

The Devil's Playthings

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The Devil's Playthings

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Summary

The bad guys have not been idle...edited to correct stylistic and continuity errors.
Just a short interlude before we go with V'lana and the rest of the Gallena family to Tuchanka where V finally gets to meet Uncle Urdnot and Mordin has to deal with a ghost from his past

Cerberus Base: Undisclosed Location, Mass Effect Universe (DFME01)

The Illusive Man, seated in his chair and smoking his cigarette, listened intently to the figure wrapped in shadows speaking to him, the entity's voice obviously being disguised by a filter of some sort or other. "We think you will be pleased at how well the cybernetic implants we have provided for you interact with the Reaper and Collector technology you have already acquired. Also, my employers wish to extend their gratitude to you for the information regarding indoctrination you have so thoughtfully provided. It is proving most helpful in furthering their research in certain areas."

"I and my scientists appreciate your gift." The Illusive Man replied as he flicked ash from his cigarette into the receptacle on the arm of his chair. "I have also been informed that we are ready to begin tests with human subjects."

"Excellent." The figure in shadows answered back, "We look forward to seeing the results of your tests in the near future. Now...if you have no further questions..."

"Actually..." The Illusive Man responded, "I do. You have been rather...vague...as to your ultimate goals. For our partnership to continue working as smoothly as it has..." the head of Cerberus continued, honeying his words, "it would help if we understood your motives a bit better."

For a moment, the Illusive Man thought he had detected a note of humor in the scrambled voice of the entity he had been speaking to. "Why..." the figure in shadows answered, "we seek the same thing you do. The defeat of our enemies—wherever and whenever they exist." With those parting words, the shadowy figure disappeared, leaving the Cerberus head alone with his assistant.

"Sir?" Agent Brooks carefully inquired, "Our allies...can they be trusted?"

"They can be trusted to carry out their plan." The Illusive Man replied with the faintest traces of a smile, "But that is all. For now, our agendas intertwine. As to whether they continue to do so...only time will tell. And time...as we have recently learned...is a very flexible concept." Turning to the other matter on his mind, the Cerberus chief commanded, "Instruct Dr. Lawson that I wish to see him as soon as possible regarding ETAP as well as Projects Zero and Grunt."

"At once, Sir."

"How is ETAP coming, Henry?" The Illusive Man asked as he got up from his chair and shook the other man's hand.

"Excellently." Henry Lawson replied as he greeted the Cerberus leader. "I think you will be pleased with our new augmented and enhanced troopers. We're running them through a training sequence now. Would you like to see them in action?"

"Lead the way." The Illusive Man replied with a single nod of his head as he gestured with his hand towards the door.

Observing as the combat simulation ran its course, the Illusive Man commented approvingly, "The reaction times of the new assault troopers seems to be much faster than even that of most of our elite combat teams."

"Thanks to those cybernetic implants...what did our advisor call them..." Henry Lawson began to reply before the Cerberus leader interjected, answering the billionaire's question.

"Borg."

"Right." Lawson nodded his head, "I assume that's short for cyborg. Did our ally give any further insight on where they come from?"

Shaking his head, the Illusive Man responded, "No. He was as evasive as usual—stating that they are very advanced."

"No matter where they come from..." The billionaire scientist declared, "Those implants, in addition to what we have already learned about indoctrination from both Saren and the derelict Reaper have allowed us to one day soon be able to mass produce the perfect soldier. One that will follow orders without question, will never surrender or break in combat, and will fight tirelessly until they are dead or have achieved their objective."

"What is the status of the other enhanced trooper classes?" The Illusive Man inquired as he and Lawson made their way to the door.

"The centurion and guardian classes should be online shortly as will the nemesis." The scientist replied, "We're having some problems with the phantom and combat engineer classes though as those require that the individual still retain some degree of creativity and independent thought and action."

"What about our two special projects..." the Illusive Man further queried, "Projects Zero and Grunt?"

"Come with me and I'll show you." Lawson replied, motioning towards a door with a nameplate on it that read *Special Projects: No Unauthorized Access*. Approaching the door, both men placed their palms on a scanning plate.

Lawson, Henry...Director of Scientific Projects. Illusive Man. Access granted.

As the door's locks and security systems disengaged, the two men entered a corridor with closed and locked doors on either side, each door with an identifying name and number affixed to it. Coming to the door marked *Project Zero*, both men could hear a female scream in rage.

"I will destroy you!!"

Looking in through the one-way mirror next to the door, the Illusive Man commented wryly as he observed the screaming woman straining against her restraints while two strange aliens quietly conducted their experiments: one manning a console as the other injected their test subject with a syringe containing a purple fluid. "I can see that you are still having problems with Jack accepting her programming."

"She has proven more resistant than our other biotic subjects." Lawson admitted, "But the...Elachi...scientists our new friends have loaned to us have been most helpful. I have been told that she should be available for service soon."

"Good." The Illusive Man nodded his head in approval. "Once she has been properly conditioned and we are certain that her indoctrination and the behavioral implants that are being inserted into her cortex are working correctly, I want her assigned to Shepard's team."

"Our associates tell me that she should be ready in the next few weeks." Lawson acknowledged, further cautioning, "We want to be very sure that her conditioning will hold out in the field. In order for her to accomplish her task adequately, she must be allowed some latitude in thought and action—similar to that we have given to both Shepard and EDI. Because of that, there is a much greater risk of her...as well as them...being able to break their conditioning than the rest of our subjects."

"That is why we have placed fail safes in them." The Illusive Man grimly declared as the pair continued to observe the young woman through the safety of the one way mirror. Moving to the next window, the Illusive Man inquired, "What is the status of Project Grunt?"

"That project is actually proceeding more smoothly than Project Zero." Dr. Lawson replied as the two men looked through the one way mirror at a restrained heavily sedated krogan warrior with tubes running out his body into a machine. Lying next to the krogan on another table was a large saurian looking being, also with tubes running out its body. "The subject provided by our...friends...they call it a Gorn...has proven most helpful. Surprisingly, this species shares much in common with the krogan—multiple organ redundancies...hardy...fiercely territorial." Lawson gestured towards two more Elachi scientists, one working at a console while the other made an incision into the Gorn's skull, removing brain tissue and placing it in a container that it then took to a machine. Placing the container into an alcove within the machine, the scientist pressed a button. As numbers and letters flashed on the monitor screen, the scientist recorded the results.

"The goal of this research..." the billionaire scientist continued, "...is to integrate those traits from the Gorn that will counteract the natural krogan instinct to berserk, making them, in the process, more tractable to our commands. Those genetic traits, combined with what we have learned about indoctrination, should produce a new breed of krogan shock troops for us. We will succeed where both Saren and Okeer failed."

"Living tanks." The Illusive Man mused, "Difficult to bring down...impervious to pain...completely obedient."

"Correct." Lawson nodded his head as the pair walked away from the mirror. "We anticipate Project Grunt will be ready for testing very soon."

"Excellent." The Illusive Man's lips turned up in a slight grin. "I also want it assigned to Shepard's team."

"It should be ready at about the same time Zero is." Lawson affirmed, further inquiring, "When can we expect our first subjects for the ETAP to report in?"

"Very soon." The Illusive Man replied, "The initial candidates should already be receiving their transfer orders...accompanied by Cerberus's congratulations, of course. You may begin processing them once they arrive."

Cerberus Frigate Normandy II

“Shepard must remain unaware of the nature of the Enhanced Training and Augmentation Program.” The Illusive Man, speaking on a scrambled channel to the *Normandy*’s first officer, Kai Leng, commanded. *“Eventually, all of her team...herself included...will be...augmented. But for now, she must not know about the program’s particulars.”*

“The Illusive Man is correct.” Dr. Lawson, also party to the private conversation, chimed in. *“There is a very real danger that her connection to her teammates might well override her behavioral implant causing the fail safes to engage.”*

“And we do not want that to happen just yet.” The Illusive Man concluded. *“The cover story she has been given by me is that ETAP is a special training program along the lines of the Alliance N7 program for elite Cerberus operatives and that Jackson has been selected due to his loyalty and high test scores. That this is a reward to him for his faithful service—which—in a way, it is. She must not find out otherwise.”*

“Is EDI aware of the true nature of ETAP?” Leng inquired, pointing out, “The AI could be a potential security risk.”

“EDI’s shackles should preclude such an eventuality.” The Illusive Man responded.

“Understood, Sir.” The Chinese assassin acknowledged. “Shepard will remain unaware.”

“Very good.” The Illusive Man replied as he flicked cigarette ash into the disposal receptacle on his chair. *“I will leave you to your duties, then. Signing off.”*

“Our man of the hour!” Mess Sergeant Gardner called out as Jackson entered the *Normandy*’s galley to the cheers of his shipmates and commanding officer and XO. “Congratulations, Jackson...you did us proud!”

“Thanks Rupert.” Jackson modestly replied as he turned to his commanding officer who, along with her first officer, approached to offer their best wishes. Smiling sheepishly at the Commander, the burly Cerberus trooper who had been modestly stated, “I know this wouldn’t have been possible without your recommendation, Ma’am. I want you to know that I’m gonna ace the ETAP.”

“I know you will, Jackson.” Shepard sincerely responded. “That’s why when Mr. Leng brought your name up as a candidate for the program I agreed at once. From what our XO has told me, ETAP is Cerberus’s answer to the Alliance’s N7 program. You’ll do just fine in it and we’ll be looking forward to you returning to us once you’ve completed your training.”

“Way to go, Jackson!” Ben Markham, the team sniper, grinned as he gave his old teammate and friend a pat on the back. “We’re gonna miss you, but I know you’re gonna kick some ass in ETAP!”

“Yeah, man.” Jason Barrett, Jackson’s replacement on Shepard’s team, declared, adding his acclamation and best wishes, “Show ‘em how it’s done!”

“Take care of yourself, Jax.” Doris, ‘Dixie Belle’ Whaley said to her old teammate in a soft voice, “I’m gonna miss ya...ya dumb Yankee.”

“Gonna miss you too, Dixie.” Jackson replied in a more subdued tone as he regarded his old friend, “But I’ll be back, and when I return, we’re gonna have us the biggest party ever known—right guys?”

“Hell yeah!” Barrett shouted as the rest of the mess hall clapped and cheered and Mess Sergeant Gardner appeared carrying a big cake in his hands.

“Chocolate layer cake.” The mess sergeant/janitor/handyman declared with a big grin on his face, “Your favorite.”

“C’mon! Go ahead and cut the cake!” Markham urged as he grabbed a saucer. “Looks good!”

Watching quietly as her friends and shipmates laughed and offered their congratulations to their old comrade, Doris heaved a dejected sigh.

“Have some cake.” Markham, seeing the blonde engineer sitting by herself, implored as he handed a saucer with a piece of chocolate cake and fork. “I also swiped some real milk from Gardner’s fridge.” The sniper whispered conspiratorially. “Dig in!”

“Thanks.” Doris smiled wanly as she took a tiny nibble of cake and a sip of milk.

“You feelin’ okay, Dixie?” The tall, handsome sniper inquired with concern.

“Yah. Ah’m fine, Benjie.” Whaley responded, forcing a cheery smile to her face as she told a half-truth. “I’m just gonna miss Jackson and that big laugh of his around here.”

Nodding his head in agreement, Markham replied, “Yeah. I know what you mean. It’s just not going to be the same without him.”

“Hey, Benjie! Over here!”

Hearing his friend’s shout, Ben smiled again at Doris, “Gotta go or he’ll bring the party over here.”

Forcing herself to laugh, the Southern-born engineer replied, “Yeah...you better get a move on. I gotta go and take care of some stuff anyway. See ya’ll around.”

“You sure you’re gonna be okay, Doris?” Markham asked as he stood up.

"I'll be fine, Sugar." Whaley grinned, "I'm just not in the partyin' mood today. Go on and have fun!"

Smiling sadly as she saw her friends laughing and drinking, Doris made her exit unnoticed. Making her way to her quarters, the engineer sat down at her desk and turned on her computer. After first deactivating the monitoring devices in her room, the lovely engineer pondered the mysterious message she had just received: *Beware monsters dwell in shadows. Farewell happy fields, where joy forever dwells: Hail, horrors, hail.* "What the hell are you tryin' to tell me...whoever you are?"

The Citadel—Councilor Anderson's Apartment

As he gazed at the message on his computer screen, Councilor Anderson thoughtfully stroked his chin. "What are you trying to tell me, my mysterious source?" *Beware monsters dwell in shadows. Farewell happy fields, where joy forever dwells: Hail, horrors, hail.*

A Secret Cerberus Base at an Undisclosed Location a week or so later

Smiling at the attractive brunette sitting in the mess hall beside him, Jackson inquired, "You part of this ETAP class too?"

"Yep." The young woman replied, her lips turning up in a shy smile. "Vera Ostrach...former Alliance marine and now Cerberus trooper."

"Gideon Jackson...pleased to meet you."

"So...know anything about this training?" Vera asked as she cut into her prime rib.

Shaking his head, Jackson responded, "Not really. Just that it puts N7 training to shame. But I learned from the best—Commander Shepard."

"Those are good credentials." Vera acknowledged, "Damn. They went all out...prime rib...baked potato."

"Guess they wanted to give us one last meal before the hard work begins." Jackson laughed as he bit into his prime rib. "Mmmm...this is good. So...when's training supposed to start."

"Probably bright and early tomorrow morning." Vera answered back taking a sip of iced tea.

"Good." Jackson responded with a yawn as he finished his meal and drank the remainder of his tea, "Cause I think I could go for a nice long nap."

"Me too." Vera, also yawning agreed, "I'm feeling so sleepy..."

Within moments both Jackson and Vera, along with the other candidates, lay slumped over on the tables, fast asleep thanks to the sedative that had been administered to them in their food and drink.

Moving quickly and efficiently, Cerberus medical personnel checked the candidates to make sure that they were all properly sedated. After that, orderlies with gurneys took them to the processing area where Jackson was placed into a tube next to one containing Vera. Once they and the other ETAP candidates were safely secured, an Elachi technician pressed a button. Regaining consciousness just as nanoprobes entered their systems, Jackson and Vera, along with the other candidates did the only thing they could do. They screamed.

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