

Reflections

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Reflections

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Summary

Ashley takes some downtime to engage in some introspection.

Notes

What I wanted to do in this part was bring out aspects of Ashley that are frequently ignored because people have this misconception of her as a racist and bigot—which couldn't be further from the truth. Did Ashley distrust the Council races? Yes—and I would argue not always without good cause. Much of her views were shaped by family history--or rather, family baggage. If you take the time to get to know her in the game and bring her with you on missions and on the Citadel rather than keeping her warehoused in the armory, you see her beginning to go past those earlier prejudices. Those who do not like Ashley seem to focus on a throwaway line she utters the first time you're on the Citadel with her. Further, in my headcanon, I see Ashley as someone who did very well in school. She could have easily gone on to college and graduate school had she wanted to, and then continue on to enjoy a very solid and respected career as a teacher or even professor of literature. She's a strong willed person intensely loyal to her friends and a woman of deep faith--but not pushy about it with others. In other words, she has her beliefs, but she's not going to stand on a street corner and harangue passersby or knock on peoples' doors and hand out leaflets. She's also blunt and to the point--you'll know where you stand with her very quickly--she doesn't play games or mince words. She's also very creative—she could well have turned her talents to writing or the arts. But, for good or ill, family history—and I would argue family obligation driven by relatives pressing her into joining as well as the aforementioned baggage from the past, drove her to follow in the footsteps of her father, grandfather, and great-grandmother and join the Alliance military. Ashley has also spent several years in the Trek 'verse now. She's found a new home where she's not judged by her family history and is encouraged to pursue her own goals. In short, she has a career she loves now, and with it, new friends and a new life and has absolutely no desire to go back to her old one. That will also cause conflicts with those whom she knew in her old life.

And yes--she is one of my favorite characters in the Mass Effect Trilogy.

Hangovers and Friends

Drozana Station—Belen's Resort

Stumbling up to the bar, Ashley, after struggling to sit down on the first available stool, covered her face with her hands as she moaned, "Ohhh...my head...I feel like a Gorn slammed into me...it's so heavy I can't move."

With a knowing smirk on his face, the Ferengi bartender shoved a mug in front of his distraught friend, "Here...drink this and you'll feel better."

"What is it?" Ashley inquired, giving the steaming hot mug a suspicious glare.

"Belen's patented cure for hangovers." The Ferengi responded with a chuckle. "After you drink that, I've got some toast and water for you. Same medicine for you too, Shelana." His chuckle now replaced by an amused smirk as an Andorian woman stumbled up to the bar.

"Shit." The hungover Andorian growled, "My head's about to explode."

"Drink." Belen ordered, gesturing at the mug. "You'll feel better...trust me."

"Down the hatch." Ashley groaned as she downed the contents of her mug in one gulp, scowling, "This tastes like horse piss!"

Shelana, also gulping down the Ferengi's brew, grumbled, "What did you put in this."

"It's a secret." Belen smirked, "But it's guaranteed to cure hangovers." Placing plates with toast and glasses, this time filled with water, in front of the two women, the Ferengi bartender instructed, "Eat and drink. By the time you're done, you should be feeling much better."

"I didn't do anything stupid—did I Belen?" Ashley asked as she took a sip of water.

"If you don't count you and Shelana getting into a bloodwine drinking contest with Captain Korath and his executive officer—then, no."

"Who won?" Shelana asked before nibbling on a piece of toast.

"It was a draw." Belen replied with a big grin on his face, "But the two of you did get standing invitations to stand with House Koloth at the next Sempok Games."

"Oh boy." Ashley sighed and then looking around the casino, asked, "Where are the others?"

"Twesata, Rana, and Nelia went to Zsa-Zsa's orgy." The Ferengi bartender laughed. Then, seeing the lovely Betazoid and her asari lover stagger into the casino, he smirked, "Speaking of..."

"Damn girls." Ashley exclaimed, somehow managing a smile through her hangover, "You two look like you've been rode hard and put away wet."

"Funny you should phrase it that way." Twesata joked as she and her companion joined the others at the bar. Turning to her girlfriend, her lips turned up in a lascivious grin, "So...which ride was the wildest, imzadi...Zsa-Zsa, Eliza, Joachim or all three?"

"All three." Rana teased back.

Shaking her head, Shelana looked around the casino, "Where's Nelia?"

"She went off with the Trill Twins." Twesata grinned, "I think they might still be going at it."

"So...how did it go with the Klingons?" Rana asked as she wriggled uncomfortably on her stool.

"Something wrong, Ran?" Ashley deflected, teasing with a wicked grin on her face.

Grinning back, the beautiful asari quipped back, "Things are a little...sensitive down there...if you know what I mean."

"Too much information!" The former Alliance marine laughed.

"We called it a tie." Shelana interjected as Nelia finally dragged herself up to the bar.

"So..." Ashley drawled, "Was it worth it?"

"You better believe it was." Nelia smirked as she gratefully took the mug that Belen held out for her. "So..." The beautiful rogue inquired as she sipped her Aldebaran tea, "What's everyone's plans for today—other than nursing hangovers and allowing certain body parts to settle down?"

"After a hot shower or two..." Ashley groaned in response, "Check in on Ajun...make sure she's adjusting okay. Then, sleep for at least six hours or until the *Valley Forge* comes in—whichever comes first."

"Oooooohhh..." Twesata teased, "Boyfriend coming to visit?"

"Soren's ship just finished a patrol in the Mempa Sector." Ashley primly replied, "And they're coming here for some R & R before heading out again."

“Sooooooo...” Nelia drawled, “What do the two of you have planned?”

“He better take you out to someplace nice.” Shelana quipped with a wicked grin on her face.

“He’s taking me out for dinner and dancing.” Ashley responded with a smile of her own. “He picked up a holosuite program from Captain Hobson. Steak dinner at Bern’s Steakhouse, followed by listening to jazz and dancing at CW’s Gin Joint. After that we’re going to Sunset Beach to do some stargazing.”

“Sounds like he’s pulling out all the stops.” Nelia smirked.

“What’s your plans, Nelia?” Ashley inquired, “I mean after sleeping off the Trill Twins.”

“Just gonna take it easy today.” The lovely Orion answered back.

“Don’t forget...” Belen reminded his partner and friend, “You’re shooting a holonovel later on.”

“Oh...that’s right!” Nelia replied, “The third part of the *Love Slave* trilogy—*Romp on Risa*. It ends with a humongous orgy guaranteed to make you...”

“We get the idea, Nel.” Shelana quickly interrupted as she outlined her plans for the day, “Zheren is taking me out to a springball match and then we’re going skiing on Andor.”

“What about the two of you?” Ashley asked Twes and Rana, “After you recover from last night, that is.”

“Just gonna take it easy.” Twesata replied, “Maybe hit the casino later on.”

“Sounds good.” Ashley remarked as she got up from her stool, “Well...I’m off to say hi to Ajun. I’ll see you girls later.”

“Later, Ash!”

“So...how’s it going, Ajun?” Ashley queried her adoptive sister as the young Bajoran let her into her new quarters. “Getting settled in okay?”

“Hi, Ashley!” The teenage girl beamed as she ushered her new sister in and asked her to sit down on a comfortable chair in the living area, “Want something to drink or eat?”

“No thanks, but if you want something go on ahead.” Ashley replied with a grin as she sat down. Looking about, the former Marine remarked on seeing a couple of posters for the neo-rock band the Maia-Threes plastered on the wall, “I see you’re getting the place decorated.”

“Yeah.” Ajun replied with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, “So...how was the party?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.” Ashley answered back, taking on the role of older sister. Changing the subject, she asked, “How’s school?”

“Not bad.” The young Bajoran responded, “There are three other students in my class and the teacher’s okay.”

“So...what did you do today?”

“Today was hard sciences.” Ajun replied, “Physics...xenobiology...math. Tomorrow we’re starting Klingon history.”

“Sounds interesting.” The ex-Marine then asked, “What’s your favorite subject so far?”

“Mmmm...” Ajun mused for a moment before replying, “It’s a tie between Phys. Ed and math.”

Chuckling, Ashley declared, “Phys. Ed was my favorite subject too...along with literature. Thanks to Dad, I had a big jump on all the other students.”

“Sooooo...” Ajun teased, “Big date coming up?”

“I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.” Ashley joked back, a faint red blush appearing on her face.

“Uh Huh...Yeah...right.” The Bajoran teen smirked, “That’s why you replicated that little black dress and bought that Spican flame gem studded necklace. So...when is the *Valley Forge* supposed to dock?”

“In a few hours.” Ashley replied, then with a mock stern look on her face, prompted, “Doesn’t your shift at the restaurant start soon?”

Taking the hint, Ajun acknowledged before adding a coy tease, “Yeah...but I want to finish this up first. Oh...by the way...I want a full report on your date tomorrow.”

“Yeah...we’ll see.” Ashley bantered back as she rose to her feet, “Well...I gotta go now and...”

“Get prepped?”

“Hey!” The former Marine joked as she made her way to the door, “I can be a girly-girl when I want to be! Be good and I’ll see you later!”

Ajun laughed as her adoptive older sister walked out the door, “Remember! I want details! And don’t leave anything out!”

Date Night

Chapter Summary

The Valley Forge arrives and Ashley and Soren go out on their date.

Arrivals Section—Belen's Drozana All Inclusive Resort and Starship Maintenance Station

Watching as the handsome Danish starship captain of the *Valley Forge* materialized on the transporter pad along with a couple of his officers, Ashley waved greetings, "Soren! Over here!"

"Ashley!" The chestnut-haired captain called back as he approached the raven-haired former marine.

The pair greeting each other with a kiss on the cheek, Ashley smiled at her beau, "Hi there. So...how goes?"

"Hi back at you." Soren grinned, "The crew is doing fine..."

"I owe you a cold one." Lieutenant Commander Michaels, the *Valley Forge's* chief tactical/security officer interjected with a laugh, as he recalled his bet with the ex-gunnery chief. "I was sure the Niners were going to take the pennant this year."

"No way!" Ashley grinned back, "Don't get me wrong...the Niners are good—they've got a great centerfielder and a strong lineup, but that Pioneer bench was just too deep. Pike City's gonna take the Series this year."

"Probably." Michaels agreed. Spotting a gift shop, the tactical officer sighed, "If it's okay with you all, I'm gonna duck into Nabar's. Gotta buy a gift for a certain someone."

"In other words..." Ashley smirked, "You're back in Ensign Carmichael's doghouse."

"He forgot her birthday." The ship's Andorian XO chuckled, joining the conversation.

"Oh boy...you really screwed the pooch." Ashley chuckled, "You better get her something extra nice."

"Yah." Michaels sheepishly responded, "Anyway...let me know when you wanna meet up and I'll buy you that beer...that is..." he teased, "if the Captain doesn't mind."

"I don't think a beer's gonna hurt anything, Jeff." Soren grinned back.

"I'll comm you later and we'll set up a time." Ashley replied as the tactical officer departed.

"I've gotta take off and see about getting us resupplied." The Andorian XO sighed, "I am not looking forward to haggling with the station's procurement chief."

"Rocal does like to bargain." Ashley chuckled, "Bring him some beetle snuff and he'll knock some off the price."

"Thanks, Ash." The XO replied, "Well...I'll see you later. Say hello to Shelana for me. Tell her I'll comm her about our date."

"Will do!"

"I hear you and your friends have been busy recently." Soren remarked as the pair exited the terminal, adding in praise. "Good job busting up those slavers and rescuing those poor people."

"Thanks." The former Alliance marine responded with a shake of her head, "Soren...the conditions those people were being kept in...what those bastards had in store for them...it makes me want to..."

"I know." The Danish starship captain sympathetically acknowledged, "Me too. You'd think we'd have gone beyond slavery by this time."

"I know what you mean." Ashley replied, "Slavery was a problem in the other universe too." Taking her companion by the arm, she walked with him out on to the concourse, "But we can talk about that later, okay?"

"Sure." Soren agreed as a sly grin appeared on his face, "No offense...but you look a little under the weather..."

"Yeah." The former marine confessed, "I kind of...well...I'm still nursing a hangover from Captain Rozsa's party and then getting into that bloodwine drinking contest with Korath. Never again!"

"One time was enough for me as well." Soren laughed, "That stuff hits you like a boulder."

"Tell me about it!" Ashley groaned, "Anyway, If you want to know all about the grisly details of what went on at Zsa-Zsa's party, Twes, Nelia, or Rana can fill you in."

"I've been to a couple of Zsa Zsa's parties. Don't get me wrong, she's not a bad person—we're friends actually—but...I guess she's a little too...you could say uninhibited...for me, so I try to make my exit before the clothes start coming off." Soren quipped as the pair walked

together.

“Smart man—and smart answer.” Ashley joked back as the pair reached the turbolift that led to the station’s hotel floor.

Sighing, the Danish captain pressed the button next to the turbolift door, “Well...I better go up and get checked in. I also need to take care of some ship details...you know how it is...”

“Yep. Sure do.” The former marine acknowledged with a knowing look, “Sooooo...we still on for tonight?”

“Of course we are.” Soren smiled back, “I’ve got the holosuite reserved for 1930 hours...so...what if we meet at your quarters at...say...1900?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Ashley beamed as she gave the handsome starship captain a kiss on his cheek. “See you then.”

Soren grinned as he returned his gorgeous companion’s kiss before stepping into the turbolift, “Until later.”

Sighing as the turbolift door closed, Ashley recited to herself in a low whisper, “Today I opened wide my eyes, And stared with wonder and surprise, To see beneath November skies, An apple blossom peer. Robert William Service...” Ashley sighed as she made her way back to the concourse, “Abby always liked him. Hope you’re doing okay, Abby. You too, Mom... Sarah...Lynn.”

Holosuite One—Drozana—later that evening

“Even though I know it wasn’t real beef, that was one of the best steaks I ever had.” Ashley sighed as she leaned against Soren, the pair now enjoying an evening on a west-coast Florida beach, relaxing on a large beach towel as they looked up at the stars in the night sky. “Where did Captain Hobson get this program? I can smell the salt air and feel a real breeze. And...was that restaurant we ate at real at one time?”

Chuckling, Captain Magnussen replied as he held the dark-haired beauty seated next to him close, “I think he got it from Admiral Weller. Chris tells me that the restaurant and club we went to after...as well as this beach...really did exist. He said that the restaurant’s based on a famous twentieth century Tampa steakhouse. And since Chris is a real stickler for details, I’ve got a feeling most of it was exactly as it was back then.”

“Is the restaurant still around today?” Ashley inquired, “I don’t remember hearing about it while I was taking my on-campus courses at the Academy.”

Soren shook his head, “Chris told me that it didn’t make it through the crash that hit all of the world’s economies in the late 2020’s—early 2030s.”

“My Earth History correspondence course I’m taking now has just gotten to that time.” Ashley sighed, “I know there were problems in the other universe during that period...environmental and climate issues...bad economies...wars...but you know what I found most interesting?”

“What?”

“That most of the other mirror and parallel universes had similar problems and all at roughly the same time. It seems that no matter what the universe, the 21st century was a bad time.”

“It was a second Dark Age here.” Soren agreed, “Only in many ways, a lot worse. At least there were no nuclear exchanges during the medieval Dark Age or the Bronze Age Collapse.”

Ashley, in a pensive mood, reflected on her coursework. “You know...part of me was nervous about doing this...taking those Academy courses so that I could make my commission permanent. In a lot of ways, I had to learn everything from the ground up, so I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to keep up with the workload, but...surprise...I found most of the courses interesting.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Soren grinned as he regarded the lovely woman seated next to him, “I’ll confess to checking in on your progress with your Academy instructors from time to time.”

“Oh...you have...have you?” Ashley teasingly remarked, raising an eyebrow.

“I hope you don’t mind.” Soren apologized, further declaring, “It’s just that I think you have a lot of potential—and it’s not because we have what we have now. You might not know this, but I can tell you that you and your friends have caught the eye of a few starship captains--not to mention a few admirals as well.”

“Really?” Ashley exclaimed in astonishment, and then asked with a twinkle in her eye, “Like who?”

“Well...” Magnussen grinned, “Chris Hobson for one. Captain Shon of the *Enterprise* for another. Not to mention Zsa-Zsa, and a few others. Also, Admiral Quinn’s keeping an eye on you all and he likes what he’s seeing and hearing. So have Admirals Tuvok and Janeway. You’ve picked up quite a fan club.”

“Wow!” Ashley gasped, “You know, in the other universe, the only people who took any real interest in me other than my family were Commander Shepard, Lieutenant Alenko, and Captain Anderson.”

“You’re a promising officer, Ashley.” Soren declared, “And I’m not just saying that because you’re in my arms right now. You’re in the top percentile in all your classes and your leadership scores are through the roof.”

Blushing, the lovely ex-marine laughed self-consciously, “I’ve had some help from some of the officers who come through here, but...like I

said...I've had to struggle with some of the courses."

"Let me guess..." Soren responded, "Mostly history and politics?"

"Good guess." Ashley admitted with a chuckle, "There's just so much...sometimes I feel like my head's about to explode."

"I know where you're coming from." Soren commiserated. "My crew and I had to do a lot of adjusting when we were brought into this time from ours. A lot of stuff can happen in a hundred plus years. Then when you add the fact that you're from a whole other universe with different cultures, races, and societies...it's understandable why you might be thrown for a loop at times."

"Tell me about it." Ashley sighed as a sad smile briefly crossed her features.

"Something wrong, Ash?" The handsome starship captain asked as he at once spotted the brief somber look crossing his date's face.

"I was just thinking about how much of a jackass I was back in the other universe." Ashley confessed, the fact that she referred to her old home as the 'other' universe not escaping her or her companion's attention, "Yeah..." she wryly admitted, "I've come to accept that where I'm at now is home. Don't get me wrong..." she clarified, "like we talked about earlier, this universe is anything but perfect. It's got its problems too..."

"I think that's true wherever you go." Soren interjected, receiving in response a sardonic chuckle.

"Yeah." Ashley commented, the ironic grin still on her face, "Whenever someone tells me that they've found the perfect solution or the perfect place, I begin to sweat because I know things are about to go to hell." Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the former Alliance marine continued where she had left off earlier, "And I do miss my family...both my real family and the family I picked up on the *Normandy*. But I've also changed a lot. I don't think some of the people who knew me would even recognize me now."

"Why not?"

"I told you that before joining up with Shepard that I had never worked with non-humans—right?" Ashley responded

Soren answered back with a nod of his head, "I remember that you told me a good part of it had to do with family history...that your grandfather was disgraced and your family blackballed."

"Right." Ashley nodded her head, "The First Contact War and Shanxi. That put me off turians for a long time..."

"That's understandable." Soren replied, adding, "But also, if I recall correctly, you said that you not only learned to work with your non-human teammates, but learned to like them. And that you also learned to accept the different races in your universe." His lips turning up in grin, he concluded, "Just like you're pretty much best friends with Shelana, very good friends with the others, and, have taken a Bajoran teenager under your wing. That's hardly the mark of a bigot or racist. I have a feeling that most of your friends and family knew that. You were a good person before even coming over to this universe—you just didn't recognize it at the time."

"Thanks." Ashley replied as she scooped up closer to her date. "But I owe a lot to Shepard...and Garrus, Wrex, Tali, and Liara. I think a lot of my changes had to do with them... Shepard in particular. She made me open my eyes to a lot of stuff...about others...and...I admit...about myself. I remember a conversation we had with each other just after Liara came on board..."

Old Memories--Old Regrets--New Frontiers--A New Life

Chapter Summary

Ashley recalls her time on the Normandy and a talk she had with her former commanding officer

Flashback—SSV Normandy SR-1--2283

Absorbed by her latest project—modifying the standard Avenger assault rifle to take the new mods she had just received—Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams didn't hear the soft footfalls of her commanding officer approaching until she was upon her.

"Hard at work, Gunny?"

"Oh!" Startled, Ashley quickly turned around, ready to snap at whoever it was who had the nerve to disturb her. Thankfully, she recognized the person who had interrupted her before she could unleash the torrent of curses that were forming on her lips. Quickly coming to attention, the gunnery chief saluted, "Ma'am."

"As you were, Chief." The redheaded human SPECTRE smiled, "I'm sorry I interrupted you. It looked like you were really involved with what you were doing. Your latest project?"

"Just doing a little tinkering, Ma'am." The gunnery chief politely responded, pausing to give her commanding officer a chance to speak.

"Go on, Chief. I'm curious about this project of yours."

"It's nothing big, Skipper." Ashley remarked modestly. "You know those mods Chellick gave you for helping him bust that smuggling ring on the Citadel?"

"Yeah." Shepard nodded her head. "Is that one of the mods?"

"Right. I'm using them to enhance our Avenger rifles. You know how they have a tendency to climb on full auto?"

Nodding her head, the redheaded SPECTRE acknowledged, "Yeah...that...and the overheat rate and slow cooldown are probably the rifle's biggest disadvantage—especially when you compare its performance with equivalent weapons such as the turian Phaeston or the batarian Terminator models."

"Exactly." Ashley affirmed. "If I'm doing this right, then these mods should take care of those problems. This one..." she explained as she held up one of the devices, "should take care of the climbing problem. It generates a mass effect field that contributes to weapon stability. And this one..." she held the other mod up, "is a massive improvement on the standard issue heat sink. That should take care of most of our cooling issues. The weapon will still overheat..." the gunnery chief cautioned, "but you'll get a higher sustained rate of fire before it does."

"Good work!" Shepard praised, "I like it when my crew uses their initiative."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Ashley replied with a broad smile. Her grin fading, the gunnery chief cleared her throat.

"Yes, Gunny? What is it?"

"Ummm...Ma'am...maybe I shouldn't bring this up..." The chief stammered nervously.

"I keep an open door policy and you have my word that anything we say is strictly off the record and will remain confidential, Chief. So...lay it on me." The commander requested encouragingly.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Ashley replied, carefully considering her words before speaking, "It concerns the aliens, Skipper: Garrus...Wrex...Tali...and now Liara."

"Go ahead, Chief. I'm listening."

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the gunnery chief decided to take the risk and express her worries. "All right...here goes. I don't think it's a good idea to grant full access to the ship to the aliens, Ma'am."

"Why do you say that, Chief?" Shepard asked politely, "Is it because they don't belong to the Alliance?"

"Partly, Ma'am." Ashley responded, inwardly relieved at the lack of a judgmental tone in her commanding officer's voice.

"I see." Shepard inclined her head slightly as she seemed to give careful consideration to her subordinate's words. "You're right. They're not under Alliance authority. But they are allies and heaven knows we need all the friends we can get—at least as far as taking out Saren is concerned. But..." she noted, again not revealing any sign of judgment, "I see that you're still not convinced. Please...continue. I really am interested in your concerns and the reasons behind them."

Taking another deep breath and exhaling, the gunnery chief politely and deferentially spelled out her objections and the logic behind them. "This is the most advanced ship in the Navy, Ma'am. I just don't think it's a good idea to allow the aliens to freely poke around and examine the ship's vital systems such as engines, weapons, and sensors. Even Alliance personnel are not permitted access to systems they don't have

security clearance for. Shouldn't that rule apply even more to the aliens?"

"You do have a point, Chief." The redheaded SPECTRE conceded, "The thing is...I can't confine them to sleeper pods or quarters and spring them just for missions and then stuff 'em back in cold storage again."

"No one's asking you to do that, Ma'am." Ashley politely, yet firmly, objected. "All I'm saying is that perhaps we need to be more careful in granting them full access."

"I see." Shepard mused, "I normally don't discuss the rationale behind all of my actions and decisions with the crew, Chief. But, in this case, as we are speaking off the record and you do have some legitimate concerns, I think you need to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Ashley replied grateful at the apparent trust her new CO was giving her. "I appreciate that very much."

"Okay." Shepard acknowledged as she began to explain her reasoning. "Let's start off with Tali and the engines. Before I allowed her full access, I spoke to Chief Adams first, getting his input on it and then asking him to give her a trial run and report back—which he did. He told me that he liked what he saw and that she suggested improvements that have improved the engines' efficiency and even allow us to maintain stealth better. I don't think I need to tell you how much that can help us in carrying out recon and infiltration missions."

"No Ma'am." Ashley acknowledged, "I understand completely."

"Great." Shepard grinned as she continued her explanation. "As for Garrus and Wrex...I spoke to Lieutenant Alenko about them before granting them access to our weapons and the Mako. Garrus has a natural gift for weapons calibrations—you might want to get together with him sometime. He might be able to give you some tips...and I've got a feeling you've got a few tricks up your sleeve that he's never heard of. Anyway, he's tuned our guns to the point where they're now more accurate and at longer ranges. I'm sure you understand how valuable that is."

"Yes, Ma'am." Ashley again replied, accepting the logic of her CO's rationale. She then inquired, "What about Wrex and Liara? Wrex is a gun for hire—you remember what happened when he joined with us to bust up Fist at Chora's Den?"

"You don't have to remind me, Gunny." Shepard acknowledged with a sigh, "Rest assured, I read him the riot act good and hard. Told him the next time he went off half-cocked like that I'd boot him off this ship faster than a vorcha running away from a real job. Why I brought on Wrex—even after that fiasco with Fist—is for the exact same reason as to why you don't trust him. Because of his long years as a mercenary. Remember, when he started his career, the Crusades were still a happening thing on Earth—and—what's even more important—he's still alive. I'd be foolish not to take advantage of his experience. Suffice to say that his knowledge has proven invaluable and—even more important—he's sharing that wisdom with our marines and Tali. You might want to take the time to get to know him. I'm sure there are a few tricks you can pick up from him..." a smile appeared on the SPECTRE's lips, "and you might show him that even old war dogs like him can learn new tricks."

"I guess I see your point, Ma'am." Ashley conceded before asking, "What about Dr. T'Soni though?"

"I brought her into the team because of her in-depth knowledge of the Protheans." Jane answered, "Don't forget, she's been studying them for over fifty years—that's longer than either of us have been alive. Her skill in biotics is a side bonus."

"Yes, Ma'am." The gunnery chief deferentially responded.

"You still look like you've got more that you want to say." The SPECTRE gently persisted in her inquiry, "Go ahead. Please...enlighten me. How do you view the Council races?"

"I'm not sure I trust them as allies, Ma'am." Ashley responded honestly and directly.

"Why not?"

"It's just that I think that we...I mean humanity...we need to learn to rely more on ourselves than the good will and charity of others." The gunnery chief bluntly declared.

"While I understand that perspective..." Shepard responded, "and I do agree with you in so far as the fact that we should stand up on our own two feet, I also think that doesn't mean we have to stand alone."

"I'm not opposed to having allies." Ashley vehemently declared, "And I'm not some Terra Firma isolationist or bigot—if that's what you're thinking."

Shaking her head, the commander held up her hand, "I'm not thinking that at all, Chief. I've observed you interacting with Tali, Wrex, and Garrus while we're on the Citadel—especially on the elevator."

"Yeah." Ashley nervously chuckled, "It's kinda hard not to overhear each other talking on those long trips in those tight elevators they've got even with that rotten music they pipe in. You'd think that, besides an on/off switch for the muzak, they'd also make the elevators move quicker and they'd make them larger so that the elcor and hanar could use them."

"They use separate elevators." Shepard laughed, "But you're right about those elevators going too slow and that horrible music. Anyway...I heard your conversations with them and I haven't seen or heard any signs of bigotry or hatred towards them from you because they were aliens. And as for that off-hand comment you made when we first arrived on the Citadel..."

Her face reddening in embarrassment and shame, the gunnery chief apologized, "Yes, Ma'am. That comment. I'm sorry about that, Skipper. I was just angry and frustrated because it seemed that no one was listening to us or taking us seriously, so I popped off my mouth before engaging my brain. I do that sometimes."

"It's okay, Chief. I have the same tendency myself at times." Jane replied graciously, "And you're right...they weren't taking us seriously. I was pretty steamed too as you'll recall."

"Yeah." Ashley grinned, "You were more than a little pissed off."

"But we were talking about allies..." Shepard noted, turning the conversation back on topic, "Why don't you trust our allies?"

"It's just...you've read history, Skipper. How often has today's ally turned into tomorrow's enemy?"

Nodding her head, Jane acknowledged, "All too often, Chief. But please...go on."

"The thing is, Commander..." Ashley explained, "No matter how friendly and supportive the Council races seem now, I think that if push comes to shove and their backs are against the wall, they'll cut us loose without a moment's hesitation."

"Some would say that you're a pessimist..." Shepard remarked with a wry grin.

"I'd say realist, Ma'am." Ashley replied with a slight grin of her own before getting serious once again. "Okay...let me give you an analogy and you tell me what you think."

"Go ahead, Gunny." Shepard encouraged as the Chief freshened their coffees before sitting down and returning to the conversation.

"All right." Ashley took a deep breath and a sip of her coffee before launching into her monologue. "Let's say you're walking into the woods with a friend and your dog and a bear suddenly attacks. No matter how much you love your dog...if you had to choose between siccing your dog on the bear and getting it killed while you and your fiend ran to safety or fighting the bear to maybe save your dog, but possibly resulting in losing yours or your friend's life or getting both of you killed along with the dog, what would you do?"

Nodding her head as she considered her armory chief's words, Shepard reluctantly confessed, "I'd sic my dog on the bear while my friend and I ran. But it looks like you have more to say. Go on...please."

"You see, Commander...as much as you love your dog, it's not human. Look, Ma'am. Like I said, I'm not a racist. It's just that like humans, the other races: turians...salarians...krogans...even asari...will always view their species as more important than us."

"I understand where you're coming from, Chief." Shepard acknowledged, "But you need to also realize that this is a multilateral mission and that you're going to need to learn to work with the aliens. You don't have to kiss them..." Both women laughed at the commander's jest, "But do take the time to get to know them a little. Shoot the bull with Garrus and Wrex...like I said earlier, I think you'll find that the three of you have a lot in common. Also, try to spend some time with Tali. Five'll get you ten that you'll end up adopting her as your little sister...I pretty much already have."

Laughing, Ashley joked, "Please Ma'am. I already have three sisters and they're enough of a handful on a good day. Would you settle for cousin or niece...at least for now...maybe we'll grow into sisters one day?"

"I can live with that." Shepard quipped back before asking, phrasing her command as a request, "There is something else I'd like to ask of you. I need someone with your experience to work with Dr. T'Soni. Before she goes on any ground missions I want to know damn well that she can pull her own weight and not get herself and the rest of her team killed. While you're working with her on weapons, skills and armor, Lieutenant Alenko will be putting her through her paces with combat biotics training. You up for that, Gunny?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Ashley promptly responded, recognizing a challenge when she heard one. "I'll put her through a modified basic training course at once."

"Good." Shepard smiled, "Any other concerns or worries—I'll get some more coffee for us and you can lay 'em on me."

Drozana—the present

"You were just being a good tactical/security officer." Soren opined, "I'd have expected you to make those same objections to me if you were under my command and a similar situation came up. Your first thoughts were of the ship and the mission."

Lowering her head, the young woman lying next to the handsome starship captain confessed, "I wish that was true. But...there's something else. Remember when I told you that I said a really dumb thing that I wish I could take back?"

"Yes." Soren replied, "You didn't go into much detail on it, but I'm sure it had something to do with non-humans."

"Right." Ashley confessed, further explaining, "It was right after Eden Prime. We'd just arrived at the Citadel to deliver our report on what happened there with the geth attack and the beacon. Udina had just gotten smacked down by the Council after he'd demanded that they do something about Saren." Shaking her head, she growled, "The salarian Councilor blew him off when he complained that the Council would have acted had the geth attacked a turian colony."

"What did he say?"

Shaking her head, Ashley responded with a scowl, "He told Udina that the turians, quote..." she then made mocking quotation marks in the air, "don't found colonies on the border of the Terminus Systems...unquote."

"Wasn't that the only area open for colonization for humans in your universe?" Soren asked, seeking clarification.

"Pretty much so, yeah." Ashley replied, "And we had to fight the batarians for what scraps we did get. Without Council support I might add."

"I've got a feeling there's more..." Magnussen prompted, "Go on."

"Oh...it gets worse." The former marine sighed, "The asari Councilor then lectures Udina, telling him that humanity was well aware of the risks when we began colonizing the Traverse—as if we had many options!" Ashley exclaimed, "But that's not the worst." Scowling she related the turian Councilor's response after Udina demanded that something be done about Saren. "He told the Ambassador..." once again she made quotation marks in the air, "you don't get to make demands of the Council..." Ashley sighed, "I'm no fan of Udina's. I think he's a politician...therefore, by definition an asshole."

Chuckling at his date's definition of politician, Soren responded, "I think that's an accurate description of politicians no matter what universe you're in...but...continue, please."

"Udina rips Shepard a new one...bitching about what happened on Eden Prime and about how it jeopardized our chances of getting a seat on the Council and a human SPECTRE. He didn't give a damn about what happened to those colonists."

"Or your squadmates." The starship captain finished, wiping a tear from his companion's face.

"No." Ashley shook her head, "He didn't. All he cared about was the political blowback. He didn't give a rat's ass about the lives that were lost—like my friends, Donkey and Nirali—or Jenkins from Shepard's team—much less the lives that got ruined—like Nirali's husband, Samesh. I was so upset...so angry...at how what happened to us had been so casually dismissed by Udina and those Councilors. None of them gave a shit about those poor people!" Ashley sighed as she confessed, "We went down to the Presidium to hail a cab to take us to the Citadel Tower. This was the first time I was on the Citadel. I saw all the different alien races walking about, and, like I said, I made one of the most stupid and ignorant comments of my life—one that I wish more than anything else that I could take back."

"What exactly did you say?" Soren, taking on the role of confessor, encouraged, squeezing his date's hand in support.

Taking a deep breath, Ashley confessed, "I said that I couldn't tell the aliens from the animals. I know...I know. It was a bigoted and speciest remark. When the Commander heard it, she dressed me down on the spot...and I deserved it."

Flashback—the Citadel—2183

"Chief!" Shepard admonished in a stern voice, "We don't refer to non-humans as animals—understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Ashley promptly replied, immediately getting the message.

"Good." Jane replied, maintaining her firm voice as she took her arm off of the gunnery chief's shoulders. "We'll talk more about this later, but right now, we've got other fish to fry...so let's haul our butts to the Citadel Tower and get the ass chewing that we're going to get from the Council over with."

"Do you really think the hearing's going to go bad?" Kaidan inquired as the three marines approached a waiting taxi.

"Yep." Shepard answered back with a grave nod of her head.

"Since when did the Council care about human colonies?" Ashley commented bitterly with a grimace as Shepard hailed a cab.

"Us being human doesn't have anything to do with it." Jane countered, then, seeing the dubious looks on both Ashley's and Kaidan's faces, pensively conceded with a sigh, "Well...yeah...it matters some, but that's really not the main reason why we shouldn't expect to get any help from them."

"Why not?" Ashley pressed, careful to maintain a respectful tone.

"Well, Gunny..." Shepard explained, "Let's see what we have for evidence..." She then ticked off their proof with her fingers, "First piece of evidence: We have physical proof of the geth attacking Eden Prime. Yes. The Council will consider that to be a serious matter, but Udina and Anderson don't have the proof to back up any accusations about Saren's involvement and there's no way the Council's going to move on their pet SPECTRE without solid incontrovertible evidence."

"What about Powell's testimony?" Kaidan inquired, "He was there at the time and saw just about everything. There are also those scientists we rescued."

Jane addressed her lieutenant's points as she and her companions entered the taxi, "That scientist...Manuel...I think was his name..." she shook her head, "He's currently undergoing psychotherapy and the other, Dr. Warren, is also suffering from PTSD. They're not going to be of any help. If anything, bringing them into this would make matters worse. They also don't know anything about Saren's involvement—and—before you ask—if Udina and Anderson try to bring up Manuel's testimony, the Council will dismiss it as the ravings of a lunatic."

"What about the farmers?" Ashley asked as the taxi lifted and began to make its way to their destination.

Taking a deep breath, the Commander again shook her head, "Again...they didn't see Saren. All their testimony will do is confirm that the geth attacked and that the machines have a big honking spaceship. Nothing more than that."

"What about Powell." Kaidan persisted, "He actually saw Saren shoot Nihlus."

Her lips turning up in a sardonic grin, the commander replied, "The same man who ran a smuggling ring and is also a suspect in some other shady stuff?" Shaking her head, Shepard declared, "Sorry, Alenko. They'll dismiss his testimony out of hand."

"Okay." Ashley prompted, "What about the beacon? The Council has to take notice of that."

"The beacon was conveniently destroyed right after it did whatever it did to me." Jane sighed. "There's absolutely no proof that Saren did anything to cause it to act that way, but it's a great piece of evidence if you want to pin the blame on me."

"Would they really do that, Commander?" Kaidan asked.

"In a heartbeat." Shepard responded. "If it comes between choosing between me and Saren...you know which way the Council is going to go."

"Saren." Ashley grumbled before inquiring, "Anything else?"

"Yeah." Shepard took a deep breath before deciding to confide in her team, "There's one more piece of evidence that I really hope Anderson doesn't introduce, but I'm afraid he will--the visions I got from that beacon." Gritting her teeth, she groaned, "If he brings those up, they'll laugh us out of the chamber."

Nodding her head in understanding, Ashley grimly replied, "Yeah, Skipper. You're probably right. Looks like we're screwed no matter what."

"Don't give up hope just yet, Gunny!" Shepard responded, sounding an optimistic note as the taxi set down in front of the Citadel Tower. "You never know what'll happen until it happens."

Observation deck—Drozana—the present

"The Skipper called it." Ashley sighed as she leaned back into Soren's arms. "Udina's charges were dismissed and Anderson and Shepard were laughed out of the Council Chambers. The only time I ever saw the Skipper that angry was when Wrex gunned down Fist. That was also the first time I ever saw her depressed." The former gunnery chief shook her head, "I still can't believe Anderson brought up her visions in front of everyone—the Council...Saren...spectators. It was absolutely mortifying for her—you could see it on her face. That was the only time that I ever saw Anderson behave like an ass. She warned him about how they'd respond and practically begged him not to go through with it, but he did it anyway."

"Why?" Soren inquired as he gently caressed the beautiful woman snuggled up to him. "I got the impression that he generally kept his head straight."

"Oh..." Ashley readily confirmed, "He usually did. It's just that he had this huge blind spot where Saren was concerned that sometimes made him say and do stupid stuff—like then." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, she elaborated, "You see...Anderson was supposed to be the first human SPECTRE, and Saren was assigned to evaluate him just like Nihlus was supposed to evaluate Shepard as a candidate. I don't remember much of what they talked about—a lot of it was private anyway, and I didn't really have a need to know. But the *Normandy's* a small ship and gossip spreads fast. What I found out was that Saren and Anderson were assigned to an operation that went wrong and Saren pinned the failure on Anderson and he's been nursing a grudge over it ever since."

"Bad situation." Soren commiserated, "But as I recall, you were able to get the proof you needed."

"Yeah." Ashley affirmed, "When we rescued Tali from those assassins, she had the evidence that tied Saren to Eden Prime. Then Shepard was made SPECTRE and...well...I think I told you the rest."

"So..." Soren prompted as he steered the discussion to something Ashley had mentioned earlier, "You mentioned that this Lieutenant Alenko didn't explain to you why Wrex and Garrus were granted access?"

"Yeah—and...to be honest...part of that's my fault." Ashley took another deep breath as she recalled to her companion her and Shepard's conversation...

Flashback—SSV Normandy—2183

"Didn't Lieutenant Alenko tell you the reasons behind my granting Wrex and Garrus access and did you ask him about it?"

"No, Ma'am." Ashley honestly replied, "He just said to give them full access, and I'm sorry Ma'am, I didn't inquire as to why. I didn't think it was my place."

Sighing, Shepard responded with a shake of her head, "He should have informed you as to why. You are my armory chief—make no mistake about that, and you need to know these things. But also..." the commander firmly stated, "you should have brought your objections to him immediately. That's why we have a chain of command, Chief. So why didn't you think it wasn't your place to ask for clarification from him?"

"To be honest, Ma'am...I was afraid to." Ashley heaved a dejected sigh as she answered her CO's query.

"Why, Chief?" Jane inquired her face etched with concern, "I haven't seen you back away from anything or anyone. Why couldn't you talk to Alenko about this? Please...tell me. If there's a problem between my officers, I need to know about it."

"It's not the Lieutenant." Ashley replied immediately, "I don't have any problems with him and I don't think he has any issues with me. We work well together."

"So..." Shepard prompted, "What was the problem? Why couldn't you talk to him about your concerns?"

Deciding to trust her new CO, Ashley confessed, “It goes back to when I was in the 212, Ma’am. The CO of that unit didn’t like or have faith in me. He didn’t trust me to carry out the mission, so he gave command of my team to my number two...Sergeant Donkey.”

“He shouldn’t have done that.” Shepard immediately declared. Then, her curiosity getting the better of her, she sidetracked the discussion and with an amused grin on her face and raised eyebrow, inquired, “I know this is off topic, Chief...but I just have to know...why Donkey?”

“Nickname, Ma’am.” The gunnery chief responded with a wan smile. “His real name was Donald Keys, but everyone called him Donkey.” Taking a deep breath, Ashley sighed mournfully, “I don’t blame Donkey. He was a good man and a good friend. When things got hot, the first thing he did was relinquish command of the squad back to me. He said that I was the most competent and that I got a raw deal and should have had the lead from the beginning.”

“He sounds like a good man.” Shepard agreed before returning to the topic, “Did your CO give you a valid reason? What was the issue between the two of you? I’ve read your service record and...to be frank, I’m confused. Your history is almost a blank slate. You should have at least one commendation on file—if nothing else, a good conduct medal. You should also have had at least one minor gig recorded. Every soldier has one or two of those—myself included. There’s nothing there but a listing of crap postings and high technical scores. No letters of recommendation...no reprimands...nothing. From what I have seen of your performance in the field, you should be at least a warrant officer or have been offered a slot in OCS and made lieutenant, and you should have practically your choice of billets in the Fleet. Can you shed some light on this for me, Chief?”

“There’s a reason for the crap postings and my only being a Chief, Ma’am.” Williams replied with a frown.

“Let me fetch some more coffee and we’ll talk some more.” Jane said as she led her crewman to an isolated corner of the armory and guided her to a bench where they could both sit and talk comfortably. Taking a sip of her coffee, the redhead grimaced, “Nothing like Navy coffee.”

“Keeps you awake, Ma’am.” Ashley joked back.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t do much for your insides.” Shepard and her chief shared some laughter before getting down to business, “Okay, Chief...please enlighten me on why you’re still a gunnery chief and not a warrant officer or lieutenant?”

“It goes back to the First Contact War, Ma’am.” Ashley, overcoming her initial reluctance, confided. “How familiar are you with the Occupation of Shanxi?”

“Hmmm...” Shepard pondered the question, racking her mind as she recalled the events of that campaign from her history classes, “It was the only human world taken during the war—and the turians paid a high price for it before we finally surrendered.”

“Yeah.” Ashley nodded, “They began waging a total war campaign, wiping out entire cities and even refugee camps. A lot of civilians were killed—entire settlements turned into craters.”

“That’s right.” Jane affirmed, “As the civilian casualties mounted, the general commanding...” As understanding dawned on the human SPECTRE, she gasped, “Oh...shit. How stupid could I be! The garrison commander was General Williams. Family, I take it?”

“My grandfather.” Ashley confessed, head bowed. “He was brought back to Earth practically in chains and put on trial. The charges against him were dismissed for reasons the Alliance has never given, but the damage was done. He was demoted...”

“Reduction in rank?” Shepard exclaimed, astonished at hearing that. “After the charges were dropped? Did they give a reason? I know a little about the trial...not a whole lot because much of it’s still classified and you have to really dig if you want info on anything having to do with General Williams, but did they give any explanation at all that you know of that might not be in the official record?”

“No.” Ashley shook her head, “Anyway, after the trial, he was assigned to desk duty—generally in the worst places they could send him.”

Sighing, Shepard empathized, “They tried to push him into quietly retiring. It’s an old trick. I’ve seen it done a time or two myself.”

“It worked.” The gunnery chief somberly declared, “After he retired, he ended up doing shit jobs in construction or wherever he could find work until one day he mysteriously disappeared. We still don’t know what happened to him. Ever since then, the Williams name has been mud as far as the Alliance military is concerned.”

“I know.” Shepard sighed as she refilled their coffee mugs, “Go on...please.”

Taking a sip of coffee, Ashley continued her tale. “My father...out of pride, I guess, enlisted—even after being warned not to. He was told flat out that there was no way he was going to be promoted or given decent postings. Hell they even invented a word for what the Alliance brass did to him and my family. They call it being ‘Williamsed’. Don’t tell me you haven’t heard that expression being used?”

Somberly nodding her head, Jane truthfully replied, “Yeah. I’ve heard it a time or two. We’re supposed to have moved beyond attainment—the children being punished for the sins of their parents. But...” she shook her head, “that’s not always the case.”

“Tell me about it!” Ashley sighed, “My father busted his ass, finally making it to Serviceman Third Class and he had to fight and scrape to get even that far. Then...because stubbornness runs in my family I guess...” Ashley quipped, a brief sardonic grin appeared on her features, vanishing as soon as it emerged to be replaced once again by a dejected frown, “When it was my turn...I enlisted. It wasn’t that long ago that I finally got my Chief’s rocker...and...to be honest...I don’t know how I got it. I think it might have been because of someone really high up the chain of command, but I don’t know who or why. Whoever it was though, has my eternal thanks. First thing my father did on hearing the news was salute me. Even though we both knew that because I’m a non-commissioned officer, I don’t rate a salute. He did it anyway. Told me that I deserved it and that I should be a commissioned officer.”

“He’s right. You should be.” Jane emphatically declared, further promising, “I’ll speak to Alenko about improving communications between the two of you. Don’t worry. I won’t reveal what we’ve talked about. I’ll just remind him that you are the armory chief and that you should

be involved in matters where that department is concerned. I'm also going to ask you to work on improving communications not just with the aliens...but also the Lieutenant. Don't be afraid to bring your concerns to him. I think you'll find that he's very approachable. When you do get your commission, it'll be important for you to know how to connect with your people and this will be good practice for that."

"When I get my commission, Ma'am?" Ashley exclaimed, startled once again by her superior officer's vote of confidence.

"When, Chief." Shepard asserted forcefully. "I told you that you have the makings of a first-rate officer, and I meant it. It will happen one day. Just keep the faith and you'll get there."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Great." Shepard grinned, "Now, why don't you put that coffee away and walk with me to CIC. There are some things an up and coming officer candidate should be aware of and I want to show them to you."

Observation deck—Drozana—the present

"I would have liked to have met your former commanding officer." Soren said as he caressed the woman lying next to him. "She's a wise leader—and she's right about you."

"Oh?" Ashley exclaimed on a slightly playful voice, "How so?"

Speaking seriously, the Danish starship captain declared, "Because you are a first-rate officer, Lieutenant—as are your friends." a note of humor returned to his voice as a twinkle appeared in his eyes, "Even though you'll never get any of them to admit it." The sober tone returning, the captain continued to speak, "You and Lieutenant Thanoptis are ready to take your evaluation cruises for your full commissions. I'd be honored if you'd do them on the *Valley Forge*."

"Wow." Ashley gasped, "I can't speak for Rana, but as for me...I'd love to." A look of regret passing her face, the former marine demurred, "But...I don't want to leave my team...and...well...we are beginning to...I mean there are regs against fraternizing."

A smile appearing on his face, Soren countered his date's arguments, "You won't have to leave your team—I promise. An evaluation cruise isn't a long-term assignment. It'll only be for a couple of weeks. The higher-ups know that you all can work well together as an independent team. They just want to see how you perform in a more structured environment."

"I guess I can see that." Ashley replied with a nod of her head as Soren remarked in an amused tone with a crooked grin on his face.

"Besides...I have a feeling your teammates are going to be in the...pun intended...same boat you're in—whether it's officially called an evaluation cruise for them or not. Before they're officially acknowledged in their commissions, they're going to have to be formally certified in the field."

A slight chuckle escaping her lips, Ashley quipped, "Nelia and Twes are going to love that." Her laughter diminishing, the former gunnery chief then pointed out, "But there's still the second issue...us."

"Have no worries on that count." Soren vowed, "I can keep personal from professional as I know you can."

"Hmmm..." Ashley pondered, "The Skipper and Lieutenant Alenko were awfully close to each other while I was on the *Normandy*—they were a popular topic of galley gossip." Laughing, she joked, "Some of us—me...Garrus...Wrex...Tali...Joker...Chief Adams...even Pressley...had a pool going as to when they were just going to go ahead and make it public—it had gotten that obvious to everyone. And it never affected their work. Neither I nor anyone else ever picked up on any favoritism being shown to Alenko by her. If guess if they can do it...we can too."

"You'll also find that I'm a harsh taskmaster as is Lieutenant Commander Michaels—whom you'll be reporting to." Soren declared, concluding by invoking his companion's former CO's name, "Like Shepard, I'm a firm believer in the chain of command."

"Well..." Ashley smiled, "When you put it that way...there's only one answer...yes."

"Then, Lieutenant..." Soren grinned as he helped his date up on her feet, but before he could say his next words, both his and his companion's comm badges chirped, followed by Nelia's voice.

"Captain...Ash...sorry to interrupt the two of you on your date, but Drake and his pals finally broke Mok's encryption. We know where they're conducting their experiments. Captain...they want you and the other captains: Korath, Rosza, and Kaval at the briefing too. Captain Hobson will be attending on subspace. They're also contacting Captain Rodenko, skipper of the Bellerophon. He just finished his assignment and he'll be joining us on subspace too. Hobson has important news. The Aeolia, while surveying the Caronid System in the Mempa Sector, found something recently. He'll explain everything at the briefing—it concerns you and Rana, Ash. I can't tell you now on an open channel. You'll learn everything at the briefing." Speaking in an unaccustomed serious tone of voice, the roguish Orion woman declared, *"This is big...very big. The others have been alerted and are on their way. I'll see you soon."*

"Well Captain..." Ashley grinned as she caressed her companion's cheek, "Time to go to work."

"It would appear so, Lieutenant." Soren acknowledged, returning his date's caress with one of his own. "We best get going. We have a briefing coming up and I need to contact my senior staff."

"Aye, aye, Sir." Ashley responded with just a hint of a grin, "And for the record...I had a great time tonight."

"For the record, I did too." Soren smiled back as he offered his arm, "May I walk you back to your quarters?"

“Please.”

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