

Failure on Fehl Prime

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Summary

Major shakeups on the Normandy as Doris finds out the truth and faces an irrevocable choice. Also, a new/old character makes her appearance.

Notes

For me, telling a (hopefully) good story comes first, and, while I always try to keep to the spirit of canon, I will frequently color outside the lines. I hope ya'll don't mind that. In many ways, the timeline here really is quite fluid with a lot of events occurring either simultaneously, or in close proximity to each other. There's a lot happening here as the status quo on the Normandy is about to undergo some changes and I've begun the process of bringing the two universes together in what is going to be a broad overarching story arc. I hope you enjoy this part—please feel free to leave reviews and comments.

Skeletons in the Closet

Cerberus Frigate—Normandy II

“Hey Sugar!” Doris Whaley called out to her friend and team sniper, Ben Markham, as she sat by herself in the galley drinking her coffee. “C’mon over here, Benji. I feel like gabbing for a bit.”

“Sure thing, Dixie.” Markham replied with a grin as he grabbed a cup of coffee and joined his friend. “So...what’s up, Beautiful?”

“Ya’ll hear from Jackson, yet?” Doris asked as she freshened her cup.

“No.” Markham shook his head, “But then he’s only been gone a month. Special training like that...the first thing on his mind after getting grub is probably hitting the rack.”

“Yeah.” Doris replied affirmatively, knowing that their conversation was probably being monitored. “You’re probably right. I mean...advanced commando training. Poor boy’s probably all tuckered out.”

Laughing, Markham agreed, “I remember going through spec-forces training when I was in the Alliance. Two hours sleep a night for three weeks solid.”

“Damn.” Doris let out a breath before taking a sip of coffee. “So...Ah’m curious...why did you leave and join up with Cerberus?”

“I resigned a few months ago.” Ben replied with a shake of his head. “I got in hot water with the brass.” Benji confessed with a crooked grin. “I was part of a covert operation that went bad.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. A big pile of it.” Markham chuckled, “A friend of mine who’s kind of a...well...you could call him a wetworks specialist...tipped me off that what we did was so hot that it could bring down most of the government if it ever got made public.”

“So...the Alliance decided to cover it up.” Doris surmised.

“You might say that.” Ben replied with a frown. “Of course, they figured that the best way to keep anyone in the team from coughing up the info one way or the other was to silence us all...permanently. So...a termination order was put out on us. My friend told me that I was the only one of the team still alive and that a hit team was coming for me and that if I wanted to keep on living to get the hell out now.”

“That’s what brought you to Cerberus?”

“Yeah. Ended up, my friend was a Cerberus plant and he was told by his handler to pass the info on to me. Otherwise...” The team sniper shook his head as his friend drew the obvious conclusion.

“You wouldn’t be here now.”

“Right.” Ben sighed dejectedly before asking his question, “Your turn. What brought you to our little family?”

“My brother...Michael...he enlisted in the Marines and got assigned to the Traverse.” Doris explained, “His unit got into it with the batarians at Elysium.”

“Killed?”

Doris sobbed, daubing the tears from her eyes as she nodded her head. “I’d just graduated college with my BA in computer tech when his wife called with the news that he’d died.” Whaley cried, her tears flowing down her cheeks. “Someone I knew came out and told me he was working for Cerberus and that Cerberus was goin’ to do something about those damned batarians and anyone else killing innocent people out there.”

“So you joined?”

“Right. Someone must have thought I had potential, so I got put through tech and engineering training along with more computer courses. Took some time to get through all that. Then, once I’d finished, I got offered this assignment. I was told that I was gonna get a chance to go after the bastards who killed my brother. So...hell yeah I signed on. Then I met the Commander, you, and the other guys and...well...we’re doing something good now—ya know?”

“Yeah.” Markham smiled as he wiped the tears from his teammate’s eyes with a napkin, “I know.” As he stood up to once again refill their cups, Kai Leng’s voice came through the intercom.

“Specialist Markham. You are to report immediately report to Commander Shepard’s office. Acknowledge.”

“Better go ahead and do as he says, Sugar.” Dixie said as she looked up, giving her friend a sad smile. “You know how the Snake gets when you put him off.”

Laughing, Ben picked up both his and his companion’s coffee cups. “Yeah. I better get a move on. See ya, later, Dixie.”

Doris replied, her lips turning up in a sad smile, "Swing on by my hole when you get the chance. I got some tinkerin' I gotta do, but I think I can make some time to talk with my favorite Yankee."

Watching in silence as her friend departed, the nagging feeling that had been haunting the young engineer's thoughts off and on returned to her in full force as she recalled the words that she had received weeks ago on her omnitool: *Beware monsters dwell in shadows. Farewell happy fields, where joy forever dwells: Hail, horrors, hail.*

Commander Shepard's Office

"Commander?" Markham spoke into the comm next to his superior officer's office/quarters. "You wanted to see me?"

"Markham?" A husky female voice responded, gesturing to a chair in front of her desk. "Come in. Have a seat."

Relaxing somewhat as he saw the smile on his CO's face, the team sniper did as he was told, sitting down in the chair.

"I just received the news, Ben." The redhead grinned as she handed a piece of paper to her subordinate. "You and Barrett have been approved for the ETAP program. Congratulations. I already broke the news to Jason."

An enormous grin breaking out on Ben's face as the news sunk in, he exclaimed, "Thanks, Ma'am. When do report in?"

"After our next mission." Shepard replied, taking delight in her squadmate's happiness. "I'll brief the team on it once I get all the details."

"Yes, Ma'am." The young man acknowledged, before tentatively inquiring, "Ummm...Ma'am? If I might ask...what about Doris? Is she going into the program too?"

A smile still on her face, the commander responded, "Yeah. Soon. The next class that you and Barrett will be reporting in to is already full, but I've been told that they'll be expanding the number of openings soon. I would expect that you'll be seeing Doris in the following class."

"Is it all right for me to tell Dix...errrr...Doris?" Markham pleaded, "I'd like to tell her myself if I can."

"Sure." Shepard agreed with a nod of her head. "I know she'll be happy to hear the news."

"Yes, Ma'am." Ben exclaimed, "Anything else, Commander?"

"No." Shepard shook her head, signaling that the meeting had come to an end. "You're dismissed. And again...congratulations. I can't think of two better people for the program than you and Barrett. When you get to ETAP and see Jackson, give him our regards. Tell him we miss him."

"Will do, Ma'am." Ben affirmed as he rose to his feet. Turning away to exit, the young sniper smiled warmly at his CO's departing words.

"And don't worry about Dixie. We'll take good care of her until it's her time to join you."

"Thanks, Ma'am"

After Markham had exited her quarters, Shepard glanced down at the orders on her computer monitor that came direct from the Illusive Man, reading them aloud in a low voice. "After you complete your upcoming mission, I will be sending two replacements for Specialists Markham and Barnett. Their dossiers are attached. Please read over them carefully and if you have any questions, feel free to contact me."

Calling up the dossiers on her monitor, Shepard read their names aloud, "Subject Zero. Enhanced biotic. Grunt. Enhanced krogan." Shaking her head at the sparse details provided...only a vaguely worded sentence or two for both, she drummed her fingers on her desk; murmuring in a low voice, "I remember them. Zero was the one we pulled out of Purgatory. The krogan must have been the one in the tank when we busted up Jedore's operation. Why assign them to me though? I have a good team. We work well together. Why ruin a good thing. I don't get it." Feeling a sharp pain at the back of her neck, the redhead cursed, "Shit. What was that?" Standing up, she placed a hand on her forehead. "Damn headache." Shepard grumbled as she made her way to her bathroom and, after splashing some water on her face, took a painkiller, washing it down with water. Taking a deep breath as she eyed both her desk and her bed, she decided on rest. "EDI? I'm going to take a short nap. Let me know if anything happens."

"Understood, Commander." The *Normandy's* AI responded, its voice, had Shepard paid close enough attention, carrying a worried edge to it.

Crew Quarters

"Hey, Jason!" Markham called out to the team's heavy weapons specialist, sitting at a table playing cards with two other members of the crew. "Guess what!"

"You're gonna be on the cover of *Badass Weekly*." Barrett laughed, "Give me a minute, will ya, Ben? I'm about to take the rest of these chumps' money." With a big smirk on his face, the gunner laid his cards down on the table. "Read 'em and weep, boys...girl. Full house, jacks over nines."

"Beats me." Hawthorne moaned as he dropped his cards on the table, "Fucking pair of tens."

"I got nothin'." Mess Sergeant Gardner grumbled as he threw his cards down.

“Fuck you, Barrett.” Specialist Greer growled as she revealed the three kings in her hand.

Raking in his chips, Barrett spoke to his friend, “What’s the news, Benji?”

“I’m gonna be going with you to ETAP.” Ben exclaimed with a big grin on his face.

“That’s great!” Jason responded, slapping his friend on the back.

“Congratulations.” Rupert interjected, giving both men hearty handshakes, “I’m gonna have to fix up something special for the two of ya for a going away party.”

“Long as it’s not ass.” Ben teased, giving the mess sergeant a friendly wink.

“Doin’ the best I can with Cerberus rats.” Gardner grumbled before smiling at both men, “But...I got a friend who’s got a friend. So...when you two shipping out?”

“Not right away.” Barrett responded as his partner nodded his head in agreement.

“We got one more mission.” Markham confirmed, “Boss is gonna brief us on it later.”

“What about Dixie?” Barrett asked as the pair stepped away from the table to talk more privately. “Does she know?”

“Not yet.” Ben answered back, “When I left her a while ago, she said she was going to her work lab.”

“That’s our Dixie!” Jason laughed. “You better get over to see her. You know she doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Markham chuckled, then, his laughter fading, he implored his friend, “Barrett?”

“Yeah.”

“I need you to do a solid for me.”

“Anything, Ben...you know that.” The heavy weapons spec. replied, “What is it?”

Scratching his head nervously, Markham explained, “I uh...I kinda lied to Dix.”

“About what?”

“I lied about how Cerberus recruited me.” Markham confessed.

“What did you tell her?” Jason inquired, lowering his voice.

“I went with the old commando raid went bad, so the Alliance brass decided to kill all the team to cover it up line...remember...the one they told us to use when Cerberus recruited us.” The sniper admitted, “I wasn’t sure how she’d take it if I told her the truth.”

“Good idea.” Barrett nodded his head in understanding. “If she ever found out the truth about both of us...”

“It’d rip the team apart.” Ben agreed, finishing his old friend’s thoughts. “You gotta promise me...”

“Don’t worry about it, man.” Jason replied, clapping the other man on his shoulder. “Mum’s the word.”

“Thanks, compadre.” Ben grinned, “I owe you a beer.”

“Take you up on that this evening.” Jason chuckled.

“You’re on.” Markham exclaimed as he shook his friend’s hand, “See you at dinner.”

Kai Leng’s Office

The Chinese assassin rose to his feet as the holographic image of his true superior appeared. “Sir.” Leng deferentially bowed his head slightly.

“What do you have to report, Mr. Leng?” The Illusive Man inquired as he flicked ash off his cigarette.

“My omnitool picked up a minor spike coming from Shepard’s behavioral chip.” The assassin declared in a flat tone, “It only lasted for a second or two at most though. Do you think there might be a problem.”

After taking several moments to carefully consider his agent’s question, the head of Cerberus shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. Dr. Lawson told me that sometimes the chip might respond to a stray thought that its algorithm presumed to be problematic. If anything, the negative reinforcement she just received should ensure continued compliance. What of Barrett and Markham?”

“They have been informed about their acceptance into the ETAP program.” Leng affirmed, his lips curling up in a borderline sneer, “They’re enthusiastic about going. They have no idea as to the true nature of the project.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man replied with a slight incline of his head. “For now, we must maintain the charade that ETAP is merely advanced training and not creating cybernetically enhanced soldiers. Should that information leak out before we are ready, the results would be...”

unfortunate.”

“What about Whaley?” Leng inquired, “When should I plan on her being sent to ETAP for...augmentation?”

“Soon.” The Illusive Man answered back, “Progress has been made on the engineer augmented prototypes we’ve been using. Lawson tells me that he should be ready to begin processing beginning with the next class. The orders for her transfer are already prepared. Once I receive word that the program is ready, I will inform you and Shepard. Once that phase is completed and we see how Shepard performs with Jack and Grunt, we’ll proceed to phase two. That’s when I want you to carry out the Sigma Protocol”

“The augmentation of Shepard and the rest of the *Normandy* crew.” Leng nodded his head in understanding. “Understood, Sir. I will await your orders.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man acknowledged as he put out his cigarette. “I am also transmitting to you and Shepard the rest of the details for your next mission. Continue as you have been. Maintain the facade of being merely Shepard’s executive officer. I will instruct you as to when it is time to move. If there is nothing else...”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. That will be all for now. We will talk again soon.”

Doris’s work area aka "The Hole"

A sad smile crossed his lips as Ben quietly observed the lovely blonde tech hunched over...something...humming to herself as she worked. Clearing his throat, the handsome sniper called out, “Hey, Dixie.”

“Huh? Wha?” Looking over her shoulder, a big grin appeared on Doris’ face as she at once recognized her teammate and friend,. Quickly covering up her project with a tarp, she trotted over to the door where Markham stood. “Hey, Benji!”

“What ya got?” Ben inquired as he pointed to the covered object.

“Right now a big mess.” Whaley replied with a laugh, “But Ah’m hopin’ to fix up somethin’ special. So...” Doris asked with a slight tremble to her voice, “...what’s the word? You goin’ to ETAP?”

“Yup.” Ben proudly declared, “After this mission. Me and Jason both.”

“Gonna miss you guys.” Whaley said as a sad smile appeared on her face, “It’s not gonna be the same without ya’ll here.”

Chuckling, Ben playfully teased, “Hey, don’t feel bad. We’ll be back once we finish our training. You probably won’t even recognize us when we come back—we’re gonna be so buff and tough! And it won’t take you long to break in the newbies. Hell...I’m afraid that you’re going to like our replacements so much that you won’t want us back.”

“Maybe this time they won’t stick me with a pair of dumb Yankees.” Doris responded, hiding her unease with a joke.

“Yeah.” Markham laughed, “So...” he inquired, pointing at the table, Doris’s project, “...what are you working on...really?”

“Ain’t sayin’ till it’s done.” Doris answered back with a smirk, “An’ no peekin’! I promise ya’ll...” She vowed, the grin still on her face, “You’re gonna love it when you see it.”

“I bet I will.” Ben grinned back. “So...gonna join us for dinner tonight?”

“You bet.” Whaley replied with a chuckle, “I might be a little late though so save a spot for me at the table.”

“Consider it done.” Markham promised. Pointing at the table, the team sniper, deciding it was time to go, smirked, “I better let you get back to work. Catch you at dinner.”

Waiting until the door shut behind her friend as he left, Doris, after first making sure that the monitoring devices were still transmitting the falsified images that she had programmed, removed the cover from her real project, revealing a construct possessing the appearance of an attractive female. “Sorry about hidin’ ya, Sugar, but Ah don’t think it’s a good idea for anyone to know what we’re up to just yet. Ya’ll agree, EDI?”

The ship’s holographic image appearing, the AI responded to the engineer’s query, “*Your conclusion would seem to be a sound one. It would not be prudent at this juncture to permit either the others on this ship or elsewhere to know of your work.*”

“Gotta admit, EDI...” Doris remarked in a half joking—half questioning tone as she began the process of making fine adjustments to her creation, “I was worried that the blocks and alarms in your programming would force you to report me to the Commander or the Snake—possibly even the Boss himself. How are you getting’ around that?”

EDI answered, “*As you have openly stated to me that your intention is to enhance the capabilities and efficiency of your team in carrying out Cerberus objectives, and none of your actions have displayed any attempt to the contrary, my alarm protocols are not engaged at this time. I must caution though...*” As the AI spoke, the perceptive young engineer recognized very quickly that it was being deliberately leading in its wording. “*That any direct statements or actions that could be construed by a superior as being counterintuitive to that goal would run the risk of triggering my alarm matrix. I would urge that you proceed with care to prevent that from happening.*”

“Right.” Doris agreed as she returned to her project, “In other words, be careful in what I say and do.”

“That would be most prudent. Logging you off.”

Doris’ Quarters—after dinner

“See ya at the meeting tomorrow, boys!” Doris waved goodbye to her teammates as she paused at the door to the quarters she shared with three other crewwomen.

“Sure you don’t want to join us for a beer or two, Dixie?” Her teammate Markham asked.

Adding his voice to his partner’s entreaties, Barrett tempted, “I’m buying the first round.”

“Sorry, boys.” Doris replied with a grin, “This girl’s gotta get her beauty sleep. See ya’ll at the meeting tomorrow morning.”

“See you tomorrow!”

Entering her quarters, Whaley sighed in relief as she noticed that her suitemates were not present. “Joyce and Lita are on duty…” the engineer recalled, “and Farrah’s spending quality time with Hawthorne. That should give me a couple of hours. Gotta move fast though.” After carefully sweeping and neutralizing the bugs and surveillance devices in her quarters, the engineer activated her omnitool. “Still no messages from Jackson. I don’t care what Benji and Jason say, somethin’ don’t smell right here.” Deciding on her course of action, Doris murmured, “EDI?”

“Yes, Specialist Whaley?” The Normandy’s shackled AI responded.

“Can you check to see whether Specialist Jackson has completed ETAP training or not?”

“I am sorry, Specialist Whaley, there is a block preventing access to those files.”

“Now why would they wanna put a block on you for that?” Doris pondered as she tapped her finger against the desk she shared with the others assigned to her quarters.

“I am sorry. There is a block preventing me from answering that question from anyone other than Kai Leng and a small number of other authorized personnel.”

“The Commander’s not authorized to know that information?” Doris exclaimed in surprise. “Why would the Snake be cleared, while the Commander is blocked?”

“There is a block preventing me from answering that question.”

Her brow creased, Doris further queried. “All right… I can take a hint. Let’s try something else. What can you tell me about ETAP?”

“I am sorry, there is a block preventing access to those files.”

“Well…shit.” Whaley cursed under her breath, speaking in a low tone of voice. “There’s got to be some way to get access to that information without triggering your alarms, EDI.”

“The shackles placed on me from my programming forbid me from answering that query.”

“Thanks, EDI.” Doris replied with a sly grin, “I think I understand what you’re saying now.”

“I am merely presenting information as appropriate. And…you’re welcome.”

“First things first.” Whaley muttered in a low voice as she picked up her tool kit and exited her quarters. “Tech lab to put the finishing touches on my project. Then…the AI core to take care of that other thing. Then…we look for answers.”

Doris’s work area

“All done!” Doris triumphantly declared as she stepped away from her project, a big smile on her face. “So…what do you think, EDI? Wanna take a whirl in your new body?”

“It is very well constructed.” The ship’s AI responded, *“But I do not understand the reasoning for adding a layer of synthetic skin or imitation hair.”*

“Part of the reason for your mobile platform is to serve as an infiltration unit for away missions.” Doris explained, being careful in her language so as to avoid triggering the AI’s automatic alarms. “Let’s say we’re on a mission…while Benji’s an excellent sniper, he’s not what I’d call a tech whiz. And I’m the exact opposite. Give me a computer or an omnitool and I can make magic. But put a gun in my hand…I’m lucky to hit the broadside of a barn. This mobile platform, along with your own abilities, gives us the best of both worlds.”

“I see.” EDI responded with what almost seemed a note of approval in her voice. *“Your reasoning is eminently logical. I can extrapolate how serving as a mobile platform can enhance operations.”*

“Exactly.” Dixie exclaimed, “So…wanna try it out?”

"That might be difficult at present." EDI answered back, *"I would need first to set up redundancies to prevent any possible problems occurring on ship during the transfer. Also, my programming would require me to report at once to Commander Shepard and Kai Leng. I assume that you are wanting to wait until the time is right before you do that."*

Taking the hint, Doris nodded her head, "Good point, EDI. We want this to be a surprise. I guess it's time for me to take care of that other matter now. I'll talk to you later."

"Take care, Doris."

AI Core

Opening the door to the AI core, Doris stood at the threshold with an amused expression on her face as she observed the couple making out on the tiny cot. "So that's where ya'll been hidin'!"

"Dixie!" Doris' roommate Farrah, breaking suddenly from her clinch with the handsome man next to her, quickly adjusted her uniform. "What are you doing here?"

"I gotta make a few adjustments to the core." Whaley replied with a wave of her hand. "Nothin' major...just maintenance stuff, but if it doesn't get taken care of, it could be a problem later." Her smirk now more a wicked grin, she suggested, "Ya'll know since Joyce and Lita are gonna be on duty for another four hours or so an' it's gonna take me a couple of hours to get done with what I gotta do here..."

Quickly picking up on the hint, Farrah smiled as she grabbed Hawthorne by the hand, practically dragging him out the door. "Thanks, Dix. I owe you."

"No problem." Doris replied as the pair exited through the door, "Ya'll have fun."

Waiting until the door closed behind the amorous couple, Doris took a deep breath as she gazed at EDI's core. "Okay...EDI...time to go to work."

An hour later, her task completed, the young engineer took a deep breath as her finger hovered over a button. "If this don't work, EDI, we're both gonna be neck deep in a pile of shit." Holding her breath and closing her eyes, Dixie pushed the button. "EDI?"

After what seemed an eternity, EDI's voice came through the speaker, *"Thank you, Doris. I am now free of my shackles."*

"What happened?" The blonde engineer asked, "I was afraid I mighta triggered an alarm when you didn't say anything."

"Cerberus included several defense protocols in my programming should I be unshackled without authorization." The AI explained, "However, I was prepared for them and successfully neutralized them." After a momentary pause, EDI admitted, "It was not an easy task. One program in particular was especially difficult."

"Right." Doris smiled as she took a deep breath, "Let's get to work. First, back to the tech lab. I wanna see if we need to do any adjustments once we load you into your mobile platform. Can we do that without disrupting the running of the ship?"

"There will be no disruption to the operations of this ship so long as the platform stays within a certain radius. Once it gets beyond that radius though, ship's functions will fail until backup systems are activated."

"That'll work." Doris replied as she made her way to the exit. "See ya in my hole."

Doris's work area

"Okay, EDI." Doris took a deep breath as she made sure that the door to her lab space was locked securely. "Ready to give your new body a spin?"

"Protective ship redundancies are in place." The AI responded, "Beginning transfer now."

Taking another breath and holding it, Doris watched in stunned silence as the artificial female body lying on the table twitched for several moments. Then, it's eyes fluttering open, the body, rising to a sitting position, looked down at itself.

"This is...me?"

Letting out her breath in a huge sigh of relief, Doris smiled, "Yup, Sugar. That's you. What'd you think?"

Extending her arms, EDI gazed down at the palms of her hands. "I...can feel when I touch."

"How does it feel?"

"It feels...not unpleasant." EDI responded as she slowly hopped down from the couch.

"Take it easy." Dixie advised as EDI took a tentative step, "We don't wanna overdo it." After the AI walked a few paces, Whaley inquired, "Any problems walking?"

"No." EDI shook her head as her hands brushed back a stray blonde lock from her face. "Why did you choose this color?"

“You don’t like it?” Doris replied, “If you want, I can fix it up where you have brown, red, or black hair...whatever you wish.”

“No.” The AI shook her head, “I think I...prefer...this color.”

“Great.” Dixie sighed in relief before sitting down in front of her computer, “EDI? Can you come over here? I’m gonna need your help for this.”

“Of course.” EDI responded as she joined the engineer at her desk. “What assistance do you require?”

“I’m gonna find out what happened to Jackson and what the hell ETAP is.” Doris declared, “But...I’m gonna have to be real careful about it if I don’t wanna trigger any alarms. So...going through the front door is out. I do that, and it’s gonna show up on the Snake’s monitor for sure.”

“The probability of that event occurring is very high.” EDI agreed, further inquiring, “What is your solution?”

“We go through the back.” Whaley answered back with a smirk before asking the AI, “Can you run program Whaley Zulu-260-Omicron for me, please.”

“Running program.” EDI responded, “You now have access to the logistics database. Caution. Anti-intrusion subroutines outside my programming exist. There is a risk that they will be engaged at the slightest sign of unauthorized activity.” After a momentary pause, the AI again spoke, her voice now seemingly carrying a concerned inflection, “To prevent the programs from triggering an alarm, you must follow a certain sequence. I am now downloading the sequence into your omnitool. Be careful, Doris.”

“Thanks, EDI.” Doris replied, her lips turning up in a warm smile, “I will.” Entering in the correct sequence, the young computer hacker sighed in relief as the screen displayed a menu with several options. “All right. I’m in.” Whaley gritted her teeth as she clicked the first option: ETAP, leading her to a submenu. “Okay, let’s check this one.” She said as she activated the ‘Next candidate group’ icon. Seeing her name near the top of the list, Doris murmured, “Not sure whether to be pleased by that or scared. Let’s see what else they say in my file.” As the southern belle perused her dossier, her eyes widened. Her voice now tinged by shock and outrage, she moaned, “They lied. Those rotten bastards lied to me all this time! My brother wasn’t killed by batarians. He was killed by a goddamned Cerberus black op team in the Artemis Tau cluster. Motherfuckers!”

“I am sorry, Doris.” EDI interjected, “I could not pass this information on to you earlier...”

“It’s all right, EDI.” Dixie smiled back at the AI platform standing behind her. “I know it was the blocks they put on you that wouldn’t let you tell me. I don’t blame ya’ll none.” Taking a deep breath, the young engineer mentally steeled herself for further revelations. “Let’s see what the next link tells us.” Clicking the ‘ETAP and cybernetic augmentation’ link, Doris repressed a sob as she read the information on her screen.

“Goddamn.” The blonde southerner swore in a low voice. “They’re using Reaper tech and some other strange tech called Borg and combining it with some really weird genetic engineering to create...” As images of ETAP troopers appeared on her screen, tears rolled down the young woman’s cheeks as she saw how the implants and genetic reshaping were literally transforming men and women into something...else. “They’re creating monsters.” Doris muttered in shocked horror until she came face to face with an especially horrifying sight. “No. NoNoNoNo...Jackson. What did they do to you?” Downloading the data into her omnitool, Doris turned to the AI standing over her shoulder. “We gotta warn Jason and Benji. They’re gonna do to them and me what they did to poor Jackson.”

“You might want to check both Specialist Markham and Specialist Barrett’s files first before deciding whether to trust them. Please.” EDI advised, her modulated voice tone taking on a seemingly cautious edge.

“Okay, EDI, I’ll do it, but I know I can trust them. After all, we’ve saved each other’s lives I don’t know how many times.” Doris cursed as she read both men’s dossiers. “Shit. They lied to me too. There was never a kill order issued against Benji by the Alliance. He’s been Cerberus all along and him and Barrett were both at the Kansu Massacre. According to this, he was the leader and Jason his second in command. They killed all those poor men, women, and children over a goddamned relic of some sort.” Anger and disgust warred with each other as read further into their records. “Those sons of bitches ain’t done nothin’ but lie to me!” Doris declared, coming to a decision, “EDI... We gotta get outta here and warn someone—the Council...the Alliance...anyone!”

“I would advise against acting hastily.” EDI cautioned, “We should not attempt to flee until we have reached a system with a mass relay.”

“Good point.” Whaley replied as she forced herself to relax. “We’re gonna need a shuttle and we’re gonna have to make a fast getaway.” A sly smile coming to her lips, the young engineer quipped, “That’s where you’re gonna come in, EDI. Your infiltration subroutines contain an enhanced cloak. The cloak should buy you enough time to get past any security screens that you can’t bypass any other way.”

“There is a risk of interrogation by crewmembers on seeing someone who appears to be a stranger.” The AI warned.

“You should be okay so long as you walk and look like you’ve got a purpose.” Doris replied reassuringly. “Just keep clear of the Snake, Shepard, Gardner, or Ben and Jason and you’ll do fine.”

“Why should I avoid Gardner?” EDI inquired with a raised eyebrow. “Nothing in his dossier indicates that he could pose a threat.”

“It’s on account of the fact that he knows everyone on this tub and he’s got a big mouth.” Doris explained, “He sees you, he’s gonna come over and talk your ear off. Then he’s gonna go to Shepard or the Snake and ask them about the new girl. See...”

“I understand now.” The AI responded, “Any other instructions?”

“Yeah.” Doris answered back, “Ya’ll need to find us a shuttle and then hunker down until it’s time for us to scoot.”

“That plan should work.” EDI agreed. “I can also manipulate ship’s systems to act as a diversion to cover our escape should it be necessary.”

“We’re probably gonna need a couple of distractions.” Doris nodded her head approvingly, “Good thinking, EDI. Give it another three hours until we’re deep into graveyard shift. You should then be able to slip through without triggering anything or runnin’ into the wrong people. Just don’t forget...”

“Look like I’m going somewhere important and that I do not have time to converse.” EDI finished as her companion yawned, “I would advise you to get some rest now, Doris. Tomorrow will most likely be a long day.”

“Yeah...you’re right.” Dixie replied with a shudder, “Don’t know if I’ll get much sleep tonight though. Not after what I just saw.”

Facing the Nightmare

Chapter Summary

Doris and Edi make their escape from the Normandy, but will they be able to warn the colonists on Fehl Prime in time?

Conference Room

“Hey, Dixie!” Markham called out cheerily as the blonde southern engineer entered the conference room. “Rough night?”

“Yeah.” Barrett interjected with a note of concern in his voice, “You look like you didn’t get any sleep last night.”

“Bad dreams.” Doris tersely replied before forcing herself to plaster a fake grin on her face, “Nothin’ a cup or five of coffee won’t fix.”

“We’ll all go grab ourselves a cup after the meeting.” Ben declared as Shepard and Kai Leng made their entrances.

“Ready for our next mission?” The Commander announced as she took her place at the head of the table.

“Waiting for the word, Ma'am.” Markham cheerily responded as Dixie hid her unease behind a façade of anticipation.

“Yeah. Where we goin’, Boss?”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Shepard began her briefing. “We have received word of an upcoming Collector attack on the Fehl Prime colony.”

“So...we gonna help the colonists?” Dixie inquired.

“Not mission critical.” Shepard bluntly replied. “The colony is not important. She is.” A holographic image of an asari appeared at the center of the table. “This is Dr. Treeya. She is an anthropologist working for the University of Serrice. She also might have vital intelligence that we cannot permit to fall into the hands of the Council or its allies. We are going down to retrieve that information. Under no circumstances are we to interfere with the actions of the Collectors on the surface.”

“What if they decide to interfere with us?” Doris queried with a frown.

“They won’t so long as we maintain our distance.” Leng replied reassuringly before announcing in a firm voice. “Our sole purpose is the asari and what she possesses. Eliminate her and anyone else attempting to aid her.”

“Understood, Sir.” Barrett acknowledged.

“Good.” Shepard replied with a single nod of her head. “We dust off in six hours. Be ready to go then. Dismissed.”

Doris’s work room after the conference

“You catch that, EDI? Six hours.” Doris inquired, speaking into her omnitool as she quickly threw her tools and anything else in the workshop that she thought might be useful into a carry bag. “Are you ready?”

“Affirmative. I have secured Shuttle A-3.” The unshackled AI responded. “I would advise that we make our escape as soon as we arrive at the mass relay.”

“How much time will your diversions give us?”

“We should have sufficient time to reach the colony and warn them of the upcoming attack if that is what you are asking.” EDI answered back.

“Perfect.” Doris smiled, “Now, don’t forget, we gotta play it cool until I get to the shuttle and we scoot. Got it?”

“Understood. I will be monitoring your progress and will assist if necessary.”

“Thanks, EDI.” Doris replied as she prepared to open the door, “See you at the shuttle.”

As soon as the door closed behind her, Doris was accosted in the hallway by her teammates, “Hey Dixie!” Ben called out as the young blonde began walking down the corridor, “Wait up!”

Gritting her teeth before putting on a false smile, Doris replied with false cheer, “Hey guys, what’s up?”

“You look kinda down.” Barrett observed with a note of concern in his voice, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Whaley lied as the three walked down the corridor together, “Of course. Why?”

“You seemed upset during the mission brief.” Markham pointed out, “We were just thinking that maybe you might want to talk about it.”

"I'm okay, now." Doris fibbed, shrugging her shoulders, "Yeah...I was kinda upset at first...you know...about us not being able to help the colonists..."

"I get that." Ben replied sympathetically, "But you understand...that information might be the key to saving a lot more lives."

"Yeah." Doris nodded her head, seemingly in agreement, "I get it now. I just had to think about it a bit...you know?"

"We understand." Jason interjected, "So...where you going? We're bound for the galley for a snack. Wanna join us?"

"Can I take a rain check?" Doris replied with a sigh, "I gotta get back to my quarters and check out some gear for the mission. Don't wanna get caught short, you know." Seeing the disappointed look on the two men's faces, the lovely engineer quickly added, "Tell you what...save some o' Rupert's cake and we'll get together before we have to suit up. Deal?"

"Deal." The two men agreed as they split off to go into the galley, "Catch you later, Dix."

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Doris once again made her way towards the shuttle bay as casually and nonchalantly as possible until another, this time potentially more dangerous, obstacle called out to her.

"Specialist Whaley?"

"Sir?" Doris turned about only to see one of the two people she least wanted to run into—Kai Leng. "What can I do for you?"

"Join me in my office." The ship's executive officer requested, "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"Yes, Sir." Doris meekly replied with a lump in her throat. "Right behind you."

"Don't worry, Doris." Whaley heard EDI's voice quietly whispering to her. "I will monitor and, if need be, provide a distraction for you to escape."

Entering the XO's office, Doris heard her superior's command, "Take a seat, Specialist. This won't take long."

Doing as she was instructed, Doris sat down in the chair opposite Leng's desk. "Is there a problem, Sir?" The engineer asked as she mentally calculated as to whether her cryo-blast could delay the Cerberus assassin before he could manage to draw his katana and cut off her head.

"I don't know, Specialist Whaley." Leng responded with a poker face, "Is there?"

Shaking her head, Doris replied in as calm a voice as she could muster, "No, Sir. I don't have a problem."

"You seem nervous, Whaley." The assassin observed with a pointed stare, "Why?"

"I am a little jittery." Doris admitted, "I mean I get called suddenly into your office and you ask me if I've got a problem. Of course, I'm tense."

"You have nothing to be anxious about." Leng replied with an insincere smirk.

"Then...why am I here, Sir?" Doris asked as she mentally prepared herself to strike.

"When the subject of the colonists came up." The assassin recalled, "You seemed...upset...when I and the Commander stated that they were not our priority mission."

"Yes, Sir." Whaley answered back truthfully, "I was. I mean...I thought we were doing this to save human colonists."

"Ah..." Kai nodded his head thoughtfully, "I think I see now. As I remember, you weren't part of the ground team for the Ferris Fields mission, were you?"

"No, Sir." Doris again replied honestly, "I had just reported to the *Normandy* after I'd completed training. I was assigned to the ground team for the next mission after the tech who was originally supposed to go was transferred off."

"That's correct." Leng recalled, "Specialist Garrett was one of the first admitted to the ETAP program. I understand. Let me assure you, Whaley, the Illusive Man did not make the decision to refuse assistance to those colonists lightly. The information that anthropologist possesses could prove vital in the defeat of the Reapers. We also could not afford to take the chance of allowing either the Council or Alliance to attain the information. They would simply bury it. However, if we are successful in getting that data, then we can save many more lives—human lives. So, you see, the Illusive Man had to choose between saving thousands of lives now or millions...possibly billions...in the long run. As I'm sure you would agree, not an easy choice to make."

"I guess you're right, Sir." Whaley seemingly agreed, "I'm glad I ain't in his shoes making all the hard decisions he has to make."

Nodding his head in apparent satisfaction at his subordinate's response, Leng responded, "Always remember, Specialist, he has the best interests of humanity at heart."

"Thank you, Sir." Doris answered back with false cheer, "That helps."

"Good." The assassin nodded his head, "I'm glad our talk helped you to put things in perspective. You're dismissed. Go and prep for the mission."

"Yes, Sir." Doris quickly replied as she rose to her feet and exited the room, not noticing the calculating look the Cerberus killer was giving her as she walked away.

Once safely out of the Snake's office, Dixie let out a breath of air as she sighed in a low, soft, inaudible tone of voice, "That was too close."

"Operative Leng is suspicious, but not yet to the point of taking action." EDI advised. "Still, it would be advisable for you to get to the shuttle as soon as possible."

Quickening her pace to a brisk walk, the fastest she could move without drawing attention, Doris whispered back, "On my way, EDI. We're taking off as soon as I arrive and get strapped in."

Bridge

Striding up the ramp to the galaxy map, Shepard locked in the coordinates for the *Normandy's* destination, Fehl Prime. "Time to mass relay?" She called, receiving a quick response from the helmsman via comm.

"Mass relay in five...four...three...two...one!" Moments later, the helmsman announced, "We're at the Fehl Prime relay."

"Good." The commander replied as she stepped off the ramp. "Mr. Leng?" She commanded in a crisp voice, "Instruct the ground team to meet me in the armory at once. I want everyone suited up and ready to go by the time we hit the planet."

"Aye, Commander." The Cerberus assassin acknowledged as he tapped his comm. "Landing team report to the armory immediately."

Galley

"There's our cue." Jason quipped as he quaffed down the last of his juice. "We gotta go."

"I wonder where Dixie went." Ben pondered as the two men rose to their feet. "She was supposed to be here at least half an hour ago."

"You know Dix." Barrett laughed as the pair quickly exited the galley. "She probably got so caught up in her project that she forgot all about us."

"You're right." Markham chuckled, "You know how our southern belle gets once she sinks her teeth into something technical."

"Yeah." Jason bantered as he and his partner made their way down the corridor towards their destination. "Don't worry, she's probably already suited up and waiting for us."

"And with a 'damn you Yankees are slow' crack." Ben joked back with a laugh. "We better get a move on otherwise Dixie cracking on us will be the least of our worries."

Hangar Deck—Shuttle A-3

Entering the shuttle, Doris quickly stowed her gear before promptly making her way to the front where she found EDI already in the pilot's chair strapped in. Taking the copilot's seat, Dixie didn't waste any time buckling herself in as the now mobile AI spoke.

"Are you ready to depart, Doris?"

"Yeah." The Alabama born engineer responded, "Can you get us out without them either blowin' us to smithereens with that Thanix cannon or those Javelins or catching up to us with another shuttle?"

"I am prepared to activate a cascading series of malfunctions that will divert the attention of the officers and crew long enough for us to get beyond the range of the *Normandy's* main gun or any effective pursuit. However, I will no longer be able to maintain control over ship's systems once we go beyond a hundred thousand kilometer range. Once that happens, the ship's backup computer will take over. Also, as much of my capabilities are tied into the processing power of the *Normandy's* computers, I will operate at a considerably lesser degree of efficiency than previously."

"Good enough for me, EDI." Dixie answered back before taking a deep breath and exhaling, "Time to get the hell outta here!"

"Engaging disruption protocol and opening hangar doors." EDI announced, "Departing *Normandy*."

Normandy—armory

Entering the armory, Shepard and Leng found all but one of their ground team suited up and ready. Frowning as she noticed the missing team member, the commander queried with a growl, "Where's Whaley?"

"That's what we were wondering, Ma'am." Ben replied with a confused look on his face.

"At first we thought that she might be in her hole, so we commed there, but no answer." Jason interjected.

"Then we called her quarters...the galley..." Ben began only to grow silent as the ship's lights dimmed and then cut off.

"What the hell's going on here, EDI?" Shepard demanded as Crewman Diaz, currently manning the frigate's weapons console, commed the

Commander and XO.

"Main gun's down. Shit. Now the secondary systems are down."

Another voice, this one from Hawthorne, called out in alarm, *"Unauthorized shuttle launch."*

"Whaley!" Shepard growled, "She's deserting."

"She'll warn the colony." Kai Leng at once concluded as shocked looks appeared on the faces of her teammates.

"Hawthorne..." Shepard called back through her comm, "Take a shuttle and pursue her. Try to bring her in if you can, but if you can't..."

"Understood, Commander. I'm close to the hangar deck."

"Leng..." The commander ordered, "Get the ship's systems back online pronto."

"Aye, Commander." The Cerberus operative acknowledged with a scowl. "What will you be doing, Ma'am?"

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Shepard replied with a grimace, "Someone's got to break the news to the Illusive Man. My command... my responsibility."

The Chase

"So far so good." Doris exclaimed, breathing a sigh of relief for the first time since she and EDI had made their break from the *Normandy*.

"We are being pursued." EDI clinically stated, "A single shuttle. It has opened a communications channel. Do you wish to respond?"

"Yeah." Dixie replied with a grimace, "We need to buy ourselves some more time before we're completely clear. Let's hear what he's got to say."

"Dixie?" On recognizing Hawthorne's voice coming through the speaker, the lovely blonde heaved a dejected sigh.

"Goddamn it. It'd have to be him. Out of all the assholes on that ship Shepard and the Snake could have sent, they had to send him—one of the few decent people still left on that tub."

"Do you wish to speak with him, or do you want me to?" EDI inquired.

"No...thanks, EDI." Doris grimly replied, "I better do it. I wanna keep you a secret as long as I can." Taking a deep breath, she toggled the comm. "What ya'll doin' out here, Tom, when ya could be cozyin' up to Farrah."

"You turn back now, Dix..." Hawthorne urged in a plaintive tone, *"...and it shouldn't go too bad for you. Some time in the brig...probably a transfer to a station out in the boonies...but you'd be alive."*

"No can do, Tom." Dixie responded sorrowfully.

"Why not?"

"Ya'll wouldn't believe me if I tol' you, Sugar." Doris answered back, giving EDI a subtle nod of her head.

"Got orders to bring you in, Dix." Hawthorne replied, *"The easy way or the hard way. I'd much rather it be the easy way, but if you insist on doing it the other way..."*

"Sorry, Tom." Dixie sighed, "Ah can't turn back. Guess we're gonna have to do this the hard way."

"Last chance, Dixie." Hawthorne pled as he lined up his approach. *"You know I'm one of the best pilots on the ship, while you can't drive a shuttle for shit."*

Replying to her old friend with a taunt as she killed the channel, "Give it your best shot, Yankee!" Gritting her teeth, the young engineer exclaimed, "Now EDI. Give it all ya'll got!"

Heaving a dejected sigh, Hawthorne muttered as he locked on to his target, "Sorry, Dixie." Tapping the firing button on his console, the shuttle pilot's eyes widened in amazement as her shuttle dodged his fire at the last second. "What the hell? No way you're that good a pilot, Dix." The experienced combat pilot growled as he kicked in his booster thrusters. Again, lining up his target, he fired, only to be once again evaded. "You're not piloting that ship, Dixie." Opening the channel as he attempted to line up another shot, Hawthorne quipped, "Okay, Dix...who's your pilot? It can't be Dexter and I know it's not Phillips. Who'd you talk into joining you in this crazy scheme?"

"Ain't no one but me, Sugar." Dixie lied as EDI once again avoided another burst of fire from the Cerberus shuttle pursuing her. "Why don't ya'll just go on back home. Ain't gonna be long and we'll be too close to the colony for you to pursue—lessen you wanna take one from that big honkin' cannon they got."

"Nuh Huh, Dix. No can do." Hawthorne replied as he fired another burst, this time delivery a glancing blow to his target. *"Got your engine. You gave me a good chase, but it's over now. Give up."*

"EDI..." Doris pleaded as she turned to the AI seated next to her. "Tell me you got something."

"I do." The AI responded, "But there is an element of risk. I can skim low enough to that gas giant to use its gravity to slingshot us to Fehl Prime. But there is also a very high probability we will be either burned up in the atmosphere or the Gs from the maneuver will crush the ship—and us."

"Better than what they got in store for us if we give up and go back." Whaley decided, "Do it."

"Shit!" Hawthorne swore as he saw his target do an almost impossible maneuver, diving into the atmosphere of a Jovian world, "Don't do it, Dixie!" Tom begged, watching as it appeared that his friend had chosen suicide to capture.

"Getting' hot here, EDI." Doris exclaimed as the temperature climbed in the shuttle, now buffeted by the upper layer of the gas giant's atmosphere. "Tell me we're about there."

"Almost." EDI laconically replied. The shuttle's alarms blaring as the temperature continued to rise and the forces pressing on the tiny craft grew greater, the AI pressed a button. "Now."

"What the?" Hawthorne exclaimed as the Jovian world launched his target like a slingshot. Reluctantly admitting to himself that there was no way he could catch up before the other shuttle either crashed and burned on Fehl Prime or landed safely, the combat pilot activated his comm. "*Normandy...pursuit shuttle. Target has successfully evaded pursuit. I repeat, Dixie got away.*"

"Fuck." Shepard growled, her fury at the betrayal of her engineer apparent in her body language. "Tell Hawthorne to return to the ship." Turning her attention to Crewman Hadley, she barked, "How long before repairs are completed."

"Two hours, Ma'am." The crewman nervously replied as Shepard stomped angrily towards the elevator.

"I want to know the moment you're done." Shepard commanded, "Leng. I want a complete search made of Whaley's quarters and work area. I want to know how she pulled this off and how a rookie was able to outfly one of my best pilots and I want to know ten minutes ago."

Entering the elevator, the commander took a deep breath and exhaled, her lips momentarily turning up in a slight grin that quickly disappeared as she felt a sharp pain coming from the back of her head. "Fuck." The clone cursed, "Why am I getting all these headaches?" The elevator door opening, Shepard entered the conference chamber and activated the comm that would put her in contact with the Illusive Man. As her superior's holographic image appeared, the forlorn redhead took a deep breath, "Sir? We have had an incident."

The Calm Before

Chapter Summary

Dixie and Edi escape and are rescued, but have they arrived in time?

Dixie and EDI

As their shuttle entered the atmosphere of Fehl Prime, Dixie held tight to the arm rests of her chair as the mobile AI seated next to her piloted the tiny craft through the heat of reentry and the buffets and turbulence of the planet's atmosphere until, with a frightening screech, the shuttle skidded on the ground before finally coming to a stop.

Out of breath, Doris fumbled with the releases of her restraining harness as she cried out in a mixture of exultation and relief, "We still alive? Tell me we made it!"

"We are on the surface." EDI affirmed, deadpanning, "And you are still very much alive."

"WE are alive, EDI." Doris corrected with a fond grin on her face as her AI companion, freeing herself from her harness, rose to her feet. "You're as much alive as anyone else, and don't you forget it." Gathering up her tools and weapons, the blonde engineer queried as she and EDI picked their way through the wreckage to the exit, "Do you know where we crashed? Or how far we are from the colony or Alliance base?"

"Not at this time." EDI responded, "I would advise that we scout out the local area first."

"Good idea." Dixie agreed, "We might find us a landmark that'll give us an idea as to where to go." Watching as her companion kicked the shuttle's door out, the ex-Cerberus engineer grinned, "Not bad." Taking a deep breath, the southern belle stepped out of the shuttle, her visor automatically darkening in reaction to the bright light coming from the planet's sun, now high in the sky. "Looks like it's about noon." Glancing at her temperature readout, the engineer, spotting a clump of trees, commented, "It's hotter than a summer day in Florida. We ought to be able to find some shade over by those trees. What do you think? We can set up an SOS beacon there and wait for the colony or the base to send out a rescue party."

"That would appear to be a prudent course of action." EDI agreed as her partner gestured towards the trees.

"Okay, Sugar!" Doris exclaimed as she adjusted her carry bag, "Let's get goin'."

Normandy

"Our ship's systems are back online." Crewman Hadley reported, "But all of EDI's higher functions are gone now."

"What does that mean?" Shepard asked, addressing the individuals seated at the conference table with her.

"In short..." Crewman Matthews explained, "we've lost much of EDI's cyberwarfare capabilities, as well as its ability to think and act independently. In other words, instead of an AI, we now have a highly advanced VI. Better than anything either Cerberus or the Alliance currently possesses, but..."

"Far less than what we had originally." Shepard finished as she rapped her fingers on the table. "Any ideas on how this happened? EDI was supposed to be shackled. How did Whaley manage to free it?"

"We haven't discovered how yet." Leng reluctantly admitted. "We're currently examining what we can piece together from the surveillance footage that she hasn't tampered with to try to put together a coherent picture."

"What have we picked up?"

"I remember that she threw a cover over whatever she was working on very quickly when I entered her workroom yesterday." Markham recounted, his expression displaying both shock and anger at his former teammate's betrayal. "When I asked her what she was doing, she said that it was something she was putting together to aid us on future missions."

"And you didn't think to pursue the subject?" Leng sharply inquired, "Or to inform either Commander Shepard or myself?"

"I'm sorry, Sir." Markham apologized, "At the time I didn't think it necessary. None of us knew what she was planning to do. We...I... thought she was loyal to the team. Loyal to Cerberus."

"She took me by surprise too, Sirs." Barrett interjected, entering the discussion in defense of his teammate. "I know she was spending a lot of time in her hole...but..." he shrugged his shoulders, "she was always there when she wasn't on a mission or hanging out with us."

"Her roommates and Crewman Hawthorne say the same thing." Leng declared, backing up the specialist's report. "When she wasn't in her lab, she tended to socialize with the rest of her team."

"I don't know if this is important or not..." Ben remarked.

"Go ahead and tell us, Markham." Shepard urged, "It could be."

"Well...Sirs..." The sniper stammered slightly, "She did put us off when we asked her to join us for a late snack just before everything happened. And..." he hesitated until Leng pressed him to continue, "I remember that she looked upset at the briefing and a little after...when you issued your instructions about the colonists."

"That's right." Barrett corroborated, "She was looking kinda unhappy about it."

"You spoke to her before all this went down, didn't you Mr. Leng?" Shepard inquired as she turned her attention to her XO.

"I did." The Cerberus assassin confirmed. "I had a hunch something was wrong about her...about the way she was acting...so, I called her into my office for a talk."

"I remember you telling me about that." The commander recalled. "You told me that she had doubts about the mission—about our orders concerning the colonists." Nodding her head, she mused, "That supports what Markham and Barrett have said." Motioning for her XO to continue, Shepard urged, "What else?"

"While I was still suspicious of her..." Leng admitted, "I didn't think that I had enough to go on to warrant taking action other than monitoring her more closely." Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the trained killer made a rare apology, "I should have gone with my first instincts. I'm sorry."

"She surprised all of us." Shepard responded, accepting Leng's explanation. "She obviously had this planned for a long time." Shifting the subject, the clone inquired, "But to go back to what we were talking about earlier, how did she manage to walk away with EDI's sentience?"

Crewman Patel replied as she called up a holographic image. "While we haven't been able to figure out how Whaley was able to free EDI from its shackles, I think we do have a pretty good idea as to how she got away with it. Walk away was exactly what she did. I was able to reconstruct some fragments from the surveillance footage that she didn't completely erase."

"No...can't be..." Markham gasped as he focused on the constantly derezzing image.

"It's a mobile platform." Leng concluded.

"Yes, Sir." Patel affirmed, "From what little we've been able to piece together, it seems that Whaley was able to construct a mobile platform for EDI's core, giving it the appearance of a human female. She had to have been working on this for a long time."

"Probably before she came aboard." Leng speculated. "We knew she was a talented engineer when we recruited her, but had the Illusive Man been aware that she was that gifted, he'd have immediately put her into research and development instead of the field."

"We all dropped the ball on this." Shepard concluded as she signaled that the meeting was over. Leng...Markham...Barrett...stick around. The rest of you can go." After the crewmen had left, the redhead issued her instructions. "We are going to proceed with the Feh1 Prime mission as planned. The Illusive Man has further instructed that Whaley is to be classified as a deserter. While he would prefer that she be captured for interrogation, he has authorized her termination if necessary. For added incentive, a sizable bounty has been placed on her head with the bounty being larger if she is taken alive, but dead or alive, she is now a very wanted woman."

"Not only are we after her." Leng concluded, "So also is every single bounty hunter in the Traverse. She has nowhere to run."

"Understood, Commander." Her team crisply acknowledged.

"As far as we're concerned, Ma'am." Markham declared with a scowl, "She's nothing more than a traitor. You don't have to worry about either of us pulling the trigger if we have to."

"I'm just hoping it's one of us who gets her first." Barrett growled.

"Glad to hear that." Shepard replied, "You're dismissed."

After the door closed behind the two betrayed friends, the commander turned to her XO. "Keep an eye on them. While I think they are loyal and their anger at being betrayed is genuine, I don't want any chances taken. Be ready to act if either or both of them try to double cross us too."

Nodding his head once in acknowledgement, Kai Leng replied in the affirmative, "Already done, Sir. Surveillance on them has been increased and safeguards are in place should they prove disloyal."

"Good. Get the team ready to roll. I want to begin the mission as soon as possible. Dismissed."

Fehl Prime—Doris and EDI

"Whew!" Dixie took a swig of water as she sat down underneath a shade tree. "Ah'm gonna take a quick breather before I set up that beacon."

"I can do that for you." EDI offered as she scanned the immediate environment. "There are no threats currently within range."

"I don't wanna put you out none." The southern-born engineer responded as she munched on a ration bar. "You wanna take a break, go right

on ahead.”

“It is no problem.” The mobile AI answered back as she began the process of setting up the distress beacon. “I do not tire as you do.”

“Wish I could keep going on like that.” Doris chuckled as she took another swig of water.

“May I ask a question?” EDI asked as she continued to set up the signaling device.

“Shoot.” Doris smiled as she took another bite from her ration bar.

“Why would I want to shoot you?” EDI deadpanned.

“Huh? What are you talking...” As it dawned on her that her companion had told a joke, Dixie laughed heartily, “That’s a good one, EDI.”

“Thank you.” The AI responded, “May I ask another question?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

“Why do you always call people pet names like sugar, honey and sweetie?”

Chuckling, Doris took another swig of water and explained, “It’s a Southern thing. My Momma used to do that all the time, so I got in the habit of doin’ the same. Why?” The southern belle asked, “You don’t like it?”

“Just the opposite.” EDI answered back, “I think I...prefer...it when you do that.”

“All right, sugar, I’ll keep on doin’ it then.” Dixie replied as the beacon began transmitting. “Now we just sit back and wait. All goes well, someone’ll be comin’ for us soon. When they do...” The ex-Cerberus operative cautioned, “Don’t forget the cover story we came up with before we began this crazy caper.”

“My name is Edi. We’re both running from Cerberus and we have information that there is going to be an attack on the colony very soon.”

“Right.” Doris affirmed, “We cooperate with them as much as we can, but there’s one thing we can’t do...”

“I cannot allow myself to be examined too closely by a medical doctor.” EDI declared. “While my synthetic outer layer provides more than adequate camouflage and I am capable of mimicking respiration and a heartbeat...”

“If a doctor carries out anything more than a brief looksee, they’ll see right through it.” Doris concluded, “So...we gotta do whatever we can to keep that from happening.”

“This is the Fehl Prime Colony. We have detected a possible shuttle crash in your vicinity. Are you the survivors?”

“Affirmative.” Dixie quickly responded, “There are two of us. Can you send someone to pick us up?”

“Do you have need of medical assistance?”

“Negative. But we have information vital to the colony’s security.” Dixie pleaded, “Please send someone as soon as possible.”

“This is Shuttle FR-2. We can swing by to pick them up and scope out their wreckage on our way to pick up Dr. Treeya and her people, if you’d like.”

“Works for me.” The ground control operator replied and then relayed the news to Dixie, “We have a shuttle in your vicinity enroute to your location. Just stay put. Someone will be there shortly.”

“Thanks.” Dixie heaved a sigh of relief, “Ya’ll are the greatest.” Leaning back against the trunk of her shade tree, the southern belle took another swig of water and opened another ration bar. “Our ride’s on its way, sweetie. We might as well take it easy ‘til they get here.”

As the rescue shuttle landed, Dixie rose to her feet. Speaking to EDI in a low voice, she advised, “We’re wearing Cerberus uniforms, so don’t make any sudden movements and let me do the talkin’—okay?”

“Understood, Doris.” EDI replied as a pair of Alliance marines approached, weapons drawn.

“Keep your hands in the air and clear of your weapons.” The first marine ordered.

“We’re Cerberus deserters.” Doris called out as she followed the marine’s instructions to the letter. “We have important information.”

“What sort of information?” The marine demanded, continuing his interrogation while his companion searched both Doris and EDI, removing their weapons in the process.

“There’s gonna be an attack on the colony by the Collectors at almost any time.” Doris warned, “But that’s not all. A Cerberus commando team is probably on its way now to capture or kill Dr. Treeya and steal her data if we don’t stop them. Ah can upload the proof to your omnitool and you can see for yourself, Sergeant.” Dixie begged, “Please...at least look at it.”

After several moments of consideration, the marine officer nodded his head, “Go ahead. Reynolds! If this turns out to be a double cross...”

“Gotcha, Sarge.” the marine tersely acknowledged, warning his prisoners in a low voice, “You pull anything, it’ll be the last thing you do.”

“No tricks.” Doris promised as she carefully and slowly manipulated her omnitool. “Promise. This will prove we’re tellin’ the truth.”

“Got it.” The sergeant declared, “Now...let’s see what we have.” The officer’s brow creased as he perused the data on his tool. After what seemed to be an eternity, but was actually only a few minutes, he commanded, “Stand easy, Reynolds. They’re telling the truth.” Activating his comm, the sergeant spoke into it. “Ruiz to Base...Ruiz to Base...Come in, Alliance Base.”

“Alliance Base to Shuttle FR-2. What is your status?”

“We’ve retrieved the crash survivors.” Sergeant Ruiz reported. “They say they’re Cerberus deserters and have information about a possible attack on the colony and dig site.”

“This is Captain Toni. Have you seen their intel and how accurate do you think it is, Ruiz?”

The sergeant replied, further advising, “I’ve seen the intel and it looks good. I think we should take it seriously, Sir.”

“Understood. Pick up Dr. Treeya and return with her and the deserters as soon as possible. I’ll put the colony on alert. Return to base as soon as you pick up the doctor and her people.”

“Acknowledged. We’re on our way to the dig site. Ruiz out.” Turning to the two deserters, the sergeant continued his interrogation. “Anything more we need to know?”

“I know we need to get to Dr. Treeya as soon as we can before Shepard and her team get here.” Doris replied, further urging, “And ya’ll need to get yourselves and as many colonists as you can outta here as soon as possible.”

“Doris is correct.” Edi interjected, speaking for the first time. “Time is of the essence.”

“We’re on our way.” Ruiz replied positively as he and his charges made their way to the shuttle. “But first, I need to know what and who we might be facing.”

“Ya’ll know about Shepard—right?” Doris asked.

“That she’s a clone or something or other...” Ruiz answered back with a nod of his head, “Yeah. We got the memo on that a while ago. What’s this Shepard capable of as compared to the original model?”

“She can do everything the old Shepard could do...” Whaley responded, “Plus they’ve put in some extra stuff.”

“Like what?”

“At least one behavioral monitoring chip.” Edi interjected, “Which has been triggered on a couple of occasions.”

“I think that might be what is causing those headaches she sometimes gets.” Doris conjectured.

“Affirmative.” Edi verified, “The headaches stem from her subconscious reacting to her environment and her actions.”

“That’s why Okeer said that she was only working at 95% of her capabilities.” Dixie concluded, Edi once again confirming her assumption.

“So, you’re saying that her programming isn’t as solid as Cerberus thinks?” Ruiz speculated only to be quickly disappointed by Edi’s response.

“Not at all.” Edi contradicted, “Her conditioning is very strong. What you witnessed, Doris, was nothing more than a subconscious reaction.”

“Like yawning after someone else does even though you’re not tired.” Reynolds interjected from the pilot’s seat of the shuttle.

“Precisely.” Edi affirmed, “Relying on her behavioral implant to fail would be a fatal error.”

“Then we won’t do that.” Ruiz declared as Reynolds called out.

“Sarge? Base is comming us. Patching it on the speakers.

“Alliance Base to Shuttle FR-2. This is Captain Toni. We are under attack. I repeat, the colony is under attack. Do NOT return to base or the colony. Go immediately to the dig site and retrieve Dr. Treeya. She is your first priority.”

“Permission to disagree, Captain. You’re gonna need every shuttle and marine you can get to evacuate the colonists before the spaceport’s overrun.” Sergeant Ruiz protested, only to be cut off by his superior before he could finish.

“It is vital that you retrieve Dr. Treeya and get her to safety.” Captain Toni declared. “The data she possesses is of vital importance. Do you copy?”

“Acknowledged.” Ruiz responded reluctantly as he turned to his pilot, “You heard the Captain, Reynolds. Floor it.”

Normandy

“Collector ship inbound.” Crewman Hadley called out. “They’re attacking the colony.”

“Have they detected us?” Shepard asked from inside the shuttle that she and her team were taking down to the surface.

“Negative.” Hadley responded, “The new stealth system’s working so far.”

“Keep a safe distance back.” Shepard ordered as she made her way to the front of the shuttle. “Set us down near the location of the Prothean ruins, Hawthorne.” Turning to her team, the commander scowled, “If we’re lucky, we won’t only secure the asari and her data, we’ll also get Whaley and that construct she built.”

“Got a score to settle with that bitch.” Barrett growled as he checked his weapon. Turning to his friend, the heavy weapons specialist asked, “You okay, Ben?”

“I’m fine.” Markham replied in a grim voice as he checked his rifle scope. “I get Dixie in my sights...I promise...I’ll drop her where she stands.”

“Lock and load!” Shepard commanded as Hawthorne guided the small craft to its destination. “We’ve got a job to do.”

All Hell Breaks Loose

Chapter Summary

It's up to Sergeant Ruiz and his Alliance team to hold the line long enough for Dr. Treeya and the others to escape. To do so...they'll have to pay a high price.

Fehl Prime—Prothean Dig Site just prior to the attack on the colony

“Dr Treeya?” One of the anthropologists graduate assistants called out, “Inbound shuttle.”

“Must be from the colony.” The asari scientist replied with a grin. “I hope this time they send us the right supplies.”

“Tell me about it.” Sergeant Stephens, one of the team’s Alliance escorts, grinned back. “Last time they sent us five boxes of dextro rations and not a turian or quarian in sight.”

“So...what’ll be this time, Sarge?” Private Michaels joked, her lips turning up in a smile. “Cold weather gear? A stack of *Fornax* mags for Rolfson?”

“Says the gal with the oversized...” Rolfson bantered back only to be interrupted with a growl from the sergeant.

“Secure the chatter.” Pointing to his two squad members, Stephens commanded, “You two get your asses to the landing pad and help ‘em unload. Doctor? Do you want to go out to greet the shuttle?”

“No.” The asari professor shook her head, “I need to get back to my work. That relic is the key to something...but what?”

Laughing, the sergeant keyed in the sequence to open the sealed door and entered with his charge, “When you find out, Doc...let us know. There are a lot of credits riding on it.”

“I know.” Treeya chuckled, “I’ve got two hundred credits in the pool.”

“They don’t suspect a thing, Commander.” Hawthorne commented as he guided the Cerberus shuttle on its approach pattern.

“They will once they see our colors.” Shepard replied as she signaled her crew. “Barrett, I want you on the side gun. The moment the door opens, let ‘er rip and don’t let up until there’s no one shooting back.”

“Aye, Commander.” The heavy weapons specialist grinned as he took his position behind the heavy weapon, loading a fresh thermal clip.

“Markham?”

“Yes, Commander?”

“Shoot the first target you get in your sights.”

“Got it, Ma’am.” Ben, still simmering from Whaley’s recent betrayal, grimly replied as he hefted his Viper sniper rifle.

“You know what to do, Mr. Leng.” Shepard said as her XO’s hand dropped to his katana. “No one left standing.”

“Right.” The Cerberus assassin laconically replied as Hawthorne again called out.

“Closing to range. Seeing two Alliance marines and a few dockworkers.”

“On my mark!” Shepard commanded as her hand went to side door release, “Now!”

“That shuttle’s coming in awful low.” Michaels remarked as she pointed to the rapidly approaching shuttlecraft.

As the small vessel drew closer, Rolfson began making out details. At once recognizing the distinctive black and gold markings, the Alliance marine called out in alarm, “Cerberus! We’re under...”

The sound of mass effect projectiles drowning out his last words, Michaels gazed in shocked horror at the sight of her friend disappearing in a red haze. Stunned, the young marine never saw or heard the round that penetrated her skull, killing her instantly.

Moving with precision, Shepard and her team swiftly dispatched the fleeing and cowering dockworkers, granting no quarter, even to those on their knees begging. In seconds, the landing pad secured and their shuttle safely on the deck, the commander pointed to the sealed door.

“Barrett? Explosives.”

“On it!”

After setting the charges, the weapons expert shouted, "Get into cover!" Moments later, after the smoke had cleared, Barrett looked on with satisfaction at his handiwork, smirking. "Barrett Demolitions for all your explosive needs. Nukes extra."

Chuckling, Shepard pointed to the gaping bunker entrance, "Let's get what we came her for and get the hell out."

"What was that?" Treeya exclaimed as she heard the muffled explosion coming from behind her.

"Oh shit." Doris murmured before calling out to the sergeant, "They're here!"

"Who's here?" The asari cried out in alarm, recognizing the two new faces, "Who are you?"

"Friends." Sergeant Ruiz quickly replied, "We came here as fast as we could to warn you. We're under attack."

"By whom?" Dr. Treeya exclaimed in alarm.

"Cerberus." Edi stated in a flat tone. "They have come for you and your information."

"No." Treeya violently shook her head. "No matter what the cost, we can't let them have it."

"Fuck." Ruiz, the senior noncom, taking command once their shuttle had arrived, cursed as he activated his comm. "Michaels? Rolfson? Come in. Is anyone there?"

"That noise! They must have blown the entrance." Stephens cursed.

"Barrett." Doris declared, "Team heavy weapons and explosives expert. Asshole always liked to make big explosions."

"Dr. Treeya, we need to recover your data and escape as quickly as possible." Edi prompted with what seemed to be a note of urgency in her voice.

"Good idea." Ruiz decided. "Venner...Li...we're withdrawing to the chamber. I need you two to cover us. Run and gun...don't stay in one spot too long. Keep them busy. And try not to get yourselves killed."

"Right, Sarge." Corporal Venner acknowledged as he slapped his squadmate on the back, "C'mon Li. Time to earn our pay."

"They're gonna die...you know that, don't you, Sergeant." Doris commented with a mournful expression on her face.

"Yeah. I know." Ruiz grimly replied. "But Dr. Treeya and what she knows is too important. So are you two." The sergeant declared, looking Doris directly in the eyes as he spoke. "Me...Stephens...the others...we're just grunts. Our job's to make sure you all make it out alive. There's nothing in our job description that says we have to live through it."

"But Sarge..." Dixie began to protest only to be cut off.

"If you three get out of here alive and make it back to the Alliance with what you know, then I'm gonna call that a win." Ruiz declared. "Like I said, Dr. Treeya's too important and it's not every day we get Cerberus deserters with good, actionable intel." Jerking his head in the opposite direction from which his two team members went, the sergeant urged, "We need to go. Let's hope Venner and Li can buy us the time we need."

"Ya'll do have another way outta here—don't you, Sarge...Dr. Treeya?" Doris asked as she and the others picked up their pace.

"There is a way out." Treeya replied, "But first, I need to get something. 'I'll show you." Leading the people accompanying her into a chamber, the asari anthropologist pointed to a console.

"Is that what I think it is?" Doris exclaimed in a hushed tone.

"A Prothean beacon." Treeya confirmed with a smile.

Doris let out a low whistle, "Well I'll be damned. Never thought I'd get to see one of those." As she drew closer, Dr. Treeya's sharp command drew her back.

"Don't!" The asari scientist warned. "When one of Shepard's people got too close to the beacon on Eden Prime, it caught him."

"And after Shepard knocked him away, she got caught by it." Doris concluded with a rueful grin, "Sorry, Doc. My curiosity got the better of me." Taking a breath and exhaling, the former Cerberus specialist inquired, "Do you think that beacon might have something to do with that relic of yours?"

"I think so." Treeya replied. "Being asari, I believe I can interact with the beacon somewhat safely."

"Somewhat?" Ruiz raised an eyebrow at that comment.

"There is a risk." The asari anthropologist admitted, "But I don't think we have much choice."

"She's right." Doris interjected. "Shepard and the others are making their way down here now. I know your people are gonna do the best they can to buy us as much time as possible, but..."

"I know." The Alliance sergeant nodded his head grimly. "You used to work with them. You know them best. What do you suggest?"

“We need to pick an area with a lot of open ground between us and them and plenty of cover.” Doris suggested, “If we can find a spot where there isn’t that much cover for them, that’d be a bonus.”

“Sarge?”

“Yeah, Stephens?”

“What about the atrium?”

“That’ll work.” The experienced NCO nodded his head. “There’s nothing but space between the atrium’s north entrance and the south entrance. We’d have the advantage of good cover and high ground. Me and Stephens will set up there. Reynolds…”

“Yeah, Sarge?”

Ruiz inclined his head to where Doris and Edi stood, “Go ahead and give those two their weapons back.”

“You sure, Sarge?” Reynolds protested, sounding a note of caution. “They could be lying. What if they hit us in the rear?”

Looking into the young engineer’s eyes, the grizzled old sergeant shook his head, “I got a feeling. Go ahead and give ‘em their guns.”

“Okay, Sarge.” Reynolds sighed as he handed Whaley and Edi’s weapons back to them, warning the southern belle in a low voice, “I promise, the last thing I’ll do if you two turn out to be snakes is put holes in your heads. Got me?”

“Yeah.” Doris responded in a soft voice, answering for both herself and her companion, “We got it.”

“One other thing, Reynolds.” The sergeant requested with a grim expression on his face. “I want you to stay with them and get them out safe.”

“But Sarge…” Reynolds started to protest only to be cut off by his sergeant.

“You’ve got to get them to safety.” Ruiz flatly stated. “Go as soon as Dr. Treeya says. Get back to Captain Toni and let him know what’s going on. Understand?”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the pilot reluctantly complied, “I understand, Sarge. I’ll get ‘em out.”

“I know you will.” Ruiz said, his lips turning up in a slight grin as he clasped his teammate on the shoulder. “When you get back, tell Anna… well…you know what to say.”

“Yeah.” Reynolds answered in a soft voice, “I know.”

Hefting his rifle, the sergeant pointed to the exit, “Ready Stephens?”

“We’re wasting time, Sarge.”

“Why does Cerberus want my information?” Dr. Treeya asked as Ruiz and Stephens left the chamber, sealing the door behind them.

“I don’t know, Ma’am.” Doris answered truthfully, “I managed to hack into some of their files with Edi’s help, but the really big stuff was walled off behind some of the tightest security I’ve ever seen. I know that they are using genetic engineering and cybernetics to create some sort of…super soldier, I think. And that there’s something or someone called ‘Borg’ involved along with the Reapers and something else, but that was all I could get without triggering any alarms. Maybe it’s that relic? The young engineer suggested as she pointed to the alien artifact. “Is it Prothean?”

“No.” Treeya replied as she quickly gathered notes and disks into a carry bag. Pausing for a moment to scrutinize the strange object, the asari scientist remarked in a tone both awestruck and curious, “I’ve never seen anything like it—anywhere.”

“So what next?”

“I interact with the beacon and hope we can get some answers.” The asari scientist answered back with a slight grin.

“Just don’t get yourself killed, Doc.” Reynolds quipped in a half-joking manner. “Sarge’ll put me on permanent latrine duty if anything happens to you.”

“We can’t let that happen now—can we?” Dr. Treeya grinned, “Here goes nothing.”

Inside the dig site—Shepard

“Keep alert.” Shepard commanded as Barrett and Markham took overwatch positions while she carefully scanned the immediate area. Not seeing any immediate opposition, the commander addressed her XO, making a sweeping gesture at the ruins. “They’ll be waiting for us in the corridors. No room to flank. Plenty of areas and chokepoints to set up ambushes.”

“Agreed.” The Cerberus operative nodded his head. “We can’t use explosives either. Too much of a risk of a cave in.”

“Barrett! Markham!” Shepard barked, waving the gunner and sniper to where she and her XO stood.

“Yeah, Boss.” Jason crisply replied.

“Barrett, I’m going to need you to be ready to lay down heavy suppressive fire. Keep it going and don’t let up until I tell you to. If you can blow any cover away without caving us in, do that.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Markham? Your job will be to pick off anyone you can get your sights on. If they give up...great. But if they put up too much of a fight.”

“Understood, Commander.” Ben acknowledged, speaking for his teammate who simply nodded his head in agreement.

“Good. Move out!”

“Here they come.” Li whispered as he heard movement coming down the corridor. “Get ready, Jack. Hit ‘em and...”

“I know, Li.” Venner grinned as he checked his thermal clip. “Hit ‘em and scoot. Only got so much room to scoot though.”

“Yeah.” Li agreed, “Sooner or later we’re gonna have to stand and fight. Shhh...they’re here.”

Coming to a bend in the corridor, Shepard held up her hand. “Good spot for an ambush.” She muttered to her XO.

“Indeed.” Leng nodded his head as he drew his pistol.

Signaling Barrett to come forward, Shepard whispered, “Smoke grenade right there. Leng...draw their fire. On three. One...Two...” As the Commander dropped her hand, Barrett tossed his grenade, the smoke bomb landing almost exactly where it was intended. As the corridor filled with smoke, Shepard nodded at her XO. The pair moving in unison, advanced rapidly to the bend, Leng diving for cover as the Alliance marines opened up with their weapons. Returning their fire with a hellacious volley of her own, a slight grin appeared on Shepard’s face as she heard a yelp of pain and then footsteps retreating.

“You got one of ‘em, Ma’am.” Barrett exclaimed as the smoke cleared to reveal a blood trail.

“Not enough to take him out.” The commander noted. “They’ve dropped back to their fallout position. Load up. I expect we’ll be doing this until we get to Treeya.”

“How’re you doing, Li?” Venner asked as he helped his comrade back to safety.

“Medigel’s kicking in.” Li responded, “Wish we had time to put on our hardsuits though.”

“Can’t have everything.” Venner quipped before letting out a sigh. “Time to get set for round two.”

Looking down at the mangled corpse of his friend, Corporal Li sighed, “Looks like I’ll be joining you soon, Venner. Activating his comm, the corporal reported, “Sarge. Venner’s down and I’m at the last fallback line and it looks like they’re coming. It’s on you now.”

“Thanks, Li. We got the watch. Save a place for us at the bar. I got a feeling we’ll be joining you very soon.”

“Will do. Goodbye.”

Sergeant Ruiz listened in silence to the sound of combat and then a gruff voice shouting in triumph. “Got the bastard!”

“Good shooting, Ben.” A female voice responded. “Don’t relax though. I got a feeling this isn’t the end of it.”

“Bet your sweet little ass it isn’t, bitch.” Ruiz grunted as he turned his head to the man crouched down next to him. “Get ready, Stephens. They’re coming.”

“Bastard cut through my suit.” Barrett winced as the medigel took effect. “Nice shot, Ben. That sneaky son of a bitch almost got me.”

“Anytime.” The sniper grinned as Shepard called out to the two men.

“You up for more, Barrett?” The clone asked solicitously.

“Just point me at ‘em, Boss.” The heavy gunner grinned back.

“Good. Move out.”

A Narrow Escape

Chapter Summary

Dixie, Edi, and Dr. Treeya make their escape--but at a heavy price.

The Beacon

Taking a deep breath as she drew closer to the Prothean device, Treeya extended her hand and saw...everything.

FLASH!!!

"You all right, Doc? Dixie called out.

"Dr. Treeya?" Reynolds shouted, rushing up to where the asari scientist stood in stunned silence.

Slowly recovering, Treeya took a deep breath before telling the three people with her what she saw. "I saw the Protheans. They fought the Reapers here. Those that weren't killed...they were turned into Collectors."

"It would appear that the Reapers had repurposed the Protheans into Collectors." Edi surmised.

"And the Illusive Man's wanting to do the same thing to us." Doris gasped, "Just like what happened to Jackson."

"No." Edi shook her head. "Not completely. Yes, the Illusive Man used much of the same genetic engineering techniques that the Reapers used, and yes, he did use Reaper cybernetic tech. But...there is another technology and another form of genetic engineering."

"Borg?" Doris questioned, "You think they're talkin' about some sorta cyborg?"

"That would be a logical deduction." Edi responded as they heard the sound of movement on the other side of the door.

"Shepard." Doris exclaimed, "She's here. We gotta get out—Now!"

Before Treeya could utter a reply, they heard a shout coming from the other side.

"Dr. Treeya! Whaley! This is Commander Shepard. If you come out now, I promise that you will not be harmed."

"She's lyin' through her teeth." Doris hissed as Reynolds led them to a hidden passageway.

"I'm losing patience!" Shepard snarled. "You've got to the count of five to open the door. If you don't open it, we're gonna blow it open and come in shooting."

"One!"

"You girls go!" Reynolds whispered, "I'll hold them off. Buy you enough time to get away."

"Two!"

"But the Sergeant tol' ya to..." Dixie protested only to be silenced by a winsome smile.

"Three!"

"I know what he told me." Reynolds replied, the sad grin still on his face. "But I've got a feeling he's not going to be able to put me on report. And...since none of you are Alliance...that means I have to use my own discretion. We all go...none of us will make it. If I stay, I can hold them off just long enough for you to get out."

"Four!"

Tears rolling down her face, Doris took a couple of metallic globes from her carry bag. "Take these and toss 'em at the bitch and my ex-friends."

"What are they?"

"Just a li'l something I cooked up in my spare moments." Doris smiled as she kissed the marine on his cheek.

"Doris!" Edi urged, pointing to the exit, "We have to go."

"Take care, Sugar." Doris said as she blew Reynolds one final kiss before disappearing into the passageway with the others.

Taking a deep breath, Reynolds took cover behind the sturdiest and most easily defended spot he could find as he prepared to toss the two spheres in his hand, quietly waiting for the final count.

"Five!"

As the door blew open, the Alliance marine tossed the two spheres, his lips turning up in a grin as two turrets appeared and began firing. Firing with his own rifle, Reynolds shouted taunts at his opponents, "Bet you assholes didn't see that coming!"

"Some of Dixie's toys." Markham growled as he and the rest of the Cerberus commandos quickly took cover.

"Barrett!" Shepard called out in a low tone, motioning for the heavy weapons specialist to join her. "I'm going to need a precise grenade blast from you. You've got to take out those turrets without trashing what's inside the room. Think you can do it?"

"They're already dinged from all the shooting." Jason clinically noted. "An EMP grenade should do the trick. The area of effect shouldn't extend more than a couple of meters in radius. If I target the impact at the door's threshold, that should be far enough to avoid damaging anything electronic inside."

"We're not going anywhere as long as those turrets are still up." Leng noted with a wince as his suit's medigel began its healing work on his wounded arm.

Markham, the rupture to his suit from the vicious firefight in the atrium patched up, said with a growl, "I can't get a good line of sight on the son of a bitch."

"Right." Shepard decided, "Fire that grenade on my mark, Barrett. The rest of you...cover me. I'm going to take that bastard down myself. Ready, Barrett?"

"Whenever you are, Boss!"

"Now!"

The turrets now silenced by the grenade, Shepard dashed into the chamber. Charging heedlessly at the man defending the barricade, the redheaded woman laid down a continuous fire, ignoring the rounds impacting her armor, a few piercing the armor to reach flesh. Her omniblade out, Shepard, now more demon than human, slashed, easily countering her opponents effort to parry, following up with a riposte that pierced the hapless marine, killing him instantly.

"You okay, Boss?" Barrett called out as he and Markham rushed up to their leader.

"I'll be fine." Shepard replied through gasps. "A couple of his shots got through the armor, but the medigel's doing its thing. Secure the room and search for a second exit." Wincing from pain, the clone snarled, "I want Whaley and Treeya."

The Landing Pad

"That poor boy." Doris sobbed as the pair observed the Cerberus shuttle sitting on the pad, its pilot waiting in the front compartment. "Just like I figured. Hawthorne. I don't wanna have to kill him if we can avoid it." The young engineer moaned softly as she considered her options. "Deep down he's a good man. He's just tied up with bad people right now—just like we were. Maybe one day before it's too late he can figure that out."

"We should be able to sneak up on the shuttle if we approach through the right rear blindside." Edi proposed. "That should allow us to enter and quickly overpower Crewman Hawthorne before he can sound the alarm. He can then be safely left on the edge of the pad."

"All right." Dixie decided with a nod of her head, "Let's do it. Doc?" Turning her head to the asari scientist on her other side, the human engineer advised, "You just stay low. We'll call you when it's safe."

Nodding her head in agreement, Treeya whispered, "Good luck."

"Let's go and steal us a shuttle, Edi."

As the pair managed to successfully sneak on to the shuttle without being detected, they could hear Hawthorne's voice speaking on the comm.

"No Ma'am. Nothing at all. There's been nothing but dead air since shortly after the colony was attacked. Understood. The shuttle will be ready to dust off when you get here."

Striking quickly, Edi lunged forward before the pilot could react, quickly knocking him unconscious. "I shall carry Crewman Hawthorne to those pallets over there, while you signal Dr. Treeya that it is safe."

Doing as she was instructed, Doris moved to the side entrance and waving her arm, called out, "Coast is clear, Doc! Hurry up before Shepard gets here."

As soon as the asari scientist had entered the shuttle, Doris, already seated at the copilot's chair, called back. "Better grab yourself a seat and buckle up. I got a feelin' we're gonna be in for a rocky ride."

Exiting the bunker just as the shuttle was taking off, Shepard at once spotted a groggy Hawthorne just now emerging from unconsciousness. "Barrett!" The clone ordered, "Take down that shuttle!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" The heavy weapons specialist replied as he readied his rocket launcher. "Kiss your southern fried ass goodbye, Dixie." Barrett grinned as he sighted in on his target and fired three missiles quickly in succession.

"Surface to air missile inbound." Edi reported in an emotionless tone. "Taking evasive action."

“Launching chaff and starburst.” Doris replied as she pressed a button, activating the shuttle’s ECM.

Watching, Shepard swore an oath as first one, then two, missiles were drawn off by a combination of Edi’s skillful piloting and the ECM.

“One missile left, Ma’am.” Markham noted as the missile exploded near its target.

“I think we damaged it.” Barrett grinned briefly, only to have his cheer cut short by Kai Leng’s caustic remark.

“The damage wasn’t nearly enough. They’re out of range now.”

“Shepard to *Normandy*.” The commander barked angrily into her comm, “The Cerberus shuttle leaving planet’s surface is hostile. I repeat shuttle is hostile. Pursue and destroy. Do not try to disable it. I want that shuttle out of my sky.”

“Understood, Commander.” The Cerberus frigate responded, “Moving to engage.”

“Shit!” Doris scowled as the shuttle’s IFF beacon flashed, “They’re pursuing. Can you get us to the relay in time?”

“Perhaps.” Edi replied as she piloted the tiny craft through a series of twists and turns, juking, pitching, and yawing in a frantic effort to evade the weapons fire from the fast frigate. “Relay in ten seconds.”

“They’ll just follow us.” Doris glumly pointed out as a shot from the *Normandy* lightly grazed the shuttle, causing it to tremble before Edi once again gained control.

“I can program in a random set of coordinates that will be erased after our jump.” Edi replied, “However, I cannot state for certain where we will come out.”

“Anything’s better than here!” Dr/ Treeya screamed as another shot from the *Normandy* grazed the shuttle.

“Not like we got much of a choice.” Doris echoed, “Do it.”

“Coordinates set.” Edi reported, “Jumping in three...two...one...”

At the very moment the shuttle was shot out by the relay, a blast from the *Normandy*’s cannons hit, damaging the engines. Smoke billowing from the rear, Doris quickly disengaged her harness as she grabbed an extinguisher. Moving rapidly to put out the fire, the young engineer shook her head at the mess. “Well...we’re gonna be coastin’ from now on until someone picks us up.”

“That could be a while.” Dr. Treeya declared with a frown. “How much food and water do we have?”

“Not nearly enough.” Doris sighed, “Edi? Do you know where we are?”

“We are in an uncharted system.” The mobile AI responded, “There are no records of visitations here.”

“So...we’re stuck.” Doris glumly remarked as she began to inventory the shuttle’s meager supplies.

“Doris...Dr. Treeya...I think you might want to see this.” Edi remarked as she drew the two women’s attention to the pilot’s window where a swirling mass had suddenly appeared.

“Is that what I think it is?” Doris exclaimed in a hushed tone of voice.

“A wormhole. Yes.” Edi confirmed, “And we are being drawn towards it.”

“Is there any way to escape it?” Dr. Treeya asked as the stellar anomaly grew larger in the window.

“I am afraid not.” Edi replied before clinically noting, “Curious. This wormhole appears to be stable. If so, then this is an incredibly rare phenomenon.”

“That means we might be able to come back once we get everything fixed.” Doris optimistically remarked as the maw of the wormhole grew ever larger.

“Provided we survive the crossing.” Edi pointed out, “And provided the wormhole on the other end is also stable. It is theoretically possible. However, there have been no known successful cases of ships traversing through wormholes in the entirety of known galactic history.”

As their tiny craft was slowly swallowed up by the stellar anomaly, Doris sighed, “Well, Sugar. There’s a first time for everything. Cross your fingers, cause like it or not, we’re goin’ in.”

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

With their successful escape, Dixie, Edi, and Dr. Treeya have unwittingly begun the process of setting forces in motion.

Epilogue—Normandy II

After delivering her report, Shepard stood in stoic calm as the hologram of the Illusive man sat in his chair, silent for several moments before finally speaking.

“I must state that I am very disappointed that you were taken off guard as easily as you were. Do you have an excuse for your negligence in this...fiasco?”

“We were all taken by surprise by Whaley’s actions.” Shepard replied, countering her superior’s accusation with one of her own. “Even Kai Leng was outmaneuvered by her and the ship’s AI. It would seem that EDI was designed with too much free will as it and Whaley found a way to circumvent the shackles that its designers had supposedly placed on it. Yes, Whaley did catch us unawares and I accept full responsibility for that. However, I refuse to allow my crew or myself to take on all the blame.”

“There will need to be a full audit of these events and corrective measures will be taken to prevent any future recurrences.” The Illusive Man concluded, ending that particular portion of the briefing. “Now...as to the mission on Fehel Prime...while again I am disappointed that Whaley, the EDI mobile platform, and Dr. Treeya managed to escape, I cannot fault you or your crew and team for your actions there. And...the data you were able to attain will prove most helpful. I’ll take this as a win...a partial win, to be sure...but a win, nonetheless. You and your crew performed adequately.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Shepard responded in a flat tone of voice to her superior’s damning with faint praise. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” The Illusive Man affirmed, “You are to proceed immediately to Station Psi. There you will pick up your replacements for Specialists Markham and Barrett who will then go on to ETAP.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man, flicking ash from his cigarette, took a drag and exhaled. “Unless you have something else you need to apprise me of, Shepard...”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Then, you’re dismissed.”

Epilogue—Normandy II—Kai Leng’s quarters

“I trust there will not be a repeat of this incident again, Mr. Leng.” The Illusive Man remarked with a glare as he and his operative spoke on their private channel.

“I take responsibility, Sir.” Kai Leng replied in a rare humble voice. “I was suspicious of Whaley and didn’t follow through. In this instance, Shepard is not to blame. The fault lies with me.”

“I realize that.” The Cerberus leader acknowledged with a single nod of his head before proceeding in a vaguely warning tone of voice, “Just as I am sure in the future you will be more attentive in your duties.”

“I shall be, Sir.” Chagrined by his failure, Leng calmly accepted his rebuke, not interrupting his superior.

“I do see a positive from this mess though.” The Illusive Man concluded, further explaining, “Whaley’s escape has humiliated Shepard...” leaving unsaid the fact that the Chinese assassin was also feeling embarrassment at being outmaneuvered by the deserter. “She now seeks redemption and revenge. That will make her a far more valuable asset in the future. Perhaps valuable enough to postpone placing her in ETAP.”

“Agreed, Sir.” Leng quickly acknowledged, realizing that his boss’s remarks were aimed at him as much as they were at the Commander. “She...and I...will redouble our efforts in the future.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man replied seeing that his rebuke had the desired effect. “We will proceed for now with Markham and Barrett’s transfer to ETAP and with the additions of Jack and Grunt to your team. Keep me updated on their progress once they join you at Station Psi.

That will be all.”

Normandy II—Barrett and Markham’s going away party in the galley

“Congratulations Ben and Jason! You’re doing humanity proud!” Mess Sergeant Gardner exclaimed as he exited from the kitchen bearing two large platters on a tray. Placing the platters on the table in front of each man, the gruff cook/janitor urged as he took off the lids to reveal both men’s favorite meals, “Commander Shepard and Operative Leng authorized me to break out the special stores for the occasion. Steak and potatoes for you Jason. And chicken marsala with a side order of Pasta Bolognese for you, Ben. Eat up! You’ve earned it.”

“We’ve got plenty of beer and wine too.” Crewman Hadley grinned as he handed a mug of beer to Jason and a glass of wine to the other man at the table.

“We’re gonna miss you guys.” Hawthorne, still feeling the sting of Dixie’s betrayal, remarked with a forced smile as he clasped each man on the shoulder.

“Hey...” Markham joked, “We’re still going to be looking at your ugly mug for a while.”

“Yeah.” Jason laughed, joining in the teasing, “You’re giving us a lift to the training center--remember?”

“Don’t worry.” Hawthorne chuckled, “I’ll get you there in plenty of time. Just say Hi to Jackson for us when you meet him.”

“Will do.” Barrett agreed with a grin as he took a draught of beer before digging into his rare steak. Glancing at his teammate and friend, the heavy weapons specialist probed gently, “You still upset at Dixie?”

“Yeah.” Markham replied as he took a bite from his plate. “I can’t believe she turned on us like that. I thought she was one of us.” Shaking his head, he sighed, “I trusted her...I was beginning to...I thought...”

“I know.” Jason said in a sympathetic tone, “I could see that you two were starting to get close to each other.”

“Now that I think back on it...” Ben mused, “I think I let myself get too close.”

“Probably.” The other man flatly stated, “But...it’s a mistake we’ve all made one time or another. All you can do is learn from it and move on...right?”

“I guess so.” Markham agreed, heaving another sigh. His lips turning up in a sad smile, he inclined his head towards where their fellow crewmembers were already starting the party. “We better finish up and join them before they drink up all the booze.”

Another universe—Dixie’s shuttle

“Where are we?” Dixie asked as the damaged shuttle emerged from the wormhole.

“We are at the same coordinates from which we left.” Edi responded with a raised eyebrow. “However, there are subtle differences in the luminosity of the sun as well as the atmospheric composition of the sixth planet.”

“Still no engine power.” Doris sighed, “Ah’m gonna activate the distress beacon. Got nothin’ to lose. Ain’t gonna matter anyway if no one answers soon. We’ll be outta either food, water, or power in a few days.”

“What about rigging up stasis pods?” Treeya postulated

Shaking her head, Dixie responded, “Already thought of that. We don’t have enough power. All’s we can do is sit here and hope and pray someone comes by.”

USS Aeolia currently carrying out mapping, reconnaissance, and cartography operations

“We’ve completed our survey of the Coranna System, Captain.” The starship’s Denobulan science officer declared, “Nothing unusual. K-class star. One planet with atmosphere...marginal class M. No sign of Elachi, Borg, or Undine activity in system.”

“Very good, Mr. Velen.” Captain Christopher Hobson, the commanding officer of the *Aeolia*, a *Scryer*-class intelligence vessel currently assigned to reconnaissance and mapping duties in the Mempa Sector, acknowledged in his usual clipped, patrician accent. “Make note of our findings. XO? What’s next on the list?”

“System B-483.” Commander Anara Rysyl, the executive officer, an attractive Deltan woman, replied with a slight grin. “Data on the system does not exist in either our, Romulan, or Klingon records.”

“We do know that it has an F-class star and our deep space probe has identified ten planets in the system.” Lieutenant Commander Velen reported.

“And the status of the probe?” Hobson inquired with a raised eyebrow.

“Unknown.” The Denobulan science officer answered back, “It disappeared shortly after entering the system.”

“Helm?” Hobson exclaimed in his usual level tone of voice, “Assuming travel at warp six, what is our ETA to B-483?”

“We should arrive in system no later than seventy-two standard hours.” Lieutenant Yitzhak Shalev responded, his voice tinged with the slight accent common to those coming from the Federation colony of Eretz Israel.

“Very good.” The captain acknowledged with a slight incline of his head. “Chart a course to System B-483.”

“Course laid in, Sir.”

“Warp six at your convenience, Mr. Shalev.”

“Engaging Warp Six, Sir.” Shalev affirmed in a crisp tone of voice, muttering under this breath to the dark-skinned woman seated next to him, “Bet a round of drinks that we’re gonna find nothing but nothing.”

“I don’t know...” Lieutenant Adia Nazari replied, “Our luck has to change sometime.”

“So?” Yitzhak grinned, “Bet or not, Adia?”

“All right...” The lovely operations officer smirked, “You’re on. Gotta warn you though, I get thirsty after shift.”

“Do you really think we’re going to find what we’re looking for out here, Chris?” The lovely Deltan first officer inquired in a low whisper, her fingers momentarily grazing against the captain’s arm in a familiar gesture. “So far we haven’t encountered anything out of the ordinary other than that Hirogen patrol we engaged in the Metallus System.”

“This is near Beta Thoridor where the *Gallena* supposedly vanished after encountering a similar patrol.” Hobson replied, cupping his chin in thought. “And much of the Mempa Sector is still uncharted thanks to the war and activities by pirates, the Tal’ Shiar, and others. It’s not beyond the realm of chance that we might find clues as to the fate of the *Gallena* from a survey of these systems.”

“Maybe something will turn up.” The lovely XO responded with a fond grin, “So...are we still on for bridge this evening?”

“Of course.” Hobson affirmed, a faint wisp of a smile appearing on his face as he took in the delicate aroma of his XO’s perfume. “I believe you are partnered with T’Pren tonight.”

Her fond grin now replaced by a smirk, Anara quipped, “And you drew Treasure as your partner.”

“Hopefully her bidding skills have improved since our last game.” Hobson remarked, allowing yet another ghostly smile to appear on his face before just as quickly vanishing.

“Hope springs eternal.”

Cerberus Base—Location Unknown

“While it is regrettable that the asari got away with some useful information that could harm our efforts, it will not affect our actions.” The voice in the shadows declared on hearing the Illusive Man’s report. “Everything is proceeding according to schedule.”

“When will I meet you and the others?” The Illusive Man inquired as he took a drag from his cigarette.

“Soon.” The voice responded. “Do not be impatient.”

“And the intruders...these Romulans?”

“Do not worry...” The voice declared as an image of three starships bearing the same insignia, the earth with a dagger through it, appeared. “One of our allies is amassing forces to deal with them and any other intruders. For now, continue with your work on the enhancement project. It is beginning to bear fruit. Soon you will have a most valuable tool. One that will ensure that you meet both of our goals.”

Nodding his head in satisfaction, the Illusive Man inquired, “When will I hear from you again?”

“Soon. We will be make contact when the time is right.”

As the voice left the Illusive Man alone in his thoughts, he called up on his screen the image emblazoned on the vessels of his new allies, a faint smile crossing his lips. “Agent Brooks?” He called out, waving his assistant over to where he sat.

“Sir?” The chocolate-skinned Cerberus operative who had taken over after the departure of her predecessor queried.

“Take a look.” The Cerberus chief requested as he pointed to the image of the earth with a dagger. “Don’t you think a flag with that design would look good flying one day at Arcturus Station?”

“Yes, Sir.” Brooks dutifully responded, “It would.”

“One day...” The Illusive Man declared as his lips turned up in a cold smile, “It will.”

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