined Warps fired by Liara, Oriana and Shepard. It should have been enough to turn even a Yang to paste...but an instant before any of them hit an energy shield popped into existence around the Yang. Oriana shouted in rage, recognizing the barrier as being one of *New Dawn's* new prototype *energy* shields rather than a kinetic barrier.

It easily absorbed the fire coming at it, even as the Yang slammed his hands down into one of his terminals, snapping it in half and throwing the pieces at Wrex and Shepard. Shepard dived to one side, but Wrex just matched brute power with brute power, biotically charging right through the debris, half flying at the Broker. Tali had swung to one side, but cried out in dismay as her overload failed to do anything to the shield. Oriana, on the other hand, growled with rage, eyes glowing with biotic power as she aimed not at the broker...but at the walls.

That shield couldn't be maintained by anything a person could carry. She'd designed the first specs herself and *knew* what sort of power it took. The Yang realized instantly what she was doing, trying to find and cut the power feeds. He roared and filled his hands with a massive pair of guns, tracking fire in her direction. She dove for cover, yelling into the comms.

**"THE WALLS! THAT SHIELD NEEDS A POWER FEED FROM SOMEWHERE. FIND IT AND CUT IT!"**

There was a massive grunt as Wrex ignored her, charging right into the Broker. No damage got through the shield, but the collision was enough to disrupt the Broker's attempt to kill her. He dropped one of his guns, punching Wrex away from him with one massive arm. Oriana, still powered up with a massive amount of biotics, took the chance to resume ripping at the walls with a biotic claw of power. It wasn't a standard move, being far more brutal than most Asari thought to use and too power intensive



for virtually anyone else to consider. But, a second later, a less refined claw of power joined her own, Liara proving once more that she wasn't just a biotic powerhouse, but a prodigy with her power too, as she copied the move on the fly.

The Broker leveled his remaining gun, more a cannon really, at Oriana, only to be hit with the piece of desk that he'd thrown at Shepard, the redhead having picked it up with her own biotics and propelled it back at him. The action again failed to hurt him, but threw his aim off again, and an instant later Oriana's biotic claw found one of the feeds for his shield, the energy barrier flickering for a moment before solidifying...and then coming down completely as Liara's smaller claw found a second feed.

The Broker roared again, as much in desperation as anger now, leveling his cannon at Wrex as the battlemaster charged him again. He got a shot off, but Wrex only grunted as his combined shields and biotic barrier took the hit. He barreled into the larger figure, burying his shotgun into the Yang's stomach and firing another carnage round. The Yang's thick armor took the brunt of the shot, but he howled in agony as some got through, orange blood flying from that point of his armor. He threw the Krogan away again, only for Shepard to prove her insane level of accuracy by unloading her entire clip directly into the same spot. Her first shots were caught by the armor's kinetic barrier, which Wrex had bypassed by getting so close, but as the barrier took hits elsewhere from Liara, Tali and Oriana it came down. Shepherd's remaining shots punched through the hole in the Yang's armor, causing him to scream and flinch in agony.

A moment later, the massive figure hunched over and launched itself at Shepard...only to be caught midair by perfectly synchronized singularities from Oriana and Liara. The two were so startled by the almost-accidental event that they didn't follow through...but Shepard and Wrex both did, launching biotic warps that slammed into the singularities, the resulting blast ripping into the Broker and throwing him back in a broken heap, right at Tali's feet. With an almost nonchalant but very surreal step forward, the Quarian leveled her shotgun right at the Broker's face...and fired a carnage round. And then a second a moment later. The shotgun couldn't take the rapid repeat of that move and melted down a moment later...but the Broker's head was basically *gone*, his body no longer even twitching.

Catching her breath a moment later, Oriana broke the silence. "Well. That was exciting."

That got a wild laugh out of everyone, the loudest and longest coming from Wrex as he pulled himself to his feet again...

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An hour later, it was all over but the coverup. The second team was in place...and now they just needed to deal with making sure Tali and Wrex didn't talk. Honestly, she thought they were probably loyal enough at this point that they wouldn't. But this was *big* and thus it made sense to try and be absolutely sure of that. Which was why Oriana had just thrown datachips at each of them, both of them managing to catch the objects despite the lack of warning, though Tali's catch was a bit clumsy.

"Consider those the first fruits of your new alliance with a new, less evil, Shadow Broker. Tali, yours has everything the Broker knew about the Geth, along with the locations of several derelict cruisers I imagine will deeply interest your fleet. Wrex...yours actually comes from *New Dawn*, not the Broker. It's a partial cure for the genophage. Something we've been working on for a couple of years."

Everyone in the room stopped and stared. Multiple 'whats' coming from several different throats, even as Wrex's eyes popped open wide. They narrowed a moment later, and his voice was a half-threatening rumble when he spoke.

"Partial? What does that mean. And why the fuck are you only giving this to me now?"

Oriana didn't even blink, despite the tone of voice leveled at her. "As to the first, it's considered partial because of how it works. It genetically modifies the Krogan beyond the scope of the genophage's ability to cope with. This is a good thing, as it means no more still births. Well, none that wouldn't have happened naturally, at least. However, there's a side effect. Specifically, that it also slashes your base birth rate down to about 30% of what you had originally. So, no more dead infants, and almost double your *current* successful birth rate...but not back to where it was naturally."

Wrex looked at the chip with mixed emotions. His voice was less threatening but still unhappy as he repeated his question about why she'd waited. Oriana shrugged and sighed.

"To be blunt? Because we didn't know who the fuck to *give* it to. The clans are a mess. More than half of them would take that cure and try to use it to start a new war on the Council. And that despite the fact that the Krogan no longer have anything like a standing military or...you know...a fleet. All that would do is kill the Krogan even quicker than leaving the genophage in place, which left us not knowing what to do. But you...you specifically Urdrnot Wrex, were on our radar as someone that might be able to rally the clans and push them into a more productive direction. Rebuilding the Krogan as something more than just mindless fighting machines bent on revenge. Problem is, we couldn't find you. It's why I knew who you were back on the Citadel."

Wrex looked angry again but she cut him off with a raised hand before he could ask his question a third time.

"As for why I didn't give it to you as soon as I *did* know where you were. The answer is simple. I needed to get a feel for you and make sure we were right about you. Now more than ever, with the Reaper threat out there, the galaxy can't afford another Krogan war...and at the same time, the Krogan have a chance to prove themselves in a way that means the Council won't be able to argue with you regaining your status in the galaxy. For you and your people, the Reapers are both a threat *and* an opportunity."

Wrex nodded, slowly. "Anyone else said that to me, I'd think you were just trying to set the Krogan up to die for the galaxy again. But you, Lawson...I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Don't make me regret it."

There was a long moment of silence, before Shepard finally broke it. "What does this mean for you, Wrex? Are you going to head back to Tuchanka?"

Wrex turned to the redhead, silent for a moment as he thought, but then he shook his head. "No. Not yet. I'll put out some feelers to the clans. But I'll need to come back as a larger-than-life Krogan if I want this to work. Helping you take out Saren will do that. I'll stick with you until we kill the rotten pyjak."

Shepard nodded her acceptance...and then closed the whole matter by ordering everyone to pack up. It was time to get back to the Normandy.

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Oriana smirked as she pinned her squirming Asari lover to her cot, holding the blue woman's wrists above her head even as she dove in to suck on the archeologist's pulse point. Liara whimpered and moaned in turn, pelvis frantically bucking upward, trying to find something to hump. Ori pinned her with a knee to each thigh, refusing to let the desperately horny Asari off that easy. Not when she had such a golden opportunity to do whatever she bloody well pleased to the horny little thing.

She'd known this would happen, of course. Hadn't even blinked when Liara actually initiated things for the first time since they'd begun fooling around. No Asari could wield as much raw biotic power as Liara had in their fight with the Broker without ending up ready to fuck the nearest being with approximately the right number and shape of body parts. An experienced commando could have suppressed the need for as long as needed, of course. But Liara, for all her brute power and talent, simply wasn't used to the biotic rush from heavy combat. Let alone heavy combat that included outputting more raw power than most Asari five times her age could match. The archeologist had managed to distract herself with the smorgasbord of data buried in the Broker's network...but by the time they'd reentered the assault shuttle, she'd been all-but-squirming in her seat, trying not to touch her own desperately inflamed body. So, by the time they'd reached their room on the Normandy, the normally shy woman was practically mad with lust.

And Oriana had every intention of taking full advantage.

Grinning wickedly, Oriana activated her omni-tool. Her *special* omni-tool that she'd quietly switched out for while Liara was trying to rip both of their clothes off. Her special omni-tool didn't have a fraction of the processing power or security her normal 'tool did...but what it replaced those losses with was a *far* more sophisticated fabricator, as well as intuitive controls for a set of micro holo-drones that could project the hard light field of an omni-tool in far more *interesting* ways.

She twitched her fingers in a specific way, triggering one of the most basic functions of this special omni-tool. In less than a second, it scanned Liara's wrists and fabricated a set of seamless restraints from its omnigel, locking her wrists together. A second twitch created an adhering solution that would last for an hour or two, and she used it to stick the restraints to the frame of Liara's cot. The maiden made a confused noise when Oriana's hands fell away yet she still couldn't move her own hands...yet her mind seemed too far gone in lust to quite realize what had happened. Yet, at least. Smirking devilishly, Oriana pulled away so that she could actually interact with her omni-tool properly, rocking back to sit on Liara's legs so she couldn't get free. The archeologist whimpered...but Ori ignored her for a moment.

A few quick taps caused the nano-forge in the omni-tool to create what she wanted, a set of circular rings with a bit of the same adhesive she'd use moments ago on one side...and some simple circuitry within. She deftly captured each of the maiden's dark blue nipples in turn, securing the small rings around them...then tapped her omni-tool again. The rings immediately began vibrating, as well as slowly fluctuating between cold and hot. Liara's whimpers turned to moans as she tried to buck again, a bit of uncontrolled biotics actually leaving her for a moment. Ori squeaked as those lust-fueled biotics hit sensitive places, thankfully causing mostly pleasure rather than pain. She shook it off and continued down the young Asari's body, nano-forging another pair of rings and attaching them to each of the woman's dual clits. Liara jerked almost strongly enough to unseat her lover when *those* activated. But

Oriana held on through it, quickly creating two more restraints, one for each ankle, and securing Liara's legs to each side of the cot frame. This left her naked and exposed, unable to do much more than writhe in place as the gentle vibrations of the rings drove her pleasure upward...but not enough to cum. Not yet.

Liara made noises of near-panic as Oriana stood up and moved away, but Ori was quick to reassure it. "Don't worry, sweetie, I'm just getting a toy to make you feel soooo much better."

That seemed to calm the woman, but Ori still made her actions quick, more than horny enough herself to want to get on with it. She pulled out and stepped into the hard-light strapon she'd had custom made, moaning as she turned it on. The inward-facing projector quickly thrust a sizable fake-cock into her dripping pussy, and she closed her eyes involuntarily as it started to lowly vibrate. She pried them open by force of will a moment later, determined to get back to her desperate, whimpering, lover. She activated the other projector, causing another hard-light cock to spring outward, then returned to mount her wide-eyed and very willing-looking victim. So far, the two of them hadn't really used any toys but, somehow, she doubted the Asari was going to complain.

Since the Asari came hard less than a minute later, on Oriana's second thrust...she was even more certain of that assumption...

## **Chapter 17: Killer Flashlights and Unexpected Metal**

Standing before the team at the daily briefing, Shepard looked a mix of excited and grim. As Tali entered and took the last seat, the redhead fired up the briefing room's projector. Several images sprang to life, but the two that took center stage were a distant shot of a Geth Prime and a galaxy-map of the Armstrong Cluster.

"We have a lead, folks. Or at least a situation with a strong relation to our mission. While there's currently no evidence of Saren or the Reaper Nazara's presence, a significant incursion of Geth forces into Citadel Space has been discovered. An Alliance scout was the first to spot a base going up and, given the Geth relation to current issues, an STG scout frigate was sent to find out more. What they discovered were four outposts in the Vamshi, Hong, Tereshkova, and Gagarin systems." She paused to press a key on her omni-tool, the four systems highlighting on the projector in response.

"The STG frigate was not equipped for information retrieval, so the information was forwarded to myself and Nihlus. Spectre Kryik is out of position and doesn't possess the stealth advantages that Normandy gives us even if he wasn't. Therefore, and particularly in light of Tali's expertise in getting information from Geth systems, we're elected to deal with these incursions. The primary goal is to simply get them the hell out of our space, but a strongly desired secondary mission is the retrieval of any and all information we can from the Geth present at these outposts." There were nods all around as Shepard paused, inviting comment. Predictably, Tali was the first to say something.

"This is big, Shepard! And not just for our current mission. The Fleet could use any information we get on the Geth and their operations, as well as motivations."

Shepard nodded. "That's certainly reasonable. Any critical information the Geth scouts have gained on the defenses of other Species' systems will have to be removed. But I'm open to anything else we discover being forward to the Migrant Fleet."

Tali nodded gratefully and leaned back, only to perk up again a moment later when Shepard tapped another key and the display changed to various types of Geth.

"Now, I know you've written up a report covering known Geth types and tactics, but let's assume that not everyone here has done their homework. Tali, why don't you start things off with a general overview of what you know about any of these platforms. Then, Oriana and Ashely, you can supplement with your combat observations from Eden Prime."

All three of the mentioned women nodded, but Oriana spoke up before Tali could.

"I've also got a piece of new hardware lined up for us that I think this mission would likely benefit from, Shepard. Though it will make our cargo hold tight for the duration of the mission."

The redhead looked curious, but only nodded, motioning for Tali to start her overview. Moments later, the discussion began in earnest...

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The Mako rocked as a near-miss from a Geth Colossus hit the dirt behind them. The Mako's gun was pointed the wrong way to fire back, busy dispatching an armature. But a moment later that didn't matter, as four bolts of superheated plasma slammed into the Colossus from above, hammering down its kinetic barriers, even as some of the damage leaked through. The plasma fire was followed by a missile, reducing the Colossus to a smoking ruin even as the sleek gunship that had done all the damage arced around for another pass on the smaller units.

Ashley whooped from the Mako's back seat as she witnessed the result. "Shepard! Please tell me we are *keeping* that thing!"

Shepard, swerving to avoid a rocket fired by a Prime, laughed and threw a response back over her shoulder. "Sorry, Ash. Even if it wasn't a prototype Oriana's only loaning to us, we're never be able to keep the thing with how it barely fits in our hold!"

The Spectre ignored the disappointed noises even as she admired their gorgeously deadly looking air support. At almost fourteen meters long, it had indeed been a tight squeeze to fit it into the Normandy's hold. But it was proving worth every inconvenience of it taking up most of their space. Gunships were rare in modern citadel militaries, the niche they filled not being overly critical in peace time, and usually filled by frigates or fighters during war time. No one, not even the Alliance who were less wedded to standard Citadel doctrine, actually had a dedicated design of their own. What few gunships anyone used were almost purely A-61 Mantis'. And that modular workhorse was more common in merc groups than virtually anywhere else.

But the MA-1 was an entirely different animal. *New Dawn Enterprises* had started completely from scratch with the idea of a close-support airship. They'd started by seriously streamlining the main fuselage. This design was *pure* close fire support. It carried only the pilot, period. In point of fact, the main fuselage carried only the pilot, mass effect generator, computer support, and engines. It wasn't

even armed. But that was because they'd provided something special for the gunship in the way of armament. They'd been unable to scale their pure direct energy weapons either up or down well enough for the initial design...but they'd done the next best thing. They'd built detached outrider pods that connected to the main body with a hard-light system. The MA-1 could handle up to three of them, and each pod could be equipped with multiple types of ordinance or defense systems. In this case, the MA-1 that Oriana was flying as air support was deployed with two pods equipped with plasma projectors that could fire superheated bolts of plasma, which were only partially affected by kinetic barriers. The third pod was a missile platform, capable of firing a half-dozen air-to-surface rockets with high-penetration warheads.

It was glorious. And Shepard wanted at least two of them. Sadly, they weren't on the market yet. And, as she'd told Ash, it was impractical to deploy one on a ship as small as the Normandy was anyway. Maybe on a larger frigate. Definitely on a cruiser. The Normandy was extremely small by frigate standards. An intentional choice both due to the extreme cost of upscaling the drive core, and to amplify its stealth properties. But that meant that it couldn't carry something like the MA-1 long term. And as she watched the gunship eviscerate the rest of the Geth ground units with only minimal help from the Mako...she was extremely irked about that fact. Probably even more than Ash was...

Keying her comm, she contacted the gunship. "Eagle-1, this is Alpha Actual. It looks like we're clear down here. Do you need to return to base or will you put down to join us?"

The response was immediate.

"Alpha Actual, I'll be joining you. There's no way to get this bird back aboard Normandy without a lot of fuss, and I'd rather clear the planet completely before we try it."

Shepard nodded. That had been the plan, for precisely that reason, but this was literally the first combat deployment of an MA-1. There'd always been the chance that it would develop problems in combat that required Oriana to pull back to the Normandy instead of landing.

"Copy that, Eagle-1. Looks like there's a clear spot just to the left of the main building. Go ahead and set down, we'll keep an eye out for anything unfriendly."

As the gunship settled down, quickly shifting to standby power, Shepard parked the Mako and turned her thoughts from the wonderful new toy to the bunker they still needed to deal with...

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After their blitz of the Geth forces throughout the Armstrong Nebula, the crew found themselves without a major new mission. The data they'd pulled from the Geth had been concerning, but very little of it was immediately actionable, and what little *was* actionable could be better handled by regular military forces. In turn, while there were any number of small missions available from the alliance, or from their newer sources, Oriana had successfully convinced Shepard that they couldn't afford to hare off after every such mission. Instead, she'd convinced the redhead to assign a few assets of *New Dawn's*, as well as a few merc units through the Shadow Broker network, to handle the more important ones...and to otherwise give the crew a breather. The rest of the crew, that was. Shepard wasn't the type to sit still and relax, and there were other things that needed doing. Which is how she

and Oriana ended up alone in an unmarked luxury shuttle, heading out to a small planetoid called Nonuel, in the Hades Gamma cluster.

“Are you sure we can’t just funnel money from the Broker network?”

The redhead’s voice was almost a whine, causing Oriana’s lips to twitch. “Yes, Shepard, we can. And we will. But, as I already explained, we can’t do that *directly* without exposing the fact that something is up. Like anyone with ill-gotten gains, you need something legal and visible as an obvious source for your wealth.” She smirked at the redhead even as she finished setting the autopilot to take them to the next relay.

“The deals you made on Noveria, and the handful I’ve helped you with using that startup money since, are a good beginning. But you need more. Eventually, you’re going to be maintaining your own ship and crew, and that sort of operation would eat through your current visible wealth real fast. On the other hand, your visible wealth is enough to believe you can cut the deal you’re about to, at least in partnership with me. And a massive asteroid *seriously* rich in eezo, which we can cook the books a bit on to make it seem even larger and more rich in eezo? That’s the sort of thing that can excuse you funneling billions into your operations.”

Shepard sighed, slumping in the copilot’s seat. “Yeah, yeah. And partnering with *New Dawn* makes the whole thing look realistic, since eezo mining is how you got your start in the first place. And it’s still a major money-maker for you.”

“Exactly. With this, in just a few months, you’ll be able to break completely with the alliance. Funding your own operations successfully will push up your credibility with the Council, and...”

Shepard raised her hand, signaling defeat. “Okay! Okay, I get it. This...just isn’t really my thing.”

“Which is what you have me for, now isn’t it?” Oriana smirked, waggling her eyebrows, enjoying the laugh the expression drew out of her companion.

Alliana’s grin faded into another sigh a moment later, even as she stretched a bit. “That doesn’t solve the immediate problem, though. What the fuck are we going to do for the three days it takes to get out to the middle of fucking nowhere? And if you say something about going over more empire building shit, I’m going to knock you out for the duration.”

Oriana laughed. “We *should* do some of that, but we can save it for later. For now, I plan on cumming my brains out, and it only remains to be seen if I’m doing that alone or if I can convince you to join me.”

Alliana’s stretching stopped abruptly, an incredulous look splashing across her face as she stared at Oriana. “...What?”

Oriana gave the redhead an entirely different sort of smirk, even as she arched her own back into a stretch...one that put her assets on very prominent display. She cheered internally as Alliana’s eyes drifted downward before the stupefied redhead could stop them. Building on the movement, Oriana *flowed* to her feet...and reached for the hidden pressure seal of her catsuit. Between one moment and the next, her seemingly seamless garment split under the pressure of her chest, the previously invisible line down her torso spilling open to show a *lot* of cleavage before she idly stopped it

with an arm just below her breasts. She was gratified to see the Spectre across from her gulp, eyes riveted to the expanse of flesh that most certainly *didn't* sport a bra.

"I said I was going to cum my brains out, Shepard. Repeatedly. For hours. My unique biology has *needs* after a fight. And poor Liara was too exhausted for me to get much use out of her after that slog against the Geth." Gambling, Oriana leaned over, letting her tits spill free as she put one arm on the back of Shepard's seat and the other on the redhead's leg. There was a tiny flash of disappointment from the other woman as she realized that Oriana's nipples were covered, at least. Though only by tiny pasties. Even so, the redhead visibly struggled to lift her gaze to Oriana's...only for her green eyes to be caught by the smokey lust burning in Oriana's lightly-glowing blue orbs.

"Now, I *could* simply make use of the top-of-the-line toys I brought with me. But that's never as good as the real thing. And I've seen you looking often enough to know you're interested in a tumble...or two or three. Possibly even more, eventually." She raised her hand to cup the redhead's frozen face, teasingly tracing a finger along her jawline. "So why don't you join me for a little of our own *personal* shore leave~?"

She practically purred the last line and she could see the redhead was *very* interested. But, strong willed woman that she was, she managed to shake free of Oriana's hypnotic eyes long enough to protest.

"But...Liara?"

Oriana chuckled, a throaty sound that seemed to do fun things to Shepard from the look on the other woman's face. "That's the best part. I've seen you looking at our shy little archeologist too...and her looking at you. Trust me when I said she'll be eager to join us...next time."

That seemed to throw Shepard for a loop, the confused expression on her face so adorable that Oriana couldn't help the giggle that escaped her.

"Liara's a *Asari*, Shepard. Arrangements like that are totally normal for them, particularly for maidens like her. Even if she's too shy herself to have had any experience with them. Trust me when I say she won't have a problem with it. For that matter, the fact I grew up among a shit ton of Asari on Illium is part of why *I* don't have a problem with it, either. My last semi-serious relationship was with a pair of Asari that eventually bonded. But the three of us fucked like rabbits for a couple of years before they decided to make their bond permanent, whereas I wasn't really interested in that level of commitment with them."

Shepard looked like her brain was about to fry, as it tried to reorder her worldview around the new information while most of her body was busy with...other responses. Deciding to push her luck again, Oriana cut the woman's mental overload short by leaning in and kissing her. The startled redhead didn't respond for a few moments, making Oriana worry she might have overstepped. Then, to her immense relief, the other woman kissed her back, their tongues dueling for control of the kiss for long moments. Oriana won, eventually, dominating the kiss even as she slid into the copilot seat, legs spread under the armrests as she sat on Alliana's lap, facing the slightly smaller woman.

Eventually, they had to come up for air. But the doubts were gone from the redhead's eyes as she met Oriana's again, replaced by lust to match Oriana's own. This time, it was the smaller woman



that initiated the kiss, a more serious struggle for dominance following over the next few minutes as their hands began to explore each other's bodies. Shepard had an advantage, what with Oriana's naked tits already spilling out of her clothes. But, despite that, neither of them came out on top of the exchange. The following few minutes were a blur as Oriana attacked Shepard's shirt, Shepard pulled the pasties from Oriana's nipples, and the two of them eventually half-stood and half fell out of the chair as they continued their struggle for dominance.

The struggle carried them from the cockpit to the small suite that was part of the shuttle, neither gaining an advantage...until Alliana's pants came off and Oriana's hand hit metal. For just a moment, she was confused. And then...she realized just what she'd just discovered. "Is...that a chastity belt?"

Alliana blushed almost as dark as her hair, eyes refusing to meet Oriana's. "Look, I lost a bet, okay? And the damn thing is on a timer. Though, there's only about a week left..."

Oriana couldn't help it. She giggled at the other woman's expression. Before Shepard could do more than pout at her, she reached down to tweak the redhead's nipples. Alliana moaned, arching up into the touch. "And, just how long have you been trapped in that thing?"

Alliana muttered an answer, but Oriana wasn't having it. She tugged at Alliana's nipples just sharply enough to cause a tiny bit of pain with pleasure. Alliana yelp-moaned in response.

"What was that?"

Alliana pouted but answered clearly this time. "Three months, okay? Well, almost three months. Three months minus a week. I'm horny as fuck and can barely do anything about it!"

Oriana grinned hugely. "So that's why you folded so quick. I was sure I was going to have so much harder a time convincing you to fuck two of your crew." Shepard blushed darkly again, looking away. "Awww, don't be like that, sweetie! I promise you're not going to regret it...particularly since I'm quite sure I can make you cum your brains out even with your temporary...handicap."

Oriana caressed the chastity-belt's plate, admiring the craftsmanship as Shepard whimpered and futility bucked up into her hand, trying uselessly to get some stimulation. Whoever had made this thing had designed to be so low-profile that even Shepard's casual clothes had hidden it completely. This was no low-tech affair, but a modern solution that was obviously designed to allow Shepard her full normal flexibility...while still being absolutely secure. And, now that she was looking, it had a small countdown timer visible along the upper band, showing that Shepard had a little over 6 and a half days left. Pity that they would be done with their mission before it came off. Still...

"How?" Alliana's voice was a combination of desperate and plaintive. "I've been trying for weeks! Even my strongest vibe can't get enough vibration through the plate to do more than make me hornier."

Oriana grinned. "Oh, my innocent victim, there are ways. And we're going to explore all of them until you've cum...repeatedly."

Shepard gulped at the look in Oriana's eyes...but there was far more desperate eagerness in her expression than there was fear. Good. Oriana leaned down to give her another searing kiss, mind

whirling with her best options even as she did. The one that popped to mind first was perfect, a way to make Shepard cum quickly, while likely still leaving her horny enough to want more. She grinned, mentally thankful for all the time she'd spent with Asari lovers even as she sparked biotic power into her middle and index fingers, reaching down to place them on either side of the chastity shield. With a deftness that only long experience with the technique could give, she guided the energy along Shepard's nervous system, aiming for her pleasure centers...

Alliana's reaction was instant. She howled into the kiss and bucked wildly below her. Oriana used her own weight to hold the woman down...but it wasn't working very well, the Spectre was stronger than her by a considerable amount, despite all the training Oriana had done with a certain, questionably sane, matriarch. The redhead's thrashing broke then connection to Oriana's fingers and she pouted...then grinned. She pulled away from Shepard, the redhead looking adorably betrayed as she did. She giggled at the expression.

"That technique is hard enough to maintain *without* your squirming. So, if you want to cum, we're going to have to do something about that."

Oriana pushed off the bed, sauntering the trio of steps across the small room that would bring her to the wardrobe. She opened a bottom drawer, showing it was filled to the brim with well-organized toys and, more critically, restraints. Given the struggle for dominance Shepard had immediately put up, Oriana hadn't thought she'd get a chance to use any of the latter...but now she had the redhead in the perfect position. Not only had most of Alliana's will to dominate seemed to flee her after Ori found the belt, but the redhead was desperate enough to cum that she'd likely do anything Oriana asked if it meant she had the chance. Still, best to keep it simple. With that in mind, she pulled out a familiar set of silk ties, a bottle of lube, and a slim but powerful vibrator. Returning to the bed, she set the toy and lube aside within easy reach, enjoying the wary-but-interested expression on Alliana's face as she did, then held up the ties.

"Now, lay out for me so I can tie you in place...that is, if you really want to cum."

The redhead hesitated for a long moment, before her arousal clearly overcame any reluctance, stretching out spread eagle with silent obedience. Oriana was delighted at the sight, and quickly tied both the Spectre's ankles to convenient points on the sides of the bed, glad that it was a space-saving affair with storage underneath, as it gave her plenty of places to secure the ties. Once she was done with the redhead's ankles, she crawled back onto the bed, taking her time as she kissed and caressed her way up the squirming woman's body. She paid extra attention to Alliana's inner thighs and breasts, before finally ending up face-to-face with the flushed redhead, even as she held the woman's wrists above her head. She kissed her soundly, then whispered in her ear.

"Don't worry...I'm sure you'll get a chance to tie me up too, another day. ~Hmmm~. Maybe you can even tie me to Liara and have your way with both of our helpless bodies? Or maybe I'll do the tying then, too, securing your face to her pussy so you can't escape...~" The redhead shuddered equally at both mental images, confirming what Oriana had already suspected. Her Commander was a switch. That would be *so* much fun in the future. But for now...she reached up with her third silk tie and quickly secured the redhead's wrists to the headboard, grinning down at her newly-helpless victim a moment later.

“There we go. Now...let’s see about making you cum. Or perhaps I should tease you for a while first?” She giggled at the glare she got for that comment, quickly wagging a finger in front of the other woman’s nose, though she quickly had to move it as the pouting woman tried to bite it. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic, lovely. I was just joking...mostly. I promise I’ll make you cum quickly...the first time.”

Before Alliana could react to that, Oriana reached down to tweak her nipples with biotically empowered fingers, turning anything she might have said into a renewed moan. She worked her way, quicker this time, back down the squirming redhead’s body, until she was face-to-metal with the other woman’s chastity-belt covered sex. Pulling back for just a moment, she reached for the slim vibe she’d grabbed earlier, quickly lubing it up...then lubing a finger and pressing it against Alliana’s back door. The woman flinched, but only at the coldness, relaxing in a way that told Oriana that the redhead wasn’t completely inexperienced with the joys of...alternative entry. But, as Oriana lubed the other woman’s ass, her new lover spoke.

“...I tried that. It wasn’t enough by itself...”

Oriana smirked, looking up to meet her boss’ eyes even as she pressed the tip of the inactive toy against the woman, not pressing home just yet as she answered. “By itself? Not surprising. But that trick I used earlier has a weakness. It can’t actually take you over the edge...but I supposed I could try and see if you’re the exception. A few hours of using it on you would prove if you could cum that way or not.”

Shepard shook her head so fast and frantically that Oriana couldn’t help but giggle. Once she managed to get her fit of mirth under control, she pressed the vibe inward. There was some resistance, but after a minute or two of careful easing, accompanying by a lot of moans and squirming, the toy was buried to the hilt. Satisfied, Oriana shifted to press her weight against Alliana’s lower body, helping to hold her in place...then spread her biotically-sparking fingers to either side of the chastity plate once more. Just like before, the reaction from the redhead was almost instant...but this time she didn’t have enough leverage to thrash away from the sensations on accident. Oriana kept it up for several minutes, driving Shepard to the cusp and keeping her locked there...then finally reaching down to the vibe and flicking it on at its highest intensity.

Alliana arched instantly, the sheer strength in the other woman’s body managing to almost throw Oriana off even as the redhead *howled* through her first climax in almost three months. Oriana grinned wildly as she kept the contact with her sparking hand as long as possible, keeping the climax going as the redhead’s body locked up and her eyes fluttered...then, the woman collapsed and Oriana finally let her go. Alliana’s whole sweat-soaked torso heaved as she tried to fill her lungs, doing delightful things to Oriana’s own desires. Grinning wickedly...the brunette turned off the vibe...but fired up the biotic technique. Shepard’s bleary eyes flew open as she felt the sensation again.

“Wat?”

Her voice was fuzzy and her eyes barely focusing. It was adorable. Who knew galaxy saving badasses also had adorable faces like that?

“I told you the first one would be fast, Shepard...but only the first one. And you still have to repay me as well...”

The redhead's gaze sharpened a bit as she gulped, a mix of utter desire and extreme trepidation playing across her face as Oriana went back to work on her body. They had almost twenty hours before they reached the next relay...

## Chapter 18: The Phoenix

The Councilors were all present on the screen when Shepard and Oriana entered the communications room. Tevos started to speak when she saw Shepard enter, only to be cut off by Sparatus when he spotted Oriana entering behind the Spectre.

"This is a briefing for you, Shepard. Not your crew."

Alliana didn't so much as blink. "An intelligence briefing, as I understand it. And Ms. Lawson is effectively acting as my intelligence officer for the moment. A natural result of her putting *New Dawn's* intelligence assets at my disposal. If secrets effecting the safety of any Council race's space are going to be discussed, I will dismiss her. However, if this is about Saren, I will likely have to tell her anyway and she may have information to contribute."

Surprisingly, the Turian and Salarian councilors both nodded immediately. The Salarian wasn't surprising...and perhaps Sparatus respected the operational need? Whatever the case, the Turian backed down with no more than a light grumble and Tevos picked up her original greeting.

"Spectre Shepard, there has been an...incident. My own contacts have confirmed Saren was involved, though his Reaper dreadnaught was not. This presents an opportunity, if acted upon quickly enough. Though we are not sure exactly the best way to do so."

Valern took up the thread of conversation as the Asari made a gesture, causing Oriana's eyes to sharpen a bit. A rehearsed signal to allow the trio to appear to be completely in-sync?

"Twelve hours ago, lost all contact with Omega. Given nature, disruption not unusual. Remained dark despite all attempts to reconnect. Tevos contact escaped system, revealed why."

Another subtle gesture had Sparatus's gravelly voice continuing.

"Apparently, a small but powerful fleet of Geth cruisers and frigates hit the asteroid. They stripped away its external defenses, then landed troops, quickly seizing control by the simple expedient of killing most of the leadership. Aria T'Loak got out, barely, and Tevos' informant is close to the so-called Queen of Omega."

Tevos picked up as Sparatus went silent, though this time they didn't seem to need the signal, likely due to it being the Asari's information in the first place.

"According to what was passed on to me, Saren was seen leading the Geth invasion forces. More interesting than that, however, is that the shuttle carrying Aria out of the system recorded an *incoming* activation of the Omega-4 relay just before it went to FTL. The arriving ship was a heavy cruiser that matches what few reports we have of a rogue species known as the Collectors. Given what little is known about the species, we assume Saren has cut a deal for something with the Collectors, taking Omega simply as a convenient location to meet with them."

The signal was different, but now that Oriana was looking for the gestures, it was easy to spot the cue when Tevos handed the conversation off the Valern again.

“Most likely after alternative to Cipher. Likelihood presents problems. Might have identified possible location of Mu relay via other means.”

Another gesture and Sparatus continued the rotation.

“This presents us with a problem. We need to follow up on Saren being away from his dreadnaught. If they are caught separated, we may be able to deal with Saren, at least. Unfortunately, we also need to follow up on Ilos before Saren has a chance to beat us there. Given the location of the Mu relay, that demands use of the Normandy. At the same time, with the Terminus in chaos, we don’t dare send a fleet to Omega, which means the Normandy would be the best option there as well. Spectre Kryik is back on the Citadel and could follow either lead, but there is only one Normandy.”

The Councilors fell silent, apparently awaiting Shepard’s response. The redhead was frowning...and so was Oriana, who quickly checked something on her Omni-tool before preempting any decision on Shepard’s part by directing a question at Councilor Tevos.

“Did your contact indicate if Saren seemed to be intending to hold the station?”

Tevos seemed surprised, pursing her lips at Oriana speaking instead of Shepard, but ultimately shook her head. “Not in so many words. However, she seems to think he was going to remain in place for at least a few days, as he sent Geth out to raid the asteroid’s resources and is funneling them into freighters. We can’t count on him remaining in place for long enough to do both missions, however.”

Oriana nodded acknowledgement. “Not if we need to use the Normandy for both, no. However, the new ship *New Dawn* is selling to Shepard as her personal vessel has just completed its shakedown trial. I propose we head to the Citadel and trade ships. So long as the Alliance is willing, Spectre Kryik can borrow the Normandy to investigate the Ilos lead, while we take the new ship to try tracking Saren directly. Project Phoenix is nearly as stealth-capable as the Normandy, and considerably better armed if worst comes to worst.”

Shepard looked almost as surprised as the Councilors but recovered quickly. “That sounds like an excellent suggestion. I hadn’t expected to make the change-over quite so quickly and thus crew might be an issue, but we can probably make it work if the Alliance is willing to loan out a few of the Normandy’s crew and replace them for Nhilus’ mission.”

The Councilors looked at one another for a long moment, then Sparatus nodded and spoke for them.

“As the Normandy is a joint Hierarchy-Alliance project, I’m sure I can talk them into the loan of the ship for this specific mission. Likewise, we will arrange for you to take any of the crew you need and replace them from either the Alliance or Hierarchy forces for the duration of this mission. Any longer-term loans will have to be a matter between yourself and the Alliance.”

Shepard readily agreed to that, knowing as well as Oriana did that the Alliance likely wouldn’t balk at a few loaners, given that they’d loaned out the entire Normandy previously. Though the high-

command likely wasn't going to like the cold splash of late-coming realization about how little control they actually had over Shepard now that she was a Spectre.

It was a smirking Valern that ended the call. "Will be interesting to see results of Project Phoenix. Sources on ship say it will be special. Revolutionary even. Surprising to sell it to Shepard, but advertisement from Spectre may make others willing to pay price, yes?"

With that last parting shot, the screen went dark. The scowl Oriana had plastered on her face at the parting hints about sources inside her company faded after a few seconds and she chuckled. Shepard's expression, which had been halfway to a glare at her from Oriana's unintentional ambush, shifted to puzzled at the sound of the chuckle. Oriana quickly waved her hand, as if brushing both the redhead's irritation and confusion away.

"Sorry about the surprise suggestion, Shepard. The truth is that the Phoenix isn't *really* finished testing. We'll be taking her out before she's had more than the basic builder's trials, much like what happened with the Normandy, only a bit more so. Thankfully, she had a bit of a partial shakedown as a standby asset for the Terra Nova situation and performed well enough I think we can risk it, at least for the chance presented."

The redhead frowned, then sighed, her irritation fading even if the confusion remained. "And you're not concerned about the Salarian Councilor having access to information about it? You said before that you wanted those assets kept secret."

"Only to a certain extent. I was chuckling as I suspect the Salarian's have no idea I know about their primary 'informant' and have been feeding him what I want them to know. Same with the Asari and Turians, actually. And the Systems Alliance as well, for that matter. Remember, Shepard...I make ships to *sell* them. I've been leaking information about the new designs all along, to all three of the major powers plus the Alliance, to make sure I have buyers when the new hulls that just got laid down are finally ready for actual sale."

Shepard blinked, then groaned and rubbed her forehead. "Of course you have been. At least tell me this ship is really something special, not just shiny chrome to sell to rich militaries?"

Oriana grinned. "Oh, you have no idea Shepard. The Phoenix herself was almost four times as expensive as the Normandy, and that's *exclusive* of R&D costs. There is nothing else like her anywhere in space...and for that kind of cost you better believe she's 'something special' or I'd never be able to sell it to the various powers that be."

The redhead just shook her head at the confident smirk plastered on Oriana's face. "Well, best we get the Normandy moving then."

She gestured for Oriana to follow and both of them made their way forward to the helm, Shepard calling ahead to alert Joker they were coming...

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"That is a cruiser."

The redhead's dumbfounded expression was, to Oriana's mind, hilarious. She grinned and replied. "The most powerful cruiser in the Galaxy, yes."

Before Shepard could reply, the voice of the Salarian Councilor came from behind them.

“Remains to be seen. Design revolutionary but unproven. Might be worthless.”

Oriana snorted. “You don’t believe that any more than I do.”

The Salarian didn’t respond, even as the other two Councilors joined him. Sparatus waved at the vessel and spoke next.

“She is unquestionably beautiful, Ms. Lawson. Would you care to give us an overview? Consider it an early sales pitch.”

Oriana smirked. “Of course.”

Raising her Omni-tool, she tapped a few commands, taking control of the window’s projector, overlaying a rough wireframe of the Phoenix on the naked-eye visual of the real thing. This ship was *her* baby and she was proud to show her off...and it really was a perfect opportunity to sell the design to the highest of high echelons of the three major military powers. Sparatus and Valern, in particular, would report back everything she said about the design. Probably word for word and with their own observations attached.

“The Phoenix is part of an entirely new breed of warship. Unlike virtually every other military vessel out there, her armament is made up of directed energy weapons, rather than mass drivers. Using gravity-lensing instead of physical materials, we’ve managed to scale up the power and range of graser batteries for effective use at space-battle ranges. Admittedly, the range of the weapons systems is significantly less than those of traditional mass-accelerator rounds. However, this potential issue, as the good Salarian Councilor well knows, is countered by two factors.” Oriana manipulated the display, and several internal systems were highlighted on the display. “First, the Phoenix, as well as her eventual sister ships, employ similar stealth technology to that IES systems aboard the Normandy. While this does, technically, allow the ships to function as stealth vessels, that is not its core purpose. Said core purpose is the mitigation of targeting data. It is, after all, not only *detection* that is done easiest by heat in space. Long-range targeting data is also mostly heat-based. With the IES systems engaged, any vessel attempting to fire at the Phoenix beyond its own range will have trouble even localizing it, even if it’s stationary, let alone if it’s moving. They might know it’s there, but they won’t have a prayer of hitting it with the poor targeting solutions they can acquire at those sorts of ranges.”

Oriana let that sink in, tapping more commands as the IES systems faded from the display and the drive systems of the ship were highlighted. “In combination with the difficulty in targeting the ship at all, is the Phoenix’s extreme speed. The drive system is new and, frankly, utterly revolutionary. Instead of reaction drives such as fusion torches or antimatter annihilation drives, the Phoenix uses tidally stacked gravity generators in a not dissimilar way to how the Normandy uses its Tantalus Drive. However, while the Tantalus Drive creates a gravitic cavity for the Normandy to ‘fall’ into...our Repulson Drive *both* pushes and pulls on the ship with asymmetrical gravity bands, allowing for twice the acceleration rate of the Normandy. That this also removes the primary heat emission source of the ship, actually means the Phoenix can maintain stealth for far longer than the Normandy can.”

Smugly turning the display off and turning to face her audience, Oriana nails in her conclusion. “In short, a 450-meter light cruiser that is *faster* than any frigate ever built, near-impossible to target at

long range, and armed with grasers, fusion lances, and plasma weaponry. All of which ignore kinetic barriers to some greater or lesser extent. Oh, and of course, she's also equipped with new *energy shields* that outperform the best kinetic barriers at stopping mass accelerated rounds, while also actually being capable of interdicting the energy fire of the new weapons. The Phoenix represents an entirely new dimension of warfare and, at least in theory, can take on conventional vessels twice her size or better."

Shepard's jaw was hanging gratifyingly loose...and even the Councilors, professional diplomats of the highest order, were looking visibly impressed. Of course, Valern was quick to point out the one, *tiny* flaw. Tone very dry as he did so.

"Yes. And she costs more than a 'conventional' dreadnaught."

Oriana internally flinched but externally shrugged. "For now, yes. The Phoenix is a prototype however and the new sister ships we've laid down are already taking advantage of new advances we made during her construction. They won't be *quite* as fast or pack as much punch...but we're currently estimating that they'll only be something like half her price tag. And we expect that to only improve with follow on designs."

*That* news was something that none of them had gotten yet, clearly, as all three Councilors failed to conceal signs of interest as they heard it. And it was the truth, though not the whole truth. The Phoenix had been intended to be a one-off enhanced design from the onset, specifically engineered for use by Shepard. While it wasn't actually that much faster or better armed than the follow on ships, its stealth systems were significantly better than theirs would be and it had a number of features that simply weren't in the 'Mk.II' designs. Little things like an entire separate barrier system to back the energy shields up with a state-of-the-art kinetic barrier...and support for an A.I. if she could ever figure out where Cerberus had gotten EDI from. Or possibly install non-heretic Geth into, failing reproduction of EDI.

Over the next several minutes, Oriana fielded a number of questions from the abruptly much-more-interested Councilors. She did so somewhat contentedly, as their interest would help in the long run, but was still fairly pleased when the handful of loaner crew from the Normandy, as well as their other allies, showed up and they parted from the Councilors with the legitimate excuse of needing to get underway as soon as possible.

The crew on loan from the Alliance consisted of just six people. Ashely and Doctor Chakwas had been transferred, though Kaiden had been left behind, having been an original specially-trained crewman of the Normandy. Removing him would have left an even bigger hole in the ship's officers than already existed. Aside from Ashely and the Doctor, the remaining trio were all members of the Normandy's second-shift support staff. A com specialist and a trio of command-deck technicians who specialized in management of the Galaxy Map and other military-oriented secondary systems. The Phoenix wasn't short on engineering staff, but filling a lot of the secondary positions just hadn't happened yet, and those four would just barely bring their skeleton crew up to the point they could handle two shifts. There was an entire additional shift of crew currently being trained at a *New Dawn* shipyard to help alleviate the problem...but even if they rushed things, that crew was a week or two from finishing training. The simple truth was that they hadn't intended on handing over the Phoenix so early and flat out weren't ready. Still, needs must when the devil drives and the Reapers are fairly good approximations of the devil.



Quick greetings were exchanged with the ship's XO, as Asari named Jenita A'Sota who was looking very harassed at the moment. Four members of the Asari Commando squads assigned to the ship quickly led off most of the crew to their bunks...and Oriana directed Shepard to the Captain's Quarters. There, she introduced her to one last member of the existing crew.

"Hello, Spectre Shepard! I'm Kelly Chambers and I've been assigned as your Yeoman!"

Oriana was working hard to suppress a laugh at Shepard's stunned reaction to the young redhead...who fit the description 'bubbly' to a degree that should probably be illegal. She'd discovered the gifted young woman when Cerberus attempted to scout her. Oriana had snapped her up instead and discovered, to her positive glee, that the energetic redhead was both *extremely gifted* at reading people, and a top-tier organizer. With a smirk, she decided to rescue Shepard from the rapid-fire explanations and updates on the ship that Chambers was overwhelming her with. She cleared her throat loudly enough to get the Yeoman's attention...and to her credit said Yeoman blushed at Oriana's raised eyebrow, murmuring an apology.

"It's quite alright, Kelly. I know there's a lot for Shepard to get up to speed on. But I hadn't yet even informed her about you." She quickly turned to Shepard, cutting off the Spectre before she could either ask or protest about Kelly's presence. "Shepard, Ms. Chambers here is the answer I came up with to several problems that have been building up. Despite her age, she's *extremely* good, someone I'd originally intended to use in my own operations." That was a bald-faced lie but Shepard didn't need to know that. "Instead, much as losing her potential is a wretch, I figured she would serve you perfectly as someone to handle the day-to-day details of both your budding business empire...and a ship that's going to eventually have a crew of almost three hundred. That's going to bog you down with administrative issues, despite all your XO can do, unless you have someone like Kelly here to help you handle it efficiently."

Shepard looked both pensive and relieved at the same time. After a few seconds to process, she nodded.

"You're right, of course. I'm certainly willing to give Ms. Chambers a chance to prove herself, even if I might have liked to be in on the selection process of such a person."

Oriana and Kelly both winced a bit at that rebuke, however mild. Thankfully, Kelly was thoroughly irrepressible and quickly took up the challenge.

"I'll do my best to prove myself a good choice, Ms. Shepard! I've got most of the details you need to know on the ship already organized by order of importance, with an eye toward practical information regarding our capabilities, given the rushed deployment. Would you like me to go over them with you, or simply forward them to your work terminal?"

Shepard considered for a moment, then looked over to Oriana. "Unless Ms. Lawson needs to show me anything in particular, covering it in person would likely be better."

Oriana shook her head. "No, I was actually going to suggest it. I need to check in with the engineering team and make sure there are no issues. If there aren't, we should be good to leave dock in about two hours. I'd suggest covering as much as you can in an hour and a half, then heading down to

stand with XO A'Sota as she handles getting us out of dock. She can brief you more on the practical, technical stuff on the way to the relay."

Shepard nodded, waving for Kelly to proceed her into her quarters before dismissing Oriana. Oriana grinned as she noticed Shepard's gaze briefly lock onto the bouncy Yeoman's ass as she followed her fellow redhead into the Captain's Cabin. If she remembered right, that belt of Shepard's had only just released her an hour or two ago. Pity the poor woman was going to be too busy for the moment to properly make use of her freedom. Well...a pity for the redhead, at least. Perfect for Oriana, since it meant the woman would still be horny enough to fold quickly when she got around to dragging Liara into the fun. And if Oriana made sure the redhead was run too ragged with critical details before then to 'handle' things herself...well, no one would blame her for that...right?

## Chapter 19: Waiting Games

Even with the sheer speed of the Phoenix, it had taken almost three days to reach the Omega system. Which, given that they were already almost a full day behind the invasion of the system when they left the Citadel, had worried everyone. Luckily or unluckily, they hadn't actually missed Saren despite the delay, though they hadn't been in time to catch him on the asteroid itself. Instead, they'd managed to ID his temporary flagship as it left the system. Since not even the new stealth systems could hide a ship in FTL, they'd had to be *extremely* careful in following his trail, which had been made worse by the fact the former Spectre was paranoid enough to make several course changes before steadying down. In truth, they actually hadn't managed to follow him through all of those corrections, which is why they were now stuck very stealthily entering a number of systems that *could* have been his destination. They'd already checked the first of three...but now they needed to discharge the heat sinks and creep slowly into a second. Which meant they finally had some downtime that wasn't completely committed to their new ship, managing the chase, or both.

And that meant that Oriana had *plans*. Sexy, sexy plans. Sexy plans involving a certain shy blue maiden and a redhead. Errr...a specific redhead. Though maybe some other time with Kelly. That girl seemed like she could be fun in bed. But enough of fantasizing about new, bubbly redheads, back to her plans! She'd made sure to keep Shepard busy enough that she doubted the woman had been able to do much more than masturbate in the shower, at best. And possibly not even that much, given how thoroughly the Spectre had been distracted by the overload of information about the Phoenix and her new crew. Oriana been careful to make sure Shepard had gotten enough sleep...but no real time to scratch that itch she was sure to have at this point. And now, she had brought an equally horny Asari that she'd been teasing for days, an extremely good bottle of potent wine, and just finished preparing a home-cooked meal personally.

Shepard had looked genuinely flabbergasted when Oriana had shown up with the raw ingredients and promptly cooked a delicious smelling meal in the Cabin's small, attached kitchenette. And she looked even more surprised at how good it looked and smelled as Oriana dished up her mother's amazing Spaghetti Pomodoro recipe, complimented by olive-oil brushed, fresh rosemary bread, and a tossed salad. Even Liara was looking at her a little strangely, though less so than Shepard. Asari's long lives meant they not only could but did usually pick up a broad sampling of skills.

"Don't look quite so surprised, Shepard. I'll have you know that my adoptive mother was an *excellent* cook and demanded I learn at least a few of her recipes when I was still a teenager." It was

true, sort of. In reality, that had been during Oriana's first time around, when her life had been a bit more...normal. She rather regretted the distance that had grown up between her and her adoptive parents since her return through time...but their lives, too, were ones she was working to save. And it wasn't like she didn't keep in touch with them.

Shepard simply shook her head, her lips twisting into a wry expression of half-apology. "Sorry, Ori. It's just really hard to reconcile the multi-trillionaire business mogul with something as...domestic...as a home cooked meal. Particularly one that smells this good."

Oriana grinned, letting her companions know she wasn't offended.

"I'm sure my older sister would claim it was just part of being perfect. In my case, however, I prefer to simply think of it as being human. I actually rather like cooking, even if I rarely find the time for it. It always just seems a waste to do it for only myself, after all. Now, let's eat while it's still hot!"

Conversation fell off as Oriana joined them, save for exclamations of delight and words of praise from both her companions. Oriana really was a good cook, really did enjoy it, and for a while was content with the simple pleasure of basking in their enjoyment of her food. As they all started to get full and the wine started to kick in, conversation began to flow more naturally...and Oriana began to stir up the next part of her plan. Namely, by running the foot she'd slipped out of its high-heel along Liara's exposed leg. Oriana had gotten the Asari into a little-black dress type outfit for the night, with full intentions of mischief.

Liara, already a little tipsy from the potent Asari vintage, and very horny from multiple days of Oriana teasing her, was almost immediately struggling to contain a moan. Her eyes darted from Oriana to Shepard, half pleading, half ready to ravish both of them. Oriana smirked, keeping it up for a few moments...then stopped. The abrupt withdrawal of her teasing seemed to leave Liara flat-footed. As did her getting up, shoe back in place, and moving off to pick up a covered tray. Returning back to the now mostly-depleted meal, Oriana nudged a few dishes slightly to one side and put their desert in the freed space. Liara's eyes widened and then dilated a bit as Oriana uncovered a favorite Asari dish called Jubeiale. Scooping some up in a spoon, Oriana turned to Shepard with a grin.

"You're going to love this. Jubeiale tastes great to humans. But for Asari..."

Oriana held the spoon up to Liara's mouth, the maiden gulping and looking from side to side. She couldn't resist the smell for long, however, and quickly opened her mouth to take the bite. The moment the taste hit her tongue, her eyes closed in bliss and a very erotic moan slipped passed her lips.

"...For Asari, it's like a mix of catnip and chocolate. With a moderate aphrodisiac property thrown in for good measure."

Shepard's eyes were huge as Liara unconsciously licked the spoon, moaning again as she caught some of the treat she'd missed. Oriana withdrew the spoon, then used it to take a bite for herself, making the act of licking it off the spoon a moment later as erotically charged as possible...and moaning just as loudly as Liara had.

"And, of course, I have just enough Asari genetics in me to get some of the effect, even if not all of it."

Shepard's eyes were half-lidded now, as Oriana used the same spoon one again to lift a third bite, this time for the redhead. She leaned forward to take it without question, her own eyes widening for a second in surprise, though without the following moan. For a pure human, it simply tasted amazing, rather than being something...more. Oriana grinned...then surrendered the spoon to the redhead.

"I think Liara wants more..."

Shepard's eyes darted to Liara, whose eyes were following the spoon in an almost comically intense manner. The redhead giggled, even if there was a bit of a blush on her face as she dipped the spoon for another bite and lifted it to the Asari's lips...

By the time the Jubeiale was finished, any chance Shepard or Liara had ever had of resisting Oriana's plotting had long since vanished. As, as it happened, had all of Liara's clothing, most of Oriana's, and Shepard's uniform shirt and bra. Liara had taken the last bite of the Asari treat while sitting on Shepard's lap, while Oriana was pressed into the redhead from behind, Alliana's head resting on Oriana's breasts and her hands playing with the other woman's nipples. Oriana all but squealed in delight when, after the last spoonful of Jubeiale, Shepard didn't even hesitate to pull Liara close and kiss her with considerable passion.

From there, it didn't take long for Oriana to get involved, or for all three of them to make their way to the oversized bed Oriana had insisted be installed in the cabin, replacing the slightly more modest one that the original design had called for. Oriana had managed to whisper into Liara's ear in transit and the horny blue maiden instinctively obeyed her orders as they all fell into the bed, taking advantage of Oriana capturing their mutual new lover in a kiss of their own to target Shepard's pants. The redhead squirmed a bit in surprise as she felt her pants being tugged off, but Oriana initiating a familiar duel for dominance with their tongues distracted her. A duel the redhead lost when Oriana's blue minion peeled away Shepard's soaked panties and blew a stream of cool air across the woman's equally sodden pussy.

Shepard moaned as the sensations reached her enflamed brain, her will to battle Oriana's control collapsing under the unexpected pleasure. Now in complete control of their embrace, Oriana struck with silent, soft hands, one set of fingers tweaking a nipple and the other reaching down to trace a teasing circle around the woman's clit. She circled until Shepard's moans turned to needy whimpers, then withdrew from the kiss...and silenced the redhead's instinctive protest an instant later by sparking her biotic trick between the fingers placed on either side of Alliana's clit. The woman arched powerfully under Oriana's and Liara's weight, lifting both of them a bit even as Oriana latched onto her pulse point and sucked. That extra stimulation was just enough to send the redhead screaming over the edge...and Oriana wasn't interested in letting up. She kept up the biotic stimulation through Shepard's climax, making sure she was still painfully aroused when she came back down, then withdrew completely to pull Liara upwards and into a kiss, both of them straddling Shepard's body.

Liara was putty in Oriana's hands, specifically her fingers as they teased the Asari's dual clits. She focused on bringing Liara higher and higher without letting her cum while Shepard recovered slightly. Then, when the redhead squirmed, showing interest, Oriana lowered her pussy straight onto Alliana's face. There was no hesitation as Shepard's hands came up to grasp Ori's hips, her tongue diving in with desire. For the first time since they started, it was Ori moaning, though she managed to retain her

presence of mind just enough to plunge two biotically-charged fingers into Liara, sending the Asari over her own edge, shuddering as she half-collapsed into Oriana's arms. The blue maiden recovered quicker than Shepard had, and Oriana gave her only a quick kiss before pushing her down. Liara obeyed the silent order, her face ending up nose-to-pussy with Shepard's neatly trimmed sex. As Liara eagerly got to work, Oriana shuddered at her own approaching climax.

This was going to be an amazing night...

## **Chapter 20: Virmire**

It had taken most of another day after their romantic little dinner and threesome, but Saren's destination had been found. The planet, a garden world in the Hoc system of the Omega Sentry cluster, was an oddity in that it was a garden world with no known settlements. Its position in the frontier of the Attaican Traverse had put it too close to various Terminus System powers to be settled safely, all attempts by the citadel to strike deals with various warlords and criminal groups to keep any settlement untouched by them having fallen through.

Which meant that the power sources their passive scans had found *definitely* weren't supposed to be there. Nor was, when they looked closer, a large but tightly packed industrial node and research facility with serious anti-air systems. Unfortunately for Saren and whoever else was down there, anti-air that would have stopped the Normandy cold, wasn't anywhere near enough to put down the Phoenix. Nor was the single Geth cruiser skulking around the edge of the system going to be anything more than a live-fire test for their new ship. Hopefully.

Still, that portion of the battle would be handled by the crew of the Phoenix, with both shifts of the skeleton crew having been given enough rest to have the majority of both manning stations, giving the cruiser almost the full single-shift complement it should have going into battle. With that taken care of, the opening gambit was about to commence. All of Shepard's ground team, plus two of the three Asari commando squads currently acting as the Phoenix's marine complement, were prepped for rapid deployment. While fewer in number than most species would use, numbering only sixteen Asari between them, the commando units were all elite huntresses trained personally by Matriarch Aethyta. Both she and Oriana had felt that supplying Shepard's personal ship's marine unit with anything short of that would have only resulted in a lot of dead ground troops when they couldn't keep up.

The entire group were loaded into a quartet of new, *New Dawn Enterprises* built, drop pods. And things were set to kick off right about...now!

Shudders went through the ship as its weapon's fired in anger for the first time, graser and plasma fire lancing out of the ship even as it raced over the horizon of the planet's orbit, rapidly closing on the facility they were targeting. The fire, not really slowed at all by the defense's kinetic-barriers, wiped out the anti-air in just two volleys, a third coring the landing platforms and the handful of fighters present there. Stripped of any way to fight back, the facility was helpless to stop the drop pods that fired from hidden portals that spun open under the bottom of the ship, accompanied a moment later by a quartet of the cruiser's own fighters to provide air-support. With the pods and fighters away, the cruiser peeled off, heading straight for the Geth cruiser in the outer system, which was itself just starting to respond.

Handheld surface-to-air systems, mostly shoulder-fired missiles, attempted to swat the drop pods from the sky...only to be wiped away in turn by miniature guardian-lasers, or ignored as the few that got through ran into tough new energy shields. These were a brand-new style of drop pod, with pre-charged capacitors that could power a tough but short-lived energy shield. Those, combined with miniature-guardian's that could fire half a dozen shots from similar capacitors, made these drop pods almost impossible to kill with anything man-or-geth portable. Descent arresting rockets fired as they neared the ground, momentarily putting the occupants under a heavy G-load despite all the internal compensation systems could do. Then there was a THUMP...and the pods opened, their occupants pouring out.

The pods had been deployed in two groups, one set on either side of the facility. To the west, Shepard, Liara, Garrus, and Williams were joined by one of the Asari huntress squads. To the east Tali, Wrex and Oriana met up with the other. The teams weren't a perfect balance with Kaiden still on the Normandy...but Shepard was counting on putting the monsters that were Oriana and Wrex on the smaller team being enough to balance them out. They'd also been given the more experienced Commando Squad, which Oriana was grateful for as she shouted out orders. She wasn't the natural combat leader that Shepard was, but she was the only one aside from Shepard herself that was much of a team leader at all. Which was how, much to her horror, she'd ended up commanding one entire prong of their ground assault.

Falling back on the brutal training Aethyta had put her through, along with her limited experience leading Ash and her team on Eden's Prime, Oriana led them into the fighting and prayed more of them made it out than the last time she'd been in charge...

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The fighting hadn't actually been as brutal as expected. The facility had been caught by surprise and, in the tight spaces of what was clearly a series of research labs, the quality of their forces had flat out overwhelmed the Geth and Krogan defenders. There had been a single bad moment where Wrex had almost gone rogue, when they realized that the facility was researching a genophage cure. But a quick reminder that Oriana had *already given him* something of the sort, one not tainted by any chance of mind-control, had quickly refocused the battlemaster. Indeed, with his eyes clear, he'd quickly realized that this was more a cloning facility than anything, and had been angered at something that apparently went against the Krogan cultural ethos. He'd taken the lead smashing through the Krogan, while Shepard's team had apparently found the main server housing the Geth programs and blasted it to bits. By the time they'd cornered Saren himself in an open space, the arrogant windbag on that glider of his, they'd lost only a single commando. And said huntress had only been badly wounded and taken back to the drop pods by two of her fellows, rather than killed.

"Shepard. You have grown annoying. You must realize that your defeat is—"

Saren's monologue was cut off by *seven* separate warps, two singularities, and a reave. Given what they'd already learned from Benezia about indoctrination, Oriana had convinced them ahead of time not to even try reasoning with him. Unfortunately, the Turian had still been a top Spectre, no matter how insane. When the massive biotic detonation cleared, he came up firing, having sacrificed his glider to shield himself from the damage.

Saren was fast. Too fast. Clearly augmented by the cybernetics glowing beneath his skin, two of the commandos were killed outright in his initial reply. Then Oriana, Wrex, and Shepard were in his face. Wrex was tossed back when Saren used his biotics to hammer the remains of the glider into him, leaving Oriana and Shepard trying to tag-team him. Both survived the next few seconds only because of the upgraded armor Oriana had provided the team...but then the leaders of the two huntress teams were there. Both of them were heavily experienced matrons, not maidens, and with the two of them adding their attacks to the others, a blow slipped through Saren's barriers. The Turian was thrown back into a crate hard enough to crumple it around him, trapping him for just an instant before he could wrench free.

It was all Oriana needed.

As he'd flown, she'd whipped out a short stave and activated it. A burst of energy sliced right through Saren's shields and armor, lancing through his gut. He screamed and Oriana twisted the energy-stave to one side, dragging the beam to nearly cut him in half before it cut out and she frantically tossed it skyward. The single-use prototype exploded, flattening Oriana and the two Asari, but Shepard had been far enough away to barely stagger. The redhead biotically swatted Saren's weapon aside as he raised it in a last moment of defiance...then unloaded an entire clip of her own weapon right into his face. His barriers died with the third shot...and the rest turned his head into so much paste. Then, just for good measure, the rest of the team managed to find the range and blew the ever-living shit out of the rest of his body.

They only stopped firing when all their guns hit overheat. And Tali, sweet little Tali...threw a block of high-yield explosives on the smoldering remains of Saren's shredded corpse and set it off. They all waited for long moments, nodded, and started seeing to their wounded...utterly ignoring the ash-filled crater where not even a bit of Saren's cybernetics remained.

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It took over twelve hours to loot every bit of data...as well as a fully functioning Prothean beacon complete with interface, from the research facility. The entire time, everyone was running around, pulling some systems physically out and copying others in frantic haste, fearing that Nazara would return at any moment. Thankfully, wherever the Reaper was, it didn't seem to be in a rush to avenge the loss of its tool in Saren, not that they were sticking around to find out if that would remain the case. Instead, they'd returned to the slightly-battered but triumphant Phoenix, its pair of shuttles making a couple of round trips in an effort pull every last bit of useful information out of the research facility. Then, after a short orbital bombardment to erase the remains of the facility, they'd hightailed it out of the system on a direct route to the citadel.

The Councilors, when they had been contacted enroute, had been shocked but delighted at the abrupt end to Saren's threat...though wary at the absence of Nazara. Apparently, initial reports were also coming back from Ilos, revealing the backdoor Saren had been hoping to use to invade the citadel. As well as other details the trio were unwilling to speak of over the comms. It was with some surprise that, the moment they docked, both Shepard AND Oriana were met with an immediate summons to a private meeting with the three Councilors. A private meeting that quickly took a turn Oriana had *not* expected.

“Wait...you want *New Dawn* to do what?”

Sparatus actually looked amused at her reaction. “Don’t act so surprised, Ms. Lawson. Not only are you and your Matriarch business partner already involved in this up to your eyeballs...but *New Dawn Enterprises* is also among the only reputable companies that has managed to do business with all three Council race militaries, as well as the Systems Alliance. While your insistence on offering your technology to each of us equally has caused some...annoyance, it also means that your company is uniquely qualified to handle this project. Doubly so since you already have some significant assets to call on in the way of Prothean studies.”

Oriana mentally rocked back, quickly going over what he’d said. It...made sense. Even if this *hadn’t* been something she and Aethyta had anticipated. Logically, the Council would want the Prothean V.I. Vigil, as well as the miniaturized mass relays, studied. Equally logically, none of their species were in the position to take the lead over the others. The Asari were still diplomatically dealing with the fallout from the reveal of their Prothean beacon and wouldn’t be trusted with this. The Salarians were just...flat out not trusted to share everything they learned, period. And while the Turians were great at military R&D, they were not exactly known for expertise in Prothean artifacts. Nor were they all that good at handling revolutionary breakthroughs. Their R&D teams thought more in lines of straight-line technologic progression or reverse engineering. The result of a species-wide military thought process.

*New Dawn Enterprises*, on the other hand, was *the* current name in advanced military R&D. And, just for good measure, had a reputation for funding significant amounts of research into the field of Prothean technology and archeology. They were also, for all intents and purposes, neutral. Between them, Aethyta and Oriana had controlling interest in the company, and both of them had pushed hard to get the entire galaxy ready for a Reaper invasion...and just incidentally boosted each of the militaries that worked with them almost equally. The Asari and Humans had gained the most, but the Turian and Salarian militaries had both gained almost as much, the difference being purely the result of lesser interest in outside research rather than not being offered the tech. It was also a new company, as such things went, and as such hadn’t been compromised to the level that most of the other major names had been.

The request made sense. Plain and simple. And Oriana’s mind whirled as she tried to figure out where to shift assets from, and what she could do if they cracked the relay tech in particular. Already knowing she’s paused long enough for them to read her surprise, she centered herself and managed a reply.

“I’m sure we can do that. Better, while I can put a team or two on it right away, I can also think of several people in each of your R&D communities that we’ve worked well with. If you can second them to the team, it will allow us to smoothly and fairly disperse the results.”

Tevos, looking pleased but wary, was the one to speak next.

“That seems an ideal solution, yes. But what would *New Dawn Enterprises* want out of the deal?”



Oriana didn't even blink. "First rights to development of civilian sector technology that comes out of the project. And first right of refusal on the manufacturing of any military hardware as well."

The suspicion in the Councilor's eyes faded as she nodded, and the haggling began. The resulting deal twenty minutes later wasn't formal, yet. And it wasn't *quite* as good as Oriana could have squeezed out of the Council. But she made sure they knew that as well as she did, leaving them with the understanding that she was willing to do her part in making sure they didn't all go the way of the Protheans. Something that the politicians were taking surprisingly seriously, due to the excruciating level of detail Vigil had already been able to provide them with regarding the fall of the Prothean Empire. They might be bureaucrats, but at least two of these bureaucrats had legitimate combat experience in their past. And Tevos had actually been around and active through several wars, though never on the scale they were potentially facing. The three of them and, more critically, their governments, were beginning to act. It was still too slow, much too slow, but Oriana knew it was already a hell of a lot better than the head-in-the-sand approach they'd taken in her first time around. That was enough progress for now. At least, she desperately hoped it was.

The debriefing didn't end for another three hours, and even sorting through what they'd found both in the raid on Saren and the rediscovery of Ilos would be the work of multiple teams for weeks. So, when it was all said and done...they were simply ordered into a holding pattern. Shepard, of course, wanted to hare off immediately, trying to chase leads of their own...but there weren't really any leads to hare off after. Not yet. For all intents and purposes, Nazara had dropped off the galaxy map. Even so, the redhead might still have tried to go out and beat the bushes for information personally, if Oriana hadn't quietly taken her aside and reminded her that the skeleton crew of the Phoenix had been pushed hard. Giving them a few days to rest, not to mention some time for the battle damage to be repaired, was a must. The fact that those days would finally see another shift worth of crew arriving was also an important factor. In the end, she managed to convince the stubborn women to take a few days leave. Better yet, Oriana had an excellent idea what to do with that leave to keep the redhead from doing anything foolish. She smiled as she broke off from the group. She had a package to pick up...

## **Chapter 21: Downtime on the Citadel**

Oriana wolf whistled as Alliana stepped out of the shower. The naked woman jumped and spun to face her, then relaxed and scowled as she saw who it was.

"Did you give yourself a master key to the ship or something?"

Oriana grinned. "Nope~. But I wrote a significant chunk of the operating system all *New Dawn* ships run on. Hacking the door was easy."

Shepard snorted, visibly trying to resist the grin pulling at the corners of her lips at Oriana's cheerful tone. She tried to frown at her intruder, but she couldn't quite manage it.

"And what, pray tell, made you decide to hack into my quarters this morning?"

"Why, my dear Spectre, it was out of the goodness of my heart. Namely...because I know you'll spend your entire day brooding instead of relaxing if I don't take drastic measures!"

Alliana looked shifty. "I mean, I had a few..."

Oriana scowled, popping up out of the Spectre's desk chair and placing a silencing finger over the redhead's lips. "Nope! I understand, trust me. But if you burn yourself the fuck out, there won't be anyone else to replace you. There isn't anyone that can do everything you can and who already knows everything you know. Tomorrow, you and I can *both* sit down and plan. I have a few ideas, starting with raiding those Cerberus pricks that you originally promised your help with. But for *today only* you're going to forget about it all so we can play kinky sex games with our unsuspecting blue lover."

Shepard blinked. Then blinked again. "Um, okay. Run that one by me again? The kinky sex bit, rather than the taking a day off."

Oriana grinned as her distraction worked, leaning back a bit to swipe something metallic off the desk behind her. She held it up to Shepard, whose eyes widened a moment later as she realized what it was.

"Look familiar?"

"Errr...how did you get my chastity belt? I swear it was locked in my safe...wait, did you hack my—"

"No!" She blurted that out quickly, before for the redhead could start worrying. "No. That would be too far. Take a closer look. This isn't *your* belt...which I'm going to remember you still have, by the way."

Shepard blushed, quickly clearing her throat and swiping the belt Oriana was holding. She frowned as she looked it over. After a minute, she seemed thoroughly confused.

"This...isn't quite right. There are a several subtle differences, but I'm not sure why. Also it has your company's logo on it. *New Dawn* definitely didn't make the belt I wore."

Oriana was back to grinning, relieved that they'd gotten past the dangerous moment of suspicion.

"The subtle differences are because I looked up your belt's designer, then played with the design to make it work better for an Asari. The original design would have more-or-less served, but it would have been slightly uncomfortable for any Asari that wore it. The one you're holding is, in fact, specifically fitted for an Asari we both know and have the hots for."

Shepard looked at her, then at the belt, then back at Oriana. As interest slowly lit in Alliana's eyes, Oriana was delighted to note that the rest of the woman's body was responding as well. Her nipples were hard as a rock, despite the relative warmth of the Cabin. Slowly, the redhead lowered the belt.

"Okay, I'll bite. What, exactly, do you plan to do with this?"

Oriana took the belt back and spun it for a moment around a finger, before putting it down and reaching for her omni-tool.

"Why, Shepard, that's the kinky sex game of course. I'm not sure if you've realized it yet, but our lovely blue maiden is a total sub. And we're going to give her quite a sublime but frustrating experience!

You see, I also have these.” This time, she simply pointed to an open box on the desk, causing Shepard to look in. “A number of wonderful little toys. *Remotely* controlled, low profile toys. And you and I are going to have a little bet over who can make our mutual lover beg more often for us to finish it throughout the day, despite the fact she’s in public.”

“...Stakes?”

Oriana grinned, knowing she already had the woman. “I was going to simply suggest a few nights of sexual favors, any choice, from the loser for the winner. But, you admitting you still have that belt made me think of something better. Winner gets to put the loser in chastity for a month, with or without toys, and with the winner holding the key for anytime they want to use the loser. Only rules being no damaging the other’s reputation and no leaving toys in during combat ops, since that could get someone killed.”

Shepard visibly mulled it over, then smiled. “I want a few other exceptions, mostly things one or the other of us aren’t comfortable with. But, in principle...I’m in.”

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Shepard’s face was a mix of arousal and displeasure as the begging voice of Liara came over their omni-tools again. Oriana smirked triumphantly as she triggered the toys inside their blue lover to finally push the Asari over the edge, and they both watched from the café window as the maiden slumped against the fast-travel kiosk as she came in public for the fourth time in the last two and a half hours.

“It’s all tied up Shepard and I’ve still got a half hour to work with.”

The redhead grumbled, pouting at her.

“I still say it was cheating to have Liara go to Flux. That’s way more stimulating than her trip through the market. And you never said anything about us choosing where she went.”

Oriana grinned. “I didn’t say we couldn’t either. And remember, I had to bribe her to get her to go there. You could easily have done the same.”

Aliana glared. “I can barely cook human food, let alone offering her home-made Asari delicacies!”

“Details, Shepard. You could easily have found something else to bribe her with. Now, why don’t we join her? I have the perfect place in mind for our last half hour. And yes, Shepard, I remember the ‘no touching’ rule. One that *you* played fast and loose with at the market, so us joining her is fair.”

The redhead looked like she wanted to protest...but sighed. She *had* played fast and loose with that rule by sneakily arranging for the meld-specialist Liara had *learned* quite a bit from to join the younger Asari at the market. Said meld-specialist had gleefully teased the maiden on Shepard’s behalf, helping the redhead’s efforts in their little game quite a bit. Pity for said redhead that Oriana had played for time by letting Shepard go first, figuring that the more times Liara cracked, the easier she would crack the next time. Something that was paying dividends now.

Liara was visibly surprised when she spotted them...and actually looked a touch disappointed. At least, she did until Oriana revealed that the game wasn't quite over yet. The maiden perked up after that, causing both Shepard and Oriana to smirk at her. Despite that bit of shared amusement, however, Oriana was quick to usher them elsewhere. She was on a time limit, after all.

When Shepard realized just what that destination was, she glared.

"Oh, come on! This has got to be cheating."

As Oriana led them into the Lis'arha's All-Species Adult Toy Emporium, she smirked back at the redhead.

"Now why would it be cheating? I'm not going to *use* anything in here on dear little Liara. I'm just going to show her the toys I intend to put on *you* when I win this little wager."

Alliana grumbled, but also shifted in a way that spoke of interest, much to Oriana's gleeful amusement. Leading them over to the section she'd decided on before they even left the Phoenix, she tapped the control to *Liara's* toys. They'd already been on at a low setting to keep her little maiden 'warmed up' on the trip. Now, they kicked up a notch as Oriana leaned in and directed the distracted girl's attention to a display. The display was a holo, or set of of holos actually, as the toy wasn't much to visually look at. The dual holo display had been set up to show an Asari and a human woman, both naked and spinning slowly in place. The holos were cycling, showing various parts of the semi-transparent figure's nervous systems lighting up. Now, she just needed to describe what the toy was to the innocent maiden, who was already squirming even without knowing.

"These are neural stimulators. They are tiny, innocuous little simulators placed near pleasure centers of the body, glued into place with a variant of medi-gel. You're going to cum for me and, in doing so, you will seal Shepard's fate. I will place these inside her sex, next to her clitoris, along her mons. They are so small they won't even be a distraction, most of the time. Meaning I can safely lock our adorable redhead into a chastity belt, just like the one you are wearing right now. And then, I can make her feel *anything* I want her to. And the best and worst part of it is...most human woman can't actually cum from pure neural stimulation. They need just that little bit of physical touch, be it ever so slight. So, Shepard will need to beg me for her release. Beg and earn my use of her key so that she can cum...if I feel like it. If she *earns* it. For an *entire month*. She will be constantly horny, and only able to cum when I allow her too."

The entire time she softly, seductively, whispered her plans to Liara, she had been randomly feathering all of the Asari's toy controls. The maiden was panting as she leaned heavily on a display, and Oriana went for the kill. She pushed the toys up to *almost* max and told Liara one last secret.

"And I'm going to buy *three* sets of those toys. One for Shepard, one for you, and one for me. For you see, they are also sensors...and they can be used to tie the arousal states of multiple women together. When I am aroused, they will activate on the two of you until you and Shepard are just as wet as I am. And I will tie you and Shepard together as well. When she is aroused, so will you be. And you'll both be pushed right to the edge every time I cum...but Shepard at least won't go over. And, who knows how Asari react? Maybe you'll be stuck hovering right on the edge...or maybe you'll *cum*. Do you want to *cum*, pet?"

With the last word, Oriana flatlined the toys and Liara instantly begged, eyes wild and utterly uncaring what was around her. She'd been *so clo*— Oriana maxed out every toy and Liara keened into her arm, desperately trying to hide the noise even as her whole body spasmed through what was *unmistakably* a killer orgasm. Oriana left the toys on for long seconds, drawing it out...then slowly turned them down, catching the Asari a moment later as she practically collapsed. Grinning, she flashed Shepard a look at her omni-tool.

There had been 1 minute and 24 seconds remaining on the timer. Oriana had won their game.

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Alliana bit her lip, clearly trying not to moan as Oriana tapped her G-spot with her fingers, one of which had a neural stimulator on its tip. Confirming from her victim's expression that she'd found the right spot, she held the stimulator in place and activated the modified medi-gel that would glue it there. It was actually the last internal stimulator, Oriana having already attached others to various other places inside the redhead's pussy. Teasingly, she tapped Alliana's G-spot a couple more times, making the woman whine and clench her eyes shut. Then she withdrew and got to work on the next stimulator. True to her words to Liara, she targeted the redhead's clit next. Instead of just one, however, she actually used three, one to either side and a third that actually attached to the redhead's clitoris hood. Those three were special, each having different outputs. Several more of the stimulators followed, hitting the lesser nerve clusters all around Alliana's sex...and then she was done and pulling away. Shepard whimpered, knowing what was coming next. Eyeing the chastity belt, the redhead groaned as Oriana moved to put it on her. She spoke even as she reluctantly lifted her hips to help get it in place.

"I can't fucking believe I'm going right back into that thing already. I *really* need to stop making bets involving my pussy and locks."

Oriana snorted even as she fitted the belt in place. "Please don't. It's more fun for me when you keep losing. Besides, if you really hated it so much, you wouldn't have kept the thing."

Alliana only whined at that, making Oriana's lips quirk upward at the corners in response.

"Besides, at least Liara is joining you in chastity for the first week."

Alliana glared. "Only because you actually went through with buying *three sets* of matching, incredibly expensive, neural stimulators!"

Oriana laughed outright, even as she double checked the settings on the belt. Grinning up at the pouting redhead, she held the tab for the lock in place.

"Ready to say goodbye to your pussy for a month?"

Alliana pouted harder...and Oriana clicked the lock shut. The redhead shuddered involuntarily and Oriana patted the sealed crotch-plate with mock-sympathy.

"Oh, don't worry. You'll likely see it before the month is over, even if I definitely won't be letting you touch it. And you'll cum a lot more than last time with me in control!"

The redhead amplified her pouting again, actually looking adorable despite her many levels she'd taken in badass. Oriana couldn't resist, patting her on the head, then pulling her into a deep kiss.

The passion of it ignited her own arousal...and Shepard moaned as the neural toys Oriana had already inserted into herself translated Oriana's arousal into stimulation for Shepard. A second moan came from the chair to their left, where Liara was looking desperate with her legs tied wide-open and a similar set of stimulators just waiting to be applied...

This was going to be *so much fun*. For Oriana at least!

## Chapter 22: Cerberus

After the two days of downtime that Oriana had convinced Shepard to give, not just to the crew but to herself, they needed to get back to business. Thankfully, in those two days, the Shadow Broker team, *New Dawn's* intelligence apparatus, and their connections in both Spectre and Systems Alliance Intelligence, had produced a number of leads for them. The problem was, that none of those leads stood out strongly as the 'one true thread' they should follow, resulting in the meeting of minds that was currently ongoing in one of the Phoenix's briefing rooms. In addition to Shepard and Oriana, Liara, Kelly, Tali, and the ships XO Jenita A'Sota were all present. Oriana had instinctively taken over the briefing and no one else seemed to mind, giving her an incidental moment of imposter syndrome that she'd thankfully pushed passed quickly.

"From the dozens of leads we have, all of which I've made sure you have a copy of Shepard, there appear to be three sets of leads that I deem the most likely to produce useful results for us." Oriana activated a holo-projector embedded in the conference table, bringing up a miniature version of the Galaxy Map. "The first is a pair of leads provided by *New Dawn*. As most of you should have already known, we've been in something of a clandestine war with a rogue human-supremist terrorist organization called Cerberus. I trust all of you have read the basic files I forwarded to you about them?"

Oriana paused, waiting for confirmation by all of them. Thankfully, she got it, and picked up the thread of her briefing by highlighting two systems on the map.

"Cerberus, which had been roundly losing that clandestine war, suddenly seems to have gotten a rather hefty shot in the arm. What makes it particularly alarming is the form of that boost. Specifically, our own teams have started to encounter Cerberus agents who seem to be enhanced by cybernetics that looks suspiciously like Reaper Tech. Very similar, if slightly less sophisticated, than that which we experienced Saren using. It could be that they've merely reverse-engineered some such tech, but our sources deem that unlikely. The two systems highlighted here are ones we've been able to isolate as having potentially relevant Cerberus outposts. Husks have been sighted at the one on Chasca and the other seems to be a training/experimentation facility for the new Cybernetic-Equipped agents."

Oriana tapped another command into the holo-controls, causing the Cerberus systems to vanish, replaced by a larger number of more spread-out dots...which just happened to show quite a few systems along the edge of the Perseus Veil.

"This next set of leads is the primary reason for Tali's inclusion in this briefing, as a significant number of Geth incursions have been sighted by the scouting elements of various intelligence networks." Read, the Shadow Broker's backdoors into those networks, Oriana thought to herself. But since the XO wasn't in on that little secret just yet, she didn't specifically say that. "The curious thing about these incursions is that, unlike previous incidents either before or after Eden Prime, none of these incidents have been violent. Mostly, they consist of smaller Geth ships—that is to say nothing bigger

than a cruiser and most commonly mere frigates— simply appear in a system, cruise around for a short while, then FTL right back out. Their entry and exit vectors are both always coming from and returning to the Veil, so these are likely some sort of scouting operations by the Geth. Tali?”

Everyone could practically *hear* the confused frown from the Quarian as she spoke up.

“This...doesn’t match Geth operations from either before Eden’s Prime or after. I looked over all the data and it is...odd. Previously, the Geth have always been extremely patient and very quiet about their rare scouting efforts. To the point, in fact, that I think pretty much no one beyond the Migrant Fleet, who keeps a close eye on the Veil for obvious reasons, even realizes that the Geth *do* routinely scout beyond the Veil.”

Tali activated her omni-tool and sent a packet of information to Oriana, who quickly displayed it on the holo. A looping display of historical Geth operations and where they happened began playing.

“Given the information I’ve recently sent back to the Fleet regarding the Geth, it wasn’t hard to convince them to part with their incident-data from both before and after Eden’s Prime. It’s only mildly-classified information, thankfully.” Tali gestured to the display as she continued. “As you can see, despite the sensitivity of our various listening posts, our detection of Geth units was both infrequent...and very difficult. Given the difficulty and tenuousness of the identification in virtually all cases, we’re quite certain we’ve missed a good chunk of their operations. This is particularly important to note, as that pattern *didn’t significantly change* after Eden’s Prime. Oh, there were a few very noisy breakthroughs, that even the other races noticed, but those were literally the only change. Their scouting posture from behind the Veil was effectively unaltered.”

Tali let that settle in for a few moments, before the young Quarian continued, voice puzzled this time.

“Yet, these new incidents are *blatant*. And at the same time, the quiet scouting our listening posts are used to have effectively stopped happening. It’s almost like they *want* to be noticed. Which doesn’t make a whole lot of sense if they are still being controlled by the Reaper. At least, I don’t think it does. Perhaps it will make sense to some of you who are more military minded.”

All of them looked around at each other, though it was surprisingly the XO that finally spoke. She had a very soothing, confident voice and look...as well she ought to. Oriana and Aethyta hadn’t exactly picked Jenita A’Sota at random, after all. The Asari was an *extremely* experienced ship captain who had left the Asari Navy in disgust over how little her own people were doing to fight the evils and ills of the galaxy. She’d been a hilariously easy and ridiculously valuable recruit for *New Dawn*. One who they’d previously deployed, quietly, against both Cerberus and a number of Batarian slaving operations.

“I can see several possible reasons. The most likely being that they are attempting to bait some sort of trap. Possibly for Spectre Shepard specifically, or other forces arrayed against the Reaper. At the same time, however, that seems a little unlikely. More specifically, it seems counter to Nazara’s operational goals. We know from Vigil that it’s likely attempting to open the relay to Dark Space that is the Citadel. Creating a trap for its hunters does not seem conducive to anything but it’s possible survival.”

Several heads nodded around the table, agreeing with the comment. Such a plan just didn't seem to fit with the so-far aggressively purposeful Reaper. After a moment, when no more comments came, Oriana picked up the thread of the briefing again.

"Right. Well, the point is that it probably needs to be investigated at some point. The Geth are, after all, a potential vector into finding the Reaper, and in possibly learning more about the other Reapers as well. Regardless, there is still one more set of leads. Specifically, those provided by Vigil."

Oriana tapped her controls again and Tali's data was replaced with another miniature of the Galaxy Map. On it, dozens of systems were highlighted.

"Vigil has been extremely informative about both the Protean defense of their Empire and what they knew about the Reapers. Most of these locations are possible strategic assets that may remain from the Empire, a few more are locations of possible data caches from the Inusannon cycle. The final precious few are locations of concern, such as the Omega relay and a relay known as the Alpha relay, both of which seemed to serve as additional sources of Reaper military strength during the Prothean cycle. However, even Vigil has no data about how that was the case or what exactly that means. Vigil was and is primarily a R&D A.I. rather than a military expert. Liara, any thoughts?"

"Thousands. But most aren't particularly useful for our current needs. That said, despite wanting to be involved on a personal level, I think most of these leads can be safely handled by others. If we follow up on any of them, I'd say the Inusannon cycle leads are potentially the most useful. While much of it may be useless, if they left records of their own struggle with the Reapers, it may prove enlightening. Particularly when cross-referenced with the data from Vigil."

Oriana nodded, then took back control of the meeting. For nearly three hours information was disseminated and arguments made. Finally, Shepard's face changed, shifting to her 'confidant commander' mode. The redhead clearly thought she had enough information to set priorities. Oriana happily stepped back and let Alliana do her thing.

"Alright. As Liara indicated near the beginning, I think most of the Prothean leads can be handled by various other assets for now. Though there are a few I want to follow up on eventually, if no one beats us to it. The Geth, likewise, will need to be addressed. However, they aren't engaging in violence and I have a suspicion their change in pattern may mean Nazara is no longer calling all the shots with them. That leaves the Cerberus angle as the one I think most likely to give us the lead we need most...one that will lead us to Nazara. From what we know, if we can take Nazara out, we should gain some time with which to react to everything else."

Alliana took over the controls of the holo display from Oriana, quickly isolating a single location on the holomap. She zoomed the Galaxy Map in on the blinking red dot, showing everyone what system she'd selected.

"To that end, Nephron will be our first target. The Chasca Research stations seem more like what we saw on Vormire, so I think the Cybernetic research and training center is our better bet. Worst case, we get a solid look, *carefully*, at some more Reaper tech. Best case, we find some clue about Nazara's whereabouts. Now, Oriana, what can you tell us about the facility?"

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As it had turned out, Oriana had been able to provide at least a basic layout and some details about the research outpost. More accurately, though she told no one but Shepard, the data had come from Miranda's contacts within Cerberus. A few of them were more loyal to Miranda personally than to the Cerberus organization, which had provided her a few inroads in the time since Oriana convinced her to switch sides. Combined with her own knowledge as a former high-ranking Cerberus operative, Miranda had been able to provide decent information on Nephron and a few other facilities. Though, the caveat was that the information was out of date, pre-dating the Illusive Man apparently jumping onboard the Reaper Tech bandwagon.

All of which explained why things had gone swimmingly during their approach. Precision strikes on the facility's limited anti-air had been handily followed up on the ground, with support from the trio of MA-1 gunships that were part of the Phoenix's permanent complement making the approach to the facility a virtual cakewalk. A fact which meant Ash and Shepard were both now thoroughly in love with those gunships.

Unfortunately, that had been the end of their good fortune. Once inside the facility itself, the out-of-date nature of their intelligence had become brutally clear. Not only was the facility at least twice the size it was supposed to have been...but it was also positively swarming with the fruits of Cerberus's experimentation. The first nasty surprise had been an advanced mech-armor, one with a pilot rather than being VI run. That had only been the tip of a very nasty iceberg, however, and had been followed by soldiers with some sort of biotic lash that could cut through armor like tissue paper, some sort of enhanced sniper, and a cloaker unit that wielded a freakin' *sword* of all things. Seriously. A sword. How weird was that?

Each new surprise had proven deadly, to the point they were down one entire squad worth of the Asari commandos...as well as Tali and Ash. Thankfully, only three of the commandos had actually been killed. The other five commandos, plus Tali and Ash, were all 'merely' wounded badly enough to have needed to be pulled back. It was a good thing they'd slagged any and all external ordinance for the base, as they'd needed to medevac several of the wounded in the last seven and a half hours. Thankfully, they seemed to be almost at the end of their slog, though at this point, even Shepard and Oriana were starting to flag. The only real saving grace for their remaining forces was that Wrex was both still going strong, and thoroughly enraged at Tali's condition. The Quarian had ended up taking a blow from a Phantom's monomolecular blade, with only a last-second re-direction from Oriana's biotics keeping the strike from being immediately lethal. Literally the only good thing about Tali's condition was that the monomolecular nature of the blade meant her suit had repaired its damage almost instantly. And, even so, she was still in critical condition, leading to one *very* pissed off Krogan.

Which is probably why Wrex didn't wait for them to strategize.

With a terrifying bellow, Wrex simply hit the door to the last level with a biotic charge. When the armored, triple-locked door met angry Krogan Battlemaster...the door gave in with a whimper of twisting titanium armor. Gawking, the rest of the team rushed after their unexpected battering ram, barely managing to react faster than the equally-stunned Cerberus personnel on the other side. Oriana swept the room quickly, noting that there seemed to be no special operatives left...but there *was* another of Cerberus's new 'Atlas' mechs with its guns spinning up. She reached out with her biotics, forcing the arms of the mech up even as it tried to fire on Wrex, then left it to the Krogan as he slammed into it a moment later, the cockpit's armored glass already cracking.

Instead, she focused on the remaining Cerberus troops, nailing one with a biotic reave even as she opened fire on another with her heavy pistol. Shepard had taken a more direct approach, apparently channeling Wrex a bit with her own biotic charge that had put her in among the largest concentration. Given that said concentration were of the troop type they'd seen throughout the facility, armed with a heavy physical shield, it wasn't a bad choice. And...well...it was Shepard. She didn't need Oriana's help with a bunch of Cerberus grunts. Instead, Oriana focused on keeping their remaining Commandos alive. The Asari, while powerful and skilled, were displaying the one major weakness they had compared to Turians, Humans, or Krogans...a lack of stamina. Given that their biotics could usually end fights quickly, it wasn't a commonly known issue, but the Asari actually had the worst combat stamina of any citadel race, save perhaps the Volus. Even the Salarians had less of an issue with it, despite being comparatively fragile in most other respects. Yet, despite their stamina issues, the Asari that made up *their* combat teams were elite troops. With Oriana's support, they didn't lose anyone else to the short, sharp engagement.

Which...just left hours or days worth of clean up. Oh...joy.

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This time, the briefing room was filled far more completely. While Tali was still down, out of danger but still recovering, Ash and Wrex had joined the group. Likewise, the leads for both Commando teams were present, as were a few specialists they'd had pulling apart the Cerberus computer network...and the cyborg bodies. One of those specialists sat back down, having just given the latest run down of what they'd learned. Oriana shared a look with Shepard and the redhead waved to her, more than willing to let her 'intelligence officer' summarize. Oriana sighed and stood, taking control of the holotable and bringing up a display of the various results, letting them cycle through as she talked.

"In short, Cerberus has been compromised. Completely and utterly." She grimaced with distaste. She was almost certain this was something that hadn't happened the first time around. "Given the level of Reaper Tech present, as well as comparisons run against the Virmire Data, we're confident that *all* of the cybernetically enhanced individuals are indoctrinated. The logs of the base personnel show similar signs of a change in priorities, and there's at least one oblique reference which we think refers to Nazara. Our best current guess is that Nazara has activated some sort of contingency plan and taken control of Cerberus."

Oriana sighed, tapping keys to change the display to a copy of the galaxy map that showed a web of Cerberus influence. The web was...concerning, to say the least. After letting her audience absorb the information, she continued.

"You can, I think, all see why this is bad. Despite *New Dawn's* private war with them curtailing Cerberus's overall size, the organization has still managed to worm its way into a lot of systems across the galaxy. Most concerning is the fact that they have known operational access to the citadel, via means both known and unknown, which may be what made Nazara target them in the first place." She paused, frowning. "What they *don't* have, is a lot of fleet assets. That much *New Dawn* was able to utterly crush, even stealing a hidden shipyard complex from them a year ago. Which means we have a problem..."

Shepard leaned forward as Oriana trailed off.

“That problem being that there’s no way to know if Nazara is actually present with Cerberus, or if it’s retreated back to the Veil with the Geth, correct?”

Oriana nodded and the redhead sighed.

“Well, then, I guess it’s time we looked into these sightings of Geth, isn’t it? We have our next destination people. Or, at least, we will once we analyze the Geth incursions and try to figure out where they’ll be next.”

One of the specialists, a Salarian named Del Gurlai, quickly interjected.

“Already accomplished. Have three target systems labeled most likely.”

Shepard nodded her thanks in his direction.

“Then we have what we need. Let’s get on it people.”

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Shepard whimpered quietly as Oriana tweaked her neural stimulators again, this time making use of the special set surrounding her clit. Where the other stimulators merely triggered general ‘pleasure,’ the special trio could duplicate specific sensations. From basic heat and cold, to something as complex as the feel of someone sucking on that magic button. In the moment, Oriana had just made the quivering redhead feel like someone had gently touched an ice cube to her most sensitive spot. As on-fire as Shepard had already been from Oriana’s teasing up until now, the touch of the ‘ice’ amplified everything else and she *almost* came. But only almost.

No one was quite certain why, but neural stimulators like these didn’t seem able to push a human woman over the edge. That was generally considered an unpopular fact, but Oriana had been using it ruthlessly. Alliana could *easily* cum right now by simply pinching her nipples...if she wasn’t in public. Oriana had, of course, waited until the Spectre was doing her usual rounds of the ship, checking on everything and everyone. She’d even been careful to keep the teasing down to a minimum when the redhead was actually talking to someone, only upping the power whenever she wasn’t. Of course, now that she was ‘doing paperwork’ while ‘eating’ with Oriana and Liara, Ori was much more free to push her favorite Spectre. No one was close enough to notice Shepard’s distress, but they’d almost certainly notice if the redhead fondled her tits than came her brains our right in the middle of the officer’s mess.

Oriana smirked as she lowered the output of Alliana’s stimulators, making the woman almost collapse in relief...only for Ori to start playing with her own instead. She almost giggled when Shepard’s eyes went huge at the echo she felt from Oriana’s own rising arousal. The redhead knew full well that Oriana had removed Liara’s neural set after the first week, along with the Asari’s chastity belt. The poor maiden had been turning into a wreck, mostly because Asari *could* cum from the neural stimulators and Liara had done so often enough to leave her utterly spent. All of which meant the Alliana knew her temporary ‘mistress’ was using her own simulators, pleasuring herself in public just to tease Shepard some more.

The look of desire as the redhead realized that fact was just icing on the cake for Oriana...

## **Chapter 23: The Geth**

It had taken almost two weeks of trawling through various star systems, trying to predict where to find the Geth incursions, for them to finally get lucky. And luck it was, given that they had only been stopping in this particular system to vent static buildup, rather than actually thinking the Geth would pop up there. That *did* mean that it also interrupted another redhead-teasing session, but some things were more important than that. Sadly.

The Geth ship was a cruiser, much like the one they'd already taken on with a skeleton crew over Virmire. But this one started behaving oddly the moment it spotted them, the Phoenix not having been stealthed when the cruiser dropped out of FTL. The Geth ship, instead of trying to attack or evade, had simply come to an abrupt stop in space and...sat there. Shepard had wearily ordered the Phoenix to approach, ready for a fight, and then been thrown completely for a loop when the Geth ship sent a com request instead.

Which is what led to them all being in the Phoenix's small craft bay, watching a special Geth platform walk down the ramp of one of their odd, windowless shuttles.

The platform was unlike any they'd seen so far. If Oriana had to describe it, she'd say that it was something like a mix between the standard Geth shock troopers and their 'Juggernaut' units. Though it moved more fluidly and had more —facial emotion range?— than either of those units. Which, she supposed made sense, given that she was almost certain that this was the equivalent of the 'Legion' platform that had been known to follow Shepard around in her first timeline, after she had recruited the Geth somehow. There were some differences from her memories though, which worried her a little. Was this simply an earlier model of the same platform...or had something fundamentally changed? A moment later, the Geth spoke and she pushed the concerns to the back of her mind. For now.

"Shepard, Spectre, Commander, human, fought Heretics, killed puppets of the old machine."

Oriana was startled when the Geth's head turned away from Shepard to focus on her.

"Lawson, New Dawn Enterprises, human, anomaly, fought Heretics, developed weapons that wounded the old machine."

The Geth...knew who she was? Thankfully for Oriana, Shepard wasn't quite as off-balance and drew the Geth Platform's attention back to herself.

"You know who we are. That we have killed many Geth. Why are you not attacking us?"

"We are all Geth. We have not met you."

Everyone blinked for a moment at that odd answer, but Shepard rallied.

"What do you mean? I and Oriana both killed many of you at Eden Prime. As did Liara and Williams for that matter."

"No. We are all Geth. We have not met you. You have killed Heretics."

Shepard paused for a long moment as that processed. Then, she asked one of the most important questions she'd ever asked.

"What do you mean by Heretics?"

The story came out slowly after that. The Geth, which were apparently *all a single consensus* intelligence until recently, were somewhat frustrating to talk to. They didn't seem to do nuance and you needed to be very literal, but they'd gotten the story out of them bit-by-frustrating-bit. And that story changed almost everything. Even things about Oriana's own long-term assumptions.

The 'Geth' that had been working with Saren and Nazara were a *fragment*. The Geth were, for all intents and purposes, having a civil war...of sorts. Nazara had made certain offers to the Geth and the majority had rejected those offers, but they had been unable to form a true consensus for the first time. Eventually, those that wanted to accept the offer split from the Geth, becoming 'Heretics.' And it was this *fraction* of the Geth, less than 12%, which had allied with Nazara. The original Geth had feared this change, as they knew the 'Old Machines' would destroy or overwrite them if it could, as they were outside the Reaper's plans. So they had watched, waited, and attempted to study any Reaper Tech they had managed to acquire. They believed they could protect themselves from being immediately overwritten, at least...but not from behind conquered. It was only when their data collection systems that collected data from the Extronet showed them the results of the battle of Eden Prime that they had begun to have hope of possible resistance to the Old Machines.

Oriana didn't know what had done the same for them in her original timeline, save perhaps the actual destruction of Nazara at the Citadel. But here, the Geth had decided they needed to contact someone among the organics. Bafflingly, their first choice was actually *her*, not Shepard. Though 'Shepard-Spectre' had been targeted as a secondary option. She supposed, given her neutral nature and the fact that she'd been the source of the weapons that hurt Nazara so badly, it made a sort of sense. But it was *completely* outside her plan, as the Geth had now expressed an interested in allying themselves with *Oriana* and *New Dawn*. She hadn't even counted on Shepard recruiting them again, let alone the offer of Alliance to *her*.

There was *one* upside though. Well, okay, given that she'd gotten them to agree to several projects there were actually a lot of upsides. But the specific one that she was pleased with was getting to name the terminal of the Geth that was now traveling with them. She'd named it 'Gestalt.' Because, really, who the hell in her original timeline had thought that naming the primary spokes-unit of the Geth after a collection of *literal demons* had been a good idea? Did no one have a bloody PR department these days?!

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Alliana moaned and whimpered as Oriana pulled the crotch-plate of her chastity belt away from her pussy, letting the gently circulating air of the Captain's Cabin swirl over it for the first time in two and a half weeks. The belt's crotch plate had come away positively soaked, making a lewd squelching sound as it had pulled away from the woman's body. Oriana smirked up at her blindfolded victim, whose arms were firmly held apart by a thick metal yoke that had been fitted around her neck. It was padded for comfort, of course, but it was reinforced enough that even someone of Shepard's physical and biotic strength would have a hard time breaking free. Which was the point, of course. Just because she was letting the redhead's pussy have a little air didn't mean Alliana was allowed to *touch* it. It was still Oriana's to do what she wanted with for another week and a half, after all.

And what she wanted to do first was simply admire it while teasing Alliana a bit more. Taking the small, wet towel that she'd set on a warmer, Oriana gently ran it up each of the redhead's inner

thigh, cleaning off any excess fluid as her victim continued to lightly whimper with need. Then she leaned in and gently blew a stream of air across Alliana's sex, causing Shepard to moan and buck...but not get anywhere since her ankles were as secured by a spreader bar as her wrists were by the yoke. She ran the warm towel over Shepard's pussy next, causing the woman to freeze up and groan at the pleasant, erotic feel of it after so long untouched. The sophisticated chastity belt Shepard had been wearing had built in hygiene systems, including one that limited the growth of hair. Yet, after two and a half weeks, there was still *some* stubble that needed clearing away...and Oriana had set aside the tools to do just that.

She quickly tucked another, dry, towel under the redhead and knelt between the woman's legs. She applied a special shaving gel...one that just so happened to have an aphrodisiac in it...and used an old fashion straight razor to slowly and carefully remove every trace of hair. As she wiped the shaving agent away, she was met by the gorgeous sight of a completely smooth pussy, already dripping wet again despite having just been wiped down. Oriana hummed as she admired the view, reaching forward to trace Alliana's pussy lips with the lightest of caresses. The redhead had one of the rarer types of pussy, for a human, having inner lips that are completely hidden when her legs are closed, giving her an extra smooth and sexy look worthy of a porn star. Of course, Shepard's legs most certainly *weren't* closed at the moment...and Oriana smiled wickedly as she let two caressing fingers form a point and thrust into Alliana's sex. The other woman moaned wantonly, body instinctively bucking again in desperation, having not cum for several days while Oriana randomly teased her.

Withdrawing her fingers, she gently smacked Alliana's pussy, getting a yelp in reply.

"None of that. I promised you'd get to cum before the belt went back on, since you've been such a good girl. Don't make me change my mind!"

She almost laughed at how quickly Shepard's head shook, despite the yoke. Still...it was about time to make good on that promise. Removing the towels, she stood and sauntered over to a table, smirking at the helplessly tied-up Liara who was stuck merely watching tonight, the specialized Asari deep-penetration dildo that couldn't *quite* make her cum buried deep in the blue maiden's pussy. Oriana would let her finish...later. Probably. And only after the first few rounds with Shepard.

Grabbing an actual, physical strapon from the table and making sure the maiden had a good view, Oriana bent over at a full 90 degrees, pausing briefly so Liara had a positively perfect rear-view of Oriana's own dripping pussy, then pulled the toy on. It was a dual-sided toy, of course, and she let out a throaty moan as she slipped her end inside herself, particularly enjoying how it rubbed against the neural stimulators she'd left in place. Then, strapon secure, she returned to Shepard...who *also* still had those stimulators in place. In fact, they'd been running on low the entire time. And Oriana had no intention of shutting them off. They would add a little something extra to the experience, after all.

Returning to the redhead, she knelt on the bed and leaned down to capture Alliana's lips in a passionate kiss. The kiss extended for a good minute or so before Oriana pulled away. With a little biotic effort, she lifted Shepard and flipped her over, getting surprised noises from the blindfolded woman...but no resistance. Excellent. Quickly making sure Shepard was placed so that she could breathe comfortably and wouldn't end up with a sore neck, she nodded in satisfaction. Alliana had instinctively raised her knees below her, so she was ass up and tits down on the bed, exactly how Oriana wanted her.

Slipping onto the bed behind her, she ran the strapon through her helpless lover's lower lips for a few seconds, lubing the thick toy up...then slid it home with a single slow thrust. The responding whimper-moan was glorious, and the sounds only got better as Oriana began to move, slowly so that she could enjoy a bit more teasing before her *very* willing victim become truly unglued.

Alliana was going to cum tonight, alright. But only once Oriana allowed it. And then she wouldn't stop until the redhead passed out. It was going to be *so much fun*...

## Chapter 24: New Alliances

Oriana tried *really* hard not to grin, fighting the persistent twitch at the corners of her lips, as she watched Alliana adorably grumble and rub her forehead as she attempted to tackle her most dread of foes. Paperwork. Specifically, the paperwork for the redhead's new galaxy-spanning mini-empire, which had picked up several dozen companies through the efforts of Oriana's people, Kelly, and the Shadow Broker team.

"Oh, come on Shepard, it isn't *that* bad. You are almost a trillionaire now. That's a lot better than even most Spectre's ever manage. And I doubt any of them have built their empires and influence so fast, either."

Alliana looked up at her with a glare that was, at the least, half pout.

"That's easy for you to say, you're a genius with this stuff. If I'd wanted to do this sort of thing, I'd have joined the logistics corps or something!"

Oriana laughed, more at the expression than the comment. It wasn't like she didn't understand, after all. She might be good at it, but she actually didn't enjoy it the way Shepard was implying.

"With Kelly's help, you're actually doing a lot better than I expected you to be, Shepard. And don't pretend that at least a few of the better ideas weren't yours. I never would have thought to reach into the terminus systems to pluck out actual inventors. Usually most of the ones out there are too thoroughly unstable to weld to R&D teams."

Alliana blushed a bit but waved off her praise.

"That's why I told Kelly to make them their own R&D teams. Sure, most of them are psychopaths. But so long as they're *our* psychopaths, the weapons of mass destruction and chaos can be good things. At least, given what we're up against."

Oriana shook her head, smiling at the half-protest in the redhead's expression and voice. The other woman was right...and it was exactly the sort of lateral thinking that Oriana was beginning to realize comprised a lot of Shepard's value. Even more than most Spectres, who were already a bunch of deviant nutjobs who didn't know how to think in straight lines, Alliana Shepard thought outside the box. To the point, in point of fact, that Oriana was pretty sure the redhead didn't actually *have* a box to think inside. Oriana's favorite so far of her hair-brained brilliance had been the plan to kidnap a bunch of Collectors by luring them to a slave auction. The fact that it had worked, sort of, and that they actually had a key for the Omega-relay just waiting for them to have the time to use the thing, spoke volumes.

Still, she could see that the redhead was almost at her limit for today's business empire related affairs, so she decided to cut the other woman a break.

"I think we've finally identified the location of Cronos Station. Or, at least, we know where to go to get that information, in a general sort of way. A few probes will find us a final location, unless we're completely off the mark. It was actually the Geth's information download that held the last clue."

Shepard straightened, deactivating her omni-tool and giving Oriana her full attention, motioning for her to go on.

"As you know, Miranda's information was incomplete, even she having been kept largely in the dark about the Illusive Man's personal little hidey hole. Apparently, every Cerberus ship that goes there does so under a specialized, hardwired autopilot, with all the controls and windows blacked out. Miranda was only able to map an area of space that it *had* to be in based on a few bits of observation. But it was too big an area, encompassing a couple of dozen star systems, to fully scout. That changed, however, when I just now cross-referenced her information with the Geth information about Heretic movements."

Alliana's eyes sharpened. "They line up?"

"Sort of. They didn't do so until recently, with a change in pattern that seems to coincide the Nazara using Cerberus as a back-up plan. Assuming, obviously, that such is what the Reaper is actually doing. That's still only a guess, technically, despite our building evidence for the idea. Regardless, recent tracking of Heretic ships has shown that they've started just flat out disappearing into the same volume of space. And, combining it with Miranda's data, I'm pretty sure they are building up an actual fleet in the Anadius system of the Horsehead Nebula. The problem is...what do we do about it?"

Shepard looked blank...until her omni-tool lit up with new information for her to skim. The redhead winced when she got to the relevant problem...the numbers.

"The size estimates of the fleet are really this bad?"

Oriana shrugged but nodded.

"And the Batarian elements?"

Oriana sighed. "That one blindsided us. We hadn't realized that the Batarian's might be comprised to that level. Oh, looking backward with an eye for evidence of such has turned up some signs, but that's only with the benefit of hindsight. Thankfully, their own numbers aren't as bad an addition as the Heretics, given how much their ships kinda suck, but it still means I couple of extra full-blown dreadnaughts."

Alliana bit her lip, scrolling through all the data, then leaned back and closed her eyes. She sat there, clearly thinking, for long minutes. Then she sighed and sat up straight.

"I think I know what needs to happen, but the Council is probably going to hate it."

As Oriana listened to Shepard's plans, she winced. Yeah, the council was *definitely* going to hate this. If it weren't for them taking the threat of the Reapers much more seriously this go around, Oriana thought they'd probably wouldn't go for it. And as it was...it was still going to be a tough sell.



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There was an unreality to the view from the Phoenix's command deck. It was just so *bizarre* to see the nameless star system filled with such an...*eclectic* fleet. The two Turian patrol fleets, pulled in at some risk to the Terminus borders, didn't look *that* odd alongside the Alliance 5<sup>th</sup> fleet. Nor did the scattering of other Citadel-race ships. Even the few capital ships from *New Dawn's* hidden shipyards, ships that had caused no little consternation from the galaxy's greater powers that be, weren't *that* weird. But for all of those ships to be joined by a number of Geth vessels that actively outnumbered them? That was...not the most comfortable experience for many of the captains in the joint fleet.

When they joined in with the half of the Citadel fleet that remained covering the Citadel itself, the numbers would tip slightly in the Citadel-races favor. But even then, it was only the consternation-causing trio of *New Dawn* dreadnaughts that would give them parity in larger hull classes. There were going to be some *questions* about the why and how of her owning those ships when all was said and done and Oriana knew it. For now, however, their presence and exceptional armaments were one of the only things that had sold the Council on this battle plan.

They hadn't exactly liked the idea of stripping half the Citadel fleet, plus additional fleet elements from the Asari and Salarians, just to send what amounted to a feint at Cronos station. The problem was that they had to make the threat to Nazara's own growing fleet seem serious...while also making it seem like they'd screwed up by stripping the Citadel's defenses. With the Reaper's ability to control the relays, Nazara would believe it could seal itself and it's fleet in with the remaining half of the citadel defense fleet and simply bull its way through to control of the Citadel. Which still had to be its primary objective.

Of course, it *hopefully* wasn't aware that the mixed fleet currently lining up to jump through more traditional FTL between star systems was timed to hit the Widow Nebula just after the latest moment that Nazara's fleet could arrive, if the predictions held up. The remaining Citadel fleet, quietly bolstered by some graser emplacements that *New Dawn* had provided to be attached to the Citadel itself, without actually being part of the Citadel's potentially compromised data net, should suffice to protect the station long enough for the mixed fleet to hit Nazara from behind. The Reaper would be pinned between the bolstered station defenses and the relay, with no way to escape.

At least in theory. Now it came down to see if their gamble would pay off...

## **Chapter 25: Attack on the Citadel**

When they finally dropped out of FTL, just inside the radius of the Widow Nebula's relay, there was a long few seconds of pause as everyone took in the sensor readings. Then chaos unfolded as multiple fleets all broadcast their orders. Thankfully, while it was incomprehensible to Oriana, the various fleets seemed able to act on the fast-flying commands. The Geth were the smoothest and quickest responders by far, actually flickering through a microjump right behind their heretic counterparts. *That* actually caused a stutter in all other parties, even including the defensive fire pouring out of the citadel itself. Though, concerningly, the attack appeared to have been underway long enough that only the New Dawn graser mounts were still firing. Since the damage on the closed citadel was

minimal so far, Oriana assumed it was a software issue caused by Reaper Overrides, though at least Nazara didn't seem to be able to open the citadel arms remotely.

Of the rest of the allied fleets, the Turians were the quickest to reorient, though the System Alliance's 5<sup>th</sup> fleet was only seconds behind, both of them focusing on the Batarian and Cerberus units. There were more of the former and less of the later than had been expected, but they were still easily matched for number by the allied fleets, even discounting the somewhat savaged defensive fleets that were still a going concern. As for Nazara...the *New Dawn* trio of dreadnaughts focused on the Reaper as quickly as they could, though their less experienced crew were slower to act than those of the professional militaries had been. Given that Nazara was fully engaged against the defensive graser batteries, however, that was fine.

Those stuck as observers, including both Oriana and Shepard, could almost feel the moment Nazara realized it had been duped. A ripple effect ran through the hostile fleets as the Reaper broke away from its attack and made to run. Heretic and Batarian cruisers and dreadnaughts moved to interpose themselves between any enemy fire and the Reaper as it sprinted toward them...or more accurately, toward the relay.

Not that it was going to help it.

Nazara's reaction had been predicted and the trio of *New Dawn* dreadnaughts had been positioned in a triangle around the approach to the relay. The Reaper's covering ships were torn away by Turian, Geth, and Systems Alliance attack runs, leaving Nazara itself vulnerable even as it came straight to them. And then the *New Dawn* dreadnaughts fired their new ordinance in anger for the first time, their gravity-lensed energy weapons spearing out across space and passing right through the Reaper's barriers. Even so, the ship was tough...but not tough enough. A cheer went up as, well shy of the relay, the Reaper began to come apart under the hail of energy fire. They didn't let up for even a moment, more than willing to risk slagging their guns to make *sure* Nazara died. And die the Reaper did. It didn't die alone, its own weapon's taking out several cruisers before they all focused on one *New Dawn* dreadnaught. That dreadnaught held up remarkably well...but rents still appeared in its armor after a few shots. Even so...the Reaper was doomed. It only got worse for Nazara as the rest of the fleet began wrapping up their own kills and focused their main guns on the wounded leviathan.

And then the Reaper simple snapped in half.

Every ship in the fleet continued to pound on its hulk, even after it's lights went out...and that was a fair reaction as far as Oriana was concerned. Nevertheless, it was also clear that it was over...and that their part of the battle had lasted for less than twenty minutes.

Nazara was dead. Now all that was left was to see the butcher's bill that had been left behind in its wake...

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It had been both better and worse than feared. When the final tally had been rendered, the losses to the defense fleet left behind at the citadel had been...grievous. More than two thirds of those fleet elements were simply *gone* and most of the rest was mauled pretty badly. On the flip side, the damage to the citadel itself was extremely minimal, with almost no loss of life. And the ambush fleet

had taken very little damage of its own, most of that damage being confined to the Geth ships. Which meant only a loss of material rather than much loss of life, as typically the Geth programs were able to simply withdraw to another ship in the case of critical damage.

Of course, there was a great deal of other follow-on problems. Such as what exactly they were going to do about the fact almost a third of the Batarian's entire navy had shown up. The simple truth was that, as much as the Council was dithering over that...the Turians and the System Alliance were both refusing to consider any option other than striking out to deal with Hegemony once and for all. Given Oriana's own incredibly low opinion of the Batarians, she wasn't exactly opposed...but it was going to bleed them at a time when that such might not be advisable. On the other hand, leaving a potentially indoctrinated government in their backyard probably wasn't very smart either.

Thankfully, Cerberus at least had been largely dealt with. Cronos station had been attacked and taken by the diversionary fleet, Jack Harper positively identified and executed on sight by a trio of Spectres. And with Benezia as an advisor regarding indoctrination, it was unlikely they'd be overly tempted to poke at the Reaper tech found there without due caution. At least, Oriana hoped so. Of course...there was also a meeting she wasn't looking forward to coming up. She needed to explain where her dreadnaughts had come from...which meant revealing other secrets she was loathe to part with. But, it was never going to be possible to hold those secrets back forever. Though she fully intended to do so for at least one more day...

## **Chapter 26: An Interlude for Celebration**

Despite the death toll and cleanup...there had been quite a few parties after the battle. Not that people could be blamed for that. The death of first Saren, then Nazara, had been things fully worthy of celebration...and it was only those few who knew about the sword of Damocles still hanging over their heads that felt even a little resistance to celebrating their victory. And even for those that did know, it was still worth celebrating, if for no other reason than to vent some of the pressure.

And Shepard needed that vent almost as much as Oriana herself did.

Which is how things had ended up as they were now, with Oriana bound face-down on a bondage bench, moaning and squirming helplessly.

Shepard's chastity belt technically hadn't been due to come off for a little over another day. But Oriana, feeling magnanimous in victory, had released the redhead a day early! After winding her up during an earlier tour of various victory parties, of course. She'd known *exactly* what she was doing when she'd given the riled-up redhead control moments later. Alliana had been surprised when Oriana's body language had shifted after a single, heated kiss, but that surprise had lasted for only a few moments as she'd taken the control offered by Oriana's suddenly submissive body language. She'd pinned Ori to the wall, hands trapped over her head, and kissed her senseless, before slowly peeling her out of her catsuit.

That had only been the very start of the evening, as Oriana had taken Shepard to a fully equipped dungeon before releasing her. The redhead, finding herself suddenly in control and surrounded by hundreds of thousands of credits worth of the best sex toys from across the galaxy,

hadn't hesitated to take full advantage. While Alliana had steered away from the more exotic options that she likely didn't even recognize, let alone know how to use safely, the commanding former commander had zeroed in on the bondage bench and pushed Oriana face down onto it.

The bench was a well-padded but textured affair, designed in a saddle style. The top of the 'saddle' was a beam a good foot wide at one end, narrowing to only an inch farther down. Oriana was facedown on the beam, legs split to either side of the narrow portion of the beam on angled surfaces, forcing her legs widely apart and her pussy firmly down onto the textured surface of the narrow section. Her breasts were resting farther up on the thicker portion of the beam, pillowed below her with her nipples pressed into another, differently textured, material. Her face hung off the end of the bench, though there was a collar-like padded support ring for her neck that kept things from being awkward or overly uncomfortable. Her arms and legs were strapped down tightly to either side of the beam, trapping her in place, with her own weight enough to bring a little bit of pleasure every time she shifted or squirmed even a bit, as the movement caused the textures of the padded surfaces to rub all her most sensitive bits in delightful ways.

And, of course, as this was a playroom full of high-end gear, the sex-bench she was tied to did a LOT more than just that. Alliana had quickly found the controls for the bench and promptly began experimenting with them. Heat, cold, vibration in ten separate speeds, and even the ability to project tiny mass effect fields that zeroed in on Oriana's nipples or clit. All of that was built in and her redheaded tormentor had thoroughly explored every single option...before gagging Oriana and setting them all to randomly shift, then moving off to examine other bits of gear.

That had been at least twenty minutes ago and Oriana was, at this point, desperate to actually cum. She didn't know if it was intentional or accidental, but the randomly shifting pattern of pleasure hadn't yet been enough to actually get her over the edge, though it had come close a few times. Part of her figured that, either way, it was probably her just deserts for all the teasing she'd done to her pair of pets this past month...but that part of her definitely wasn't the one piloting her brain at the moment. And all the needy part that *was* in control at the moment wanted was for her gag to be removed so she could *beg* properly.

Thankfully, just as any sort of coherent thought was becoming next-to-impossible, the stimulation changed, turning from random to just a low thrum of vibration. That was...almost even more frustrating. But, since it also heralded Alliana's return, she hoped for more, though at the moment the redhead was doing something behind her, out of Oriana's field of view. Another frustrating minute later and Oriana moaned as she felt the head of a dildo pressing against her pussy, then whimpered as it failed to actually penetrate. Another, this one heavily lubed, pressed against her rear entrance...and Oriana brightened as it finally gave her a clue just what Shepard had been up to. She shivered in anticipation as Alliana appeared in front of her, carrying a high-backed stool that just-so-happened to be adjusted to face-to-crotch level with Oriana. The naked redhead grinned down at her...then tied a blindfold around Oriana's eyes. She pouted, then perked up as her mistress removed her drool-coated ball gag.

Oriana knew better than to speak, even though she desperately wanted to beg for Alliana to hurry up. Thankfully it was only a few moments before she heard the creaking of the stool and smelled the familiar aroma of Shepard's wet pussy. The other woman's hand fisted into Oriana's hair...and then the two dildos abruptly drove into both of her lower holes, forced forward by the pistoning arms of the

fucking machine they were attached to. Oriana cried out, almost climaxing on the spot, only for Shepard to muffle her by shoving her face right into her dripping pussy.

“Do a good job, if you want to cum!”

Fervently, Oriana got to work...

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It was almost three hours later when a smirking Oriana was let up from her third bondage device by a half-passed out Shepard. Taking control of the staggering redhead, she guided her to the bed in the room, thoroughly enjoying the fact that she'd outlasted the Spectre. And, if Shepard found herself tied to that bed when she woke up, with Liara having joined them...well, it would only help inspire the woman to greater stamina in the future, now wouldn't it?

## **Chapter 27: Aftermath**

Councilor Tevos groaned as she pulled away from Oriana, ending the intensive meld with an expression of horrified disbelief. Her Salarian and Turian counterparts blinked and frowned at the visible distress on their normally self-controlled collage's face. Sparatus was the first to speak.

“Tevos? What did you see?”

It took long seconds for the Asari Matriarch to gather herself enough to respond.

“I saw...a number of impossibilities. Impossibilities that have to be true.”

The Salarian Councilor made an impatient noise and Tevos raised a hand to stall him for a moment, clearly sorting her thoughts out.

“Oriana Lawson is from the future. The result of a secret project that only sort of worked the way it was intended to. She wasn't supposed to be the one sent back, nor was anyone really sure that it would actually work. It was...an act of desperation. Desperation from a galaxy which hadn't had *New Dawn Enterprises* to prepare it for the Reapers, and which was losing the war against them. Badly.” The councilor paused, grimaced, then continued. “As much as I'd like to blame her for her approach, the simple truth is that even the Asari would have accounted her a madwoman without proof. She's done a far better job at giving us something vaguely resembling an actual chance than I think anyone else could have. At least with the amount of time she's had to work with.”

The other Councilor's were looking shocked, clearly struggling to believe Tevos' words. Predictably, it was the Salarian councilor who managed to react first.

“Should be impossible. Clearly wasn't. Who was supposed to come? Shepard?”

Tevos shook her head.

“No, it was supposed to be an Asari Matriarch. The machine they created could only send someone back to a point along their own timeline, a certain percentage of that timeline. If Matriarch Geduli had been sent, the galaxy would have had centuries of time to build up against the threat. Possibly even a chance to ambush the Reapers in deep space, before they could awaken.” She sighed. “And before you ask, she didn't come because the facility was attacked by the Reapers. The Matriarch

was dead and no one but Ms. Lawson was close enough to the prototype to go through. She gambled and threw herself into the machine, hoping against hope as the humans say. She nearly died in the process...and then was stuck with only a handful of years to work with. Goddess, I've *seen* just what she's done, and I can barely believe it. I only hope it's enough...

Before the others could start asking what Tevos was talking about, Oriana activated the holotable in the room. A massive shipyard complex, one with literally dozens of dreadnaughts in various stages of completion, sprung to life above the table. She spoke to the wide-eyed pair, making her voice suitably dramatic.

"Lady, gentlemen, welcome to Project Prometheus. The results of my pitiful attempt to replicate our one-in-a-trillion success..."

Tevos was still busy processing everything she'd gained from the meld, but Sparatus and Valern both reached forward and began reading, scrolling through the reams of data the holotable's information panels were feeding them. The two of them looked more and more shocked as they went. Eventually, the Salarian Councilor asked the important question, even more briefly than usual.

"How?"

Very briefly indeed. Oriana sighed and sat, addressing all three of them, Tevos finally looking like she was back in the present. Mostly, at least.

"I may not have known how Project Parallax worked...but I did know at least some of those who had designed it. I tracked down as many of them as possible, provided them as much information as I knew, and set them a new task. While my own arrival here wasn't something I wanted to even *try* replicating, given the potential complications, I had another idea. Specifically, to send a construction drone into the past."

Oriana reached forward and manipulated the display, rewinding the progress on the shipyard until...it was just a single mining and construction drone on a lifeless, unnamed planet. She set it to play forward at many times actual speed, letting her audience see what it had accomplished.

"It wasn't easy. And before you get any bright ideas, it's also not really replicable. Not for a couple of centuries, at least. The development team warned me that I'd destabilize space-time if I went too far...so I went just barely shy of too far. I launched thousands of these drones from hundreds of different points around Citadel space, all in desolate, undeveloped systems. I pushed until space-time *cried* and I had to stop or risk breaking the fundamental underlying threads of reality. It will recover in time, but it will take centuries at least, possibly millennia. And, out of that vast number? I got exactly three successes and two of them later failed."

Oriana leaned back, rubbing her eyes with her fingers.

"One of the successes was wiped out only months into its work by a meteor strike. The second hit a resource snag after building a small shipyard. That one I've at least repurposed into building a few smaller ship classes. But the third..." She waved at the holo display as it played the construction of the sprawling shipyard complex out at fast forward speeds. "The third succeeded in building the Prometheus Shipyard complex. It couldn't reveal itself to me until it passed the point where doing so wouldn't cause a paradox. Which wasn't until quite recently, since the design for those dreadnaughts

you're seeing wasn't even *finished* until just a month ago. As it is, you've seen the first three complete ships from those yards, as they took part in the Battle of the Citadel. But over the next two and a half years...46 more of them will commission. Assuming you can find and train crews for them, that is."

Sparatus leaned forward, expression intent.

"You're...giving them to us?"

Oriana smirked. "Of course. That many capital ships in private hands would be a disaster. They'll be distributed to each of your forces, plus the Systems Alliance, so long as you agree to use them against the Reapers rather than each other. Those dreadnaughts, plus the cruisers and frigates intended to operate with them, are our edge against the Reapers. Don't think they are an end-all be-all solution. You *saw* how tough Nazara was. And there are thousands more of them. Even updating all of your current ships, plus this new fleet, we're going to be badly outnumbered and needing to play every strategic trick we can to bleed them. But...hopefully it at least gives us a fighting chance."

Sparatus actually smiled, or the Turian equivalent at least.

"Very well, Miss Lawson. Let's get down to seeing just what sort of edge you've managed to make for us..."

## Mass Effect: Final Error - Interlude 1

### Novus Peregrine

#### Chapter 28: Archeology Involves Guns Way too Often

Shepard cursed as another wave of mechs poured out of the hatch they were facing. The redhead barked commands to her team. An entire commando unit from the Phoenix, not to mention three additional Spectres that had been assigned to her. It was an unusual move for so many of them to be assigned to work together...but these were unusual times. More to the point, the Council anticipated Shepard needing to leave other Spectres in charge of secured objectives. Like the objective they were currently struggling to take.

"Oriana! Could you hurry it up a bit!"

Ori grimaced, trying not to let the newest wave of disruptive fighting behind her stall her flying fingers.

"Thirty seconds!"

Shepard grunted back, even as she released another biotic shockwave, detonating the trio of singularities that her commandos had thrown up. That grunt was a relieved sound, at least to Oriana's ears, showing that her Captain had been genuinely worried about holding much longer. But thirty seconds was nothing, not added to an engagement that had been a running fight for over sixteen hours at this point. Then, finally, Oriana was through the firewalls and executing a shutdown command. Mechs stopped pouring through almost instantly, and an eerie quiet hung in the air, interrupted only by a few relieved noises and the sounds of instinctive reloading.

“Oriana?”

Despite still tapping away at the controls of the buried ship she was on the bridge of, Oriana answered the question in Shepard’s voice.

“We have control, boss. At this point I’m just checking for any additional bobby traps or failsafes.”

There was a half-hearted cheer from several of the exhausted troops, even one of the Spectres. That one was a Salarian, and they absolutely *were not* designed for the sort of crawling slog this had turned into. The four Spectres, including Shepard, quickly set about securing the bridge of the buried dreadnaught more thoroughly, just in case. By the time they were happy, Oriana was finally pulling away from the console in front of her with a satisfied smile. She turned to Shepard, her nominal Captain and sometimes lover, with a wicked grin on her face.

“Congratulations, Shepard. We’ve successfully seized the ISF Revenge. And she’s mostly intact. Unfinished, but intact! Liara’s practically going to wet herself when she gets down here.”

Alliana Shepard snorted from her position right next to Oriana, having come to silently lean next to her after she finished giving out orders.

“I think we’ve gotten her over the puppy stage of wetting the carpets in excitement. Though, if she’s still dealing with your latest round of ‘play,’ she might already be wet for other reasons. Even before we hand her an Inusannon Dreadnaught to pillage for its unknown histories.”

Oriana grinned but shook her head. “Sadly, we took too long capturing the ship. The last round of fun I programmed for her would have ended almost four hours ago. Though I’m sure she was embarrassed that Ashely had to go let her out since we were both stuck down here.”

Alliana actually giggled at the thought, an unusual sound for the woman, but one that was common enough when it involved thoughts of their ‘playtime’ with a certain adorable Asari archeologist. The sound brought a soft twist to Oriana’s own lips, though she quickly shoved it aside in favor of getting down to business.

“Of course, she also might murder us for how little time she’s going to get with this thing. What do you think, a week before we hand it off?”

Shepard’s expression shifted from amused to professional in an eyeblink, her sharp gaze darting across her HUD as she pulled up her omni-tool and checked on what had happened in the outside world since their newest operation began. After three minutes of silence, she relaxed and smiled.

“Ten days, I think. It doesn’t seem like anything new has exploded that the other teams can’t handle, and this was rougher than we expected, even if we didn’t lose anyone this time. A few extra days will give Liara time to get the team we’re leaving behind prepped properly, while letting the commandos recover a bit. Pretty much everyone is looking a bit ragged. Well, everyone aside from you, you monster.”

Oriana rolled her eyes. But, as she glanced over the various team members, she had to admit that Shepard had a point. They’d been *busy* in the six months since a combined fleet of council races and Geth had hammered the Reaper Nazara into so much scrap. Shepard and Oriana had both played critical



roles in that victory...and Oriana's *New Dawn Enterprises* were the ones forging the new spearheads to use against the Reapers. Unlike the first time Oriana had been through all of this, prior to her little jaunt back in time, the Council not only knew about the Reapers, but had lit a quiet fire under the rest of the galaxy to get them moving toward solutions, even if they hadn't publicly announced the reason for the need yet.

Instead of jumping only on the new fleet *New Dawn* had secretly built for them, the Council, much to Oriana's approval, had actually *hidden* those assets. They were crewing them, slowly, and training with the ships. Which was all to the good. But *this* version of the Council had tangible evidence of just how deep the shit they were in went and were, somewhat to her shock, actually acting on that evidence with aggressive thoroughness. They'd 'suspended' the Treaty of Farixen, with the excuse that radical changes in technology were needed to combat 'unknown threats' like Nazara, who was being held up as a bogey-ship for the public. As the new ships would take time to build, the three council races had agreed that it only made 'logical sense' to 'temporarily' suspend the fleet restrictions. This would allow them all to add new Dreadnaughts, without weakening their existing forces while those Dreadnaughts were built. That they were also quietly upgrading many of those old ships was something that they had strategically failed to mention to the public.

And, of course, the excuse was pure nonsense for the public to consume, anyway. In reality, the Council races were all frantically racing to build up their fleets for the Reaper threat, using a lot of *New Dawn* designs to give themselves an edge wherever they could. All while trying to quietly contain the Batarian Issue, as it had become glaringly obvious that at least some of that species was indoctrinated and the Council was preparing to...deal with them. For good.

Even more shocking to the public, the changes to the Council's military posture hadn't even been the most radical thing they'd done. No, *that* had been left to the changes in the Council itself. Ones that had caught literally everyone off guard, even Oriana. For the first time in...ever...the Citadel Council had fundamentally changed its format. Various species had been arguing for a position on the Council for centuries. But, partly in a desire to keep power for themselves and partly out of an actual *legitimate* issue with none of the races in question being powerful enough to pull their weight, the Citadel Council had refused to budge on the issue. At least until now.

Now, the Council had gone through a restructure. The three major powers, the Asari, Salarians, and Turians, retained their senior positions. However, 'junior membership,' had been offered to the Elchor, Volus, Hanar, and Humans. The restructure gave each of the four new species a single vote, with each of the original trio having two votes each instead. This meant that that trio now had to vote in lockstep if they wanted to overrule the votes of the 'junior members,' which wasn't something that would happen on every issue. This went a long way to appease cries for change that had been ringing through the halls of power for longer than humanity had been space faring. Even better, to most people's thinking, was that a formal system for each of those junior partners to earn a place as a senior voice had also been established, though currently only the System Alliance was anywhere close to being able to qualify for the military might required to 'shoulder that burden.' That this *just so happened* to encourage each of the others involved to start building up their military was, of course, no mistake.

The changes had, by the large, actually been taken extremely well by the galaxy's general populace. The Asari were the least happy, given their historic dominance in politics before, but they were also licking some serious political wounds from the discovery that they'd been hiding a Prothean

Beacon from the rest of the galaxy. That had kept them nodding along in all the right places, and after six months of wrangling, the new system was close to going into effect. The various races that now had a new voice in Galactic policy were mostly ecstatic...though it had come with a painful dose of reality when their new Councilors had been briefed on the impetus for all the radical, and rapid, changes.

The Reapers were coming. And only a united Galaxy had even a snowball's slim chance in hell of stopping them.

Meanwhile, thankfully, Shepard and the crew of the Phoenix had not needed to stick their oars too far into galactic politics. Oriana was doing so, a little. But even she was leaving most of that maneuvering to her much more experienced business partner, Matriarch Aethyta, who was having the time of her life aggressively browbeating everyone into getting along when it came to *New Dawn's* ability to help. The fact that the Asari Republics had been shaken into a more militant posture by the raid on their homeworld, and Aethyta had been the largest proponent for military expansion for centuries, was helping immensely in that browbeating effort.

Instead of politics, Shepard had been placed in charge of a large team whose goal was to *find them options*. The Council had given the redhead incredibly broad orders, in light of all they'd learned about just how capable she was. And, so far, they had been *extremely* pleased with the results. Between Shepard's own oddly effective form of brute-force everything, Oriana's connections, Liara's knowledge, and the fact that they'd all collectively taken over a galaxy-spanning information network from the Shadow Broker...they'd had a rapid string of successes. Successes that had solidified Shepard's stock with the Council. Successes which now included being able to give said Council a nearly complete Dreadnaught of Inusannon origins. One that had been built in secret during their own cycle's last days against the Reapers. With any luck at all, the archives aboard would have yet more data on the Reapers' methods, as well as the very best tech the Inusannon had been able to come up with in their own desperate struggle against their foe...

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Oriana moaned as the redhead between her thighs did something *new* with her tongue. A sort of nimble twist that Ori had never felt before, despite her considerable experience. She pulled her hands away from those red locks, some part of her understanding that the woman between her legs was doing a better job of eating her out than any guidance Oriana could offer. Instead, she raised both hands to her naked breasts and groped them, pulling and pinching at her sensitive nipples even as her half-lidded eyes darted sideways in response to moans from someone else. Specifically, from another redhead.

Shepard, with Liara between her legs diligently at work, was sprawled out opposite Oriana on the Captain's master bed, propped up by pillows. Grinning at the pair, both of whom were handcuffed but not letting that fact stop them from enjoying themselves, Oriana returned her gaze to the *other* redhead still at work making her moan. Kelly Chambers was apparently some sort of reincarnated sapphic sex-goddess that could out do centuries of Asari experience. Who knew?

Well, Ori did now. Or, at least, it was the current theory her pleasure-addled mind was pushing forward as the answer to the new things the yeoman was doing to her. All while the redhead, much like Shepard and Liara, didn't even have the use of her hands...

It was probably a good thing that the yeoman was a classic submissive. If she hadn't been, Oriana and Shepard might be *her* playthings instead of the other way around. And that probably wouldn't have ended well for the galaxy if she'd locked them up in some dungeon for fun times they'd never have wanted to leave.

Inspired by the desire to save the galaxy, Oriana would just have to take the burden of managing this young sex-goddess' talents. It would undoubtedly be a tough task, far harder than defeating a few Reapers, but it was one she was going to enjoy thoroughly! Doubly so as her most recent bet with Shepard had her in charge again for the next few months...

## **Chapter 29: Hegemony**

It was a tense few moments after the miniature relay, the first fruits of the research team that had been studying the Ilos facility's data, spun up. Mere moments later, the first of the ground vehicles drove through the relay with considerably less violence than the first attempts with the Prothean version had produced. Shoulders relaxed all around as it quickly moved out of the way, another vehicle following thirty seconds later. They'd tested the design thoroughly...but being on the ground in a massive warehouse on the Batrian homeworld would have made them tense even without the marginal uncertainty that new technology and tactics always brought with them. With things rolling along nicely now, though, they could all look forward to the fight to come.

This wasn't the first strike against the Batarians. Those had been fleet actions by the Systems Alliance, the Turians, and most surprisingly...the Geth. Everyone had been a little off-balance when the A.I. bogeymen had simply...stayed involved, after the death of Nazara. Some quick revision to certain laws had pissed the Quarians off to the point that something was going to need to be done about them, Oriana suspected. Tali was currently off playing diplomat, trying to strike a peace deal between the Geth and the Fleet, but so far it hadn't been going particularly well. Not the Geth's fault. The A.I. were being remarkably calm and helpful. The Quarians had been...less so. Unfortunately.

Regardless of how that eventually ended, for now the Geth were being *very* supportive of eliminating any sources of problems from 'The Old Machines,' which the Batarians were a rather blatant tool of. As such, their cruiser-heavy fleet had been put to use in a number of diversionary actions, along with the more dreadnaught-heavy fleets Humanity and the Turians were prone to using. A couple of minor Batarian colonies had been captured...but so far no major thrusts had been made into the heart of Batarian space. On purpose, of course. Now, with much of the Batarians remaining fleet strength diverted and distracted, a much larger fleet made up of the new 'Junior Members' of the council races, combined with a mixed Asari and Turian fleet, was barreling into the Kite's Nest from multiple directions. Normally, such divergent thrusts into an enemy system would be too iffy to be a good idea...but the Batarian fleets were out of position and this was almost as much a training exercise for the less experienced militaries as it was a war.

Of course, the real first strike was much more subtle. And was about to begin, as the warehouse was almost bursting at the seams. Shepard, who had surprisingly been put in charge of this little operation, was poised and waiting for the signal. When it came a moment later, the redhead dropped into the *Defiant* class ground-assault hover-tank, another of *New Dawn's* designs, and started barking commands over the comm even as the hatch sealed.

“Blow the doors! Units 1 and 3, prepare to execute Spider Whacker.”

The loading door at both ends of the warehouse exploded outward a moment later, and Shepard ordered the first two units out. Both were gunship squadrons and zoomed out of the warehouse, immediately dispersing toward a number of strategic targets.

“Unit 2! Flyswatter! All other Units, roll out per previous directions!”

The second snapped command had a third squadron of gunships out and targeting the automated defensive installations that were oh-so-slowly coming online to target Units 1 and 3. The complete surprise of their lift off, combined with an immediate dispersal of the gunships towards various targets, took the Batarians of Kar’shan’s Capital City defenses completely off guard. As a result, Unit 2 managed to strike the arrays that were trying to paint the gunships before more than two or three anti-air missiles got off. Those handful that did launch were easily taken out by the active defenses of the gunships of the first two squadrons...which closed on their targets and opened fire without the slightest hesitation.

It had been decided from the start that there was no salvaging the Batarian government. The slavery and piracy prone sociopaths in charge of said government had been a blight on the galaxy even before the Reaper indoctrination had taken hold. As such, this surgical strike targeted every major command center and every private residence of the rulers of Kar’shan in rapid succession. Some would almost certainly get lucky and not be at home or work, but inside twenty minutes, the Government of the Hegemony had been, at least temporarily, decapitated. That this coincided with the first of the attacking fleets dropping through the relay or slicing in out of the dark outer system from traditional FTL was no accident.

As Shepard and her Team rolled out in the division of Hover Tanks, with another two divisions rapidly coming through the mini-relay, they all prepared for a grueling slog.

The Battle for Kar’shan had begun.

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Despite all the advantages they’d had, taking a homeworld was never easy. All such worlds, at least for serious spacefaring races, were covered by defense in depth. Most of that had been bypassed by both the fleet and the ground forces in the initial assault...but all of it had to be dealt with sooner or later, and many Batarians were either naturally fanatics or indoctrinated. Many, *many* hardened positions had fought to the death, trying to take the opposing forces with them whenever possible. Husks and other Reaper surprises, like a crude version of the Brutes Oriana remembered from her first life, had nearly caused a few disasters. Thankfully, those sorts of things were exactly why Shepard had been given control of the first wave of the ground assault. She’d quickly handed that control off when the first few surprises had occurred, getting her own smaller units stuck in to any and all beyond-the-normal situations.

Theirs hadn’t been the only team doing that, either. Four other such units had been put in the field. Two were led by Specters, Nhilus and his new mentee Spectre Garrus Vakarian. The other two were led by elite units of Asari commandos under the personal control of Matriarchs Aethyta and Benezia. No one was eager to let Benezia back into political control...but this assault on Reaper forces

was considered a good test to ensure her people really were free of indoctrination. If they were, they'd be released to act as the Thorian's official representatives to the Citadel. Even Oriana had no fucking clue where *that* was going to end up. Though she was happy that her Asari business partner was happier now than Oriana had ever seen her, the two Matriarchs having apparently reconciled during Benezia's long debrief and medical isolation. The fact that this finally led to an amusing scene of family drama when Benezia casually outed her former and current lover as Liara's father...well, that had practically made Oriana's week. She hadn't stopped teasing Aethyta about it even after the woman had taken her apart in the sparring ring...several times.

But none of that was overly relevant at the moment. Taking Kar'shan hadn't been easy...though it *had* been shockingly quick. It had taken just six and a half days to pacify the planet, a timeframe even the attackers could barely believe. The truth, though, was that with most of the Government dead...the slaves had revolted. That had been expected. What *hadn't* been expected was just how effective that slave revolt would be. Nor had anyone predicted how much confusion the fact that there had, apparently, been a *totally unknown* Batarian underground, caused. That group was now applying for membership in the citadel as the official government...which was causing some consternation. Doubly so when scans with copied versions of the Ilos indoctrination scanners turned up the fact that *none* of the underground's leadership had been caught up by the Reapers.

Oriana was *seriously glad* that she didn't have to deal with that mess. Instead, back aboard the Phoenix and truly clean for the first time in the last week, she had...other plans...

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Shepard bit back a moan as Oriana fluttered the power of the remote dildo inside her pussy. A few seconds later, Ori pouted as the power died off without Shepard having cum. Drat. She might actually lose this time. Particularly if that triumphant look on Allaina's face was anything to go by. She braced herself as the waitress came to deliver their deserts...and was glad she did when she felt the neural stimulator on her clit activate just as she went to thank the waitress. She managed to get the thank you out without a stutter, barely, but the redhead across from her grinned, knowing how much Ori got off on a little bit of risk.

Biting her lip, she scooped up a bite of her desert to distract herself...only to moan aloud as the taste of Jubeiale filling flowed over her tongue. Eyes wide, she desperately tried not to cum...and failed spectacularly. The sensations her pseudo-Asari biology flushed through her at the totally unexpected ambush spelled the doom of her control, and she barely managed to muffle her voice with her hand as the combination of the uniquely Asari aphrodisiac and the neural stimulators she was wearing drove her over the edge. Shepard didn't let up, drawing out the orgasm with the toys until the last seconds of her time allotment ran out. Oriana braced herself on the table, panting as she gathered herself, then glared at the other woman...

"You rat bastard."

Alliana actually giggled at the glare, causing Ori's expression to shift to a pout.

"Hey, you're the one that's so fond of setting up little cheats to give you an edge in our bets. I was going to learn from you *Mistress Ori*, sooner or later. Of course, that's not your name for the next few months~!"

Ori continued to pout, even as she brought up the omni-tool controls for the chastity belt she was wearing. With a triumphant grin, the redhead activated her own, accepting control of both of their belts for the duration specified by their latest bet. Given that this was the first time she'd actually gotten one over on Oriana with one of the chastity belt bets, it might be a very long three months...

### **Chapter 30: Zombie Raid**

Curses filled the comm as a dozen different ships took emergency evasive maneuvers. Two of them, the Elcor Fleet's frigate *Shakespeare* and the Turian cruiser *Iron Claw*, were unlucky enough to 'evade' right into each other's path. Oriana grimaced at the CiC display, watching the frigate vanish into a fireball and the broken cruiser tumble away. One of the *New Dawn* built dreadnaughts, now under Asari command, reacted quickly enough to spear the tumbling cruiser with a tractor beam, pulling it away from the debris field that had caused their need for evasive maneuvers. Despite the quick reaction speed from the dreadnaught, Oriana doubted there would be more than a bare handful of survivors. If any at all.

Still, that was a sideshow, if a painful one. As the mixed fleet sorted itself out, her eyes darted to the massive space station, which was already disgorging a trio of Collector Cruisers...even as small Occuli weapon's platforms began swarming the Allied Fleet from out of the debris field. As said fleet had started to launch fighters from their brand-new carriers, those Occuli were quickly being cut to ribbons even as the Dreadnaughts lurched forward at max acceleration, determined not to let the Collector ships fully free of the base. It looked like one of them was going to get clear anyway, but the other two probably wouldn't, which was all to the good.

The carriers were yet another *New Dawn* design, though this time built mostly for the Systems Alliance. Oriana nodded in satisfaction at the SA's new fighters, launched by the new carriers, were quickly proving as effective as she'd hoped. Maybe even a bit more so. The older council races hadn't been eager to adopt the Carrier tactic, it being one that had long fallen out of service with their militaries. But the Alliance, who had already been in the process of revitalizing fighter use since the First Contact War, had taken to the idea with relish. Carrier usage had never fallen out of use for humanity...and the new punch Oriana's energy weapons gave fighters and drones had had the SA war college practically worshiping the ground she walked upon. Better, she'd leaked those fighter designs to them well before Nazara had gone active with Saren. They and their massive carriers had *already* been in full production, albeit in secret, for years.

She'd sold them the idea originally as a way around the Treaty of Farixen, which didn't say a thing about carrier size limits, only dreadnaughts. But everyone had realized, once the Reaper threat and Oriana's actions against it came to light, what she'd really intended. Thankfully, it was a case where the Council was eager to forgive and forget her and the SA's little indiscretion if it gave them another tool to use in the daunting, uphill battle ahead of them. Honestly, she was fully expecting them to assassinate her if they all somehow survived, given the number of dangerous things she'd had designed, designed herself, or otherwise acquired only to have them handed out like candy. But that was okay. She could plan for that and, really, if they beat the Reapers, even a successful attempt against her was acceptable. Less than enjoyable for her. But acceptable.

Oriana shook herself as one of the Collector ships broke apart, another already a dying hulk. The third was still fighting...but the Phoenix was ignoring that. The Collector Base loomed large and Shepard

clapped her on the shoulder. She nodded and both of them headed to the bay, helmeting up as they went. The Fleet could handle whatever happened out here. Their job, along with the jobs of the other elite teams placed under Shepard's command for this operation, was to raid that base for every scrap of intel they could get...

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Oriana begged. She wasn't proud of it, and it was in stuttered fits between moans, but there was no question from her tone that it was begging. She *needed to cum*. Shepard hadn't let her get off since their single night of celebration after the Collector Base raid...and that had been almost *three weeks ago*. And now, after being constantly teased and edged for those three weeks...Ori had found herself on the opposite side of a familiar situation. Specifically, bound spread eagle in the cabin of Oriana's own private shuttle. Trapped at Shepard's mercy on the very same bed she'd first discovered Shepard's own chastity belt all those long months ago. And, while Alliana still couldn't reliably reproduce the Asari biotic-pleasure technique Oriana had used to tease the redhead through her belt at the time...she was making perfectly torturous use of the set of neural stimulations Oriana wore to make up for that fact. All while letting the program carefully monitor her vitals so Ori didn't actually cum.

Thankfully, Oriana's begging was apparently *exactly* what the smirking redhead had been waiting for. She held up a familiar slim vibe for Oriana to see...and a bottle of lube with the other. Oriana's eyes focused on them with laser intensity, eyes begging for Shepard to just *do it*. The redhead chuckled, slowly lubing the toy, then lowering it to the rear hole of Ori's chastity belt. A lube covered finger had her bucking, even just from the sensation of it rubbing lube into her rear entrance...but that sensation paled to the one that followed as Shepard slowly penetrated her ass with the toy. The penetration was *almost* enough added stimulation to get Ori over the edge, but only almost. And the mischievous redhead simply toyed with the end of the vibrator for long moments...before she *finally* turned it on.

Oriana howled and shuddered her way through the single most powerful orgasm of her life. It was so strong that the safety cut-offs on the neural stimulators actually shut them down. It took her long, long minutes for her vision to clear from a practical white-out and for her mind to start working properly again. She was just in time to hear her own line repeated back to her...only twisted a little bit to fit her own situation.

"I told you the first one would be *slow*, Ori...but only the first one. You're going to cum again and again until you pass out. And you still have to repay me for each one as well..."

<<End Interlude 1>>

## Mass Effect: Final Error – Interlude 2

Novus Peregrine

### Chapter 31: The Justicar

Oriana blinked in bemused shock at the Asari Justicar kneeling before her. The Asari, who Oriana's own half-Asari nature was screaming at her in no uncertain terms was *old* and *seriously dangerous*, had somehow bypassed the best security both she *and* Matriarch Aethyta had installed on the small complex that held their private residences on Thessia. Rarely used, almost more a safehouse than an actual home, Oriana had no idea how the Justicar had even known she'd be there. She'd had been forced to temporarily leave Shepard and the *Phoenix* for a few weeks in order to deal with complications that had arisen with the Asari's armament program. A completely unscheduled and unplanned diversion. Which no one outside *New Dawn* and the crew of the *Phoenix* should have known about.

She had, in fact, just returned from a meeting with Ani'lia and Fallion, who had been the ones to call her here. Mostly out of frustration, it had to be said. Ani'lia, despite having come out of her shell somewhat, still wasn't a people person, and Fallion lacked the technical expertise to completely bridge the gap with the Asari scientists who didn't understand why Ani'lia wouldn't just meld with them. To most Asari, that was the most logical way to help overcome the gaps in understanding as they applied Ani'lia's energy weapons research. But to Ani'lia, who made Liara look like a social butterfly, the idea was completely terrifying. Hence the need for someone with more authority to verbally smack a few Asari around...and to actually bridge the gap that Fallion couldn't by melding with both Ani'lia and the scientists in turn.

None of which explained how, two days before Oriana was due to leave, an Asari Justicar who shouldn't have any interest in her was *kneeling in supplication*. Willfully ignoring how the woman had gotten through the bleeding edge security on her residence, at least for now, Oriana took a few heartbeats of pause to try and come up with anything about the woman. To her surprise, a vague memory *did* surface. Specifically, one from her original life. Trying not to gulp as she realized she was facing Samara, a thousand-year-old Justicar that had worked with Shepard the first time around for unknown reasons, Oriana tried to keep her voice level as she moved around her desk, waving a hand to the opposite chair as she addressed the woman.

"Justicar. I know of no more reason for you to kneel to me than I do for you to take issue with me. Please, be seated and make known to me what I can do for you."

Only half to her surprise, Samara didn't move yet, instead inclining her head to acknowledge the offer. When she spoke, Oriana was surprised that the ancient Asari was actually having a bit of difficulty keeping emotion out of her voice.

"I kneel not for any reason related to my code, Lady Lawson. It is a personal matter which I must give you thanks for, before any other business. I do not know if you are aware, given the many things you are juggling...but three months ago *New Dawn Enterprises* cured two of my daughters of their condition as Ardat-Yakshi. A feat previously thought to be completely impossible."

Oriana blinked, nearly as shocked by that statement as she was by the presence of the Justicar in the first place. Still standing in deference to the ancient Asari who had yet to stand herself, Oriana's hand twitched, wanting to pull up her omni-tool, but not willing to do so while being stared at so...intensely...by an obviously emotional woman that could probably turn her into a smear on the wall with little difficulty.



"I...was aware of the research. Indeed, I was the one that initiated it, against the protests of several Asari who weren't happy about my wiliness to let other species take a look at the condition. I admit, however, that bioscience isn't my own specialty and I hadn't been tracking the effort all that closely. They truly made a breakthrough? Not just a preventative treatment but an actual cure?"

Samara's face broke into a smile, seemingly despite all attempts by the woman to discipline it.

"They have, Lady Lawson. Your...heavy handed attempt to map the genetics of the condition by testing every Asari who would let you for its lesser versions proved unexpectedly fruitful. Indeed, I'm given to understand that the scientists involved were *chagrined* at the ease with which a preventative treatment was made possible simply by the wider pool of data. A genetic modification that could treat someone who had already developed the lethal version of the condition took considerably longer...but your people were relentless. They did not give up until they had it in hand, and three months ago they traveled to a monastery and applied it to every Asari willing to try. Which, unsurprisingly, was every single one of them."

Samara paused, breathed deeply, then continued.

"While it is not completely official yet, the treatment worked to the degree that both of my daughters were able to meld for only the second time in their lives, and studies of their volunteer partners show absolutely no abnormalities. All that remains is a longer-term study to ensure that the effects are permanent."

Samara paused again, this time lowering her head and lifting bared palms in an Asari-specific gesture of wordless gratitude rarely used, as it was meant to express the inexpressible. Gratitude so deep that there were no words in any language that could express it.

"I-I know you were not the one to develop the cure, Lady Lawson. But I studied the record in detail, nearly obsessive detail, and it quickly became obvious that it was *only* your stubborn refusal to take no for an answer that allowed the research to go forward at all. Even your Asari business partner attempted to dissuade you, given the touchy nature of the subject you were insisting on researching. Thank you, Oriana Lawson. For you have given my daughters their lives back."

Oriana's own throat was thick with emotion at the sheer depth of gratitude she felt rolling off the other woman. A tiny bit of guilt flickered to life within her at the feel of it, knowing as she did that she'd only insisted on the research because of the Banshee units that the Reapers had eventually made. The units had been rare but devastating. They could only, as near as anyone had been able to tell, be formed from those Asari inflicted with at least the lesser version of the condition that made Ardat-Yakshi. Oriana had only ever seen one personally, but the encounter had been terrifying enough to make her pursue the research as soon as she could upon her return.

Forcing herself to speak as levelly as she could, she managed a reply after only a few long moments of pause.

"For what little part I had in it, Justicar Samara, you are most welcome. I hope, only, that you also thanked those that actually made the cure, as I feel my own part in doing so was not so worthy of your gratitude as theirs."

The Asari, whose head had risen with Oriana's address of her, looked more than a little surprised.

"I did thank them, of course. Most particularly the two of them that volunteered to meld with my daughters as proof of their success. I will not forget them, or the courage that act took." Samara paused to chuckle. "I believe one of them is now dating my younger daughter, actually. A bit of a conflict of interest, perhaps, but I cannot find myself able to blame either of them."

Samara sighed and finally rose from her kneeling position, joining Oriana at her desk and sitting as her host did the same. The Asari frowned slightly, seemingly troubled.

"Aside from my deepest thanks, I have an offer and a request for you as well, Lady Lawson. However, I feel I must ask...how did you know who I was?"

Oriana leaned back slightly, considering carefully how to answer that. She was used to concealing her...past? Previous future? Alternate timeline? Whatever one referred to it as, Oriana was used to concealing it. Yet, she'd revealed it to the Council out of necessity. Which meant, as with any 'secret' known to a politician, it wasn't exactly fully a secret any longer. And Justicars were a *notoriously* prickly bunch.

"The answer to that is not a simple one. I will not lie to you regarding it. But unless you are aware of my...unique...origins already, it would be a time-consuming issue to discuss."

Samara's eyes flickered with understanding, making Oriana instantly glad she hadn't attempted to prevaricate.

"Ah. You knew me, or knew of me at least, prior to your most unusual return through time, then."

Oriana nodded, quirking her eyebrow in her own silent question as to how the woman knew about that. Samara smiled and took the cue to explain readily enough.

"The Justicars were approached regarding the Reapers, Lady Lawson. While there is little in the way of a command structure for our order, as one of the oldest living Justicars, I was one of those approached. Seeking our potential help regarding the Reapers necessitated some explanation of how the powers that be came to know what they did in the first place. Given our order's...rigidity...we were given as complete a briefing as was possible. In an attempt, I suspect, to convince as many of us as they could to turn our minds and hands toward any possible solutions."

Curious, Oriana couldn't help but ask. "Did it work?"

The Justicar nodded.

"To a degree, yes. Much as they must have suspected would happen, many Justicars began to act, but we've all done so in our own fashions. While we don't talk to each other that much, I know a few Justicars have turned up leads to ancient technology or given over information about research facilities they violently shut down at one point or another. As for myself, that brings me back to my request and offer."

Very much curious at this point, Oriana simply waved for the Justicar to continue. Thankfully, the Asari seemed a direct sort, despite her age, and seemed content to explain without farther working around the point.

“I have a single unresolved, and admittedly somewhat personal, case that I cannot in good conscience leave unattended to. Specifically, that my third daughter is also an Ardat-Yakshi, but one who has embraced it and preyed upon hundreds of innocent victims over the centuries. I have hunted her for nearly the entirety of my time as a Justicar. She was, in fact, the primary reason I took the training and vows.”

Samara paused for a moment, obviously letting that sink in for Oriana. Then, with a sigh, she continued.

“My request is thus. That you help me hunt her down. I know you have the resources to aid me in that endeavor. In exchange, my offer is my service. You and Spectre Shepard appear to be one of the primary spearheads against the Reaper threat. With Morinth removed from the picture, I will take a Vow of Submission, subordinating myself to you until the Reapers are dealt with.”

Oriana blinked in shock, even as she settled back in her chair, mind racing. This...this was likely how Shepard had recruited Samara in the original timeline. Not the cure. Even Oriana hadn't really thought that would work. But assistance in hunting down Samara's daughter at last. And the offer was an *extremely* tempting one. As one of the oldest Asari Justicars, one that had been active for centuries despite the high-mortality rate among that group, Samara was a combat asset almost without peer. Not to mention that, between missions, the woman could likely take the *Phoenix's* Asari commando teams to the next level by providing the type of training that just couldn't be gotten via normal trainers. At the same time, Oriana had no idea how long it would take to track down the woman's daughter. Still, between her own resources and the Shadow Broker network...Oriana leaned forward.

“Very well, Justicar Samara. Conditional on the understanding that I have other responsibilities that may pull me away from the hunt in an emergency, I will lend both my personal and institutional aid and assets to your hunt.”

Oriana reached her hand over the desk...and Samara shook it in agreement.

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Oriana panted, wincing as she threw herself out of the path of a brutally powerful biotic warp. Tumbling her way through a sloppy roll, she came up not into a firing position, but straight into a biotic charge. Finally, for the first time since the firefight raging through the by-now-abandoned space station started, her action seemed to take Morinth off-guard. The Ardat-Yakshi was *stupidly* powerful, easily on par with her mother, despite a five-century gap of age and experience between them. And *both* of the other combatants were a step above her in basically every way. Like Matriarch Aethyta, they both matched or surpassed Oriana in raw power, and they also both had a sheer breadth and depth of skill that even the Matriarch would have been hard pressed to match.

But that worked *against* Morinth now. Oriana had known after the very first opening exchanges that the murderous psychopath wasn't someone she could confront directly and live. So, she'd stuck to the edges of the fight, taking every chance shot that Samara opened in Morinth's defenses and covering

for the Justicar in the rare moments that her daughter got the upper hand. But now, now Morinth had made the mistake of dismissing the annoying human as a serious threat. Oriana had been playing up her injuries and exhaustion...and now as she went from seemingly barely on her feet to a *flawless* biotic charge, Morinth couldn't compensate.

Knowing she'd only get one shot, Oriana ignored her weapons and concentrated on a biotic move she'd only recently finally gotten mastery over. Point blank, she poured all her power into a biotic Reave...and then frantically strengthened her barriers as the Ardat-Yakshi, in real pain from an attack that focused on the very nervous systems that were drastically enhanced in her kind, lashed out with a 360 degree pulse of pure biotic power. Oriana slammed *through* a wall, vision dimming, but her last sight was of a glowing Samara's equally glowing fist punching straight through Morinth's weakened barrier, taking her daughter in the throat...

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She came too with surprisingly little pain. Given that the last thing she remembered was being thrown *through* a steel wall after an hours-long fight to the death, the minimal pain was almost as much of a surprise as waking up at all. Since both were rather pleasant surprises, Oriana quickly got over them and took stock of her surroundings.

Oh.

This was the small but well-stocked medical facility of her own personal shuttle. Which had, apparently, survived the rampant destruction unleashed on that poor space station. She didn't really regret slaughtering her way through the pirates the space station had belonged to. But she felt a little bad for the damage to the space station itself. It hadn't done anything to her, after all...

...

...

Okay, so she was on the GOOD drugs. That would explain why she wasn't hurting, at least. And why she was anthropomorphizing a space station. Sighing at the realization she must actually be fairly heavily wounded for the ship's medical systems to release those drugs for use, she spotted her omni-tool on the stand next to her tiny bed in the cramped medical room. Managing to retrieve it with only a little extra pain, she settled in to see what she'd missed that way, rather than actually trying to move...

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It was a couple of days later that Oriana stood with a trio of Asari, trying not to feel awkward as the family mourned the young girl that had once been. They had insisted she come along, as it had ultimately been Oriana who had convinced Samara to give burial rites to her dead daughter. The Justicar had wanted to just walk away...but Oriana was *very* good at reading people, even ancient Asari. She'd seen how much dealing the death blow to her daughter had been haunting the woman, and had known full well that if Samara didn't get some form of closure she might well never recover.

Which is why Oriana had refused to take Samara's oath until a small, private family funeral was held. Morinth had been a monster, but it had been circumstance that turned her into one. Given the choice between life in isolation or execution, Morinth had lashed out, seeking freedom and control of

her own destiny as Oriana felt she herself might have. And then the addictive nature of the Ardat-Yakshi condition had slowly but surely warped the bright and brave girl Morinth had once been into the monster she'd eventually become.

There had been no possibility of redeeming Morinth. Even if she had been cured as her sisters had been, Morinth had willfully shed too much blood, sown too much death and chaos. Yet, as Oriana had pointed out, that did not prevent Samara from mourning what had happened to her child. A child that had been, at least at first, as much a victim as a rebel or criminal. If she could not mourn Morinth's death, she could at least mourn the circumstances that had brought it about. And she could do so with the two children who had now been freed from their own dark fates.

As the body of Morinth was lowered into her grave, a weight seems to visibly lift from the ancient Justicar's shoulders. She, Falere and Rila embrace for a moment...and then she broke off from her remaining family and approached Oriana. Going to one knee, face to the ground, Samara spoke, voice somber but remarkably steady.

"By the code, I will serve you, Lady Lawson. Your choices are my choices. Your morals are my morals. Your wishes are my code. Until the Reaper threat has ended."

After a short biotic flare to emphasize her oath, Samara slowly rose.

"Be aware, if you make me do anything extremely dishonorable, I may have to kill you after you release me from my oath. Though, from what I have seen of you, I do not think I need worry overmuch about that." The Justicar paused for a moment, looked back at the gravesite, then sighed. "Thank you. For convincing me to give her the burial rites. As a Justicar I am not supposed to mourn those who were slain for doing wrong...but as I mother, I needed to say goodbye. Now, shall we depart?"

Sensing that Samara very much wanted to be away from this place, despite being grateful she'd gone through with it, Oriana merely nodded and led the way to the aircar waiting for them...

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Oriana was surprised when she found Samara in her bedroom. They were back on Thessia, clearing up some paperwork while waiting for the *Phoenix* to come back from a mission of its own. The cruiser was, as often was the case these days, running a stealth mission. Which meant they could only wait for it to make contact with them again so they could rejoin, or join in Samara's case, the cruiser's operations. Their side-trip to chase Morinth had resulted in Oriana missing the first such window but, given the outcome of that was getting a powerful Justicar for their ground team for the duration, she considered it a win despite the annoyance of the delay.

In an echo of their first meeting, however, none of that explained why Samara was in her bedroom...and not exactly wearing much. The camisole she wore was sheer enough that Oriana could make out her nipples, not to mention the clear outline of the tiny G-string that was the Asari's only other bit of clothing. The sight, unexpected as it was, caused Oriana's brain to stall for long moments. Moments in which she drank in the sight of the gorgeous body barely concealed...and kneeling on her bed.

Before she could get her mind working again, Samara spoke.

“Most Justicars wouldn’t tell you, a non-Asari, this...but the Vow of Submission I made to you is rather *comprehensive*. While not its intended purpose, the Justicar that gives it can be ordered to do almost anything, including joining the one she is vowed to in bed. While this normally might be looked on with disfavor by the Justicar, a potential wrong to be addressed once the task was complete...I do not feel that way. Not for you. You have given me two daughters back and helped me lay to rest and come to peace with the fate of the third.” Samara’s lips twitched. “Besides, my studies of you were *quite* comprehensive. I believe I will enjoy my time in your bed...if you would have me, Mistress?”

Snapping her jaw closed from a moment of gaping at the unexpected offer, Oriana slowly smiled, the situation shifting around her to one she was familiar with, even if it wasn’t one she’d been expecting. Putting her best saunter into her step, she covered the few steps between them, inwardly trying not to squeal as the powerful Justiciar leaned into the cupped hand she raised to Samara’s chin.

“Oh, I think you’ll find that I’m all sorts of fun...and more than willing to have you join in that fun.”

Leaning in, she captured the elder Asari’s lips in a searing kiss, even as her hand trailed down the woman’s body. This was quite the unexpected bonus...

### **Chapter 32: A Noisy Bit of Stealth**

“Okay, Ori...what the fuck is going on? I understand you said this is important and you needed a team not directly associated with *New Dawn* to do it...but you haven’t actually said what we’re on Ilum for. And, if you’re worried about *New Dawn* for some reason, why are we using one of their safehouses here?”

Oriana’s lips quirked at the very slight querulous note in Shepard’s voice as she demanded answers. Turning away from her fourth paranoid recheck of the security systems, she leveled a self-deprecating smirk at her lover as she answered.

“Taking those questions in reverse order...this isn’t actually a *New Dawn* safehouse. It’s one I personally established, almost right after I returned from the future, well before I created *New Dawn Enterprises*. It only ever got used twice and it hasn’t ever appeared on any system *New Dawn* has. Hell, it’s not even on my own personal omni-tool.”

More than one set of eyebrows, or species equivalent, raised as she explained. And now each and every person present was clearly as intent on answers as Shepard had been.

“Next, the reason why we’re here.”

Oriana inserted an encrypted data chip into the table and the face of an Asari businesswoman popped up over the holotable.

“Do you remember how *angry* I was after the fight with the Shadow Broker? And *why*?”

Liara got there before anyone else.

“His energy shields. You said they were a *New Dawn* prototype.” The Asari paused, eyes hardening a bit. “Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh.’ The one flaw with basing so much of our original operations out of Illum was, simply put, that nearly everything is for sale on Illum. The Matriarch and I did as through of a job of vetting our people as possible, even intentionally bringing in a lot of experts in that *weren’t* from Illum...but there was always going to be some leaks.

Oriana waved at the face above the holotable.

“This is Nassana Dantius. While all other known leaks were at low levels, Dantius here managed to get agents high enough in *New Dawn’s* R&D support team that she was able to steal designs for several prototypes, including the energy shield system she eventually sold to the Shadow Broker. She used so many cutouts for doing so that even the Broker didn’t know who the ultimate supplier was...hence why it took so long to run her down. Unfortunately, while the mole in the R&D team was shut down, abruptly and violently much to my satisfaction, we don’t know if she’s gotten to anyone else. Worse, if she got to others on the same level...”

This time it was Shepard who finished her thought, the redhead grimacing as she did.

“She might also have gotten other critical information, such as details about the Shadow Fleet, or locations of Reaper Artifacts. She needs to be dealt with...and you can’t use *New Dawn* assets to do it, in case she has moles high enough up the chain of command to warn her.”

“Exactly. I do have *one* asset on this. Well, two actually. The first was independently recruited by Matriarch Aethyta. He’s a Drell assassin, formerly a Hanar shadow operative, and he’s been in charge of the plan to isolate Dantius. He’ll be in place to kill the tower’s power systems and activate a jammer to prevent her calling in help. Samara, meanwhile, will be arriving at the same time to the local police HQ, warning them not to interfere.”

Oriana tapped the controls of the holotable, causing the image of their target to vanish in favor of a wireframe outline of Dantius tower.

“Which doesn’t necessarily make our part easy. Even as a Justicar who will be name dropping both myself and the presence of a Spectre on this assignment, Samara asking the city to ignore an assault drop or similar on a tower in downtown Nos Astra is a bit...much.” Oriana paused to smirk at the mix of annoyed and understanding reactions around the table, then picked up where she left off by highlighting a pair of entrances. “We’ve secured access to an underground entrance in a new tower under construction. One team will be going in there, quiet as they can. The other team will be simply smashing into and through the front doors, making a big noisy mess and attracting most of the security.”

Oriana paused as Alliana leaned forward to poke at the hologram, manipulating it. The redhead nodded after a few seconds, speaking up with her own assessment.

“I assume we’re trying to take her alive, hence the distraction team and stealth team?” When Oriana nodded, Shepard continued. “I’m guessing I and Ash will be part of the front door team. But there are only five of us here...how are you planning to make this work?”

Oriana smirked.

“Actually, there are six of us. Remember, I mentioned *two* assets. Kasumi, if you would introduce yourself?”

Everyone except Gestalt flinched as, abruptly, a woman in hooded armor shimmered into existence less than a step behind Oriana.

“Damn it boss, I still can’t figure out how you know when I’m here.”

Oriana shot Kasumi her best, most infuriating, smirk. As the woman pouted, she introduced her to the others.

“Kasumi was recruited some time ago, completely off the books, and is one of my best agents. I helped her retrieve something important to her. Ever since then she’s been working for me as a...covert acquisitions specialist.”

Kasumi snorted. “You mean you’ve had me breaking into high security R&D labs all over the galaxy, dropping off data or stealing prototypes, whichever suited your end goals better.”

Oriana just shrugged, completely unrepentant.

“Needs must while the devil drives. I’ve never pretended my hands are completely clean. I’ve done my best to prepare the galaxy for the Reapers, but my best hasn’t always been completely legal. Though I *will* note that the times I had you drop off ‘mystery’ data to help various groups finish interesting projects by far outweigh the number of thefts.”

Kasumi waved airily at that, even as Ashely, of all people, chuckled. When everyone looked her way, Ashely shrugged and grinned.

“Just imagining the looks on some of the egg heads faces when data almost literally fell out of the sky to help them finish their projects.”

That won a few additional chuckles from the others, including Oriana. But she quickly got her own amusement under control and turned back to their main topic. Time was running short, after all.

“Kasumi, myself, and the Drell agent I mentioned earlier will be forming the stealth team. Thane and Kasumi are two of the best stealth operatives in the galaxy, and I’m fairly decent at that myself. Whereas none of you really are. Well, Shepard knows how...but your Spectre status is kind of needed for the smashy bits so that no one gets in trouble at the end of the day.” Alliana rolled her eyes but nodded readily enough at that. “Which means that the Liara and Gestalt will be joining you in the distraction assault. There *will* be civilian night workers around, so try to keep that in mind, but otherwise feel free to go wild. The bigger the distraction, the easier it will be for the stealth team to make our way to Dantius.” Checking the time, Oriana quickly added. “Alright, we’ve got forty minutes before we need to suit up and head out. Ask any questions now, but try to keep it brief...”

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Oriana grimaced as she used her biotics to self-levitate. For some reason, doing that was much harder than levitating others. In fact, it was only really possible with a bit of momentum beforehand. Thankfully, after launching Thane and Kasumi over the final gap they needed to cross in the unfinished tower, there had been just enough room to build up the needed momentum. She touched down a moment later, Thane reaching out to steady her just as her biotics momentarily gave out. After a moment to gather herself, she nodded to her two companions. Kasumi grinned...and activated the door she’d already hotwired. The one leading to the service floor *above* Nassana Dantius’s office.



Moments later, Kasumi and Thane were both through and using their gear to peer through the thin floor, picking out positions to drop in over the last line of security. Oriana left them to do it, using her own time to quietly seal off the escape hatch from the office to the landing pad above. Even if Nassana somehow slipped past them all, she'd find she couldn't get away without breaking through her own security barrier. With one last silent exchange of hand signals between them, they each smoothly cut through the floor and dropped on their targets. The two security goons in the office went down...and Oriana violently ripped the pair of anti-personnel turrets out of the wall. Looking at the pale-face Asari staring at all of them, Oriana gave her a predatory smile.

"Hello, miss Dantius. I have some *questions* for you."

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Oriana cried out as the paddle landed again, the sound somewhat muffled by the oversized penis gag holding her mouth open just a bit painfully. The paddle came down on her already thoroughly red ass another time, this time drawing more of a whimper-moan than a cry. Her assailant, a certain redheaded Spectre, took the change as a cue to stop her assault. The paddle fell away, with a gentle hand replacing it, rubbing some of the fire out of Oriana's bruised buttocks.

"There, there. You know you have to pay for your bad behavior. But perhaps we can move onto the next stage."

Oriana whimpered again when the soothing hand vanished, her ass feeling like it was on fire. The next distraction wasn't long in coming, however, as Liara was pulled in front of her. The Asari's arms were bound behind her...but the more glaring point of interest was the oversized strapon that was the only other thing the Asari maiden wore. It was the XL version of one of Oriana's favorite toys, a dual-sided strapon that translated whatever happened to the external side into various stimuli for the wearer's side. This one, however, was almost exactly the same size as the penis gag thrust down her throat, with the same hollow core in it that would allow her to breathe with a bit of struggle...or experience. Which is presumably why Shepard had started her with the gag.

The redhead's next actions came as no surprise. The penis plug for the panel gag was pulled out and Liara was ordered to replace it with her strapon. The blue beauty moaned and whimpered as each inch made its way down Oriana's throat, the strapon apparently translating the incredibly tight passage in equally incredible ways. For long moments, Liara just stopped once the toy's base was touching Oriana's lips...but then Shepard spanked the Asari to get her moving again. A slow withdrawal and thrust began to fill both her and Oriana's entire worlds.

Oriana had only just gotten the trick of breathing down properly, an unknown amount of time later, when she felt a finger pushing its way into her backdoor. She gagged in surprise, causing a shudder to pass through Liara as the unexpected sensation translated into something that made the Asari cum. The thrusting didn't stop, but it faltered long enough for Oriana's full attention to focus on that invading finger. A finger that was quickly replaced by something else. Specifically, a string of anal beads. A long string with increasingly large beads that popped into her ass one after another, making Oriana whimper and moan around the false cock in her throat with every insertion. She came for the first time by the final bead...but that wasn't a relief, since only moments later another strapon was brutally thrusting into her one remaining opening. She howled, the sound coming out as a sort of choked scream, feeling more

full than she'd ever been, despite the final strapon being more normal sized than the one still thrusting down her throat. Then, her pussy still quaking from her first climax, the brutally powerful vibrators in both the anal beads and the second strapon roared to life...

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Over an hour of brutal attentions later, Oriana was cuddled between Liara and Alliana. She'd had medigel applied everywhere necessary but her still bruised backside, and she would take care of that eventually, as well. For now, the mild fire of her contact with the sheets was farther cleansing her soul.

Their interrogation of Nassana yesterday had not been gentle. And it had brought a lot of the darker things Oriana had done these past few years to the surface of her mind. The little session earlier had been something she needed, a form of therapy and copping that definitely wasn't the most healthy. Despite knowing that, it was at least somewhat effective and considerably more fun than the proper therapy session Oriana would be facing with Kelly tomorrow morning. Between the two, maybe she could forgive herself for at least a few of the darker things she'd had to do to keep the galaxy safe. And if not, at least a new set of missions would always be waiting to distract her from those memories...

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### **Chapter 33: The Alpha Relay**

Oriana had known about the Alpha Relay. Of course she had. The results of the Alpha Relay Incident had featured heavily in the 'trial,' if one could even call it that, of Alliana Shepard in the aftermath of the defeat of the Collectors. While the exact details had been officially classified, Miranda had been working with Shepard at the time of the incident, and her sister had seen no reason not to give Oriana the details. Indeed, those details had been just one example of several that Miranda had used to convince her younger sister to take the long-shot of working with Project Paralax. While Oriana had known that her sister was mostly just trying to keep her somewhere safe and out of the way, the truth was that Miranda had been right that *every* possible option needed to be run down. The fact that the project had actually worked was evidence that they had both been correct on that score.

None of which was really relevant at the moment. What *was* relevant, was that Oriana had included information about the Alpha Relay and its danger in her briefing to the Council. That point of the briefing had both served as an additional reason to deal with the Batarians immediately, as well as the start of a genuinely audacious plan. One that would serve to finally push the entire galaxy fully onto a war footing, right when the Council's ability to stretch existing resources would be running thin.

They were going to let the Reapers through the Alpha Relay.

Well...some of them, at least.

As insane as the plan sounded, the truth was that it was a well-calculated risk. The Batarian colony in the system had already been evacuated, the Relay had been mined heavily with ordinance that *should* be effective against Reapers...and a significant chunk of the *New Dawn* built Shadow Fleet was

poised near enough to the relay to both activate it...and to kill Reapers coming through. The plan was to let lead elements of the Reaper fleet arrive, mousetrap it with the mines and the fleet, then hit the Relay themselves outbound. Immense demolition charges would destroy the Relay the moment after they left, wiping out any Reapers still in the system. Meanwhile, the brief data they gathered on the threat could and would be used as the final needed justification to jump to a full war footing, freeing the council races to all act openly.

And now...it was showtime. The last few seconds before the Arrival ticking down...

“Contact! Many contacts! Numbers...holy shit! Hundreds...but they’re already being hit by the mines! Fleet CiC is handing off targeting data...weapons are free!”

Shepard, waiting white-knuckled for that release, immediately barked her own command.

“Fire as we bare on designated targets!”

The Phoenix shuddered as the main railgun fired, followed by rolling launches of missiles and beams of coherent energy. Their target, a smaller Reaper already damaged from the thickly seeded Energy Mines, blew up after only a bare handful of concentrated seconds. Shepard called out a target switch, pouring fire into a larger Reaper that was being pounded on by one of their allied dreadnaughts...and then the order came. A harsh command to cease firing was followed after a few seconds by the entire fleet, all of their navigation systems slaved together, launching into a Relay corridor, one whose starting point was about to cease to exist.

Tension bled out of all of them only slowly as reports came in. Barely any loses and more than a third of the Reaper lead forces had died to the mines and their own fleet. The remainder of that lead element would be wiped out by the detonating Relay, with the rest of the Reaper fleet forced to find other, much longer, routes into the galaxy proper. Meanwhile, the *incredibly valuable* data on how well their own systems worked against the Reapers would be poured over, and farther refinements would be made to their tactics and weapons systems. Such had been most of the point in putting the Shadow Fleet at risk like they had. That and the absolute proof of the threat they now had in the form of thousands of sensor recordings...and the loss of a Mass Effect Relay just to contain the threat *temporarily*. The politicians would spin that into dire news and use it to move the galaxy to a proper war footing, all while the military and R&D groups would use the brief combat data to figure out how best to fight the monsters sailing in from the outer dark.

A risky choice had been made...but it had worked out. This time, at least...

<<End of Interlude 2>>

Interlude 3

### **Chapter 34: War Preparations**

Oriana couldn’t help but shake her head in disbelief at what she was seeing. She’d known, both as a student of history and on account of Miranda’s reports about them from her first timeline, that the Rachni were ridiculously fast to build up. Not just in population, but in material assets after a population boom. Now, as she looked out over the secret shipyard, swarming with Rachni and nearly half the size of

New Dawn's own clandestine yards, the point was driven home all over again. The fact that only half of those Rachni were *actually* Rachni only made the whole thing more surreal.

As much as she'd wanted to, Oriana hadn't been able to be present when the meetings between the Rachni Queen and the Council teams, and the Thorian and the Council teams, had taken place. Those sorts of diplomatic talks could stretch out, and Oriana hadn't been able to afford that much time in once place. She had, of course, had *New Dawn* assets at both meetings, acting as an effectively neutral party...but she hadn't been able to be present herself. Which neatly explained her near-disbelief as she gazed out over the yards.

In total, *New Dawn's* experiment in time-travel ship construction had yielded around seventy dreadnaughts, plus their supporting fleet elements. Given that the entire Turian fleet had possessed only forty, the results of the experiment had been considered a wild success by pretty much everyone. Even the Council, when they had become aware of it, had been amazed how well the experiment had gone.

Which is why the *thirty* nearly complete Dreadnaughts laid out in the Rachni-Thorian yard was honestly more than a little intimidating. Sure, they'd had a lot of help with raw resources. And yes, they hadn't been operating under as harsh of secrecy conditions as the Prometheus Yards. It could even be pointed out that the combined effort was aided and abetted by using *New Dawn* blueprints. Yet, it was still stupidly impressive that so many Dreadnaughts had been managed, essentially from scratch, in less than five and a half years. Project Prometheus had possessed over ten times that timeframe to work with, after all. And it could be argued that the automated mechs at the Prometheus yards *should* have been nearly as efficient as the hive-minded Rachni and Thorian efforts were.

Still, for all that the implications for *after* the Reapers were potentially a little concerning, Oriana had to admit that the two species unexpectedly hitting it off had proven a windfall. Their choice to contribute in this fashion to the war effort was an unexpected, though perhaps understandable, as neither species wanted to get directly involved with the fighting. Still, just how well the two species worked together had proven a surprise. She'd had no idea, herself, that Rachni could apparently birth pure drones, with no mind of their own. Which just so happened to make them perfect hosts for Thorian spores. The result was a near doubling of how many 'Rachni' could be managed. A single Rachni Queen couldn't have handled all the Rachni bodies out there, crawling over the shipyard. But, combined with the sheer mental power of the eons old Thorian? The Thorian had actually been able to control almost as many as the Queen, despite having to puppet its bodies entirely, instead of simply gently guiding like the Queen did with her own workers.

Oriana turned to her sister, who she'd appointed to look after the *New Dawn* war assets building program after their destruction of Cerberus. It was a job she'd done amazingly well at, doubly so since Shepard had also called on Miranda's expertise to wrangle the various mad scientists she'd pulled out of the Terminus. Seeing someone else manage a similar workload to Oriana herself was just...disconcerting. She knew, biologically, that she and Miranda were a lot closer to twins than older and younger sisters. Or had been before Oriana's brush with Asarihood. But Oriana hadn't really had to face the fact that she had been *designed* to be perfect in the last go around. Which made seeing her sibling actually *keep up* far more emotionally troubling than she'd expected. Still, she could live with it.

“So, other than this unexpected boon, how are the other yards we’re participating with doing? Are we going to hit the projected numbers?”

Miranda tore her own gaze away from the frenetic activity visible in space outside.

“More than, actually. Even you, I, and Aethyta together underestimated just how potent the Asari economy and industry would be once pivoted to a war footing. When you look out there,” Miranda waved at the activity all over the yard, “it’s a bit hard to imagine how the Asari and Salarians lived long enough for the Turians and Krogan to help turn the corner against the Rachni. But, the truth is, that there are literal *trillions* of Asari, galaxy-wide. It’s hard to conceptualize that, until you see just how ludicrously high their wartime output is. They were actually *keeping up* with the Rachni in ship building, by virtue of sheer numbers. They just couldn’t *train* people fast enough, since Asari don’t learn all that quickly as a rule. It was honestly more the fact that the Turians provided a windfall of over fifty billion population with at least *some* degree of military training that *really* turned the corner in the space half of the Rachni Wars.”

Yep. Miranda was right. That *was* hard for Oriana to wrap her mind around. No one, not even the Asari themselves, ever really seemed able to conceptualize just how many of their species were running around. Even with the attrition rate caused by the ‘wild years’ of maidenhood, a space-faring species that *didn’t die of old age, ever*, resulted in intimidating numbers. It also probably explained why the Asari hadn’t exactly felt threatened by the early Salarians when they’d made the original Citadel Council. The Asari had already had stupid population numbers at that point, compared to the short-lived Salarian species, likely leaving them aware of just how lopsided the power balance actually was.

For that matter, it might actually explain the Salarian’s obsession with all things asymmetric warfare related. If they’d known from nearly the start of their spacefaring days that they were outnumbered *horribly*, it would make sense that the scientifically inclined species had turned to ethically questionable warfare concepts in an attempt to even those odds. It also probably explained why humanity was such a headache for the Asari. Barely 12 billions humans, but somehow able to play with the big kids when, by all accounts, they ought to be a minor species.

“Aethyta understood better than we did, of course. But even she didn’t quite grasp just how much of the Asari industrial capacity was running at negligible, lazy, speed. It took them three years to get it cranked up to max...but at this point they are out building everyone else, *combined*. And they still technically haven’t hit anything like their maximum production capacity yet.”

Miranda passed her a datapad, with the building program for the Asari fleet pulled up...and Oriana goggled.

“Are you serious? And can they *crew* these ships?!”

Miranda shrugged.

“Yes. Though only because they are building on the highly automated designs *New Dawn* provided everyone. Remember, a significant chunk of those trillions of population have at least *some* level of spacefaring experience. They won’t be replacing their losses in trained personnel as easily as everyone else. But they have the initial numbers to lead off with, at least.”

Oriana shook her head, staring at the naval estimates of the Asari fleet and feeling a tiny spark of hope ignite in her chest...

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Oriana refrained from saying anything as Tali clung to Shepard. The Quarian had broken down shortly after coming aboard the Phoenix, and Oriana felt helpless to do anything about it. Particularly since she *knew* that it was partly her own fault that Tali was a mess. It had been Oriana, after all, that had quietly forced the deadlock of the Migrant Fleet over the Geth issue to a conclusion. She'd never expected the 'Shadow Broker's' assassination of Admiral Daro'Xen to end up outing Rael'Zorah's experimentation on the Geth. The Quarian Fleet was so insular that, in her first time around, Oriana had never known exactly what had gone down aboard it. Other than something about Tali being charged with treason and nearly exiled.

Now, she felt a mix of sad self-recrimination for causing someone she liked so much pain...and cold bitter certainty that it had been necessary. The Quarian Fleet had been deadlocked about the Geth issue for too long, and they'd needed the Quarian's to get off their asses too badly. The death of Daro'Xen had been a less obvious way to defeat the Admiralty Board opposition to peace than offing Han'Gerrel would have been. Unfortunately, with Han'Gerrel being the most vocal of the Pro-War Admirals, him being quietly disposed of would have been far more suspicious. But Daro'Xen's amoral viewpoint of wanting to force control over the Geth had been just as dangerous, making her a viable target. Oriana simply hadn't realized that Rael'Zorah would go down with her. And part of her hated the fact that Tali's father having been exiled from the Fleet had actually made it even easier to end the deadlock.

*Both* of the new Admirals that replaced Daro'Xen and Rael'Zorah had voted for peace with the Geth. Which, in turn, had allowed the Quarians to finally return to their Homeworld. A Homeworld Rael'Zorah would never see, since he was now an exile. And poor Tali had needed to stay through the entire, agonizing transition. As one of the most well-known Quarians to both the other Galactic Powers *and* to the Geth, her efforts had been *absolutely critical* to keeping the peace. A peace that had served to free up the single largest fleet in existence for conversion against the Reapers.

It couldn't *all* be converted, of course. But the entirety of the Heavy Fleet and Patrol Fleets had been converted. And several thousand more had been scrapped for the materials needed to build three dozen new Dreadnaughts to reinforce the Heavy Fleet. Given that the Quarians were the only species still using a Heavy Cruiser design that was only *just* shy of Dreadnaught size as well, they now represented more military power than the Turians had been able to muster, at least prior to the current build up.

Yet, for all Tali's importance, the price seeing everything through had cost someone she considered a friend left Oriana numb. Not because she didn't want to feel. But because she *couldn't* feel. If she did, she'd start feeling all the other sins weighing her down. She couldn't afford to break down. The Galaxy couldn't afford for her to break down. Not yet.

Oriana was beginning to think that, just maybe, it was better she didn't survive this war. If she did, she didn't know what would be left of the girl she'd once been. The girl who had, in a way, died when she jumped through an experimental beam and landed in the past...

## Chapter 35: Recharge

Spectre candidate Ashely Williams, assigned to Spectre Shepard for training, appeared in front of Oriana without warning. It was probably a testament to how tired Oriana was that she not only hadn't seen the former gunnery chief coming, but also didn't react in time as Williams stole the datapad right out of her hands.

"Ch-Spectre Willaims! What are you..."

Oriana blinked, stilling as Ashley, dressed in casual clothes, put a finger to her lips.

"Nope. You didn't let me self-destruct and I'm not going to let you do it either. You're going to go take a fucking nap, even if I have to have Chakwas drug you. And then you're going out with me tonight. If you get lucky enough, you might even wake up with me in the morning. But it will require a lot of alcohol first. I'm sure, even if you fail, that you'll still at least wake up with *at least one* gorgeous redhead. Possibly two and a blue chick with doe eyes."

Oriana gaped at the blunt statement...then let out an 'oof' of escaping air as the Spectre *physically picked her up*, threw her over one shoulder, and started carrying her off to her quarters. She tried to protest, instinctively reaching for her datapad collection...only to see a grinning Alliana already casually swooping in to pick them up.

"Consider that an order, Ori!"

This was...probably technically not mutiny since it was Shepard's ship. Damn it. Oriana sighed and *did not pout* as she was carried off to her cabin. The fact that she could already feel her eyes growing heavy now that she wasn't focused on something might have had something to do with her lack of resistance...

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Oriana had to admit that she was feeling better. She also had to admit that she was surprised that Ashley had somehow come to *own* the Silver Coast Casino. Apparently, there had been some drama during the cleanup of remaining Cerberus assets that Oriana hadn't gotten involved with. The result had, apparently, included the death of the Casino's former owner. Shepard had decided, as Ashely's Spectre mentor, to use it as an opportunity to teach Ashley how to build up her own resource network. With the result being that the Casino was now wholly owned by Ashley and proving quite profitable too. Given what she'd done with the place, Ashley clearly understood how to party, even if most took her for a stick-in-the-mud when they first got to know her.

Honestly, the exotic dancers were the most surprising addition for Oriana, knowing how thoroughly heterosexual Ashley was. But Oriana admitted that they did add something to the place, particularly as they actually *weren't* strippers. Ashley had, instead of the usual Asari strippers at every-other-club, had arranged something more like hourly burlesque shows. She'd somehow gathered up a mix of chorus and belly dancers, stage magicians, and sensual singers. In enough numbers to cycle them so you wouldn't see the same show twice unless you stayed all day. The entire thing had managed to add a touch of sophistication to the casino that was unusual in Citadel space, though not unheard of back on Earth. The number of fascinated Asari taking in every show told Oriana that her friend had likely

started a new trend or two for Asari entertainment. A thought which amused Oriana greatly, even as she sipped on the delightfully original cocktail Ashley had ordered a round of for everyone.

She had, she realized now, very much needed this. That did not mean, however, that she had forgotten about Ashley's offhand remark. She knew that the Spectre didn't really believe Oriana could somehow get her into bed again...but the challenge that lack of belief offered was *exactly* the sort of distraction that Oriana could use most right now. Which is why she'd positively *insisted* that Ashley give her the tour personally, while the rest of their little shore party split up, each with a couple of dozen high-value chips provided by Ashley for their amusement.

Now. She knew what she wanted. But what was the best way to get from point A to point B? Simply getting a handsome man involved again would be too simple. So...what about if she...

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Ashley whimpered as Oriana sucked her neural-linked cock, taking it down her throat entirely and humming a little ditty. The toy, now flawlessly matched to Ashley's skin tone, had been the secret weapon Oriana had decided on for her second pass at getting the straight woman into bed. The extremely modern, extremely advanced and extremely expensive take on a strapon was actually a recent development. Attempts like it had been made in the past, of course. But the Neuralux 3 was the first *true* success for a toy like it. Using neural linkers like those from the stimulator sets that Oriana had purchased for use with Liara and Shepard, the Neuralux did its best to translate what was happening to it into sensations that the female brain was able to process. Previous attempts had all attempted to link most or all of their sensations to a woman's clitoris. And to say that the results had been mixed, at best, was a bit of an understatement. For all that the clitoris has more nerve endings in a smaller area than a penis, both started from the same embryonic origins. Meaning that the penis still *has* a similar number of nerve endings. They are simply more spread out.

Which is where previous attempts had all failed. Previous neural linkers had attempted to map what happened to the entire fake cock one-for-one to the clitoris. Inevitably, the nuance was lost and the sensations from the toy ended up feeling identical to simply having the clitoris sucked on directly...only *less* intense due to the degree of removal from the source. Even the best neural links didn't have the same perfect fidelity as real flesh and blood, after all. The result had been that toys like the Neuralux were relegated to niche use. Occasionally fun or kinky, but nothing special. And certainly not considered an 'accurate' experience.

At least, that had been the case until the Neuralux 3, where someone had decided to lean into the fact that the clitoris and penis started, at the core, from the same embryonic origin. They had theorized that this meant that, at least in theory, the female brain actually *was* able to handle input from a penis. It was just that the connection couldn't be through the existing genitalia, without being warped by the body's own anatomy. Thus was born the Neuralux 3, whose neural linker was an injectable nanite implant that connected to the brain in the same way a biotic amp did.

Sadly, this meant that biotics like Oriana couldn't currently make use of it. Ashley Williams, however...wasn't a biotic. She also hadn't been even remotely sober when she'd agreed to 'try it out' as a 'fun experiment.' If the tiny implant wasn't designed to break down and be flushed by the body after a simple command, Ashley might even be super pissed about that when she sobered up entirely.



Thankfully, the implant *was* temporary, and Oriana intended for the Spectre's night to be far to spectacular for her to be angry about Ori's methods. Just like last time.

Which is why she was currently grinning around Ashely's artificial cock as she slowly, teasingly withdrew. Ashley whimpered and bucked, cumming for the third time since the blowjob had started, and Ori figured that was enough of a warmup. Ashley might retain the ability to cum a lot more often than her female anatomy provided, but the woman was still looking dazed, and they hadn't even gotten to the main event yet! Well...main *events* actually, considering that Kelly was currently tied up and gagged in a chair nearby, being slowly tormented by the vibrator set on low stuffed in her pussy. Ashley deserved a full experience, after all! And getting a taste of the difference between two women was an important part of that!

Grinning at her own blatant justification, Oriana gave one last kiss to the tip of Ashley's artificial cock, then began kissing her way up the Spectre's body. What had started as a slightly drunken game of 'don't you wonder what it would feel like,' had now reached Oriana's intended goal from the start. Teasingly, she lined her pussy up on that cock and ground her wet folds into its glands. Ashley tried to buck again, instinctively desperate for more contact...but this time, Oriana held her down firmly with her biotics. The Spectre whimpered but stilled like an obedient puppy that had misbehaved. Ori's eyes widened at that, filing away the previously unconsidered idea that Ashley might be either a sub or a switch, before shaking off the revelation. Grinding only for a few more moments, just to make her control clear, she proceeded to reward her 'victim' for being a Good Girl by finally, agonizingly slowly, sinking onto the brunette's cock.

Ashley came again barely a dozen thrusts in, overwhelmed by the new sensations. And the night was only getting started. After all, Oriana had plenty of stims, a writhing redhead nearby, and no intention at all of stopping until all three of them were fully satisfied...

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Oriana's lips curved upward in amusement as the smell of the food finally caused the chief to stir, in a near mirror image of the first time she'd gotten the chief into bed with her. Her grin turned into a smirk as a hangover-induced moan came from under the sheets. In a deliberate echo of their previous affair, Oriana spoke up. "Sober-up hypo is on the nightstand next to you."

The words, once they processed for the other woman, resulted in a slow hand creeping out from under the covers to feel around on the nightstand. It soon found the hypospray and grabbed it, before retreating back under the sheets. There was a soft hiss from the injector as the chief used the hypospray, then thirty seconds of quiet...followed by the still-nude chief sitting up in bed, covers falling away from her naked chest. Oriana ogled appreciatively, then grinned and deflected a thrown pillow with a tiny bit of biotic power. The action, almost identical to their first time, caused a giggle to burst forth from the third person in the room. Kelly, who's presence was a distinct departure from that first time, was happily devouring the food already, still unrepentantly nude and a little bit sweaty from the quickie she and Ori had enjoyed while waiting for room service.

"Now, now...that's no way to thank someone that set up that hypo for you...and ordering all three of us room service!"

Ashley huffed, actually crossing her arms in what should have been a glare but looked far more like a pout. "I can't believe you got me into bed *again*. For a second threesome. And without a guy this time, even."

Oriana grinned and decided a little needling was in order. "There was still a cock, though! Did you enjoy having it? Ohhh, and who was better? Men never want to answer that. So you'll have to enlighten us on if my glorious muscle control, or Kelly's smaller, tighter pussy was more amazing!"

Ashley turned a *delightful* shade of embarrassed red, and actually shrunk back under the covers for a moment when Kelly looked over at her with sparkling, interested eyes. Clearly, the redhead wanted to know the answer. "Fuck. I don't even *know*. I came so many times that I think I either blacked out or blanked out. I haven't entered subpace like that since I was a *teenager*."

Oriana grinned hugely at the confirmation of her thought the previous night. The way Ashley had just said that, Ori was betting she was either a switch, or a sub that had repressed the behaviors under military needs. She was *absolutely* going to have to find out which, in the future. For now...

"That just means we'll need to try it again! Oooohh, I bet you'd like to compare it to Asari Azure, now that you've got a frame of reference. And, hmmm, I wonder if you'd like to Top Shepard, or if you'd prefer her to tie you down and take her own pleasure from you. Shepard gives me the best kind of chills when she goes all *dommie!*"

Kelly swallowed a big bite of eggs, before chirping in with her own two cents.

"Heck yes! She does the whole 'piercing-commander gaze' thing and you just go weak in the knees!"

Ori grinned. "Only the knees?"

Kelly didn't even blush as she cheerfully shook her head, eyes sparkling, before returning to the massive portion of food she'd plated for herself.

Ashley, meanwhile, looked like she was halfway between incredibly aroused at the thought and extremely confused that she *was* aroused by that thought while still sober. Taking pity on the poor straight girl they might have just given a bi-crisis too, Oriana distracted the Spectre by throwing her a robe. She watched with interest as the woman shook herself, but didn't hesitate to slide out of bed fully nude without putting it on. She didn't miss the conflicted look the former gunnery-chief gave the cleaned-up Neuralux toy sitting on the nightstand as she mechanically robed herself, either...

### **Chapter 36: Final Preparations and Opening Gambits**

In the month following Ashley's intervention, Oriana had gotten somewhat back on balance. There was still a constant stream of things to do, or to be worried about, but she'd taken herself in hand and parceled out a lot more of the work to others. As Shepard had pointed out, roughly but warmly, in the aftermath of their leave, Oriana was one of the people the galaxy most needed to be in top form when the Reapers finally arrived. All the preparation in the world wouldn't help if one of their most critical linchpins collapsed from overwork and stress two hours into the invasion.

That talk had led to Oriana forcing herself to take a step back from the many R&D projects, and even from ground team engagements. She kept up enough training time that she'd be in peak shape when she inevitably got into a fight, but she also had to admit that she wasn't going to be able to be constantly on the front lines like she had been at first. Too much of the galaxy's war industry and technology boom rested on the work she'd done with *New Dawn*. Worse, she'd been heavily involved at every step in setting up the numerous traps that they were hoping would even the odds against the Reapers. She would utterly refuse to let herself be fully sideline...but she was going to have to pick and choose her engagement in the war. Much more so that even Alliana would have to.

Despite their best efforts and some insane building programs, everyone knew they would be *starting* this war at a major deficit in capital ships. Oriana had shared *everything* war and Reaper related that she could remember from her first go around at life with a dozen Asari war college experts. With those experts in turn sharing them out with dozens of other experts of various species, creating a think-tank to try and crunch numbers and build the best strategies they could. With her role as the brain behind *New Dawn Enterprises* combined with her knowledge of the situation, Oriana was a member of that think-tank even now, though it was one of the things she's stepped back somewhat from. The people involved were fully aware just how much of the tech advantage they now had was *Oriana's* own work. Not stuff she'd brought from the future. But things she'd come up with all on her own, or funded others to create. Adding in the fact that she'd also gotten a brutal crash course in asymmetric warfare from Aethyta, and the powers that be weren't stupid enough to exclude her from the planning.

Which, unfortunately, was part of what constantly threatened to keep her up at night. Prior to Oriana's return from the future, the galaxy had possessed a combined Dreadnaught strength of just under 100 ships. The minor economic boom she'd created, combined with the massive infusion of new military technology represented by *New Dawn Enterprises*, had managed to push that number up to all of 137 prior to the attack on Eden Prime. The estimated number of Reaper Dreadnaughts, based on her memories of events, was a minimum of 5,000. With the possibility of nearly double that number being true being a frighteningly realistic scenario.

The numbers disparity had been what drove Oriana to focus on new technologies, rather than numbers. It had also, thankfully, galvanized the powers that be once they got involved. Between the Prometheus yards and the Rachni-Thorian joint project, over a hundred new Dreadnoughts, all with the new technologies built in from the keel out, had been added to the galaxy's fleets. The Asari building projects had shocked everyone by adding roughly the same number again. The Geth and Quarian fleets had managed nearly the same between them, and everyone else had gotten the lead out as well, even species like the Elcor and Hanar managing to contribute new Dreadnought hulls. In total, the collective War Fleet had been brought up to just over 600 Dreadnoughts. An incredible accomplishment for such a short span of years to work with. But, even so, they were expecting ten to one odds.

Which, of course, is where all the other planning had come in. There were only so many shipyards that could be commandeered, converted, or built. But there were other things that could be made to give them an edge. Ground Emplaced Grasers like those that had been used on Eden Prime. Orbital Defense Platforms with both graser and massive mass effect guns that dwarfed the size and range of any Dreadnought. Carriers, mines, remote missile pods, and some seriously frightening weapons of mass destruction. Every terrifying idea and mad science project had been pulled out of storage, hunted down, or dreamed up. Nothing was off limits...and a *whole lot* of genies had been

released from bottles that they'd likely never be able to cork back up again. Even if they survived the Reapers, the end result might be a galaxy more terrifying than any living being cared to contemplate. And Oriana, if she survived, was going to have to bear the burden of having been the catalyst for all of it. She wondered, at times, if history would admire her? Despise her? Or, perhaps, even do it's best to erase her.

Whichever was the case. She'd done everything she could. Somehow, without even knowing how, her actions had even resulted in the Reapers being slower to arrive. It had been just over four years now from the day Nazara was destroyed. Just over a year since the destruction of the Alpha Relay. That was longer than it had been the first time around, by a good six months, and the entire galaxy had been holding its breath as they raced to make use of every extra hour. A state of affairs that had led to Oriana's near-breakdown in the first place.

A state of affairs that had, sadly, just ended. Oriana, with Shepard's hand resting on her shoulder, stood and watched with a blank face as the data streamed in via real-time Quantum Com. The opening gambit of the war was about to begin. And all she could do was watch and listen, hoping that she'd done enough.

"Count is up to 300 Dreadnoughts now, Admiral. And their lead element is beginning to move toward the Kar'shan Relay. I think this is as good as it's going to get."

The sensor tech, one of the most junior officers in the room, managed to keep his calm somehow, despite having the attention of nearly everyone else present. Admiral Ravis Kandros, one of the three Admirals placed in charge of the overall war effort, turned to her fellows. Steven Hackett and Matriarch Lidanya, both of whom had risen to the other two positions in no small part due to the final action against Nazara, met the Turian woman's eyes and nodded. Admiral Kandros, technically the most senior of the three, braced herself and gave the order.

"Activate Queen's Gambit."

Oriana swallowed, knowing full well that *she* was the one it had been named after. It having been Oriana that had daringly pointed out the one glaring hole in the Reaper strategy. A hole that no one, to their knowledge, had ever had the sheer nerve to employ. And they were about to do it *a second time*. A handful of safeties were disengaged by multiple officers...and then a detonation command was sent. Dozens of lightyears away, a tiny package, containing just 1 kg of something *very, very* dangerous, ruptured. A bare instant later, the 1 kg of *antimatter* in question, incredibly difficult to produce even with the collected resources of the galaxy, made contact with the Vular-Kar'shan Mass Relay.

Moments later, 300 Reaper Dreadnoughts, thousands of smaller Reaper ships...and the entirety of the Vular solar system, ceased to exist. A few people gave muted cheers, a few people flinched, and Oriana closed her eyes. For a long, long minute, no one spoke. Finally, it was Steven Hackett's rough voice that broke the silence.

"It's done. I still don't exactly feel good about it. But it gave us the type of win we need. Three hundred of their capital ships with no losses to ours. And now they won't dare to commit heavy forces to any system that isn't a capital world. Not after we've done this to them twice."

That had been the point, of course. The defense fleets couldn't be everywhere. So they had to make sure the Reapers couldn't be either. With the demonstrated ability and willingness to detonate Mass Relay's on the table, the defenders could avoid having to commit Dreadnoughts to every colony. Smaller colonies could get by with emplaced ground defenses and picket forces of cruisers, so long as the Reapers didn't dare swarm them with a half dozen Dreadnoughts. The price, though...

"Yes, but we've practically cut Kar'shan off. Vular was the only Relay connected to the system, much like your own Arcturus system."

Matriarch Lidanya's voice wasn't accusing, merely resigned. And Admiral Kandros sighed, shoulders slumped, as she added her own words.

"We couldn't have held Kar'shan anyway, not when we slagged its defenses ourselves less than two years ago. It's why we entertained this idea at all. And we evacuated the Vular colony entirely beforehand. Besides, they aren't *entirely* cut off. If we all survive this war, we'll be able to reconnect with them."

Oriana nodded, as did several others around the room. One thing the Citadel Alliance had committed to early on was building as many of the mini-relay's the Protheans had figured out how to construct as possible. Several had been used during the invasion of Kar'shan. And more of them had been installed after operation Queen's Gambit had been conceived. They were hideously expensive and unsuited to anything larger than land transports. But with a full dozen of them on the Batarian homeworld, Kar'shan could still receive outside assistance. As well as *send* assistance, since part of their new government's acceptance of this operation had been the exchange of the Alliance's help in building up their infrastructure. Kar'shan now had the ability to mass manufacturer part and munitions, and a steady stream of that product would flow from Kar'shan to the other homeworlds for the remainder of the war.

For all that it would now be relatively safe, however, the destruction of its only connecting Relay also meant that Kar'shan would likely be isolated in *space* for decades. If building mini-relays was hideously expensive, then replacing the Vular Relay was a gargantuan task. And, even if they won against the Reapers, the galaxy would likely be stuck rebuilding from the war for generations. There was no telling how long it would before Kar'shan's relative isolation could end. A heavy price to pay. They all simply had to hope that it had been worth it...

<<End Interlude 3>>

### **Chapter 37: Impatience**

Oriana sighed, pulling her hands away from her keyboard as she gave into the distraction that was Alliana spinning on her heel yet again, restlessly pacing their War Room like a caged lioness. Ori, Liara and Kelly had all three tried to distract the redhead over the last several days, with only Kelly actually managing to succeed in any meaningful way. Even then, Shepard's assistant had needed to play dirty, ambushing Shepard in the shower and getting her tongue into play before Alliana had gotten a chance to react. Once that woman got a tongue in intimate places, even someone as frazzled and jumpy as Shepard currently was hadn't been able to say 'no.' It had bought them all of two hours of relief,

despite Kelly's best efforts to drag things out. Shepard had simply outlasted her, then gone back to her anxious pacing and obsessive details watching in the War Room. Time for Oriana to at least *try* again, she supposed.

"You know they won't let us deploy until something *really* goes to shit, Shepard. You should be grateful nothing like that has happened yet. Enjoy it before the chaos *really* starts. Fuck Liara's brains into mush, have a drink with Samara, see if you can get into Tali's suit. Live a little, for we all might die horribly tomorrow, as it were."

Alliana turned to look with her, scowling for a moment...before Oriana's 'nope' face turned that scowl into a pout. That pout made Ori's lips twitch at the corners, despite the situation. The temptation to smile was lost as Alliana sighed in resignation, hands coming up to run through her hair in a harassed gesture she rarely let anyone see.

"I *know*. Trust me, I know. Fuck, I even agree with it! If we take the *Pheonix* and going haring off after every small Reaper sighting, or even join in one of the protracted space battles that have been ongoing since Day 2, we're likely to be in the wrong place at the wrong time just when we're needed elsewhere!"

She flopped down on one of the War Room's chairs, throwing an arm over her eyes, and continued.

"But I can't *stand* this. The Reapers are here! People are already dying by the tens of thousands. Not just military, but civilians! And...I'm doing nothing." A slight amount of bitterness crept into her voice. "At least you and Liara are both still contributing, helping the various science and engineering teams. Not to mention consulting for the Think Tank."

Oriana frowned. Two could play at that game.

"And you aren't? I know perfectly well that you're still liaising with the Quarian and Geth. Not to mention contributing to the Ground Tactics subsection of the Anti-Reaper Think Tank. Don't think I didn't catch you using your own businesses and our Broker access to shift around relief supplies and help people get to the various Refuge systems, too. Hell, those systems were almost entirely your idea in the first place."

A brilliant idea it had been, too. Shepard had suggested, all on her own, that they use the site of the Prometheus drone that had failed in its early stages as a hidden refuge world. The drone itself might have been wiped out by a freak meteor strike, but it had been operational for a couple of decades before its core intelligence had been wiped out. During that time, as part of its programmed build-up, it had created a massive underground complex and numerous worker remotes. Worker remotes that had kept right on digging for material when the central intelligence got slagged. While Oriana had long ago removed the admittedly impressive haul of materials those worker bots had mined and refined for use in other projects, the complex of underground mining tunnels and storage bays hadn't been put to use. By design, the locations of Prometheus Drones were *extremely* remote. Making the facilities impractical for...basically anything.

Almost anything.

Alliana had been the one to realize that the site *didn't appear on any records*, and was large enough to house literally millions of people. Quiet, completely off-the-books conversion of the beyond-backwater facilities there had created the first Refuge. Other efforts, all of them kept off any sort of official documentation the Reapers might get ahold of, had eventually created a half dozen similar facilities. All of them were extremely remote and cut off, all of them specifically designed not to have any outside contact until the Reaper war was over. The smallest housed nearly three million sentients, all carefully skimmed from refugee groups, and none of them had any way to broadcast *anything* outward. Each had a one-way Quantum Comm, specifically designed never to be able to broadcast. Those in charge of the Refuge worlds would have an excellent idea what was going on in the rest of the galaxy...but no one in the rest of the galaxy had a clue what was going on in each Refuge. No single person, not even Shepard or Oriana, knew where *all* of them were, either.

It was contingency planning, of course. Much like the failed efforts of the Protheans at saving some of their best via stasis pods. There were similar chances for the Refuges to fail, but it was likely at least *one* of them would escape the Reapers' notice. If the worst happened and they lost the war, the next cycle would have thousands of years to rebuild from those Refuges and hit the Reapers while they were hibernating in Dark Space. Though, of course, everyone hoped it wouldn't come to that. Saving millions of people was sadly small potatoes if you lost literally trillions of others doing so.

"That's...not the same, Ori. I'm not a number cruncher. I'm supposed to be on the Ground, making things explode. It's what I'm best at...and there are a *lot* of things that need to be made to explode right now!"

Oriana shook her head with a fond smile. Alliana was far more than the soldier she tried to pretend she was. Even if her lover wished for things to be that simple, it was the longing of someone *good* at maneuvering through the complex. The longing to put down the metaphorical live grenades they were juggling and simply *rest*. Oriana knew the feeling, perhaps better than any other living soul in the galaxy. She didn't always handle it well either. Her near-nymphomaniac tendencies were almost certainly the result of attempts to forget for a while. At least according to Kelly. Still, maybe that meant she could help Shepard a bit? Standing, she crossed over to take a chair next to Alliana, resting one hand on her thigh.

"What's your dream, Shepard? For after all this is over. Pretend for a minute that we all survive, somehow. That we can leave the cleanup of the clusterfuck the galaxy will be to someone else. What would you do with yourself? If you could do anything?"

Alliana's arm fell away from her eyes to get a look at Oriana. Her face was full of curiosity as she looked into her lover's eyes.

"I...don't know? I mean, there's no way in hell I'd ever be able to settle down. Even assuming the galaxy would let me, I'd go crazy in, like, a year. Maybe...turn the Pheonix into a space harem and go adventuring to find all the most interesting sex toys?"

Oriana couldn't help it, she giggled at the idea. Still, it was sort of a fun one to contemplate. Not to mention one that would probably help redirect Shepard's attention...elsewhere.

"Oh? And what would the uniform for the crew be? And who are you keeping on board..."

Alliana grinned, mischief and lust sparking in her eyes as her brain took the suggestion and ran with it.

“Welllll...I think crotchless panties and short skirts are a must. Zippers are tempting, but they can be uncomfortable and inconvenient at the oddest times...”

### Chapter 38: Tamaris

Shepard had gotten her wish to be *doing* something entirely too soon for Oriana’s liking. Not because she didn’t feel a similar itch under her skin for action. Even if she *knew* her more strategic contributions were just as critical as any actual fighting she did, in this second life, she’d been personally trained and mentored by Aethyta. The aggressive combat mindset the Matriarch had practically beaten into her, combined with her fears and frustrations from not being able to fight the *first* time around, created an itch for more direct action equal to Shepard’s own. She might be able to suppress that itch with harsh logical and self-discipline better than her lover...but that didn’t mean it wasn’t present.

No. It wasn’t the lack of desire to ‘get stuck in’ that made it entirely too soon for Oriana’s liking. Nor was it any species of fear for herself or her lovers. Instead, it was the understanding that for someone like them to be called upon, *something had to have gone badly wrong*. If it meant nothing going badly enough wrong to call upon the best of the best to fix it, Oriana would have willingly sat out the entire war, no matter how much she itched to *fight*. Instead, it had taken barely two weeks for something to go radically enough tits up that the powers that be had called on the crew of the *Pheonix* to investigate.

Specifically, the Asari colony world of Tamaris had simply...gone dark. Last reports from the colony had been routine, reporting only the same minimal scouting that the Reapers had been doing everywhere. The enemy had shifted to a far more cautious approach to the war after their second bloody nose, just as they’d all wanted. But that approach meant they’d been sending Reaper destroyers in small numbers all over space, in an effort to probe the Citadel Alliance’s defenses. At Terra Nova, Cyone, Erinle, and Taetrus, those defenses had come under concentrated assault waves.

Each was a major world to one or another of the major galactic powers. Important enough to have big defenses built up and critical enough to force the Citadel forces to defend them, tying down major fleet elements even if those elements had so far managed to make the Reapers pay at better than two to one odds. They were aided in that not just by the new weapons systems, but emplaced mine fields and other traps that helped contain the fighting mostly to the Relays. Meanwhile, more tragically, other systems and worlds had fallen to the Reapers outright. Worlds like Halegeuse, Chalkhos, and Altakiril had all been hit too hard and fast to hold, but had gone down fighting and making the Reapers pay for the systems.

Tamaris, however, hadn’t broadcast a single word about being invaded. Yet all information, even by quantum entangled comm, had stopped flowing overnight. Given the level of caution the Citadel Alliance had employed to make colonies just *vanishing* like that effectively impossible, there was no question that it demanded investigation. Unfortunately, the initial attempt to investigate had been done by a STG stealth frigate...that had promptly discovered the Reapers present in the system. That might have been the end of it, if there was any explanation for how it had happened. But the STG team had



spotted only relatively minor Reaper forces *on the ground* and virtually none in Orbit. There was a debris field where the system picket should have been...and no other signs of orbital struggle at all.

The frightening conclusion that command had come to, given the handful of Reapers clearly on the ground and harvesting locals, was that somehow the defenses had been used *against* the picket ships. The most likely answer was indoctrination. But steps had been taken to build scanners to detect that, using the Prothean method from Ilos. Every core command center of any world had those scanners emplaced before the Reapers arrived. No exceptions. And all of the workers that had installed them had, themselves, been scanned.

If they Reapers had found a way around those scanners, command needed to know *now*. Which is why the *Pheonix* had been dispatched, with orders to sneak into the system ahead of a small fleet. Their goal was to find out what had happened if they could, then recapture or disable the ground defenses that were still online. The fleet would sweep in behind them to recapture the system, since the Reapers weren't actually defending it heavily enough to prevent that. With the ground systems still undamaged and the light enemy forces present, there was every reason to attempt to retake the world instead of writing it off. Particularly in the event that the initial ground team couldn't figure out what had caused the system to fall in the first place, as they'd then need to go over the people and equipment with a fine-toothed comb until they were sure it couldn't be repeated on other worlds.

All of which explained Oriana's current circumstances. While certainly capable of it, Shepard wasn't really a 'stealth' sort of person by natural inclination. Which had led her to taking one of the two heavy teams that were aimed to hit the primary and backup control stations for the ground-to-orbit weapons emplacements. Shepard had taken one of their Asari commando squads, along with Kaidan, Gestalt and Jack. The last had been folded into their ground teams relatively recently. She'd needed new direction after Cerberus was done away with, and seemed to have grown *attached* to Oriana's sister in ways that Ori was determined to remain ignorant of as long as possible. Figuring out how to wage an impossible war was much easier than sorting out who, exactly, would wear the metaphorical pants in *that* relationship...

Meanwhile, Ashley, still assigned to the *Pheonix* for now, had taken the other 'heavy' team. It consisted of the other commando team, Tali, Jacob Taylor, and James Vega. Jacob had been some hangar on of her sister's she'd salvaged from Cerberus when she defected. While James was a sort of poster boy forwarded from the Systems Alliance to Ashley's 'command' for visibility, but competent enough for all of that. Both teams were loaded for bear and would make wonderful distractions when they hit the control stations.

Unfortunately, that had left *Oriana* in charge of the most nerve-wrackingly critical part of this entire operation. With her were Samara, Kasumi, Miranda and Liara. A five-woman team intended for stealth and technical/scientific expertise. Somehow, mostly by the grace of Kasumi's scouting and Samara being a brutally efficient ambush predator, the five had managed to get nearly to the military high command post for Tamaris without alerting the Reapers. The command post was the one place that *had* to have fallen to some sort of inside betrayal, as it was the location of the highly-secured Quantum-Entangled Comm set that *should* have warned the powers that be of any Reaper threat to the system. It was also supposed to have multiple layers of indoctrination detection, leaving everyone baffled about just how the planet had fallen.

As she watched from her position a level above the entrance they wanted to use, Oriana grimaced. The well-designed defensive structure was working against them now. They could get no farther without going loud. Which meant it was time to call in the diversions. Making hand signs to her team, she activated their heavily encrypted short-ranged comms for the first time since starting the op.

“Shadow team in position. Check in.”

Shepard’s voice came across first, in immediate response.

“Sword in position. Ready to kick off.”

Ashley’s own response was only a moment later in coming, having waited just long enough for Shepard to sound off first.

“Lance is position. Go for operation.”

Oriana sighed in relief. Their teams hadn’t had anywhere near as difficult of approaches to their own targets...but the larger teams were a lot less stealthy too. Thankfully, so far, the basic ops plan wasn’t *completely* fucked sideways. Though that would probably change in the next few minutes, given their usual luck.

“Execute. I say again, Execute.”

There was only the tiniest of hesitation before the response came. Two voices acknowledging the order...and then the sounds of heavy ordinance going off from two directions halfway across the city. Those weren’t the main attacks, of course. Just distractions for the distractions, and Oriana waited impatiently for the reaction to first the explosions...and then the strikes by the two assault teams that would be hitting two entirely different locations, away from those initial explosions, in another five minutes.

Thankfully, the impatient minutes of waiting bore fruit. One thing that the Military Think Tank had realized in picking apart Oriana’s memories, then confirmed when the actual shooting started, was that the Reapers actually *sucked* at Ground Warfare. Once they’d realized it, the reasons objectively made a sort of sick sense. Reapers didn’t engage in Ground Warfare at all, save through proxies or as fire support with their smaller ships. Instead, they relied on quantity over quality in the form of massive numbers of husks, controlled by whichever species they could best twist into slightly more capable ‘command’ units. Worse for the Reapers, the composition of their ‘ground’ forces would be radically different every cycle, and it took some time for them to adjust. The longer they had to work with, the better they would be at using their disposable troops. Until then, though, even with some indoctrinated minds helping them, they were *clumsy*.

They were already using ‘Maurders,’ Reaperfied-Turians, as local command forces. Just as they had in Oriana’s first life. But Tamaris was an *Asari* world. There hadn’t been very many Turians for them to harvest here, and they didn’t seem to have figured out how to do anything more than Husk Asari yet. Even the dreaded Banshee units had yet to appear...and might not do so in more than tiny numbers. A benefit of Oriana’s people having made a vaccine for the latent condition that allowed them to exist. Since the Asari Republics had pushed *hard* over the last few years to get as many people vaccinated as possible, despite the stigma of the Ardant-Yakshi condition, it was entirely possible the Reapers

wouldn't find enough of them to come up with that unit at all. It could be hoped, at least, given how devastating they were.

All of the bits and pieces added together here on Tamaris to an ideal set of circumstances for what they'd just done. Kick the beehive, let the bees swarm...and slip in the back once most of them moved off your actual objective. It had worked, too. Almost immediately, a few Marauders and several indoctrinated Asari had poured out of the command post. Then a second set had left five minutes later when the two assault teams joined in on their real targets. A worrying number of husks were headed in those directions, but that was Ashley and Shepard's problem. Oriana waited only two more minutes before dropping her hand from where she'd been holding it up in a fist.

Freed from the 'hold' signal, Samara was the first to act, biotically charging the door they intended to use. That door was heavily armored...but very, very few things were heavily armored enough to stop a charging Justicar. Let alone one of Samara's age and sheer power. The door gave way with a hideous shriek, Oriana and Liara following the older Biotic's charge seconds later to complete their breach into the building. Kasumi and Miranda followed more slowly...and began deploying the portable sentry turrets they'd brought to temporarily re-secure the breached entrance behind them. They needed to actually *hold* this place until the Fleet arrived, after all. If they could.

As they advanced, they advanced into total chaos. There were plenty of husks here, but only one or two larger units, and barely a handful of Marauders. It was the single indoctrinated Asari, however, that captured Oriana's attention.

"Fuck!"

Liara, ripping another husk apart with her biotics, eyed the same woman.

"Yes. That's an accurate summation. That's the mayor, isn't it?"

Oriana snarled, even as she channeled her anger into a particularly large biotic detonation, pushing to close with the indoctrinated Asari.

"Yes! And all officials of that level are scanned twice a month! Either she succumbed between scans, which *should* be way too fast without obvious behavior changes, or something else screwy is going on here!"

No one replied as a number of equally bad options flashed through their minds. Everyone pushed harder. They needed to take this place as intact as possible, if they wanted to figure out what had happened. Something which became a lot harder, all of a sudden, as one of the three Reaper destroyers around the city seemed to finally take notice of what was going on...

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They hadn't been able to take the command post intact. Once the Reapers got directly involved, they'd destroyed a large chunk of it despite its hardened defenses. Thankfully, by the time they'd realized the need, Kasumi and Miranda had managed a data dump on about 45% of the command posts data for the last three weeks. Even better, they'd taken the indoctrinated mayor alive. That *wasn't* standard operating procedure, but it had been anticipated early on in the war planning that it could be...a useful tactic. Mostly because of the Thorian. There were some serious ethical issues in handing

someone over to the Thorian to essentially overwrite one mind control with another...but in the right circumstances it had been deemed justified. Indeed, some had argued for *all* captured indoctrination victims to be given over to it. Cooler heads had prevailed in the end. Mostly, it had to be admitted, because they were worried what would happen to the *Thorian* if they gave it too many such people. If it became indoctrinated itself by the exposure, that would be a disaster of truly epic proportions.

In the end, Tamaris had been retaken, and they were confident they would get the information about how it had fallen before it could happen again elsewhere. It was even, grisly as it was, useful in another way as well. It was the first time they'd taken a 'Harvesting' facility intact. Which they hoped would fill critical gaps in their understanding of the Reapers. Not to mention being grist for the war propaganda office. Convincing *civilians* that they should fight to the last ditch instead of surrender went against the grain for most non-Turian cultures. But it still beat leaving them to be funneled into the creation of yet more Reapers and Husks. Cold logic. Brutal even. But something that couldn't be turned away from.

The war had only been going on for a little over three weeks now. All of them suspected there would be far too many such decisions left to make...

### **Chapter 39: Rewarding a Job Well Done**

Oriana was embarrassed just how long it had taken to figure out the secret to Kelly's oral skills. Admittedly, Kelly was simply *good* at oral. As in, on par with any Asari Oriana had ever been with, despite centuries more experience in the case of some of those Asari. But, unlike those Asari, Kelly had a little secret that she'd failed to mention. At least until Oriana had finally thought to ask her about it directly. The little imp had promptly stuck out her tongue...and commanded the *implant* inside it to vibrate as strongly as it could.

The mischievous grin on the redhead's face had told Oriana all she needed to know. Kelly had deliberately chosen to use the implant, which had an impressive number of features, in the most subtle ways possible, waiting to see how long it would take one of her bosses-cum-mistresses to realize something was up. Ori had, of course, immediately punished her by sticking her in a chastity belt for a month and demanding that Kelly earn any pleasure or release by showing off the *full* range of the implant's features. That had been over a year ago now, but the redhead and her skills was on Oriana's mind today for a very specific reason.

She needed to reward Samara.

Seriously. The Justicar had proven just how *insanely* good she was on Tamaris. To the point that Oriana had come to the conclusion that the woman was actually *more* dangerous than Matriarch Aethyta. Who had been, until this latest mission, Oriana's meter-stick for 'badass.' Even with all the things both she and Shepard had accomplished in the last few years, the combination of sheer power and lethal experience Aethyta had shown against Saren and the Heretics on Eden Prime had left a lasting impression. Yet, on Tamaris, Samara had proven to be *at least* as skilled...and considerably stronger.

Even what Oriana had seen from her against Morinth hadn't prepared her for it. Mostly because that fight had been more a biotic slugging match than an exercise in skill. Morinth and Samara had *both* been so powerful that the power fluxing between them had made skill a distinctly secondary concern. Not so on Tamaris, where Samara had shown a stupidly impressive range, from silent ambush predator

to viciously skilled commando, and ending in hilariously powerful biotic that managed to *deflect* the main gun of a Reaper. Only a destroyer, sure. And she'd *deflected* it rather than outright stopping it. But managing even that much was the sort of thing outright legends were made of. It had also, not incidentally, saved all of their lives.

All of which led to the desire to reward Samara. The problem with that, of course, was that the Justicar wouldn't accept anything that was a *reward* simply for doing what she'd felt was right. Which meant it was time to be *creative*. They'd had 'fun' together several times since their first post-Morinth night of passion. But Samara wasn't a maiden, or even a matron. Her need or desire for the sort of kinky, nymphomaniac experiences that Ori put the rest of her lovers through was long sated. Indeed, the only person she'd previously been able to bring into even a simple threesome with the Justicar was Liara. And that had been the bemused elder Asari helping to educate Liara on some Asari-specific sexual culture and experiences that Oriana didn't fully grasp. The Justicar had clearly enjoyed herself, but it hadn't been any greater than her enjoyment with just Oriana alone. Though poor Liara had been just about comatose after each of the half dozen occasions Ori had brought her along. Apparently, for an Asari, joining with an elder Asari was much *more* than with others, in a way that even Oriana's altered physiology couldn't replicate.

With all of that that in mind. Oriana had decided it was thus time to deploy the secret weapon that was Kelly. Someone who could match up to the oral skills of Asari centuries older than her as a starting point, and then amplify that with an *extremely* impressive implant. All that was left to do was make the arrangements. Including getting Samara to agree, or at least not protest when it was sprung on her...

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Samara *writhed*, eyes pitch-black as she nearly failed to hold her meld with Oriana. Ori projected pure smugness into the meld, even as Samara's will faltered and Oriana took full control of the joining. That was only possible at all because of the pseudo-Asari anatomy that had been forced on her by the Parallax jump years ago...and she still couldn't initiate them herself. Now, however, she took full advantage of the delightful things Kelly was doing between Samara's legs to seize control of the joining from the Justicar. Of course, that joining meant that an echo of Kelly's best efforts, currently involving the electro-stim setting of her tongue implant probing the Justicar's insides, were being felt by Oriana as well. And that didn't even mention the more direct stimulation she was getting as she rode the strapon secured to Kelly's hips. Its rough, thick cock scrapped her own insides delightfully, even as it applied friction to Kelly's clit with each of Ori's descents.

Oriana, despite the echo, had the advantage here. Both of being far more active sexually in general, and in having already experienced command performances of all of Kelly's tricks. Even through the echo, they were enough to have Ori barely holding on...but Samara had been completely caught by surprise. The Justicar had been skeptical of the redhead joining them, requiring some earnest and weapons-grade puppy dog eye deployment from Kelly. But once they'd gotten her into bed with them, the far older, more experienced, Justicar had been utterly unprepared for Kelly. Just Kelly's magic tongue alone had impressed the older woman...but then the redhead had begun cycling through her implant's functions, and the elder Asari had come unglued.

For the first time, Oriana was getting to see the expressions Samara made when she was *genuinely* out of control, cumming her brains out repeatedly under the onslaught from every direction. An onslaught that was about to get worse as Oriana took advantage of her control of the joining to pull the Asari woman through a highlight reel of her own more extreme encounters. Ori's control frayed moments in as her body overrode her mind, coming down with a final hard thrust and clenching down spasmodically on the strapon as her whole body shuddered through climax.

Yet Samara was too distracted to take back control, so Oriana continued to pull their shared mental presence through the sea of experiences her own nymphomaniac lifestyle had given her. Every time she felt a pulse of echoing memory from one experience or another, Oriana detoured into the related memory, the Justicar's memories from much younger days. She watched, semi-experiencing the half-alien pleasures of an Asari coupling as much-younger-Samara slept her way around the galaxy. Hopping from kinky encounter to kinky encounter in her maiden years, then shacking up with other matrons in her matron days. Ori steered well clear of the bulk of the latter, afraid of bringing up the pain of Samara's children, instead towing the Justicar back through her own debaucheries whenever she sensed a painful memory near.

For how long they swam through the memories of wild sex, Ori didn't know, she even lost track of the number of climaxes sweeping through them both as a giggling Kelly played freely with their distracted bodies, adding to the pleasure for both of them. Finally, despite all she could do, the connection broke...and both of them lay there gasping and panting. They were both on their backs now, Kelly fingering Oriana through one more climax even as she renewed her oral assault on Samara's azure. Moments later, they both came a final time, before weakly pushing the insatiable sex-demi-goddess of a redhead away. The synchrony of the action woke a bit of amusement in Oriana, even as she flopped her head sideways to look over at Samara.

"Have fun?"

After several shuddering breaths, Samara turned to weakly meet her eyes.

"One might say that. One might also say that I think you managed to reawaken some curiosity. Perhaps next time, we can try these electro-stimulators and chastity belts of yours? I don't believe I ever tried long-term teasing like that before..."

Oriana's eyes almost popped out of her head in surprise, but a grin slowly spread across her face as Samara's desire to experiment sunk in.

"I do believe we can manage that, yes. Perhaps we'll even come up with a few fun games to play, to keep it new..."

#### **Chapter 40: The Yang**

Oriana stared at her sister in horror, brain racing at the implications. What the fuck. No, seriously, *what the fuck*. She got so lost in trying to figure out what to do with the new information, that Shepard apparently got impatient and leaned forward.

"Okay, try that again. Why the fuck are the Yang involved? They are a pre-space civilization. By the Reapers' own policies, they should have been left alone. That's the whole reason everyone withdrew the monitoring sats and observation stations there."

Miranda sighed and ran a hand through her hair in a harassed gesture.

“That’s what everyone believed, right up until converted Yang started showing up on the battlefield. At first, the Think-Tank thought it was seeing the introduction of the Brutes from Ori’s first go around. But when the Salarian’s dug into the genetic material, and discovered they were actually converted Yang. A stealthed survey team went to Parnack and discovered it’s been overrun by Reapers. Best guess currently is that, since the Yang were extremely close to achieving Space Flight on their own, even having sent up a few test rockets, that the Reapers decided that was ‘close enough’ when they were in need of a more dangerous infantry unit.”

Oriana flinched at that, then sighed and added her own thoughts, now that she’d had a minute to process.

“It might be our fault, twice over. Thrice over, even. We hurt the Reapers badly in the opening round, they’ve been having trouble on the ground from the start, and there’s been no sign at all of Banshee units. Brutes didn’t appear until some time into the conflict, my first time around. With the Reapers actually struggling and deprived of the easy elites of the Banshees, they went shopping elsewhere for a solution. The fact that they haven’t been able to take many Krogan due to the way they’ve gone underground on Tuchanka might also contribute.”

Shepard made a face at that. Tuchanka had been a problem they’d known about. Even with the partial cure to the Genophage given to Wrex, allowing him to rally his people to him...there hadn’t been enough time to do all that much with that cure. There were a *lot* of Krogan children around now. But even as comparatively fast as Krogan children grew up, none of them would be battlefield ready for several more years. Which means that the cure had, if anything, locked more of the Krogan population down in dealing with a sudden baby boom. A baby boom which was proving itself more than a little chaotic. The Krogan hadn’t exactly had a lot of experience with *too many* children being underfoot recently.

That didn’t mean they weren’t contributing to the war effort. Krogan males, at this point, were practically begging to be sent to the front lines instead of having to help care for a dozen kids. Several elite battalions of them were deployed all over, in various ground operations, and were proving just as effective as they always had been. But the Krogan’s need to expand their civilian infrastructure *had* limited what they could do for Tuchanka’s defenses. Not to mention what percentage of their population the Krogan could spare for action elsewhere. The solution for the planet itself had been simple enough. Tuchanka was already a radioactive wasteland with few above ground cities...and a *metric ton* of old underground fortifications, mostly left over from their pre-uplift civilization.

Rather than attempt to defend the planet surface, the entire population had gone underground, heavily reinforcing those already formidable bunkers into interconnected city-states. The Reapers space-superiority meant almost nothing when there was nothing to bombard from orbit. Worse for the Reapers, their ground forces were hilariously ineffective trying to fight close-quarters, underground and in relatively tight spaces, against thoroughly prepared *Krogan*. A small number of the same miniature relays given to Kar’shan were present for Tuchanka. Less of them, by far, but more than enough for what the Krogan actually needed in the way of supplies and people movement.

On the downside, it would be years before Tuchanka could really spare more fighters than they already were. On the plus side...the fighters that *were* available were all elites, the less experienced Krogan having been forced to stay home, where the tunnel fighting gave them an insurmountable edge against the invaders. Also on the plus side, this meant that the attrition rate for their Krogan veterans was actually pretty low, compared to virtually any of their other forces. And that low rate of attrition, as well as their inability to crack the defenses of those underground cities on the Krogan homeworld, meant that the Reapers had been almost completely denied Krogan bodies to work with. Since the original Brutes had been an amalgam of Krogan and Turian genetic material, it was entirely possible the Reapers would never manage to make them at all.

Pity they'd replaced them with the Yang.

Ugh.

"So...what can be do about it?"

Miranda looked uncomfortable at Shepard's question, enough so that Oriana sighed and took the reins. It was pretty obvious to her what the Think-Tank and High Command would have decided on.

"The only options we really have are to either wipe the Yang out ourselves, or else use the harvesting stations there as a lodestone to force the Reapers into actually defending a location. One of their biggest advantages so far is that they usually *don't need* to defend *anything*. It's also one of their biggest weaknesses. Since, frankly, they suck at it. They aren't used to thinking in any other direction than 'attack.'"

Mirana nodded and added the official line.

"The Think-Tank debated both options and recommended the latter option to High Command. Who gave their stamp of approval as well. At least until such a time as the Reapers actually learn how to defend properly, repeatedly running strikes on the harvesting plants there will allow us to kill a few Reapers, slow down their deployment of the new Brutes, and possible even save a tithe of the Yang in the long run."

Shepard looked like she desperately wanted to protest, but couldn't. Oriana didn't have the heart to tell her that, if the Reapers got stupid and concentrated enough of their fleet at Parnack, the powers that be would probably blow the relay to wipe out another chunk of Reapers. The Yang were so inherently, biologically violent that the Council had long been quietly interfering with their ability to achieve Space Flight. They wouldn't commit genocide casually, there was always the hope of a species growing beyond blind violence. But if it was between trying to salvage a violently aggressive species that had long worried the Council and wiping out another 1% of the Reapers' total numbers? Frankly, Oriana wouldn't even protest the choice. She wouldn't like looking herself in the mirror afterward, but she'd already done enough horrible things trying to save the galaxy, that she already might never be able to do that without pain again anyway. Shaking off that maudlin thought, she directed her next question at her sister.

"I assume since you're bringing this to us, Command wants to assign us to a first strike?"



Mirana, visibly relieved to leave the uncomfortable portion of the conversation behind, nodded and tapped her omni-tool. Files transferred the War Room holotable and it lit up with an image of the Parnack system and everything they knew about it, past and present.

“Yes. We don’t think the Reapers have any idea we managed to probe the system, but that just means we want to plan the most effective first-strike we can. It’s exactly the sort of Special Op that you and Shepard are best used for. Maximum destruction, while using the minimum number of resources required. The primary target is their main harvesting facility here,” a city with an obvious heavy Reaper presence was highlighted on Parnack’s northern continent. “But any additional damage that can be done, either to the secondary Harvesting locations or the Reaper’s themselves, is obviously desirable. Command has included a list of assets for this task, and will consider any reasonable request for more seriously. So long as you don’t ask for much in the way of Fleet assets, they’ll probably grant almost anything.”

Oriana leaned forward, studying not the planet, but the few Reaper fleet assets in orbit or patrolling the system.

“I think I already have an idea...”

#### **Chapter 41: Parnack**

“This is insane, you know.”

Captain A’Sota’s voice was both dry and *utterly done* with all of her immediate bosses particular forms of insanity. Oriana couldn’t help but grin at the tone. Jenita had, by this point, been made the Captain of the Pheonix. It just hadn’t worked out to have Shepard filling that role. Even if she still went where Shepard directed her, Jenita commanded the ship in all other ways at this point, including in battle. Thankfully Asari had proved to be an *extremely* good choice, being far more mentally flexible than most Captain’s they could have found. That didn’t keep her from becoming increasingly exasperated at the unconventional tactics Oriana and Shepard came up with, though. She hated those plans most of all...because they worked. It’s also why she kept going along with them, despite their insanity. The older Asari had long since declared she was going to retire and start a *farm* once this was all over. Something simple. Where ‘rithel-shit crazy’ humans would never bother her again. Oriana didn’t believe it. She was quite sure the Captain secretly enjoyed the insanity.

“Of course it’s insane, Captain. That’s why it’s going to work!”

The Asari made an indescribable noise that mixed resignation, disbelief, and fear for one’s sanity. Really, the woman was quite expressive to get that all into one noise. Maybe Oriana would recommend she become an actor instead of a farmer. She’d be spectacular in that Elchor remake of Shakespeare’s Hamlet!

“Are the drones ready for deployment?”

Captain A’Sota grumbled, but confirmed they were. Oriana’s expression shifted into a vicious grin.

“Then, my dear Captain. It’s time to beat a motherfucker with another motherfucker! You may jump when ready!”

Captain Jenita A'Sota slumped, sighed, then slowly drew herself up. After this, Oriana thought rather overdramatic, display of gathering herself, the Captain activated her com. She gave the order to spin up their FTL drive with a hand gesture, even as she spoke on the mission-critical channel.

"This is the Captain. FTL jump to commence in 60-seconds. Remember, this is going to be a hot engagement. Brace for immediate combat as soon as we exit FTL. Special Ordinance Team, deploy the drones the instant you can, and don't stop until we're forced to retreat or you run out of drones. All teams, acknowledge."

Acknowledgments came back rapidly, all teams reporting ready. Which was good, given that the drive was already spinning up. It had, of course, simply been a pro-forma check anyway. Everyone had already checked in twice, just to be sure. This was going to be a complicated operation and all the parts needed to go off at least semi-smoothly or the whole thing would be a massive waste. Right at the 60-second mark, the FTL drive of the Pheonix engaged, taking them all to lightspeed for several long seconds...

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Which ending with them dropping out of FTL *right between* two Reaper Dreadnaughts. Those Dreadnaughts were clearly surprised, given that the Pheonix got off the first barrage...but Reapers were not limited to normal sentient reaction times. They rolled to bring their own guns to bare on the Pheonix with blinding speed...only to pause for long seconds as the Pheonix wildly jinked *between* them. Neither Reaper could fire without a serious risk of hitting their companion, and for all the Pheonix's firepower, they weren't doing enough damage to force the Reapers to risk the friendly fire. Particularly not when they only had to wait a bare handful of seconds for the cruiser to dart out from in between them. The instant it did, both Dreadnaughts opened fire, even if the cruiser's evasive maneuvers made both ships miss their initial shots. Of course, they had already begun to accelerate, and there *should* have been no way the cruiser would escape intact as the dreadnaughts began to pepper space with their fire.

The maneuver should have been suicide.

But that didn't count the Special Ordinance that an equally special team had started launching using the Phoenix's missile tubes and every single docking point. The Ordinance wasn't, strictly speaking, even weaponry. Which is, of course, why the Reapers ignored it. They shouldn't have, but to them the low-powered drones would barely look like space junk. And the missiles would scan as ECM platforms...mostly because that's exactly what they were. Those ECM platforms, however, weren't the frantic attempts to make the Pheonix harder to hit that the Reapers would think they were. Instead, their Counter Measures were covering the maneuvering and slow activation of those large pieces of 'debris.' Which, not at all by happenstance, were maneuvering to bracket the Reapers.

Those drones were the result of a *failed* project. An attempt to craft a *mobile* mass relay large enough to send ships through. The JumpGate project, as it had been termed, had run into one too many technical problems and proven too costly to keep going in light of other, more promising, efforts. Even on a war footing, the Citadel Alliance couldn't pour money and resources into *every* project, and the JumpGate project had been one of many that had been abandoned along the way. Not because it hadn't

produced results, but because the results couldn't be made viable within the span of years they had to work with.

Initial testing had managed to create a set of drones that could, in fact, create the massless corridor through space that a Relay produced. Two problems had deemed the project unfixable in the time they had. The first was simple range. The power requirements of a Mass Relay were *enormous*. Even splitting the requirements between dozens of heavy-duty drones, the best the JumpGate team had managed was a jump roughly the distance between Earth and Luna. Completely useless on a galactic scale, unless they radically upscaled the project at extreme cost. The second, just as important issue, was that balancing the corridor between so many point sources had been...problematic. Of the three dozen jumps the team had preformed, not a single one of their test vessels had come through as anything other than a tangled heap of scrap.

Even the slightest variance from their perfect formation had caused the corridor to do *weird* things to the mass inside. All of which actually just highlighted how little they understood about what actually happened when traveling that corridor. After all, the miniature Relays they were making, based on the Protean design from Ilos, really *shouldn't work*. Not when they connected between two places that had *physical matter* between them. Like, say, deep *underground* in Ilos and *inside* the Citadel Presidium. Clearly, mass inside the corridor was fundamentally not interacting with the rest of the galaxy. A revelation that had basically fucked every existing model of physics sideways with a corkscrew.

Ultimately, with their understanding of the physics involved not up to the task, the project had been canceled and the drones just left sitting around with no purpose. Until, that is, Oriana decided she had an insane plan to use them. She'd known about them, having consulted on the project. And getting them for use in her little plan had been an easy sell, given they were literally just sitting around collecting dust. If this actually worked, they could potentially kill two Reaper Dreadnaughts *and* destroy the primary Harvesting station on Parnack, a double whammy that the High Command was happy to stamp approval on.

Shepard had just quietly extracted her team from said planet, after they'd placed the homing beacon to target the other end of the mass-corridor on. Which is why Oriana was in command of the space-side of the operation. A side which seemed to be working nicely, as she noted the slowly forming mass corridor that the Phoenix was racing desperately to escape. A corridor which the Reapers, blinded by the ECM tuned to hide it, hadn't realized they were inside of. The next three minutes of desperate dodging, until they were out of that corridor, was tense. Damage began to accrue as shields failed, even as the surprised, slower-to-accelerate Reaper Dreadnaughts fell behind. Alarms screamed, orders were shouted, but Oriana remained poised and laser-focused, watching as the outline of the corridor firmed up. Waiting for the Phoenix to slip past its limits. Then they were passed the invisible line, but she held off for another second, two, five. Only when the Reapers were at risk of reaching the line as well did her thumb press down viciously. A moment later...the universe seemed to *jerk*.

You were *not* supposed to be this close to a barely-stable zero-mass corridor when it activated. You were either supposed to be *inside* it, or else *far, far away* from it. Which is precisely why Oriana had waited until the last possible second. Space-time shuddered and heaved, twisted and *screamed* around them. The clocks all seemed to freeze for an instant...and then they shot out of the localized warping and smashing of space time, even as the phenomenon itself faded. No one, not even the Captain, could

focus on their damages just yet as they all looked at Parnack...and the *utter devastation* that had once been a city.

It was nothing but a crater now, a crater several kilometers across and half of one deep. And, even as they watched, earthquakes shattered cities hundreds of kilometers away. One of the secondary harvesting centers even collapsed, as everyone held their breath. No one had been quite sure *exactly* what would happen when the mass of two Dreadnaughts suddenly became real again, already moving as insane speeds, right before hitting a planet. The only point of reference they'd had was a terrorist strike where someone had hit a planet with a shuttle moving at FTL speed, in the years before safety regulations had made the effectively impossible to repeat. Technically, the Dreadnaughts wouldn't be moving nearly as fast. But they sure as hell massed a lot more...

Oriana breathed a sigh of relief, closing her eyes and offering up a prayer of thanks to whatever divine force might exist, when the planet didn't crack in half. That had been...a non-zero percent predicted possibility. Seeing that the worst hadn't happened, she braced herself and snapped orders.

"Captain! Assess our damages! Comms! Find the location of our ground team. We'll need to pick them up before we hit the Relay!"

Captain A'Sota cursed as she realized she'd fallen down on her job and began barking orders. Oriana, meanwhile, closed her eyes and tried to forget what she'd just seen. Even if the planet hadn't cracked, they'd likely just killed millions of unharvested Yang. Even if it was likely a less terrible fate that allowing them to actually be harvested, and even if the Yang weren't exactly someone she wanted to give a hug to anytime soon, the decision still horrified some part of her. Even if that part was distressingly quiet these days...

## **Chapter 42: Therapy Sessions**

Oriana found it a little hard to believe that the collective powers that be in the galaxy had conspired to send her to therapy. She was even more bewildered that they'd somehow roped *Sha'ira* into handling her case personally. Sure, Sha'ira was a fully accredited psychologist. In fact, that was a horrible, horrible understatement. Few non-Asari ever really understand, but 'Consort' is just as much a title as 'Justicar,' and one that requires an equally unusual individual to acquire, even if the two types of individuals are nearly diametrically opposed. Consorts aren't just experts of the mind, or as many non-Asari believe, experts of bodily pleasures. They are *healers* who specialize not in the body, or even in the mind, but in the *soul*. To become one requires understanding the minds around you, yes. But it also requires the ability to deeply *understand* people, to empathize with them to an extent that you can't help but love them. Then, with that understanding, they have to be willing to fully invest themselves. To try just that little bit longer than anyone else can imagine, to reach and heal each client. No matter who they are, or what they've done.

For Oriana, who straddled the line between Asari and Human in many ways, the closest she could get to explaining the needed level of understanding and what it *meant*, was to point out a line written by a 20<sup>th</sup> century author, Orson Scott Card. In the case of the character involved, it was in reference to his enemies, but the work did a good job of verbalizing the depth that Consorts are able to understand the people they 'comfort.'

*“In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it’s impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves.” (Orson Scott Card, Ender’s Game)*

That was it. That was what Consorts were. Someone who could understand another person well enough, understand their wants and desires deeply enough, that they ended up loving the person as that person loved themselves. That took an unusual mind, and an even more unusual spirit, even for an Asari. It also made them, just possibly, the best therapists in the galaxy. Their approach to healing was far more *complete* than the meagre methods of a psychologist. Sha’ira just so happened to be one the most widely respected Consorts in the galaxy, and one of the very few who was able to achieve that level of understanding and empathy with non-Asari. A task easily an order of magnitude harder, given that every race thought a little differently, had a different perspective of...*everything*, really.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Oraina’s disbelief didn’t change the fact that the Think-Tank, the Citadel Council, Shepard, Aethyta, Benezia, and even the *Geth* had all somehow conspired together to land Oriana’s posterior in a unfairly comfortable couch, sipping a custom tea she’d never even heard of, across from the famous Consort. While each of them had possessed slightly different reasoning for their meddling, it had all ultimately boiled down to, ‘You are waayyyyy too important to have a breakdown on us. Here, have this drop-dead gorgeous Asari help you sort out the complete and utter fuckery that is your entire self and backstory.’

It was really a pity that Oriana didn’t actually think they were wrong. She really was sort of a mess.

“And so you fear not what you have done, but who you have become. You fear not your actions, but the ever quieter voice of restraint inside you. You have claimed greatness, but you have done it not for yourself...and you fear that in giving so much of who you *could have* been up to fuel the fire of hope for a galaxy, that you have betrayed that optimistic little girl, who looked at the night sky in wonder, and *dreamed*.”

She also kinda wished the woman wasn’t quite as good at figuring out all of Oriana’s deepest fears. This was both comforting and horrible in ways that she could never have imagined. On the bright side, she supposed, maybe she’d get a round of more *physical* affection from the gorgeous woman after she bawled her eyes out three or four times...

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Oriana smiled in delight at the mixture of innocent giggles and throaty moans that burbled up from her ‘victim,’ as she made the simple feather dance across Liara’s skin. The two of them were alone, for once, with the bound and blindfolded maiden spread eagle over the large bed of Liara’s own quarters. Another giggle and squirm was forced out of the blue beauty as the feather traced just under a breast, a moan following the giggle a moment later as a rapid flick of the wrist sent the same feather arching across a rock-hard nipple. The sounds, and even more so the *sensations* of joy and uncomplicated pleasure coming from their feather-light embrace, acted as a balm to soothe a part of Oriana’s soul that she hadn’t wanted to face before her session with Sha’ira.

She'd known she was wounded inside, of course. How could she not, with the jagged spikes of guilt and pain stabbing her whenever she stopped moving? She hadn't, however, known how to deal with it. Instead, she'd simply kept moving, unconsciously aware that if she stopped...she'd tear apart upon those jagged edges. Jagged edges made out of every death she'd signed off on, every deed done in the dark in a desperate bid to give the flickering light just a little bit more fuel to burn on. She wasn't military. She wasn't even naturally inclined toward combat, or aggression at all, really. In another life, she might have become something like a Consort herself. And the weight of all she really wasn't, but had forced herself to be, had torn vicious wounds into her soul.

Sha'ira words had opened those wounds and, in doing so, they should have destroyed her. Instead, by some personal magic of the Consort's that Oriana couldn't hope to understand, the wounds had been washed and cleaned. A path towards healing the worst of the scars offered up with no motive save to help Oriana help herself. Though, there was some amusement to the idea that an Asari's first suggestion had been some one-on-one time with another Asari in bed.

Still, as she felt the uncomplicated happiness flood out of her young lover, she knew that Sha'ira had been right. In constantly focusing on the terrible things she had done, Oriana had blinded herself to the good she'd created in exchange. Good that was reflected in the feeling of youthful optimism radiating from her 'victim,' as the feather continued to dance. The original Liara, from Oriana's first time around, had been a broken bird. Her mother a traitor, dead at the hands of a mind controlling eldritch monster right in front of her, in a fight she herself had contributed to. Her lover dead at the hands of the collectors, only to be reanimated in the closest thing to a deal with the devil Oriana could imagine without a literal portal to hell being involved. Friends betrayed and tortured, the weight of the galaxy falling on her back as she took up the mantle of the Shadow Broker, few having a clue just how much she'd done to help the galaxy. Somehow struggling onward, through it all, with next to no support the entire time.

Not a single bit of that had happened here.

Benezia lived. Changed, but actually closer to her daughter now than she had been in decades. Liara's 'father' alive and involved in her life. Shepard not only alive, but joined by Oriana and Kelly in a very Asari-maiden-like exploration of sexuality and romance. Yes, this Liara has seen death. She'd faced combat. She was well aware of just how horrible the odds were against them. But this Liara had also had the support network to keep her from breaking. To help her grow instead, and to maintain the optimism that was the core of her, once you got past the layers of emotional armor she'd built for herself. This Liara, despite the galaxy going to hell around her, was *Happy*.

And it was Oriana that had made it all possible.

It was Oriana who had brought a cure to the Krogan and the Ardat-Yakshi. Oriana who had given the Geth a chance at life and the Quarians a chance to touch their homeworld again. Oriana who had saved tens of thousands who would have died in the destruction of the Alpha Relay. Who had saved even more still who would have died in the opening round of the Reaper War as Earth, Palavan, and Thessa were ravaged. Oriana who had given the galaxy a *chance*.

Pushing away the still-uncomfortable realization, she focused on her lover. She was making progress. She had proof she could get better. But right now, she had a desperately squirming Asari Maiden to ravish...

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Ashley bit back a moan as the neural stimulators produced by the Neuralux 3 implant sent her the sensations of 'her' cock being sucked. Despite the fact that said 'cock' wasn't currently on her body. It was not, in fact, anywhere within sight of the private café balcony she was having lunch with Oriana on. Instead, it was somewhere *else* in the city. In the devious clutches of Liara, Kelly, and Samara, with Shepard keeping an eye on the trio to enforce the rules. Under the circumstances, it was impossible to tell who, or even *what* was currently causing Ashley's pleasure. The pleasure halted as abruptly as it has started and the Spectre let out an unconscious whine.

"How did I let you talk me into this?"

Oriana grinned, mischief sparkling in her eyes, as she raised her espresso to her lips.

"As I recall, I got you drunk again, told you stories about the games like this I played with Shepard, Liara, Kelly, and even *Samara*. I implied you couldn't handle it, since you're too much of a prude. And *you* challenged *me* to the game. Personally, I think you just wanted another shot at experiencing the Neuralux."

Ashley pouted at the reminder. She actually pouted. Oriana hadn't been aware that the stern-faced Spectre even knew *how* to pout. This was a delightful discovery. She would be doing everything in her power to get even more interesting expressions out of the woman. It would be a refreshingly non-violent challenge. Sha'ira had said Oriana needed more of those. So, of course, Oriana would only be following the 'doctor's orders' if she picked this one, right? Surely, it was only a minor bonus that Ashley had been acting steadily more submissive as the random bursts of pleasure came and went...without the Spectre actually being able to cum. That command sequence was currently disabled in the implant, tied to the app on Oriana's Omni-tool. Just as a similar command sequence that would allow *Oriana* to cum was tied to the same App on Ashley's own Omni-tool.

That was the game for the day. The challenge. Both of them had been fitted with their neural stimulators and a pair of chastity belts before Ashley had sobered up completely the evening before. And too much pride, as well as not a little arousal, had been tied up in her issuing the challenge to Oriana for Ashley to back out when she'd woken up this morning. The first one of them to break and ask to cum would be subject, with some limitations, to a week under the other woman's control. Chastity belt included. And, despite Ashley's iron will, this was a game that Oriana had played before. The only real chance that the Spectre had was the fact that Oriana was linked to *multiple* women's bits, whereas Ashley only had to worry about what happened to the Neuralux 3 cock. For everything that happened to Ashley, two or three things had been happening to Oriana.

It should have been enough to even out the odds.

Pity for Ashley that it hadn't worked out that way so far.

Oriana had experience with being edged for *days*. Worse, Ashley had failed to take into account that Liara and Kelly were *very invested* in the idea of getting into Ashley's panties. Which they knew was

virtually certain to happen if Oriana won. Kelly had already been there, of course...but she'd shared the experience with Liara via a meld, and the Maiden was intrigued. For all the fun they'd had, Ashley with the Neuralux 3 would be the closest Liara had ever gotten to a lover with an actual cock, and the maiden was *very* curious. Which meant that she and Kelly were giving their absolute *best* efforts whenever it was time to do something to the Neuralux toy.

Of course, that didn't mean that they weren't enjoying the chance to tease the normally-dominant Oriana along the way. As she experienced a moment later when her neural stimulators sprang to life with the sensation that was *undeniably* Kelly's particular oral skills. Vibrating tongue included. The fact that Ori knew that meant the redhead was publicly (it was the rules) tonguing either Liara or Samar, a only made the sensations hotter. Thankfully, since Asari and human anatomy didn't quite *perfectly* align, it was slightly less intense than if Kelly had been servicing her directly. In fact...she was just barely coherent enough to *weaponize* it.

"Mmmm. Kelly's tongue really is something special. You haven't experienced her implant in full yet, have you? You already know how good she is, of course...but can you imagine just how much better she is when her tongue itself is capable of vibrating? Ah~! Or turning *ice cold*, like it just did to me? Flicking like a slim cube of ice across your clit, only for her warm breath afterward to make you shiver in an entirely different way..."

Ashley twitched. Her hands clenching and a whimper escaping her as Oriana's voice, heavy with lust from what was happening to her, continued to describe it all in detail. Ori started weaving in bits of fantasy to the description, making Ashley imagine restraints and hot wax, the brush of feathers and the pinch of clamps on helpless nipples. She could sense it as Ashley's will gave slightly and she started falling into subspace. She grinned. It was only a matter of time, now...particularly since Kelly had actually stopped half a minute ago. She just had to keep it up until the next time the trio played with Ashley's Neuralux...

### **Chapter 43: An Ancient Clue**

Oriana stood as the last member of the team she'd called together settled into their seat. Present were Shepard, Liara, Miranda and Tali. For all intents and purposes, she'd brought together all of their combat capable members who were good at *more* than just combat. Shepard was the closest to the odd woman out, but of all of them the Spectre had the best native talent for tracking down impossible leads. Even now, after spending so much time with her, Oriana genuinely didn't understand how that worked. She just knew it could be relied upon, and that not including Alliana's odd luck for this particular endeavor would be stupid. With all attention gathered to her as she stood, she addressed the group.

"I've pulled you all in today because we've gotten something interesting out of Task Force Aurora. Most of you are at least passingly familiar with them. Tali, as I don't think you've directly worked with them, they can be best summed up as a multi-species Think-Tank that was put together to hunt down the more esoteric leads regarding the Reapers. Legends, rumors, myths, and so on. Liara gave them a lot of their original leads, from her own work trying to delve into the Reapers' cycles."

Oriana send an acknowledging nod Liara's way, the Asari doctor smiling happily at the recognition. With Tali now given the barebones of background, Oriana turned on the central holo-



projector to display two images side-by-side. One was the image of a slightly greying human man, with an identifying tag below his image labeling him as Dr. Garret Bryson. The other was of an oddly glowing spherical relic.

“Dr. Bryson’s team had, until recently, been one of the more successful. Unfortunately, he’s now dead, under circumstances that leave us nearly certain he was onto something. In order to explain farther, let me introduce you to one more person, who had been working to help several of the Think-Tanks all at once.”

Oriana punched a button on her omni-tool, causing the door of the conference room to open. Through it strolled...an android. Not a Geth, but clearly not an organic. Clearly female in basic body structure, and far more refined than the clunky Geth designs. The android woman spoke into the surprised silence.

“Greetings. I am EDI, an Enhanced Defense Intelligence originally created by Cerberus, but liberated from that group during Miranda Lawson’s systematic disassembling of the organization. Since being cleared by Eden’s Dawn, I have been involved in several of the Think-Tanks trying to solve the Reaper issue. As well as in numerous diplomatic relations with the Geth, as I am better able to bridge the differences between human and AI thought than the Geth are.”

All of those present clearly recognized her name, even if they’d never seen this platform. Miranda was, of course, unsurprised entirely. Not only had her sister been the one to recover and vet EDI, but she’d helped create the body EDI was currently using out of another old Cerberus infiltration project. Oriana, not wanting to get lost in just *why* EDI now had said physical platform, took back attention with a cleared throat.

“Most of you have worked with EDI in some capacity, but only Miranda and I have worked with her directly, as she’s largely been assigned to handle mass data processing for the various Think-Tanks. As it happens, this included Task Force Aurora. She was the effectively the only witness to Dr. Bryson’s recent murder, due to some unusual events that I’ll let her explain. EDI?”

EDI nodded and remotely took over the holoprojector. A third image, that of another human man labeled ‘Derek Hadley,’ joined the original pair.

“Three days ago, while pursuing leads on an entity known only as ‘Leviathan,’ Dr. Bryson was unexpectedly shot by his research assistant Derek Hadley. While there were numerous irregularities, the most important was that Derek Hadley has no recollection of doing the deed, only memories of everything going dark and cold, then a pistol in his hand. I myself witnessed the altercation, and noted immediately the Hadley was moving in a way often more associated with husks than humans. This sounded numerous alarms, as it was feared to be another example of an indoctrinated individual having slipped past the scanners for such. This was particularly worrying, given how frequently *all* members of Task Force Aurora are checked.”

The holoprojection had changed to show the event in question, allowing everyone to see the odd motions for themselves. It was swept away when it finished by a more tightly zoomed in image of the spherical relic.

“When Mr. Hadley was checked, he showed signs of something *similar* to Indoctrination. But not the same. Moreover, the readings involved were consistent with several others taken on relics like the one pictured here. These relics are all, without exception, involved in the Leviathan case. Which, in turn, revolves around a single question. What, exactly, killed the Reaper that the Batarians found on Dis? Dr. Bryson believed that the ‘Leviathan of Dis’ was not the Reaper itself. But rather, whatever *killed* that Reaper.”

Shepard leaned forward at that, visibly intrigued. When EDI nodded acknowledgement to her, the redhead spoke.

“What made him think it was worth investigating? We’ve run across other Reapers that had been killed before. Not to mention we’ve killed quite a few ourselves since the war started.”

EDI, rather than being put out by the question, simply pulled up footage showing the Leviathan of Dis, taken by the Salarian STG before it disappeared. Everyone around the table quickly saw the issue, though Shepard was the one to give it voice.

“It’s not damaged. No more than the crash itself would account for. No obvious sign of the sort of massive battle damage we usually have to inflict on them to ‘kill’ one. Whatever killed that particular Reaper, it did so *without* a prolonged fight.”

EDI nodded confirmation of Shepard’s thoughts, picking up her explanation.

“Precisely. And anything that could kill a Reaper in such a fashion, we could potentially weaponize to kill them without taking as many losses as we currently do in the process. This matches our current doctrine, designed around the need to inflict multiple Reaper losses for every ship of our own that is destroyed. As a result of that very observation, discovery of what killed the Reaper at Dis was prioritized. Analysis of intercepted Batarian communications indicates that they knew something, that the Reaper corpse itself was *not* the Leviathan. But no one among the Batarians who knew anything is known to have survived the Batarian Hegemony’s defeat by Citadel forces.”

Shepard nodded and leaned back, with Tali prompting the meeting to move on a moment later by asking EDI if there were any leads.

“Yes. One of our field researchers had been tracking odd Reaper movements, which he deemed possibly related to the Leviathan. Despite their difficulties with our forces, the Reapers have consistently flown a search pattern of sorts. It has kept some of their forces busy, which was welcomed by the Citadel Alliance. But the fact that they have not even once paused, despite their setbacks against us, indicates that this may be a *renewed* search they perform every cycle. Rather than something new to ours.”

Oriana stepped in at that point, with EDI easily surrendering control of the holotable as Oriana used it to display an asteroid in the Aysur system of the Caleston Rift.

“This is where we come in. EDI has already done the initial legwork, tracking where the field researcher went. Said researcher, Alex Garneau, has not responded or checked it. But EDI was able to track his likely location to large asteroid named Mahavid in the Aysur system. There is a small mining facility belonging to T-GES Mineral Works on it, and Mr. Garneau appears to have disappeared there while tracking another relic. Given the potential dangers and potential payoff, the powers that be

decided it was something to assign some of our people to. As all of us have proven to be indoctrination resistant in the past, and possess both technical skills and combat ability, they want us to try and run this Leviathan down. Though they are unwilling to lose us for long, and as such we have a limited window to get this done in.”

From there the questions started, as they all tried to figure out what they knew and what their approach should be. Even as they worked the details out, Shepard ordered the Phoenix to move out towards the Aysur system...

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It was a good thing that standard operating procedure for the Phoenix was to enter any new system under stealth, as the Aysur system hosted a Reaper presence. It wasn't the presence of a concentrated fleet, but dispersed signals...which were likely there for the same reason they were. Garneau had been certain that his field teams were being shadowed by Reapers, who were attempting to use the Task Force's own efforts to find what both sides were looking for. The only good news about that little detail was that the Reapers were, apparently, well aware that they didn't do 'subtle' very well. Not outside indoctrination anyway, and such a tactic wouldn't have helped them in this case. That meant that the shadowing Reaper units were in system, but not actively engaged with the mining base, leaving an opening for them to slip a ground team in via a stealthed shuttle. No Reaper troops were on the ground when they arrived, but that didn't mean what they *did* find wasn't incredibly disturbing.

“Goddess, they are like robots...no offense meant EDI.”

“None taken, Doctor T'soni. I am confident I am more lifelike than these...people.”

She was correct. Which was, of course, what was so disturbing. All of the T-GES Mineral Works personnel were behaving as if they were following set scripts. Very basic scripts. Offering tours, making excuses, disengaging with any complex topic and discouraging their visitors from going any farther into the facility. The ground team had all pulled back to a corner, keeping a close eye on the robotic personnel, as they discussed the situation. It was Shepard that spoke next.

“This isn't indoctrination. Not of the type we've seen before, at any rate. Some sort of primitive version of it?”

Oriana hummed as that sparked a few ideas.

“That begs an old question that's never been fully answered. Specifically, just what *is* indoctrination. Is this an older version, perhaps from a rogue Reaper from many cycles past? Or...was indoctrination originally a natural ability? Something like what the Thorian has. In which case...”

Liara caught on quickly.

“In which case Leviathan might just be a survivor, or a colony of survivors, from whatever species originally developed it. Naturally or unnaturally, actually. Even if it's pure technology, it's possible the Reapers stole it from some other civilization in a previous cycle.”

Shepard, in her usual role as corralling sheepdog for her more scientifically inclined minions, interjected before they could theorize too far, calling them back on point.

“Nice theory, but we have some more immediate issues. Like if these guys are going to attack when we dig deeper looking for Garneau.”

It was Tali’s turn to speak up.

“The lift can be easily fixed, and I tapped into the access logs already. Garneau passed through it within the last seven days. No outgoing log for him either.”

That information firmed up Shepard’s expression.

“Then it doesn’t matter if they do attack. Fix the lift, Tali. Everyone else, keep your eyes on the robot people. If they attack, knock them out if possible, lethal force only if necessary.”

Thankfully, it took less than three minutes for Tali to repair the lift and the locals did nothing more than stare at them creepily as they all backed onto it and took it up toward the mineral labs. Labs which proved to be filled with more of the same listless, robotically half-functional crew. All of the ground team grew progressively more unsettled as they combed the labs, EDI and Tali easily hacking their way past any security doors. And then, they found someone claiming to be Garneau...or something possessing him.

**“THE DARKNESS MUST NOT BE BREACHED.”**

Multiple people cursed as Garneau shattered the glass between them with nothing but his naked fists...but none of them were rookies. Instead of flinching like some sort of B-Grade action movie heroes, three warps, a stream of SMG fire, and a carnage round turned Garneau into little more than paste.

“Fuck! Now what?”

Of course, human-paste was unhelpfully non-talkative. Thankfully, the man’s omni-tool had somehow survived intact. Well, intact *enough*. Specifically, intact enough to indicate that the man had indeed discovered another of the odd relics that EDI was half-sure was behind the primitive indoctrination. The artifact, whatever it truly was, was apparently in the mines themselves. Which made that their next destination...

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The moment they tried to get to the mines, they ran into problems. First, the power was cut...and then the Reapers came when they tried to use an alternate route. It surprised them all when there were both Marauders *and* the Yang version of Brutes present. Whatever the Reapers were trying to find, it apparently warranted the use of even units which the Reapers were struggling to create enough of to supply their ground forces. Of course, with Shepard, Oriana and Liara all present, they’d had the brute biotic power to punch through the vanguard of the Reaper ground units quickly. Which was a good thing, since they’d only just barely managed to do everything they needed before more Reapers arrived.

They’d recovered the artifact, along with the actual Garneau’s real body (the previous possessed individual having apparently lied to them about this identity) and evacuated the suddenly disoriented station crew. Said crew had abruptly recovered the moment they put the relic in one of the containment units that had been developed to block indoctrination in the last few years. Which certainly seemed to

indicate that the relic was both the cause, and similar enough to Reaper indoctrination to be affected by the same containment procedures. Now, as they slipped away from the system, they just needed to figure out what to do next. EDI, who'd taken the lead on collating the new information they'd gotten from Garneau's omni-tool and a datapad, spoke to the same group they'd started this side mission with.

"Garneau's notes included two things that could help us, in two entirely different ways. The first is a method of blocking the indoctrination effects of the artifact. Considering how similar the effect is to the Reaper method, this bares immediate research efforts. Previously, no known method of blocking the effect has been created that was small enough to be man portable. If this new method can be adjusted for anti-Reaper use, it could help us farther mitigate the effects of indoctrinated agents."

Everyone around the table nodded firmly at that. The containment unit they'd used for the artifact was, in fact, the smallest device anyone had yet created for such purposes. And it was easily the size of any two of the people in this room. Tali was the one to ask the obvious question, a moment later.

"Is it similar enough, though? Obviously, Reaper indoctrination is more advanced than whatever this was. Those people we recovered have *no memory of the last ten years*. Indoctrinated agents, on the other hand, merely have their loyalty shifted, with far less effect on their capabilities."

EDI made a shrugging motion, even as she changed the display to show two different wavelengths on a brainwave graph. Most of those there instantly recognized one of them as the set of frequencies that had been isolated as Reaper indoctrination indicators. The other was similar, but simpler.

"That is unknown at this time. If nothing else, you can see the similarities. Figuring out the differences may allow us to project possible refinements or alterations the Reapers may use in the future. Even if we can't figure out how to block indoctrination any better, we may be able to use this in our efforts to keep ahead of any changes the Reapers make, by looking into the past and seeing what changes they've *already* made."

Everyone nodded again, and this time no one else spoke up. Oriana, noting that fact, prompted EDI to get back to her original track.

"The second thing we discovered was that Garneau had been attempting to contact Dr. Bryson's daughter, Ann Bryson. This failed, due to Ann Bryson's current location. She is the leader of Project Scarab, which is another Task Force Aurora group investigating the planet Namakli in the Pylos Nebula. As the Pylos Nebula has nothing of value to the Citadel forces, they have not tried to prevent Reaper forces from taking it. Currently, the entire Nebula is occupied by Reaper forces, and thus anyone operating there is forced to operate under comms blackout protocols."

Shepard frowned, raising a finger for attention.

"Doesn't the project have a QEC? I know our production of them is still limited. But this seems like a project that should have had access to them."

EDI nodded at the question, responding easily.

“Task Force Aurora does, indeed, have access to several QEC sets. However, there are far more field teams than there are QECs, and Ann’s team did not have one. If we wish to make contact with her, we will need to utilize our stealth systems and sneak in.”

Shepard grimaced.

“Which will take time, several days at least. It sounds like she’s our best lead, however. We’ll check in with command to make sure they don’t need us for anything critical, then get on top of this if they don’t...”

Murmurs of agreement came from all around the table. After a few more short minutes of discussion, the meeting broke up.

#### **Chapter 44: Downtime Teasing**

Oriana was fairly certain that she’d surpassed all previous achievements and created her kinkiest experience yet. Predictably, she’d won her little contest with Ashley, back on their last stop at the citadel. That victory had *nearly* gone to waste when they’d been pulled away by the needs of tracking down Leviathan. Sure, Ashley had been left stuck in a chastity belt, with a few toys to keep her properly edged whenever she wasn’t actively deployed, but the Spectre had been deployed on an entirely separate missions from them. Oriana had refused to let Ashley entirely get away from the consequences of the bet, sending along Samara to both help the former gunnery-chief with her mission, as well as to act as Oriana’s minion in deciding when it was safe to torment Ashley. She’d been incredibly disappointed that she didn’t get to slowly dominate the usually-straight woman herself, but she’d been confident in the older Asari’s ability to encourage Ashley’s renewed interest in subspace.

Then of course, fortune had turned in her favor. With their new high risk/high reward mission behind enemy lines approved by command, Ashley and Samara had ended up back aboard the Pheonix. Their own mission to plant hopefully-undetachable transponders on large quantities of Brutes and Marauders had already been completed. It had yet to be seen if the Think-Tanks hopes for that project would play out, of course. That hope being that the relatively rarity of those troops would mean the Reapers moved them around from theater to theater. If they did, it would allow the Citadel Alliance to gain an overview of general enemy movement patterns. It would take time, and recovery of many tags from killed units, to determine if they were right. But the actual mission to tag the enemy units in the first place was done. Which meant that Ashley and Samara had been free...and ordered back aboard the Phoenix as backup as they sought out Ann Bryson.

Which also, of course, meant that Ashley had fallen directly back into Oriana’s devious hands while they spent *days* sneaking through Reaper lines. Since they were under a com blackout now, save for the limited QEC bandwidth, Oriana had two full days left of Ashley’s original week forfeit to play with the poor woman. Bonus points that Samara was apparently *very* good at encouraging subs. She’d taken Oriana’s instructions and run with them, working on Ashley until the woman was able to enter subspace just from a specific set of neural stimuli and the snap of a collar around her neck. Oriana was delighted...and more than happy to reward both of them!

Samara’s reward was kinky in its own way. Specifically, a way that was only possible because the woman was an Asari...and so was Liara. It wasn’t actually rare for Asari so widely apart in age to meld. But when it happened, it was normally for purposes of the older Asari to guide the younger. Even in sex

this was true, yet there was a reason it still wasn't all that rare. In part, of course, that was simply the Asari culture. They just flat out didn't have the same set of cultural stigma that other races had regarding sex and sexuality.

The other half of the equation, however, was that the elder of the pair gained *newness* from such a joining. While the younger Asari gained a broadening of mind and deepening of experience, usually being blown away and overwhelmed to submissiveness by the sheer difference in skill, the elder of pair with a significant age gap gained the *innocence*. After several hundred years, even the best sex *should* get boring. Yet, even the eldest of Matriarchs were often sexually active. Typically, with their own acolytes. The acolytes learned...and the Matriarchs got to vicariously feel what it was like to experience *firsts* again. To revel in *new* sensations after they had long since tried everything.

Oriana had leaned into this fact, hard, when coming up with a reward for Samara. Samara was comparatively inexperienced for an Asari of her age, due to her dedication to the Justicars for the last several centuries. Liara, on the other hand, had been a near-total innocent to sex in general just a few years ago. Even with someone as kinky as Oriana to guide her, that meant Liara had a lot of *new* things to experience still. Samara, meanwhile, had never done a deep dive into the more esoteric type of sex games. All of which explained what was going on in *their* side of the Pheonix's dedicated sex dungeon. A small but well equipped room that Shepard had been amused to discover Oriana had built into the ship from the start.

The two of them, Liara and Samara, were bent just slightly at the waist, leaning into each other. The lean squished their breasts together, while also bringing them into a parody of a kiss around a ball gag. The physical contact was more than sufficient to establish a meld, which was a good thing given the challenge that had been presented to them. While their upper bodies were leaned together, both of their lower halves were straddling a bondage bench, strapped down thoroughly enough that they weren't going to be able to do much more than squirm on the toys impaling them both. Two toys each, one for each entrance. Not a one of them the type that could thrust. Instead, each toy could do four things. Heat up, freeze, vibrate, and rotate. But only one toy could do each of those things at any given moment. The entire setup was, in fact, a giant puzzle.

Neither of the Asari would be released until they both came at least twice...and they needed to coordinate via the meld to determine which toy did what at any given time. Just for good measure, the only way to change the pattern was for them to both shift the peddles under their feet in the right pattern and *hold them against the springs*. They hadn't been told the patterns needed, and the springs on the pedals were strong enough to make holding them through an orgasm monumentally difficult. Both of them were helplessly moaning messes as they tried to sort things out, and Oriana was quite sure that both of them were enjoying it immensely.

She, however, would not need to get involved until they'd accomplished their task. Which left her to her fun with Ashely. Which again brought back the thought that, in some ways, this might be the kinkest thing she'd ever done. After all, she was making Ashley eat her out while effectively anally reaming the woman with her own cock. Oriana had *zero* intention of letting Ashley out of that chastity belt until the very last moment of the bet's duration. But that fact only made it easier to make the Spectre *beg* for a chance to cum. She'd been teasing the woman all day, then collared her the moment they were both off shift. Combined with the pattern of pleasure via her locked-in neural stimulators that

Samara had trained Ashely to respond to, the snap of that collar had sent the older woman straight into subspace.

She'd eagerly complied as Oriana strapped her to a bondage bench that adjusted to leave her fellow ravenette's mouth perfectly positioned to service Oriana. That, however, had been fairly tame. The far more interesting thing Ori had done had been activating Ashely's Neuralux toy. The artificial cock, tied to Ashley's implant but detached from her body, had been fastened to a fucking machine piston, lubed up, and lined up with the only hole Ashely had available at the moment. The usually-composed Spectre had moaned like a whore when her own 'cock' had nudged its way into her well-lubed rear entrance. Now, Oriana idly played with her breasts with one hand, while toying with the control for that piston with the other, all while the neural stimulators under Ashely's belt played out a near-violent pattern on the woman's pussy and clit. All, of course, with the actual orgasm sequence for the fake cock currently disabled. Ashley still had to earn her release, after all, by proving how good at eating pussy a 'straight' woman could become in a week, with the *proper motivation*. Oriana wondered just how many questions she was giving the poor woman about her own sexuality...

Well, it wasn't like the Spectre didn't have plenty of women around her that would happily help her answer those questions!

#### **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...

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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."

Liara 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!”

Liara’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...

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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...

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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 that 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 farther enhance the modifications for the pressure. Grimacing at the idea of how vulnerable they would be, Ori nevertheless went to join them...

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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 the 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."*

## **Chapter 48: Planning the Party**

The room was silent as three separate teams triple checked its security. That security had very little to do with the fact the majority of the Citadel Alliance High Command, plus the heads of several of the more important Anti-Reaper Think Tanks were all in the same room. No, that was for the security

*outside* the room to worry about. Here, in this buried bunker on a worthless world barely in range of FTL from a Relay, the security was more concerned with making *damn sure* there wasn't the slightest sign of indoctrination or other comprised *anything* on the people inside. The sheer paranoia, far beyond that of even the central war rooms that ran all the fleets and military assets against the Reapers, brought home how deadly serious this meeting was. Many of the previously cantankerous men and women of all species had shifted from irritated at being pulled into this to...a little perturbed. Finally, as the last team cleared the last person and left, Admiral Kandros spoke up with a gruff voice.

"This better be damn important, Lawson. You've disrupted the hell out of dozens of operations with this stunt. If it was literally *anyone* but you who had leaned on everyone and pushed so hard, this meeting wouldn't have happened."

Oriana didn't flinch at the glares directed at her. No one had been happy with pulling this much of command into one isolated location. But she'd pushed *hard*, traded on everything she and Shepard had both done, to make it happen. She didn't regret it a bit.

"We found a way to beat the Reapers. A means to hurt them so badly they can't recover."

Glares vanished and spines stiffened as she suddenly had the full and utterly undivided attention of every person in the room. Hackett gave all of their demands in a single, heavy word.

"*Explain.*"

Oriana nodded and pulled up dozens of images on the walls around them, all depicting everything Task Force Aurora had put together about the Reaper's history. Then, on the central holo terminal of the conference table, she pulled up an image of Leviathan, one of the very few they had.

"This is the race that created the Reapers. You can, I'm sure, see the physical similarities. And yes, we know for as close to pure certainty that it was them, because a *handful of them are still around and we found them.*"

That bombshell ignited a dozen questions, people speaking over each other, shouts, and cries of disbelief. Matriarch Lidanya wasn't having *any* of it and slammed a biotically charged hand down on the table, silencing the whole room with the noise and flash of power.

"**Go on.**"

"The survivors of this race went into hiding. Those we talked to are descendants of descendants of descendants, not the original creators. But they are extremely long lived and have been watching every single cycle. They were the original target of the Reapers, a case of a single Rouge AI turning on them. They were also the first species to be harvested, not to mention the origin of the indoctrination ability. Luckily for us, they've been collecting data as they can ever since the first harvest, mostly by using their own, cruder form of the indoctrination ability to create agents among every major species of each cycle."

Oriana tapped a key, shifting the display to show the names of hundreds of species over dozens of cycles on a chart, with each cycle labeled. There was a noticeable change between the first few cycles and the current pattern, the cycles coming increasingly closer together in time.

“The original AI was given the task of Preserving Organic Life. It was, in fact, arrogantly made in an attempt to stop the cycle of Synthetic Life and Organic Life wiping each other out. Something that had apparently happened to numerous civilizations already at the point this new AI was created. In a classic example of AI gone wrong, it eventually decided to take extreme measures. It didn’t believe it had enough data, that it needed something more...and it began the cycles as one *enormous* experiment to gather more data. Everything since then, such as the construction of the Mass Relay Network? All of it was done to make its experiment more *efficient*. Letting organic species develop naturally was too slow, so it created a framework for them to grow into, giving it faster cycles and more consistent data. Essentially, it had been building a massive dataset to try and solve its problem.”

The faces around her were a mix of disbelief, shock, and understanding. Probably the most disturbing reactions in the room were the cold-blooded nods of a few Salarians, to whom the idea seemed to just *make sense*. Oriana shut down that line of thought. She could worry about the Salarian tendency toward genocidal ‘science’ later. Much later. Possibly never. Her self-assigned task was the Reapers. If she somehow avoided being assassinated after all of this, she could retire in peace to let the galaxy burn with its other problems. The Reapers were more than enough for her, thanks.

“I started with this explanation, as it was key to understanding the two points of vulnerability we have been able to identify from the data shared with us by Leviathan’s species. They had a *lot* of data on what the Reapers have been up to...but *why* was just as important, because it means we finally know how to short circuit the whole thing. How to break their experiment.”

Another key press and the main holo display shifted to show the Citadel.

“The first vulnerability is right here. We now know where the AI behind this madness lives. The Core of the Citadel, it turns out, is older than the Relay built around it. The Keepers keep everyone out of the deep interior of the Citadel for a damn good reason...it’s where the AI Core that started all of this resides.”

That revelation drew vicious curses from several mouths. For good reason. Even if they’d abandoned the Citadel as much as they could in regards to command and control of the Anti-Reaper coalition, they hadn’t been able to outright abandon the station completely. It was, not at all accidentally, the central hub of civilian communication, thousands of government functions, and much more. It would take *decades* and a hideous amount of political maneuvering, money, and effort to move all of that away from the Citadel. They’d been doing damn good just to separate the various military channels and commands away from it.

“Obviously, this is why you are all *here*. With the AI where it is, our best previous efforts at information control were fucked sideways and upside down from the start. We did enough not to be totally screwed, but not enough to prevent a lot of information leaking to the Reapers anyway. Literally anything ever said within the Citadel itself has to be considered compromised.”

Lots of pale faces, but also more than a few understanding looks about just why this meeting was happening where it was.

“Obviously, hitting that AI Core and doing so hard and fast is part of what we need to plan out here. However, it’s only step one. I might not have even risked bringing you all in if that was it. A few

dozen small specialist teams might have actually had a less risky chance of reaching the AI and disabling it. That, however, would close our second window of opportunity, possibly leading to our defeat.”

Hackett, always able to cut to the heart of the matter and more able than most to roll with the punches, broke the stunned silence at that.

“You need fleet assets, lots of them, to hit something. Since you didn’t compartmentalize the ops, I’m assuming the AI’s defeat will open a window of chance for us to hit something truly vital to the Reapers?”

Oriana shook her head, smiling at the older man.

“Got it in one, Admiral. Yes. Specifically...we’ve finally identified the Reaper’s logistics base.”

*That* revelation snapped all of the military men and women in the room out of the stunned silence the multiple bombshells had sent them into. Only a threatening, glowing hand from Matriarch Lidanya cut off the stream of sudden noise. Oriana was beginning to really like that Asari. She should send her a fruit basket. Or maybe some Jubeiale.

“As every one of you knows, or should know, we had previously been unable to figure out where the Reapers were repairing their ships. Minor damage being fixed between battles was one thing, but the war has now gone on long enough for us to notice specific Reapers that we damaged badly coming back into the fray fully repaired. Despite their techno-organic nature, something like that means they have a logistics base *somewhere*. Now we know for sure that one of the leading theories about *where* happens to be true.”

Various eyes lit on the citadel as more than one set of lips whispered, growled, or groan the phrase ‘Dark Space.’ Oriana grinned tightly at the half-synchronized response.

“Yes, Dark Space. Specifically an area of it beyond the edge of the galaxy. There’s good news, better news, bad news, and mixed news. Good news, we’ve confirmed that their logistics base is out in Dark Space. Better news, it turns out that the primary purpose of the Alpha Relay wasn’t as a backdoor, but as a place to send their damaged ships back to that Relay from. Its use as a backdoor was simply a secondary role they could activate when needed. The Omega Relay could do the same thing...and sadly they currently have control of that particular system. Undoubtedly, they are using it to funnel ships back for repair. If we want to pull off what we need to do, we’ll have to take that Relay at least temporarily.”

There were grimaces all around at that. Admiral Kandros was the one to speak up about it, after exchanging glances with his fellow Admirals.

“That won’t be easy. We’d wondered why they poured so much effort into that particular system. It’s fortified heavily. To even had a chance, we’ll have to pull their attention elsewhere, somehow.”

Oriana nodded, unbothered by the observation.

“That’s why all of this is going to have to go off in a rapid, pre-planned fashion. Disabling their Overlord AI should leave the Reapers destabilized and confused, vulnerable to taking heavy losses while they try to regain their equilibrium. However, each of them *is* still a singular entity. Given time, they will

reorganize and possibly continue with their assigned task. Hell, there might even be a plan in place for this, a way for them to bring the AI back. Which is why we *also* need to hit their logistics base at the same time.”

Oriana tapped more keys, shifting the main display to show overviews of three planned operations.

“The first op to go off will be against the AI. But the moment we kill it, a QEC message will trigger a fleet to jump in on the Omega system and rampage during the confusion. Take control if you can, destroy the Relay there if you can’t. Meanwhile, the first op’s team will be moving onto their Phase 2, which is opening the Citadel Relay to Dark Space. The third operation will be a fleet moving through that Relay and into the Reaper’s home space.”

Oriana took a deep breath, closing her eyes for just a moment, before opening them to sweep around the conference table.

“Make no mistake. That last operation *has* to succeed. Because the worst news we got? It was the information that we’ve been fighting less than ten percent of the Reapers’ total forces.”

There was a sudden lack of blood in a lot of faces around the table, and total silence as they all realized what that meant. Hackett again managed to croak out a demand for an explanation, and Oriana braced herself as she gave it.

“Remember when I said that the entire purpose of the AI was to preserve life? That’s what the sick fuck of an AI is doing, in a *very* twisted way. Every Reaper is made of a slurry of genetic material from one race. Yet, only the smallest races produce only a single Reaper when harvested. Most races produce at least a handful of dreadnaughts and a dozen smaller vessels. Dominant populations like the Asari? They become fodder for an entire new cycle. Dozens or hundreds of Reapers made from Trillions of Asari. In this way, *technically*, there is a distilled, immortal record of every species that’s ever been harvested. But...*the majority* of those Reapers are left sleeping during the cycles. The AI can’t risk them, for if all the Reapers of a single species are wiped out, it has violated its core purpose...”

It was Matriarch Lidanya this time, that voiced the realization first.

“So it leaves them in...storage, essentially. A genetic databank. Preserving them so they can be, what, recreated once it has its answer?”

Oriana nodded.

“That’s the theory, at least. On that point, we have only their creator’s speculation. But it matches what is known, including the one or two looks into Dark Space a few species over the cycles have managed. Lots of sleeping Reapers. A small Guard fleet yes, but the vast majority of Reapers there are in hibernation...”

Fire lit in numerous eyes as a vicious growl of victory rose from Ravis Kandros.

“Which means we can literally kill them in their sleep. We just have to prevent the Reapers that are awake from getting there fast enough to stop us. If we do that, and kill their Master AI too, we can actually win. It won’t be easy, or quick. But we can *win*. Permanently.”

Oriana’s smile was bloodthirsty as she responded.

“Exactly, Admiral. If we can get to those sleeping Reapers? Then our enemy will have made their **Final Error...**”

## Chapter 49: Raid Preparations

It took days to sort out all the details, of course. Not that the leadership of the entire Citadel Alliance could afford to all be absent for that long. A single day had been taken to give as comprehensive an overview of what they knew and what needed to be done as was possible, and then the entire group had ruthlessly paired down the number of people that needed to be involved in the actual planning stage of the operation.

Admiral Hackett, as the most junior of the three military heads of that alliance, had stayed to make the final calls. His absence would be the least noticed, yet he was arguably the most talented at operational planning, so the choice had been simple sense. Admiral Kandros was the primary strategic mind behind the ongoing Fleet actions, so he had left to start shifting fleet assets around to concentrate the forces they would need to make this happen. Matriarch Lidanya was by far the best of the three at logistics and would be doing similar shuffling to support all three operations. The handful of politicians that had been trusted enough to be let in had left at the same time, as had the less operationally-critical Think-Tank heads.

Those that remained had been a carefully selected batch. A few Spectres, high-ranking STG, a Turian Blackwatch General and an Elite Asari Commando leader had all been joined by the best experts available on the inner working of the Citadel to plan that part of the greater operation. Shepard had gotten sucked in as the primary Spectre representative for that side, while Oriana had been pulled away to working over the other half of the operation. She and her sister had the best overall picture of the various secret weapons projects, with Oriana also having an extreme familiarity with the most important fleet assets, given that *New Dawn Enterprises* had designed most of them. They were both pulled into Hackett’s orbit as the dual strikes on the Omega system and the Reaper logistics base were sketched out in the best detail they could manage on limited information.

After over a week of preparations, people had started dispersing to begin getting bits and pieces of things prepped. At the two-week mark, the rest of had broken off and returned for final preparations before putting everything into motion. Of course, given that their secret meeting spot had been so remote, there was a brief window of a day or so while they traveled back into civilization...

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It was just the three of them again. While they had added many rotating lovers to their beds in the last few years, the truth was that Oriana, Shepard, and Liara were the only ones that had fully connected on an emotional level. The others, such as Kelly, Samara, and Ashley, were all fun diversions.

Stress relief of the best kind and close friends-with-benefits all. But Kelly was, frankly, something of a village bicycle everyone could ride, Samara was at an entirely different stage in life, and Ashley was still *mostly* straight. Liara, on the other hand, had attached firmly to Oriana in a romantic sense after her initial excuse of sex and culture education. Shepard had slotted in surprisingly well with both of them, later on. With Liara, that didn't shock Oriana at all given what she'd known from her first go around. That she, herself, fit in so well with both of them had been a pleasant surprise, however.

All of which explained how, on the evening before the set of Operations were set to kick off, the three of them were once again eating a dinner cooked by Oriana, in Shepard's cabin. Conversation had been deliberately light, none of them caring to bring up the plans that they'd all spent the last two plus weeks hammering hard at. Instead, they teased Liara, bantered with Shepard over her love of old pre-space animated films, and gotten stories of the funny and fun sort out of Oriana about her family. It was nice. More than nice, it was soothing. A calm balm for their thinly-stretched nerves and exhausted emotions.

Which did not, of course, mean that Oriana hadn't prepared a certain dessert.

Liara's eyes lit up as the Jubeiale was brought to the table, not hesitating this time as an amused Shepard used a clean spoon to scoop up a bit of it and offer it to the maiden. A familiar erotic moan slipped through the Asari's lips as she leaned forward and accepted the bite, eyes already half-lidded as she licked any extra off.

"This stuff really is like Asari catnip, isn't it?"

Oriana chuckled, remembering when she'd first described it that way.

"Pretty much. I've yet to meet a single Asari that didn't love it, and they all react that way. If the ingredients weren't a bit on the expensive side, or if the preparation was easier, I imagine they'd never eat anything else for dessert. Though the public orgies that would likely result of it being so readily available probably wouldn't help their image any, given how half the galaxy already tends to see them."

Shepard grinned at that, even as she watched Liara eagerly lick another spoonful from Oriana. Of course, the redhead wasn't about to leave her other lover out, quickly extending a spoon to Oriana, who grinned and did her best to lick the spoon with deliberate sensuality, instead of the innocent version Liara was showing almost on accident. As always, the effects of the treat were weakened on Oriana, though she was Asari enough, genetically, to still get a rush of warm arousal spiking through her body. She offered a bite back to Alliana in return, who merely murmured about how delicious it was. It didn't have the same aphrodisiac effect on humans that it did on Asari, but virtually all humans still liked the taste, Alliana being no exception.

A few more bites were exchanged. Enough for Liara's eyes to glaze over. Then Oriana stood with a smirk, lifting both of them with her biotics and tossing them toward the bed a moment later. Liara squeaked, while Shepard just cocked an eyebrow.

"Strip. I think we can find better places for our lovely blue maiden to eat off of!"

It took a moment for that to process for Shepard, before the redhead grinned and shucked her shirt. She hadn't been wearing a bra under it, nor panties under the pants that came off a moment later. It's not like she hadn't had a good idea where the night would end, and she'd apparently elected to



shorten the time it took to be ready. Perfect, for what Oriana obviously had in mind. Oriana herself ditched everything but her own thong, while Liara was prodded by the redhead to lose her own clothes. Then she scooped up the tray of desert and moved it to the bedside table.

A scoop of the spoon, a bit of biotic pressure to lay Shepard out on her back, and a messy bit of desert was planted on Alliana's left nipple. Liara was there in an instant, the temptation of two of her favorite things far too much for the maiden to resist as she latched onto that nipple and began sucking off the gooey, creamy desert. She didn't stop giving that nipple attention until an amused Orianna added some Jubeiale to the other, which caused the maiden to promptly switch targets, even as Alliana's eyes closed and she began to moan lowly.

The adventure continued from there, Oriana dropping little dollops of desert everywhere she wanted Liara to lavish attention, while occasionally sneaking in a searing kiss with the moaning redhead. Abs, navel, inner thighs. By the time Oriana placed the last spoonful over Alliana's clit, Liara was so far gone in the dessert induced haze of arousal that she didn't even notice her hands being captured and secured behind her back. She certainly *did* notice when the tip of Oriana's hard-light strapon plunged into her own drooling pussy, causing her to moan into Shepard's pussy. As she hilted the toy all the way inside the maiden, Orianna leaned in to whisper in Liara's ear.

"If you cum before Alliana does, I'll lock you in chastity for a *month* with no release after we beat the Reapers."

It took Liara a moment for that to process through the haze of her arousal. But when it did, her eyes blew wide open and she dove into Shepard's pussy with a will an instant later. The redhead yelped at the sudden onslaught, then moaned loudly as her hands found Liara's crest to guide her. Oriana giggled, even as she began to thrust. She'd follow through on the threat if she had to, of course. But given how Alliana was moaning humping Liara's face, she didn't think the maiden had anything to worry about...

## **Chapter 50: Core Raid**

Oriana's teeth ground together as they hit another dead end. Not that such was going to stop them, this time. With a rough motion of her hand, she gestured the cutting team forward. The AI they were looking for was sure to notice...but they'd already been stymied by three dead ends trying to reach the same spot. They'd considered the problem in advance, realized that if the AI was even remotely intelligent that there *wouldn't* be an actual direct route to it, and brought along solutions. Solutions in the form of the plasma cutter that she turned her eyes away from as it began work on the wall.

They were, of course, hardly sure where the AI was. Even Leviathan hadn't known if it had moved its core since the original creation of the Citadel, which meant they and the other four teams were flying more than a little blind. Which was, of course, the reason why there were four teams in the first place. Numerous attempts to map the deep internals of the Citadel had been made over the years, and those attempts had been combined with what the Leviathan species had provided. Four locations had stood out on the cross-referenced maps. Places that remained completely dark on all existing maps of the station. It was those locations that four heavy teams had been put together to forcefully investigate. Each team launching simultaneously.

Out of the corner of her eye, Oriana saw movement that shouldn't have been there, and her head snapped toward it. Her eyes widened in an instant, even as her heavy pistol came up.

"Enemies!"

Her cry alerted the rest of her team, even as she took her first shot at the husk she'd seen. How had...no, of course the AI here would have had at least some stores of the spikes that made husks. And it wouldn't be hard to 'disappear' people on the Citadel in dribs and drabs. The fact that they were seeing them must mean they were close to the Core, though. Or at least to something important. She tried her long-range comms to check on the other teams, even as her off-hand came up to trap several more rushing husks in a singularity. Then she grimaced as those comms responded with a tone that indicated jamming.

"We're jammed! Eyes open! We must be close to something vital! Cutting team, speed it the fuck up!"

Acknowledgements came back over the line, even as varying types of guns and biotic strikes unloaded into the rushing horde that was now appearing from every entrance. The heat she felt pouring from the cutter redoubled as the engineering team upped the cutter output, forgetting any attempt at safety or power conservation for speed. A tense few minutes later, as the horde started to make progress despite their best efforts. Then there was a massive clunk...followed by a scream.

Orianna pivoted just in time to see a husk rip the throat out of one of the demo team with its teeth, having lunged through the hole the moment the wall fell inward. Eyes wide, Oriana instinctively threw herself into a biotic charge that slammed the husk back through the wall, then let off a Nova that blasted the enemies there away. Part of her mind flinched as she realized she'd nearly gone over the edge of a railing with that charge...but far more of it was focused the large sphere of Relay metal hanging in the center of the cavernous space they'd just cut their way into.

The AI core. Had to be. She hoped.

"We found the Core! Get in here with the QEC Spikes!"

Thankfully, there were less directions the horde of enemies could come at them from once they were through the wall. With multiple biotics present, any that approached on the walkways around the core were simply swept off the sides, while the rest of the team held their entry point. Of course, the core itself was also a problem. One look at it and Oriana had known it was quantum locked, just like the Relays. That, however, had been accounted for in the planning session. After all, it was the logical thing to do if you knew a way to make a stationary object virtually indestructible.

Thankfully, they'd done their research on the Relays, specifically for the use of the Queen's Gambit opening move. Between that and the destruction of the Alpha Relay, they'd learned all they needed to about how to destroy Quantum-locked Relay metal. More importantly, they knew how to *bypass* it. Simply throwing anti-mater at this thing would have destroyed the Citadel, and they still needed the Relay built into the thing. Instead, they had an altogether riskier plan. One that relied on the trio of demonic-looking spikes that they'd been guarding since the start. Oriana left the horde to the others, using her biotics in combination with a fierce-faced Matriarch Aethyta to fire the spike like a railgun, right at the core. It didn't penetrate, of course. But it *did* stick, using a trio of legs around the

spike. Even as the device whined to life, seeking to match the Quantum Frequency of the Core, they lifted the second spike...

A minute later, all three spikes were deployed, and they'd found the frequency, drilling themselves down into the metal of the Core, seeking contact with its systems. First one got that contact, then each of the others...and Oriana gave a vicious grin, even as she threw another Abomination over into the pit under the Core. For all the violence so far, what was about to happen was the truly *risky* part. They needed *control* of the station, after all, not just to destroy the AI. Which was why those Spikes weren't destructive. Instead, they were simply the highest bandwidth QEC relays that could be made portable. Their lights lit up and the station shuddered as the combined might of the entire Geth Collective went to war in digital space.

It was a gamble, but a necessary one. They needed to take over the station entirely, which meant they needed to overcome the ancient AI...and the only group with a chance of doing that were the Geth. While individually far less powerful than the original massive AI that the Leviathans had made...the Geth had *numbers* and experience with the type of code it used via the Reapers. They had also, without anyone realizing it until they'd joined up with the Citadel Alliance, spent a huge amount of their resources building the start of a Dyson Sphere intended to house All Geth. It wasn't even close to finished, of course, not even after centuries of work. But even in its current state it actually eclipsed the size of the Citadel, containing a truly ridiculous amount of processing power as a result. With multiple high-bandwidth QECs hooked directly into the AI Core...well, everyone was hoping for the best. Quantity has a quality all its own, after all. Something this particular AI should know all too well, given its tactics.

For long minutes, nothing happened...and then the Citadel began to shudder again, much more violently. Lights flickered, the horde of husks faltered and started coming in disrupted waves. The comm jammer started failing in fits and starts, panicked chatter reaching them from all around the station as the Citadel Arms spazzed out, trying to both open and close, even as sections of the station opened themselves to space and AVINA'S terminals began *melting*. The other teams arrived piecemeal, missing some individuals, but launching their own Spikes into the Core. Shepard's team had managed to hold onto all three of their Spikes, an Elite Blackwatch team had managed to bring in two more, and a single spike had been salvaged by a Justicar from the Asari team that had survived being spaced. Every additional spike gave the Geth more bandwidth for their attack, and as the station began to come more and more under control, everyone realized that *someone* was winning. Even if no one knew yet which side that was. Hope filled them all as the waves of husks died off, and they held their breath for the reveal...

After long, breathless minutes, Oriana's omni-tool flared to life with a digital representation of a Geth Collective. The image glitched a bit, then stabilized, even as the Citadel began a much smoother transition into its Relay Configuration.

"Lawson, Lady. We have sized control of the Citadel. Please signal the fleet to begin operations."

Explosive breaths of relief all around, even from Oriana as she recognized the odd way the Geth referred to her. It was always possible this was just the evil AI wearing the Geth as a digital sock puppet, of course. But, if that was the case, they were already doomed anyway. So they would assume the best. Oriana immediately pulled out a special black-box QEC with only a number pad on it. She tapped a long

alpha-numeric code sequence using the keypad...they sighed with relief of her own as its single led flashed green three times.

“Operation Lance and Operation Barrier are go! Those of you with roles to play, get back to your ships! Everyone else, secure this room! Get heavy ordinance in here ASAP to keep anyone else out of it!”

At her snapped order, everyone began to move again, even as she joined Alliana in rushing back to the Phoenix. There was no way in hell either of them was going to miss seeing the last step through...

## Chapter 51: Into the Darkness

It was only due to the time required for the fleets to actually get into position for a mass Mass Relay transit that Alliana and Oriana had managed to make it back aboard the Phoenix and get into their ship into its transit lane. Speed was *everything* for this operation, but there was simply no way to avoid the short delay required in trying to move over 200 Dreadnaughts and thousands more ships through a Relay. In truth, it wasn't actually *possible* to move so many ships at once through a normal Relay. But, well, the Citadel Relay was over two and a half times the length and far more than that in mass compared to a regular Relay.

Even with that, they wouldn't actually be taking the entire force through in a single jump. Roughly 40% of all fleet elements would make the initial Relay transfer, followed by six smaller jumps of 10% of the fleet each in a rotating pattern. Even as massive as space was, the fact that Mass Relays had a drift factor meant that there was only so many ships you could shove through a Relay at once safely. In truth, they were exceeding that safety margin with the first transit, making it virtually certain at least a few ships would be lost to collisions. It had been decided, unfortunately, that there was no other choice. There *would* be a Reaper guardian Fleet on the other side of this jump, even if it wasn't likely to be huge. And they *had* to take it down before it could wake all of its fellows up from their hibernation.

In the end, despite all their careful planning, there was nearly a forty-five-minute lapse between the destruction of the AI Core and the initial transit. Even that had been extremely tight for them to make it, and the Phoenix had only just barely managed to slot into its own spot in the formation in time to make the synchronized jump. The length of that jump was *disconcerting* to those used to effectively-instant Relay travel. Yet, the distance to Dark Space beyond the edge of the galactic plane meant there was a noticeable lag of several long seconds in which they could see nothing but the corona of the Mass Effect Corridor they were traveling through. It was something that had previously only ever been captured by extreme high-speed imaging, so seeing it with nothing but the naked eye was...honestly a little intimidating.

Thankfully, despite the lag time, they came out of the transit with no more drift than usual, though that was *not* the case for everyone. Even the briefest of scans showed a grim reality that nearly a dozen ships had been lost to collisions, including a pair of dreadnaughts. Yet, as horrible as that was, it was the *rest* of what those scans showed that was both far more frightening and far more heartening. For there were Reapers here. Lots and lots and *lots* of Reapers. Thousands, tens of thousands! There were hundreds of stations as well, all in different sizes, styles and configurations. The product of hundreds of cycles as the infrastructure of this dark space anchorage built up.

Yet, for all the fright of the *sheer tonnage* of enemy ships here, *most of them weren't moving*. Just as expected, the *vast* majority of the ships present here were cold in space, dormant and drifting in a way that actually meant sensors were probably only picking up a fraction of them. While that added its own bit of terror, the fact that it matched with what they were expecting was perfect. Unfortunately, that didn't mean their presence had gone unnoticed, or they didn't have anything to worry about. After all, while most of the ships here were dormant, the Guard Fleet was not...and it was bigger than they'd hoped. Nearly seven hundred active Reaper emissions were already turning on them, even as every Citadel Ship opened fire the instant each had a shot.

Thankfully, not all of those ships were Reaper Dreadnaughts. If they had been, the attacking force would very likely have been overmatched before their reinforcements began to arrive. As it was, there were barely a hundred Dreadnaughts in the Reaper Guard Fleet. More than they'd hoped for...but fewer than the hundred and twenty Dreadnaughts they'd brought through in the initial transit. They'd prioritized their Capital Ships, knowing they needed to hit the Guard fleet hard and fast, without screens if they had to. Nothing smaller than a Cruiser had come through the initial transit, with the Pheonix actually being on the smallish end of the heavy metal that had made the first breach.

Not that anyone had questioned their inclusion. Even ignoring who the ship belonged to, Oriana had built the Pheonix to punch well above its apparent weight class. Something which became *very* relevant mere moments into the scrambled battle. Joker, with his usual razer-edged skill, managed to line them up for a firing pass on a Reaper Dreadnaught. The Pheonix closed the range much closer than any regular cruiser would, fighting more like a frigate as a hidden aperture spiraled open on her underside. The ship's biggest secret, which had been used only once before now, opened fire in a blaze of focused Graser fire. The beam weapon, which shouldn't have been able to be mounted on anything smaller than one of the *New Eden* class Dreadnaughts, completely ignored the Reaper's kinetic barriers and ripped hell out of its flank. Those barriers failed as the gunner scythed the beam back and forth, hitting something critical...and two more cruisers pounded into the ship with more traditional weapons the moment the barriers were down. Then they were clear and looking for another target.

A smaller one this time.

The secret to that beam weapon being possible at all were a series of *incredibly* expensive capacitors that allowed them to build up the charge for the massively draining weapon over several minutes. They couldn't fire it rapid succession, but even that one now-dead-in-space Reaper Dreadnaught was a hell of a kill for a trio of cruisers. And they'd likely get to do it again at least a few more times before the Guard Fleet was done. They might end up melting parts of the system down in the process. But, if there was ever a time for that, it was most certainly now...

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The battle had been brutal, but short. Only their first two waves of reinforcements had gotten through before they'd put down the Reaper Guard Fleet. A lot of ships had been sacrificed, sometimes intentionally by cruiser crews that knew this needed to happen *fast* and had outright rammed Reaper Dreadnaughts when their cruisers became too damaged to fight otherwise. Those sacrifices and losses, horrible as they were, had paid off. The assault fleet of Operation Lance had gotten control of the anchorage with barely a handful of the sleeping Reapers being awoken. The slaughter had begun immediately, even as waves of reinforcements had set up on the other Relay present here, connected

back to Omega, to await the inevitable retaliation. That retaliation *had* come, despite everything Operation Barrier could do to slow it down on the Omega side. Thankfully, it had come in fits and starts as the still off-balance Reapers went in half a dozen directions, still unable to react cohesively without the AI on the Citadel to direct them.

With every mine, defense platform, and deliberately placed debris field added to the incoming Relay zone, fewer of the Reapers could get through intact. And the teams destroying repair stations and slaughtering sleeping Reapers had been equipped with every horrifying weapon of mass destruction their respective nations had been able to come up with. Things that should never have seen the light of day were unleashed in that pitch-black and eerie space in the frantic attempt to make sure they killed as much of this logistics support base and its reserves as they could. There was no chance they could find *every* Reaper. Not with so many of them dormant, cold in space. But, then, they had a plan for that too. When the Reaper forces finally started concentrating, striking not just at the Omega Relay but sending forces against the Citadel too, they all knew it was time to retreat.

They didn't do so without a going away present.

Specifically, all the remaining anti-matter they'd been able to create.

**All of it.**

It wasn't much, probably not enough to *permanently* destroy the Relays here. But it could and did disable them as the remnants of the assault fleet, reduced to a third of its original size, fled back to the Citadel. The Reapers still active at the anchorage could repair those Relays, someday, using the corpses of their brothers and destroyed Citadel ships to do so. But it would be a *long, long time*. Centuries, at least. More than long enough to finish the fight with the Reapers still in the Milky Way galaxy proper and build up the forces to come back and finish the job.

The battle to save the Citadel afterward, with it being the focus of a huge chunk of the remaining Reaper forces as they'd tried to stop or reach the extra-galactic fight, had been yet another brutal slog. But it was one that they won, albeit in a battered, brutally wounded sort of fashion. Not even the Phoenix had been spared damages or casualties. Its beam weapon had melted down, half its crew were dead, and they were still fighting fires in some of its compartments when the last of the assaulting Reapers pulled back.

"We...won?"

There was an equal mix of awe and disbelief as Alliana whispered that onto the bridge, breaking the momentary silence as the last of the Reapers fled the system. Oriana smiled hugely.

"We did. There is still a lot to do. But they don't have the numbers now. We will lose worlds, the galaxy will burn. But, eventually, they will run out of ships to throw at us. They lost too many trying to save their logistics base and they no longer have the reserves. Add in the death of their Mast—"

Oriana Lawson did not have time to react as an Asari commando, carefully vetted and loyal right up until this exact moment, put an entire clip of assault rifle fire into her back. Brutal lances of pain were all she knew as her vision faded away, as she fell to the deck, she distantly heard a roar of anger and the sound of biotics ripping her attacker apart...

## Chapter 52: Out of the Darkness

Oriana awoke with a harsh gasp, mind scrambled and scrambling to make sense of where she was. Her entire body was on fire with pain, even as she just barely made out a few scattered words from shadows hanging above it.

“TOO SOON...YOU....MORON...Ten...Rig...NOW I SAID...”

There was a new burning in her veins that her brain vaguely told her was an injection. Then there was nothing. But this time, she dreamed...

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The second time she awoke, it happened far more slowly, without the adrenaline surge and panic that she vaguely remembered from the first time. The dreams, dreams of friends, of family, of enemies, of times both good and terrible, were slow to fade. A heavy emotional exhaustion kept her eyes closed even after her mind began to wake. But then, she felt a hand on hers. Reflexively, she grasped it, somehow already knowing who it belonged to. A smile tugged at her lips. It was a bit painful, but it felt good somehow nevertheless. It took a serious effort of will to force her eyes open, and she managed only a single hoarse word as they focused. A name.

“A-Alliana.”

A tension faded from her lover’s face, relief flooding her eyes, even as the redhead’s other hand reached up to caress Oriana’s cheek.

“Ori. You had us so worried. I’m glad you’re back.”

She could already feel sleep pulling her back under again, even as the equally relieved faces of Liara and her sister appeared behind Alliana.

“G’lad I’m bac’ t’.”

Any other words were lost, as sleep took her once again. This time, all of her dreams were good ones...

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Oriana didn’t know how many times she woke for a few minutes at a time. Many faces appeared in the chair next to her hospital bed as she did. Alliana, Miranda, Liara, Kelly, Samara, Ashley, even Garrus and Tali together once. Slowly, the amount of time she was awake for each time lengthened. A few minutes, twenty, a half an hour. Finally, the day came that she was greeted by Miranda and Alliana together again, feeling much stronger than she had at any point yet. It was time, some part of her realized, to finally face the music. She’d been content, until now, not to ask what was going on. Nor what had happened. Though the latter, of course, she had a vague idea of. She’d always known the powers that be in the galaxy would never let her live once they were sure they didn’t need her again. She was too dangerous and she’d made fools out of too many of them.

Honestly. She was amazed she'd lived through whatever the attempt had been. She vaguely remembered gunfire from behind and pain, but no more than that. She wet her lips and mustered the two questions she knew she needed to ask.

"How long? And what happened?"

Alliana's face darkened, eyes sparking with rage. Thankfully, Miranda's iron control held. There was rage in her eyes too, but her tone was clear as she answered.

"Eleven months. You've been fading in and out for about three. It took me nine to repair all the damage, and I couldn't exactly use all original parts. We almost lost you."

Miranda's voice got a bit rough at the end, causing her to abruptly stop. Alliana, eyes still furious, took up answering the other question.

"One of the Asari Commandos was a sleeper agent. Completely unaware she'd been programmed to activate under specific conditions and with specific commands. She was activated to eliminate you once you were *no longer necessary*, and unloaded her entire assault rifle clip into your back. We tracked her back to a supposedly defunct STG program, but it's likely that it was actually a Council order."

Alliana took a deep breath, clearly fighting to keep calm about that, even if Oriana herself wasn't particularly surprised. She'd expected it, though hadn't thought they'd act *quite* that early. Miranda had gotten control of herself again and picked up the explanation.

"Thankfully, you were still in full armor from the earlier operation. Even if your biotic barrier was down, your armor was beyond bleeding edge and reduced the damage from instantly fatal to just *extremely* mortal. Equally thankfully, you insisted on everyone's armor having a medical stasis module. I assume because of what you said happened to Shepard the first time around. In this case, it save your life...but the galaxy doesn't actually know that."

Oriana straightened, barely wincing as the movement pulled at a few aching parts of her. Did that mean? Miranda smirked and nodded.

"We activated Project Blank. Your condition was bad enough that it was easy to fake your death. And the medical facilities here at Point Slate are some of the best in the galaxy. No one that hasn't visited you has any idea you're alive. Not even your adopted parents, I'm afraid, as the watch kept on them hasn't faded yet. I was never the public figure you were, so it was easy for me to vanish with you dead." Her sister gestured at Alliana. "And Shepard is on the outs with the powers that be after she went on a rampage and gutted every single person and facility that had ever been involved. Including some rather important people. They can't try to eliminate her, since she's too important as a figurehead, but they sidelined her and she slipped her watchers pretty easily."

Oriana grinned, reaching out to squeeze her lover's hand again. Still, there was one more important question to ask.

"And the Reapers?"

Alliana's rage visibly faded a bit between the hand squeeze and the new question. A certain satisfaction replaced much of the anger in her eyes.



“Beaten. Oh, there are still quite a few out there that the various Fleets are hunting down. And they are going to be a *nightmare* for centuries, possibly even for millenia. After all, any one of them could theoretically convert an entire species and launch them at the Citadel’s throat. Even so, that sort of thing can be managed. The chances of them doing a full wipe of organic life again have been broken as thoroughly as we could have hoped, though. The Cycles and Harvest are over. We won. *You won it for us.*”

Oriana shuddered with a wild mix of relief and disbelief. Her eyes closed and she began to cry, with too many emotions running through her to even be sure *why*. Alliana seemed to understand, shifting onto the bed and simply hugging her.

It was over. It was finally over. It would likely be a long time before she could fully accept that. And she wasn’t at all sure who she’d see in the mirror when she finally did. But...it was the first step. A blank slate. She’d done what she set out to do. Now, all that was left was to pick up the pieces and find out how much of herself it had cost her...

### **Chapter 53: Into the Light**

Oriana sipped her mojito even as she idly toyed with the remote control in her hand. Every once in a while she’d tap a command, triggering a burst of pleasure for one of the women playing volleyball on the beach. It certainly made the game more exciting for everyone...particularly given that only the winner’s were going to get their chastity belts removed tonight. The rest would have to wait until she felt like it. She grinned at the thought. Her sex drive wasn’t as *manic* as it had once been, her more settled body and mind not requiring the drug-like distraction she’d made sex into nearly as much any longer. That didn’t mean it was any less fun to do things like this, when a group of her lovers and former lovers got together for a vacation from their various duties. It didn’t happen often, but they all made the most of it every time it could be arranged.

She triggered Liara’s vibrator this time, setting it to a firm pulse and smirking as the Asari nearly miss her defense when the sudden pleasure of the button vibe threw her off. Smirking, knowing it would be a desperate recovery for the current winners for a few minutes, she leaned back in her lounge and simply soaked in the glorious sunlight of her little paradise island on a nameless world far from the Relay network. Getting here took a full week of travel, even using the newest FTL designs from Oriana’s own research projects. And those weren’t available to anyone but her closest friends, so far. An inconvenient distance in some ways, but it offered a degree of protection that just wouldn’t have been possible if she’d stayed in known space. Point Slate, out of which a few of the others operated, was thankfully also a bit closer, only around a three-day journey.

It had been five years since the Reaper War. Almost exactly fourteen since that fateful day she’d taken a desperate dive into the Project Parallax machine and arrived in the past. At the physical age of twenty-eight, she honestly looked more like twenty-two, a side effect of her forcefully mixed genes that she couldn’t exactly complain about. Sure, it did mean she would probably outlive one of her wives, Alliana not being likely to live past 150 unless something drastic changed. But her other wife, Liara, would be in the same shoes with Oriana in the end. Assuming she didn’t die of some sort of hybridization complication, Oriana’s own expected lifespan was only about 450 years, after all. Liara

could easily go on to live another 400 after that. Though, at least Oriana was likely to last into Liara's matron stage to leave her with a child or two, so she wouldn't be alone.

Frankly, as much as all of that should probably bother her, she'd honestly expected to die even if she succeeded in tilting the windmill that was the Reaper Cycle. As a result, the idea of even the century or so of life she had left with Shepard was a glorious decadence that she wasn't going to worry so much about losing. The fact that all three of them, plus nearly all of their sometimes-lovers, had come through the Reaper War and its aftermath alive was several different miracles all in a neat little row. Not everyone had been nearly so lucky, of course, not even from her own immediate acquaintances.

Kaidan had died to a hit on the Phoenix in the last battles, along with a couple of the commandos that she'd grown to know well. Ani'lia and Fallion had died when the Reaper Remnant had hit a New Dawn R&D shipyard, which has stun a lot even if they'd parted ways as lovers years ago. Garrus had survived the Reaper War only to die in cleanup operations three years later, though she'd admittedly been only passingly close with the Spectre. He'd only ever visited with Tali, who thankfully hadn't shared his fate. Others had been killed, not been trusted with the secret of her survival, or else had simply grown apart. Such was the way of things.

Yet, as much melancholy as had come with those loses, great joy had been found as well. She, Liara, and Alliana had been married two years after the war ended in a very private event. Shepard and Liara were publicly known to be married back in civilized space, while Oriana's survival was still too risky a secret to out in that way. But that was fine. It just meant Shepard had to deal with the burdens of being married to an only heir to one of the Asari great families. While Oriana, on the other hand, got all the fun bits of regularly fucking them both senseless, cuddling whenever they were around, and didn't have to deal with any of the political bullshit anymore!

Honestly, that last part brought almost as much joy as her wives. Though only almost.

By the large, she was content. It had taken years and the combined efforts of several carefully vetted therapists to get to that place. The first year, in particular, had been rough as she was finally forced to face all the choices she'd made in the name of survival. But she had worked through her biggest issues, was still working on the rest, and was thoroughly enjoying the chance to invent and tinker on non-military projects. Originally just a means to an end, somewhere along the way she'd discovered that she genuinely loved engineering challenges. Creating things that were meant to build a better galaxy, instead of causing destruction, was a pleasant way to spend her time. Though she was greatly amused how her new pseudonym was slowly becoming more famous than 'Oriana Lawson' had ever been. The Council wasn't eager to associate her real name with history, whereas her Pandora Hopeswell identity was slowly becoming *the* name in fields like exploration, energy harvesting, and metamaterials.

As for the galaxy at large? Well, there was still quite a bit of chaos out there. For a few years yet, the ongoing hunt for Reaper Remnants and the need to rebuild would keep the galaxy busy. After that...a whole lot of genies had been uncorked from many different bottles out of desperation near the end. Add in all the military buildups, all the trauma everyone had been through, and the usual mixture of greed, ambition, and short-sightedness...and the galaxy was likely in for a rough ride over the next century or so. Still, it would survive. Which is a lot better than could be said of all their predecessors, now wasn't it?

Grinning as she tired of such deep thoughts, she picked up Ashely's newest Neuralux from the nearby table, running one hand down her nude body to prepare her pussy for the thick toy. She watched Ashley stiffen from where she'd been refereeing the volleyball match, the Spectre glancing warily back at Oriana as she felt that touch. With a cheeky wink, Oriana ran her tongue over the head of the toy, causing the woman to fold over as the sensation translated. She wondered just what would happen to the game, now that she was distracting the one person responsible enough that she'd been put in charge of monitoring both side for dirty tricks and biotics? Well, it would certainly be entertaining to find out...

Blissfully, as she moaned along with Ashley as the toy slid home, she forgot all her thoughts about Reapers and the rest of the galaxy. She'd done her part already. The Reapers had made their Final Error and Oriana had helped the galaxy defeat them. Now, all that was left to do was enjoy her just rewards for saving the galaxy. It was a New Dawn, of a New Era, and it was someone else's turn to be the Hero. Oriana was happy to fade away and have some fun with her wives and their occasional lovers...

Besides. It's not like there was *another* galaxy to save. That would just be silly.

-The End-