

Mass Effect: The Final Error

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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 two foot 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 one 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...

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...

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 ezeo 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...

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 wandering off a bit and 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 ezeo 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 and Illium was Eclipse territory besides. But his money would help...and she needed actual combat experience. She stepped into his living room, hands glowing and biotic barrier up...

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 ezeo 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 the thoughts off. They were 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 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 who had gotten Oriana her job as a runner for the matriarch. 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. Fallion was actually a decent sort and the fun they had together was more exploratory than serious. It might actually 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 ezeo 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...”

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 be part of 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. Hmm, 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 why...just that it would be fun...

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 few 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. It's 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...

"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 an Aethyta's education, she liked to think she could make even most straight women look twice, but 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 Williams' 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...

"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...when 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 emplacement's 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 marine 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 line. 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 overheating. 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 Nirali 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...

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 onto 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, 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 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 that 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 he had a place to start 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 pre work, no one was about to complain. During that time, the Meld Specialist had confirmed the authenticity of Liara's vision, all those of 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 battlemaster, 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, Oriana 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.

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 didn't happen. For now, focus on the council...who was 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 changed to 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."

Oriana smiled back at the other woman, just as grimly. Even if, inside...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.

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 her 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 other 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 opened them 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...

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, the 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, she whipped the cover off the food cart...neatly wiping away any lingering annoyance from the gunny as she 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...and had simply seemed 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...and finally, 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 5 years ago, if they hadn't. But...my loyalty was always to you 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....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!

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 toward arranging new gear for the crew 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...and 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'd 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...and 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 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...is how Oriana found herself desperately dodging 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...and 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, 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...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.

And, of course, there was the other wildcard that she 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 and Benezia hadn't been to Noveria yet in this timeline...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 other three 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 excited the tram unmolested...then all hell broke loose when they took the elevator up the science station.

The lighting reactions of the Spectres and 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 pull 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...something 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 their 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. 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 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 nearly gotten into their first serious 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 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 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, and 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 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 her early issues 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 the case with the rush-job they're doing on 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 and also 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 council 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' secretary is actually an internal investigator for the Noveria Executive Board..."

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 in 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 our yourself. 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's 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 join 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 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 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 bandaid 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 gained 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 councilors, 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...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' 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 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 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, 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. And 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 to blush even more darkly. 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 her 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 eased 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 buttocks 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 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 coms 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, who had quickly taken over control of the 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...

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. 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 that 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 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. 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 defensible...just in time for the Freighters 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 grimace, 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 complicated 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 been farther 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 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 she'd been an Asari 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. Now, however...she was intending on pushing her companion and hopefully soon-to-be lover a bit more. The way Liara had been looking at her last night had made it clear she was interested in more, just unsure about...everything, really.

Which was perfectly okay with Oriana. She had *plans* for the maiden. Fun ones. And they started with the Thessian meal she'd cooked herself, 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...

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 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 pulling out 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, 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...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...

End of Part 5

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 omi-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.

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 up 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."

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..."

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...but we're playing for stakes that include the wellbeing of every advanced civilization in the known galaxy. We're playing 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 she didn't...

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 women 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, that 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 with the fact that it would be almost entirely her people running the Broker network afterward.

Finally, 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...

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 his terminal, 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 half flying at him. 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 than 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 the 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 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...

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 'what's' 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 Urdnot 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.

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-squirring 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 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 it 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...

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 that 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...

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 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 ezeo, which we can cook the books a bit on to make it seem even larger and more rich in ezeo? 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 ezeo 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 certain *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 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...Liana?"

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.

"Liana'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 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 the 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 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 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 silence 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 pressed 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 the 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...

End of Part 6

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 affecting the safety of the 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' 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 as 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. 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 had 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 tests, 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 System's 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...

"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.

"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."

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 drive 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 a 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 wrench, 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 doing exactly this.

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 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 comical 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, at the cost of a fish tank one of the designers had been obsessed with needing to be moved into one of the walls. Oriana had managed to whisper into Liara’s ear in transit and the horny blue maiden instinctively obeyed her orders, 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 orgy, 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 had 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 the Phoenix. 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 Heretic 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 in to 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 could do. Then there was a THUMP...and the pods opened and their occupants poured 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...

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...

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, it's 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 coms. It was with some surprised 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 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 System's 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 in 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.

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 find leads...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. The redhead might still have tried to go out and beat the bushes for information personally...but Oriana had 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...and 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 the 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. Not 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 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 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 did you want 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 go 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."

End of Part 7

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. Ones 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 of 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, a 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 they, 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. So 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.

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 groaned 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 the 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 to both Spectre and System's 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 encounters 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 and 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 teams 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 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, Npeheron will be our first target. The Chasca Research stations seem more like what we saw on Virmire, 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?"

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 Npeheron 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 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 arm of the mech up even as it tried to fire on Wrex...and 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 crack 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.

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 last 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 brining up a display of the various results, letting them cycle through as she talked.

"In short, Cerberus is comprised." 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 with 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.”

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, even if she’d upped the power whenever she wasn’t. But, now that she was ‘doing paperwork’ while ‘eating’ with Oriana and Liara, she 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 she 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 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...partially because Asari *could* cum from the neural stimulators and had done so often enough to leave her utterly spent. Which all 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, when they finally got 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 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, 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 piecemeal. 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. 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?!

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 the first thing she wanted to do was simply admire it while teasing Alliana a bit more. The first thing she did was take the small, wet towel that she'd set on a warmer and gently run 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 by the yoke. Oriana ran the warm towel over Shepard's pussy, 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 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 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. 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 pulling 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 has 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.

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 it only got better as Oriana began to move, only 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*...

End Part 8

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 how 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 likely 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 auto-pilot, 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's such is what the Reaper is actually doing. That's still only a guess. 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 it we've 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."

Alianna 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.

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 5th fleet. Nor did the scattering of other citadel ships. Even the few 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 it 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, 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 5th 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. 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 System's 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 simply snapped in half.

Every ship in the fleet continued to pound on its hulk, even after its 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...

It had been both better and worse than feared. When the final tally had been rendered, the loss 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 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 27: 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 hung 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 random 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, Oriana moan 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...

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 26: 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 a 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 it’s incredible. 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 Valren both reached forward and began reading, scrolling through the reams of data the holotables 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 totally 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 it’s 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..."

<End of Part 9>