

Mass Effect: Final Error - Interlude 3

Novus Peregrine

Chapter 34: War Preparations

Oriana couldn't help but shake her head in disbelief at what she was seeing. She'd known, both as a student of history and on account of Miranda's reports about them from her first timeline, that the Rachni were ridiculously fast to build up. Not just in population, but in material assets after a population boom. Now, as she looked out over the secret shipyard, swarming with Rachni and nearly half the size of New Dawn's own clandestine yards, the point was driven home all over again. The fact that only half of those Rachni were *actually* Rachni only made the whole thing more surreal.

As much as she'd wanted to, Oriana hadn't been able to be present when the meetings between the Rachni Queen and the Council teams, and the Thorian and the Council teams, had taken place. Those sorts of diplomatic talks could stretch out, and Oriana hadn't been able to afford that much time in once place. She had, of course, had *New Dawn* assets at both meetings, acting as an effectively neutral party...but she hadn't been able to be present herself. Which neatly explained her near-disbelief as she gazed out over the yards.

In total, *New Dawn's* experiment in time-travel ship construction had yielded around seventy dreadnaughts, plus their supporting fleet elements. Given that the entire Turian fleet had possessed only forty, the results of the experiment had been considered a wild success by pretty much everyone. Even the Council, when they had become aware of it, had been amazed how well the experiment had gone.

Which is why the *thirty* nearly complete Dreadnaughts laid out in the Rachni-Thorian yard was honestly more than a little intimidating. Sure, they'd had a lot of help with raw resources. And yes, they hadn't been operating under as harsh of secrecy conditions as the Prometheus Yards. It could even be pointed out that the combined effort was aided and abetted by using *New Dawn* blueprints. Yet, it was still stupidly impressive that so many Dreadnaughts had been managed, essentially from scratch, in less than five and a half years. Project Prometheus had possessed over ten times that timeframe to work with, after all. And it could be argued that the automated mechs at the Prometheus yards *should* have been nearly as efficient as the hive-minded Rachni and Thorian efforts were.

Still, for all that the implications for *after* the Reapers were potentially a little concerning, Oriana had to admit that the two species unexpectedly hitting it off had proven a windfall. Their choice to contribute in this fashion to the war effort was an unexpected, though perhaps understandable, as neither species wanted to get directly involved with the fighting. Still, just how well the two species worked together had proven a surprise. She'd had no idea, herself, that Rachni could apparently birth pure drones, with no mind of their own. Which just so happened to make them perfect hosts for Thorian spores. The result was a near doubling of how many 'Rachni' could be managed. A single Rachni Queen couldn't have handled all the Rachni bodies out there, crawling over the shipyard. But, combined with the sheer mental power of the eons old Thorian? The Thorian had actually been able to control almost as many as the Queen, despite having to puppet its bodies entirely, instead of simply gently guiding like the Queen did with her own workers.

Oriana turned to her sister, who she'd appointed to look after the *New Dawn* war assets building program after their destruction of Cerberus. It was a job she'd done amazingly well at, doubly so since Shepard had also called on Miranda's expertise to wrangle the various mad scientists she'd pulled out of the Terminus. Seeing someone else manage a similar workload to Oriana herself was just...disconcerting. She knew, biologically, that she and Miranda were a lot closer to twins than older and younger sisters. Or had been before Oriana's brush with Asarihood. But Oriana hadn't really had to face the fact that she had been *designed* to be perfect in the last go around. Which made seeing her sibling actually *keep up* far more emotionally troubling than she'd expected. Still, she could live with it.

"So, other than this unexpected boon, how are the other yards we're participating with doing? Are we going to hit the projected numbers?"

Miranda tore her own gaze away from the frenetic activity visible in space outside.

"More than, actually. Even you, I, and Aethyta together underestimated just how potent the Asari economy and industry would be once pivoted to a war footing. When you look out there," Miranda waved at the activity all over the yard, "it's a bit hard to imagine how the Asari and Salarians lived long enough for the Turians and Krogan to help turn the corner against the Rachni. But, the truth is, that there are literal *trillions* of Asari, galaxy-wide. It's hard to conceptualize that, until you see just how ludicrously high their wartime output is. They were actually *keeping up* with the Rachni in ship building, by virtue of sheer numbers. They just couldn't *train* people fast enough, since Asari don't learn all that quickly as a rule. It was honestly more the fact that the Turians provided a windfall of over fifty billion population with at least *some* degree of military training that *really* turned the corner in the space half of the Rachni Wars."

Yep. Miranda was right. That *was* hard for Oriana to wrap her mind around. No one, not even the Asari themselves, ever really seemed able to conceptualize just how many of their species were running around. Even with the attrition rate caused by the 'wild years' of maidenhood, a space-faring species that *didn't die of old age, ever*, resulted in intimidating numbers. It also probably explained why the Asari hadn't exactly felt threatened by the early Salarians when they'd made the original Citadel Council. The Asari had already had stupid population numbers at that point, compared to the short-lived Salarian species, likely leaving them aware of just how lopsided the power balance actually was.

For that matter, it might actually explain the Salarian's obsession with all things asymmetric warfare related. If they'd known from nearly the start of their spacefaring days that they were outnumbered *horribly*, it would make sense that the scientifically inclined species had turned to ethically questionable warfare concepts in an attempt to even those odds. It also probably explained why humanity was such a headache for the Asari. Barely 12 billions humans, but somehow able to play with the big kids when, by all accounts, they ought to be a minor species.

"Aethyta understood better than we did, of course. But even she didn't quite grasp just how much of the Asari industrial capacity was running at negligible, lazy, speed. It took them three years to get it cranked up to max...but at this point they are out building everyone else, *combined*. And they still technically haven't hit anything like their maximum production capacity yet."

Miranda passed her a datapad, with the building program for the Asari fleet pulled up...and Oriana goggled.

“Are you serious? And can they *crew* these ships?!”

Miranda shrugged.

“Yes. Though only because they are building on the highly automated designs *New Dawn* provided everyone. Remember, a significant chunk of those trillions of population have at least *some* level of spacefaring experience. They won’t be replacing their losses in trained personnel as easily as everyone else. But they have the initial numbers to lead off with, at least.”

Oriana shook her head, staring at the naval estimates of the Asari fleet and feeling a tiny spark of hope ignite in her chest...

Oriana refrained from saying anything as Tali clung to Shepard. The Quarian had broken down shortly after coming aboard the Phoenix, and Oriana felt helpless to do anything about it. Particularly since she *knew* that it was partly her own fault that Tali was a mess. It had been Oriana, after all, that had quietly forced the deadlock of the Migrant Fleet over the Geth issue to a conclusion. She’d never expected the ‘Shadow Broker’s’ assassination of Admiral Daro’Xen to end up outing Rael’Zorah’s experimentation on the Geth. The Quarian Fleet was so insular that, in her first time around, Oriana had never known exactly what had gone down aboard it. Other than something about Tali being charged with treason and nearly exiled.

Now, she felt a mix of sad self-recrimination for causing someone she liked so much pain...and cold bitter certainty that it had been necessary. The Quarian Fleet had been deadlocked about the Geth issue for too long, and they’d needed the Quarian’s to get off their asses too badly. The death of Daro’Xen had been a less obvious way to defeat the Admiralty Board opposition to peace than offing Han’Gerrel would have been. Unfortunately, with Han’Gerrel being the most vocal of the Pro-War Admirals, him being quietly disposed of would have been far more suspicious. But Daro’Xen’s amoral viewpoint of wanting to force control over the Geth had been just as dangerous, making her a viable target. Oriana simply hadn’t realized that Rael’Zorah would go down with her. And part of her hated the fact that Tali’s father having been exiled from the Fleet had actually made it even easier to end the deadlock.

Both of the new Admirals that replaced Daro’Xen and Rael’Zorah had voted for peace with the Geth. Which, in turn, had allowed the Quarians to finally return to their Homeworld. A Homeworld Rael’Zorah would never see, since he was now an exile. And poor Tali had needed to stay through the entire, agonizing transition. As one of the most well-known Quarians to both the other Galactic Powers *and* to the Geth, her efforts had been *absolutely critical* to keeping the peace. A peace that had served to free up the single largest fleet in existence for conversion against the Reapers.

It couldn’t *all* be converted, of course. But the entirety of the Heavy Fleet and Patrol Fleets had been converted. And several thousand more had been scrapped for the materials needed to build three dozen new Dreadnaughts to reinforce the Heavy Fleet. Given that the Quarians were the only species still using a Heavy Cruiser design that was only *just* shy of Dreadnaught size as well, they now represented more military power than the Turians had been able to muster, at least prior to the current build up.

Yet, for all Tali's importance, the price seeing everything through had cost someone she considered a friend left Oriana numb. Not because she didn't want to feel. But because she *couldn't* feel. If she did, she'd start feeling all the other sins weighing her down. She couldn't afford to break down. The Galaxy couldn't afford for her to break down. Not yet.

Oriana was beginning to think that, just maybe, it was better she didn't survive this war. If she did, she didn't know what would be left of the girl she'd once been. The girl who had, in a way, died when she jumped through an experimental beam and landed in the past...

Chapter 35: Recharge

Spectre candidate Ashely Williams, assigned to Spectre Shepard for training, appeared in front of Oriana without warning. It was probably a testament to how tired Oriana was that she not only hadn't seen the former gunnery chief coming, but also didn't react in time as Williams stole the datapad right out of her hands.

"Ch-Spectre Willaims! What are you..."

Oriana blinked, stilling as Ashley, dressed in casual clothes, put a finger to her lips.

"Nope. You didn't let me self-destruct and I'm not going to let you do it either. You're going to go take a fucking nap, even if I have to have Chakwas drug you. And then you're going out with me tonight. If you get lucky enough, you might even wake up with me in the morning. But it will require a lot of alcohol first. I'm sure, even if you fail, that you'll still at least wake up with *at least one* gorgeous redhead. Possibly two and a blue chick with doe eyes."

Oriana gaped at the blunt statement...then let out an 'oof' of escaping air as the Spectre *physically picked her up*, threw her over one shoulder, and started carrying her off to her quarters. She tried to protest, instinctively reaching for her datapad collection...only to see a grinning Alliana already casually swooping in to pick them up.

"Consider that an order, Ori!"

This was...probably technically not mutiny since it was Shepard's ship. Damn it. Oriana sighed and *did not pout* as she was carried off to her cabin. The fact that she could already feel her eyes growing heavy now that she wasn't focused on something might have had something to do with her lack of resistance...

Oriana had to admit that she was feeling better. She also had to admit that she was surprised that Ashley had somehow come to *own* the Silver Coast Casino. Apparently, there had been some drama during the cleanup of remaining Cerberus assets that Oriana hadn't gotten involved with. The result had, apparently, included the death of the Casino's former owner. Shepard had decided, as Ashely's Spectre mentor, to use it as an opportunity to teach Ashley how to build up her own resource network. With the result being that the Casino was now wholly owned by Ashley and proving quite profitable too. Given what she'd done with the place, Ashley clearly understood how to party, even if most took her for a stick-in-the-mud when they first got to know her.

Honestly, the exotic dancers were the most surprising addition for Oriana, knowing how thoroughly heterosexual Ashley was. But Oriana admitted that they did add something to the place, particularly as they actually *weren't* strippers. Ashley had, instead of the usual Asari strippers at every-other-club, had arranged something more like hourly burlesque shows. She'd somehow gathered up a mix of chorus and belly dancers, stage magicians, and sensual singers. In enough numbers to cycle them so you wouldn't see the same show twice unless you stayed all day. The entire thing had managed to add a touch of sophistication to the casino that was unusual in Citadel space, though not unheard of back on Earth. The number of fascinated Asari taking in every show told Oriana that her friend had likely started a new trend or two for Asari entertainment. A thought which amused Oriana greatly, even as she sipped on the delightfully original cocktail Ashley had ordered a round of for everyone.

She had, she realized now, very much needed this. That did not mean, however, that she had forgotten about Ashley's offhand remark. She knew that the Spectre didn't really believe Oriana could somehow get her into bed again...but the challenge that lack of belief offered was *exactly* the sort of distraction that Oriana could use most right now. Which is why she'd positively *insisted* that Ashley give her the tour personally, while the rest of their little shore party split up, each with a couple of dozen high-value chips provided by Ashley for their amusement.

Now. She knew what she wanted. But what was the best way to get from point A to point B? Simply getting a handsome man involved again would be too simple. So...what about if she...

Ashley whimpered as Oriana sucked her neural-linked cock, taking it down her throat entirely and humming a little ditty. The toy, now flawlessly matched to Ashley's skin tone, had been the secret weapon Oriana had decided on for her second pass at getting the straight woman into bed. The extremely modern, extremely advanced and extremely expensive take on a strapon was actually a recent development. Attempts like it had been made in the past, of course. But the Neuralux 3 was the first *true* success for a toy like it. Using neural linkers like those from the stimulator sets that Oriana had purchased for use with Liara and Shepard, the Neuralux did it's best to translate what was happening to it into sensations that the female brain was able to process. Previous attempts had all attempted to link most or all of their sensations to a woman's clitoris. And to say that the results had been mixed, at best, was a bit of an understatement. For all that the clitoris has more nerve endings in a smaller area than a penis, both started from the same embryonic origins. Meaning that the penis still *has* a similar number of nerve endings. They are simply more spread out.

Which is where previous attempts had all failed. Previous neural linkers had attempted to map what happened to the entire fake cock one-for-one to the clitoris. Inevitably, the nuance was lost and the sensations from the toy ended up feeling identical to simply having the clitoris sucked on directly...only *less* intense due to the degree of removal from the source. Even the best neural links didn't have the same perfect fidelity as real flesh and blood, after all. The result had been that toys like the Neuralux were relegated to niche use. Occasionally fun or kinky, but nothing special. And certainly not considered an 'accurate' experience.

At least, that had been the case until the Neuralux 3, where someone had decided to lean into the fact that the clitoris and penis started, at the core, from the same embryonic origin. They had theorized that this meant that, at least in theory, the female brain actually *was* able to handle input

from a penis. It was just that the connection couldn't be through the existing genitalia, without being warped by the body's own anatomy. Thus was born the Neuralux 3, whose neural linker was an injectable nanite implant that connected to the brain in the same way a biotic amp did.

Sadly, this meant that biotics like Oriana couldn't currently make use of it. Ashley Williams, however...wasn't a biotic. She also hadn't been even remotely sober when she'd agreed to 'try it out' as a 'fun experiment.' If the tiny implant wasn't designed to break down and be flushed by the body after a simple command, Ashley might even be super pissed about that when she sobered up entirely. Thankfully, the implant *was* temporary, and Oriana intended for the Spectre's night to be far to spectacular for her to be angry about Ori's methods. Just like last time.

Which is why she was currently grinning around Ashley's artificial cock as she slowly, teasingly withdrew. Ashley whimpered and bucked, cumming for the third time since the blowjob had started, and Ori figured that was enough of a warmup. Ashley might retain the ability to cum a lot more often than her female anatomy provided, but the woman was still looking dazed, and they hadn't even gotten to the main event yet! Well...main *events* actually, considering that Kelly was currently tied up and gagged in a chair nearby, being slowly tormented by the vibrator set on low stuffed in her pussy. Ashley deserved a full experience, after all! And getting a taste of the difference between two woman was an important part of that!

Grinning at her own blatant justification, Oriana gave one last kiss to the tip of Ashley's artificial cock, then began kissing her way up the Spectre's body. What had started as a slightly drunken game of 'don't you wonder what it would feel like,' had now reached Oriana's intended goal from the start. Teasingly, she lined her pussy up on that cock and ground her wet folds into its glands. Ashley tried to buck again, instinctively desperate for more contact...but this time, Oriana held her down firmly with her biotics. The Spectre whimpered but stilled like an obedient puppy that had misbehaved. Ori's eyes widened at that, filing away the previously unconsidered idea that Ashley might be either a sub or a switch, before shaking off the revelation. Grinding only for a few more moments, just to make her control clear, she proceeded to reward her 'victim' for being a Good Girl by finally, agonizingly slowly, sinking onto the brunette's cock.

Ashley came again barely a dozen thrusts in, overwhelmed by the new sensations. And the night was only getting started. After all, Oriana had plenty of stims, a writhing redhead nearby, and no intention at all of stopping until all three of them were fully satisfied...

Oriana's lips curved upward in amusement as the smell of the food finally caused the chief to stir, in a near mirror image of the first time she'd gotten the chief into bed with her. Her grin turned into a smirk as a hangover-induced moan came from under the sheets. In a deliberate echo of their previous affair, Oriana spoke up. "Sober-up hypo is on the nightstand next to you."

The words, once they processed for the other woman, resulted in a slow hand creeping out from under the covers to feel around on the nightstand. It soon found the hypospray and grabbed it, before retreating back under the sheets. There was a soft hiss from the injector as the chief used the hypospray, then thirty seconds of quiet...followed by the still-nude chief sitting up in bed, covers falling away from her naked chest. Oriana ogled appreciatively, then grinned and deflected a thrown pillow

with a tiny bit of biotic power. The action, almost identical to their first time, caused a giggle to burst forth from the third person in the room. Kelly, who's presence was a distinct departure from that first time, was happily devouring the food already, still unrepentantly nude and a little bit sweaty from the quickie she and Ori had enjoyed while waiting for room service.

"Now, now...that's no way to thank someone that set up that hypo for you...and ordering all three of us room service!"

Ashley huffed, actually crossing her arms in what should have been a glare but looked far more like a pout. "I can't believe you got me into bed *again*. For a second threesome. And without a guy this time, even."

Oriana grinned and decided a little needling was in order. "There was still a cock, though! Did you enjoy having it? Ohhh, and who was better? Men never want to answer that. So you'll have to enlighten us on if my glorious muscle control, or Kelly's smaller, tighter pussy was more amazing!"

Ashley turned a *delightful* shade of embarrassed red, and actually shrunk back under the covers for a moment when Kelly looked over at her with sparkling, interested eyes. Clearly, the redhead wanted to know the answer. "Fuck. I don't even *know*. I came so many times that I think I either blacked out or blanked out. I haven't entered subspace like that since I was a *teenager*."

Oriana grinned hugely at the confirmation of her thought the previous night. The way Ashley had just said that, Ori was betting she was either a switch, or a sub that had repressed the behaviors under military needs. She was *absolutely* going to have to find out which, in the future. For now...

"That just means we'll need to try it again! Oooohh, I bet you'd like to compare it to Asari Azure, now that you've got a frame of reference. And, hmmm, I wonder if you'd like to Top Shepard, or if you'd prefer her to tie you down and take her own pleasure from you. Shepard gives me the best kind of chills when she goes all dommie!"

Kelly swallowed a big bite of eggs, before chirping in with her own two cents.

"Heck yes! She does the whole 'piercing-commander gaze' thing and you just go weak in the knees!"

Ori grinned. "Only the knees?"

Kelly didn't even blush as she cheerfully shook her head, eyes sparkling, before returning to the massive portion of food she'd plated for herself.

Ashley, meanwhile, looked like she was halfway between incredibly aroused at the thought and extremely confused that she *was* aroused by that thought while still sober. Taking pity on the poor straight girl they might have just given a bi-crisis too, Oriana distracted the Spectre by throwing her a robe. She watched with interest as the woman shook herself, but didn't hesitate to slide out of bed fully nude without putting it on. She didn't miss the conflicted look the former gunnery-chief gave the cleaned-up Neuralux toy sitting on the nightstand as she mechanically robed herself, either...

Chapter 36: Final Preparations and Opening Gambits

In the month following Ashley's intervention, Oriana had gotten somewhat back on balance. There was still a constant stream of things to do, or to be worried about, but she'd taken herself in hand and parceled out a lot more of the work to others. As Shepard had pointed out, roughly but warmly, in the aftermath of their leave, Oriana was one of the people the galaxy most needed to be in top form when the Reapers finally arrived. All the preparation in the world wouldn't help if one of their most critical linchpins collapsed from overwork and stress two hours into the invasion.

That talk had led to Oriana forcing herself to take a step back from the many R&D projects, and even from ground team engagements. She kept up enough training time that she'd be in peak shape when she inevitably got into a fight, but she also had to admit that she wasn't going to be able to be constantly on the front lines like she had been at first. Too much of the galaxy's war industry and technology boom rested on the work she'd done with *New Dawn*. Worse, she'd been heavily involved at every step in setting up the numerous traps that they were hoping would even the odds against the Reapers. She would utterly refuse to let herself be fully sideline...but she was going to have to pick and choose her engagement in the war. Much more so that even Alliana would have to.

Despite their best efforts and some insane building programs, everyone knew they would be *starting* this war at a major deficit in capital ships. Oriana had shared *everything* war and Reaper related that she could remember from her first go around at life with a dozen Asari war college experts. With those experts in turn sharing them out with dozens of other experts of various species, creating a think-tank to try and crunch numbers and build the best strategies they could. With her role as the brain behind *New Dawn Enterprises* combined with her knowledge of the situation, Oriana was a member of that think-tank even now, though it was one of the things she's stepped back somewhat from. The people involved were fully aware just how much of the tech advantage they now had was *Oriana's* own work. Not stuff she'd brought from the future. But things she'd come up with all on her own, or funded others to create. Adding in the fact that she'd also gotten a brutal crash course in asymmetric warfare from Aethyta, and the powers that be weren't stupid enough to exclude her from the planning.

Which, unfortunately, was part of what constantly threatened to keep her up at night. Prior to Oriana's return from the future, the galaxy had possessed a combined Dreadnaught strength of just under 100 ships. The minor economic boom she'd created, combined with the massive infusion of new military technology represented by *New Dawn Enterprises*, had managed to push that number up to all of 137 prior to the attack on Eden Prime. The estimated number of Reaper Dreadnaughts, based on her memories of events, was a minimum of 5,000. With the possibility of nearly double that number being true being a frighteningly realistic scenario.

The numbers disparity had been what drove Oriana to focus on new technologies, rather than numbers. It had also, thankfully, galvanized the powers that be once they got involved. Between the Prometheus yards and the Rachni-Thorian joint project, over a hundred new Dreadnoughts, all with the new technologies built in from the keel out, had been added to the galaxy's fleets. The Asari building projects had shocked everyone by adding roughly the same number again. The Geth and Quarian fleets had managed nearly the same between them, and everyone else had gotten the lead out as well, even species like the Elcor and Hanar managing to contribute new Dreadnought hulls. In total, the collective War Fleet had been brought up to just over 600 Dreadnoughts. An incredible accomplishment for such a short span of years to work with. But, even so, they were expecting ten to one odds.

Which, of course, is where all the other planning had come in. There were only so many shipyards that could be commandeered, converted, or built. But there were other things that could be made to give them an edge. Ground Emplaced Grasers like those that had been used on Eden Prime. Orbital Defense Platforms with both graser and massive mass effect guns that dwarfed the size and range of any Dreadnought. Carriers, mines, remote missile pods, and some seriously frightening weapons of mass destruction. Every terrifying idea and mad science project had been pulled out of storage, hunted down, or dreamed up. Nothing was off limits...and a *whole lot* of genies had been released from bottles that they'd likely never be able to cork back up again. Even if they survived the Reapers, the end result might be a galaxy more terrifying than any living being cared to contemplate. And Oriana, if she survived, was going to have to bear the burden of having been the catalyst for all of it. She wondered, at times, if history would admire her? Despise her? Or, perhaps, even do it's best to erase her.

Whichever was the case. She'd done everything she could. Somehow, without even knowing how, her actions had even resulted in the Reapers being slower to arrive. It had been just over four years now from the day Nazara was destroyed. Just over a year since the destruction of the Alpha Relay. That was longer than it had been the first time around, by a good six months, and the entire galaxy had been holding its breath as they raced to make use of every extra hour. A state of affairs that had led to Oriana's near-breakdown in the first place.

A state of affairs that had, sadly, just ended. Oriana, with Shepard's hand resting on her shoulder, stood and watched with a blank face as the data streamed in via real-time Quantum Com. The opening gambit of the war was about to begin. And all she could do was watch and listen, hoping that she'd done enough.

"Count is up to 300 Dreadnoughts now, Admiral. And their lead element is beginning to move toward the Kar'shan Relay. I think this is as good as it's going to get."

The sensor tech, one of the most junior officers in the room, managed to keep his calm somehow, despite having the attention of nearly everyone else present. Admiral Ravis Kandros, one of the three Admirals placed in charge of the overall war effort, turned to her fellows. Steven Hackett and Matriarch Lidanya, both of whom had risen to the other two positions in no small part due to the final action against Nazara, met the Turian woman's eyes and nodded. Admiral Kandros, technically the most senior of the three, braced herself and gave the order.

"Activate Queen's Gambit."

Oriana swallowed, knowing full well that *she* was the one it had been named after. It having been Oriana that had daringly pointed out the one glaring hole in the Reaper strategy. A hole that no one, to their knowledge, had ever had the sheer nerve to employ. And they were about to do it *a second time*. A handful of safeties were disengaged by multiple officers...and then a detonation command was sent. Dozens of lightyears away, a tiny package, containing just 1 kg of something *very, very* dangerous, ruptured. A bare instant later, the 1 kg of *antimatter* in question, incredibly difficult to produce even with the collected resources of the galaxy, made contact with the Vular-Kar'shan Mass Relay.

Moments later, 300 Reaper Dreadnoughts, thousands of smaller Reaper ships...and the entirety of the Vular solar system, ceased to exist. A few people gave muted cheers, a few people flinched, and

Oriana closed her eyes. For a long, long minute, no one spoke. Finally, it was Steven Hackett's rough voice that broke the silence.

"It's done. I still don't exactly feel good about it. But it gave us the type of win we need. Three hundred of their capital ships with no losses to ours. And now they won't dare to commit heavy forces to any system that isn't a capital world. Not after we've done this to them twice."

That had been the point, of course. The defense fleets couldn't be everywhere. So they had to make sure the Reapers couldn't be either. With the demonstrated ability and willingness to detonate Mass Relay's on the table, the defenders could avoid having to commit Dreadnoughts to every colony. Smaller colonies could get by with emplaced ground defenses and picket forces of cruisers, so long as the Reapers didn't dare swarm them with a half dozen Dreadnoughts. The price, though...

"Yes, but we've practically cut Kar'shan off. Vular was the only Relay connected to the system, much like your own Arcturus system."

Matriarch Lidanya's voice wasn't accusing, merely resigned. And Admiral Kandros sighed, shoulders slumped, as she added her own words.

"We couldn't have held Kar'shan anyway, not when we slagged its defenses ourselves less than two years ago. It's why we entertained this idea at all. And we evacuated the Vular colony entirely beforehand. Besides, they aren't *entirely* cut off. If we all survive this war, we'll be able to reconnect with them."

Oriana nodded, as did several others around the room. One thing the Citadel Alliance had committed to early on was building as many of the mini-relay's the Protheans had figured out how to construct as possible. Several had been used during the invasion of Kar'shan. And more of them had been installed after operation Queen's Gambit had been conceived. They were hideously expensive and unsuited to anything larger than land transports. But with a full dozen of them on the Batarian homeworld, Kar'shan could still receive outside assistance. As well as *send* assistance, since part of their new government's acceptance of this operation had been the exchange of the Alliance's help in building up their infrastructure. Kar'shan now had the ability to mass manufacturer part and munitions, and a steady stream of that product would flow from Kar'shan to the other homeworlds for the remainder of the war.

For all that it would now be relatively safe, however, the destruction of its only connecting Relay also meant that Kar'shan would likely be isolated in *space* for decades. If building mini-relays was hideously expensive, then replacing the Vular Relay was a gargantuan task. And, even if they won against the Reapers, the galaxy would likely be stuck rebuilding from the war for generations. There was no telling how long it would before Kar'shan's relative isolation could end. A heavy price to pay. They all simply had to hope that it had been worth it...

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