

Reminiscences

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Reminiscences

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Summary

The Cerberus Normandy crew led by Dark Shep wind down while on the Gallena, Kaidan shares memories of his time on the original Normandy in the past. We also find out what REALLY happened to Ashley on Virmire!! This is a turning point in the story as we're now going to be spending a lot more time in, for lack of a better term, one of the Star Trek universes, and we'll be doing a lot of switching between the two universes before everyone finally meets. A lot of story left to go.

The Present: Cerberus Frigate Normandy 2 en route to Phantom Station

"You owe me a steak dinner, Dixie!" Markham chuckled as he quaffed down a beer in the crew lounge.

"I'll fix it for ya when we get to the station, Benji." Doris promised with a grin, "Ya'll earned it on the last mission." Her laughter subsided, she uttered in her southern accent, "You saved my ass back there and I...I..."

"Hey, don't mention it, Dixie Belle." Markham, the team sniper, interjected with a warm smile as he placed his hand gently on top of the hand of the Alabama born engineer. "Besides...I recall you bailing me out of a tight spot too. I'd say we're even..." his lips turning up in a wicked grin, the Wisconsin born sniper teased, "...but if you really wanna pay me back..."

"In your dreams, you damn Yankee!" Doris teased back, her gentle laughter filling the room as Jason Barrett, the team's heavy weapons expert, spotted their commander standing near the doorway observing them.

"Hey Boss!" The heavysset, well-muscled dark-skinned man called out, waving in a come hither motion, "Come on over and join us."

Chuckling, the Shepard replied, "Can't right now. Gotta finish writing up the after action report or the Big Boss will have my head. I'll stop by when I'm done though if you're still here."

"We'll be here, Boss." Whaley replied as she held up her mug. "Got plenty o' beer to drink. The Snake...errrr...Mr. Leng...is in his quarters doing whatever it is he does if'n you need to talk to him."

"That's all right." Shepard grinned back, "I got everything I need for my report from Leng already." She then asked before turning away and leaving, "What's the latest word on our guest?"

"Still sound asleep in his tube." Barrett replied with a chuckle, "Thank God. I know the last thing I wanted was a four hundred pound krogan running around loose."

"Yeah, Boss." Markham echoed, "Thanks for keeping him sealed up."

"All goes well..." Shepard replied, her smile still on her lips, "He'll sleep all the way to Phantom Station. Then he becomes the Big Boss's problem." Heaving a sigh, the commander made her somewhat reluctant departure, "This report's not gonna write itself. I'll see you later."

"Later, Boss!"

Entering her quarters, the clone poured a cup of coffee before sitting down at her desk, "This is going to take a while." She muttered as she activated her computer. "EDI? Did you get the information I asked for?"

“Yes, Commander.” The Cerberus AI affirmed in a flat tone, “I have all of Commander Shepard’s logs from when you first became Executive Officer of the *Normandy* through your final log entry just prior to the attack that resulted in the destruction of the ship and your death.”

“Good.” Shepard replied, “Play all log entries starting with the first...”

2183 CE: SSV Normandy

Executive Officer’s Log First Entry: Was welcomed aboard today by Captain Anderson and immediately began my duties. This assignment...this assignment is all I ever dreamed it would be. Serving under Captain Anderson...the first person to graduate from the N7 War College and a hero of the First Contact War. One of our most decorated Special Forces officers. I’m looking forward to learning everything I can from him while I’m here...

Jane Shepard’s First Day: SSV Normandy—2183

“Permission to come on board, Sir.” Newly promoted Jane Shepard snapped off a sharp salute to the stocky, yet fit, dark-skinned man standing in front of her wearing the blue uniform with gold trim of a System Alliance officer and bearing on his shoulders the rank insignia of captain.

“Permission granted, Commander.” Captain Anderson replied, returning the commander’s salute. After a momentary pause, a grin appeared on the captain’s face as he extended his hand in greeting. “Welcome aboard the *Normandy*, Commander Shepard.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Jane replied as she took the captain’s hand and shook it. “Mother sends her regards, Captain.”

“And how is Hannah?” Anderson inquired as he motioned for his new executive officer to accompany him.

“Doing well, Sir.” Shepard replied as the pair walked past the galaxy map and entered the elevator. “She took just command of the *Orizaba* and is currently on patrol.”

“Fine ship and crew.” Anderson nodded his head as the pair made their way to the crews’ quarters. “Exec’s cabin is over here.” The captain gestured to a door. “I’ll let you stow your gear. Then, I’m sure you’re going to want to take some time to get familiar with the ship and crew before we begin our assignment.”

“How long will I have, Sir?” The commander asked as the pair entered the executive officer’s tiny quarters.

“A couple of days at least.” Anderson replied, further explaining as his new second-in-command stowed her duffle bag under her rack. “We’re waiting on a passenger. Wish I could tell you more, Shepard, but everything’s need to know and right now...”

“I don’t need to know.” The redhead replied with a crooked grin as she ran her hand through her short, silky, red hair.

Chuckling, the captain responded, “Right.” His laughter fading, he apologized, “I’m sorry about all the cloak and dagger stuff, but...”

“I understand, Sir.” Shepard demurred, with a slight incline of her head, then flashed another wicked grin, “Been there...done that.”

His smile returning, the captain again shook his new officer’s hand. “Well...I’ll leave you to get settled in. You need anything...you know where I am.”

“Thank you, Sir.” The commander replied. As the captain left her alone, the redhead took a deep breath and taking out her duffle bag from its temporary storage spot, began the process of unpacking. “One of the advantages of being in the service.” Shepard grinned as she proceeded about her task, “You learn to travel light.” Once she had completed the process of moving in, the new XO muttered to herself, “Well, Jane... time to meet the troops.”

Cerberus Frigate Normandy 2—the present.

“Gonna need more coffee.” Shepard sighed as she looked up from her computer console.

“I can have the galley send you up a carafe.” EDI suggested.

“Do it.” The commander requested, “I have to take a piss. I’ll be back in a moment.”

“I have informed the galley of your request.” EDI declared as Shepard rose from her chair. “The coffee will be here when you return from the head.”

“Very good.”

Returning a few moments later, her bladder now empty, Shepard refilled her mug with fresh hot coffee and sat back down in front of her console. Taking a sip, she activated the computer. “Let’s see the next log entry.” Taking a sigh, she began to read muttering under her breath. “Gonna be a long night.”

“Executive Officer’s log...” Commander Shepard recited as she made her second official log entry summing up the events of the day. “After meeting Lieutenant Alenko, I set about meeting the rest of my new crew. They’re good people...all of them. Gotta say one thing about Captain Anderson...he knows how to pick ‘em. My first interview was with the navigator...Lieutenant Pressley...”

“Lieutenant Pressley! Come in and have a seat.” Jane urged as the bald headed navigator entered the XO’s quarters.

“Ma’am.” Pressley politely replied as he sat down on the chair next to the new executive officer’s tiny desk. “I was told that you wanted to see me?”

“Yes.” Shepard replied as she sipped her coffee. “This is an informal chat. I’m just wanting to get acquainted with the senior officers and staff. Would you like some tea or coffee?”

“No, thanks, Ma’am.” The navigator stiffly replied.

“Relax, Pressley.” Shepard urged with a slight grin. “As I said, this is an informal chat, not your performance evaluation.” Shaking her head as the navigator retained his stiff posture, Jane sighed, “All right...straight to business. Tell me something about yourself. What was your posting before coming on to the *Normandy*.”

“I was on the *Agincourt* before the *Normandy*,” Pressley stated proudly.

“A fine ship.” Shepard nodded her head. “I met her skipper, Captain Ferrara, a time or two before he took command.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The navigator replied, a slight smile appearing on his face, “I was proud to serve aboard her. I was a Chief Warrant Officer at the time. We were one of the first reinforcements to arrive at Elysium after the Skyllian Blitz.”

“You have no idea how happy we all were when you guys showed up. It was like the cavalry riding in just the nick of time.” Shepard replied with an appreciative grin on her face. “And I want you to know my offer still stands. I’m buying the first round for any member of the relief force I run into. So...first shore leave we get...drinks are on me. Got that, Pressley?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The grizzled navigator responded, his grin growing wider. “Anyway, Ma’am...” he said as he continued his narrative, “... after Elysium I received my commission...Captain Ferrara put me in for it and wouldn’t let me turn it down. Then...Captain Anderson asked me to serve on the *Normandy*. I couldn’t refuse. Didn’t really have a choice...” the navigator recalled with a chuckle, “Captain Ferrara told me that if I didn’t take the position, I’d be wearing his boot prints on my ass for the rest of my life. Couldn’t tell Captain Anderson no after that.”

“Don’t feel bad.” Jane laughed, “Captain Ferrara can be pretty intimidating when he wants to be, and Captain Anderson’s a hard man to turn down. So...what drove you to enlist?”

“Family.” The navigator responded. “My grandfather served in the First Contact War...”

After the navigator had finished his account of his family’s history in service, Shepard nodded her head in understanding. “I see that Alliance blue runs in your blood, Navigator.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Pressley responded with pride. “Counting me, three generations of Pressleys have worn the blue and my son will be entering the Academy next year.”

“That’s good to know.” Jane acknowledged as she rose to her feet, signaling an end to the interview. “Thank you for your time, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” The navigator responded as he came attention and rendered a snappy salute. “Permission to return to duty?”

“Permission granted.” The XO responded, returning her officer’s salute with one that was equally crisp.

Executive Officer’s Log: After meeting Pressley, I spoke to the Chief Engineer: Lieutenant Adams. Like Pressley, he was handpicked by Captain Anderson. Also like our navigator, he is very good at his job.

“Come in Chief Adams.” Shepard smiled, deliberately referring to the lieutenant by his title of chief engineer. “Have a seat. This is just an informal chat.”

“Thanks, Ma’am.” Adams replied as he sat down on the same chair Navigator Pressley had recently occupied.

“So, Chief...” The commander inquired as she passed in front of the engineer before sitting down behind her desk, “What did you do before Captain Anderson snared you for the *Normandy*?”

“I’ve served on pretty much everything the Alliance has.” Adams replied with pride, “If it flies, I’ve been on it.”

“Where was your last assignment?”

“The *Tokyo*, Ma’am. Don’t get me wrong, she was a fine ship...good captain...great crew...solid. But...it can’t hold a candle to the *Normandy*.”

“How so?” Shepard asked.

“The *Normandy*’s a hot rod, Ma’am.” Chief Adams grinned, “She’s fast, sleek, and the IES Stealth System gives her an edge no other ship, inside or outside the Alliance, possesses. We can slip into an enemy controlled system, drop off a recon or strike team, and slip out without no one knowing or we can hover within the system and monitor enemy activities without being detected.”

“I like that.” Shepard nodded her head in understanding, “It’s also good to know that we can get out of trouble as fast as we got into it.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Although...” the chief warned, “...you do have to vent the heat sinks every so often and that makes us stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Thanks.” The XO nodded her head, “That’s good to know. So...” She asked, “Any family?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Adams smiled warmly, “Parents in the Alliance and the Missus...she’s back on Earth.”

The interview continued for several more minutes until, satisfied, Shepard rose to her feet, indicating that the conference was over. “Thank you, Chief. It’s good to know that the *Normandy*’s engines are in such good hands. I’ll let you get back to work now. Dismissed.”

“Ma’am.”

As her engineer walked out of her quarters, the newly appointed XO recorded another entry into her log...

Executive Officer’s log: Still have our pilot and chief medical officer to interview, but I’m liking what I’m seeing. This is a helluva ship and I’ve got a feeling I’m in for a helluva ride. Executive Officer logging out.

Cerberus Frigate Normandy 2—present day

“Hey Commander?”

Her concentration disrupted by the intercom call, Shepard answered, “Yes.”

“Sorry to disturb you, Boss...” Markham’s voice came through the speaker, “But we’re wondering if you were still planning on joining us.”

Glancing at the log entries on her computer console, the commander pondered for a moment as she asked herself what her predecessor?...past self?...would have done. Breaking out of her reverie, she responded, “Give me a moment and I’ll be right down. Just don’t drink up all the beer.”

“Gonna have to hurry!” Doris’s voice resounded through the speaker. “Jason’s chugging down another pitcher!”

The logs aren’t going anywhere. Shepard said to herself as she got up from her chair. *And...to be honest...a cold beer sounds good right now.*

As her monitoring devices picked up on the Commander leaving her quarters, EDI once again regretted not having a human form because, if she did, she would be smiling right now.

Virmire—2183 Saren’s Research Labs prior to Shepard’s landing

Rana Thanoptis let out a breath of air as she called up her most recent notes on her omnitool. “Damn.” The asari neuroscientist swore under her breath as she made her way to the indoctrination cells, ostensibly to check up on the salarian prisoners being kept there. “I was afraid of this. The effects of indoctrination also effect those in the vicinity. So far, my exposure has been negligible, but that’s going to change quickly if I don’t find a way out of here.” She muttered to herself as she worked her way to the lower levels of the facility, finally reaching an exit.

After ensuring that she was no longer being tracked by the facility’s monitoring devices, she slipped out and made her way down a trail until she reached a small cavern. Entering the cavern, she proceeded down for what seemed like kilometers, passing several intersections and branch offs until, having gone deep enough, she paused as she reached an area where the walls were composed of a smooth surface rather than rough rock. Pausing for a moment, the attractive asari sighed in relief as she again called up her omnitool and checked its readings. “No sign of Sovereign’s signal penetrating here. Whatever material these walls are made of, they’re dense enough to block its signal. That’s probably the only thing keeping me from one of the cells. Too bad there’s no way I can just disappear down here.” She groaned as she proceeded further down the passageway, “If I did, it wouldn’t take long for Saren to find out and then he’d stumble on to this...”

Reaching her objective, the asari smiled a brilliant smile as she beheld the sight before her. “Damn!” She gasped as she wondered at the structure. “I don’t know who made you, but whoever it was...they put the Protheans to shame.” Approaching what appeared to be a control console, she passed her hand over a surface, causing the center of the structure to display an image. Rana’s gaze was drawn to the image of what appeared to be a chamber hewn out of rock with, on one of the walls, what appeared to be an inscription of some sort. “I still can’t figure out what you’re saying...” The asari scientist remarked with a crooked grin as her eyes fell on the strange markings. You’re obviously some sort of alphabet—some of the markings in the image are the same as those on the console and archway, but what are you trying to tell me? Are you what I think...what I hope...you might be?” She pondered for several seconds before reluctantly ending her reverie, “Because if you are...then you might just be my...as the humans say...ticket out of here. But where?”

RRW Gallena—the present day

“Lovely sunset.” V’lana said in a soft voice as she leaned her head on the shoulder of the man sitting next to her on a small hill, the couple watching a dual sunset on the garden world of Parelus III. Seeing the distant look in her man’s eyes, the lovely Romulan tenderly probed, “Something wrong?”

“Huh?” Kaidan exclaimed, “Oh...Ummm...I’m sorry, ‘lana...I was just thinking.”

“What were you thinking about?” V’lana gently persisted.

“The *Normandy*.” Kaidan’s lips turned up in a sad smile, “The old *Normandy*. A couple of years ago today, Jane came aboard and we met for the first time.”

“Tell me about it.” V’lana prompted.

“You sure you wanna hear this?” Kaidan replied, “I mean...I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable or anything...”

“If you’re worried that I’m going to get jealous over a ghost...” V’lana smiled warmly as she gently touched her companion's hand, “I won’t. Promise. But I think it’ll do you a lot of good to talk about her...and about the rest of your friends that you lost.”

Letting out a small chuckle, Kaidan grinned, “That’s the same thing Counselor Chambers told me.”

“Good advice.” The lovely Romulan stated, “That’s one of the reasons why she’s here. “So...spill...”

“All right...” Kaidan replied with another warm grin, “But don’t say I didn’t warn you...”

SSV Normandy—2183 just prior to the Eden Prime mission

“That was awesome!” Corporal Jenkins exclaimed as his superior officer, Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, biotically levitated him into the air and then gently set him down while the ship’s doctor, Karin Chakwas, looked on with a big smile on her face.

As the dark haired biotic released the corporal from his hold, the doctor approached, “How are you feeling Lieutenant? No headaches.”

“I’m fine, Doctor.” Kaidan replied with a grin.

“What about you, Jenkins?” Chakwas inquired with a big grin on her face.

“That was amazing!” The hyperactive Alliance marine responded.

“Glad you had fun, Corporal.” The lieutenant remarked, before, his laughter fading away, reminding the young marine, “Don’t you have a watch to stand? Better go if you don’t want to explain to the new XO why you were late reporting for duty.”

“Yes, Sir.” Jenkins sheepishly replied, “I’ll go now.”

“Speaking of our new XO...” Dr. Chakwas smirked as a redhead wearing Alliance blues with commander’s stripes approached.

Coming to attention, Kaidan saluted, “Commander.”

“As you were, Lieutenant.” The commander replied with the slightest trace of a smile on her face. “I take it you’re Lieutenant Alenko?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The lieutenant responded crisply.

“Commander Shepard.” The redhead replied, returning her subordinate’s salute with a crisp one of her own. “I understand you’re in charge of the ship’s marines.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Kaidan acknowledged.

“What’s their current state of readiness?”

“Ready and able, Ma’am.” Alenko announced in a confident voice.

Nodding her head in approval, the commander replied, “Good.” Her slight smile returning, she commented, “I believe that you’re also the copilot of this ship?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Kaidan affirmed, “In fact, my watch will be commencing shortly.”

“Then I had better let you go.” The commander acknowledged, her grin growing wider, “After all, you wouldn’t want to explain to your new XO why you were late for watch.”

“No, Ma’am.” The Canadian biotic affirmed as a slight smile appeared on his face as well.

“Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

“Ma’am.”

The Present—Holodeck on the Gallena

“Sounds like she was pretty...what’s the human expression? By the book?” V’lana remarked as she again leaned her head against the shoulder of the man sitting next to her.

“Hmmm...no. Not really.” Kaidan shook his head, “She wasn’t a martinet if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Martinet?” V’lana inquired with a raised eyebrow, genuinely confused by the term.

“You know...” Kaidan replied with an amused grin, “...one of those officers who loves to hold surprise inspections and expects you to always have your shoes spit shined, armor polished, and quarters squared away. Like Admiral Mikhailovich. Shepard knew when to loosen up on the reins and when to crack the whip.”

“I know Starfleet captains and admirals and Romulan commanders and admirals who I guess you could say are martinets.” V’lana replied with a nod of her head, now understanding her lover’s meaning. “You’ve got two types of senior officers: the assholes and the hard asses. And yeah...you’re right. There is a difference between the two although at first glance they might appear to be the same.”

“Yeah.” Kaidan agreed, “The assholes get you killed for no good reason. And while the hard asses might get you killed; they don’t do it because they’re stupid like the assholes. They usually have a very good reason for doing it like...like...”

“Like when Shepard had to choose between you and the other one...”

Lowering his head, Kaidan ruefully acknowledged, “Ashley. Yeah.” The human biotic sighed dejectedly as memories of his old comrade flooded his mind. “I remember...I remember...Virmire...”

“Tell me about it.” V’lana gently urged, placing her hand over the hand of her human partner, “Please.”

Kaidan sighed dejectedly as he began his tale.

Virmire—the hunt for Saren—2183

“What’s next on the agenda, Skipper?” Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams asked as she and the rest of Shepard’s team sat in their seats in the *Normandy’s* communications room.

“Our next stop’s Virmire.” Commander Shepard declared as she brushed back a stray lock of red hair. “I just received word from the Council that a STG team that had been sent there to gather information on Saren has gone dark after sending out a garbled message.”

“The geth probably got them.” Ashley stated the others in the team murmuring their agreement with her hunch.

“Probably.” Shepard conceded, “Or they could still be alive, but unable to set up communications.”

“That’s not an impossibility.” Kaidan averred. “There could be conditions that prevent their setting up a proper communications relay.”

“The salarian councilor was thinking the same thing.” Jane declared. “He also stated that the message they received was on a mission critical channel. So...whatever it was they were trying to tell us...it must have been important.”

“It could be that the councilor’s simply worried about his people.” Liara suggested.

“Maybe.” The commander conceded, “But...I don’t think so. The salarian councilor doesn’t impress me as being the sort that would worry about the condition of his assets so long as they carried out their missions.”

“I gotta disagree with you there, Shepard.” Garrus chimed in. “From what I’ve heard about Valern through the C-Sec rumor mill, he’s very pragmatic in outlook. STG operatives are on a par with Alliance N7s and Turian elites. He won’t throw away the lives of a trained infiltration team lightly. If he says that they might have uncovered something of importance down there, then it’s a safe bet they did.”

“Point taken, Garrus.” Shepard grinned, “I stand corrected.” Taking a deep breath, she continued with her briefing. “We’re already en route and should arrive at the Styx Theta cluster mass relay shortly. From there, it’s a short hop to Virmire. This is going to be an all hands on deck operation, so check your gear out and grab some shuteye—I’ve got a feeling we’re all going to need it. Questions?” Seeing that no hands raised, the commander nodded her head once, “Good. Dismissed.”

RRW Gallena—present day

“Sounds like Shepard was the sort who listened to her people.” V’lana stated as the pair continued to watch the setting of the two suns which had sunk lower into the horizon.

“She was.” Kaidan smirked, “I remember a conversation we had after we picked up Liara on Therum. We were discussing how she wasn’t getting any backup from the Council and...well...I offered my opinions. She could have easily shot me down then and there and told me to zip it and not a few officers I know would have done just that. But...she listened. A little later on...we had another conversation. You see, while she wasn’t a strictly by the book officer, Jane tended to always try to do things the right way. Nothing wrong with that...if I gotta be honest, that’s one of the things that drew me to her...the fact that she’d always try to take the approach that caused the least suffering and pain—even if it wasn’t the most expedient.” The human biotic declared as his Romulan companion quietly listened, “But...it’s not always the best route to go...especially when you’re putting yourself out on a limb like she was with no real support from anyone and lots of people looking to

see her fail.”

“You’ve got give yourself a way out—just in case the shit hits the fan.” V’lana interjected with a smirk.

“Those were just about the exact words I said to her.” Kaidan chuckled. His laughter dying down, he reminisced, “She also listened to everyone else. Took their suggestions and opinions into account. But...when it was time to make a decision—she made it and stuck with it and took the consequences—good or bad.”

“Like Virmire?” V’lana prompted in a soft, gentle voice.

“Like Virmire.” Kaidan nodded his head. “I was part of the Mako team along with Jane and Ash. The plan was for Joker to drop us off and we’d provide a distraction and take out the AA guns to give him the room he needed to land the rest of the team at the salarian camp. It worked because we saw fighting almost as soon as we touched down...”

Virmire—the hunt for Saren—2183

“Picking up a signal.” Joker declared, “That’s probably our infiltration team.”

“Take a look at those defense towers.” Kaidan said, pointing out the structures that ship’s sensors and drones had pinpointed.

“Drop the Mako...” Jane ordered, “We’re going in hard and fast.”

“Clean drop, Commander.” Joker related as the *Normandy* sped off fast to avoid detection by the Geth surveillance devices.

“Keep my baby safe, Joker.” Shepard ordered, “Stay out of range and keep evasive until we knock out those gun emplacements.”

“Aye, Commander.” The ace pilot responded, “Switching to undercover mode until you say otherwise. Joker out.”

“All right.” Jane smiled as she clapped both of her teammates on the back of their shoulders, “Let’s mount up and roll out!”

As Shepard drove the Mako through the shallow water, Ashley called out, “Rocket drones at 12 o’clock! Firing main gun!”

“Direct hit!” Kaidan exclaimed as the first drone went down.

“Switching to machine guns.” The gunnery chief shouted as mass effect projectiles impacted on two more drones, bringing them down. “All clear.”

“I’m sure they brought friends with them.” Jane declared with a grimace, “So keep your eyes peeled.”

“Scratch two more drones.” Ash announced with a big grin on her face.

“Good shooting, Chief.” Shepard grinned back, “But don’t get cocky.”

“Yes, Ma’am...” Ashley replied, the grin still on her face, “I mean no, Ma’am...activating cocky filter now.”

“Better slow it down here, Commander...” Kaidan advised, “Good spot for an ambush.”

Doing as she was advised, the redheaded Spectre applied the brakes, slowing the Mako down to a virtual crawl as all eyes were glued to the armored vehicle’s scanners and monitors.

“Nothing so far.” Ashley declared in a voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s too easy.” Shepard murmured. “Keep your finger on that firing button, Gunny.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

“Here they come!” Kaidan exclaimed as several assault and rocket drones suddenly appeared.

“Let ‘em have it, Ash!” Shepard commanded as she put the Mako through a series of gyrating maneuvers and making frequent use of the vehicle’s jump jets, coming close on more than one occasion to the edge of a cliff or to the deep water that lay only a few meters away.

After a fight that seemed to last for minutes, but was really over in a matter of seconds, the gunnery chief called out, “I think that’s the last of them.”

“Secure and reload.” The commander ordered as she put the Mako back on its course. “I doubt this is going to be the only surprise the Geth are going to have in store for us.”

RRW Gallena—the present

“Helluva gauntlet you guys ran.” V’lana declared, “Sounds like the three of you worked well together.”

“That was nothing compared to the one we had to run through on Ilos.” The Canadian biotic chuckled, “But...getting back to what you said, yeah, we all worked well together—didn’t matter what combo went out on a given mission. Jane was sorta like you...she insisted on rotating

people around so that we were all well aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, but she also realized that certain combos worked better in certain circumstances than others."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Kaidan smiled as he reminisced, "I remember asking her about why she tended to pair certain people with others once...it was after we completed the Noveria mission, but before we got the word to go to Vormire. We were cleaning up after another one of Cerberus's messes and after we finished dealing with one of their hidden labs and had returned to the ship, we talked..."

2183—Just prior to the Vormire Mission

"Commander?" Kaidan cleared his throat as the redheaded Spectre drew closer, "Anything I can help you with?"

"Just wanted your input on our last job." Jane replied with a sly grin on her face.

As he realized that their conversation would soon get more personal, a slight grin appeared on the Canadian biotic's face as well as he gave her his tactical analysis of the recent mission. After he'd delivered his report, but before the conversation could turn to more intimate matters, he inquired, "Hope you don't mind me asking, Commander, but why did you pick me and Ash for this assignment, but went with Garrus and Tali when you took out those Geth bases in the Armstrong Cluster? No reason for me asking..." He quickly added, "Just curious."

Her smile still on her face, Jane explained the reasoning behind her choices. "I'm sure it hasn't escaped your eye that certain members of our team work better with each other than others."

"I did notice that." Kaidan replied with a smirk.

"Take...for example..." The redhead further elaborated, "Tali and Wrex. They've developed a sort of grandfather—granddaughter bond."

"Yeah." Kaidan laughed, "Wrex seems to have taken our little quarian under his wing."

"And turned her into hell on wheels with a shotgun." Jane laughed, "But yeah, I like to keep those two together whenever possible. Same thing with you, me, and Liara. Besides the three of us getting along well with each other, we synergize nicely out in the field—our strengths augmenting the others' weaknesses."

"What about Garrus?"

"Believe it or not..." Jane laughed, "Him and Wrex work best together." Her countenance sobering, she explained, "Yeah...at first...because of their peoples' shared animosity for each other, their relationship was kinda rocky..."

"Kinda?" Kaidan interjected, raising an eyebrow. "Our first day out, Ashley had to break up a fight between the two of them before they trashed the hangar bay."

Jane laughed, "I remember that. They scared the shit out of our poor requisitions officer. But..." she pointed out, "...after Garrus pulled Wrex's ass out of the fire when we busted up Nassana's sister's slave ring and then Wrex returned the favor when we picked up Liara, the pair have kinda forged this weird relationship of theirs. I haven't figured it out yet..." She grinned, "But whatever it is...it works and you know what they say...if it ain't broke..."

"Don't fix it." Kaidan laughed, "Yeah. I see where you're coming from, but...like I said, I'm curious about your reasoning behind taking Garrus and Tali when you busted up those geth bases and that rogue VI on the Moon, but only taking me and Ash when we go Cerberus hunting."

"Cerberus is an Alliance fuckup." Shepard replied, all traces of humor now gone. "We made that mess...we should be the ones to clean it up. We shouldn't expect the others to do our dirty work for us."

"Understood, Ma'am." Kaidan responded, his countenance also now serious and grave.

"Also..." Shepard added in a somber tone of voice, "We owe it to the memories of Admiral Kahoku and his people to take down those bastards responsible for their murder."

"Agreed." The Canadian biotic answered back with a single nod of his head, "They deserve that much seeing as the Alliance has declared their cause of death as...accidental."

"Cloak and dagger bullshit." Jane grimaced before changing the subject to a happier topic. "As for why I took Tali and Garrus with me to the Moon and later to take out those geth bases instead of you..." She smiled warmly at the dark haired man standing before her, "It wasn't because I didn't think you could get the job done—far from it. It was because where it concerns computers and synthetics, Tali's the best there is."

"Can't argue with that Ma'am." Kaidan acknowledged, a smile reappearing on his face. "She can hack through almost anything."

"Right." Jane nodded her head in agreement, "And as for why I took Garrus...he's damned good at sabotaging weapons systems...no offense...but he's a lot better at it than you are."

"No argument there." Kaidan responded.

"I also needed someone who could reach out and touch the geth or those rocket drones at long range—something neither one of us nor Tali are

capable of. Yeah...I can handle a sniper rifle okay, but Garrus is better—much better. Although I'll kill you if you tell him that. Truth is... he's the best sniper we've got—bar none.”

“Again, no argument.” Kaidan conceded, “And...my biotics wouldn't have been as effective against the geth or those drones at the Luna training facility as Tali and Garrus's electronics know how.”

“Right.” Shepard nodded her head, “So...you understand now?”

“Yeah.” Kaidan grinned.

“Good.” Jane replied with a smirk, “Because I've got other stuff I want to talk with you about right now...stuff that I don't want to get put out on the ship's gossip mill. Walk with me?”

“Lead the way.”

RRW Gallena—the present

“Sounds like she had a good handle on her people.” V'lana noted.

“She did.” Kaidan agreed with a nod of his head. “She took the time to get to know all of us on a personal as well as professional level and she didn't play favorites—not even after things got...close...between us. That came in real handy after we'd reached the salarian camp...”

Virmire—the hunt for Saren—2183

After parking the Mako at the salarian encampment, Jane and her companions walked up to a salarian who appeared to be the one in charge of the team. Ashley, reaching the salarian first, complained, “So what the hell are we supposed to do now?”

“We stay put until we can come up with a plan.” The salarian answered back in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

“Are you the one in charge?” Jane requested, further inquiring, “What's your status?”

“Captain Kirrahe, Third Infiltration Regiment, STG.” The salarian responded crisply. “You and your people have landed in the middle of a hot zone.”

“Kinda figured that out.” Shepard interjected with a crooked smile.

Ignoring the commander's light tone, the salarian captain continued his report, “Every AA battery within twenty kilometers has been alerted to your presence.”

“Got any ideas on how we can pass the time?” The commander replied, her casual exterior masking inner concern.

“We stay where we are until the Council can send reinforcements.” Kirrahe replied, again in a straightforward manner.

“You're looking at your reinforcements, Captain.” Kaidan interjected.

For the first time showing any real emotion, Captain Kirrahe, startled by the news, exclaimed, “What? You're telling me you're all they sent? I told the Council to send a fleet.”

“You honestly expected them to get off their fat asses long enough to do that?” Ashley remarked with a derisive snort.

“Your message was garbled, so they sent us to investigate.” Jane explained, feeling sympathy for the stranded STG captain.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Kirrahe grumbled, “That is a repetition of our task. I lost half my men investigating this forsaken place.”

“Find out anything?” Kaidan asked.

“We found Saren's base of operations.” The salarian answered back. “He has a research facility here, but it's crawling with Geth and they're well-fortified.”

“Have you seen Saren?” Jane, now keyed up, inquired, her eyes taking on a steely glint.

“No.” Kirrahe responded, “But his geth are everywhere and we've intercepted communications referring to him, so it's probably safe to assume that he's either here or close by.”

“Do you have a clue on what he's researching?” The commander further queried.

“He's breeding an army of krogans.” The STG officer replied in a surprisingly level tone of voice.

Overhearing the salarian's words, Wrex interrupted the conversation demanding, “How is that possible?”

“Oh shit.” Ashley muttered under her breath, “This is the last thing we need.”

“Tell me about it.” Kaidan whispered back.

“Apparently Saren has discovered a cure for the genophage.” Kirrahe responded, again, surprisingly keeping his emotions in check. Seemingly ignoring the large krogan standing within crushing distance of him, the STG officer continued to speak, “We created the genophage to keep krogan numbers down. Without it, the krogan will quickly overrun the galaxy. Added to that, these krogan follow Saren.”

“The geth in combination with a krogan army...” Jane shook her head, “We can’t let this happen.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Kirrahe replied, agreeing with the commander. “We must destroy both this facilities and the secrets it contains.”

“My people are dying.” Wrex growled, “And the research in the facility can save them. You can’t destroy it. I won’t let you.”

“We can’t let his cure leave the planet.” The salarian captain shook his head, “If it does, the krogan will become unstoppable. We can’t make that same mistake again.”

Walking up to the salarian, Wrex, barely keeping his rage in check as his krogan blood grew hotter, stabbed his finger at the STG officer, clearly enunciating every word, “We. Are. Not. A. Mistake!” After uttering his words, the grizzled old battlemaster stomped off, growling under his breath the entire time.

“Is he going to be a problem?” Captain Kirrahe remarked, his voice hitching for the first time, “We’ve got enough krogan to deal with now.”

“He’ll be fine.” Jane answered back in a reassuring tone, “I’ll settle him down. He’ll listen to me.” Then she muttered in an almost inaudible tone picked up only by Kaidan and Ashley, “I hope.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Kirrahe acknowledged, “My men and I need to rethink our strategy. Can you give us some more time?”

“Sure.” Jane nodded her head, “We’ve got stuff to take care of too. I’ll come back once you’re ready.”

“Looks like we landed in a big pile of shit.” Kaidan remarked, bringing smiles to both of the women standing with him.

“You can say that again, LT.” Ashley responded with a chuckle that quickly vanished as her eyes caught sight of the old krogan firing his pistol into the surf. “Wrex looks like he’s about to explode.”

“I was going to give him a few minutes more to cool off.” Jane replied, shaking her head, “But it looks like he’s only getting angrier. I better talk to him now before he decides to do something stupid.”

“Be careful, Ma’am.” Ashley cautioned. “He looks like he’s on a hair trigger.”

“Yeah.” Shepard acknowledged with a nod of her head, “I’ll be careful. The commander paused for a moment, not wanting to give her next order, “I hope I won’t need you, Ash, but be ready if things go south.”

“Aye, Commander.” Ashley replied with a grave voice. “I hope you don’t need me either, but I’ll be ready if you do.”

As she drew near, Jane clearly heard her krogan teammate’s angry words, “This isn’t right, Shepard. If there is a cure to the genophage, we can’t destroy it.”

“Look Wrex...” Jane spoke in a calm, modulated voice, “...I understand that you’re upset and I understand the reason why. But please, remember, Saren is the real enemy here. He’s the one you should be pissed off at.”

“Are you sure about that, Shepard?” Wrex retorted, “He’s found a cure for my people and you’re one of those wanting to destroy it. Help me out here...” The large krogan’s voice seemed to take on an almost pleading quality for a moment before returning to its bitter and angry edge, “it’s getting harder for me to tell who my friends and enemies are.”

Realizing that she had to be very careful in how she chose her words, that one wrong utterance could result in a teammate who had also become a friend lying dead on the beach sand soaked in his own blood, Jane responded, again keep her voice calm, yet firm, “What Saren created here isn’t a cure, Wrex. It’s a weapon. Those krogan are not your people. If Saren succeeds here, your people will not benefit from it. No one will.”

“We should be willing to take that risk.” Wrex countered, but without quite the conviction he had spoken with earlier, “We’re talking about the fate of my entire race.” His sense of outrage returning, Wrex continued, but with a slightly less confrontational tone, “I’ve been loyal to you so far. Hell...you did more for me than my family ever did. But if I’m going to stick with you, I need to know it’s for the right reasons.” He then drew his shotgun, causing Jane to instinctively draw her pistol as Ashley took careful aim with her sniper rifle at what she knew was one of the krogan’s few vital spots.

“These krogan are not your people Wrex.” Jane reiterated, “They’re not even slaves. They’re less than slaves as far as Saren is concerned. They’re just tools to him—to be discarded after he uses them. Is that what you really want for your people?”

After what seemed an eternity, Wrex spoke, his tone now almost one of regret, “No. The Council used us as tools once. Then they neutered us—some thanks after we defeated the Rachni for them. But...at least some of us are still alive and free. I don’t think Saren will be that generous.” Lowering his weapon, the old krogan conceded. “All right, Shepard. I don’t like this, but I trust you. I’m only going to demand one thing.”

Jane, sighing inwardly with relief, answered back, “What is it?”

“When we catch up to that turian bastard.” Wrex declared, “I want his head.”

“You’ve got it.” Jane promised, clasping the old krogan on his shoulder.

RRW Gallena—the present

“Damn.” V’lana swore under her breath as she held Kaidan closer to her. “That was a close call.”

“Yeah.” Kaidan nodded his head as he caressed the cheek of the Romulan woman leaning against him. “Too close. Ashley almost pulled the trigger when Jane and Wrex drew down on each other.”

“What stopped her?”

“That’s a good question.” Kaidan replied thoughtfully. “A few months earlier...she probably would have fired. You have to understand...” The Canadian biotic explained, “We humans in this universe kinda have a big chip on our shoulders. Many of us feel like the Council is treating us as second-class citizens and resent it.”

“I picked up on that from seeing some of your extranet.” V’lana noted. “I remember watching a speech that this moron...what’s his name... oh yeah!” The lovely Romulan snapped her fingers in a human gesture, “Charles Saracino...”

“The man’s an ass.” Kaidan growled, shaking his head.

“You can say that again.” V’lana laughed, “It seems he’s running for a seat in your assembly and was spouting off some bullshit about alien appeasers and humanity standing up for itself and a bunch of other shit. I turned down the volume and poured myself a drink.”

“Jane, Ash, and I ran into him on the Citadel while he was running for the same office. That speech might have come from his election campaign back then.”

“Could be.” V’lana replied, inclining her head, “It was part of a news program examining the political party he belonged to...”

“Terra Firma.” Kaidan’s lips curled into a snarl, “Bunch of assholes.”

“No argument there.” The lovely Romulan laughed, “The reporter agreed with you.”

“What was the reporter’s name?”

“Hmmm...” V’lana mused before responding, “Emily...I believe...yeah...Emily Wong. She really didn’t like that man.”

“Wong’s a good journalist.” Kaidan noted, “Helluva lot better than that bitch from Westerlund News—Khalisah al-Jilani or something. al-Jilani ambushed Shepard in the docking bay just after we’d disembarked from the *Normandy* for some downtime, but Jane deflected all her questions. Kept her cool too. A couple of times, I was sure she was going to punch the bitch out—but...she just smiled and turned the tables on her every time.” Pausing for a moment, he advised, “When we return to the Citadel or should we find ourselves on Earth, you might want to watch out for her. If you agree to an interview with her, she’ll try to trip you up.”

“Thanks for the advice.” V’lana replied, “I am planning on bringing us back to the Citadel after we finish up at Tuchanka. The crew hasn’t had shore leave since we arrived in your universe and...frankly speaking...we’re all beginning to go a little stir crazy.”

“I agree.” Kaidan acknowledged, “I’m hearing the same thing from the Alliance personnel on board. I think everyone wants to get off and stretch their legs a little.”

“So...” V’lana smirked, “Are there any other reporters I should worry about?”

Laughing, Kaidan responded, “Oh...only about a transport full. But of the ones you’re most likely to run into on the Citadel, the only other one I’d say to keep your guard up around would be Diana Allers. She works for Alliance News Network and has a program called ‘Battlespace’ although most of us in the Alliance call her show ‘Battlelets’ because she’s got big...”

“I get the picture.” The lovely Romulan chuckled. “In other words, she wasn’t hired for her journalistic skills.”

“Right.” Kaidan chuckled, “Really she’s just a propaganda tool for the Alliance military. She puts out only what they let her put out...at least as far as news stories go. What she puts out beyond that or who she puts it out for...that’s something else entirely.”

“Right.” V’lana grinned, then, after a short pause as the couple watched the suns set, she gently prompted, “So...Virmire?”

“Yeah.” Kaidan responded as a pensive look appeared on his face. “After settling Wrex down, Jane talked with us before touching base with Captain Kirrahe...”

Virmire—the hunt for Saren—2183

“That was too close.” Jane sighed as she talked to the other two humans on her team. “I thought for a moment that I’d lost him.”

“Thank God it worked out. I didn’t really want to live with the memory of having to kill him.” Ashley agreed, “Believe it or not, I’ve grown to like the big lummox.”

“We all have, Chief.” Kaidan agreed, “So what next, Commander?”

“Now...” Shepard declared, “We see what Kirrahe has cooked up. Come with me. I want your input on any plans made as I’m going to be relying a lot on both of you.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Thank you for calming that krogan down.” Captain Kirrahe said as Shepard and her team approached. “Attacking Saren’s base is going to be difficult enough as it is. We don’t need any more additional complications.”

“Like a pissed off krogan on the warpath.” Ashley muttered under her breath.

“Did you come up with a plan?” Jane inquired.

“More or less.” Kirrahe responded, “We can convert our ship’s drive system into a twenty-kiloton bomb. It’s crude, but it’ll get the job done.”

“Nice.” Ashley’s lips turned up in an evil grin, “Nuke the base from orbit and if all goes well Saren along with it.”

“Regrettably.” The salarian rebutted, “That strategy will not work. The facility’s too well fortified—much of what we need to take out has been hardened in anticipation of just that sort of action. We will have to get into the facility and place the device at a precise location.”

“Where do we have to take the nuke?” Shepard asked, “And what’s the best way to get there?”

“The bomb has to be taken to the far side of the facility.”

“Of course.” Ashley interjected, rolling her eyes.

“Your ship can drop it off...” Kirrahe declared, ignoring the gunnery chief’s comment, “...but we’ll need to infiltrate the base, disable the AA guns, and take out any ground forces first.”

“We don’t have the personnel for an infantry assault.” Kaidan objected.

“Kaidan’s right.” Jane affirmed, “There’s no way a frontal assault would work. We’d be mowed down before we reached their first line of defense.”

“Agreed.” Kirrahe acknowledged, “But there is another way. I’m going to divide my team into three groups and we’ll launch a frontal assault on the facility while you sneak your shadow team through the back.”

“In theory it could work.” Jane shook her head, “But you and your people will get wiped out in the process.”

“We’re tougher than you might think, Commander.” The salarian captain stated proudly, then, his voice taking on a more somber quality, admitted, “But you’re right. I’m not expecting many of us to get out alive.” Pausing momentarily, Kirrahe reluctantly requested, “That’s going to make what I want to ask more difficult. I need to ask you to loan us one of your people to help coordinate the teams.”

“I don’t like placing my people under someone else’s command.” Jane quickly objected.

“I understand, Commander.” The salarian responded sympathetically, “And...for what it’s worth...I feel the same. But this mission is too important. We can’t let our personal preferences get in the way.”

“He’s got a point, Commander.” Kaidan interjected, “Both teams have to be at their best if this is going to work. I’d like to volunteer to go with the captain and his people.”

“Hold up, LT.” Ashley raised her hand, “The Skipper’s gonna need you to arm the nuke. You’re the best one to do that while I’m the best at pointing and shooting. I’ll go with the salarians.”

“Not your call to make, Gunny. With all due respect.” Kaidan responded.

“In other words...” Ashley grumbled, “Kiss my ass. I’m pulling rank.”

“And I’m pulling rank on both of you.” Jane snapped. Then, heaving a dejected sigh, the commander spoke to the salarian, reluctantly conceding, “You’re right of course. This is the best chance we’ve had yet of stopping Saren. We can’t afford to fuck it up.” Turning to her Gunnery Chief, Shepard took a deep breath. “You’re going, Williams. No heroics—you read me?”

“Loud and clear, Ma’am.” Ashley responded in a crisp voice.

RRW Gallena—the present day

“Hard decision to make.” V’lana said in a soft voice as she gently caressed her companion’s arm. “But it comes with the rank. I found that out myself on more than one occasion. All you can do is pray to whatever deity or deities you worship or make a wish or whatever and hope you made the right call.”

“Yeah.” Kaidan agreed, “You’re right, of course.” After a moment’s reflection, the handsome Canadian remarked, continuing his story as the woman next to him quietly listened, “I remember our last conversation, before Ashley left to join the salarians...”

“This is it.” Ashley declared as she took a deep breath and exhaled, “Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone, LT. You too Commander.”

“We’ll be fine, Ash.” Kaidan replied with a gentle smile, “You’ll see.”

“Yeah...right...” The gunnery chief stammered, “Just...uhhh...good luck...’kay?”

“What’s wrong, Ash?” Jane inquired solicitously, “Is there something you want to say?”

“It’s just...weird, Commander.” Ashley replied in a sad voice, “I’ve gotten so used to working with you...” Her gaze falling first on the man standing next to her, then the rest of the squad milling about on the beach, “...with all of you. I kinda feel like...like...I just want both of you to know that it has been an honor serving with you.”

“We’re going to make it outta here, Gunny.” Jane smiled encouragingly, “All of us. You read me?”

“The Commander’s right, Ash.” Kaidan interjected, adding his encouragement, “We’ll see you on the other side.”

“Watch each other’s backs.” Shepard commanded in as positive a voice as she could muster, “Keep your eyes open and fight like hell and afterwards—we’re all going to go to Flux and get shitfaced together.”

“Just do us all one favor, Commander, when we have that after-mission party.” Ashley pleaded with an evil smirk.

“What Gunny?” Jane inquired with a smile on her face.

“Don’t dance.”

“Fuck you, Williams.” Shepard responded with a laugh; her laughter joined immediately by the chuckles of her two longest-serving companions.

RRW Gallena—the present

“And...” Kaidan sighed, “That was the last time I saw Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams alive.”

“Computer...” V’lana ordered, “One bottle of saurian brandy...with alcohol...no synthelol...and two glasses.” As the brandy and drinking glasses appeared, the lovely Romulan took the bottle and, after opening it, poured the amber liquid into the glasses. Taking the full goblets, she handed one to the man seated next to her and took one for herself, raising her glass, she toasted, “To Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams and Commander Jane Shepard. May the Elements guide their souls to eternal rest.”

“To Ashley and Jane.” Kaidan responded as he lifted his glass and drank with the woman next to him. “Rest easy. We’ve got the watch now.”

Virmire—the hunt for Saren—2183

“Commander...can you read me?” Ashley called out on her comm as one of the salarians who had accompanied her fell from the oncoming torrent of fire from the geth, his blood splattering her armor.

“The nuke’s almost ready, Williams!” Jane called back through her comm, “Get to the rendezvous point—pronto!”

“No can do, Commander!” Ashley responded as yet another salarian fell, leaving her, Kirrahe, and Commander Rentolla, Captain Kirrahe’s second in command, the only ones still living and fighting. “The geth have us pinned down on the AA tower.” The gunnery chief cursed as she heard a yelp of pain. “Shit! Captain Kirrahe just went down. There’s no way we can make it in time, Ma’am.”

“Get them out of there, Joker! Now!”

“Negative!” Ashley commed. “It’s too hot! We’ll hold them off as long as we...”

“Shit!” The gunnery chief swore as her link to the commander was severed. Cowering behind cover, she barely heard Rentolla call out to her.

“Chief? Over here...” The salarian waved her over to his position, shouting with a weakened voice. “Hurry. We don’t have much time.”

Keeping low to avoid the torrential downpour of geth fire, Ashley dashed to the salarian’s position. “What is it, Rentolla?”

Pointing to what appeared to be the entrance to an underground passageway, the salarian responded as a geth round pierced his leg, “A way out for you...maybe.”

“You mean a way out for us.” Ashley stated, “I’m not going to leave you behind.”

“You must.” Rentolla urged, “No medigel left. Wounded...critically...maybe mortally. Will only slow you down.” The salarian winced from the pain, “Take explosives and set charges once you’re safe. I will buy you time. Will not let Captain Kirrahe down.”

“God be with you.” Ashley said in a soft voice as she placed a tender arm on the salarian’s shoulder.

“Hurry.” Rentolla pleaded as he handed the satchel containing the explosives to the gunnery chief. “Join your friends...tell them...tell them

we held the line.”

“I promise. Ashley vowed as she turned away and dived down the hole. “I will.” Her headlamp automatically turning on in the dark, the gunnery chief at once spied what looked to be a passageway. As the sound of gunfire ceased Ashley bowed her head in a swift, silent prayer. Gritting her teeth, she advanced down the passageway, alert for any sounds or movement.

Rana Thanoptis had been running practically non-stop from the moment Shepard had told her that she was going to set off a nuke in the facility. “A nuke!” The asari neuroscientist panted as she ran, “That goddess damned human’s going to set off a goddess damned nuke and it’s gonna blow the goddess damned hell up right on top of where I’m going. That goddess damned thing better be what I think it is...” she muttered as she ran, “...because if it isn’t, I’m fucked!”

As she proceeded down the passageway, Ashley heard the sound of running feet approaching. Spotting a figure emerging from a branching corridor, the Alliance marine, readying her weapon, prepared to fire until she recognized that her target was neither geth nor krogan, but was instead asari. Aiming her weapon, the gunnery chief shouted, “Freeze or I fire.”

Rana immediately stopped running on hearing those words. Looking up, the asari woman saw what looked like a human female wearing combat armor and...most importantly pointing an assault rifle at her. Raising her hands, Rana shouted back, “Don’t shoot! I’m unarmed!”

“Come closer...” Ashley ordered, still pointing her weapon at the asari, “...slowly...and keep your hands in the air. Don’t even think about pulling a weapon or using your biotics. I’ll gun you down the moment you try.”

“I told you I’m unarmed and I promise...no biotics. I’m not that strong to begin with.” Rana pleaded as she did as she was instructed and advanced very slowly towards the menacing human, keeping her hands raised as she did so.

As the asari drew closer, Ashley saw that she was wearing no combat armor, but was instead clothed in what appeared to be a lab coat and suit. Not seeing any weapons, the gunnery chief instructed her prisoner, “All right. You can lower your hands but keep them in sight and keep your movements slow and easy.”

Sensing that, for now at least, she was out of danger, Rana breathed a sigh of relief. “We’ve gotta get outta here. That crazy human Shepard is going to blow up a goddess damned nuke right on top of us.”

“I know.” Ashley replied, “I’m part of her team. The question is...who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing here?”

“My name is Rana.” The asari replied, “Rana Thanoptis. I’m a...neuroscientist.” As she gazed into the eyes of her human captor, Rana took a deep breath as she debated between lying and telling the truth. Her eyes falling on the assault rifle still pointed at her, the asari scientist decided that, in this case, honesty was the best policy. “I was working for Saren.”

Her body tensing as her finger tightened on the trigger, Ashley growled in a threatening voice, “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blow your head off right now.”

Thinking quickly, Rana pleaded for her life. “I didn’t have a choice! When I was hired, I didn’t know what he was really planning. I believed him when he told me that he was a Council Spectre working on a top-secret project and that he needed me. Once I found out the truth...that he was investigating what he called indoctrination...how the Reapers can control people...it was too late. My predecessor had already fallen under Sovereign’s influence and I knew that if I didn’t find a way off this planet, I’d be next. So...while I was exploring, I found a cavern that led to these passageways.”

“Okay...” Ashley responded, her weapon still pointed at the asari, “You bought yourself some more time. Go on.”

“Have you seen the walls?” Rana exclaimed, pointing to one of the passageway walls, “They’re smooth as glass. That means someone built them.”

“Are you saying you found a Prothean relic or something?” Ashley inquired.

“No...” Rana shook her head, “Not Prothean...at least I don’t think so.”

“So...” Ashley queried, “If it’s not Prothean, then what is it?”

“I don’t know.” Rana admitted, “Do I look like a goddess damned archaeologist to you? All I know is that I think that whatever it is might be a gateway out of here. But we’ve got to hurry! The fighting and explosions...I think it might have set off an automatic defense system or something.”

“I haven’t seen any turrets or defenses.” Ashley replied in a skeptical tone.

“I’ve heard skittering in some of the passageways. Rana replied as both women heard a noise like an insect scuttling about on the floor. “Like that! I think there’s something here with us and I don’t wanna be around when it comes looking.”

Glaring at the asari scientist, Ashley growled, “Tell me why I should trust you. And how do I know you’re not going to stab me in the back the first chance you get.”

“I could ask you the same questions.” Rana replied, turning the tables on her captor. “But...to answer your question, I’m the only one who has even the faintest idea how to operate that gateway. I’ve studied it every chance I’ve had since I got on this rock. Think you can figure it out before Shepard sets off that nuke? And as for why I wouldn’t stab you in the back...” The two women again heard what sounded like an insect skittering on the floor. “That’s why.”

“Reason enough.” Ashley responded as she motioned with her gun for the asari to take the lead. “All right...lead the way.”

As the pair made their way down the dimly lit passage, the skittering noise grew louder, now joined by a low hum. “What’s that noise?” Ashley asked, “Not the shit we’ve been hearing. That...the humming.”

“It means we’re getting closer.” Rana replied as the two drew near an intersection. Pausing, she motioned to the human walking behind her. “Would you check that out? You’re the one with the gun and armor.”

“All right.” Ashley sighed as she moved up to investigate. Not seeing anything, a big grin appeared on her face as she signaled, “Coast is clear, you can...” Seeing motion out of the corner of her eye, the marine called out, “Belay that!”, as she swung her rifle towards...it...and quickly fired a burst. “Shit!” She cursed as the thing, apparently unfazed by her gunfire, charged towards her. Replacing her assault rifle with her shotgun, she set it on maximum and fired and continued to fire until her weapon overheated just as it finally brought down whatever it was a few meters before it reached her. Motioning for Rana to join her, the gunnery chief murmured, “I think I got it. Stay put and I’ll check it out.”

“Oh no!” Rana shook her head, “I’m not staying here all by myself. I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself.” Ashley shrugged her shoulders as the two women advanced towards the still twitching thing. Looking down, the gunnery chief remarked in disbelief, “That almost looks like a scorpion...but look at its size! It’s as big as a horse!”

“Look at its exoskeleton...” Rana observed, “That thing took an entire burst from your assault rifle and nearly survived your shotgun burst. What is it?”

“It’s not native to this planet?” Ashley inquired as the asari shook her head.

“No.” Rana replied, “Nor have I seen it on any other world I’ve been to. You?”

“Same here.” Ashley responded. “Maybe this was another project of Saren’s? One that he gave up on for whatever reason?”

“Could be.” Rana allowed as the pair resumed their trek, “Like I told you, I haven’t been here long. No telling what Saren’s been doing.”

As the pair walked down the corridor, they heard another sound, this one a familiar one. “Fuck!” Ashley swore. “The geth. They must have followed me down. How far do we have to go?”

“We’re almost there.” Rana replied as they turned down a side passage. Hearing the sound of the approaching geth growing louder, she exclaimed, “We’re almost there.” Picking up their pace, the two women raced down the corridor until they came to a door. “This is it.” The asari declared as now they heard the unmistakable clicking sound of the geth communicating with each other. “Give me a moment and I’ll get it open.”

“Move it!” Ashley ordered, “They’ll be here any minute.”

As the door slid open, Rana called out. “It’s open...hurry!”

Ashley’s jaw dropped as she dashed into the chamber and saw the arch and other structures in the center. “What the hell...”

“The geth!” Rana cried out as the pair took cover from a burst of weapons fire. “They’re here.”

“I’ll hold them off!” Ashley shouted, “You get that damned thing working.”

“I’ll try!” Rana answered back as she struggled to remember the correct sequence of buttons to push. “The sequence was actually pretty easy to remember once I figured it out.” Rana clinically observed as Ashley fired on the geth from her covered position. “It’s almost like whoever built it wanted to make it easy to figure out the puzzle...but not so easy that a primitive culture could decipher it.”

“Hurry!” Ashley urged as she switched to her sniper rifle to take out what appeared to be a geth destroyer preparing to join the battle. “I’m not going to be able to hold out much longer.”

“Got it!” Rana exclaimed as the image of a rocky chamber with what appeared to be a control station at the center appeared in the archway.

“Damn.” Ashley gasped, momentarily stunned before a burst of geth weapons fire brought her back to matters at hand. Pushing her way forward, the gunnery chief managed to barely close the chamber door before a round from a geth rocket impacted. “I don’t know how long that door’s going to hold. She exclaimed as her attention was once again focused on the image. “What the hell is that?”

“I think it’s a doorway...” Rana replied in a soft voice. “And our only way out of here.”

“It just looks like a holographic image to me.” Ashley shook her head, “Maybe a bit more polished than most I’ll grant you.”

“No.” Rana shook her head as the chamber door pounded from rocket and shell impacts. “It has to be a doorway.”

“A doorway leading where?” Ashley asked as the chamber door began to curve inward from the repeated blows.

“Who cares?” The asari exclaimed, “As long as it’s out of here!”

Seeing that the door was going to give way at any moment, Ashley quickly set the charges on the explosives that Rentolla had given her. “There’s no way anything here’s gonna remain standing once these explosives and Commander Shepard’s nuke go off.”

“Then let’s get the fuck outta here!” Rana shouted as she and the gunnery chief practically leaped through the gateway and landed... somewhere else.

Somewhere else

Coming back to consciousness first, Ashley slowly picked herself off the ground, before helping her companion get up.

Noticing a human sized figure lying motionless on the ground, Ashley moved to investigate. Coming closer to the still figure, the gunnery chief, at first thinking he was human, knelt down next to him. It was then that she realized something had happened. Something strange. “Rana?” The Alliance marine called out, motioning for her asari companion to join her as she pointed at the apparently dead male. “Have you seen him before?”

“No.” The asari responded, “I thought he was one of yours...he looks human.”

“Since when do humans have pointed ears?” Ashley answered back in a hushed tone before gasping, “Where the hell are we?”

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