

The Big Dance

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The Big Dance

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Summary

The battle for the Coronado System reaches its decisive point as Ashley meets someone she thought long dead. Next story will be the epilogue of this story arc and then we return to the ME universe to tie up some loose ends as the stage is now nearly set.

Prelude

Coronado System: Ground Assault

"The Klingons and Romulans have taken their objectives and the prisoners are safe." Shelana reported as Ashley and her group cautiously made their way down the corridor. "Any sight of the krogan or turian or any of the other prisoners?"

"No." Ashley responded as her team continued down the corridor, "And that's what frightens me. They might have already done what they were going to do to them."

"Be careful, Ash. Don't forget...you owe me a beer or six."

"Yes, mother." Ashley joked back. Raising her voice, she instructed her team. "Okay, everyone. Take five to rest up and get your shit together. Then we go back to work." Turning to the woman standing next to her, wearing the midriff and short skirt of the 23rd century Terran Empire, the former gunnery chief inquired in an effort to make conversation, "So, Salome, maybe you can fill me in on the story behind all the different Terran Empires and why yours is different?"

The former Imperial, leaning up against a wall, replied, "It's a long story, but here's the short version. You know about the alternate universe Federations like the Kelvin 'verse or that other universe...the one from where that ship, the *Discovery*, comes from, right?"

"Yeah." Ashley nodded her head, "They're different some in big ways, some not so big."

"Right." The *Belladonna* science officer affirmed. "Well...the Mirror 'verses are similar. They're all different—some more different from others. Then...you have universes similar to the one we came from where we took a little different path."

"You come from a third type of universe? A hybrid? or something?"

"Hmmm...not quite a hybrid. We're a little different." Salome averred, shrugging her shoulders

"How so?" Ashley asked, her curiosity piqued.

Salome answered with a joke, "I wouldn't call us a 'mirror 'verse even though our uniforms are similar to what some of the barbarians wear so much as an alternate universe with a lemon twist."

"Alternate universe with a lemon twist?" Ashley laughed, "What do you mean by that? How is your old universe different from ours or the others?"

"Okay..." Salome explained, getting serious again, "You know how in this universe you might have captains like Magnussen who genuinely care about their crew and are for lack of a better term...good people."

"Yeah." Ashley's lips turned up in a warm smile.

"Well...in many...if not all...of the mirror 'verses, Fleet Captain Magnussen would be a murderous psychopathic monster who was probably responsible for wiping out at least one entire species. That's why they're called mirror 'verses."

"Okay..." the former gunnery chief nodded her head, "I get that. So why is your universe different?"

"Most of the mirror 'verses diverge from the main timeline rather dramatically at certain key points--not all those points as easy to pick as you might think." Salome explained, "Sometimes you get the big divergences that are obvious, other times is a bunch of little stuff--a decision to sack a city here instead of spare it or passing a certain law or amendment and so on. Little stuff that piles up. If we're going to go through any of those, we're going to be here awhile."

"Okay...let's just talk about the big stuff." Ashley agreed, "What are you talking about there?"

"Let me throw a few examples at you." Salome replied, "How do you think things would have evolved in this universe or your old one if the Confederacy had won the American Civil War? Or if Huey P. Long was not assassinated, but rather went on to become President instead of Franklin Roosevelt being reelected? Or if the Civil Rights movement of the later 20th century failed? Or if the Soviet Union had successfully invaded Western Europe during the later 20th century? You get the idea."

"Yeah." Ashley nodded, "Authoritarian regimes...ethnic cleansing...probably a lot of other bad shit. It wouldn't be very pretty."

"Exactly!" Salome exclaimed. "In the mirror universes we encountered, events encouraged the development of consistently more brutal societies that led eventually to the different Terran Empires. But what makes us different from the mirror 'verses is that the Earth in our universe actually developed along similar lines to the Earth of this...and I presume your...universe."

"So...when was the break point for your universe?"

"The 21st century, of course." Salome shrugged, "The Century of Hell in most universes. In our universe, it wasn't anything we did. No nuclear war or environmental catastrophe. No Eugenics Wars. No Khan. It was an alien invasion. It took us decades, but eventually we kicked out the invaders, whom we identified as the Xindi, and then we reverse engineered their technology. That's how we developed warp drive. We never had a Zephram Cochrane."

"Or found a stash of alien technology on Mars or a mass relay beyond Charon." Ashley interjected with a wry grin.

"Right." Salome chuckled, "And because of that disastrous first contact we had with the Xindi..."

"You tended to adopt a shoot first—ask questions later—attitude. Kind of like how many humans, myself included, in my old universe, felt after the First Contact War."

"Yeah." Salome nodded her head. "Thanks to the Xindi, we concluded that it was better to be the conqueror than the conqueree. That's how our Terran Empire came into being. You see, we're not barbarians like those coming from what we like to call the *Disco*-Empire or that group led by Admiral Leeta or most of the other mirror 'verses. Also, we weren't able to conquer either the Romulans or the Klingons, so we dealt more lightly with the races that we did conquer like the Vulcans, Andorians, Orions, and Tellarites. We just couldn't afford rebellions and committing genocide against entire races just because they said no to something we demanded is just plain stupid—that's the sort of shit the Mirror Universes like to do. So...we took a page from the ancient Romans and made it possible for other races to earn Terran citizenship and to serve in the Imperial Fleet. We were also forced to make alliances with races like the Ferengi and Gorn who would have been difficult to conquer, but who also saw it in their best interests to work with us."

"Makes sense." Ashley nodded her head in understanding as the Terran science officer cautioned.

"Make no mistake we're still a bit more aggressive and impulsive than your average Feddie, but we're not brutal or in your face about it like the barbarians. That's just...I don't know...so déclassé. We don't use agonizers and as a rule we don't torture or abuse prisoners—unless they either really...really deserve it like these clowns or they have important information—and even then, we don't use those goddamned agonizers. Speaking for myself, I like to use a more subtle approach in my interrogations. Often you don't even have to lay a glove on your subject, the mere threat of torture is enough to break them."

"Hmmm..." Ashley mused, "I guess that does make a certain amount of sense." Changing the direction of the discussion, she quipped, "So, I'm assuming that Zsa-Zsa and you guys were a bunch of outlaws in your universe as well?"

"Yes and no." Salome responded with a cheeky smile. "As I said, we are a whole lot less inhibited than people in this or I suspect your universe."

"Yeah." Ashley smirked, "I noticed. I can imagine the reaction of Admiral Hackett or Mikhailovich...or especially my old drill instructor—Gunny Ellison—at the sight of you in your uniforms—not to mention some of the stuff you all have pulled on shore leave."

"Like the captain's parties?" Salome's lips turned up in a lecherous grin before continuing, "You should come to one of mine sometime. Yeah...I guess you could say that we're a bit more...hmmm...uninhibited than you. However, our Empire does have a fairly rigid class system based on birth with Captain Rosza and Commander Flores both coming from one of the lower classes."

"So...which class did you come from?" Ashley inquired.

"Gentry." Salome responded, "My father was a magister--what you would call a judge. I was the black sheep of the family."

"That's why you're here." Ashley chuckled.

"Right." Salome nodded, "When Admiral Bateson drew up the roster for the *Belladonna*, he made a point of pushing for both Zsa-Zsa and Eliza as captain and first officer and made sure that our crew came from every social order and class and from most of the races of the Empire."

"He did that deliberately?"

Nodding her head, Salome confirmed, "Exactly. First reason was because he was smart enough to see that the threat we are all facing is going to take all of us working together to beat. Second, because he knew that the Captain and XO would get the job done and done right because both of them got their ranks the old fashioned way."

"They busted their asses."

"Yep. You see, our old universe is similar in one regard with most universes: results matter. But...it also makes those in the Old Guard resentful when someone from one of the lower orders makes good."

"So...why did you all wind up here?"

"Bateson sent us on a on a scouting mission where we found that one of our colonies had disappeared."

"That's interesting." Ashley remarked, "Do you think it might be related to what's going on here?"

"That's the working hypothesis." Salome nodded, "We found some old ruins on Cyrus IV where we had our colony. We were able to decipher from those ruins what amounted to a map pointing us to another world. We followed the trail and...you guessed it...another set of ruins with another puzzle and we followed the trail to Eleuthra IV. Long story short, we found a way to use those ruins to open up a portal into other universes and that's when we ran into Captain Rodenko and the *Bellerophon*. After almost shooting each other, the captains decided to work together to explore a weird..." shaking her head, Salome whispered, "I can't explain it. It was just..."

"It must have spooked all of you." Ashley remarked in a whisper.

"Yeah." Salome admitted, "And we don't scare easy--and when I say we, I'm including Captain Rodenko and his crew."

"Shit." Ashley let out a low whistle. "That's some story." Checking her rifle, Ashley reluctantly put an end to the discussion. "I guess it's time to go to work now. "Doris...you ready?"

"Always ready, Sugar."

“You others good to go?”

“Whenever you are, Boss.”

“All right...let’s do this!”

Act 2: Ugly Secrets

Chapter Summary

Ashley and her team discover part of what the bad guys are doing--and it isn't very pretty

Science lab

“Shit.” Ashley growled as she saw a pair of humans with pale-green skin and what looked like circuitry shambling about in a cell, along with a turian male laying on a slab, obviously the victim of vivisection. “I was afraid we’d find something like this. We need to get Rana here.” Tapping her comm badge, Ashley spoke, “Rana? Are you done there ‘cause I need you to get your blue ass over here pronto.”

“I’ve just finished the last of my patients and their doctor’s up now.” The asari geneticist replied, *“What’s wrong?”*

Speaking in a glum tone, Ashley remarked, “I think we might have another Virmire on our hands. We’ve got humans from the freighter who have...” choking up, Ashley grimly commanded, “Come here and see for yourself.”

“I’m on my way.” Rana responded, further cautioning, *“If they’re locked up...for the goddess’s sake, don’t let them out!”*

“Got no intention of doing that.” Ashley replied, “Williams out.”

“Okay...” Salome drawled, “What happened at Virmire.”

“Long story.” Ashley replied with a grimace, “I’ll tell you when we’re at the bar getting shitfaced. For now though...we need to get whatever they’ve got on their computer.”

“Right.” The Terran intelligence officer replied as she activated the console, “On it.”

“I’m gonna set up some turrets and a shield regenerator.” Doris announced, “Just in case.”

“Good idea, Dixie.”

With a big grin on her face, the Alabaman quipped, “I think that’s the first time you used my nickname.”

“Yeah...” Ashley grumbled, “I guess you might be all right. But until I make up my mind, you’re still on probation.”

“Thanks.” Doris replied as she got to work. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“I’m going to see if I can get into their minds.” Twesata said as she pointed at the once-human creatures.

“Be careful.” Ashley cautioned, “I don’t want to explain to Rana why her girl’s now a drooling idiot.”

“I’ll be careful, Mommy.” Twesata quipped as she took a deep breath and concentrated. Moments later, the Betazoid telepath screamed in agony as her hands went to her temples.

“The voices! Crying out in pain!”

“Salome!” Ashley called out in alarm, “Can you do something.”

“Yeah.” The Terran replied as she rushed to the telepath’s side and, taking out a medkit, injected her with a hypospray. Letting out a breath as the Betazoid calmed down, Salome guided her patient to a chair. “Take it easy. I injected you with a cortical analeptic. That should repair any damage done to your cortex, but I’ll feel better once we get you into a proper sickbay.”

Minutes later, Rana appeared accompanied by a burly *Belladonna* security officer and Nealo, the starship’s security chief who was also an ace sniper. At once spotting the shambling creatures in their cell, the asari scientist uttered a single word, “Shit.” Then, on seeing her Betazoid lover, sitting down holding her head in her hands, she rushed up and gently embraced her, “Are you all right, siha?”

“Just the mother of all headaches, imzadi.” Twesata replied with a shaky grin as she looked up at her girlfriend leaning against her as Rana gently stroked her long luxurious black hair. The Betazoid moaned, “I tried to get through to them, but it was like trying to get into a Ferengi’s head. Then...all of a sudden, I felt this sharp pain—like my head was on fire and voices screaming in agony. And then...dead silence. Thankfully, Salome was able to inject me with a cortical analeptic.”

“Thank you.” Rana said as she looked up at the Terran woman who smiled back in acknowledgement. Turning her attention back to her companion, the asari geneticist asked in a worried tone, “Do you think you might have been indoctrinated.”

“No, imzadi.” Twesata smiled back, “But I’ll have a telepath make sure when we get back.”

“Good.” Rana sighed in relief, “It also might not be a bad idea for you to receive some of that Romulan doctor’s cure.”

“Yes, dear.” The beautiful Betazoid chuckled as she turned her gaze on the transformed humans in their cage. “Those poor people...” she shook her head, “what they went through. I could feel their agony as they lost themselves.”

Still embracing her lover, Rana asked Salome who was currently analyzing the information she had just recovered from the computer, “Have you found anything?”

“Quite a bit.” Salome replied, “Those bastards were trying to combine Borg nanites with this Reaper tech and spores from a being called...”

“It’s a Thorian.” Ashley interrupted with a scowl, “A plant creature we encountered on Feros...”

“Right.” Rana interjected, “It used its spores as a means of controlling the minds of any organic that they infected. Saren thought that it could be used as a means of combatting indoctrination.”

“Was it?” Twesata asked.

“No.” The asari scientist shook her head, “It was a dead end. Indoctrination works on a completely different...far more subtle and complex level. But...No! They couldn’t be doing what I think they’re doing. It’s so dangerous. A million things could happen—all of them bad.”

“What are ya’ll talking about?” Doris asked as she joined the conversation.

“They couldn’t be trying to combine Reaper and Borg tech with the thorian spores. Combine that with augment DNA and who knows what else. Shit! No one could be that stupid!” Speaking to Dixie, Rana worriedly questioned, “Did those files you and Edi downloaded back in the other universe contain anything at all about this?”

“Me and Edi tol’ ya’ll about that ETAP program...right?”

“I read the files, but it might not be a bad idea for you to fill me in as well.” Salome requested, “Often personal insights can fill in holes left in the raw data.”

“All right, Sugar...but it’s gonna take a while.”

“Gonna have to put this on hold!” Ashley exclaimed as a loud crashing sound followed by an angry cry rang out from behind the door.

“I think we found our krogan.” Dixie wryly commented.

“I hope someone’s got a good plan...” Twesata remarked, her joking tone contrasting with the worried look on her face as the door began to give way to the ferocious pummeling, “That door isn’t gonna take much more of that pounding.”

“That door!” Ashley commanding point to a door on the other side, “Hopefully it’ll lead us either back to the others or more defensible terrain.”

“Good idea.” Salome affirmed as the door gave way even more, the cries and sound of crashing debris from behind it growing even louder.

“I got a feeling those turrets ain’t gonna stop him.” Dixie declared, “But I think I got an idea...just that it won’t work here.”

The door almost caved in, Ashley nodded, “All right. But first, time to get the hell out! Move it!”

Act 3 Unexpected Meetings aka What do you do with an angry krogan

Chapter Summary

Ashley and Donkey finally meet as she and her team face off against a rampaging krogan

Donkey and Donna

“What was that sound?” Donna paused as she heard a loud roar from behind the door of the room the couple were hiding in followed by a crash.

“It sounded krogan.” Donkey replied in a low whisper as he motioned for the woman crouching in cover next to him to remain quiet. “Listen.”

“*He’s in a lot of pain!*” The pair listened as a woman’s voice called out in anguish.

“*I know it’s difficult...it’s hard for me too, siha...but you need to try to block those emotions. Please!*” Another voice, this one seemingly worried and comforting spoke, both surprising and lifting up the Alliance marine.

“One of those voices belonged to an asari.” Donkey whispered as the footsteps and voices grew louder.

“How do you know?” Donna asked.

“That word she used...*siha*. Asari only call people they’re very close to that.” The Alliance gunnery chief explained.

“And how do you know that?” Donna asked in an accusatory tone.

“Old friend.” Donkey replied, “I’ll tell you about Tyria later—assuming we get out of here. Promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that promise.” Donna vowed as the couple heard more shouting from the other side of the door.

“*That door.*” Another voice exclaimed, “*Maybe we can use what’s behind there.*”

At the sound of another loud roar, a third voice remarked in response, “*We don’t have much choice. Move!*”

“*Hope so.*” A voice that sounded like it might have come from the American south said. “*For this to work though...I’m gonna need some help.*”

“They sound human.” Donna whispered, “Do you think they might be Alliance?”

“Maybe...” Donkey murmured in response, “Or they could be part of the same group as the man we killed. I’m not taking any chances. Like I said, if they’re not wearing Alliance blue—shoot first...ask questions later.”

Another voice...one that sounded very familiar to the Alliance marine...then spoke as the sound of rampaging footsteps grew louder.

“*We don’t have much choice. Salome? Life signs?*”

“That sounds like...” the gunnery chief shook his head, “No...that’s impossible.”

“What?”

“That voice!” Donkey whispered, “Can’t be.” He shook his head in disbelief. “She’s dead. This has to be a con. The moment that door opens, shoot.”

“*I’m picking up on two lifesigns behind the door.*” A female voice declared. “*Human.*”

“Shit.” Donkey swore. “Whoever it is has got some sort of scanner. They’ve made us.”

“*They’re frightened.*” One of the earlier voices sounded a cautionary tone, “*Be careful.*”

“*Phasers on stun. We don’t want innocent casualties. Rana...think you can throw up a barrier, then follow it up with a stasis field?*”

“*I’ll try.*” The voice apparently belonging to the asari replied.

“Shit.” Donkey cursed in a low voice, “They’ve got a biotic.”

“Could they be asari commandoes?” Donna suggested.

“Maybe.” Donkey replied, “But that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re on our side. They might be Eclipse or some other merc group.”

“*You can do it, imzadi. I have faith in you.*”

“*Have I told you how much I love you, siha?*”

The voice coming from the other woman sounding both surprised and pleased responded, *"Wow! Didn't see that one coming."*

"Too soon?" The asari asked, her voice carrying a fretting tone.

"No. Not too soon. You just took me by surprise—that's all. I feel the same way about you, imzadi."

"Okay...you two love each other...great...I'm happy for you. Fuck each other silly later. Right now, we've got work to do."

"Yes, Boss." A female voice responded with a laugh.

"Doesn't sound like they're out to kill us." Donna said sounding a hopeful note. "Maybe they're on our side."

"Maybe..." Still skeptical, Donkey conceded reluctantly, "Maybe not."

"Shouldn't we at least listen to them?" Donna urged as a voice the pair associated with that of the leader called out to them.

"Whoever's in the room...we're from Starfleet and we're here to help you."

"There's that voice again." Donkey growled. Raising his voice, the Alliance marine warned, "Whoever you are—using the voice of an old friend of mine isn't going to work. We're gonna open up a ton of whoop ass on you the moment that door opens."

Immediately recognizing the angry and frightened voice coming from the other side of the door, Ashley called out, "Donkey? Can't be! I saw you go down on Eden Prime! If this is some Impie's or Tal 'Shiar's idea of a sick joke..."

"I got better!" Donkey sarcastically responded, "And whoever you are, I know you're lying. Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams died on Virmire."

"Twes?"

"He's telling the truth. He really is your old friend."

"Donkey? We don't have much time. There's a pissed off krogan coming this way. I'm going to tell you something only the two of us know. Then we're coming through that door and if we have to, we'll come in phasers blasting, stun you, and talk later."

"All right...If you're really who you say you are, then you'll know the answer to this question." Donkey challenged, "What were our primary and secondary missions and what did you say to me about the lieutenant who commanded us on Eden Prime and what did I say about how the squad felt about you?"

"We were assigned to patrol the area from the colony to the beacon." Ashley responded promptly. "Besides our primary mission of guarding the Prothean beacon, our secondary task was to keep an eye out for any weapons smuggling going on in the vicinity of the spaceport."

"Okay. You got that part right." Donkey reluctantly confirmed, "But you could have gotten that by just digging through the records. Go on."

"You told me that you'd rather have me leading the squad..." Ashley recollected, "...and that the lieutenant was an ass...which I told you he was. I also told you that he was holding the Williams name against me. Then you told me that the squad thought that I had the biggest balls in the whole platoon. That I could keep my cool when things got crazy. And that I should stick around because sooner or later someone was going to recognize that."

Taken aback, Donkey gasped in surprise, "Ash. It really is you."

"Yeah, it's me. Now let us in. We've got to get ready for that crazy krogan."

"Okay...come in."

"What the hell are you wearing, Gunny?" Donkey gasped in surprise as he gazed in shock at the woman he had thought dead wearing a red miniskirt with her hair done up in a beehive.

"Work now...talk later." Ashley commanded as she signaled the rest of her team, commanding them to enter. "Everyone inside. Dixie... what are you going to need?"

"Ah'm gonna need one one of them photon grenades, then I'm gonna need to ask one of you girls in blue to set up a...what do you call that thing...that device that can slow someone up or freeze 'em where they stand?"

"An electro-gravitic field?" The woman scandalously clad in a blue midriff top and short skirt responded as she began to work alongside the southern-born woman wearing a red miniskirt like his old squadmate.

"That's right, Sugar. All I gotta do is rig that device with the photon grenade and lay down a chroniton mine barrier at the door. Then if he comes burstin' through..."

"He gets hit so hard that by the time he recovers, we'll have him stunned and in a confinement field." Ashley exclaimed, "Dixie...we pull this off...all of us are gonna treat you to an all-expenses paid weekend on Risa."

The blonde engineer responded with a chuckle, "From all I heard about the place, I think I'll take ya'll up on that."

"Where do you want me?" Donkey asked as he hefted the weapon in his hands.

"Stay back." Ashley commanded, "You're not armored or shielded and you're not familiar with our weapons."

"And you're armored?" The Alliance mariner laughed, "With what you're wearing, a stiff breeze would put you out of action."

Tapping a button on her belt, Ashley revealed the skin-tight armor she wore beneath her uniform. "Transparent. And don't let the fact that it matches my curves fool you. It's more resistant to damage than Alliance issue armor."

"You're not keeping me out of this fight, Ash." Donkey protested passionately. "Not after what they did to our people and what they were gonna do to us. I'm gonna make those sons of bitches pay."

"Then keep your friend safe." Ashley chided, "I'm willing to bet she's never seen a pissed off krogan and this krogan has had some modifications done on him making him even more dangerous and pissed off than usual."

"Donkey..." Donna pleaded as the footsteps and bellows from the angry krogan grew louder, "She's right. I'm scared. Real scared."

"All right. You win, Ash. But I want to help. I'll stay in the back but there has to be something I can do."

"Maybe there is." Salome interjected as she took a remote control device from her kit. "I'm going to set up a self-cloaking anethazine gas bomb by the entrance. When that light shines green, push the button. It'll activate the mine and—if all goes well—will, along with what Dixie has planned, slow him down at a minimum and if we're really lucky, stun him long enough for us to activate the containment field."

"Heh...so I'm just a glorified button pusher now." Donkey remarked with a mocking sneer.

"No." Ashley declared, "You're our reserve. If everything goes fubar we're going to need you to pitch in."

"Fine." Donkey reluctantly agreed as the krogan, yelling in pain and rage, began pounding on the door.

"Even though that door's made of duranium, it's not going to take him long to break through." Nealo commented as he set up in the rear where his sniper rifle would have the greatest effect.

"The big guy's right. He's going to come through any minute now." Rana echoed as she mustered her reserves of strength.

"All right, everyone." Ashley ordered as the door began to cave in, the bellowing getting even louder, "Take your positions. If you know any prayers...now would be a good time to say them."

"Goddess..." Rana ironically prayed aloud, "Get us out of this mess and I'll take back every insult I said about Athame until the next insult."

"Easy..." Ashley said in a calm, even voice. "Wait until he gets in the kill zone."

The door giving way with a crash, the beast rushed into the room tripping the mines as he entered. With a scream of rage, he ripped a console off its stand and threw it at one of the *Belladonna* security officers, sending the poor man flying across the room, his skull impacting hard against the wall.

"Now Dixie...Salome!" Ashley yelled as the blonde engineer's prefabricated phaser turrets began to fire, causing even louder shouts of rage from the pain-wracked augmented krogan as she pressed the button setting off the photon grenade.

Screaming at the concentrated phaser fire, the krogan charged one of the turrets as the grenade went off.

"Shit!" Twesata cursed as her phaser fire deflected off the krogan. "It's adapting like a Borg."

"Frequency modulators! Now, Dixie!"

"On it!" Quickly going to work, the young engineer tossed one to Ashley and a second to Nealo. However, before she could get a third one completed, she looked up to see the krogan charging at her. "Fuck me!" she screamed as she barely dodged the screaming monster's charge, diving quickly behind a console as the krogan crashed into the far wall, denting it.

"That was duranium!" Salome exclaimed disbelievingly as Rana quickly threw a barrier around Dixie. "You telling me you took on those assholes on a regular basis?"

"Yeah." Ashley grinned, "Sometimes two at once."

"Fuck me dead." The Terran gasped before yelling at Donkey. "Now...Jackass! Push the button!"

"My name's Donkey!" The Alliance marine hollered back as he pushed the button and detonated the mine while Salome activated the electromagnetic field, momentarily stunning the raging monster.

Seeing that now was the moment to strike, Ashley shouted out commands rapid fire as she tossed a stun grenade. "Nealo...aim for the hump!" Ashley shouted as she tossed a second grenade. "Rana! Now would be a good time for a warp."

Taking a deep breath and gathering her strength, the asari biotic launched her warp, striking at the same time as the Zulu sniper's phaser and Ashley's grenade, staggering the giant.

"Your turn, Twes! Put him down for the count!"

Tossing a cryogenic grenade, the Betazoid science officer shouted out a warning, "Gonna get a little chilly in here!"

The cold released by the grenade, on top of the disruptive effects of the electromagnetic field in combination with the sustained phaser fire finally had their effect on the rampaging krogan as, with a final bellow of rage and pain, he collapsed to the floor.

“Set up that confinement field—fast!” Ashley commanded as Salome and Twesata moved quickly to comply.

“Level ten containment.” Salome explained to Donkey and his companion. “It’ll hold him until we can beam him up to more secure confinement.”

Rushing to the downed security officer and kneeling down next to him, Rana quickly ran her medical diagnostic over him, shaking her head at the results. “Sorry, Salome...Nealo...” she consoled the fallen man’s shipmates, “His injuries were too severe.”

“Pappas was a good man.” Nealo declared. “He saved my life on Prius III.”

“Sorry, Sugar.” Dixie consoled, placing her hand on the Zulu’s shoulder.

“Shit...what the fuck did they do to him?” Donkey scowled, looking down at the once-proud krogan warrior now disfigured by implants and circuitry, his skin a dark shade of green.

“Me and Edi saw somethin’ like this when we hacked into those Cerberus files.” Doris commented in a somber voice. “We found out that Cerberus had a secret research lab on Tuchanka that was conducting experiments on humans and krogans. It’s part o’ that ETAP program—the one that turned my friend into a monster and that they were gonna send me to.”

“What about the others? Donna pleaded, “Captain Forrester, the children, and the other passengers. Are they all right?”

“I’ll check.” Ashley replied as she tapped her comm badge. “Team Red to Team Blue. What’s your status?”

“Team Blue to Team Red. We’re okay. The kids are a little scared, but they’ve calmed down. The ship’s doctor and a quarian...her name’s Zara...have been watching over them. The turian woman, Orinia, is worried about her husband though. Any updates on his status?”

Speaking the few words of Andorian that her friend had taught her, haltingly and with a thick accent, Ashley replied somberly, “*Not open comm. Bad. Very bad. Will explain soon.*”

“*Understood.*” Shelana acknowledged, also in Andorian. Switching to Federation Standard, she asked, “*What about the krogan?*”

“We ran into the krogan—it’s worse than we thought.” Ashley responded glumly. “We’ve got him in a level ten confinement field and we’ve doped him up with so much sedative that it should keep him out for a little while at least—but I’d suggest we get him into more secure confinement soon given how fast krogans can regenerate.”

“*Did you get the intel?*”

“We got it. We’re stuck here until we can transport that krogan though.”

“*Do you want us to make our way to you?*”

“Negative.” Ashley responded as she once again switched to Andorian. “*Bond mate see bond mate...bad...very bad.*”

“*Understood.*” Shelana replied, “*We’ll stay dug in here until they finish up in space. Team Blue out.*”

“Team Red out.” Tapping her comm. badge again, Ashley spoke, “Team Red to Team Yay. Status?”

“*Team Yay to Team Red. Area secured. The pet’aQ weren’t even worth our time.*”

Then another voice.

“*Team Ecurai to team Red. Objective is under our control. Opposition neutralized.*”

“Acknowledged.” Ashley responded, “Hold position. Good job, everyone. It’s all up to our people upstairs now.”

Act 4 A Dance in Space

Chapter Summary

The battle in space reaches its explosive climax

The Battle in Space

USS Aeolia

"Electromagnetic pulse probe and sub nucleonic carrier wave targeting the *Monbosh*." Lieutenant Commander T'Pren reported from the *Scryer*-class starship's tactical console. "Probe detonated. One support craft destroyed. A second damaged, the *Monbosh* has suffered damage to its shields."

"Mr. Velen...status of carrier wave?"

"The *Monbosh*'s weapons are temporarily offline, Captain."

"Then let us take advantage of its momentary weakness. Phasers target weapons subsystems. Mr. Velen—give me a viral impulse burst if you would please. Let's try to bring down their engines."

"Aye, Captain." Both bridge officers responded as Captain Hobson addressed his executive officer.

"Status of the other ships in the fleet, Commander Rysyl?"

"*Valley Forge* and *Bellerophon* are engaging the Terran *Exeters*, *Klothos* and *D'ressa* are in position to engage the *Monbosh* and the *Spoiled Princess* and *Belladonna* signal ready."

"Very good." Captain Hobson replied. "Signal Captain Magnussen. It is time to play our trump cards."

USS Valley Forge

The ship shaking under the impact of weapons fire, Commander Zheren, the Andorian executive officer, exclaimed, "Shields holding at fifty percent. Number three phaser disabled. Engineering reports minor injuries. No deaths."

"Strengthen structural integrity fields and concentrate fire on that cruiser's starboard nacelle." Magnussen ordered.

"Direct hit on enemy starboard nacelle." Michaels reported from his tactical station. "Their shields are down."

Leaning forward in his chair, Soren commanded, "Fire quantum torpedoes—high yield."

"Torpedoes away...direct hit...their engines and shields are down."

USS Bellerophon

"Direct hit on the Terran's left warp nacelle." Dya exclaimed from her tactical station. "He's venting plasma."

"Shields are still down from that last hit." Lieutenant Commander S'taav, the Vulcan engineering chief announced.

"Get those *shyortov* shields back on line!" The Commissar commanded.

"Shields have been restored to thirty percent." S'taav replied in a flat emotionless voice.

"Tanvir?" Boris called out, Damage Control status?"

"Teams have been sent to engineering and deck five." The Indian operations chief responded.

"Good." Captain Rodenko nodded, "S'taav! I want those *shyortov* shields back up now!"

"Aye, Captain."

"Angie? Boris commanded, Bring us one-eighty about on my orders."

"Aye, Sir." The blonde helmswoman promptly responded.

"Ilya? Tell me the surprise you, Lucky, and Simi cooked up is ready."

"It is indeed." The Halenoi first officer responded with a wicked grin. "Just say the word."

"Shields at seventy-five percent." S'taav announced. On seeing his captain's glower, the Vulcan engineer calmly stated, "That is the best that can be done until repairs are completed."

"Da." Boris nodded, "Good job." Taking a deep breath, the Commissar issued his commands, "Angie? Execute maneuver now. One hundred and eighty degrees about. Ilya? Now is the time. Do it."

"Lucky...Simi...Dya...show time."

:"Kinetic magnet launched along with a gravimetric inversion wave." Luciano declared, "Your turn, Simi.":

"launching electromagnetic pulse probe and a viral matrix." The Bajoran science chief declared, "That should keep them busy."

"Dya!" Ilya commanded, "Knock him out."

"Launching full spread of quantum torpedoes and mines." The Elasian tactical officer cheered as the combined attack overwhelmed the defenses of the Terran cruiser.

Watching as the enemy vessel exploded in a fireball, Boris sighed, "Angie? Bring us about. Let's see if *Valley Forge* needs a hand."

Valley Forge

"Captain Rodenko has reported that his ship has taken out one of the Terran cruisers, Sir, and asks if we need assistance." Layla, still manning the communications console, announced.

Watching the Terran cruiser he and his ship had been battling drifting dead in space, Soren shook his head. "Give Boris my regards and tell him we've got the situation well in hand."

"Aye, Sir."

Nodding his head in satisfaction, the Fleet Captain was about to issue the order to transport boarding parties when the view screen suddenly lit up.

"Enemy ship destroyed." Michaels commented in a hushed tone.

"Their captain chose to blow himself, his ship, and his crew up rather than surrender." Magnussen mused, "What was he trying to hide?"

"Hopefully Ash and her people might find the reason." Zheren opined.

"Let's hope so." Magnussen replied as the communications officer reported.

"*Aeolia*, sir. Captain Hobson says it's time to play our trump cards."

"Very good." Soren replied, "Give the order to the fleet. Target the *Monbosh* and coordinate with *D'ressa* and *Aeolia*. I want time on target when I give the word."

"Aye, Sir." The comm officer replied, "*Valley Forge* to all ships...execute Grand Slam."

Klothos

"Concentrate fire on that Terran cruiser." Captain Korath ordered as he stroked his beard. Then as he spotted a vulnerability, a sly grin appeared on his face. "K'Gan. When I give the order and not before, I want you to target that cruiser's shield subsystems and then carry out Attack Plan Kahless."

"Understood."

Nodding his head in satisfaction as the Terran ship exploded, the Klingon captain, his predatory grin still on his face, murmured in a low voice as he spied the *Belladonna* on his screen. "Now it is time for you to hunt my favorite *norgh*."

Aeolia

"Acknowledge *Valley Forge*'s order." Captain Hobson announced as he observed the savage fight on his viewscreen.

"Helluva fight." T'Pren dryly commented then exclaimed with a big grin as the Terran cruisers exploded leaving only one left, "Damn. Didn't see that coming!"

"Neither did the Terrans." Anara responded with a smirk of her own.

"Prepare to disengage cloak and fire on Captain Magnussen's order."

"Aye, Sir." T'Pren, now focused on the business at hand, affirmed. "Ready for time on target."

USS Belladonna

“Grand Slam’s a go.” Sito called from the recon destroyer’s tactical station.

Chuckling, Zsa-Zsa smirked as the *Mirandas* joined by a surviving Syphon frigate and the surviving *Exeter* moved to engage the destroyer and the *Spoiled Princess* who had also joined the fight, “Chrissy and his bridge metaphors.”

“I can’t figure out what he sees in that game.” Eliza joked as the music switched to a neo-rock cover of the Clash’s *London Calling* done by a Betazoid band that was now climbing the charts.

“Me neither, *dragam*.” Zsuzsanna replied as she tapped her toes to the beat. “Too slow for my tastes.”

Gesturing at the frigates and the surviving Terran *Exeter* on the screen now firing their weapons, Eliza quipped as the ship shuddered under the impact of a pair of photon torpedoes, “Looks like we’re gonna have to go to work.”

“*Igen*.” The Hungarian captain replied as she pushed the helmsman off his seat and took control. “Give me the helm, dahling!”

“Tractor beam locked on to us.” T’Vrel, the Vulcan science officer, announced in a dry voice. “Polarizing the hull to counter.”

“Good.” Zsa-Zsa smiled as the ship shook once again this time causing a console to short out, bringing down an officer.

“Medics to the bridge.” Eliza ordered as T’Vrel very quickly administered a hypo to the injured crewman.

“Shields at 30%.” Zarva shouted

“*Baszd* the goddamned shields.” Zsa-Zsa cursed, “I want power to engines when I give the word.”

“Crazy Eddie?” Eliza smirked.

“*Igen*.” The Hungarian captain grinned back, “On my order. You all know what to do.”

“Here we go...” Eliza smirked as her captain took control of the helm and immediately executed a barrel roll, evading the frigates’ weapons fire as the recon destroyer fired all its weapons, concentrating on the *Mirandas*.

“Eliza...countermeasures—Now! T’Vrel...gravity well...now!” Another wild barrel roll and evasive turn as the *Belladonna* science officer opened a gravity well, drawing the *Mirandas* into its center. “Ian...discharge coolant and ignite on my orders.” Zsa-Zsa commanded as she executed another barrel roll, then followed it up with several tight turns, shedding a tractor beam fired from one of the Syphons in the process. “*Spoiled Princess*” The Hungarian captain cheekily commed, “Come join the party, dahlings.”

Spoiled Princess

“Damn. That woman is crazy!” Candy remarked with a smirk as she and the rest of the *Princess*’s bridge watched the *Belladonna* engaged in a ferocious melee with the two Empire *Mirandas* through their monitors. The recon destroyer, while dodging and weaving frantically to evade most of the ferocious onslaught of weapons fire targeting it, still took more than its share of hits as witnessed by its glowing shields.

“Oh Zsa-Zsa.” Nelia purred from her position at the center chair. “You wicked girl.”

“Orders, Captain?” Candy called out.

“Atris...parallel *Belladonna*’s course.” Nelia commanded with a wicked grin. “Candy? Can you jam those Syphons’ sensors to keep them from getting a lock on the *Belladonna*?”

“Ask me to do something hard, Captain.” The science officer replied with a cocky grin.

“All right...I want you to hit them with an overload cascade and follow that up with a viral matrix. Can do?”

“Can do.”

“Joachim? Lay down the quantum mines immediately after Zsa-Zsa ignites the coolant she’s about to dump. Then turn about and hit them with a torpedo spread. We time this right, while she’s taking out the *Mirandas*, we’ll be trashing the Syphons. That’ll give the heavy hitters the opening they need.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“All right...let’s do this!”

“Now, Ian! Burn the *seggfej*! Eliza...torpedo spread!” Smirking as she saw first one Syphon, then the other go down before the *Spoiled Princess*, the Hungarian captain ordered, “Now, *dragam*! Send those assholes to hell!”

Valley Forge

“What the hell are those two doing? Michaels remarked as the *Belladonna* and *Spoiled Princess* initiated their attack against the frigates.

“They’ve giving us our opening.” Soren replied with a grin. “Target the *Monbosh* and coordinate with *D’ressa*, *Bellerophon*, and *Aeolia*. I want time on target when I give the word.”

D’ressa

“Those women are insane.” Subcommander R’kel chuckled, shaking his head.

His lips turning up in a smirk, Kaval joked back, “Ah...but Zsa-Zsa and Nelia do insane so well.” Taking on a more sober demeanor, the Commander ordered, “Prepare to decloak and fire on Fleet Captain Magnussen’s order.

Klothos

“Good hunt.” Korath exclaimed as he watched the two escorts tear through the enemy frigate screen, leaving the Terran cruiser open.

His executive officer, responding with a pleased grunt, commented, “They fight well.”

Seeing his opening, the Klingon captain commanded, “Now, K’Gan! Attack plan Kahless!”

Disruptor and quantum torpedo fire lanced from the Klingon cruiser as it made its pass against the limping Terran cruiser. A smug smile on his face, the human augment Klingon nodded at his Executive Officer, tacitly permitting him to join in the victory song was singing. “Victory is its own reward.” Korath remarked to himself before returning to the battle. “Form up on the *Belladonna* and *Spoiled Princess* but let them have the glory of the kill. They’ve earned it.”

Valley Forge

Fleet Captain Magnussen nodded his head thoughtfully as he listened to his first officer’s report. “The *Monbosh* is still recovering from the *Aeolia*’s strike and is now wide open. The last Terran cruiser has just been destroyed by the *Klothos* and the girls. *Spoiled Princess* and *Belladonna* have punched through the frigates and are on an attack vector, *Klothos* is backing them up. *D’ressa* and *Aeolia* report ready for time on target.”

Taking a deep breath, Soren signaled his communications officer and addressed the fleet, “All ships. Time on target. I want that *Monbosh* out of my skies.”

The end came quickly, in the form of a massive fireball as the Elachi battleship collapsed under the combined fire of all ships in the taskforce.

“Enemy ship destroyed.” Commander Zheren reported.

“Escape pods?” Soren asked, hoping against hope that some of the other side had managed to survive.

“Terran pods from two of the Terran cruisers and the *Mirandas*.” Lieutenant Commander Michaels replied. “Nothing from the Elachi.”

“Have the *Aeolia* carry out search and rescue operations and then join the fleet at the base.” Captain Magnussen ordered. “Prepare a boarding party to secure that freighter and once we’re in communications range, raise Lieutenant Williams.”

“Aye, Sir.” The XO responded, “All ships have acknowledged.”

“Good.” Soren nodded his head, “Set course for the base, maximum impulse. Hopefully, Lieutenant Williams and her people will have found what we need.”

Act 5 Mission Accomplished

Chapter Summary

The Coronado System and its secrets is secured, but at a cost.

Ashley's Team

Leaning up against a table next to his old squadmate, Donkey let out a breath of air, "Some fight, huh?"

"Just another day at the office." Ashley quipped back as she glanced down at the still slumbering krogan. "A little tougher than most days... but yeah...par for the course in this job."

"So...How did you and that asari..."

"Rana." Ashley quickly pointed out her asari teammate's name. "Her name is Rana Thanoptis. Long story short...you're probably familiar with what happened at Virmire...right?"

"Yeah." Donkey glumly answered back, "I was still recovering from Eden Prime when the news broke. But you were listed as killed in action. That obviously didn't happen. So what did?"

"You heard that I was assigned to assist a salarian commando team?" On receiving her friend's head shake, she sighed, "Okay...did you find out about our mission?" As his friend again shook his head, the dark-haired lieutenant swore, "Damn."

"A lot of what happened down there is still classified." Donkey replied, "The records only state that you were killed in action. Nothing about your operation or what happened."

"I'm not surprised." Ashley sighed, "The Council and Udina didn't want to hear about the Reapers even before I was...killed." She chuckled ironically. "So, I wasn't surprised when Dixie told us that just about everything having to do with the Reapers and our mission on the *Normandy* was classified."

"Yeah." Donkey agreed, "They put a tight lid on it. So, what did happen?"

"Well..." Ashley sighed as she recounted her and Rana's escape via the underground tunnels and then the gateway and ending with their encounter with Nelia and the others and the two joining Nelia's team.

"Shit." The gunnery sergeant snorted, "That's some story. So...you're a lieutenant now?"

"Yeah." Ashley smiled, "Not too long after me and Rana joined up with Nelia, we were sent on a special mission. Well...Twes...Twesata... Shels...Shelana...and Nelia had their commissions restored and Rana and I were given brevet commissions and we've both been working to make them permanent. All we've got left now is our evaluation cruise and I have a feeling this is going to qualify for that."

"Gonna be quite a change going back to gunnery chief when you return to the Alliance." Donkey joked.

Shaking her head, Ashley averred, "I'm not coming back."

"What?" Donkey exclaimed astonished, refusing to believe the words his old squadmate had just uttered. "You're Alliance blue! You can't turn your back on your oath...your people..."

"Donkey!" Ashley sighed, "Please understand. This is my home now. I've been here for quite a few years. I have friends...a more or less adopted kid sister back on Drozana Station...a career where I'm judged by what I do and not by my last name...and..." she shyly concluded, "someone special."

"And you're willing to throw away all you've fought for and believed in for that?" Donkey exclaimed, his tone one of surprise with an undertone of disappointment, "Who is he?"

Before she could answer, Ashley's comm badge beeped. Automatically tapping her badge, she answered, "Williams here."

"*What's the status of your team Lieutenant.*" Soren's Scandinavian accented voice came through the comm.

"Five casualties, Sir. The Klingons report two...the Romulans one. We lost Pappas from the *Belladonna*, and Matthews and Kristoff from the *Valley Forge*. I'm sorry, Sir."

"*Lort.*" Soren grimly responded, swearing in Danish. *They were good men. I'll let Zsa-Zsa know about Pappas. Were there any survivors from the freighter?*"

"Yes, Sir. I have two here. Gunnery Chief Donald Keys of the Systems Alliance Marines and Donna Welles, the chief purser. Most of other survivors—including ten children and teenagers—are safe with Shelana's team. There are some humans in a containment cell that have had experiments performed on them."

"*What kind of experiments.*" Soren asked, with a discernable fury behind his normally placid tone.

Taking a deep breath, Ashley responded, *"They altered them with Borg and Reaper implants and also they apparently exposed them to spores from the Thorian plant that comes from my universe."*

"Damn." The Fleet Captain cursed, *"Do you think they could be cured somehow?"*

"I don't know, Sir." Ashley honestly replied, "I do know that the effects of the Thorian spores can be neutralized by a low concentration nerve agent, but I don't know any of the particulars about it. As for the Reaper and Borg tech..."

"I understand, Lieutenant. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, Sir." Ashley affirmed, "We also have a krogan they were experimenting on. He is currently sedated."

"He's beginning to come out of it." Twesata warned, "I've never seen regeneration that fast before."

"He's a krogan." Donkey responded with a derisive snort, "Redundant organs and systems."

"We have him in a confinement field." Ashley affirmed, "But I'd feel much safer if we had him in more secure facilities."

"Understood. We'll set up a level ten field in sickbay. From the description you've given me about his species, that should keep him confined."

"Aye, Sir. They also experimented on a turian male. We found him on a lab table. The bastards vivisected him, Captain."

"Lort."

"It gets worse, Sir. His wife is one of the survivors with Shelana's team. She doesn't know."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll be the one to break the news to her."

"I can do it, Sir." Ashley replied, volunteering for the hard and painful, but also necessary and humane, duty.

"Thank you, Lieutenant..." the captain replied, Donkey raising an eyebrow at the fondness in the taskforce commander's voice, *"But this sort of task comes with command. However, I would ask that you be there with me as you are familiar with her people and culture. I would also appreciate your advice on how best to break the news to her."*

"Of course, Sir." Ashley responded with a slight smile on her face that again did not go unnoticed by her former comrade.

"The taskforce is now in orbit and the system secure. We are beaming support personnel to the freighter." Soren declared, *"I'll be beaming down shortly."*

"Aye, Sir." Ashley acknowledged as Captain Magnussen signed off. Turning to her old friend, she explained, "That was Fleet Captain Magnussen. He's in command of the taskforce I and my team are a part of."

"He's your someone special?" Donkey asked with a disapproving frown.

"Yeah." Ashley responded with a bashful smile, "And no...we're not breaking regs. We're both professionals and Starfleet's rules on fraternization are more flexible than the Alliance's."

"I see." Donkey replied, his displeasure clear in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Donk." Ashley apologized, "But he's a good man and we really do care for each other. And no...we haven't slept together yet...not that that's any of your business."

"I didn't say anything." Donkey replied with a frown. "Like you said, you're not a marine anymore."

Quickly picking up on the meaning behind her former squadmate's final words, the former gunnery chief scowled as four pillars of blue light appeared nearby. Putting aside her seething anger at her former comrade, Ashley greeted Soren and those with him after they rematerialized, smiling on seeing the Danish captain. "Sir. Fleet Captain Soren Magnussen, this is Gunnery Chief Donald Keys of the Systems Alliance Marines."

Coming to attention, Donkey rendered a crisp salute, "Sir."

Inclining his head respectfully at the Alliance noncommissioned officer, Soren replied, "No need to salute, Chief. Starfleet has long dispensed with that custom. It's a pleasure to meet you. Lieutenant Williams speaks very highly of you."

"Thank you, Sir." Donkey, still maintaining his military posture, replied before asking, "Might I ask about the others?"

"Yes, Sir." Donna interjected, "When can we see Captain Forrester and everyone else? And when are we going to be able to go home? Can we go home?"

"We'll take you to your friends in just a few moments, Ma'am." Soren politely replied as Michaels, currently overseeing a blue shirted medic and two security personnel attending to the still comatose krogan signaled his commanding officer.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Jeff?"

“Doctor Cicar has set up a quarantine facility with a level ten confinement field. That should keep the big guy here secure.”

“Very good.” Soren acknowledged, “Beam him up along with those poor souls in that containment unit and then I want you and Corpsman Thompson to come with us to check on the rest of the passengers.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Speaking now to Salome and Twesata, Magnussen inquired, “Were you able to recover any useful intelligence?”

“I think we were, Sir.” Salome replied as she handed the Fleet Captain her padd. “It will take some time to analyze it, of course, but I think we might have found the key we were looking for somewhere in that data.”

Nodding his head in approval, Soren acknowledged, “Let’s hope so. Now I think it’s time we saw about the other people—don’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Taking the lead as he and the others walked down the corridor. Soren paused at a window that allowed him to see into the other room, a laboratory with several slabs and tables. Clenching his teeth at the sight of the turian male lying on one of the slabs, his chest splayed open and carapace removed, the Danish starship captain spoke in a low, forceful tone. “This is the man you were telling me about?”

Ashley, who knew that Soren rarely openly displayed his anger, realized that her captain was at this moment incredibly furious. Controlling her own anger at what she saw, she answered back in an equally measured, restrained voice, “Yes, Sir.”

“Michaels!” Captain Magnussen commanded, “Beam this poor man back to the ship at once. Have Dr. Cicar do what he can to make him look...” as the captain tried to find the words to say, Jeff interjected compassionately as he motioned at a security officer, pointing at the lab door.

“Understood, Sir. I’ll have Fredericks accompany him back to the ship.”

“Thank you.” Soren replied. His eyes reflecting cold fury, the fleet captain again spoke in a low, commanding voice, “Williams... Thanoptis... Keys... Whaley...you understand his race better than any of the rest of us. What are their funerary customs?”

“Garrus and I talked about this once before Virmire.” Ashley recalled, “He wanted us to understand what to do should he...you know...”

Nodding his head in understanding, Soren requested, “Continue, please.”

“A turian funeral is very formal. Those in military service...and they would view Starfleet as being military...wear their dress uniforms with medals and decorations. They do not have a particular color or style of dress as we do, but as I said, formal attire is required. The funeral itself, from what Garrus told me, is very beautiful with blue candles and incense accompanied by the sound of tiny bells. The body is laid out on a silver slab etched with runes and designs.”

“I can show you which ones to use and help with the planning.” Rana volunteered. “When I was an undergraduate, I spent a year at the University on Palaven studying dextro-genetics and my roommate’s mother passed on while I was there. She explained to me what was involved with the funeral rituals. The body and slab are decorated with flowers and he would need to have his clan markings repainted. Hopefully, the freighter’s library will have that information in its codex.”

“It does.” Donna replied in a low whisper.

“Normally a priest officiates, but as the senior officer commanding, you would be an acceptable substitute.” Rana then explained in detail the ceremony and burial, adding, “Since burial isn’t possible, our practice of launching him in a torpedo casing at the sun would be considered appropriate.”

“Would it be proper to have his funeral alongside our people?” Soren inquired.

“It would.” Ashley replied, “The turians are a military culture with a strong sense of duty. His wife will consider it an honor for her husband to be buried alongside dutiful and courageous soldiers.”

“Then we will make the appropriate arrangements.” Soren declared as they entered the security holding area where Shelana and her team were watching over the remaining survivors. “Lieutenant Shelana. Report.”

“We’ve provided medical attention to the crew and passengers that we were able to rescue, Sir. Dr Frobisher has been a great help.”

At once recognizing the quarian woman sitting with the turian, Dixie gasped in a low whisper, “Zara.”

“Who?” Twesata asked, then remembering what the blonde engineer had said about her old quarian friend whispered, “Oh. That Zara.”

“Yeah.” Dixie murmured as she tried to make herself inconspicuous, “She probably hates my guts now.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t.” Twesata replied with a reassuring grin. “But you’re right that now’s probably not a good time to say hello. Later... once we’re back on the ship, you really should see her.”

“No.” Dixie shook her head, “I can’t do that.”

“I’ll come with you if you want.” Twesata promised, reminding the former Cerberus engineer, “You’re forgetting I’m an empath. If I pick up on anything bad, I’ll cut the conversation short and we’ll get the hell out before anything happens.”

“Okay.” Dixie took a deep breath, “When we get back to the ship. Thank you.”

“Hey...don't mention it.” Twesata smiled, “That's what friends are for.”

Escorting Fleet Captain Magnussen to the freighter's captain, Shelana made introductions. “Fleet Captain Soren Magnussen, this is Captain Elmer Forrester, the captain of the *Dawn Star*.”

“Thank you for saving us, Fleet Captain.” Forrester stated in sincere thanks as he shook the Danish starship captain's hand before asking in a plaintive voice, “Sir...do you have any information on my missing passengers and crew or on the status of my ship?”

“Your ship is secure.” Soren answered back soothingly. “I've taken the liberty of sending support personnel to ensure that there has been no sabotage and that it is still operable.” Seeing the concerned looks on the faces of the captain and the others, Magnussen reassured, “They have not entered anyone's private quarters nor accessed any records or files. However...we would appreciate your allowing us access to your library database and logs as they might provide us valuable information on potentially getting you back home.”

“By all means, Fleet Captain.” Forrester agreed, “If your people need any assistance...”

Immediately recognizing that the other captain was politely asking if he and his crew could return to their ship, Soren nodded, “Thank you, that would be appreciated.”

After a momentary pause, the freighter captain inquired in a worried voice, “Can you please tell me anything about my missing passengers and crew?”

Pulling the captain aside where their conversation couldn't be overheard while at the same time motioning for Ashley and the two humans rescued by her team to join them, Soren said in a low, solemn voice, “I don't know how to tell you this but to tell you straight. If it were my crew, that's how I would want to hear it.”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the freighter captain responded, “Thank you. I appreciate that, Captain.”

“The people who took them performed...experiments...on the ones we found.”

“What sort of experiments?” Forrester asked, choking back a sob.

“They had a variety of genetic and cybernetic experiments done on them.” Soren plainly replied.

“Shit.” The freighter captain swore. “Do you know who did this?”

“Perhaps we can discuss this later, Captain Forrester?” Soren suggested as he glanced at the disconsolate turian woman sitting with another woman who Soren had recognized was a quarian. “I'm sorry, but there's one more task I have to take care of.”

Following the Fleet Captain's gaze, Forrester nodded, “If it's what I think it is, Fleet Captain...I should be with you when you tell her. Her and her husband were passengers of mine and so my responsibility.”

“Of course, Captain.” Soren concurred as his gaze turned to his ground team leader, “Lieutenant, if you would join us, please?”

“Yes, Sir.” Ashley responded with a slight incline of her head.

As they approached, Captain Forrester cleared his throat and spoke in a gentle tone, “Orinia? This is Fleet Captain Soren Magnussen and Lieutenant Ashley Williams.”

Looking up, the turian woman pleaded, “Do you have news of my husband? Is Lorrin all right?”

“I'm sorry, Ma'am...” Soren said in a soft, consoling tone of voice, “Your husband...”

“No!” Orinia shook her head, “No...No...No! This was our anniversary cruise!” Tears running down her cheeks, she sobbed, “How?”

“With courage, Ma'am.” Ashley lied, “He honored his family, clan, and regiment.”

Giving Ashley the turian equivalent of a sad smile, Orinia replied, “You don't need to lie to me, Lieutenant. My husband was a businessman. He was never much of a soldier. We met while he was doing his required service. He was a clerk assigned to logistics and procurement. Just answer me one question, and please be honest. Was it painful?”

“I'm sorry, Ma'am.” Ashley replied as tears ran down her cheeks, “I'm afraid it was.”

“Did you get the ones who did this to him?”

“Some of them.” The Starfleet lieutenant responded.

“And you have my word we will find the rest, Ma'am.” Soren interjected as Lieutenant Commander Michaels approached.

“I'm sorry, Sir.” Jeff apologetically interrupted, gestured at two Klingons warriors behind him with a human male standing between them. “They said they found him hiding in a storage room. He says he's part of the freighter's crew.”

“Captain?” Soren turned to the commanding officer of the *Dawn Star*. “Is he part of your crew?”

“Yes.” Forrester nodded his head, “He's a communications officer.”

“How did you escape?” Magnussen queried the man, quietly signaling Twesata to join him and the others.

“I was lucky.” The communications officer responded, “I was able to break away from those pointy-eared aliens during the attack.”

“He’s lying. He works for Cerberus.” Twesata declared, glaring at the man as she drew her phaser and fired, instantly stunning him. “He had a false tooth filled with cyanide.” She explained as she holstered her weapon. “I didn’t think you wanted him dying on us.”

“Good work, Lieutenant.” The Fleet Captain praised before explaining to the surprised and shocked freighter captain. “Lieutenant Glex is Betazoid. Her race is both empathic and telepathic.”

“What are you going to do to him?” Forrester inquired as he looked down on the fallen spy.

“While I’m tempted to let the Klingons have him…” Soren replied, bringing cruel grins from the two warriors, “I think I’ll let Salome interrogate him instead and then turn him over to Starfleet Intelligence. Jeff?”

Kneeling down next to the man, the security chief quickly removed the false tooth. “One fake tooth filled with cyanide, Sir.” Michaels exclaimed, the disgust on his face evident as he glared down his nose at the Cerberus agent before handing the phony tooth to his commanding officer. “You sure you don’t want me to save us the headaches and just give him to the Klingons, Sir?”

“I’m sure.” Soren replied, dismissing the Klingons. On their way out, the two warriors spat at the feet of the spy, with the leader growling in a low, menacing tone, “*Pet’aQ.*”

“Salome?” Soren gestured at the *Belladonna* intelligence officer, motioning for her to join the conversation.

“Sir?”

“Go with Lieutenant Commander Michaels and the prisoner. I want you in charge of this man’s interrogation.”

A cruel smile crossing her lips, the dark-haired lieutenant queried, “How extensive do you want the grilling?”

“Get as much information as you can while staying within the boundaries.” Magnussen grimly answered.

“The spirit or the letter?” The intelligence officer asked, the predatory grin still on her face.

“Keep it in the lines, Lieutenant.” Soren replied, “Get everything you can from him, but I want him in one piece when we get back.”

“Understood, Sir. But…” she remarked as she looked down at the prisoner, now beginning to shake off the effects of the phaser, “he doesn’t have to know that—does he?”

“I see no reason to tell him that.” Soren responded, “Just remember that you’re in Starfleet now.”

“I promise I’ll behave.” Salome vowed. Sauntering up to the groggy Cerberus agent, the intelligence specialist cupped the man’s chin while looking down on him. With a sneer on her face, she practically purred, “You and I are going to have such fun together.” Motioning for Dixie to join them, Salome requested, “Dixie’s familiar with his organization, Sir. Request permission for her to join the interrogation. It would also help if I had a telepath with me.”

Nodding his head, Soren gave his assent, “Glex…Whaley…go with Lieutenant Jenkins and assist her.”

“Aye, Sir.” Both women replied as they joined the group about to beam out.

“We’ll get what we can out of him, Sir…” Jeff promised, “but do I really have to keep the girls from ripping him apart?”

“I’m afraid so, Jeff.” Soren answered back. “I’ll see you back on the ship.” Turning his attention back to the grieving turian, the Danish starship captain inquired in a kindly voice, “Is there anything you need? Anything we can do for you?”

Orinia sniffed as the quarian woman with her comforted her the best she could, “Thank you. Please…may I see my husband? I need…I need to say goodbye to him.”

Nodding his head, Soren signaled a Caitan nurse, “Ensign Srerow will take you to him.” Turning to the ensign, the Fleet Captain requested, “These people aren’t familiar with how our transporters work and they’ve been through enough shock for one day. Contact the ship and have a shuttle sent down to take her and the others to the *Valley Forge*. See that they all receive checkups and medical care as needed and then have them assigned temporary quarters. Also, inform the counselor that his services will be needed.”

“Yes, Sir.” Ensign Srerow acknowledged as she gingerly took charge of the turian woman, speaking softly to her as she led her away.

“Thank you, Admiral.” The quarian woman said as she introduced herself, “I am Zara’Arosa vas Callina. But please, call me Zara.”

“Of course, Zara…” Soren smiled back, “But my rank is Fleet Captain, not admiral. Fleet Captain is a brevet rank given to a captain put in command of a temporary taskforce.”

“My apologies, Fleet Captain.” Zara replied, “May I ask you a question? Are we truly in another universe?”

“I’m afraid you are, Zara.” Soren answered back apologetically, “But rest assured, we will do everything we can to get you back to your home again.”

“I might have a theory on that, Fleet Captain.” The young quarian explained, “My specialty is astrophysics. I am currently studying the increased presence of dark energy and dark matter in certain star systems. The Farinata system, what we call the parallel system to this in our

universe, possessed an increased amount of both dark energy and dark matter along with certain particles I cannot identify. I was wondering if..."

"You might be able to use our science labs?" Soren interrupted with a smile, completing the quarian's request, "Of course you can. I'll have my chief science officer coordinate with you. I'd be most interested in your findings."

"Thank you, Fleet Captain." Zara enthusiastically responded, "If I may, I'd like to get started as soon as I can."

"By all means." Soren readily agreed, "A shuttle should arrive for you shortly to take you to the ship."

"Sir..." Zara politely requested, "If I may, I know that you use matter teleportation—I saw our captors use it to escape. I would like to ask that I be allowed to travel by that method so that I could get to work as soon as possible."

His smile growing wider, the Danish starship captain responded as he tapped his comm badge, "Of course. Magnussen to *Valley Forge*. One to beam up, quarian, standing one meter in front of my location. Have Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara meet her in the transporter room and tell Talana to cooperate fully with Ms. Zara."

"Understood, Sir. Locked on, beginning transport."

As Zara transported up and the other surviving passengers and crew of the *Dawn Star*, led by their captain, were escorted to the waiting shuttle, Soren turned to Ashley, announcing, "We'll be leaving behind a garrison along with the Klingons and Romulans and another joint task force will be arriving in system shortly after we leave. You and your people did an excellent job, Lieutenant. You should be proud."

"I am, Sir." Ashley responded, "But not for myself. It's the team that deserves all the credit. They worked well together. I just barked orders."

Nodding his head approvingly, the Fleet Captain declared, "I'll make sure that everyone receives proper credit when I file my report with Admiral Tuvok and Starfleet Command." Watching as Shelana and Rana, along with the rest of the landing party, beamed out, Soren, smiling fondly at the gorgeous raven-haired woman standing next to him, quipped, "Ready to leave this rock, Lieutenant?"

Taking her beau's hand in hers for a brief moment, Ashley looked up in his eyes and smiled back, "Hell yeah, Sir."

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