

Mass Vexations: Redemption

Chapter 1: Stranger in a Strange Land

Ethan slowly woke up, his head throbbing with a vicious headache. His vision was blurry, but his eyes had adjusted enough to see clearly after blinking numerous times. Last thing he remembered was starting the experiment at Big Mountain, where he had attempted to enhance the Transportalponder's efficiency. Then, without warning, the experiment went awry. Now, here he was, lying flat on his back in a dark alleyway, only God-knows-where. Lucky for him, though, the Think Tank had allowed him to take his weapons along on the trip, in case anything happened to him.

The Courier stood up and looked at the map on his Pip-Boy. From the readout, the area was huge, probably around the size of either a large city or a small nation, but not much else. It looked like he had some exploring to do, so it could add in some minor details. The date and time read 13 July 2283, 1738 hours exactly.

Then, he looked at the Transportalponder held in his hand, only to find the thing trashed. The plastic casing was cracked, the antenna snapped off, and the chip itself – the source of the Transportalponder's energy – burned out. Until he could take a closer look at it, he couldn't fix it. At least he could play around with it for now, like a toy gun, if he ever had the chance.

He checked his surroundings after dusting off his armored Vault 21 jumpsuit and putting the Transportalponder back into his backpack, only to find a small security camera tracking his every move. He hoped nobody would come through the alleyway; the sight of some guy randomly appearing in a dark, dank alleyway would be suspicious, to say the least.. He figured that would be highly unlikely. If anyone found this out and decided to take advantage of it, he'd be screwed unless he covered his tracks.

He stepped out of the alleyway, only to be taken completely by surprise by what he saw.

This place was rather filthy with a foul odor he couldn't identify wafting about. Perhaps it was just some random corpse nearby. He hoped it was a corpse. The place looked much like a scene from a bad science-fiction movie or a superhero comic book, like La Fantoma. It was dull, brown, and seemed rather dirty. Even the dimly-lit storefronts and aging neon signs reminded him of his travels in the Mojave Wasteland, especially the Strip in New Vegas, the technological and scientific wonders of Big Mountain, the ruins of the Divide, including the missile silos, and the vending machines at the Sierra Madre (he was grateful that he didn't teleport to either the Divide or the Sierra Madre).

What was even stranger to Ethan were the ‘locals’, which most of them were actually aliens. Some of them had four eyes and unnaturally brown skin. Some of the others had these metallic plantings on their face, making them look like a weird cross between a bird, a raptor, like a dinosaur from the Pre-War books, and a futuristic trash can. He also noticed that few of the locals are small and skinny, but their heads were big with horns on top, and their eyes were big, beady, and black. To him, they looked too much like greyheads to his comfort. The rest of the locals were human, or at least they looked like humans. Well, except for some of the women, with their blue skin and skin-like tendrils for hair. Ethan was especially worried about that big-ass gorilla-looking creature guarding what appeared to be a nightclub.

Even the weapons and armor the guards have made his own seem outdated in comparison. What worried him the most were these orange lights glowing on their arms. Were they weapons or gadgets? He didn’t know and he didn’t want to find out the hard way.

When he tried to gather information about the place, the only things he received were some dirty looks from the residents. He even had trouble understanding what some of them were saying, along with finding a terminal that could actually work to his satisfaction. But he managed to learn plenty of things about the area. First, the strange place known only as Omega. The name of the place – Omega – made sense to him in a strange, contextual way.

Second, the place was run by someone called Aria T’Loak. Upon asking further questions, he was instead given directions to a marketplace, where he could buy some spare parts and repair tool kits. Much to his chagrin, a thug, one of the four-eyed things he saw, tried to rob him along the way. Fortunately, he knew how to defend himself. After he beat him to a pulp, he took the thug’s money, which appeared to be a credit chit; but it was about enough to buy a translator and the entrance payment to the nightclub. After buying said translator, he decided to head back to the nightclub to relax and hopefully find an opportunity there.

“Uh, excuse me,” Ethan spoke as he approached one of the locals lining up in front of the nightclub.

The local turned around, revealing to be a large and intimidating creature encased in red armor. The local was taller than Ethan, about seven feet or so. He resembled a cross between a reptile, like a gecko, but with a hump, and a...what are they called again? Tortoises? A tortoise, definitely a tortoise, though some sort of a shell was on his face instead of his back. Or that hump.

“What do you want, human?” asked the giant tortoise-thing in a rather rude tone of voice. He

was not speaking in some alien language, but English. Guess his translator worked after all.

Ugh! Bad breath alert! Ethan thought as he squirmed at the sheer smell from its breath. Do they actually smell that bad, or was it Omega that made them this way? They smelled worse than the locals at Freeside, for Pete's sake! He would definitely like some answers, though. "Is there any place where I could find some scrap? The type I'm looking for isn't available at the shops," he asked, more concerned with his bad breath than his rude gestures. "Also, what's up with that line you're in? Eager to meet someone?"

"Scrap?" the creature asked. "You can find jobs anywhere on this damn station. And who are you to not know about the best club on Omega?" He muttered something else which Ethan didn't quite catch, even with his translator, but that he assumed was probably not very nice.

"Someone who has lived under a rock his whole entire life and just got here on Omega for the first time," Ethan snapped. "Do you people always treat new arrivals like this? I wouldn't be surprised if you do." He sighed irritably. "Anything else you can tell me 'bout this place? Maybe where--"

The creature simply frowned, leaning a bit closer to Ethan. "You got a problem?" he asked threateningly. "You just look and find scrap just about anywhere."

"Fine, then," Ethan grumbled. "Just to let you know, yes, I have a problem with assholes that have really bad--" He stopped mid-sentence as someone bumped into him. He then turned around to see a hooded man quickly shuffle by. There was a quickly uttered apology before he vanished into the crowd, completely skipping the line and going straight inside to the club.

The creature was not amused, frowning as he suddenly grabbed on to Ethan's collar, bringing him just a little *too* close to him. "You mind repeating that, *human*?"

Ethan then felt was probably the equivalent of a gun being pushed roughly up against his ribcage. "You heard me," he replied as he quickly drew his Colt M1911A1 pistol, trigger the safety off, and pointed it at the thing's head, right between his eyes.

Instead of stepping back like Ethan hoped, though, the thing simply barked out in laughter. "And what're you going to do with *that* thing?" he asked, indicating the Colt. "That thing doesn't look like a gun! I'll bet you anything it doesn't even shoot real bullets!"

Ethan responded with firing one shot at the thing's head, leaving behind a crack with the bullet buried partway between the eyes. Then, recalling someone mentioning about pulling the shell on

this thing's face, he pulled out his bowie knife and struck at it, right at the edge of the plate.

This got the creature's attention, and within seconds, a more fearful expression came on his face and he cowered slightly. He put the gun-like thing down. "Hey, calm down, I just want to relax here!"

Ethan sighed a breath of relief. "Alright. Good," he panted, pulling his bowie out of the creature's head plate and holstered it. "Now why don't you drop me down and forget about all this, okay?"

With no further resistance, the thing did exactly that. "I didn't even think you knew about the head crest thing," he admitted. "I didn't think you knew how to intimidate a krogan like that..."

"Well, you can hear all sorts of things on Omega," Ethan replied as he reloaded and pulled the slide on his pistol. He then put the safety back on and holstered it. "So you're a krogan, huh? I don't know much about them, though."

"You don't know what a krogan is, and yet you're on a station where half the people here aren't human?" asked the person in front of him. "I don't know if I believe you or not..."

"Well, actually, I was hoping that he would be a mutant of some sort, but nope. But at least it was resolved, well, rather peacefully, unlike that one encounter with those greyheads back at the Mojave," Ethan joked as he turned to the strange alien. A krogan, actually. "No offense here.

"Don't do it again," the krogan advised. "I don't think a lot of people will be this good to you. Anyway, what do you want?"

He looked at the entrance to the club and looked at the sign, which said *Afterlife*, as it glow a bright purple color. "Did anybody notice a hooded figure pass by here just seconds ago?" Ethan asked curiously.

"At least you're not blind," commented the krogan. "Yeah, why?"

"Well, I dunno," Ethan answered. "But it sounds sounds like there's an opportunity waiting. I think I'll go check it out."

"You *do* realize there's a line, right?" asked the krogan, pointing at it with his thumb.

"Yeah, but I think the line's actually for meeting someone important," Ethan replied. "I've seen

some other people skipping the line. Maybe I'll go for a drink. Hope they don't mind."

With this, Ethan sauntered past the krogan and also past the line as he walked up the stairs to the nightclub after paying the payments to get in.

As Ethan walked down the hallway to the club, he noticed some of the locals were glaring at him. It might have something to do with him intimidating that krogan. Or maybe it was the fact that the armor he was wearing was out of place and outdated, as he noticed earlier. Then, they started muttering to themselves, which he assumed it has something to do with the former. There must have been witnesses, but apparently word traveled faster than he could say 'brahmin crap'.

Along the way, he quickly thought about the experiment. If it were successful, then why did he travel to the future, or an alternative universe, instead? If it was a spectacular failure, was he actually dead at Big Mountain? If so, then it was one hell of an afterlife, pun intended. And symbolic, noting the images of fire on the walls. He chuckled to himself for that as he entered the bar.

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"Dr. T'Soni?"

The conversation had been abruptly halted as an asari turned to the hooded figure. She blinked uncertainly, a hand going to her side as she looked up at the mysterious man who had interrupted her conversation with the elcor sitting next to her.

"Uh... should I...?"

She looked a little harder at the man in question, finding extremely black eyes looking at her. From what she could see in the lighting of the club, his skin... scales rather, now that she thought about it, were of a rather bright set of hues. She blinked, and then realization dawned on her.

"Oh, sorry," said the asari. "I'm not very used to this kind of thing."

"It's all right," replied the hooded figure understandingly. "I'm Feron, Dr. T'Soni."

"Please, call me Liara," replied the asari. "It's what Shepard would've done."

"Shepard," nodded Feron, crossing his arms as he looked at the asari. "You were looking for information on her body's whereabouts, correct?"

“Yes,” said Liara. “What do you know?”

Feron glanced around, leaning in closer to the former archaeologist. “I can’t tell you here,” he replied. “We should get outside.”

Liara looked up at her informant, nodding. “All right,” she said, looking at him. “Let’s leave this place, Feron. I hope we can find Shepard quickly...”

With this, both asari and drell walked out of the club, Liara following her hooded companion.

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The sudden change in music was rather jarring when Ethan explored much of the bar. It went from a smooth techno beat to a fast-paced, alien version of jazz in a matter of seconds. Not only that, but he saw the hooded figure sitting next to a blue-skinned woman clad in a skin-tight armor when he went downstairs. It wasn’t the most practical he’d ever seen, though. It was quite laughable, in fact. He also saw another one of those giant gorilla-looking things sitting next to them, much to his frustration.

He then watched as both the hooded figure and the blue-skinned woman stood up and walked towards the exit of the bar. With a curious expression on his face, Ethan followed suit as he dug out one of his Stealth Boys from his backpack and activated it, disappearing without a trace.

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“It’s not really safe, walking around asking questions on Omega--even if you’re from around here,” Ethan heard the hooded man speak as he followed them down the empty part of the station. Lucky for him, and thanks to his Stealth Boy, they were unaware that he was following them close by. “The information you’re looking for wasn’t easy to find--not even for me.”

“I guess not,” said the blue-skinned woman. “There are a lot of dangerous people here. But I can handle myself.”

“I hope you’re right,” admitted the hooded man.

No kidding, Ethan thought. It wasn’t like he needed some washed-up Brotherhood scribe to tell him that. This part of Omega was quite a sight to him. He could see the stars blinking out in space, along with an asteroid ring encircling the station and ships of all shapes and sizes causing

some traffic. He was in awe by the mere sight of the night-like sky out there, wondering if he where exactly he was right now. *I wonder if Omega is near Earth, or was it actually far away from that irradiated husk? Why are there humans aboard? I must be in the future or maybe an alternative universe. I dunno.* He shrugged off his thoughts and focused his attention on the hooded man and the blue-skinned woman.

Still under the effects of the Stealth Boy, he spotted something gleaming out in the distance. From what he saw, it somewhat resembled a scope of a weapon, likely a sniper rifle. He quickly realized they could be in danger of exposure from a sniper, if they are hostile to whoever was out there. He quietly approached them as he stood up from his crouching position and tapped the blue-skinned woman on the shoulder. It might have been against his better judgement, unfortunately.

Because then, the blue woman glowed a dark blue color. Ethan could barely say anything before suddenly, he found himself frozen in place by some... blue barrier. He was beginning to sense a theme here, and he didn't like where it was going, either.

"Who are you?" asked the blue-skinned woman. "And why are you following us?"

"Can't...talk clearly....Just...remove...that damn....barrier....and I'll...tell you..." Ethan barked as the stealth field wore out, much to his despair. *How the hell did she do that?!*

The blue woman stared at him for a second or two more, the hooded figure nodding slightly. At a glance, his skin...no, scales, actually, were a set of hues with various colors. He couldn't see much more of his face due to the low lighting of this place. "We may be able to get information out of him. If he works for the Shadow Broker..."

"That *is* a good point," mentioned the blue-skinned woman. She finally dissipated the stasis field, leaving Ethan to breathe freely again.

"Good god!" Ethan gasped for breath. "What the hell was that?!"

The hooded figure blinked. "That seems like something odd to know nothing about..." he mentioned, his voice betraying his mild uncertainty.

"Wait a minute, was that dark energy you just manipulate?" Ethan asked, blinking in confusion.

The two strangers both did a double take. "Are you... Yes, that was dark energy," said the woman. "How do you not know what biotics are?"

“It’s just that...ugh, nevermind,” Ethan sighed as he shook his head. “Look, I’m not here to kill you, alright? If I were working for this Shadow Broker, I would’ve killed you at the nightclub.”

The blue-skinned woman frowned. "So why were you following us?"

“Because I saw your hooded friend here going into the nightclub,” Ethan explained. “But on the way, I noticed someone following you out in the distance. So, since I am a good Samaritan, I decided to warn you. There’s also something involving this Shadow Broker. Great name for someone who does honest business, if you ask me.”

"So your first instinct upon saying this to yourself was to follow said 'hooded friend' so you could ask him information he probably wouldn't tell you anyway?" asked the hooded man incredulously.

“Um...basically, yeah,” Ethan shrugged. Boy, did he felt like an idiot right there.

The other two seemed to agree with this sentiment, for the blue-skinned woman promptly facepalmed. This left the hooded figure to shake his head in dismay. "If not for the fact that Omega has only one rule, I would say that you broke a rule of this place."

“Great. What rule did I break?” Ethan asked, expecting for the worse.

"Don't fuck with Aria."

“You’re joking, right?” Ethan asked nervously, raising an eyebrow.

"And don't worry, you didn't break it," the hooded man spoke with reassurance.

“Oh, thank god,” Ethan sighed with a relieved look on his face. “All I know about Aria that she runs Omega.”

"Yeah, I haven't been here that long, and I knew some of that," mentioned the blue-skinned woman.

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked the hooded figure. "I'm beginning to think you are mentally unstable.”

“Mentally unstable? Yeah, I get that a lot,” Ethan replied. “Bet you would’ve call me crazy when

I provoked that one krogan. If you ask me how I backed him down, you just have to know where to look for information.”

The blue woman nodded. "Yeah, I would have," she mentioned. "I... I'm not even sure why we're having this conversation anymore."

"Neither am I," said the hooded man.

“Because we’re out giving presents to little children, like Santa Claus, while we expose ourselves to snipers with open arms,” Ethan answered sardonically. “But we’re obviously in danger, of course. We should go someplace safe and talk about whatever it is you’re planning on doing. But given the nature of things, I don’t think anywhere could be safe on this station.”

The hooded man seemed to frown. "We are aware of how dangerous Omega can be," he replied. "But how do we know we can trust you? You're a random man asking questions. For all we know, you could be working for someone else."

“I don’t,” Ethan replied bluntly, “and I’m a courier.”

The blue-skinned woman gave Ethan a very perplexed look. "Courier?" she asked. The woman then turned to her hooded companion. "I... I don't know what that is. Is that something humans do?"

"No, I've never heard of a courier either," added the hooded man.

"How strange..." said the woman, glancing to Ethan. "What...*is* a courier?"

Ethan sighed irritably. “Postman, mailman, delivery boy, messenger...” he explained. “A courier is someone who delivers mail and packages, basically. And I’m armed.” He pointed at his M1 Garand, which was hanging over his back. “Anyway, I think we’re wasting time here. Maybe I can help.”

"You don't even know what we're trying to do, and you want to help?" asked the hooded man.

"Well, he does have a gun," mentioned the blue-skinned woman.

"Not the point," replied the hooded man. "We don't even--"

Suddenly, a squad of soldiers leaped out of the shadows. Humans, those four-eyed,

brown-skinned things, the metallic-plated things, and a few krogan. The armors they were wearing resembled the Green Lantern Corps uniforms, just like from these Pre-War superhero comics he had read. Except that the colors were blue and white, not green and black. One of the soldiers grabbed the blue-skinned woman from behind as Ethan and the hooded man found themselves surrounded.

In response, Ethan quickly pulled out his M1 Garand, triggered the safety off, and exhaled as he carefully aimed his rifle at the four-eyed soldier behind him. He activated the V.A.T.S. program from his Pip-boy and fired a few shots, but it had no effect on the soldier. He noticed there was a blur on the soldier when the bullets just bounced right off him. Realizing they have shields of some sort, Ethan tackled the four-eyed thing against the wall. He then pulled out his bowie and stabbed him in the throat. Crimson blood flowed down from the wound as the four-eyed soldier gargled in pain. Suddenly, the soldier exploded into a pile of gory paste.

That, thankfully, provided Ethan with a very good distraction. Grabbing the soldier's pistol, he fired at one of the other soldiers as quickly as he could.

He heard some gunshots go off, and then he turned to look as the hooded man drew a pistol. With good precision, the hooded man fired a shot at the thing that had taken the blue-skinned woman hostage. After a few shots, the hostage-taker went down. The blue-skinned woman shook free soon after, and then she glowed blue as she tossed another armored soldier away.

He watched as the hooded man and the blue-skinned woman ran towards him.

"Is that all?" Ethan asked. "Seems like whatever package you have or were getting is--"

"We weren't getting a package," replied the hooded man as he turned and fired a shot at another soldier that was kind of behind them now. "Long story."

"Then tell me the short version," said Ethan as he picked up the nearest rifle and fired at yet another soldier that popped out of cover and exploded into a fine, red mist.

The blue-skinned woman hid behind a pillar, still a little shocked that some of the people that Ethan was shooting at just... exploded. For no reason. "We're looking for someone's body," said the woman. "Feron is my contact." She indicated the hooded man.

The hooded man then frowned at this. "Liara, are you sure it's a--?"

"He's gotten into a firefight on our side right now, it's as good a time as any," said the

blue-skinned woman in reply. "We're looking for the body of Commander Shepard. Feron here had some information."

"Who's Commander Shepard?" Ethan asked as he ducked behind cover and threw a grenade at the next squad of soldiers, which it exploded with blood and body parts flying everywhere. "Oh, *that's* your name? Name's Ethan Sunderland, by the way, but most people call me the Courier for obvious reasons!"

Of course, he realized almost instantly that he had wasted his breath on the two as they both gave him incredulous looks. "You..." asked Feron uselessly.

"How do you not know who Shepard is?" asked Liara.

"You'd think that you would know who Shepard was, being human and all," said Feron.

"Long story short," Ethan replied as he peaked from behind a futuristic trash bin, only to find many more coming in their direction, "let's just say that I'm not *really* from around here."

"We know many people who are not from here," added Feron, shooting at another merc.

"Take a long, good look at my Pip-Boy," Ethan spoke irritably as he showed his left arm, which had his Pip-Boy strapped on it. "Do I look *like* I'm from around here?"

A bullet whizzed by soon after, causing Feron to glare at Ethan. "Save the showing us your arm for after the battle," he said. "We can't look at it when we're trying to make sure we're not dead."

"Right," Ethan sighed as he continued firing at the mercs. No matter how many they killed, another two took his place. They will become quickly overwhelmed if they don't think of something.

Liara leaned out of cover, gathering much of the blue energy in her hands. Within a second or two, she launched the ball of energy at the mercs in question, and it stood suspended there. Soon after, some of the mercs began flying around the object as if they were attached to a string in the ceiling. The mercs cried in shock as they got lifted.

This, of course, was the perfect opportunity for Feron to redirect his pistol fire at some of the floating mercs. Ethan ducked as one of the mercs flew over him. He fired at the other floating mercs, with Liara shooting another merc that came running on the scene.

Then, the firing ceased as one of the krogans chuckled darkly as he pulled out a grenade launcher. “Keep those biotics in check,” the krogan shouted as he hefted his grenade launcher at them, “or all of you will be blown to nothing but smears on the wall!”

“Better be a good shot and a sharped charge, or else you’ll blow all of us up and this part of the station!” Ethan shouted behind cover.

Fortunately, Liara had leaned out and used one last biotic attack. It was the same one that Ethan realized had been used on him only minutes earlier.

Then, without warning, one of the mercs simply fell down to the ground with a bloody hole through his head. “Sniper!” one of the mercs cried out in fear as he pulled out his rifle, but another shot went through his head. One by one, the others followed. This could be the opportunity for them to escape.

And indeed, the other two capitalized on it. Liara ran first, tossing one more merc. Feron dashed away soon after, grabbing Ethan’s arm before following the asari. Neither looked back as they ran, and Ethan decided not to look back either.

“Wait, where are we going?” Ethan asked as they ran down the empty hallway. “I can look up a good spot on my Pip-Boy!”

As soon as they had rounded a corner, Feron paused. After running a few steps, Liara turned and realized the other two had paused. “What?” asked Feron.

Ethan looked the map on his Pip-Boy, with Feron looking over his shoulder. From the readout, much of the place was detailed.

“What... what *is* that?” asked the hooded man uncertainly.

“I must admit, I have never quite seen anything like it,” admitted Liara.

“Okay, let’s see here...” Ethan replied as he zoomed in on one part of the map. “What about this spot?” he asked as he brought the cursor to a certain location.

Feron only looked at Ethan. He shook his head after a second or two. “That puts us in the middle of the markets,” he said. “It’s a public place, which is bad for us. However, the Blue Suns would not think to attack us there.” He then pointed at the Pip-Boy. “But for the record, you still haven’t answered the question.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ethan replied, still looking at his Pip-Boy. “This here is a Pip-Boy 3000. It has a Geiger counter, radio, it can monitor my health, knows the date and the time, store data, plays some music, and I can also use the screen like a flashlight, among other things,” he explained as he showed his Pip-Boy to Feron and Liara.

Both Feron and Liara stood stock-still as Ethan mentioned this. “Why would you need a Geiger counter?” she asked.

“So it can tell me how much radiation I contain. You’re not going to believe how much radiation you can find on Earth,” the Courier answered.

Feron only gave him a confused glance. “Earth has large levels of radiation?” he asked. “I hear the slums of most cities are bad, but I did not think the Systems Alliance was dealing with enough radiation to necessitate implementing a Geiger counter into that Pip-Boy contraption of yours.”

"Systems Alliance? What are you talking about?" Ethan asked, giving Feron a confused look. "Oh, so you didn't know anything about RobCo Industries. They're the ones that manufactured much of the technology nearly three centuries ago, including this Pip-Boy."

This left his company even more confused. "RobCo?" asked Liara. "I've never heard of..." Her frown only intensified. "Wait, when did humanity first develop the nuclear bomb?"

"Uh..." Ethan answered, thinking back. "It was invented around 1945, near the end of World War II. It was developed by the United States to win the war in the Pacific against the Japanese. Why do you--" He widened his eyes in surprise. "Oh, no. What do you know about the Great War? Back in 2077 with the Americans against the Chinese?"

Liara glanced to Feron, the two exchanging now thoroughly confounded looks as they turned their attention back to Ethan. "There was a war between America and China a little over a century ago?" asked Liara. "That... I don't know what to..."

"Little over a century ago?" Ethan snapped as he fiercely shook his head. "I--you don't know--great, you didn't know about the war as well. What about the NCR, the Brotherhood of Steel, or, hell, even the legend of the Vault Dweller?"

Now Liara and Feron were both staring at him like he was fucking crazy. Liara was slack jawed, but the hooded figure frowned at this. There was complete silence between the three for a few

seconds, before Feron nodded.

"Off the top of your head, what year is it, and where do you think we are?" he asked.

"The date's July 13, 2283, last time I've checked," Ethan answered. "And according to my Pip-Boy, we're on Omega." There was a wary silence between them.

Liara glanced down at the ground for a second. "I... truly don't know how to respond to this," she stated.

"Ethan... the year is twenty-one eighty-three," replied Feron. "And Omega is many thousands of light years away from Earth."

He proved me right. I'm about a century off, I'm far away from Earth, and they don't have a clue what I'm talking about... Ethan thought, pinching the bridge of his nose as he shook his head. *Shit, how can I convince them that I'm not insane? Well, I've been called that a lot, but still. This might have confirmed that I'm in another universe...* Then, he pulled out his broken Transportalponder from his backpack and showed it to Liara and Feron. "See here?" he asked. "This thing brought me here."

Liara stepped forward, looking at the device in question. "What is that?" she asked. "I... I don't think I've ever seen anything like it before..."

"It's a Transportalponder, made from Big Mountain," Ethan explained verily. "Originally, this thing was designed to transport me to Big Mountain from the Mojave and vice versa. I, uh...started an experiment to improve this thing's efficiency, but somehow, things had gone awry. And now, I'm here on this goddamn space station. I think I needed some scrap material to fix it...Um, is there any scrap I could find? Maybe any type of electronics would do? Or a gun?"

Liara and Feron glanced at each other. "By the Goddess..." muttered Liara. She turned to Ethan before looking back to Feron. "Feron, do you think...?"

"I... don't know," said the hooded man. "But whatever happened... It..."

Liara shook her head. "Do you... Assuming this Transportalponder works as you say it does, do you think maybe you jumped into an alternate timeline of some sort?"

Feron turned to Liara. "You do realize that is a very big assumption you just made, right?" he asked.

“Apart from Ethan being insane, it’s the only explanation I can come up with.” The woman gestured to Ethan. “What does your Pip-Boy say about the Protheans?”

“Protheans? No, I don’t have that,” Ethan answered. “I don’t even know *what* they are!”

Liara nodded. “And the turians?” she asked.

“Those bird-raptor-like things? That’s what they’re called?”

The woman frowned. “So no, then,” she said. “All right... Mass relays?”

“Hm...” Ethan responded as he looked through the data on his Pip-Boy. “Nope, my Pip-Boy didn’t catch that. It can only retrieve notes, holotapes, data from terminals, and--”

“Then that proves it,” said Liara, raising an index finger after looking at the Pip-Boy to be sure. “I... don’t know how it happened, but... you aren’t in your home timeline anymore.”

“This... I don’t know what to make of this...” said Feron.

“That’s enough,” an unknown voice, presumably female, spoke from behind them.

“Wha--?” asked Liara, turning to the voice. “Who’s there?”

“An ally,” a black-haired woman in a black and white uniform replied as she approached the trio with two armored bodyguards behind her. It was hard for Ethan to tell if she was actually beautiful or just that uncanny. “Relax, asari. We’re working towards the same goal. Finding Commander Shepard.”

“Uh, hello? Could someone *please* tell this clueless human here who Commander Shepard is?” Ethan asked, indicating himself. “Or maybe, everything.”

As the woman and her bodyguards gave him a very confused look, Liara sighed. “It’s... a very long story,” she said. “And we only just figured it out.” The asari turned towards Ethan. “I’ll explain in full later, but Commander Shepard... None of us would be here if she hadn’t stopped an invasion at the Citadel.”

“Oh, uh, right, right...” Ethan replied nervously as he rubbed the back of his neck, getting his act together. “I heard that she got killed in action not too long ago. Terrible loss, if you ask me,” he

said, trying his best to sound convincing.

“Yes, that sounds about right,” said the black-haired woman. “This was... not what we expected to find, I must admit.”

Liara glanced to Ethan and Feron, right as Feron removed his hood. Then, Ethan saw what looked like a humanoid lizard man of some sort. It felt like he was the odd one out. He didn’t mind, though. But at least he doesn’t look like a Mirelurk, though Mirelurks are more amphibian in that case.

“I wasn’t expecting to end the day like this either,” admitted Liara. “Who are you, and what do want?”

“I,” said the black-haired woman, “am Miranda Lawson. And I’m here to take you to my boss.”

“That was quick,” Ethan chuckled. “First, you told us your name, and then you wanted us to go with you. Why is that?”

“He is after the same thing all of you are,” said Miranda. “He wishes to find Shepard as well, and he may have some intel in regards to that.”

Feron glanced to Liara. “I don’t trust this set-up,” he said. “Cerberus is expressly pro-human. They’re only interested in Shepard because she was human.”

“And what does that matter?” asked the asari. “We have the same goals. Let me meet with her boss.”

“Very well then,” said Miranda, brushing some strands of hair out of her face. “Follow me.”

The woman set off soon after, with Liara following along quickly. Feron hung back slightly, and Ethan caught up with him shortly after.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” stated the lizard-man.

“Well, I’ve got myself into an alternative universe, provoked a krogan, got into a gunfight with you and Liara, and now we’re working together with a human supremacist group named after a particular three-headed dog in ancient mythology to find a corpse of a well-known hero,” Ethan replied sarcastically, taking a deep breath. “Of *course* you have a bad feeling about this.”

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It felt like an eternity when Liara was in the room talking to the Illusive Man, the leader of the organization Cerberus. Neither Feron nor Ethan spoke, the both of them preferring to wait until Liara stepped out. It was taking longer than they hoped.

So when the blue-skinned woman finally stepped out Ethan was *more* than relieved to see she was all right.

“So, how did it go?” he asked as he was repairing his rifle. He had also tried to repair his Transportalponder as well, but much to his chagrin, he didn’t have enough materials nor the time to finish it.

“It went... better than I expected,” replied Liara. “I don’t know what just happened, but... I think we might have intel about Shepard’s location.”

“That’s good,” said Feron. “But... We still have to wonder what... Ethan, was it? What Ethan will do?”

“Well, since I’ve somehow dragged myself into this mess and the fact that I’m a courier...” Ethan answered as he took apart a pistol and studied the internal parts and to see how it works. The internal parts of the pistol looked rather strange to him. He couldn’t help himself but think it like it resembled a cross between a recharger pistol and a ballistic gun, like his M1911, along with other parts that appeared to be a computer system. With this in mind, he assembled it back together in a matter of seconds, like it was before. “I might as well tag along.”

Feron rose an eye ridge at Ethan’s repair skills before nodding. “I have no objections,” he replied. “He has seen quite a bit more than most people.”

“Yes, of course,” continued Liara with a nod. “But... There’s the issue that he jumped to an alternate timeline. That too.”

Feron frowned at this. “You still believe that?” asked the lizard man.

“Hey, would I really lie to you?” Ethan asked, still repairing his equipment. “And also, I think these weapons are a lot like my guns. Kinetic, right?”

“At this point... I don’t really know,” admitted Feron. “And yes, weapons in this year are kinetic. I... guess you don’t know any alien species, apart from the krogan.”

“I backed down a krogan by putting my bowie knife *right* at the edge of his shell,” Ethan answered as he imitating a strike with a knife. “Also, if these weapons are kinetic, then how come my old weapons wouldn’t work against these these shields? Is it about the velocity of the bullet? The mass? Or maybe the material of the bullet?”

“I imagine so,” says Liara. “Though... I didn’t think you could intimidate a krogan with a knife. But... I guess we’ll have to get you used to this galaxy.”

“While finding the body of Commander Shepard,” added Feron.

“Yeah, I was about to ask about that, among other things,” Ethan replied as he stood up. “Who is she? All I know that she saved everyone in the...Milky Way galaxy from certain doom.”

“That’s... the short version,” replied Liara. “The long version... she stopped an invasion of the center of all galactic life almost single-handedly. She had been chasing... a really powerful soldier around. He was leading the invasion force. And she... stopped him.” Liara got all... misty-eyed? “I was part of her ground team...”

“She’s not just your commander, she’s also your friend as well, ” Ethan spoke sympathetically. “I...” he hesitated, thinking of what to say. “...know what it’s like, having something taken from you.”

Liara nodded somberly. “She was a friend to everyone she knew,” she replied. “And an extraordinary woman.”

“And now we are finding her corpse,” Feron replied in a deadpan tone.

“For the funeral, of course,” Ethan sighed, glancing at Feron, then looked at Liara again. “Anyway, would you like a hug? I like hugs.”

“A... a hug?” Liara blushed slightly at this. “Uh...” She let out a sigh. “I... guess. I... haven’t accepted her death yet.”

Ethan grinned, shrugging. “It might as well cheer you up.”

The human then pulled Liara into a rather gentle hug. Ethan had to admit, it actually felt rather nice to get a hug from someone else. Yeah, he felt kind of like he belonged somewhere for the first time since he came here. For once, there was a group of people who did *not* want him dead.

That was really nice.

“Begin again, but know when to let go,” Ethan whispered in what he assumed would be the sides of her head where her ears would have been, if she actually *had* any.

The woman said nothing, even as they parted. She looked up to the human as Feron stood off the side.

“We’ll see,” she said. “There is an exchange taking place with her body sometime soon. We need to figure out where it’s taking place.”

Feron nodded. “We can ask Aria T’Loak,” said the lizard man. “Come on. I don’t think she has left Afterlife since we left.” He looked to Ethan. “And while we are on the way, we get him up to speed on as much as possible.”

“Oh, boy,” Ethan sighed. “I wonder what she has to say about the trouble I’ve caused? Hope I didn’t piss her off. Also, think there’s enough time to gear up and get into one of these armored suits?” He turned his head to his left.

Liara glanced to the side to see what Ethan was pointing at. “I... think so,” she said. “Why?”

“Think they can allow me to change in that armor?” Ethan asked, looking at a red-and-grey armor.

Feron shrugged. “I think so,” he said. “We’ll wait for you here.” As Ethan turned to grab the suit of armor, he was stopped in his tracks by one final set of words from the lizard man.

“Oh, and Mr. Sunderland? Good to have you with us.”

Ethan smiled. “Thanks,” he replied. “I am, after all, one of the best couriers out there, long as the package’s not too big and it doesn’t involve slavery, smuggling drugs, human trafficking, and other shady dealings. Or pets and children.” He entered the next room and started changing.

Chapter 2: The Ripple Effect

Ethan had to admit, the armor he was surprisingly lighter than he would have imagined. However, he was more concerned about getting nauseated in the skycar they were in than thinking about how the armor reminded him of the Stealth Suit from Big Mountain and the training he had received for wearing Power Armor, though he realized that he missed that suit's voice. He also wished that he had ED-E with him. He wondered how that beaten-up flying robot was doing, now that he was thinking about it, since he was now in an alternate universe.

He read through the datapad he was given as he was taught much about the galaxy at large from Liara and Feron. The Reapers intending to wipe out the galaxy of all organic life, Saren, the former Spectre, aiding them, the various races such as the turians, salarians, asari, ex cetera. The ancient Protheans, and Commander Shepard becoming the first human Spectre, the Citadel Council, and, well, the Spectres themselves, among other things. Ethan had also learned quite a bit about much of the technology and how they work, such as the omni-tool--which are the orange lights that were on people's wrists--and the mass relays.

Questions were asked and answered, which led to some interesting results. Tales were delivered between them. Though Ethan was careful about not revealing anything concerning his real past. He explained to Miranda that he came from a backwater colony and went to Omega to escape from the slavers. After that, he made some sarcastic comments, which resulted in a few groans from the others, mainly Miranda.

Finally, they landed at the docking bay, near the nightclub. The transport doors opened, and the three stepped out. Miranda gave them barely any acknowledgement before the three of them moved out.

"Mr. Sunderland, are you listening?"

"Uh, yeah," Ethan answered, shaking his head as they stood by the skycar. "Just thinking about what we've talked about, that's all." He then checked his weapons, one of which was something called a Mattock. It looked rather old and a little heavy, but he carried guns like this before. Also, it was a semi-automatic rifle, much like his M1 Garand.

Feron nodded. "I imagine this is all a lot to take in," he mentioned.

"Like a brain being overloaded with all that stuff cramming into my head, that's for sure," Ethan replied sarcastically as he checked his Pip-Boy. "Anyway, so this is where we start looking?" He then looked at the nightclub ahead.

“Well, it’s where Aria’s throne is, so yes,” said Liara, crossing her arms. “It won’t be easy getting an audience with her, though... from what I hear she never lets anyone get close...”

“Allow me to take care of that,” said Feron as he walked in. “The guards let you through if you have enough credits, usually.”

Something doesn’t seem right here. “Say, Feron, mind if I ask you something?” Ethan asked as they walked down the hallway.

The drell turned to Ethan. “What is it?” he asked.

“How do you know so much about the Shadow Broker?” Ethan asked, suspicious. “It sounds to me like it’s not exactly common knowledge, even for an information broker like you.”

If Feron was caught off guard by the question, he did a good job of hiding it. “My job is as an information broker, yes,” replied Feron. “I should know *something* about the best broker in the galaxy, no? I may also know one of his operatives. They don’t talk, but I know enough.”

“We’ll have to take Feron’s word for it,” said Liara. “This is the closest I’ve come to finding Shepard’s body... I’m not letting it slip away now.”

As they entered the bar, they overheard an argument nearby.

“Going somewhere, Hando Due?”

“Hello, Greedro. What brings you here to Omega?”

They turned their attention to a four-eyed being and another one of those metallic-planted things sitting at a nearby table. Ethan assumed that they were what an atypical batarian and turian looked like, though that batarian had this unusual green tone for his skin.

“It’s about the money isn’t it?” the turian, Hando Due, asked. “Tell him I got the money.”

“It’s too late for you, Hando!” the batarian, Greedro, answered, pointing his pistol at the turian. “You should’ve paid him when you had the chance. I bet he’ll put a price on your head so large, every bounty hunter in the galaxy will be looking for you. Lucky for me, I found you first.”

“Yeah, but this time, I got the money,” Hando replied, gesturing with his talons.

“If you give it to me, I might forget I found you.” Feron and Liara both gave very confused looks to their surroundings, with Ethan facepalming in response to this scene.

“I don’t have it with me,” the guard replied as he slowly went for his pistol. “Tell him--”

“He’s through with the likes of you,” the batarian chuckled. “He has no use for bodyguards who screws up on the job.”

“Even I get boarded sometimes,” the turian guard replied angrily. “Do you think I had a choice?”

“You can tell that to him,” Greedro smiled smugly. “At best, he may apply red sand directly to your eyes. Or rip out your platings.”

“Over my dead body!”

“That’s the idea,” the batarian chuckled, feeling confident. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“Yeah, I bet you have,” the turian spoke. He raised his pistol and fired at the batarian, leaving behind a bloody hole through his chest. Greedro’s body slumped down on the table.

Hando stood up as he put away his pistol. He then turned his attention to Ethan and the others.

“Sorry about the mess,” he sighed as he turned to see them. It would’ve made Ethan’s life complete if that turian gave a coin of some sort to the bartender.

“That’s, uh...all right.”

“Say,” Hando replied as he turned his attention to the human, “aren’t you the human who has been causing all that trouble?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ethan answered, shrugging. “Why do you ask?”

“Because Aria wanted to see you,” the turian answered. “She doesn’t like it when you keep her waiting. So yeah. Follow me.”

The turian walked away, the three following suit. After a few seconds, Liara turned to Ethan.

“What in the name of the Goddess just *happened*? That was... I cannot even begin to talk about

how *strange* that was...”

“Yeah, but don’t bother asking,” Ethan replied awkwardly as he bit his lip.

“Do things like this happen around you a lot?” asked Feron.

“All the time, but I tend to take it in stride. You’ll get used to it.”

Feron glanced to the side. “I see...” he said nervously.

“I... don’t have anything to say to that,” admitted Liara. “Well, except that we got our audience with Aria T’Loak.”

“Yes, that was much easier to attain,” mentioned Feron as they began ascending a staircase up to a private box. “Well... let’s see what she wants first.”

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As they reached upstairs, they saw a purple-skinned asari sitting down on a couch across from them as she looked down at the bar, with the surrounding guards watching their every move.

“Alright, boss. Here he is, like you requested,” Hando spoke as he approached the asari.

“Good,” said the asari as she sat up. Her attention turned to the newcomers. “That’s close enough. Scan them for weapons.”

A batarian soldier nodded and approached Ethan. “Stand still,” he said as he activated his omni-tool and scanned Ethan.

“FYI, there’s a gun right *here*,” Ethan spoke as he showed his pistol to the batarian. “Either you’re blind or you’re not doing a very good job looking for weapons.”

“Maybe,” commented the purple-skinned asari with a chuckle. “But this is standard procedure. Nobody gets close until they have that scan.”

“Alright,” Ethan replied as he put his pistol away. “But if I wanted to kill you, I would’ve done so in the first place.”

The asari smirked. “That’s what I thought,” she said.

A beep sounded from the batarian's omni-tool. "He's clean," declared the batarian. "No funny business."

Ethan nodded. Before he could say anything, though, Feron stepped forward.

"We need information," said the drell quickly.

"One thing at a time," replied the strange asari coolly. "First, I need to have a talk with your friend here." With this, she stood up. "Do you know who I am?"

Ethan had a feeling that she probably knew he was not from this universe, and he didn't like where it was going. "You must be Aria, the ruler of Omega," Ethan answered, playing along. "Or 'Queen,' if I'm feeling a bit dramatic." He gestured with his fingers, putting the emphasis on the word 'queen'.

"I guess you're feeling middling today," replied Aria. "I figure you already know that the only rule of this place is not to fuck with me. This... is complicated by a few things..."

And to Ethan's lack of surprise, one of the guards lifted his omni-tool and broadcasted a surveillance video.

In the video, the alleyway was empty, save for a stray vorcha moving around in a garbage can, searching for supplies. Then, there was a flash of light, followed by the screen buzzing out for a few seconds before it went back to normal. This time, he saw himself lying on his back for a few minutes before regaining consciousness.

Don't know if I can talk my way out of this one, Ethan thought as he rubbed his chin thoroughly.

"When I had my tech specialist check it over, he told me that the camera was interrupted by what he called an abnormality. Obviously, this means you are very dangerous... This is... rather sensitive," said Aria. "And if there's one thing I dislike more than people fucking with me, it's an anomaly that shows up with no explanation that can disrupt the power balance." She chuckled then, rather darkly. "But, you lucked out... We may be able to come to an arrangement."

"What kind of an arrangement?" Ethan asked, cautious.

"Well, an arrangement that would benefit both sides," she replied. "From the way you looked, I was expecting someone had left you for dead. I can offer you protection, on the condition that

you work as a bodyguard of mine for a year.”

“On two conditions for my part,” Ethan replied as he pointed his finger upward. “One, we need information for the whereabouts of Commander Shepard’s body and two, I wouldn’t come off as lightly compared to your average bodyguard. I would like a large sum if I wanted to be your bodyguard. Better yet, I’m a courier.”

“Ethan, we have a job to do,” Feron reminded him.

“Conditions for conditions?” asked Aria. “I can just hand the footage I found to whoever wants you dead and get rid of that problem.”

“Yeah, I’ve got people who want me dead, but it’ll be kinda tough for them to find me when they’re... too far away to make it over here to kill me,” replied Ethan.

“I’m giving you a chance here,” said Aria, crossing her arms. “My guards saw what you did to that krogan earlier. I didn’t think any humans knew about that head-crest, so you know your way around a dangerous situation. You can take my offer without your conditions or be left to Omega.”

“But the exchange--!” said Feron.

“The Shadow Broker made sure I knew about the exchange happening with Shepard’s body,” she said. “He gave me full details.”

Liara stepped forward then. “So you know that the Collectors are receiving Shepard’s body?” she asked.

This caused Aria to blink. “The Collectors?” she asked.

Wait a minute... “Huh. Thought you knew everything that happened on Omega--”

“Except when relevant parties leave out information,” she said, frowning. “This complicates things in ways I don’t like...” She leaned forward, looking at the three people before her. “You said you needed the information?”

“Yes,” replied Feron. “This is quite an urgent matter.”

Aria smiled. “I’ll tell you what, then,” she replied. “I don’t like it when certain people leave out

certain details about exchanges on my rock. So, thanks to your friend bringing this to my attention, I think I will accept your conditions.”

About to point that out, but you beat me to it. Thanks, Aria. “Alright, then,” said Ethan. “But first, I need to finish my other job, which is getting Shepard’s body back.”

“I suppose that can be arranged,” said Aria. “But after this job, you are coming straight back to Omega. Is this clear?”

“Yes, ma’am. Loud and clear,” Ethan replied flippantly. “So, you’re going to give us the information on Commander Shepard’s whereabouts?”

Aria nodded. “The exchange is taking place in the lower levels,” she said. “It is in an old mining plant pretty far from here.” She keyed a few things on her omni-tool. “This is where it’s taking place.”

Miraculously, Ethan’s Pip-Boy made a ‘ping’ sound. “What the...?” he mumbled to himself as he looked at the journal on his Pip-Boy. From the journal, it told him what Aria just said. Then, he pressed a button as the screen switched tabs. On the map, the marker pointed out to the entrance to the lower levels of Omega. He assumed that it was where the mining plant was at. They had a bit of a long ways ahead of them. Ethan knew that his Pip-Boy could retrieve data from various sources, such as wirelessly connecting to a terminal. But from something that was probably more advanced than the Pip-Boy, like an omni-tool? He wasn’t expecting that. *That’s odd. Was her omni-tool working under the same frequency as my Pip-Boy?* “Huh, thanks,” he said as he glanced at Liara and Feron. “Guess we’ll be on our way, then.”

Aria simply looked at Ethan. “If you walk out after this job, I will find ways to hunt you down, Mr....”

“The name’s E--” Ethan answered, but not before stopping himself, hesitating on whether he should tell his real or not with the possibility of a real and dangerous, yet unlikely, enemy. It would better be safe than sorry. “Courier. You may call me the Courier.”

The asari nodded. “Just get your job done.”

And with that, Ethan and the others walked down the stairs and sauntered past the crowd at the bar.

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“I’m still confused. Why take the job anyway?”

“It’s better off for me to accept the deal than to take them all on by myself, even though I could. And it would make my life here easier if I have allies here instead of enemies. Besides, it’s good to be paid.”

“I must ask though; you do realize she is ruthless, right?”

“I know her type, Feron; I’ve done my share of doing these kind of things.”

Feron simply shook his head, Liara walking along as they walked away from the cab they had just exited. There stood the mining plant, with a Blue Suns ship seemingly parked a short distance away. They could not see any mercs outside, however, so they figured the exchange was happening inside the plant.

Liara looked at the plant nervously. “It’s so strange to think that Shepard is in there,” she said warily. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“We have nothing else to go on,” said Feron. “This is the closest anyone has come to finding Shepard.”

Liara nodded. “You’re right,” said the asari. “We can’t back out now.” She took a deep breath. “Come on. Let’s go...”

The Courier thought briefly on how they would get into the building. After a second of thought, he pulled out two of his spare Stealth Boys. He then handed them both to Liara and Feron, nodding at the both of them.

“These are Stealth Boys. Just activate them like this,” he said as he pressed the button on his. He vanished from sight immediately, leaving both the drell and the asari to stand there.

Liara was very confused by this development. “Uh... what did that thing just do?” she asked tentatively.

Feron simply glanced at Liara. “I think... it made him invisible...”

The asari blinked uncertainly at this. “This RobCo company must have done some rather strange research...”

“Sure they do. If you think these Stealth Boys are pretty weird, then wait till you read though some of the stuff on my Pip-Boy. You’re not going to believe how fucked up they can be,” Ethan replied from his spot.

Liara glanced at the Stealth Boy warily before sighing. “Just so you know, I have a bad feeling about this...”

Neither Ethan nor Feron said anything, though, for then Liara pressed the button of her Stealth Boy. As she vanished into thin air, Feron glanced at the spot with an arched eye ridge. Finally, he pressed the button, and then all three of them approached the plant.

Ethan crouched down and went on ahead, with Liara and Feron following suit. The party of three slipped by inside undetected, and began navigating their way through a corridor that seemed fashioned out of pipes. With that in mind, Feron climbed on a series of pipes until he reached the catwalk, where he motioned to Ethan and Liara. The human and the asari followed rather closely behind.

The three then walked on, noting how little security there was. They did see the occasional Blue Suns merc, but the Stealth Boys made sure they went undetected. And so, they moved about.

Eventually they made it to a window where they noticed they could get a good vantage point into a hangar. Conveniently, there were boxes scattered around the platform in question which could serve as cover. Ethan nodded, indicating the window.

The other two nodded silently, seeking a way to the platform in question. After a second or two, Feron noticed that there was some doorway leading right there.

“Are you sure that’s going to work?” asked Liara as she noticed a Blue Suns merc patrol by.

“With the Stealth Boys, I think so,” Feron whispered back.

“Yeah, but we better hurry. These things only last about an hour.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure we’re fast.” Feron took a huge step over the catwalk at this, preparing to drop down. “Hope you can land quietly.”

With this, the drell dropped down, landing silently despite sporting a full trenchcoat. Liara followed suit soon after, with her fall being a little clumsier. Fortunately, she had landed close to

a wall, and so she grabbed a hold of it to steady herself.

The asari looked up at Ethan as he prepared to jump, then glanced back at the human she had met. Tentatively, she raised her hands up, surprised to find that the Stealth Boy had cancelled out the effects of biotics on her own body. With this in mind, she gently lowered what she approximated to be Ethan down to the ground, and upon noticing a pair of footprints form in the ground, Liara knew she had been successful.

The Blue Suns merc passed without incident. As soon as he was out of sight, Feron opened the door to the platform in question, and the three of them filed in. Right as they filed in, they quickly hid behind the boxes.

There, they saw a huge group of Blue Suns mercs standing around a box that looked like a coffin. Ethan surmised that it must have been where Shepard's body was. It was a bit close to a Blue Suns vessel, almost too close for Ethan's comfort. Soon after they had arrived, a strange ship flew into the hangar.

It landed there soon after. However, they looked on as an absolutely huge man with horns walked out of the ship. Everything about him was imposing, even from the distance the three of them were watching from. Ethan assumed this was what an atypical salarian looked like, as he was quite large where he had heard they were supposed to look much more fragile. He was wielding what looked like a grenade launcher, and he sauntered over to the Blue Suns mercs.

Feron tensed instantly, black eyes betraying the slightest hint of fear as he took a calming breath.

"Tazzik..." he muttered.

"That guy?" Ethan whispered as he looked at the large salarian walking to a coffin-like container. "Jesus, they sure grow him large in their neighborhood, don't they?"

Feron shook his head, ignoring Ethan's attempt at humor. "This just went from bad to worse..."

"Feron?" asked Liara nervously.

The drell looked to the huge salarian. "That is the Shadow Broker's one and only hitman," he stated. "He never gets called in unless the Broker *really* wants results. He gets them almost all the time." He inhaled deeply to settle his nerves. "This may be more serious than we could have anticipated..."

“Heh, compared to some of the things I’ve fought, this guy’s small-time,” Ethan smirked as he glanced at the crates near the ship and looked to his right to see an unmanned turret. “This could give out a nasty surprise. Liara, think you could use your biotics to lift these crates? From what it looks like, they’re explosive, right?” He leaned in closer to get a better look at the crates.

“I...” Liara squinted, looking at the crates in question as well. After a minute or so, Liara nodded. “Yes, I think they are,” replied the asari. “I can handle the crates.”

Feron nods. “And I can handle the turret,” he stated. “I must say Ethan, this is dangerous business, disregarding a threat like Tazzik in such a manner.”

Liara nodded her agreement, indicating the salarian in question. “That grenade launcher of his could cause a lot of damage if we don’t act quickly...”

“Or he could hit those mercs or himself by accident...” Ethan muttered as he saw two of the mercs trying to lift the casket.

“No. Put it down!” they heard Tazzik order. The two mercs instantly pulled their hands away from the casket.

The three paused, not saying a thing. After a few seconds, the mercs moved along. Finally, Liara turned to her two companions.

“That *is* a fair point,” the asari admitted. “We need to move. I’ll handle the crates, Feron will shoot at the ship, and Ethan can help me with the mercs. Unless you had something else in mind, Ethan?”

“Hm...” Ethan then positioned his Mantis sniper rifle and looked through the scope as he aimed it at Tazzik’s head. He had a clear shot. However, right as he pulled the trigger, his Stealth Boy wore out. He also had the misfortune of timing his coming out of cover just as a Blue Suns merc had turned in their direction. And he thought that kind of bad luck many claimed it only happened in Vegas. It sure as hell doesn’t apply to him. Not very often, at least.

“We got hostiles!” shouted the merc, grabbing an assault rifle as he turned to where Ethan was standing.

“Ethan! Get back into cover!”

Ethan ducked back behind cover and fired at the merc’s head. It took some effort to take her out,

with the shields and all, but the merc exploded. “Now, Liara!”

Taking a deep breath, Liara turned to the crates that were off to the side quickly. Glowing blue, she grabbed the crates with her biotics, quickly tossing them at the mercs in question. The crates sailed through the air, heading right towards them...

...and then they randomly blew up in sequence before they could ever get to any of the mercs in question. The wave of explosions rang throughout the plant, Liara ducking down behind cover as the fire billowed everywhere. Ethan just sat behind cover, looking on with a stunned expression on his face.

When the smoke cleared, they were all able to see Tazzik standing stock-still, the grenade launcher smoking. The huge salarian hadn't even moved a muscle since the crates had blown up. He simply looked at where Ethan and Liara were with a mildly annoyed expression on his face.

“My turn,” Tazzik gruffly spoke as he fired his grenade launcher several times at Ethan and Liara.

“Grenade! Move it!” Ethan exclaimed. Using V.A.T.S. once more, he quickly switched to his assault rifle and fired it at some of the grenades, which exploded in a sequence. He quickly grabbed Liara and leaped out of the way as the rest of them landed nearby. The wave of explosions had knocked them off the ground as Feron turned the turrets towards the ship. He began firing at it, the rounds impacting in a couple of places on the ship's hull.

But Tazzik was not to be deterred. He turned his grenade launcher on Feron's turret, launching a couple of grenades at it as the Blue Suns mercs opened fire on the drell's position. With only a slight shift of his expression, Feron ended up abandoning his post quickly. He leaped off the seat, right as a grenade landed where he had been seconds before. He had only managed to roll away when the explosion rocked him off his feet. He was lucky that he landed behind cover, but the drell seemed shaken as he looked over to Ethan and Liara.

Tazzik then fired another round of grenades at Ethan, but this time Liara threw a biotic barrier around the two of them. She turned to face Feron as she watched the drell push himself up on his arms.

“Feron, get over here!” she shouted.

The drell shakily managed to get up, limping the rest of the in a half-crouch.

Wheezing from the wounds caused by the explosion and the shrapnel sticking out of the drell's body, Ethan pulled out a stimpak and struck it on Feron's leg. The fragments then fell from his body as some of his wounds stitched together like cloth. He dragged Feron toward the nearest crate to support his weight.

The Courier then administered another stimpak on himself to help recover from the wounds inflicted on him by the explosion. He turned and fired at the mercs, causing them to, yet again, explode.

However, as Liara's biotic barrier died down and Ethan pulled Feron to safety, they found that they were sorely outnumbered as mercs began to pour in from all the openings. Ethan was only able to pull Feron closer to where he and Liara were before he suddenly saw all the mercs converging on them.

And then, a few seconds later, the three of them were surrounded on all sides by Blue Suns mercenaries. Liara edged closer to Ethan, her breathing quickened as she looked around.

"What do we do?" she asked nervously.

Before Ethan could respond, one of the mercs grabbed him from behind and another kned him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. They managed to grab Liara to give her the same treatment, and she simply looked at Ethan, shocked by this turn of events. The mercs then grabbed Feron, holding up the already weakened drell by his arms.

And then, the mercs parted slightly. And through them walked the huge frame of Tazzik, who looked somehow pleased with himself in the smarmiest way possible. Ethan briefly thought of trying to wipe that expression off his face, but thought better of it given his position.

"Disappointing, Feron. Disappointing," Tazzik scoffed. "The Shadow Broker would've expected more from you, but you're a waste in the end."

Ethan looked right at the drell, shocked to hear this. He was right!

"F... Feron...?" Liara asked.

"He is handing Shepard's body to the Collectors," replied the drell, defiantly facing the hitman. "I found out through extraneous channels. I won't work with anyone who makes deals with the Collectors. And especially not ones where—"

One of the mercs elbowed Feron hard in the stomach, interrupting him mid-sentence as Tazzik shook his head.

“A profit’s a profit. We sell to the highest bidder, no matter who we buy or sell to. You’ve known that since day one, Feron.”

“Says the tool who answers to the Shadow Broker...” Ethan muttered under his breath.

One of the Blue Suns mercs elbowed Ethan in the stomach again, leaving the human out of breath.

Feron simply looked at Tazzik. “I think this is where you and I come at a distinct disagreement,” he said. “I can’t work for him knowing what he’s going to do here, and now...” He chuckled bitterly. “I think you and I both knew this would end with me leaving the Shadow Broker eventually, Tazzik.”

Tazzik nodded. “You were an ally, Feron. One of the best, in fact. But do you know how we punish double agents, especially to those who are most valuable?” the hitman asked coldly.

“You ask me that like I don’t know what he does to them,” replied Feron, giving the salarian an extremely bitter smile. “Sometimes, Tazzik, there are risks that everyone needs to take. I took mine, and I know the consequences.”

Liara turned to Feron. “Feron, what are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m saying it will not be... pleasant,” replied the drell.

Ethan could have sworn he heard Liara mutter ‘oh, Goddess’ at this. But he didn’t get any time to dwell on it as Tazzik nodded at Feron.

“You’re right about it not being pleasant,” he said. “It’ll certainly be worse than what your two friends will be getting.” He turned his attention to Ethan. “And you, human. You have somehow appeared on Omega without any sorts of transportation, if I assumed correctly. No passports. No traces of matching DNA. And yet, people are already talking about—”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep talking, bug eyes,” Ethan retorted, smirking. “Tell me, does this Shadow Broker let you do his laundry? Set off bombs to terrorize innocent people? Maybe even shoot someone unlucky enough to get in your way?” He chuckled darkly as he shook his head.

“The Shadow Broker’s one and only hitman - talk about a joke! I don’t know about you, but if you’re trying to imitate a krogan, then you’re doing it wrong . And compared to some of the things I’ve faced, you’re rather small-time for my taste. And when I get out of this mess, I’m going to wipe that smug smile off your fu—”

The human was instantly interrupted with a particularly hard punch to the gut. It was hard enough that Ethan let out a rather loud groan in response.

To him, it was still worth it.

Liara simply shifted. “Ethan, don’t provoke him,” she said. “We don’t know what he’s going to do with us yet.”

“I would listen to her,” said Tazzik, gritting through his teeth. It seemed obvious to Ethan that he had angered Tazzik, but he was keeping it in line. “I think she knows how this works.” He turned his attention to Liara. “Oh, and here we’ve got Liara T’Soni, friend of Commander Shepard. Obvious that someone like you would’ve come along to follow on the trail.”

“Of course,” Liara replied, looking up at Tazzik. “Someone would’ve come for her eventually.”

“Surprised that you and your goons planned ahead,” Ethan muttered under his breath. “First the commander, and now Liara. What’s next for you, Tazzik? Who’s gonna be--”

Ethan was interrupted again when one of the mercs whacked him from behind, sending a nasty shock across his entire body. He twitched fiercely as he attempted to turn his head to see the merc wielding what appeared to be a stun baton. All he could see right now were shapes and figures. Silhouettes.

“Good. I was getting tired of listening to him,” Ethan heard Tazzik spoke. “Put them on my ship. The Shadow Broker would be pleased to hear this, given the circumstances...”

Before losing consciousness, Ethan saw the large figure of the hitman approaching him. He was then given a hefty kick to the face, causing him to see whirling stars and flashes of light. And then, darkness.

Chapter 3: Mission Impossible

“Shadow Broker.”

“I was not expecting to get a call so early.”

“Has the job been done?”

“Yes. We have Shepard’s body en route to the location of the exchange. I assume you will be sending whatever technology you have soon?”

“Perhaps with an extra gift, since you recovered Shepard’s body in such a timely manner. I would much prefer if you came to oversee this exchange in person.”

“My operations are too vital for me to compromise my appearance. Tazzik will hand you Shepard’s body, as he has been commanded to do.”

“Very well, then. We look forward to this exchange, Shadow Broker.”

“As do I. Now... if you will excuse me, I have a number of assets I must keep track of.”

“Very well. You will hear from us again when we have Shepard’s body.”

* * * * *

The Courier opened his eyes as they adjusted to the sudden brightness. Finding himself lying flat on a bed in a cell, its white walls bright enough to make it difficult to see, he quickly began to feel his limbs again. he took a glance at himself, only to find that he was now back to his Vault 21 jumpsuit without the armor padding. Lucky for him, his captors haven’t taken his Pip-Boy off him, if they figured out how. What idiots they are, indeed.

Fearing that they may have tortured him while he was unconscious or worse, they have experimented on him, much like the Think Tank did back at Big Mountain two years ago, where they replaced his brain, spine, and heart with cybernetic implants, Ethan checked the data on his Pip-Boy as he sat up.

The readings on his Pip-Boy told him nothing of his captors tampering his body. In fact, he was feeling much better than when he arrived to Omega in this universe. He pondered why the Shadow Broker agents wouldn’t bother torturing him, until he recalled what Liara told him of the

Collectors. They are a race known to trade new technologies in exchange for unusual specimens for each race. Also, the rest of his equipment were taken away from him, including his Transportalponder. He was still fixing it too, but he hoped that they haven't trashed it or used it to their advantage.

Ethan turned to his left, finding Liara across the cell, sitting on a bed similar to his. "Liara!" he exclaimed as he stood up and approached the asari. "You alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Liara nodded as she stood up from her bed and took a few steps forward. She does not look fine. She looked rather pale, shocked from whatever happened during the time he was unconsciousness.

"Any idea where we are?" asked Ethan.

"We're on Tazzik's ship right now, I think," the asari answered, looking down for a second before looking back up to Ethan. "We're...I don't know where we're going, but we're stuck in the middle of Goddess knows where. Also, I don't know where Feron is..."

"At best, he's receiving presents and having a great time with Tazzik," Ethan replied sarcastically as he looked around the cell, looking for a way to escape.

Liara frowned. "Ethan, I'm being serious here," she said, offended at Ethan's joke. "They..." She looked down somberly, her tears streaming down her cheeks. "Whatever is happening between him and Tazzik can't be pleasant." She took a step backward and sat down on the bed. "I don't think you understand. Feron betrayed the Shadow Broker...I think. I really don't know."

"Listen," Ethan replied. "Right now, I'm thinking of a way to for both of us to escape from this cell."

Liara looked up to Ethan. "And how exactly are you doing that?" asked the asari. "And once we do get out, what *exactly* are we supposed to do? How do you propose getting off this ship?" She quickly stood up and stepped forward, pointing her index finger at Ethan's chest. "In case you haven't noticed we're stuck in the middle of literally nowhere right now with no way to escape. And we don't even know where Shepard's body is..."

Ethan looked down for a moment before letting out a deep breath. "We fight our way out, find Feron, get our stuff back, find Shepard's body, and get the hell out," he responded, building confidence in himself. "And if we get the chance, we'll blow this place up sky high! That'll send a message to the Shadow Broker not to mess with us."

Liara let out an exasperated sigh. “In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t know where we are, you don’t know where we are, we don’t know where our equipment is, and we don’t even know the layout of this ship!” She brought up a hand to her head, closing her eyes. “Look, I don’t know how are we going to fight our way through when we’re unarmed. And I don’t know how you plan on getting out of here before...doing whatever it is you’re planning on doing.”

“Look, trust me on this one. We can take the guards by surprise and take their weapons. If there are any,” the Courier reassured Liara as he placed his hand on the asari’s shoulder. “Hell, where I came from, this is a daily occurrence.”

The asari nodded as she wiped her tears off her face. “Yeah, I...” she let out a sigh. “Sorry. It’s been rough, being captured like this. You weren’t there when they took Feron away. I don’t even know what they’re doing to him, and the screams sounded so bad...” She took in a deep breath. “You’re right. I should trust you. I’m sorry about that.” She then nodded. “So do you have an idea?”

Ethan looked at his Pip-Boy. From the readout, it showed him much of the ship they were on right now. However, the map depicted it to be rather large, around the size of a small station. They were not on Tazzik’s ship, but at one of the Shadow Broker’s stations. He then showed the information to Liara.

Liara frowned, rubbing her chin. “Huh...” she said. “When did we get off of Tazzik’s ship? I don’t...” She shook her head. “Actually, a lot of what happened is a little fuzzy right now...”

Before Ethan could answer any further, the lights began to flicker out in the cell, leaving it in complete darkness. He brighten the screen on the Pip-Boy enough to use it as a flashlight. Then he approached the cell door, noticing a red light on the door panel. He patted his hands near the panel, hoping for something to tamper with. Although he had plenty of experience with hacking terminals, lockpicking doors, and tampering with devices he couldn’t even identify, but he was uncertain if these skill can apply here since this universe developed differently from his. He would have to try, though.

He placed the tips of his fingers on a tiny gap, and after finding a bigger gap for his fingernails to fit through, opened the panel, revealing a circuit board. From the looks of it, he could manipulate the nodes and rearrange parts of it, therefore rerouting the emergency power supply to the door. He cracked his knuckles and began working.

A confused Liara stepped toward the Courier as she leaned forward slightly. “Ethan?” she asked,

looking over his shoulder. “What in the name of the Goddess are you *doing*?”

The human smirked as he turned his attention to Liara, the light from the Pip-Boy shining on her face. “Uh, I’m improvising,” he answered as he turned back to tampering with the circuit board. “Y’know, dismantling and rearranging the parts, bypassing security, finding a way to escape.”

“Without an omni-tool? How exactly are you going to do that?” Liara asked as she tilted her head to the side. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“All I have to do is--” Ethan answered as he continued rerouting the nodes, but stopped when the door opened of its own accord. He took a step to the left to see what happened, only to find a figure oppose of him, placing its omni-tool on the other door panel. The light from the omni-tool revealed the figure to be a brown-haired male human in a grey jumpsuit.”

“Well,” the man spoke as he turned to the duo. “I would like to thank you for making this easier for me. I take it you also rerouted the power to the cell?”

“Yeah I did, but--” Ethan replied.

“I don’t a lot of time left,” the man spoke again, interrupting the Courier. “Cerberus sent me. The Illusive Man received intel on possible locations of Shepard’s body not long after her ship was destroyed, so he sent plants to each of the locations in the likelihood that her body might be here. I am one of those plants, posing as maintenance here at the base. You’re fortunate that I’m around.”

“So why help us now? It would’ve made sense if you get Shepard’s body instead of rescuing us,” Ethan replied, suspicious.

The Cerberus plant smiled. “I am simply an observer, not a doer,” he answered. “Oh, does that device of yours can extract data?”

Ethan nodded. Then the Cerberus plant keyed a few things with his omni-tool, creating a ‘ping’ sound from the Pip-Boy. “I don’t know where exactly Shepard’s body is at the moment, but the coordinations can lead you to the database.”

Ethan then brought up his Pip-Boy. From the map of the base, the marker pointed to a large room a good distance from their current location. Also, the station is are on a planet called Alington. The Cerberus plant turned and began walking into the darkness.

“Thank you, but we never caught your name,” said Liara.

“I’m Agent Lynch,” the plant’s voice answered in the darkness.

“Of course you are,” Ethan deadpanned.

The moment the lights flickered back on in the grey hallway, the Cerberus plant was gone, as if he was never there to begin with. Then, a shrill beep sounded throughout the walls. Liara ducked, her hands covering where her ears should be. The asari looked at Ethan wildly, her eyes wide in shock.

“Goddess, the alarm!” said the asari. “Ethan, we need to hide!”

“Dammit! So much for being quiet right there,” the human sighed as he and Liara as they quickly ran down the hallway, looking for a place to hide. At the end of the hallway, however, they spotted a guard nearby turning to their direction.

“Over there!” the guard shouted as he pointed to Ethan and Liara. “Get them!”

Just as the guard was about to go for his pistol, the Courier charged at the guard and tackled him, pinning him against the wall. “Liara!”

The asari jerked at the guard’s pistol, a blue aura surrounding it. The pistol was pulled towards her, and as it flew she barely managed to catch the object. She looked at it, and then looked at Ethan as he knocked out the guard.

And right as another one peered around the corner, Liara turned around, running back as a shot barely missed her shoulder. She grabbed Ethan’s arm and ran off past the corner as a second shot barely grazed him.

The asari kept running, looking at the pistol at her hand. “Well, at least we’re armed now,” she said. “Come on! We need to find a hiding spot!”

Ethan nodded with a surprised look on his face and followed Liara. “Huh. I forgot you can do biotics effectively without an amp. Is your race that adept at biotics? I should’ve paid more attention earlier,” he said flippantly. “Oh, well. Guess that’ll make things a lot easier for us.”

The look Liara gave him was nothing short of serious. “Yes, indeed,” she replied. “Now look for somewhere to hide!”

As they continued running down the hallway, avoiding the guards whenever they can, Ethan spotted a door to his right. He glanced at his Pip-Boy for a second before opening the door. From the map, it would lead to a closet. “Get in here!” he barked out as he opened the door and quickly stepped inside.

It turned out that they were walking straight into a supply closet. But Liara and Ethan were not deterred; the two of them crammed themselves in there, with Liara pulling the door shut as quickly as she could. A broom nearly kept the door open, but quick thinking on Ethan’s part made sure that the door closed fully.

Soon after, they heard footsteps race past the door. Not just singular footsteps, either: from what it sounded like to the two, it was a whole *legion* of them. It took about half a minute for them all to get past, and Liara tightened her grip on the pistol as she took a shaky breath.

After another minute of tense waiting, the asari nodded. “Well... we’re safe for now,” she said. “But I don’t think we’ll be safe for much longer if we stay in this supply closet. We need to figure out where our equipment is...”

Ethan rolled his eyes as he opened the door, grabbed the broom, and peaked outside, the alarm blaring out in the station. “Well, I think we’re clear,” he spoke as he looked at his Pip-Boy again. “According to my Pip-Boy, our equipment is right around...” He pointed up ahead, to his right. “...there.”

Liara frowned, looking at where Ethan’s finger pointed. “Right there?” she asked. “Doesn’t that sound a little counter-intuitive to have our equipment be so close to where we’re taken?”

“Maybe. Unless it’s a trap,” Ethan replied as they approached the door to the armory. “Whoever designed this station should be shot, if you ask me. Either that, or it’s inconveniently small. Or maybe it has multiple floors. Or maybe it’s just conveniently placed for the guards in case any prisoner *escapes*. Still, let’s hope for the best.”

“I’m not sure if it’s worth speculating,” she said. “I’ll test the door. You stay there.”

With this, Liara walked towards the door. Ethan moved to say something, but Liara lifted her finger. She then looked at the panel in front of the door, frowning further.

“It’s green,” she said, looking back to Ethan. “That means it’s open.” She glowed blue. “Be ready for hostiles, Ethan. We might encounter a couple of them when we go through the door.”

With this, the asari's hand tapped the door panel, even as Ethan raised his broom. However, strangely, nobody was guarding the room where their equipment was. This struck both Ethan and Liara as being exceedingly odd, though neither of them could quite place exactly why.

Ethan passed through the door first, frowning as he walked through the doorway. He then noticed a piece of his armor among the other things in the storeroom, moving down and touching it with his broom. When he touched the piece of armor, absolutely *nothing* happened at all.

He then looked around for his other equipment, including his Transportalponder, as he quickly grabbed his armor. "If I were the ruler of the galaxy, I would--" the Courier interrupted himself when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Something shiny. Something platinum.

He then approached that shelf. There, he saw a platinum poker chip, the number 38 engraved on it. The same chip that caused all of that trouble. "I'll take that," he muttered as he snatched the chip and continued changing into his armor and arming himself whatever he could grab.

Liara glanced at Ethan with a perplexed expression on her face. The door closed behind her, and she frowned. "Ethan?" she asked as she grabbed some of her armor.

Ethan turned his attention to Liara as he pulled the leg portion of his armor. "Yeah?"

"Uh... what did you find?"

He sighed deeply. "Something personal of mine," he hesitantly answered. "A...poker chip. A reminder of my adventures. Actually, a delivery package."

"Oh... Uh... I see..." She bit her lower lip. "I imagine it must have led you to some wild adventures."

"Yep," Ethan nodded. "Hopefully, we'll have enough time to change into it." The human then pulled another piece of leg armor.

There was shifting around as both of them managed to get whatever armor they had on. A minute or so passed in relative silence, before Liara seemed to realize something. She slipped on an additional piece of armor, and then turned her head slightly. It was not enough that she was looking at Ethan, but it was enough that he could tell that her voice was directed towards him.

"So..." she says. "We got our equipment back just fine... I suppose we should figure out what to

do from here...”

Then, they hear more footsteps passing by the door. Ethan leaned by the door, his rifle ready at hand. He saw Liara across the doorway as she glowed blue. “Right, I suggest we should go to the main database. Hopefully, we could track down the location of Shepard’s body and Feron,” he explained, grinning. “Sounds like a plan, yes?” *I really do hope so. I’m just making it up as I go, actually.*

“Yes, that is a rather good idea,” said Liara, nodding. “We need to get off with Shepard’s body, so figuring out where it is would be a good idea.” She frowned soon after she said this. “But where is the main database? Does your Pip-boy say anything about where it is?”

“Hopefully,” he answered as he looked at his Pip-Boy. “Problem is, it’s pretty obvious that the database would be heavily guarded. Why do I have the feeling that...” He tapped the door panel, finding the hallway empty. “Oh, thank god,” he sighed.

Liara nodded, stepping outside of the room and looking around the corridor before leaning against the far wall. She gestured Ethan to come along, and the human did so.

“Let’s just hope our luck holds until we can find Shepard’s body,” she says. “Anything on this floor?”

“Uh...” He continued looking at the map on his Pip-Boy. “Nope, not at all. Unless you want to loot some more stuff, then be my guest.”

And with that, they sauntered down the hallway, evermore alert for any guards and other security.

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Ethan looked on ahead as Liara checked his six. Up ahead, they found themselves in a large room with pillars supporting much of the base, along with plenty of things to provide for cover. The hallways spread out in four directions. The asari gestured to Ethan, and he looked at the map on his Pip-Boy. If there was a thing or two he would find annoying, it was the fact that he would have to explore much of the place so he would get a full readout and it had difficulty differencing between various floors. At least he was lucky since there were workarounds.

“Ethan, where does the Pip-Boy say we should go next?” asked Liara as she followed her companion.

The Courier continued looking at the map on his Pip-Boy. From the readout, the cursor pointed the way. He then bit his lower lip. "Hm, my Pip-Boy is telling us to go that-a-way," he answered as he hesitantly pointed his index finger to his right. He then looked in said direction, only to find that part of place strangely empty. "Okay, seriously! This has *got* to be an ambush!" he scoffed.

Liara frowned, looking in the other direction. Soon after, she glowed blue, taking a tentative step forward. "Well, there's only one way to know for sure," she said. "Come on."

Ethan instantly turned around and fired his rifle. With a look of surprise on her face, Liara turned around, finding a turian guard, though an inexperienced one, with a hole in his stomach that was larger than it probably had any right to be. Behind him was a...blue...fleshy...plug thing, wobbling around like jelly. It took Liara a second or so before she suddenly realized what *exactly* the jelly thing was. The guard staggered about for a few seconds before entering rigor mortis, his eyes filled with shock. The other guards quickly approached the duo. However, they stopped in their tracks as they took a glance at the turian's corpse, then looked at Ethan. With a yelp of terror, they fled from that gruesome scene like a pack of nightstalkers, scared out of their minds.

Liara looked at the turian. "What... what... did you shoot out his stomach?"

"Yes...yes, I did," the Courier nodded, trying his best not to laugh. "You don't see that everyday."

"I mean... that doesn't even really seem possible," said the asari with an uncertain expression on her face.

"Body organs, some cartilage, plenty of bones...yeah," the Courier chuckled as he moved ahead of Liara. "Hell, let me tell you, that was one clean chunk." He then examined the corpse and the stomach plug nearby, tentatively poking the thing with his foot as it wobbled about. A shiver went down Liara's back at how that plug thing moved.

Ethan frowned as he turned his attention to the asari. "Right, let's move out, shall we?" He tilted his head towards their direction. "The database is not far from here."

With this, Liara nodded as she and the Courier moved down the hallway.

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With the readout from his Pip-Boy, Ethan and Liara arrived at what appeared to be a large set of double doors. A narrow hallway stretched out behind them. Past the door, the database should be

there, or at least where that cursor on his Pip-Boy pointed at.

"Wanna knock?" Ethan asked smugly. He thought for a second, then shrugged off that idea. "Nah, let's surprise 'em with your biotics."

"Whatever you say," said Liara as she glowed blue.

Soon after, Ethan slammed his fist against the door panel, the door opening quickly. He then hefted his rifle as they entered the room. Inside, a guard popped out of cover from one of the desks and fired a submachine gun at him.

Ethan managed to duck behind one of the desks, but not without his shields going down along with a bullet grazing his right shoulder. Ignoring the pain, he switched to the Katana shotgun and fired it at the guard, suppressing him to stay into cover. After disabling the guard's kinetic barrier, he then managed to shoot that guard in the torso in an instant, causing him to burst. Blood splattered all over as the remaining legs slumped to the ground, resulting in a group of overly shocked guards.

Another guard popped out of cover, but Liara was ready for him. She pulled the guard out of cover, and dove behind cover while firing at another one closer to the nearby terminal. Sensing an opportunity, Ethan fired at the lifted guard.

Body parts flew in all directions, causing further disorientation among the guards. "Did you see that?! What in the name of the spirits are we up against?!" a turian guard asked, appalled at what he saw.

"Don't space out! Just focus on them!" another guard, a salarian, barked out as he fired at Liara.

Sensing an another opportunity, Ethan switched to his Predator pistol, popped out of cover and scored another headshot at the disoriented guard, causing him to explode into a blue pile of gory paste.

Liara pushed another person back with her biotics, his back snapping rather violently against the edge of a desk. She then fired her gun at another guard as he rose up to try to get a shot on them. This guard simply fell back, fear clearly showing on his face.

"Ethan, how many guards do you think are between us and the console?" she asked.

"One...uh, no wait--" the Courier joked as he peaked out of cover and counted the remaining

guards. However, a bullet whizzed by his hand. He quickly ducked back into cover “--yeah, two! I think!”

The asari shook her head as another bullet flew past her head. “Ethan, this isn’t the time for jokes!”

Ethan rolled his eyes as he back-handed a nearby guard. “Well, *excuuuuuuse me*, princess!” he scoffed as he knocked out said guard, in case he might know at least some of the passwords for the database.

Liara shook her head as she shot the final guard in the room. She looked behind her, even as Ethan moved to the back of the room while dragging the unconscious guard with them. “Well, that’s all the ones we have for now,” she said. “Now... let’s figure out where Shepard is.”

“Operative Lando. Operative Lando, report.”

Ethan jolted slightly as he turned his attention to a humanoid-shaped, robotic figure standing across from them, surrounded by multiple bright lights. “And you are...?” he asked cautiously as he and Liara approached the figure, pointing his pistol at it.

Liara looked over, approaching slowly with her pistol raised. “Rather, *what* are you?” she asked.

“You are not Operative Lando,” the figure replied. “I am impressed by the breakout, *Mr. Sunderland*. You would have made a valuable ally.”

How did he--of course... “Lemme guess, you’re the Shadow Broker right?” Ethan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It seems like it, yes,” said Liara, edging closer to the console that she would access. “Tell me, Shadow Broker: why do you want Shepard’s body?”

“I would say their offer was too good to pass up, Dr. T’Soni. You should understand that,” the figure answered.

“So you were selling Shepard’s body to save your what? Skin? Scales? Typical,” Ethan scoffed.

“The compensation is my business, Mr. Sunderland,” the figure replied. “But it was significant enough.”

“Significant enough to deny everyone she knew the comfort of knowing that she was dead for sure?” asked Liara, anger tinging her words.

With Liara keeping the Shadow Broker busy, Ethan walked to one of the terminals. He bit his lip, trying to think of something, but Liara’s recent behavior was making him concerned. He hoped she wouldn’t just use her biotics to wreak the place. At least not at the moment. Numerous images flashed on the screen as he typed a command down on the holographic keyboard. It felt strange to type on practically nothing, even for someone like him. However, it was time for him to work.

“It was simply sound business, doctor. I have nothing personal against Shepard nor any of her friends.”

“I hardly think that giving Shepard’s body away like it’s something to be experimented on is a sound business model,” said the asari. “Do you even know what the buyers are going to *do* with Shepard’s body once they have it?”

“You make too much of this corpse, doctor. Obsessed, I would say,” the Shadow Broker replied, hiding the smug tone under his voice. “What could they possibly gain from such a wretched thing?”

“Closure, maybe,” said Liara. “Or do you not know that Shepard is technically listed as Missing In Action?”

“And I can inform them to list Shepard as Killed in Action,” the broker replied. “Enough of this. The deal is done, Dr. T’Soni. As of right now, Tazzik is about to make the exchange with the Collector. Product: for sale. Right now, the only ones that should know their place are you two. Do not assume I am unaware of this, Mr. Sunderland. This room is connected from me to my permanent staff on Alingon. As soon as I give the word, they will come and capture you again. If you are working for someone else, they will get it out of you. It is not my choice of style, but it is effective.”

The terminal beeped. Then, Ethan whipped out his Predator pistol and fired it at the figure. Its head exploded as sparks spewed out of its robotic body.

“Should’ve kept his mouth shut if you ask me. Ironical for an information broker,” the human spoke as he holstered his pistol. “Anyway, I got what we need. It was tougher than I thought, with the firewalls acting like crazy, but...it was worth it.”

Liara nodded, biting her lower lip. “Where is she?”

He looked at what his Pip-Boy had gathered from the OSD. “She’s in the hangar right now,” Ethan answered. “And Feron’s--”

“The hangar?” asked Liara, fear tinging her voice. “Goddess... We have to move! Now!”

“What about that guy over there?” the Courier asked as he pointed his finger at the guard, who was now regaining consciousness. “We should--”

But Liara had already started running. As she ran by the guard, she quickly threw him biotically to the wall, causing him to black out a second time in a row. She said nothing as she ran to the door of the room they were in.

“That works, I guess” Ethan shrugged as he took a glance at the unconscious guard. Then, he attempted to catch up to Liara. “Hey, wait up!”

* * * * *

Darkness. It was all Feron could see around him, save for a set of lights looming over him, along with a series of orange electronic screens surrounding where he was strapped at. The alarm continued to blare out in the facility. It felt like it had been a while since anyone had checked up on him since someone - he couldn’t tell who exactly - programmed the device to work automatically. As far as he knew, they only tortured him two times before now. Once by fire, once by fire, and now by shock. Slowly, even over the course of several hours, his will was beginning to break.

His eyes briefly shifted to the door as a guard finally came through, the light pouring in through the door the person had come through. Or was it a medical person? Everyone in the facility looked so much like each other that Feron honestly couldn’t tell what was happening. However, he was lucid enough to notice three very important things. The first was that the merc was armed with a pistol. The second, was that she was all alone.

The third, was that Feron noticed something important-looking in the guard’s hand. Namely, it looked like the keycard to his bindings.

The drell imperceptibly turned his head up, feigning unconsciousness.

The guard turned her attention to the supposedly unconscious drell. Frowning, she approached

him and checked his pulse. She felt a few beats against his scale-like skin, and nodded. Feron then attempted to reach toward the keycard. With the straps locked on his wrists, it was difficult to maneuver his hands. However, he eventually managed to reach for the woman's keycard, gripping it as firmly as he could in his index and middle fingers. He pulled the keycard away as carefully as he could, hoping that she would not notice her pocket was getting picked.

Thankfully, her attention was turned to the monitor nearby for her to notice this, and so she didn't notice as Feron held the keycard at around the level of her waist. She then turned around as Feron held his breath, hearing her footsteps get further as she walked out of the room. Finally, he heard the sound of the door opening and closing. By then, he knew that the Blue Suns merc was out of the room. With this, he opened his eyes, looking at his restraints.

He then glanced at the keycard, shaking his head.

"How did she not notice that?" he asked to himself, out loud. He then looked around, taking stock of his surroundings. He unlocked the restraints and quickly sat up from the table as he removed the device attached to his body. With nothing of interest to take in this room, he way quietly left the room, ignoring the pain inflicted on him by the device. The lights then blinked away as the door closed behind the drell, leaving the room in complete darkness.

Chapter 4: Approximately 3,720 to 1

Not long after leaving the database behind, Ethan and Liara encountered yet another squad of guards in a four-way hallway, conveniently enough. The squad was somewhat small, mixed with a variety of races, including batarians, human, and turians, and a krogan, if their the shape of their appearances were to indicate. Also, this squad had the usual arsenal, assault rifles and all. However, one of them was wielding what appeared to be a shotgun, though it looked more like a giant brick with a trigger. But it wasn't like anything Ethan and Liara couldn't handle.

But before he could do anything, Ethan found himself lifted from the ground and toward the guards, with a blue aura surrounding him for a brief moment. At least it couldn't have been any worse for him.

And then one of the guards aimed the aforementioned shotgun at him.

Liara caught notice of this, however, and before the guard in question could fire the gun, she extended her hand, tossing a biotic warp. The warp did its job, sending the guard stumbling back as Ethan dealt with the hail of other bullets that he was exposed to in kind.

Then, Ethan fell down, resulting him in landing with his face planting to the ground. "Ow..." he groaned as he shook his head and stood up, dazed, only to see another guard, a salarian, aiming his rifle at him. He then pulled out a grenade and threw it at the aforementioned guards as he limped his way to find some cover, barely dodging another hail of bullets. He hissed in pain as he crouched behind a conveniently placed crate.

"Watch out! Grenade!" one of the guards barked out as he jumped out of the way.

Liara ducked behind the crate, hearing the grenade go off. Glancing at Ethan, she ran over to the Courier.

"Shit, Ethan!" she said.

"And I thought you were the only one with biotics," the human said flippantly as he peeked out of cover and fired his pistol at one of the guards. Then, he attempted to dig out a large stimpak with a leather strap on it out of his armor storage and wrapped it around his right arm, letting the super stimpak do its work.

Liara shook her head. "Unfortunately, we're not," she said, glancing up briefly and firing her pistol a couple times. "Come on, we need to get moving faster than this!"

“Right,” the Courier spoke, taking a deep breath as the gaping wounds sewed together at an insane rate, causing him to have a feeling of weakness and nausea. “Up I go.” He quickly switched to his rifle, his arms shaking wildly from the side effects of the super stimpak, and aimed it at the wounded krogan, managing to score a few headshots and several shots to the chest as he disabled the kinetic barriers and knocked him back a few steps. The krogan then roared like thunder as he charged at Ethan.

The krogan slammed the human against the wall, causing him to drop his rifle. Remembering his lesson on Omega, Ethan quickly pulled out his bowie and struck it at the head crest right before the krogan was able to finish him off, just in the right spot and in the right angle. He pulled the bowie, and with a sickening rip, the crest came right off, exposing the soft skull to the air of the base as the krogan dropped him to the ground. The krogan roared out in agony as he held on to what was left of his head.

It looked - and smelled - pretty foul. But it was that or be turned into grind meat. Ethan stood up, picked up his rifle and aimed at the krogan’s head. He fired several shots before the krogan’s head, along with the rest of his body, exploded into ludicrous gibs. He figured that he would be *really* sore in the morning for that one.

Liara’s first instinct was to cringe, but as she saw the other guards close in on them, she realized she had other things to worry about. Thus, she ran forward, grabbing Ethan by the arm.

“Come on, this way!” she shouted.

Before Ethan ran on ahead with Liara, he took one last shot at one of the guards, though he barely missed, hitting that guard in the arm. With so much going on right now, he didn’t look back. Sadly, he didn’t get the chance to loot the corpses. But at least he was just lucky to be alive. Again.

With that, they then continued onwards, dashing down the hallway. Numerous guards, mainly the Blue Suns mercs and a handful of troopers hired by the Shadow Broker, clad in night-black armor, tailed them in advance. Bullets whizzed by as a ball of electricity exploded on impact, its electromagnetic pulse wave disabled both Ethan’s and Liara’s kinetic barriers.

“This is gonna end well for both of us,” the Courier sighed as he pulled out his rifle, only to find it overheated from the EMP wave. He quickly leaped behind a wall and attempted to vent his rifle’s heat sink.

He leaned out of cover and fired at some of the soldiers. However, he noticed a few things: first, their shields take a while to take down. Second, their weapons hurt a lot. Third, he could have sworn one of the guards he killed had cried out, “My spleen!” as he exploded into a pile of gory paste. Lastly, Liara just created a ball of energy in her hands and launched it at the group ahead. It was the same biotic technique that was used back on Omega. A gravitational singularity.

Liara and Ethan redirected their weapons at the guards and mercs that were dangling around the artificial black hole, screaming in shock and fear as they were shot down one by one. Then, Liara threw a warp field at one of the Shadow Broker troopers. The trooper, who appeared to be humanoid, flailed around as the warp field swarmed over his body, ripping it apart from the inside.

Ethan ducked back behind the wall and waited for some of the remaining troopers to stop suppressing fire at him. However, he noticed an opportunity when he noticed another trooper closing in on him. When he was just a few steps away from where Ethan was at, Ethan yanked the trooper and pinned him against the wall. At the same time, he pulled his bowie out from his leg and stabbed the trooper through his neck. It instantly ended his life as more blood than it is seemingly possible for the trooper to contain spewed out from his throat when Ethan pulled the bowie out. It provided, yet again, a good distraction since it resulted in a group of overly-shocked troopers.

“Ethan, does your Pip-Boy tells us anything about a shortcut?” Liara asked after she biotically pushed the last remaining troopers, sending him flying down the hallway.

“Lemme check,” Ethan replied as he ducked back behind cover and look at his Pip-Boy. From the readout, it appeared that the base was actually larger than it appeared to be, with a few buildings interconnected to each other. By the time they could reach to the main hangar, Shepard will be long gone. Upon further observation, he noticed something particular on the map, so he zoomed in on that spot. He noticed that there was a ship resting in a smaller hangar not far from here. “Yep, there is,” he smirked, with the asari looking over his shoulder.

Liara frowned with a perplexed look on her face, looking at the Pip-Boy’s map interface, still baffle by its functionality. “Over there?” she asked skeptically. “I still can’t think that--” She stopped when more footsteps were heard down the hallway. She gasped as her heart skipped a beat. “Goddess! We need to get moving.”

“Right behind you,” Ethan nodded as he and Liara continued onwards.

* * * * *

Feron hid behind the crates in the hangar as he saw Tazzik and several other mercs gathering nearby his ship, some of them slanting around the container of Shepard's body, waiting patiently for their customer to arrive to receive her body. Along the way to the hangar, he managed to apply some medi-gel at a strangely empty pharmacy to stop the bleeding momentarily, long enough for him to endure the pain before he could receive some proper medical treatment. If he managed to get through this. After all, the Shadow Broker has very likely branded him as a traitor, and surely neither he nor Tazzik would be as merciful to him the second time.

He peaked his head out of his spot, but barely enough for anyone to spot him, only to spot a volus escorting what appeared to be a four-eyed, chitinous insectioid into the room. almost immediately, the defector recognized that insectioid to be a Collector. But he noticed something odd about that thing, as if there were golden spots of light glowing on its body, like magma.

"And here it is--the body of Commander Shepard--exactly as it was described!" the volus exclaimed as he and the Collector approached Tazzik and the mercs, gasping through his mask each time he paused in his sentences and finished speaking.

"Good," The Collector nodded as it stood over Shepard's coffin. "Indeed, the Shadow Broker has done well..."

"Technically, it was Tazzik, here who took care of the last, uh, leg," the volus admitted nervously, but in a matter-of-fact and professional tone. "Eh, no pun intended."

The large hitman smirked as he crossed his arms. "You don't even need to take inventory. Everything that was Shepard is *right* in that container," he said. "But even she was identified as a female, it was...difficult to tell what her gender was at a glance, blown to hell and back like that. But if that's what you want, she'll be use as soon as the Shadow Broker transfers the payment."

Feron knew what he had to do, even if would take away his life. Even with the pistol he stole from a merc he killed on the way to the hangar, it would be too dangerous for him to take them on his own. But he wouldn't take his chances to 'accidentally' let Tazzik get away with Shepard's body. If he had the chance, he could try to talk his way out, buying time for Liara and Ethan, if they ever managed to escape.

He then ducked back behind the crates as he heard the mass effect drive of a shuttle flying overhead, along with footsteps approaching his spot. *Damn, have I been spotted?* Feron asked himself in his thoughts. *Or are they surveying the hangar?*

But before he could move, Feron felt a gun against his temple. He slowly turned his head to his right to see a human Blue Sun merc pointing what appeared to be an M-15 Vindicator assault rifle at him. "Drop your gun and get moving," the merc spoke coldly. "Bet Tazzik will be delighted to see you again."

"Indeed he *will be*," the defector deadpanned as he placed his pistol on the ground and hesitantly stood up, thinking up of *all* the things he could say to Tazzik as the merc grabbed his arms. Then, he was led to the hitman and the Collector near the ship. From the looks on Tazzik's face, Feron could tell that he was at the very least unamused, if not furious.

"Feron," Tazzik growled through his teeth as he turned his attention to the defector and drew his pistol. "You've become one *hell* of an annoyance."

Feron couldn't help himself but smirk. He didn't imagine himself as the type he would face death with dignity. But he might make this one an exception, if he really was going to die. "For a pretty good reason, I'd say," he said, referring to back on Omega. "And yet, you're still doing this."

"For the safety of the galaxy, Feron," the hitman replied, furious enough for a salarman to the point that he would rather finish Feron off and be done with it. "And I'm beginning to lose my patience."

"Your patience or your nerve?" asked Feron enigmatically. "I'm not sure I can decide on one one you're losing."

"I wouldn't say that if I were--"

"You pretend to be everywhere at once...I already am!"

Tazzik frowned. "What's he babbling about?" he asked, suspicious of the rambling Collector.

Then, the Collector immediately raised its head, causing many of the troopers nearby to jolt up in the air. "The Shadow Broker has informed me of a human courier that goes by the name Ethan Sunderland. He was responsible for communications."

"We are aware of his breakout," Tazzik replied. He did a decent job of hiding how he was dumbstruck at what Ethan did.

Feron blinked. "Huh. Ethan has proven again and again to be the strangest man I've ever met." The drell closed his eyes in thought. *Probably the most resourceful one, too.*

This has caught both the Collector's and the salarian hitman's attention. "Then tell us more about this human," demanded the Collector.

Perhaps this could buy Ethan and Liara some time... "Nothing else of note," the drell replied. "But he is strange enough that he will put up quite a resistance. Don't underestimate him."

"But why are you willing to tell us about this human? Grudge, I suppose?" Tazzik asked, suspicious.

Feron simply smiled. "No, actually," he replied. "I say that because I know he'll give you a nasty scar. And I would hate to see a scar on your pretty little face. I also think that he'll escape no matter what you do."

The hitman simply frowned. "And how do you propose that? You seemed to quickly forget how easily I captured you."

"You forget that drell have perfect memory," replied the defector. "I seemed to forget my capture, much as you quickly forgot what was between us at one time."

"...Amusing," Tazzik replied, his frown more intense. The hitman was unamused. "How kind of you to point that out. Now, if you--"

Without warning, several shots rang out in the hangar as a few troopers dropped dead to the ground, their heads missing. Tazzik barked out orders to his men. The troopers spread out, taking positions in cover behind the nearby crates. However, more of the troopers died as their bodies drooped down to the ground. Despite him being infuriated at this turn of events, the salarian hitman kept his cool. He, the Collector, and the remaining troopers, including the one that held Feron hostage, kept their ground.

But before they could do anything else, Feron spotted a figure shimmering in the air. The figure, a dark-haired human in red-and-gray armor, appeared near Tazzik, pointing a Mattock rifle at his head. It was Ethan. But Liara was nowhere in sight.

"Looking for me?" Ethan asked sardonically. "Nice to see you again! I'm here to talk about the price. Call off your goons, give Feron and Shepard's body to me, or I will blow your head off and kill the rest of your goons in this room."

* * * * *

“Humph. You used a stealth field,” Tazzik scoffed. “Clever.”

“A magician doesn’t tell his secrets to his audience,” the Courier retorted.

The hitman turned his attention to the human in question, his teeth clenching together. The Courier definitely made him angry. And impatient as well. “Yes, yes. But do you think you could make such demands after breaking out of your cell, fighting your way through the base and gunning down my men before you showed yourself? Even if you and Dr. T’Soni managed to escape with Shepard’s body, it wouldn’t deter the Shadow Broker’s operations in the slightest.”

“Yeah, I know. What else do you think I’m capable of?” Ethan asked.

The insectoid known as a Collector took a step forward. “And you’re the courier the Shadow Broker spoke of. You have cut off their communications, but ours cannot be stopped so easily, for I am everywhere,” it boasted.

The Courier smirked. He thought for a moment to stop the Collector’s monologuing, and even Tazzik was getting impatient with the conversation, but he thought better of it. *Gee, you think so? But there goes the gloating. Always with the gloating! What’s next, evil maniacal laughter?* “Well, in that case, that’ll make it easier for me to find you.” He looked at Feron, then looked back at Tazzik, his aim steady. He knew he was outnumbered, but he had plenty of maneuver around the hangar. “And honestly, I think you needed a new hobby. Traveling the galaxy and harvesting galactic civilizations must be really boring for you. I heard that there’s opportunity for you at the--”

“Enough of this shit,” Tazzik growled. He turned as his right hand formed into a fist, flying into Ethan’s jaw. But he deflected that hit with the butt of his rifle and, in response, landed a punch against the salarian’s jaw.

Ethan turned around and fired at the troop that took Feron hostage. After a few shots, the hostage-taker’s body exploded into a fine, red mist, causing the drell to stumble a few steps forward, nearly tripping himself in the process. “Liara, now!” he called out as he dodged a hail of bullets and quickly looked around for yet another conveniently placed crate that would be large enough to provide cover. He swore that no matter where he went, he always find spots that could go up to his waist. Eventually, he managed to find a crate before his shields were depleted from the gunfire. Feron picked up the dead trooper’s rifle and began firing.

Liara exhaled deeply and emerged from a crate not far from the ship. She launched a biotic

projectile at the troopers, sending them away in all directions, including that one volus who was unfortunate enough to be in the fray.

The Courier sensed an opportunity, or perhaps two in this case. When he peaked out of cover, he saw the coffin out in the open, with nobody taking their positions since Liara biotically threw most of the mercs out of the way as she and Feron put suppressive fire to the rest of the troopers, including Tazzik. He could get out there, grab Shepard's body, and get out of here. But on the other hand, he could be vulnerable to gunfire, especially with the Collector undeterred from the impact of the throw.

Even with Liara using more of her biotics and Feron shooting down more troopers, they are becoming overwhelmed with more troopers joining in the fray. Liara's good and Feron's quick with his reflexes, but they badly needed backup or they wouldn't last long. If he decided to help them, Ethan feared this would give Tazzik and the Collector the chance to escape with Shepard's body. And that would be terrible. But they, especially Feron, knew the risks of getting Shepard's body back from the Shadow Broker, and they are giving him the opportunity to risk his life.

The Courier had made his decision.

He exhaled deeply and emerged from cover, taking a few potshots at the troopers. Luckily, they hit one of the troopers, her head exploding into pits and pieces of bone and brain matter. He stopped a few paces away from the container, only to find the Collector standing in his way. "I will direct this personally," it spoke, its eyes and body glowing a golden hue as it launched a biotic projectile at him.

This time, Ethan was prepared for it. He strafed to his right, dodging the slow projectile, and switched to his shotgun. He braced the butt of the gun against his stomach and fired, knocking the Collector back a few steps. As it was recovering from the impact of the shotgun, Ethan dashed to the container. When he began to drag it, the Collector jumped up, grabbing him from behind. As he struggled to break away from the Collector's grip, Ethan felt like he was being ripped apart at the atomic level, as if his flesh was burning. The warp field flickered in and out of existence as it rapidly shifted across his body. He knew that if he doesn't act quickly, he would be done for.

Screaming, he turned his back in the direction of the troopers as they directed their fire on him, their bullets penetrating through the Collector's flesh and onto Ethan. The gunfire hurt like hell, but its grip has weakened. Then, he tossed it over his head and slammed it hard to the ground. With an expression nothing short of anger, he drew out his pistol and pointed it at the dying Collector. It showed no expression of fear nor weakness for death. It looked up at him and said, "I will

find--”

Ethan didn't give the Collector a chance to finish its sentence. If that thing will always come back, then he will never stop killing it. He fired twice at its head, causing it to explode not in blood or flesh, but into a burst of black ash as its body disintegrated. Panting, he shook his head as he tried to shrug off the pain.

Then, the container glowed a blue hue and floated several inches into the air. The Courier turned behind him, only to see Liara assisting him with the coffin. He was thankful for that, as it made it easier for him to bring it up to the frigate. With this, he pushed onwards with the container to the ship.

“Enough, dammit!” Tazzik growled as he pulled out his grenade launcher. “It's time to end this!” He turned his weapon at Ethan and fired, launching a couple of grenades at him as he pushed Shepard's body up the stairs and into the frigate. But before he could fire another shot, Feron charged at the hitman and locked his neck with his arms, pinning him down to the ground.

Using V.A.T.S., Ethan managed to shoot down the grenades in the air with his pistol, causing them to explode in sequence. However, the impact from the premature explosion caused both him and coffin to jolt forward, sending them further into the ship as his lead landed hard against the coffin. He was lucky to be alive when he only received a concussion.

His ears rang loudly as more gunfire was heard outside the starship. He turned around, only to see a cloud of smoke down the stairs as it began to clear out. Then, a blurry figure of Liara emerged from the smoke, seemingly no worse for wear. “Ethan, c'mon! Let's go!” she barked, firing several shots as she entered the ship.

He shook his head and complied as he crawled back up to his feet as the asari ran past him. His head was still throbbing from the concussion. He scanned down the stairs for Feron, but the drell was nowhere in sight, even with the smoke clearing up.

He then saw a badly injured trooper, a turian with black markings on his face, crawling up the stairs, his legs bleeding out. *Persistent, huh?* the Courier thought as he raised his pistol once more and fired a shot. However, it was only enough to incapacitate the trooper, since his body didn't explode, as his body slid down the stairs.

The stairs began to close as the frigate lifted off the ground. The Courier dragged the coffin down the small, light-grey corridor, looking for a room large enough to store Shepard's body. Along the way, he took a closer look on the body. Through the small glass, which only showed

her head, he could tell that her body was bunt to a crisp. Liara told him earlier on Omega that the fell through the atmosphere of an uncharted planet when the Normandy ship was destroyed. Recalling what he know about physics, astronomy, and the autonomy of the human body, it was a miracle that the remains of her body were mostly intact. Her exposure to vacuum of space and the impact of landing on such a planet could completely obliterate her body, if not for her armor. Lastly, it was difficult to tell what her gender was, with her body going through hell like that.

He pondered for a moment why the Shadow Broker and Cerberus would be interested in the body of a well-known heroine. He knew that the Alliance could do DNA tests to confirm her identity. But from what he was told about Cerberus, they've done some questionable experiments, something that wasn't so different from what he has seen in the Wasteland.

Maybe they could clone her from her DNA? Or maybe they could resurrect her? Make a VI of her? Still, I would love to see them try, though.

Finally, after looking through each room, Ethan found the cargo hold as he punched in on the door panel, revealing a room with several crates and boxes scattered about. He sighed deeply. Relieved. He placed the container at a safe spot and left the room, closing the door behind him.

After a few minutes of walking, the human arrived at the bridge. When he entered the small cockpit, he saw Liara sitting in front of the controls, typing down commands as she piloted the ship. Through one of the windows, out there in space, Ethan saw billions and billions of stars, along with a massive metallic object out in the distance. The mass relay's long arms stretched out in a direction, its two rings revolving around a glowing, blue core of the mineral, element zero. It was quite a sight, really.

The Courier looked down at Liara as he approached her. The asari appeared to be misty-eyed again, her body trembling from the shock of combat. She turned her attention to him. "Oh, hello," she said somberly. "Is Shepard safe?"

He nodded as he looked back at the window as they get closer to the mass relay. Liara was relieved, but she appeared to be upset, probably at losing Feron. "Y'know," he said, smiling, "ever since I was a kid, I always wanted to go to space, like Captain Cosmos."

"And yet here you are," the asari replied as she turned her attention back to the controls. "I know you're trying to cheer me up, but now is not the time."

"What about Feron?"

“I don’t know,” Liara answered. “I’m not even sure he survived.” She sighed as their ship drew closer to the mass relay. “I think you should get some rest.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Ethan agreed as he began to turn and saunter out of the cockpit. “But I think you should rest as well. Try setting the course for auto pilot to Omega.”

“Thanks, but I needed to be alert in case any more of the Shadow Broker’s men comes after us. Oh, and Ethan?”

The asari turned her attention to Ethan as he stopped in his steps. “Hm?” he asked, turning around to see Liara, his eyes meeting hers.

“Thank you. For everything. It’s good to have you here.”

Ethan smiled. “Well, um,” he gulped. his cheeks blushing as his heart skipped a beat. “Yeah. I need to use some medi-gel because it hurts like hell. And some rest, too. Wake me up when we’re there.” With this, he sauntered out of the cockpit, right as the frigate was within the relay’s reach, propelling the ship as it jumped to its destination.

----**----

Things have been rather quiet, even after they arrived at the busy hangars of Omega. Ethan stared out at a distance, sitting down at the bottom of the stairs to the frigate as he watched Liara setting an arrangement with Alliance officials through her omni-tool, requesting transportation for the body of Commander Shepard to the Citadel, which was said to be the heart of the galactic community. He sighed as he leaned forward and scanned his surroundings. The hangar was huge, busy with many forms of activity.

Many species reside in the hangar. Turians, batarians, asari, and a few vorcha here and there, scavenging for whatever junk they could find in the dark corners of the hangar. They may seem extremely ugly, just as much as the ghouls from the wasteland, but that rather be insulting. Along with that, two krogan making a discussion, and several humans working, he could see ships of various sizes entering and exiting the station, going about their business.

Indeed, the amount of activity in Omega overwhelmed the Courier. More so than the Strip at New Vegas and several communities in the wasteland, including those part of the NCR. He thought for a moment, wondering if he wanted to go back home to his universe. Sure, head seen the ugly side of this universe, and it was full of crap. But like in the wasteland, there is also a good side to it. He just has to run around in the right places.

Also, he could have sworn that he saw a small pack of varren, which are dog-like creatures, running around the place. Apparently, no one seemed to care nor notice anything out of the ordinary about that pack, particularly the strange metal collars around their necks. Although inconvenient, they seemed harmless, and Ethan had more important things to worry about.

“I’m impressed you and that asari managed to escape from the Shadow Broker alive,” a female voice spoke out in the distance.

The Courier turned to his right, seeing a dark-haired woman in a white suit, which he immediately recognized the woman to be Miranda Lawson, approaching him, backed by two armored bodyguards. “I aim to please,” he said flippantly as he sat up and approached the Cerberus agent.

“Of course, only after getting yourself, the asari, and the drell captured,” Miranda frowned.

“I’m adaptable and resourceful, for one,” Ethan shrugged. “Oh, and I have good timing, apparently! Does that count?”

Miranda shook her head in response as her bodyguards gave out a small chuckle. “I assume you have the Commander’s body?” she asked, sighing.

“No, we’re just stopping by to smell the lovely roses on this pisshole of a station,” the Courier answered sarcastically, growling. “Yes, we have Shepard’s body. If we haven’t, we wouldn’t be here, do we?”

“Ethan does this a lot, I think. I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to it,” said Liara as she approached the Courier and the others after trying to make the arrangement with the alliance. Unfortunately for her, she hasn’t had any luck contracting them. He wondered if Cerberus has anything to do with interfering her efforts. “But yes, like he said, we have Shepard’s body. However, we lost Feron.”

“The drell knew the risks as much as anyone else involved when he took up the job,” Miranda replied.

The Courier raised an eyebrow. “So you were looking for him rather than the other way around?” he asked, curious.

Miranda smirked. “You’re correct, but simply put. In fact, he was actually a mercenary

information broker, doing small jobs for the Shadow Broker from time to time. We've tried recruiting him a few times to turn him on the Shadow Broker. I've figured he'd be easy for him to switch sides, since he would be the type that goes for the highest bidder."

"He wasn't," Liara retorted.

"I'm aware of that, Liara," Miranda replied, dismissive. "Fortunately, he agreed to work with us when we expressed the same concerns he had--the Collectors' interests in Shepard's body. But the Broker started to cut him out, preventing him from using his resources. Feron needed a way in, and that was the asari. But you were a spare body. Useful, yes."

Ethan bit his lip as he was reminded of various people who used manipulation as a tool and as a weapon. Chief Hanlon, Elijah, Ulysses, and even that fink Benny, though he did a rather horrible job at manipulating him. That Cerberus agent is quite clever, though.

"And Shepard's body?" the Courier asked, hoping he was right about what Cerberus might be planning on doing with Shepard. "We risked our lives back there to get her body back. It would help us, especially Liara, if we are given some closure."

Miranda thought for a moment, biting her lip. Then she sighed. "Fair enough, I suppose," she spoke as she crossed her arms. "We intend to fully restore Shepard back to the way she exactly was."

"Ethan, wait!" Liara exclaimed as she placed her hand on the Courier's shoulder. He turned to her, his expression nothing short of contempt. "I don't think it's a good idea to hand over Shepard's body to them. I've seen the way they have done their experiments. The rachni, the husks, and even the Thorian. Plus, I'm certain they've jammed the transmissions."

"Pretty sure that's not petty of you for saying about hacking your omni-tool and jamming the signals for the last part," Ethan replied sarcastically to Liara. "But yeah, I figured as much."

The Cerberus agent shook her head. "A mistake. We weren't making an army. We're making shock troopers, designed to take on missions we can't handle. We abandon experimenting on the rachni when we found about their true nature. The same goes for the Thorian. The husks were considered to be too dangerous to control them."

The Courier pinched the bridge of his nose. He doesn't like where the direction is taking. "I don't know much about human traditions, but I think you should let the dead rest," Liara replied to Miranda, distraught. "This isn't what Shepard wanted. This isn't what anyone else wanted for

Shepard.”

Except for Cerberus, apparently.

“This is almost like--” Liara tried to finish, but the Cerberus agent interrupted her.

“Like something the Collectors would have done?” Miranda questioned the asari. “We don’t know what they would’ve done Liara...”

Women, the Courier thought, sighed as he stepped away from Miranda and Liara as they continued arguing about what to do with Shepard’s body. After taking a few steps away, one of Miranda’s bodyguards approached him.

‘Hey,’ the bodyguard called out, his voice distorted by his white helmet, which completely covered his face. “ You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m alright,” the Courier answered, looking at the bodyguard. “Just taking my mind off the catfight.”

“You and me both,” the bodyguard replied flippantly. “I don’t know much about the asari, but between her and the boss, they’re packin’ up some heat over there. Biotics are flarin’ up, too. He tilted his head to the right. The Courier turned his attention to Liara and the Cerberus operative. Although the bodyguard was exaggerating about the catfight, but the way both of them showed their expressions at each other, it was indeed heated. “Now I know a ting or two about how biotics work. Unless you got balls of steel, run the hell away. You don’t want to see them angry.”

“It’ll likely not come to that, y’know,” the Courier replied. “I’ll talk to them. Get it resolved.”

The bodyguard scoffed. “Heh. your funeral, pal.”

The Courier ignored the Cerberus trooper and sauntered toward Liara and Miranda as he weighed his options. If he gave Shepard’s body to the Alliance, they would likely just give her a formal and flashy funeral. Keyword ‘likely.’ If they were informed about the Collectors and the Reapers and didn’t dismiss them as some obscure myth, then they would send out squadrons to take out the Collectors, stabilize their colonies in the Terminus Systems. *And then what?* he asked himself. *Do they actually know about the Collectors and the Reapers? Besides, do they have the means and the resources to resurrect the Commander? I would like to seem them try to clone her, though. That would be fun.*

On the other hand, he could encourage Liara to give Shepard's body to Cerberus. HE already know about the measures they took and how extreme they can be. Miranda, the Cerberus officer, could either be lying about Cerberus' plan with Shepard's body or is just simply misinformed. There was also a possibility that Shepard could never be the same if she was brought back to life. He couldn't exactly trust them either. *But how would they resurrect Shepard?* he asked himself. *Maybe they could just ask the Think Tank for the Y-17 trauma hardness--no, wait! Bad idea!*

He also considered other options, but most of them are not pleasant. He didn't like it, bu it was better to be safe than sorry. *Sorry, Liara*, he thought.

The Courier approached the two women. "Liara," he spoke.

The asari turned her attention to the Courier, her expression full of scorn. "What is it?" she asked impatiently.

Ethan exhaled deeply. "We should give Shepard's body to Cerberus." He saw her clenching her fists in anger. "I don't trust them either, Liara, but the way things are going right now, not a lot of people know about these Reapers and the Collectors, so they can't do anything about it."

"Ethan, that's just--" Liara retorted, infuriated.

"Liara, handing Shepard to Cerberus may be our best chance," Ethan exclaimed as he took a step forward. "And the Shadow Broker, his agents, and the Collectors will have a hard time getting her body back if we do hand Shepard over to Cerberus."

The asari paused for a moment, thinking over her options before letting out a sigh. "I...I'm sorry for being so rash. You're right," she sighed. Then she turned to the Cerberus operative. "But you'll keep your word: Shepard will exactly be the way she is before. If you don't..."

"You have my word," Miranda smiled, sighing in relief. "Shepard was fortunate for making some good friends. It turns out we were right to put our faith in you. But as for you," she continued, turning her attention to Ethan. "We would like you to come with us."

"So you can see my good looks?" Ethan asked sarcastically as he pulled a smug smirk. "Or is it about my performance for the mission?"

"More about the performance and the information you brought from the base," Miranda answered.

“Huh. That makes sense,” the Courier shrugged. “But what about the ship? And my old equipment, for one?”

“For the ship, we’ll put it to good use. Otherwise, we dispose of it. As for your equipment, we can guarantee that we can deliver them to you, once we arrive at the station and you receive your payment. Though--”

“It’s better not to finish that sentence. Trust me,” the Courier responded swiftly, interrupting the Cerberus operative. “So what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

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Much of the trip to one of Cerberus’ bases, along with the preparations made, was thankfully uneventful. Well, apart from Ethan spotting a figure out in space that resembled a blue police box, but nobody else seemed to notice or care. Not long after he and the others arrived at the station, he overheard that the scientists involved may not be able to restore Shepard due to the suboptimal preservation systems in the body, as her body was even worse than he and anyone else had expected. At first, the Courier regretted his decision, but with the information he had provided from the OSD and his Pip-Boy, it may suggest something else otherwise, even giving a chance that the project will succeed. Suspiciously enough, he hasn’t heard much about Tazzik’s ship. At the very least, he hoped they got rid of it.

While the Courier waited for his payment and his equipment to show up, he had a chat with another operative that was in charge of security at the station. His name was Jacob Taylor. He seemed like a nice guy, which made the conversation rather pleasant, though brief due to Jacob’s job. He was then told by Liara that she’ll be on the planet Illium as an information broker, fighting against the Shadow Broker at his own game. She, it, they, whatever. After receiving his equipment back and his payment, the Courier said his goodbyes to Liara.

With this, Ethan left for Omega, his mind filled with many thoughts and questions. He thought about how would he find the time to fully repair his Transportalponder and get back home, along with figuring what measures to take, especially against the Shadow Broker and his mooks. Eventually, he arrived at Omega, ready to start anew.

Even though Shepard may rise from the dead, blood will still spill, fighting will continue, and many shall live and die, just as anywhere else, because, as he heard numerous times before, war...war never changes. However, he would add, people do change, through the roads they walk. And that road was just the beginning.