Scattering Grief

by thievinghippo

Summary

It is said one joy can scatter a hundred griefs. But after the destruction of the Reapers, there is hardly time for either as a new threat emerges, determined to make Shepard realize how much death a person can take.
The Six of Swords, Upright

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**The Six of Swords, Upright**: A need for continuing effort and strength. Once one obstacle is surmounted another presents itself.

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March 2187 - Cape Canaveral, United North American States

Wrex was late.

The krogan was supposed to be at her prefab five minutes ago. Sitting on the uncomfortable plastic chair, Shepard crossed her legs and brought up her omni-tool. She needed a distraction. They were supposed to be well on their way to a meeting with Primarch Victus, but instead she was alone in her tiny dwelling with too much damn time to think. And thinking led to only one thing

Counting. Shepard shut her eyes, knowing that once the numbers started rolling in her head there was no stopping them.

Ninety-seven days since the Reapers had been destroyed.

Ninety-three days since she was found in the wreckage of the Citadel.

Sixty-four days since she woke from the coma and discovered the explosion caused complete hearing loss in both ears.

Twenty-nine days since she was released from the hospital.

Twelve days since the last major fight between the krogan and the rest of the damn planet.

Eight days since the *Normandy* should have run out of dextro rations.

*Garrus* …

When they had rescued the students at Grissom Academy, James Vega laughed about David Archer’s counting. But Shepard was an engineer. She *knew* numbers. She understood them. There’s a sense of peace in numbers, a reality that couldn’t be denied. And as much as she would like to, there was no denying that there were only a certain number of dextro calories on board the *Normandy* to be consumed.

She closed her eyes tight. Why hadn’t she bought more? Or pinched a couple of boxes of those high quality rations they found on Triginta Petra? Garrus had loved those, said they were so much better than the rations that were usually on the *Normandy*. But instead of keeping some for her own dextro crew, she delivered them all to the Citadel, pleased that she found yet another way to assist the war effort.

With a slap on her wrist, she closed her omni-tool interface. The battery was already running low, and she only had so many daily energy reserves allotted. Her hearing implants were controlled through her omni-tool; if it lost power, she lost her ability to hear. Though there were times, like now, when Shepard would turn the implants off completely and simply watch sky. It had been a long time since she lived planet side. She had forgotten how the sky constantly changed.
She wondered where the *Normandy* was. Galactic comm systems had been up for a month now and there was no sign of her ship. No messages, no word from the QEC, nothing. Shepard refused to give up hope that they were alive out there, she would ‘keep faith’ as so many people had told her to do over the years, even if the Alliance made the decision to classify them as ‘missing in action.’ But even if the ship was still in one piece, nothing changed the fact that Tali and Garrus had no food to eat.

And if the *Normandy* wasn’t found, in another month, the levo crew members would be out of food. The thought of her crew, her brave, loyal crew would live through the war only to starve to death…

No. She wouldn’t go down that path. Bad enough to keep thinking of Garrus with diminished shoulders, and an even trimmer waist, but she could not, she *would* not, think of the rest of the crew in those same terms. They deserved better than that. Garrus, too, deserved better.

A sudden hand on her shoulder caused Shepard to look up, unholstering her pistol as she did so. Wrex stood at her side, lips moving, but she heard no sound.

“Sorry, Wrex, implants are off,” Shepard said, raising a hand in apology. She quickly brought up the app on her omni-tool interface and turned the implants back on.

“Said I was sorry for being late,” Wrex said, “but I’m not going to say it again. You’re damn lucky you can turn the Council off on a whim, Shepard.”

“I would never, ever do that, Wrex,” Shepard said, standing up, stretching her arms over her head. Wrex chuckled. “Give me a minute, I want to go to the bathroom.”

“Couldn’t you take a piss before I got here?” Wrex asked.

Shepard started walking towards the tiny bathroom in her prefab. She was lucky to have one. The majority of prefabs had to share a communal bathroom with nearby neighbors. “You made me wait, now I’m making you wait. Haven’t you ever heard that before? It’s a power play.”

“Stupid political bullshit,” Wrex muttered under his breath as she closed the bathroom door behind her.

She quickly did her business then made the mistake of glancing in the mirror. The image in the mirror didn’t look all that different from the one she saw before the war, not really. The third degree burns on the left side of her face and neck had healed nicely, though the pigment of the healed skin was slightly different than the rest of her face. The result was almost comical; a straight line from her hairline to her breastbone. There’d been some nerve damage, so there was less feeling in her neck. Shepard’s hair was growing out. Her Cerberus implants grew her hair faster than normal, so her hair was already slightly longer than it had been when she was in command on the SR-1.

Her hair annoyed her; the waves were coming out in force and it wasn’t quite long enough to put in a pony tail. She was so used to having a shaved head. But once Garrus had come aboard the *Normandy* after the Reapers invaded, he considered shaving her head his job. Sitting on the floor of her cabin with Garrus behind her on the couch, slowly and methodically dragging the omni-razor across her scalp were some of most relaxing moments she had during the war. If the worst came to pass, she simply would never shave her head again.

“About damn time,” Wrex said as Shepard emerged from the bathroom.

She shrugged as she picked up a few datapads. “Cold out there?”

“For a human? No. The sooner the relays are fixed the better,” Wrex said.
“Three months to go, then you’ll get home to your babies,” Shepard said with a grin.

Wrex held up his hands immediately. “Don’t even joke about that, Shepard. We’ve got two months before the eggs are supposed to hatch. Gonna be the longest months of my life.”

“Supposed to?” Shepard said, pulling a jacket over her BDU. “Wrex, it’s going to happen.”

“We’re changing the subject, Shepard,” he said, opening up the door to her prefab. “Let’s talk about how people are actually listening to me.”

Shepard walked outside and let the sunshine warm her face. Originally, the Alliance wanted to set up an operations base in Vancouver. But being the middle of winter, it made more sense to settle closer to the equator. Especially when the leaders of the rest of the races planned on staying close by.

While Cape Canaveral was warm, there was still enough of a chill from the ocean to warrant a coat. Shepard wrapped her arms around her center, trying to ignore how her frame was still too slight. Everyone was rationing, her included. Until more suitable farm land was recovered, rations and genetically modified food was the entirety of her diet. At least she had food to eat, unlike some…

Don’t go down that road, Shepard, not now.

“The krogan finally getting in line?” Shepard asked as they walked towards the turian refugee camp. Around them, the city was a contradiction. On one side new prefabs were being constructed, while on the other a dead Harvester waited to be burned. The city smelled like burning bodies twenty-four hours a day. And unlike Garrus, it was a smell she could never get used to.

“Now that we’re making them work for their food, yes,” Wrex said gruffly. “I didn’t want it to come to that, but if they have something to do, there’ll be less fighting.”

“Been almost two weeks since the last bout,” Shepard said, putting her hands deep in her coat pockets. Up until two weeks ago, the krogan forces on Earth were restless. They wanted to fight, or better yet, mate, now that the genophage was cured and without easy access to either? They simply went out of their way looking for a fight. And with the other races just as unhappy being stuck on Earth, the krogan found some easily.

But then Wrex and Grunt came up with the idea that no krogan would be given their rations for the week unless they proved they worked. Since then, productivity soared across the planet. Krogan everywhere were helping on building sites, doing heavy construction, chopping up the empty shells of the Reapers to be put in cargo ships. Scuffles broke out now and then, but nothing like there was. Amazing how the promise of food could get people to work.

The turians guarding the refugee camp waved her and Wrex in without checking any credentials. “Should talk to the Primarch about that,” Shepard muttered.

“If Victus wants to have lazy soldiers guard his camp, why should you care?” Wrex said.

Shepard looked around the camp, noting how organized it seemed compared to the human encampments. Not a single turian laid about; each had a job, even the children, and they were doing that job proudly. Victus had told her they made a makeshift hierarchy specifically for all the turians on Earth, which numbered at more than a million, between the ones who managed to get off the Citadel and the ones stationed on ships which fought in the final battle.

The numbers started rolling in her head again. When the Reapers invaded, there had been approximately twelve billion humans on Earth. With the latest census data, there were only four billion now. Two out of three people on Earth were killed because of the Reapers. And more would
die in the upcoming days. Almost every other day there were reports of suicides from those who had been unfortunate enough to be caught in the Reapers’ enslavement camps. Indoctrination was common. With the Reapers gone, those indoctrinated felt they had no other choice but to die by their own hand.

*Eighty-three minutes inside a dead Reaper …*

Shepard told the voice in her head to shut up. She made the choice to destroy the Reapers; would that be the choice of someone indoctrinated?

“Glad you can be here for this, Shepard,” Wrex rumbled.

“This might just work, Wrex. It could be the making of the krogan,” Shepard said.

They entered one of the larger prefab units in the camp, the turian headquarters. One of the Primarch’s aide stood up and saluted. “The Primarch’s ready for you both.” she said.

“Thank you,” Shepard said.

They were led into a small room, with a long table and a few chairs as the only furniture. Primarch Adrien Victus stood at the end of the table, typing on his omni-tool. He closed it shut once they entered. “That’ll be all, Yeoman,” he told the aide.

The door closed behind them. Victus crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back. “Have you given any thought to my proposal, Wrex?”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” Wrex said. “Some of it good, some of it bad.”

“Wrex,” Shepard said, a note of warning in her voice.

“I’m not about to let the turians try to make the krogan a client race, like the volus or the prijians,” Wrex said. “I need to know exactly how the turian hierarchy will view the krogan.”

Victus sighed. “I’ve explained it already, Wrex-”

“Explain it again.”

“Wrex, you’ve seen the numbers,” Shepard said softly.

More numbers. Sometimes she wondered if she’d ever escape them.

One of the first things the turian hierarchy did once the comms were functioning was to complete a census of its citizens. To say the numbers were disheartening was an understatement. Before the Reapers invaded, there were approximately seventeen billion turians scattered across the galaxy. Now there were only five billion. Worse was the population imbalance.

There had always been more male turians than female turians. Instead of an almost even split like humanity, there were generally fifty-eight percent male, forty-two percent female. The disparity explained why the asari were so popular among turian males. The Reapers changed those numbers. For the first time in their recorded history, there were more females than males.

“I’m supposed to care that the turians are less than half of what they were? So are the krogan. And the humans. Don’t know about the asari, but they can reproduce with anyone, so who cares?” Wrex said. “The quarians are down at least one third their population and there weren’t many of them to begin with.”
“The galaxy needs ships,” Victus said. “The turian hierarchy was fortunate in that regard. The majority of our ships are in working condition. What we need are bodies manning those ships.”

“So you want my people,” Wrex said, placing his hand down on the table.

“Yes,” Victus said. “And we would train the krogan that serve on our ships. You’re about to have a population boom, Wrex. But if all you’re doing is raising your children to send them out to fight and be killed? What’s the point? You need skilled workers. You need krogan with medical skills, with technical skills. And we will train them as long as you help patrol our borders.”

Wrex placed a hand over his mouth and stared into the corner of room. “I’m not saying no,” he said finally. “I’d like to talk this over with Bakara.”

“Understood,” Victus said. “Don’t take too long to decide. If what I’m hearing is true, the relays should be up in a few months. I’d like to have this settled well before they go active. Maybe even start training.”

“We’ll talk more in a week,” Wrex said, nodding his head. “Ready, Shepard?”

“Actually, I need to speak to the commander,” Victus said.

Shepard tensed, wondering if Victus had heard something about the Normandy that hadn’t reached her yet. “Certainly, Primarch,” she said slowly.

“We’ll talk later, Shepard,” Wrex said, leaving the room.

Victus let out a breath and sat down in one of the plastic chairs. “That went better than expected.”

“I think he’ll agree,” Shepard said, sitting across from Victus. “He has high hopes for his people, but you’re right. The krogan need skills.”

He ran his hand over his fringe. “And the turian hierarchy needs children.” Victus leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. “It’s only been three months and I think I have an idea how the krogan felt for all those years. Children are going to be our most important commodities, and Spirits, that’ll be nothing compared to a female in her child bearing years. Imagine it will be the same for all the races.”

“But at the same time,” Shepard said, “there are a lot of kids out there that need a home.”

“Funny, but before that final fight on Earth? I thought things would get easier once the Reapers were gone,” Victus said with a bark of a laugh.

“You and me both, sir,” Shepard said. She tapped her foot nervously, a habit she picked up in the last few months. “You wanted to talk to me?”

Victus nodded. His shoulders slumped as if a heavy weight was holding him down. “Is it true the Alliance has officially declared the Normandy to be MIA?” Victus asked.

Shepard closed her eyes and thought about her meeting with Admiral Hackett yesterday. He felt no choice but to declare the ship to be missing-in-action. If no word was heard for another three months, the crew would all be declared KIA.

“Yes,” Shepard said with a sharp intake of breath. “It’s true.”

Victus bowed his head and folded his hands before him, looking like he was in prayer. He was a
man devoted to the Spirits, perhaps he was. “Then I regret to inform you that Operative Garrus Vakarian will be declared killed in service.” He looked up then and right into her eyes. “I considered him a good friend, by the end. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“But the Alliance classified them as MIA, not KIA,” Shepard said, feeling her mouth dry up. She placed a hand on her throat; she needed to breathe. “I don’t understand-”

“The turian military has no designation for MIA soldiers. You’re either alive and fighting for the hierarchy or you’re not,” Victus said gently. “I’ve put this off as long as I could, but with the Alliance making that distinction, I don’t have a choice.”

Shepard stood up and breathed deeply. She would not fall apart in front of the Primarch. She wouldn’t. “I see,” she said finally.

“I understand from our correspondence that he intended on asking you to be his wife. Once things are less chaotic and I’m back on Palaven, I’ll make sure you are given all the benefits of a top tier hierarchy member’s widow,” Victus said.

Widow.

Shepard wished she could go back five seconds and turn off her aural implants so she didn’t have to hear that word. She would have to get used to this; once the news of the Normandy’s classification spread, more and more would want to send their condolences for her mate, for her crew. Her family.

“Thank you,” Shepard said after a moment, turning to look at Victus, but not quite in the eye. “Has there been any word from his family yet?” If Garrus was to be lost to her, she wanted to at least help his family, but there had been no sign of them. The last time Garrus heard from them they were on the way to the Citadel. She simply had to hope they never made it there and were somewhere else.

Victus shook his head. “If that changes, I’ll let you know immediately.”

She nodded her thanks. With nothing more to say, Shepard left the room. Thankfully, the hallway was empty and Shepard jogged out of the compound. Once outside, she broke out into a sprint until she left the turian camp altogether.

Placing her hands on her knees, Shepard took gulping breaths, forcing the air into her lungs. This was a shock she had not prepared for. How could anyone be prepared for this? Anger spiked and if she was a biotic, Shepard was sure she would have caused a great deal of damage due to her surge in emotion.

When her breathing was under control again, Shepard forced herself to be calm. The turians had rules and procedures they had to follow. That was their way of coping. She didn’t have to agree. The numbers weren’t in their favor, but it wasn’t a hopeless case. Until then…

Shepard turned off her aural implants and looked to the sky. Tomorrow she was scheduled to meet with Hackett and then the Council. If Shepard thought she worked hard during the war, it was nothing compared to her efforts since she was released from the hospital.

It would be so easy to curl up in a ball and mourn for her lost love. But she wasn’t ready. Until the numbers told her there was absolutely no hope, she would keep faith. And now?

There was work to be done.
Judgment, Reversed

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Judgment, Reversed: Delay in concluding a series of actions. Lack of progress due to lack of important decision making.

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One Month Later

“Commander Shepard!”

Shepard waved from the opening of the small encampment but did not go inside. She watched the group of children in front of her playing ‘Duck Duck Goose.’ It was a varied group, half human, a few turian, young asari and even a tiny volus. They laughed and smiled, seemingly pleased not to have to play alone.

Jenna walked up to Shepard just as a human boy tapped an asari on the head. The asari hopped up and tried to tag the human, but he was too fast. “Conrad went out to pick up some rations, he’ll be so upset that he missed you.”

The news that Conrad Verner was one of the almost five million that made it off of the Citadel after it transported to Earth made Shepard surprisingly happy when she discovered it. Though she would have rather not have learned by waking up after a nap in the hospital to find him staring at her. Perhaps living through yet another attack on the Citadel had hardened him; Conrad quickly asked the question in which he needed an answer, then told her to get some rest.

And then he was gone. Shepard had been half tempted to believe Conrad had been a vision from some left over pain medicine. But three days later, news that ‘The Shepards’ were taking in orphans of all species spread through Cape Canaveral. Now Conrad led a group of almost fifty volunteers watching over approximately five hundred children.

“I’ll be here for a bit,” Shepard said, watching the game continue.

The asari walked around the circle, patting everyone’s head. When she got to the volus, she yelled, “Goose!” To the volus’ credit, he valiantly tried to get up and play, but by the time he took his first step, the asari was already sitting down. Shepard frowned; the volus didn’t have a chance against the other races.

A turian girl stood up then and said, “Let’s play that spinning and falling down game.” The other children quickly agreed, and soon chants of ‘Ring Around the Rosy’ could be heard.

Her schedule didn’t always allow it, but Shepard tried to get down the camp a few times a week. She would walk around, watch all the children of different races working and playing together and wonder if this was the future Garrus had hoped for them. Adopting a ragtag group of orphans and creating a family of their very own.

Worried Daddy’s rifle collection might scare Junior?

He had broken their unspoken rule - don’t talk about the future - and now any hope which burned deep inside her was dangerously close to being snuffed out. Thirty-seven days since the rations would have run out. Shepard had spoken to a turian doctor a few weeks ago. He informed her that
turians could go approximately thirty days without sustenance before death. A quarian physician told her that Tali would have a better chance. Quarians could last forty-five to sixty days without food.

The information still didn’t change the numbers. They haunted her. At night, she would find herself doing the math in her head. If they started rationing after one month, they still might have some food. But if they waited and didn’t ration enough… The numbers were the reason for the bags under her eyes and why well-meaning people told her you so look tired, you should rest more.

Shepard didn’t want to rest. She wanted to be working, so she didn’t have to think.

Jenna led her to a table where a group of young teenagers were all working on datapads. Conrad had tutors come in every day of the week, so that the children still had lessons and homework to do. Shepard occasionally liked to help the kids with math, which always had been her favorite subject.

The group had been laughing, but quickly shushed each other once they realized Shepard was approaching. “Hiya, Commander,” one brave salarian said.

Caelia, a turian girl in her early teens, maybe - it was hard to tell sometimes with turians - and Shepard hadn’t wanted to ask, waved. The first time Shepard came to this camp, Caelia had caused her a bit of a shock. She wore the same colony markings as Garrus and in all the time Shepard had worked besides turians, she had never seen another with his markings. Making the mistake that the teenager must have been family, a cousin perhaps, Shepard had eagerly walked up to the girl and introduced herself.

The confused teen had no idea who Garrus was and Shepard quickly learned that similar colony markings does not a family make. Since then, Shepard saw her every time she visited the camp. Over time, Shepard had enough courage to ask about the story behind the markings, cursing she never found a moment to ask Garrus himself when she had the chance.

From Caelia, she discovered the markings represented a small neighborhood in Cipritine. When the colony wars broke out a thousand years ago, those turians living on Palaven decided to design their own markings. Major cities all had their own designs. And Cipritine? It was so densely populated the city took it a step further: each neighborhood had their own unique look.

“Hey there,” she said to the group. Just as Shepard was about to sit down, her omni-tool buzzed, a priority message. “I need to take this.”

She took a few steps away from the table and brought up her interface. There was a text message from Hackett. Council wants to meet in an hour. Your presence could be vital. Stop by HQ first.

Shepard sighed. Since being released from the hospital she more or less had assume the role of humanity’s representative to the Council. Politician was her least favorite job in the galaxy, and sadly one she had to don more and more often.


“Oh I will,” Jenna said with a laugh. “He’s going to be devastated he missed your visit.”

“Hopefully next time,” Shepard said.

While he might have hardened a bit, Conrad was still overawed and overeager when it came to anything Shepard and still absolutely desperate to please. But he was doing good work. The various camps didn’t have the resources to look after all these children and someone had to.

One mystery Shepard hadn’t been able to solve in the two months she’d been visiting was the
relationship between Jenna and Conrad. Jenna was fiercely protective of him, but Shepard didn’t sense there was any romantic feelings between the pair. It wasn’t her place to ask. Thanks to her past dealings with Conrad there was a line she would prefer not to cross with him.

Shepard turned and walked quickly towards the Alliance Headquarters. The building was one of the few left standing in Cape Canaveral. Two hundred years ago it housed NASA’s space program. For the last fifty, the Alliance used the space as a minor administrative office. Now it was the place where humanity fought tooth and nail to rise from the ashes.

Unlike the turian camp, which never bothered to check her credentials, the guards refused to budge until Shepard brought out the actual plastic card which had her name and picture. The Alliance took no chances with her identity, not since the incident on the Citadel. Maya Brooks had been killed during the last waves of battle and the main question on Shepard’s mind - were there others - remained unanswered.

“Go on in,” the young ensign said with a crisp salute. She looked so young; Shepard wondered how long she had actually been in the military or if she was a new recruit. The Alliance was desperate for any able men and women. Hackett had gone so far as to offer any human members of the Blue Suns, Eclipse or the Blood Pack stranded on Earth who could pass a drug test a career in the Alliance. A surprising number of them accepted. Shepard had to hope it wouldn’t bite the Alliance in the ass some day.

It was a short walk from the gate to get inside the actual building. As she entered, people stopped and saluted. Shepard nodded, hoping that some day this treatment that she was special, somehow above them all, would stop. She liked to think she did what any proud member of the Alliance would have done in her shoes.

Another guard blocked entry into Hacket’s office. “Sorry, ma’am,” the guard said, an older gentleman with a Middle Eastern accent. “You know the drill.”

“I do,” Shepard said with a sigh, bringing out the ID card again. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Shepard nodded and opened the door. Hackett was sitting at a plan metal desk, hunched over a stack of datapads. He was wearing what Shepard considered to be the standard uniform for the Alliance now, regular BDUs, like she was wearing. Hackett hadn’t worn dress blues in months. “Shepard,” he said, standing up as she entered the room. He handed her a datapad. “We’re about to get our asses chewed out by the Council.”

“What for?” Shepard asked, looking down at the pad. She tried to skim the words, but there was simply too much information.

“We’re in trouble, Shepard,” Hackett said, running his hand over his face. “What do you remember about the Leviathan Enthrallment Team?”

She blew some air out of her lips. “Not much,” she said honestly. "We took some of those artifacts. The goal was to use the Reaper’s own troops against them.”

“Exactly. If we had more time before the final battle, the Enthrallment Team could have caused a great deal of destruction.”

“So what happened?” Shepard asked.

“The team was comprised of eight men and women of different races. I want you to know, Shepard,
that Primarch Victus, Dalatrass Linron and at least three asari matriarchs knew of our plan and fully supported our efforts,” Hackett said, taking a breath.

“Admiral,” Shepard said, a knot of worry forming in her gut. She shivered slightly; her circulation was not what it should be yet.

“They’ve gone rogue, Shepard,” Hackett said, the fist not holding the datapad curling on into itself. “Within the last week, there have been two murders across the galaxy and one attempted murder.”

“Rogue?” Shepard asked, her eyes going wide. “Are you sure?”

“No,” Hackett said, bowing his head. “And that’s our problem.”


“The Alliance had no business deploying a team and using these artifacts without sanction from the Council!” Councilor Valern crossed his arms over his chest and stared angrily over the table.

“The Alliance,” Shepard said, leaning forward and resting her weight on her hands, “did the job that the Council should have. The job of coordinating the Crucible should not have fallen onto our shoulders. The Council should have been leading the charge. So we did what we had to do, including utilizing the Enthrallment Team.”

There was a sense of satisfaction facing the Council in a plain prefab and not in the elaborate Council chambers, where they raised themselves above the rest. “If you dragged me in here to give you some sort of apology, let me tell you right now, it’s not going to happen.”

“The Council has a right-”

“Maybe if the Council allowed humanity to appoint a new Councilor after Udina was killed, you would have learned about the team,” Shepard snapped. She took a breath and centered herself. Normally, she considered herself calm and collected, traits vital for an engineer with a specialty in explosives. Jerky or quick movements led to death. “It’s been almost eight months since humanity has been represented on the Council. You gave us a seat, Councilors. I suggest you let us fill it.”

“Humanity’s status on the Council isn’t the purpose of this meeting,” Sparatus said.

“Our status? You say that as if it’s a question,” Shepard said, her voice low and close to dangerous.

“We are more concerned about these reports,” Tevos said, putting her hands in front of her on the table. “There was an attempt on Aria T’Loak’s life. A Matriarch was murdered.”

Shepard looked down at her datapad at the names. “Grothan Pazness was also killed,” she said sadly. “Along with any chance of peace with what’s left of the batarians.”

“Maybe,” Valern said with a sniff, “if the asari had provided the information about the Catalyst earlier, we might not have needed the Enthrallment team at all.”

“Don’t you dare blame the asari,” Tevos said angrily.

Shepard sighed. So it began. Always the same damn argument every time she stepped into this room.

“Think of what we could have done if the humans had allowed earlier access to the archives on Mars,” Tevos said, narrowing her eyes. “We could have built the Crucible much sooner than we did.”
Most of the time Shepard simply let the Councilors play out the scene, but today? With this news of the Enthrallment Team going rogue? Absolutely not. “Would it have made a damn difference?” Shepard said, pushing her hands off of the table. “If we let the asari in after The First Contact War and one of them found plans on the Crucible, would anything have changed?”

Tevos shrugged a shoulder. “Perhaps. We’ll never know, will we?”

“No, we won’t. All I know is talking to the regular folk out there, they have lost all confidence in the Council as leaders. Most people want to blame the asari for not pitching in earlier. The asari want to blame humanity.” Shepard crossed her arms over her chest. “The turians look like bullies, for refusing to pitch in until the krogan helped them and the salarians look like traitors for trying to sabotage the genophage when they knew the turians needed the krogan’s help.”

Valern started to speak but Shepard cut him off. “Urdnot Bakara is a wise woman, Councilor. She’s getting the people of the galaxy on the krogan’s side. he’s making sure that every single person in this galaxy know the role the krogan played in fighting this war. To ordinary folk? They hear the genophage was cured and then they went out and fought instead of staying home and having children. You want an example how upside down the galaxy is right now? The krogan are winning the PR battle.”

Once Shepard stopped talking, the silence overwhelmed the room. “Are you finished?” Sparatus said stiffly.

Shepard glanced down at the floor and closed her eyes briefly. She hadn’t meant to go off like that. Felt damn good though. “Yes,” she said, looking up at the Councilors. “We need to figure out what to do about the Enthrallment Team.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Tevos said with a wave of her hand. “From the reports, the culprits are in custody. The leader of this group is believed to be on Earth and we have the approximate locations of the other members.”

“We’ll have to locate leader of the team,” Sparatus said. “I believe he is an acquaintance of yours?”

“Major Yuval Efron, we went through the N7 program together,” Shepard said. He was a quiet man, a warrior poet, they called him, back during N7 training. The Efron she knew wouldn’t be capable of going rogue. But N7 training was years ago. And he was also an Infiltrator, which made him very, very dangerous.

“We’ll warn top level leaders in the areas to be on their guard. Until the relays are up and functioning again, there’s not much to be done.” Valern turned away from the table and placed his hands behind his back. “Might I add that I know Lieutenant Tolan and Commander Rentola from their outstanding work in the STG? I don’t believe it possible they would cause any issues.”

“I would say the same thing of Colonel Corinthus,” Sparatus said, shaking his head. “She was last believed in the Apien Crest system. We’ll be in contact with Palaven.”

“If Efron is on Earth, I believe we all should take precautions,” Shepard said. She hated putting herself in the same category as the Councilors, but Shepard was aware of her place in this galaxy.

“Agreed,” Tevos said at once.

“So are there other programs that the Alliance failed to inform us about, or just the Enthrallment Team?” Valern asked. He waved a hand as he turned back to the group, indicating the other Councilors. “I believe I speak for all of us when I say we don’t appreciate surprises.”
“We have a candidate ready and able to sit in the open Councilor seat,” Shepard shot back. “Say the word and humanity will happily do it’s part.”

“Funny, now you seem to want to work with us, when before you wanted everyone to work for you,” Tevos said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Or had you forgotten that already?”

*Why do I even bother …*  

Sparatus and Valern started talking over each and Shepard stepped away from the table, not sure how much more she could take. The galaxy would never move forward if even the highest levels of government refused to stop playing the ‘blame game,’ herself included. As she was contemplating her next move, the door opened and an Alliance yeoman walked in.

The yeoman - always so damn young - handed Shepard a datapad. “Hackett said you need to read this straight away, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Yeoman,” Shepard said, wondering if any information Hackett could provide her would help them out of this absolute mess. She glanced down at the pad and felt throat constrict.

Normandy’s in system. Long range comms were damaged beyond repair. Should dock in approximately two hours. They’ve requested a turian and quarian doctor meet them at the docking bay ready to treat malnutrition.

Without thinking, Shepard slowly brought the datapad to her chest and clutched it tightly. Garrus was alive. The crew of the Normandy were alive. The knot that had been in her stomach since she woke up from the coma slowly unfurled. Garrus and Tali would get the medical attention they needed and she’d make sure the rest of the crew was safe.

Looking up, Shepard saw the eyes of all three Councilors were on her. Her heart was racing. “Shepard, do you have anything to add?” Tevos asked. The walls around Shepard seemed to shrink. She needed the open air, to see the sky; she needed to be at the docking bay. She needed to feel Garrus’ hand in hers and look into his eyes. And she needed these things now.

Only one response seemed appropriate.

“I should go.”
The Lovers, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Lovers, Upright: Difficult decisions to be made not necessarily about love. Possibly a struggle between two paths.

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The docking bay was in chaos.

Someone must have let the news slip. A well meaning Alliance soldier? A friend or family member of one of her crew? Shepard stood in the back of the crowd, full of press and soldiers and refugees, tugging the brim of her baseball cap down and pulling the collar of her coat up. The last thing she wanted right now was to be recognized.

The walk from the Council’s building tired her; three months of physical therapy not enough to piece her quite back together. Both legs had been broken, along with her arms. But her Cerberus implants still chugged along, defying the AI’s threat that she would be a victim due to her choice.

She had lived.

Sometimes she wondered if she would ever be Commander Shepard again. And sometimes she wondered if she even wanted to be. She let out a huff of a laugh. The question could be answered later, not when Garrus was within reach.

The thought of Garrus almost staggered her. She steadied herself on a nearby crate, watching the doctors walk up to the ramp. An attendant with a stretcher and two wheelchairs also stood waiting. Her stomach twisted at the thought of him being so weak that he needed a stretcher.

But soon she would see him for herself.

Shepard closed her eyes and tried to remember the last time they saw each other. That day was fuzzy in her memory. She could almost feel the warmth of his mouth plates against her lips, stretching the muscles in their legs, getting ready for the run of their lives. She remembered thinking Garrus had a better chance of making it to the beam than she did; turians were much faster runners. The thought had felt like a cruel joke.

Her eyes flew open when a cheer - louder than Shepard ever heard before - went up. The noise startled her, and before she could stop herself, Shepard turned off her hearing implants. Raking the sky, Shepard saw the Normandy, still small, still too far away, but whole. Around her, the silent cheers continued as the Normandy pulled into the bay. Docking clamps went down and her ship was still.

Welcome home, beautiful.

A moment later, the doors to the docking ramp opened and the doctors rushed inside. Shepard felt her throat constrict. The Normandy had brought Garrus back to her. Had brought her crew back to her. She wiped away the tears before they had a chance to fall.
Her breaths started to come in gulps. Shepard squatted down, hugging her knees to her chest and tried to force herself to breathe. Since she woke up in the hospital alone, Shepard tried to enforce her rule, don’t talk - or even think - about the future, but the numbers kept invading her thoughts. The last few weeks were almost unbearable, her hand desperate to reach for what simply wasn’t there.

Burying her head in her arms, Shepard let the silence and the lack of light calm her as she felt a slight breeze from the ocean raise the fine hair on the back of her neck. Garrus was alive. The words repeated themselves over and over in her head like a mantra.

Her breathing under control, Shepard stood up and looked at the Normandy. She hoped there would be a vid of this moment for her crew to see later on. They certainly deserved every bit of a hero’s welcome home. As far as she was concerned, they couldn’t pile the accolades high enough for her crew.

Her omni-tool flashed at her wrist once, indicating a message. She brought up the interface quickly, wondering if Garrus wrote her, telling her to get inside. Surely the Alliance told the crew that she lived? The message was from Joker.

I see you hiding in the back. Get your ass in here.

A smile crossed her lips as she closed the interface. She waved towards the cockpit, wondering if he could see her or if the external camera was looking in a different direction. Standing up, Shepard hunched her shoulders, putting her hands deep in her coat pockets and started making her way through the throng of spectators.

Recognition arose only a few steps into her journey. People patting her on the back and trying to shake her hand, shouting questions she couldn’t hear. She forced a smile on her face, wishing she could ask them to give her some room - she needed to breath - and why did anyone think it acceptable to touch someone without their permission?

Some Alliance soldiers took charge of the situation, clearing a path in front of her. Each step closer, a step closer to him. Eventually Shepard made it through the throng, past the line of guards, ready to maintain order. When she made it to the ramp, Shepard knew she had to do something, give the hundreds of people who gathered here for a glimpse of the Normandy a present of some sort.

Taking off her hat, she turned to the crowd and waved, smiling, not quite happy, but not sad, either. A quick nod, and Shepard stepped onto the ramp. Her pace picked up to a slow jog until she arrived at the doors to the Normandy. She reached out, touching the doors with her bare hands.

“Thank you,” she said softly. Moments like this made Shepard wish she believed in Garrus’ spirits. Until she had a command of her own, she never realized: ships have souls. The Normandy flew fiercely as Arashu herself, protecting her crew until she brought them home again.

Flicking open her omni-tool, Shepard turned her implants on and waited for the doors to open. She wasn’t sure what to expect when she stepped foot onto her ship. When she first woke from her coma, she dreamed of Garrus showing up at her bedside in the hospital one day. The dreams changed when she was installed into her own prefab. Then she would meet him at the door and the moment they opened, they’d be in each others arms. The last few days, her dreams were nightmares, meeting his casket at the gate.

“So you just had to prove everyone wrong and survive the blast from the Crucible,” Joker said, standing in the door to the cockpit.

Shepard smiled, a true smile, using facial muscles she wasn’t sure she’d ever use again. “What can I
say? Death owed me a favor.”

“Thanks, Joker,” she said, giving him another smile before turning to the right to head into the CIC.

A cheer went up went up as she walked down the short ramp and down the stairs. The stairs never made sense to her; would have made much more sense to have a flat surface throughout the CIC. From the looks of it, almost half the crew were standing there. Fitch, Ng, Ayanbadejo, too many names to think of in just one moment. She wetted her lips, wondering if they would expect her to say something. As much as should love to take the time to greet them all one by one, she needed to see Garrus.

Vega came to her rescue. He walked right up to her and gave her a bear hug, lifting her feet off the ground. “I knew you hadn’t kicked the bucket!” he yelled. “I knew it!”

“Glad to see your faith in me was rewarded, James,” Shepard said with a laugh.

He looked at the gathering crowd. “Lola can give us a speech later. I think we all know she wants to see Scars right now.”

“It’s…” Shepard took a breath and looked at the faces of her crew. “I’m so glad to see you all again.”

The crew quieted, though murmurs could still be heard. She could hear comments about her face, her hair, how skinny she looked now. Shepard knew none of it was malicious, just nerves, probably, glad that they were home.

As they walked towards the elevator, Shepard saw Adams standing next to Ken and a visibly pregnant Gabby. Shepard stopped in front of the group. “Hell of a souvenir,” Shepard said, looking down at Gabby’s belly. “This happen before or after the Crucible?”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Gabby said sheepishly. “I knew you’d never let me back on the ship after shore leave.”

“Damn right I wouldn’t,” Shepard said. “Well, you’re home now.”

“Yes, we are, Commander,” Ken said, putting his arm around Gabby’s shoulders. “Thank you for that.”

Shepard nodded and walked into the open elevator where James was waiting. The doors closed and Shepard felt her whole body sigh. Almost there, she told herself.

“Good work out there, Lola,” James said quietly.

Shepard wasn’t sure whether he meant her work in the Citadel or saying hello to the crew, but she accepted the compliment for what it was. “Thanks, James. It’s good to be home.”

The moment the doors opened, Shepard rushed into the mess hall to the med bay. The windows were in privacy mode, leaving Shepard with a moment of doubt. Perhaps the doctors needed more time.
“Shepard, there you are.”

Turning, Shepard saw Doctor Chakwas leaning against one of the kitchen counters. “Shouldn’t you be in there?”

Chakwas walked up to Shepard and shook her hand. “I’ve done what I could; it’s best to give the physicians room. I would only be in the way.”

“Sit rep?”

“Not nearly as bad as I’m sure you imagined,” Chakwas told her. Shepard shifted her weight and clasped her hands behind her back, trying to keep from fidgeting. “We rationed very well, once we realized the situation. Both Garrus and Tali were far luckier than most who deal with a lack of food. They both had personal vitamins on board. So while their bodies didn’t receive the sustenance needed, they did receive the nutrients.”

“Good,” Shepard said, closing her eyes. The knowledge that Garrus was truly going to be fine washed over her. Chakwas opened her mouth as if to continue, but Shepard raised her hand, silently asking for a moment. She turned, so her back faced Chakwas and James. Covering her face with her hands, she said, “That’s good,” her voice cracking on the words.

“Very, I assure you,” Chakwas said as Shepard felt the doctor’s hand on her shoulder. Shepard took a breath and turned back around. Chakwas continued. “They’ve both lost weight, which has caused some complications for Garrus. He injured his hip during the run to the beam. We operated, but I hesitate to call it a success, not without a turian physician giving his hip a thorough examination. Compound his hip with his lower back issues returning due to the weight loss, and, well, let’s just say most of his time has been spent in the med bay over the past few weeks.”

“Will he be alright?” Shepard asked, wondering why Garrus never mentioned he had back issues before.

“I would estimate he’ll return to his old self in a few weeks, though he’s going to have to make a decision about his back. Surgery or giving up heavy armor are his most logical options,” Chakwas said.

“Thank you for taking care of them,” Shepard said, grasping both of Chakwas’ hands in her. “Thank you.”

“We all assumed the worst, Shepard, when we saw what happened to the Citadel. I’m very glad to know we were wrong.”

“Do you think I can go in there?” Shepard asked, looking at the door, the only thing between her and Garrus. Her heart was beating wildly beneath her breastbone. They were so close…

“I can’t think of any medical reason why not. Joker made a shipwide announcement that you were on your way, so he knows you’re here,” Chakwas told her.

Shepard palmed the door to the medbay, relief seeping into every pore of her skin. She would see him within seconds, now. “Then I better not keep him waiting.”

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Any moment Shepard would walk through that door and this nightmare would be over. Garrus tried to pay attention to the doctor, he really did. A few days in hospital for observation. Once released, only a clear liquid diet for three days, followed by a few days of a plain liquid diet. In a week,
maybe, if everything went well, he could start eating solid food again.

He flinched slightly as a needle pricked the soft hide of his underarm. “Let me know if you start feeling nauseas,” the doctor told him.

Garrus nodded his thanks and for the first time in a week, felt hunger pierce his stomach, though he knew the feeling had nothing to do with food and everything to do with Shepard. Where was she?

He had been convinced when she sent him away on the Normandy that they had used up all their luck. Between Cerberus and Omega and Reapers, neither one of them deserved as many second chances as they had. Yet here they were. While he might not be at his best - two weeks of no solid food would knock anyone down a peg or two - he was alive.

More importantly, Shepard was alive. There were so many days he struggled to believe she lived. If Garrus lived to be a thousand years old, he would never forgot the moment when Joker’s voice came over the medbay speakers, telling him Alliance Command said Shepard would be thrilled the Normandy arrived safely home.

“Doing okay there, Tali?” Garrus asked, trying to stop counting each second that ticked past.

Tali was lying down on her back, her arm outstretched as a quarian doctor attached a thin tube to Tali’s face mask port. “Never better,” Tali said, sounding exhausted. The weeks had taken their toll on Tali; her environmental suit wasn’t quite as smug, her breasts not nearly as full, her hips smaller. Details Garrus might never had noticed if not for Shepard.

He knew he looked no better. His civilian clothes hung off his frame a bit. Once they had known rationing was to be in their future, Garrus stopped lifting weights. Turians lost muscle mass quickly and the result was even a slimmer waist than when he had been on the SR-1. He didn’t think it was a good look for him. Not anymore.

As the doctor gave Garrus another shot, the doors opened and she stepped inside.

Shepheard.

She stood just inside the doorway and neither spoke, just simply looked at the other. Garrus could almost feel her cataloging the changes in his body, just as he did the same for her. The difference he noticed at once was her face. How badly must she have been burned for her skin to heal a different color? Spirits, he wished he could have been there with her through the worst of it. But they were together now, and somehow Shepard was healthy and whole in front of him.

The fingers of his hand flexed without thinking, a reaction, perhaps of wanting to feel the weight of her hand in his. The movement was enough to spur Shepard to action. Three steps later, their arms were around each other. Garrus closed his eyes and breathed her in, holding her as tight as he was able. The embrace felt different; they both had lost weight.

Garrus felt Shepard slide her cheek against his mandible and it was all he could do not to let out a keening cry of relief. He had wanted to believe so desperately that she lived and now she was in his arms.

Shepard pulled back, though not letting go. Garrus took a talon and slowly traced the line down the middle of her face. Their wounds almost mirrored each other. Her left, his right. Her mouth opened, as if to say something, but then closed, giving him a smile instead. There were unshed tears in her eyes and they told him everything. He way she leaned against him spoke of her exhaustion. Shepard knew her ship’s inventory; she would have known how long the rations would last. He could only
begin to understand the emotional toll the last four months must have taken on her. But they were together now. They could rest. Maybe not a beach, but a few days off sounded absolutely perfect.

Smiling gently, Shepard placed her hands on either side of his neck. Garrus leaned forward and touched his brow to hers. “I love you,” she whispered, her words barely brushing the air, quiet enough so no one else in the room could hear.

“I love you, too,” he said, just as soft, though his sub-vocals betrayed him to the doctor. He didn’t care. Not today.

The medbay doors opened and a stretcher was brought inside. Shepard looked at it, her brow furrowed. “Do you need a stretcher to get out…” her words trailed off when she saw Joker, holding his cap in his hands. “Oh god, no,” Shepard whispered, her eyes locked on the AI Core. “EDI?”

Garrus brought her close again, as he if could somehow shield her from the upcoming blow. “Inactive since the Crucible fired,” he said quietly. Shepard placed her forehead on his shoulder. He reached up and cradled her neck, trying to help steady her as she took uneven gulps of air.

The attendant started pushing the stretcher to the AI Core. “May I have a minute in there?” Shepard asked, not looking up from their embrace.

“If you want,” the attendant said. Shepard swallowed loudly and raised her head. Garrus looked her in the eye, silently offering what support he could. He tightened the grip on her hand as she walked slowly around his examining table. They held hands until the last possible moment, but then Shepard took a step further away and he had no choice to let go.

Shepard stepped over to Tali, who was now sitting up. “Good to see you, Tali,” Shepard said, putting her hands on both of the quarian’s shoulders.

Tali patted Shepard’s hand and cocked her head in a way that Garrus knew was a smile. “Go say good-bye to EDI, Shepard. We have plenty of time to talk.”

Nodding, Shepard walked up to the doors of AI Core and took a breath. Looking over his shoulder, Garrus saw a glimpse of EDI’s body before the doors shut behind Shepard.

“They’re going to give her body to some of the Crucible scientists,” Joker said. “Guess a few of them are working on trying to get the geth up and running again.”

“Geth are down, too?” Garrus asked. Damn. So much had changed in only four months.

“Guess so.” Joker ran his hand over his hair. “They think it’s the same issue, so if they can get back one, maybe they can get back the other.”

“Here’s hoping,” Garrus said with a nod. There was nothing else to be said.

After a few minutes, Shepard stepped back into the medbay. Garrus didn’t miss the reddened eyes or the not quite dried tear tracks running down her cheeks. She quietly patted Joker on the shoulder, and then walked back over to Garrus. The only thing he could offer at the moment was his hand. So he held it out and she took it at once, squeezing tightly. They watched in silence as the stretcher rolled into the AI core with Joker following.

Shepard leaned against him as they waited for the stretcher to return. The doctor was in the middle of giving Garrus yet another shot when the AI core doors opened. Garrus was glad a sheet had been placed over EDI’s body. Joker told the Normandy crew there was quite a crowd gathered for their return. EDI didn’t need to become a spectacle.
“Let’s follow,” Shepard whispered. Garrus nodded. He doubt he’d be able to keep up, but he’d do his best.

The doctor made no protest and told him a wheelchair was in the mess hall waiting for him. Garrus declined for the moment. His place was standing by Shepard’s side.

They followed EDI’s body in silence, hands clasped tightly together. Each step seemed to take more effort than the last. Garrus could feel Shepard looking up at him, wanting to ask if he needed to rest or sit in that damn chair. Once they stepped off the ship, then yes, the chair sounded good, Spirits, the chair sounded great. But he needed to walk off of the Normandy on his own two feet.

The memorial wall beaconed and the memory of the plaque with Shepard’s name on it felt heavy in his hands. He remembered all too clearly; Joker placing EDI’s name on the wall, then Williams putting up Anderson’s. Then it had been his turn. In the end he simply couldn’t do it. And now, feeling her lean against his shoulder, Garrus was glad he never fully succumbed to doubt.

Shepard dropped his hand and stood right in front of the memorial. The fingers of one hand brushed Anderson’s name, a mirror of what Garrus himself had done with her plaque. With a sharp intake of breath, Shepard turned and marched into the starboard observation deck.

The stretcher with EDI’s body disappeared into the elevator. Garrus leaned against the wall, wondering if Shepard needed a moment alone or if he should go in and get her. Practically won out. He needed to be in a hospital for observation and there was no way he was leaving the Normandy without Shepard.

Ignoring the pain in his back, Garrus made his way to the door. As emotional of a day it was for him, Garrus had to imagine it was ten times worse for her. He knew the crew was safe, after all; he’d had four months to get used to EDI’s death. She was learning all of this in one day.

The doors opened and Garrus walked inside. He assumed she’d be standing, so when he didn’t see her right away, he became concerned. But then he saw her. Shepard was on her haunches, rocking slowly, her hands weaving through her hair. Taking another step towards her, he heard Shepard muttering to herself.

Her eyes were focused on a fixed spot, next to the chair in the corner. And once Garrus comprehended the words, a sense of dread clawed at his gizzard. She wasn’t talking to herself. She was talking to someone.

“Please, just say something,” Shepard said softly, her voice urgent. “Why don’t you ever say anything? Legion, please.”

When his fingers touched her shoulder, Shepard wouldn’t quite meet his gaze as she stood up. Garrus wouldn’t ask questions, they could wait for the moment. As she put her hand in his, Garrus understood that perhaps Shepard wasn’t nearly as healthy and whole as he hoped.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Three of Cups, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**The Three of Cups, Upright:** A fortunate end to a valued project or venture. A card of abundant trust and harmony. Possibly a celebration.

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“Shepard! Up for another?” James held up a can of beer.

She shook her head, content with the beer currently in her hands. For once, the Alliance had done something right. Instead of ushering her crew into small cramped rooms and starting the debriefing process right away, they allowed her crew to gather in what used to be an outdoor picnic area. Shepard pulled as many strings as she could and Hackett himself showed up at the beginning of the party - thankfully only staying for a few minutes - and towed in six cases of beer. Alcohol was scarce, only to be served at diplomatic functions, but the Alliance knew if anyone deserved a treat after what they had been through, it was her crew.

Food was a different matter. The arrival of the Normandy meant an additional fifty-four mouths for the Alliance to feed on a daily basis. So instead of the feast they deserved, her crew had to be content with the best MRE’s that could be offered. But considering they’d only been eating ration bars for the past month, most saw the MRE’s as a treat.

From her vantage point on the picnic table, Shepard could see the ocean and feel the breeze coming off the waves. An ocean view was one she was used to. Like James, she grew up on the Pacific. One of her favorite things to do as a teenager was go the Santa Monica Pier. She’d walk the length of the beach, offering to walk people’s dogs or watch their kids for credits. And by the end of the day, she’d have a tan and a handful of chits in her pocket.

Funny, she hadn’t thought of that in years. She wondered if the pier was still there, or if the Reapers had gotten to it like so many other places. The Egyptian Pyramids. The Cristo Redentor. The Taj Mahal. All blasted to dust by the Reapers.

Some day humanity would have to build new wonders.

“Skipper.”

Shepard looked up to see Ashley standing in front of her. “Lieutenant Commander Williams,” Shepard said with a grin. She patted the space next to her. “Sit your ass down and talk to me.”

There was a strange sense of nostalgia seeing Ashley in front of her, wearing regular BDU’s instead of the casual uniform she had preferred. Her hair was even up in a bun. Shepard laughed. She could close her eyes and almost picture Wrex standing around, and Garrus fixing the Mako across the way. “Yes, ma’am,” Ashley said with a mock salute. She climbed up on the picnic table next to Shepard.

“You did good, Ash,” Shepard said softly.

Ashley smiled sadly at the praise. “I didn’t want to leave you,” she said, shaking her head.
Shepard had only heard bits and pieces from various crew members about what happened to the *Normandy* after the Crucible fired. For now, she was content to listen to what the crew was willing to tell her. But once they all were back and working again? Shepard wanted answers. She needed to know exactly why they were gone for four months.

Bumping Ashley’s shoulder with her own, Shepard said, “You did what you needed to do to keep the crew safe. You know if I had to choose between them or me I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Ashley nodded. “I know. That’s why I was able to look at myself in the mirror.” She leaned back on her hands. “I had no idea how integrated the *Normandy*’s computers were tied into EDI and the AI core. It took three weeks just to get the damn on-board computers working again. We actually had to go outside and look at the stars to figure out just were the hell we were. I’m just a soldier, Skipper. I can’t tell you how lost I felt, knowing I couldn’t do a damn thing to help Tali and the engineers.”

“We all thought EDI was invincible,” Shepard said, trying to keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

It had been the shock of seeing EDI’s unresponsive platform along with Admiral Anderson’s name on the memorial wall. That’s what she told herself. She hadn’t had a vision in weeks, not since arriving back at her prefab after Victus told her Garrus would be declared dead by the Hierarchy. Then she had opened the door to her prefab and found Shiala sitting on her couch.

At first Shepard hadn’t recognized the asari; she was tinted blue, not green, like the last time they saw each other, on Illium. Shepard had tried talking to the vision, her mind racing, wondering if this was it, if she had finally slipped into indoctrination at last. Hand on the holster of her pistol, she’d promised herself if the vision spoke and anything vaguely sounding like instructions came out of her mouth, Shepard wouldn’t hesitate.

She’d find the courage to pull the trigger.

But Shiala - like the small Prothean child Shepard had seen weeks before her - didn’t speak or make any sign she realized Shepard was even there. And after a few minutes, Shiala was gone. Shepard had gone to the couch, placing her hands on the seat, trying to feel warmth on the cushions or any type of evidence. Of course there had been none.

Shiala had written to Shepard once during the war, mentioning she and the other colonists were planning on leaving Feros to fight. Shepard had wondered if it would be better or worse to learn of Shiala’s fate in the war. After some deliberation, Shepard decided she needed to know. She needed facts.

The Alliance databases told her that Shiala and all of the Feros colonists had been killed two weeks before the battle on Earth.

PTSD manifested itself in strange ways. She wouldn’t be the first soldier to suffer, nor the last. If any soldier under her command spoke of visions, she knew what her advice would be: go talk to the therapists. That’s what they were there for. Yet she hesitated to take her own advice.

She still remembered the rounds of mandated therapy she’d endured after Akuze. By the end she wanted to scream. Yes, she was gutted that so many people died while she lived. Yes, she felt responsible at times. But in the end, she knew the attack wasn’t her fault. At the time, she blamed the thresher maw. Now at least she could blame Cerberus.

There was so much work to be done. Confessing to these visions now… they wouldn’t take chances with someone of her clearance level. She’d be classified as Cat-6 faster than she could blink. And maybe it wasn’t fair for her to take those chances herself. She could talk to Garrus, once he was
stronger. She’d certainly get a fair and honest opinion from him.

“Everything okay over here?” James asked, walking over to them. “Things got all quiet.”

“We’re fine, Vega,” Ashley said. “Be a gentleman and go get me another drink.”

James grabbed Ashley’s hand. Bringing her hand up to his lips, he kissed it gently. “Anything for my lady,” he said before jogging off.

Ashley leaned forward and covering her face with her hands. “Shoot me now.”

“Ashley Williams,” Shepard said, drawing out each syllable. She could feel the silly grin on her face. “Are you telling me your one-night stand with Mister Vega has developed into something more?”

“Maybe?” Ashley said, a sheepish grin on her face. She turned her head and looked at Shepard. “I don’t know what’ll happen now that we’re back on Earth. Neither one of us is really comfortable with the idea of breaking regs. Or being like you and Garrus.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow, wondering how much Ashley had to drink to bring forth such honesty. “What do you mean, ‘like me and Garrus?’” she asked, hoping there was no venom in her tone.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Skipper,” Ashley said. She brought both feet up onto the picnic table and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Look, the night before we held the memorial for you, Anderson and EDI? We decided to have a party and we finished off every single drop of booze on the ship.”

“I keep my ship well-stocked, Williams, that must have been a hell of a party,” Shepard said with a low whistle.

“We were all so hung-over during the actual memorial, but that’s not the point,” Ashley said. “Garrus got drunk. Really drunk. Like wanting to talk about feelings drunk.”

“Do I want to know?” Shepard asked, trusting Williams to be honest with her.

“Eh, Cortez convinced him to do drunken shuttle simulations with him before Garrus said anything too horrible,” Ashley said with a smile. “But one thing he did say that you two had been together for sixteen months, and for ten of those months, you guys were apart.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s true.” She didn’t add that if she had her way, they would never be separated like that again.

“I don’t know if I want a long distance relationship.” Ashley sighed. “The Reapers are gone, Skipper. I don’t think my place is on the Normandy any more.”

Shepard knew this conversation would happen at some point, but she didn’t expect it to be so soon. Ashley was meant for more than sitting around the observation deck, waiting for those far too few moments when she would go on a mission, or when they’d sit together and Shepard would discuss the finer points of command. Once Shepard had Alliance clearance again, she had looked into Ashley’s service record for the previous two years. She had done damn good work. And Shepard was pleased with Ashley’s leadership abilities for some of the smash and grab missions she led. “And you’re a Spectre.”

“And I’m a Spectre,” Ashley agreed. “But for now… he’s a good man.”

“That he is,” Shepard agreed. Leaning back on her hands, Shepard added, “Damn. You owe me big
time, Williams.”

“I owe you?” Ashley asked, sitting up. She crossed her arms over her chest, looking like she was trying not to smile. “How so?”

“If not for my subtle encouragement the night of the party, you might never have hooked up,” Shepard said smugly. “That, and you had sex in my guest bedroom before Garrus and I had a chance to. You owe me.”

“You and Garrus had a perfectly good bed of your own, Skipper,” Ashley said, not trying to fight smiling any longer.

“Yes, we did,” Shepard said, letting her mind linger a bit. She and Garrus tried to christen every available surface of that apartment during their shore leave. Even with the war raging, that had been one of the happiest weeks of her life. Spending so much time with her crew, the night in the casino with Garrus, the party… She wondered if the apartment was still standing or if it had been turned into dust.

No one quite knew what to do about the Citadel. The resources simply weren’t there to rebuild at this point, not when so many planets needed basic infrastructure. Eventually a decision would have to be made, repair or destroy. Shepard was beginning to like the idea of a fresh start. Let the races come together and build their own space station, based on their own designs and technology, not the Prothean’s.

James called Ashley over then, leaving Shepard alone on the picnic table. For a few minutes, she simply watched her crew interact, seeing how the months had changed them. Perhaps it was just the alcohol, but everyone seemed so close. Barriers had come down between the crew. She saw no difference between enlisted or officer. Even her most reserved squad members, Javik and Liara were talking to Fitch and Traynor respectively.

The four months of being stranded caused any walls between her crew to crumble.

It was a shame they’d have to be separated after this. When discussing the logistics of her returned crew with the Alliance, Shepard insisted that her crew be given a week of shore leave. The majority of them had families to find and plans to make. Once back, Shepard would have to work to find new assignments for her crew. She hated the thought of breaking them up, but until the relays were back up, the Normandy was grounded. Tentatively, the Alliance planned on putting her in dry dock and getting her back up to shape.

After that? No one thought that far ahead.

“Shepard!” called a voice from the dance floor. “Dance with us!”

She debated for all of three seconds before standing up. Shepard knew she looked like an idiot when she danced, but she didn’t care. Chugging the last of her beer, Shepard walked over to the other dancers.

“Captain on deck!” Cortez yelled, just like he had the night of her party in her apartment.

Shepard danced.

“You look foolish, commander, when you attempt to move in time with the music,” Javik said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Let them laugh, Shepard thought with a smile as she continued to dance. She raised her arms over her head, trying and failing to stay in time with the beat. They were alive. If that wasn’t worth a bit of laughter and dancing, she didn’t know what was.

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“You sure, Lola? I’ll walk you over there,” James said, his arm around Ashley’s shoulders.

“I’m sure, Vega. There are lots of patrols out,” Shepard said. “Besides, it’s a beautiful night for a walk.”

“Commander Shepard, leaving before the party is over,” Liara said with a smile, crossing her arms over her chest. “Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Guys, I’m going to go see my…” Shepard trailed off, realizing she was about to say husband. Over the past month, since the word widow had scalded her ears, Shepard occasionally let herself indulge in daydreams, thinking herself Garrus’ wife. The thought had kept her darker moments at bay. He’d have to stop that. At least until they had a chance to figure out the future. “My Garrus,” she finished. She pointed at James jokingly. “Don’t begrudge me my Garrus.”

James threw off a crisp salute. “Yes, ma’am. Go see your Garrus, Lola.”

Shepard simply smiled and gave her crew one last wave. They all cheered as she walked out of the picnic area. Shepard buttoned up her coat and put her hands in her pocket. She meant what she said, looking up at the sky. It was an absolutely beautiful night.

She made good time to the turian camp. The turian and krogan guarding the gates waved her in without checking her ID, like normal. It was really happening. The informal turian and krogan alliance officially began a week ago. The asari and salarians were on the record saying that they were absolutely insane. Shepard couldn’t help thinking that if it worked, both races would wish they thought of it first. Hell, if it worked, Shepard would be annoyed that she didn’t think of it first. Victus was a smart man. Alaven was lucky to have him as Primarch.

The camp seemed different at night. Shepard had only been here during the daylight hours before. There were row after row of tents. A few prefabs were in the start of the camp, were the Primarch lived and worked. She was pleased to see that there were guards outside of Victus’ prefab; the Council must have warned the other leaders about Major Efron being on the loose.

Even at night there were turians working, sorting rations and food donations from the quarian live ships. Victus said he was fairly confident the turians on Earth would have enough to eat until the relays were fixed. But if the repairs took longer than anticipated, there could be issues. They would wait for another month before deciding if contingency plans were needed. Though after seeing what Garrus and Tali went through, Shepard thought it might be smarter to start planning now. Just in case.

The field hospital was a quick walk once inside the camp. There were no habitable buildings near the turian camp, so they set up a series of large tents to house their wounded. Shepard imagined it looked very close to what a battlefield hospital looked like hundreds of years ago.

She stepped inside the main tent and realized she had absolutely no idea how to get to Garrus’ hospital bed. There were rows of large panels of fabric separating the various beds. Not wanting to disturb any of the patients, Shepard quietly asked for directions from an aide.

The aide led her through a series of hallways and into a different tent altogether. They stopped in
front of a cubicle with two serious looking guards standing side by side. Garrus must be closer to the Primarch’s seat than they realized if Victus felt the need to assign two guards.

“May I go in there?” Shepard asked the guard softly.

“Sure thing,” the guard said.

Shepard nodded briskly. She pushed the fabric out of the way to enter the makeshift hospital room. Then quickly turned around and pulled the fabric taunt together, to give them the illusion of privacy.

Taking a step towards the bed, Shepard realized that Garrus was on his side, sleeping. He made those little noises, almost like purrs, which were the turian equivalent to a human snore. She had always teased him about those sounds. But now? She could listen to them all night.

There was a nearby chair, and Shepard sat down. Shepard looked at Garrus, his eyes shut, taking deep breaths. He wasn’t wearing his visor; sleep being just about the only reason he took it off.

Shepard pulled the chair closer to the bed, so she was right next to him. His gloveless hand was right there, and Shepard had to fight the urge to wrap her fingers around his and feel the soft hide of his palm against her cheek. She put her hands under her thighs to control the urge to simply touch him. For now, Shepard would let herself be content simply looking at him. Waking him up would be selfish; she knew he needed the rest.

The look of peace on his face was addicting. And right now was the closest he’s been to having a sense of peace. They had found each other again after four months. But unlike reuniting on Menae, when they were both unsure of the other’s feelings, this time there was no doubt. She knew he couldn’t possibly been briefed on the entire state of the galaxy in one evening. The old saying ignorance was bliss certainly applied in this case. She hated to think tomorrow he’d start to learn their new reality and she might not see this look on his face again for a long, long time.

She stifled a yawn and realized just how exhausted she really was. Emotionally, it had been a tiring day, between the Council meeting, reuniting the Garrus and the Normandy, not to mention the impromptu party. That last beer had been a mistake.

And it was a long walk back to her prefab…

Scooting the chair just a little bit closer to the bed, Shepard rested her arms on the mattress, being careful not to disturb Garrus. With one last glance at his face, Shepard lay her head on her arms and closed her eyes.

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Talons caressing her cheek ended her slumber. “Garrus?” she said groggily. “What time is it?”

“Midnightish,” he told her, moving his talons from her cheek to grip her hand. The look on his face was intense, as if he was afraid he’d blink and she’d disappear. She understood the feeling. “How long have you been here?”

“Twenty-two hundred hours, maybe?” Shepard said, rubbing her eyes with her free hand. Knowing they were alone in the cubicle, she slipped her hand underneath his mandible. Garrus leaned into the gesture at once. “I just wanted to say good-night.”

He patted the space next to him. “Bet we could both fit,” he said. His voice was steady, but Shepard didn’t miss the slight plead in his sub-vocals.
Shepard bit her lower lip and looked over her shoulder, thinking of the guards behind the thin curtain. Not like they would even really kiss when there was potentially an audience. But simply sleeping in the same bed wouldn’t hurt anyone. She grinned and reached down to take off her boots.

Garrus took one of his pillows and placed it over on ‘her’ side of the hospital bed then folded the other in half for himself. After taking off her coat, Shepard carefully lowered herself into the bed, her back facing Garrus. Immediately Garrus drew her close, so their bodies were flush. As he slid his arm around her waist, Shepard felt her body truly relax for the first time since she learned of the Normandy’s disappearance. She had missed him so damn much.

“Comfortable?” Garrus asked, touching the back of her neck with his mouth plates. She nodded, shivering as Garrus untucked her uniform and placed his palm onto her belly, then covering his hand with the shirt.

“Very,” Shepard said, almost in a whisper. She quickly set the alarm on her omni-tool for far too early in the morning. “You?”

“I am the embodiment of comfort right now, Shepard,” Garrus said lazily. She smiled, picturing the way Garrus’ eyelids were probably fluttering, the way they did when he was about to fall asleep but was fighting against slumber.

“Good night, Garrus,” Shepard said, slipping her hand under her shirt so it rested on top of Garrus’.

“Good night, Shepard,” he said, kissing the back of her neck again.

And there was no doubt in Shepard’s mind that it was. Even with so much to be decided and worried about, Shepard knew they’d get through it. They always did.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Nine of Wands, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Nine of Wands, Reversed: Lack or inability to give and take. Delays and disarray. A secure position that is no longer.

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Hackett handed her the datapad without comment. That alone was unusual. Shepard could generally count on a summary of some sort, preparation for what she was about to read. If Hackett didn’t have any thing to say…

She skimmed the information in front of her. “Another murder by the Enthrallment team?”

Hackett nodded. “General Invectus, on Palaven,” he said. “They have Colonel Corinthus in custody.”

“If any relation to the general?” Shepard asked.

“His daughter, I believe.”

“Damn,” Shepard said, sitting down. Her head hurt. The last three days had gone in a blur. Between welcoming her crew home, to meeting with Hackett and the Council about the Enthrallment Team to spending every available moment with Garrus in the hospital, Shepard was exhausted. And exhausted was never a good look on her.

But having the knowledge that the Normandy was back and her crew safe made the lack of sleep worth everything.

“That’s three now, plus two attempts. Any sign of Efron?” Shepard asked.

“Nothing,” Hackett said. “We’ve tried every known comm we have for him, every alias and there’s no trace of him.”

“It’s a big planet if you don’t want to be found,” Shepard said with a sigh. “This is bad, Admiral.”

Hackett ran his hand over his face, which no longer had the sharp looking goatee but a full beard. Shepard had asked him why he made the change once. His answer made so much sense she felt silly for not thinking of it herself. First, he didn’t want to waste the water shaving and second he simply didn’t have the time. “The Council’s getting worried,” he said, sitting down at the table.

Shepard bit the inside of her cheek, not sure how to say what needed to be said. “Sir, have we considered the possibility that the team has not gone rogue?”

Hackett looked at her sharply. “The artifacts were all shielded, Shepard,” he said finally. “The only time the team would be anywhere near an unshielded artifact is when they were deployed.”

“They all accounted for?” Shepard asked.

“Scattered all over the galaxy,” Hackett admitted. “I don’t even know how many there are. We
assigned two of the Crucible scientists to work with the Enthrallment Team. Might be best to talk to them while we search for Efron.”

“I can do that,” Shepard said.

“Ann Bryson and Padok Wiks,” Hackett said. “They’re still with the team, helping fix the relays.”

“I’ll talk to them soon.” The scientists were working in Orlando, separated from the rest of camps in Cape Canaveral. Once Shepard woke from her coma and learned the scientists, along with a number of leaders across the galaxy, were all in the same space, she insisted that there be some separation. Her training forced her to see how easily it would be to put the entire galaxy even more into chaos by a few well placed bombs around the area. Thankfully, Hackett agreed, though the scientists protested. Loudly.

So if butting a few heads to get the scientists into locations more secure was necessary, Shepard would do what it took. Some called her neurotic, but Shepard preferred cautious.

Without those scientists, the galaxy might never have the chance to return to some semblance of normality. Shepard knew they were working day and night, trying to figure out exactly how best to fix the relays. Current predictions were two months. Shepard itched to get the daily reports of their progress and there were even times when she wanted to raise her hand and yell, ‘I’m an engineer! Let me help!’ But she knew there were scientists there with a great deal more Prothean knowledge than she had. Her time was best spent on other matters.

Shepard’s omni-tool pinged. “It’s the Council,” she said in surprise. She quickly read the message. “Pushing up our meeting. They want to meet in an hour.”

“Of course they do,” Hackett said, shaking his head.

“I have a few things to take care of before the meeting,” Shepard said. She stood up, eager to get back to her prefab to clean a bit before Garrus moved in this afternoon. Back on the Normandy, she had Yeoman Fitch who snuck into her cabin once a day to make sure everything was kept neat and orderly. Without the good yeoman, Shepard had to remind herself that uniform shirts don’t magically fold themselves in the drawers or that towels don’t pick themselves off the floor.

Shepard knew Garrus preferred things neat and organized. In theory, Shepard did as well. However, reality had not held up to that ideal. She would have to get better at that. She truly wanted Garrus to view the prefab as theirs. And if she messed up the place all the time, Shepard feared he would think she was taking over.

“I’ll see you there,” Hackett said.

Shepard nodded and left the room. Once outside headquarters, she zipped up her coat, the air a little chilly for her liking. She looked up to the sky. No sun, but that wasn’t surprising. The effects of smoke from the burning cities across the planet might last as long as year. For now, everyone had to hope that the lower temperatures wouldn’t affect future crops.

As she continued to walk, the sounds of construction filled the air. Thanks to the efforts of the krogan - still working for their food - cities across the planet were being rebuilt far more quickly than if humans tried to take on the tasks themselves.

Though new buildings didn’t put food in people’s stomachs or gave them water to drink. Every morning Shepard woke up and stood in line to get her rations for the day. Most days she simply accepted a HDR, which provided the necessary nutrition for an entire day in a single bar. Those who
consumed an HDR instead of asking for three MREs were allowed extra energy rations, which were vital for Shepard to keep her omni-tool charged at all times.

She never wanted to repeat the embarrassment of her omni-tool running out of power during a meeting with top Alliance brass. When she had realized what had happened, Shepard expected impatience and maybe a touch of anger for wasting such a valuable commodity: their time. But all she had seen on their faces was pity, which was ten times worse. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to pity her.

Shepard was alive and she was still fighting. Pity need not apply here.

There were times Shepard needed to remind herself that rationing wouldn’t be forever. Usable farmland had been discovered across the planet and plenty of people volunteered to work the land. Once the fall harvest occurred, there was enough food expected to allow the rationing to end.

And once more reliable transportation was available, the water rationing might end as well. Shepard was quite sick of sponge baths; she missed her shower on the Normandy. She had taken her shower for granted, being able to stand under the warm spray of water, feeling the stress drain from her muscles. Then Garrus stepping in behind her, slipping his arms around her waist. Sometimes it had led to sex, but more often than not, simply led to quiet conversation as they washed each other.

While Earth was being rebuilt, the human colonies across the galaxy weren’t fairing nearly as well. Almost three-fourths of their colonies were dark by the end, with no response to any attempt of communication. More sadly would disappear in the next two months, the ones where the farmland had been destroyed and unless they had six months of surplus supplies…

Across the galaxy, the story was the same for all races. Earth, Palaven, Sur’Kesh, Thessia, Tuchanka, Rannoch, Dekuuna, Kahje, Irune, Khar’shan even Heshtok all were working on recovery. But none of them were able to provide anything other than good wishes to the colonies across the galaxy. Not until the relays were fixed.

Shepard made it to her prefab in record time. Before entering she stood in front, scanning for any possible intruders. Additional security for her prefab, Shepard could handle. Having a bodyguard, like the Councilors? Not in her lifetime. The day she couldn’t handle an intruder was the day she took Garrus up on his beach front retirement plan.

Once her foot touched the laminate tile, Shepard heard the shifting of fabric not her own and saw a distinct shape to her right in her peripheral vision. With a flick of her wrist, Shepard deployed her combat drone, and reached for her pistol, wishing her Paladin hadn’t been lost during the run to the beam in London.

She named her drone, Piper, thinking it appropriate, not only as a synonym to the word drone, but Shepard appreciated the imagery of the Pied Piper, leading her enemies to their death.

Piper had many good features. Features that Shepard had worked long hours perfecting. Chain Lightning would knock three people on their asses at once. And when Piper took too much damage to continue operating? It’d blow up in an enemy’s face. But the feature Shepard found the most useful was the IFF. Piper knew never to fire on another Alliance soldier unless directed. The non-Alliance members of her squad were also included; a simple app installed on their omni-tool meant they’d never be attacked.

Piper didn’t fire.

Shepard could count the number of Alliance personnel who had the technical skills to break through
her security systems with one hand. Her day just became a whole hell of a lot more complicated.

“Efron.”

“I’m not armed, Shepard. You have to help me.”

He was sitting, hands in the air, at the small table in the corner which doubled as a dining room table and a desk. He looked an absolute mess, dark brown hair too long for Alliance regulations. His clothes, sturdy traveling gear, were rumpled, as if slept in for several days.

Shepard kept her pistol trained on him. “We’ve been trying to contact you, Efron.”

“I know, I got the messages,” he told her. Slowly as not to alarm, Efron lowered his hand and placed them in front of him on the table. His voice was weary, on the verge of breaking. “As soon as I heard there was trouble, I started for Headquarters.”

“Then why didn’t you answer?” Shepard asked sharply, holstering her pistol, but not taking her hand away. She was starting to regret she didn’t pay more attention when Garrus and Zaeed started listing all the ways to rig her apartment on the Citadel during the party she had thrown. “Better yet, why are you in my prefab instead of Headquarters?”

“Because I knew you would be involved,” Efron said. His dark brown eyes pleaded with her. “You’ve got to help my team.”

“I’m going to call the Alliance and we’ll take you into custody, Efron. Then we can talk.”

“Please, I’m just asking for a minute of your time.”

Shepard felt her jaw clench. N7 training was hell. That wasn’t hyperbole but a statement of fact. Their N1 class had thirty-six recruits. By the time they made it to N6, only four were left. And of those four, only she and Efron had made it through to be awarded the N7 designation.

Two years she had Efron had worked side by side, going across the galaxy to train in different environments. Extreme hot and cold, every type of weather imaginable. They tested each other on tactics, language and even first aid.

And even though she had not seen him - or to be completely honest, even thought of him - in years, the bond was still there. He was family.

Not many engineers were asked into the N7 program. In fact, Shepard could only think of one other besides herself in the last ten years, Captain Riley. Infiltrators like Efron or Adepts were popular N7 candidates; perfect for solo N7 missions. Though Shepard never understood the contradiction. The N7 program was designed to train future leaders, yet most Infiltrators operated alone. Engineers had to play nice with others or no work would ever get done; they knew how to lead teams.

Being an Engineer, and used mainly for her work in explosives, Shepard never worked alone on N7 assignments. Someone was always there to watch her back as she set bombs or hacked computers. Most assignments, there would be time to meet the person she’d be working with, to get a sense of them.

But occasionally? Shepard would be forced into a combat zone with a complete stranger who she had to trust to keep her alive and help finish the job. Never once did any stranger assigned to watch her back let her down. Those experiences shaped her, made her trusting, too trusting, Garrus would often tell her.
It was why she trusted Tela Vasir, a fellow Spectre without hesitation. Maya Brooks knew Shepard's weakness and used it well; Shepard never questioned Brooks, thinking it impossible someone wearing an Alliance uniform could betray her.

Never again, she’d told Garrus as they slipped under the covers in her apartment after the numerous debriefings dealing with the theft of the *Normandy*. No more leaping before she looked. The next time someone asked her to trust them without question she’d tell them to get the hell out, she’d said proudly, not willing to admit her new attitude would absolutely break her heart.

If she hadn’t trusted unconditionally, Jack would have been dropped off at the closest port after rescuing her from the prison ship. Shepard would have never let Grunt out of his tank. Legion given to Cerberus for experiments. And Garrus…

Garrus would never have stepped foot onto the SR-1.

If she had ignored his plea - *I'm coming with you* - would Garrus had ever become Archangel? His time on Omega forged him - she could tell from the little he had told her - made him the man she fell in love with. If he had stayed with C-Sec instead, the chances were marginal that they would have ever met again. Shepard tried to imagine her life without Garrus.

No waking up with him in the morning. No sounding board, where she could throw him ideas, both good and bad, and together they’d come up with solutions to whatever was thrown at them. A galaxy with a Shepard but no Vakarian to warm her was a dark place indeed. Empty, Garrus had said. She understood the sentiment completely.

Shepard had chosen to trust them all. And now forced onto a precipice, she realized she needed to keep trusting.

“You have one minute.”

Efron’s whole body seemed to deflate. “Thank you, Shepard.”

“Fifty-five seconds.”

“I’ve gotten messages from a few of my team, all saying the same thing. They were cold, and it was dark. We need to find them.”

She swallowed and tried not to think of being cramped in that diving mech, watching the barely concealed panic on Garrus’ face as the hatch closed over her form.

*I think they want to kill you.*

“We have four in custody. Tolan is on the loose and Rentola and the geth are dead,” Shepard said.

Efron bowed his head. “Damnit,” he muttered. He looked up at her, his eyes pleading. “Will they be treated fairly?”

“I can’t make any guarantees but I hope they will,” Shepard said, wondering what sort of justice Aria T’Loak on Omega had in mind for her attempted murderer. Perhaps Shepard should give her a call.

“This was supposed to be an easy gig,” Efron said. “The team was made up of mainly Infiltrators, a couple of scouts. Land in a combat zone, activate the tactical cloak, drop off an artifact and get the hell out of dodge before anyone knew we were there.”

“Is there an artifact on Earth?” Shepard snapped. When Efron took a second too long to reply, she
lowered her voice. “Answer me.”

“I didn’t bring any,” Efron said. “But I don’t know about the science team, Bryson and Wiks.”

Shepard took a deep breath. Those artifacts were used to observe. If there were any near Bryson, especially since they had taken her over before…

“I’m calling the Alliance,” Shepard said. “They’re going to take you in to custody. We can’t take any chances, Efron.”

“I understand,” he said, running his hand through his head. “I’ll cooperate anyway I can, Shepard. Just… the shields were supposed to protect us. None of my people would have signed up if they knew they’d become a murderer.”

What if Leviathan had taken control of Cortez or Garrus once they crashed on Despoina? Shepard knew she would want to protect her team from any fallout just like Efron did. “Let’s get you secure, just in case.”

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“So Efron believes this Leviathan is behind the attack?” Tevos said, her eyes wide.

Shepard looked ahead, standing at parade rest. Next to her, Admiral Hackett mirrored her posture. She nodded once.

“And you believe what he says, that the team did not commit these murders on their own free will?”

A lump formed in Shepard’s throat. “I believe we need to investigate the possibility they did not,” she said, tasting sawdust on her tongue.

Leviathan.

She remembered their arrogance. How they were so sure of their place as the top species in the galaxy. Garrus had tried to tell her, asked her if Leviathan was truly the type of ally they wanted in the war. Brushing off the criticism, she had chased them down with a singular focus until Leviathan had no place to hide.

And what had they accomplished? Shepard had poured over the mission reports of the Enthrallment Team. They were afraid to use the artifacts, thinking the Reapers would be able to counter the attacks before too long.

After her debriefing with Hackett and learning about the creation of the Leviathan codex, Shepard hadn’t given the aliens a great deal of thought. The Normandy had landed on Thessia only three days later and suddenly the giant creatures seemed far less important than finding the catalyst and defeating Kai Leng.

It this was Leviathan’s attempt at sending a message, it was clumsy. Yes, people were killed, but their murderers caught. They needed to speak to the team itself, and not rely on third party sources.

“Well, then I believe that will be our answer,” Valern said. “On the Council’s behalf, once they relays are working, Shepard, you’ll take the Normandy and investigate the team and these artifacts.”

“Now wait a minute,” Hackett said, taking a step forward. “You can’t just commandeer the Normandy. We’ll need her more than ever once the relays are up.”
“The Alliance gave the *Normandy* to the Citadel for Council business,” Sparatus said.


The Councilors all looked at him. Shepard clenched her fists behind her back. *Give them the ship,* she silently whispered. If the Council was denied their request, Shepard had no doubt they would use this as reason not to allow humanity back on the Council.

“This mess is thanks to the Alliance, specifically Shepard here,” Valern said. “We need information, and Shepard is already briefed on the situation and we can trust her to be discreet.”

Shepard had to hold back a laugh. That was the closest to a compliment she would ever get from them.

“Fine,” Hackett said after a moment’s silence. “Shepard can take the *Normandy.*”

As much as Shepard wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery, Shepard knew she couldn’t just simply accept the assignment. A year ago she would have charged in and jumped through every hoop they threw in front of her. But now? This decision wouldn’t only affect her life.

The assignment would affect Garrus’ as well, and Shepard needed to respect that. While they hadn’t spoken of the immediate future in the few days since the *Normandy*’s return, there was no doubt in her mind whatever was to be their future they would face together.

“While I appreciate your faith in me, Councilors,” Shepard said, trying not to cringe at the hypocrisy of her words, “I need twenty-four hours before I can give you an answer.”

Not often was the Council left speechless, but Shepard’s words seemed to have that reaction. Pursing her lips, Tevos answered, “Fine. Twenty-four hours.”

“How do you like the Councilors, Councilors,” Shepard and Hackett said at the same time.

The meeting over, they left the room. Shepard was about to speak when Hackett flashed a hand signal, telling her to be silent. Once out of the building, Hackett said, “Too many potential eavesdroppers in there. Didn’t want to say anything.”

“Understandable,” Shepard said as they started walking towards the Alliance compound.

“So the bastards want the *Normandy,*” Hackett said with a grimace. “You up for this, Shepard?”

“Well-

“Vakarian will go anywhere you go, you know that,” Hackett told her.

Shepard’s brow furrowed, insulted on Garrus’ behalf. If she’d learned anything this past year was Garrus certainly was his own man. He had no problem calling her out and asking, sometimes even demanding that she explain her decisions. If Garrus followed her, it was because he believed in her and the battles she fought. He wasn’t following blindly like Hackett suggested.

“I’ll discuss the assignment with him and we’ll see,” Shepard said, not willing to give Hackett anymore information about the subject.

“Understood,” Hackett said. “But for now, I’m assuming you’ll accept the assignment.” He stopped in the middle of the broken sidewalk. “This is exactly what they want. Send you out into the galaxy so you’re out of their hair.”
“The thought crossed my mind, sir,” Shepard said. She didn’t ask for it, but because of her role in the war, Shepard knew she had power. People would listen to her before they listened to the Council. Though she would never dream of abusing the power. Sending her out on a mission made perfect sense. Then they could remind everyone that Commander Shepard worked for them. And if it took a couple of months to get the job done? Even better.

“If you do accept, we need to discuss your official Alliance classification,” Hackett said.

Shepard tugged her coat around her. “Wouldn’t it just be like the war? Fighting for the Alliance and using Spectre status if necessary?”

“You’ve been officially on medical this whole time, Shepard. I know you’ve worked your ass off and I can’t begin to tell you how much it’s appreciated,” Hackett told her. His voice softened and Shepard felt a chill up her spine. Hackett didn’t do soft. “But the reality of your medical situation means if you take off on the Normandy it won’t be as an Alliance soldier.”

The fingers of her right hand circled her left wrist, where her omni-tool lay. “Because I can’t hear without assistance?”

“You have two choices: honorable discharge or retire from active duty.”

“I see,” Shepard said shortly. She should have chosen MREs this morning. Dessert, even a fabricated one sounded really good about now. “If I retire, even with-” She waved her hand around her face indicating her ears. “-I’d still be allowed to be in the reserves, wouldn’t I?”

“Correct,” Hackett said. “You’d maintain the rank of Commander and we’d hire you straight away as an advisor.”

“I’ll tell you what I told the Council. Give me twenty-four hours,” Shepard said, as they started to walk again.

The rest of the walk to Alliance HQ was in silence. Once they reached the gate, Hackett gave her a nod. Shepard nodded back, just as solemn, then turned to begin her trek to the turian field hospital.

An advisor. She had served the ideals of the Alliance faithfully for fifteen years. Taking a breath, Shepard put her hands in her pockets. Maybe this would work. As she told Maya Brooks, they all matter. Maybe this would be her chance to officially serve all the peoples of the galaxy.

Shepard let out a laugh. She and Garrus had a lot to talk about.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Six of Pentacles, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Six of Pentacles, Upright: Solvency in material affairs. Repayment of favors. Charity, patronage, sympathy and a kind heart.

“Vakarian.”

At the sound of Primarch Victus’ voice, Garrus snapped his omni-tool shut. The backlog of four months of news and reports would keep. As he straightened up, his back gave a twinge of protest. The decision about surgery would have to be made soon.

“It’s good to see you, sir,” Garrus said, letting his mandible flare in greeting.

“Please, I’m here on my own time, none of this ‘sir’ crap,” Victus said, extending his hand.

Garrus held Victus’ hand for a moment, a proper turian handshake. Once the Relay 314 Incident ran its course, turian and humans were both surprised to learn they shared the same basic greeting of a handshake, though Garrus never understood the numerous variations of the human handshake.

Some were barely more than a brush of the fingers, while others gripped far too hard. Even the lengths weren’t standardized. Whenever Garrus went to shake a human’s hand, he had no idea how long he’d be required to hold on. The one exception to that had been time when he took Shepard’s hand in both of his on Menae. Then he had simply never wanted to let go.

Turian handshakes were different. One beat to clasp the hands, one beat to hold and one beat to let go. Simple and to the point.

“Victus,” Garrus said, leaning against his hospital bed.

“So will the Alliance ever release what happened to the Normandy?” Victus asked.

“Not much to tell,” Garrus said truthfully. “We were hit by a beam and crash landed on Gliese. If we had been in dry dock, once the computers were up, the repairs would only have taken two weeks. Instead…”

“Four months,” Victus said with a sigh. “And another two before the relays are fixed. I want to get back to Palaven and have sex with my wife.”

“Ah,” Garrus said with a chuckle, not exactly sure how to respond. He and Victus had become not just colleagues but friends thanks to the Reaper War. Garrus didn’t know whether to be pleased or recoil that the Primarch of Palaven felt he could say such things to him.

“I would have visited earlier…” Victus trailed off.

“From what I understand, you’ve been busy,” Garrus said. Truth be told, Garrus was glad Victus hadn’t found time to visit until now. He much preferred to see the Primarch, even if he was a friend, when he wasn’t wearing a hospital gown and when he was able to stand on his own two feet. The
medicine Garrus had been given worked very well.

“To put it mildly,” Victus said, grabbing a chair and sitting down. “I hope you don’t think you’re heading for a vacation. I mean to put you to work.”

“Looking forward to it,” Garrus said. And he was. There were times when he felt absolutely useless on the *Normandy* over the past few months. He was able to help getting the computers back online, but after that? He didn’t know anything about the drive core. Most of his time was divided between helping Traynor with the comm or sitting in the AI Core, seeing if there was anything he could do to bring EDI back to life.

“Vakarian…” Underneath the word, Garrus heard a low tone of apology in Victus’ sub-vocals. The quiet thrum changed to one of worry. Garrus tensed for whatever the Primarch had to say. “A month ago, when I told Shepard you were to be classified as killed in service, I might have let it slip that you planned to propose.”

Garrus relaxed and waved away the apology. “She knew,” he said, thinking of those last desperate moments before they ran towards the beam.

*You better have your answer ready.*

He already had known what her answer would be, never doubted it. But Garrus had wanted to hear the words *after* the fight was over.

“Alright, then,” Victus said, his sub-vocals lighter now, sounding pleased. “When will you-” He held up his hands, stopping himself. “Never mind. That’s none of my business.”

Before their forced separation, Garrus assumed they’d wed almost immediately after the Reapers were defeated. The last four months altered his thinking a bit. Not about Shepard; his feelings for her hadn’t changed one bit.

But the reality was thanks to her damned rule - not wanting to talk about future - Garrus didn’t quite know what Shepard actually hoped for in hers. She didn’t exactly say no to the idea of starting a family together, but she didn’t say yes, either. Until they both knew what the other wanted, proposing, even when he had no doubt she would accept, didn’t seem wise.

The last thing Garrus wanted was to rush into marriage, like his parents had. He knew how to count; Sol was born only four months after they wed and turian pregnancies were six months long. The result of their haste? Separate dwellings, light years away and Garrus and his sister barely seeing their father.

His marriage to Shepard would be different. He would make sure of that.

“Well, I suppose now isn’t the best time, not when she’s about to drag you into another mission,” Victus said, lowering his voice. “We’ll discuss the details tomorrow, but you’ll be the Hierarchy’s representation for the duration.”

Garrus tensed, wondering what exactly Victus was speaking of. He would like to think Shepard would have told him about a mission. Keeping his sub-vocals steady, Garrus said, “Tomorrow will be fine.”

“Good. And before I go, there hasn’t been any sign of your family yet,” Victus said. “We haven’t had any luck yet, but there are plenty of places for a ship to hide in this galaxy. And we get reports daily of new ships checking in.”
Garrus nodded. Shepard had told him about the situation last night. Right now, all he could do was ask the Spirits to keep them safe. It didn’t seem like nearly enough.

“I need to get back to it,” Victus said. They shook hands once more. “It’s damn good to have you back, Vakarian.”

“Good to be back, Victus,” Garrus said with a nod as Victus left the room.

Before long, Shepard walked into the small hospital cubicle, closing the makeshift curtain behind her tight. His eyes raked over her form; she needed to gain weight. Shepard wasn’t ever this thin during the war. But back then Shepard had Yeoman Fitch, who seemed to make it her life’s work to ensure Shepard ate three meals a day.

She wasn’t placing her full weight on her left foot as she walked. He hadn’t noticed that before. Garrus couldn’t help wonder how many other details in her body might have changed thanks to the Crucible. He’d have to find out.

“You ready to get out of here?” she said, wrapping her arms around his cowl.

Brushing her cheek with a talon, Garrus said, “So what’s this I hear about you dragging me back into hell?”

“How in the world have you heard about this already?” Shepard asked, shaking her head. “You know details?”

“No,” Garrus said truthfully. “But here certainly isn’t the place to talk about them.”

“Agreed,” Shepard said, standing up straight. “And nothing is set in stone yet. I told the Council I needed twenty-four hours to make a decision.”

Standing up, Garrus grabbed the bag of liquidfied meals which were to be his sustenance for the next several days. As much as he joked about hating ration bars, he couldn’t wait to actually eat one again. “Why?” he asked.

Shepard punched him lightly on the shoulder. “Because I meant when I said ‘No Shepard without Vakarian,’ Garrus. I’m not making a decision like this without your opinion.”

Garrus took her hand. “I don’t know details yet, but do you think this mission is important enough to warrant your personal attention?”

They had quite different opinions when it came to missions requiring her attention. Shepard seemed to think if the mission was assigned to her, like most of those pesky ones from Hackett, they were important. Picking up Reaper tech and securing a canon were absolutely not important in his mind. Hackett had plenty of other N7s. The admiral should have utilized them more.

He was pleased to see she was considering his words and not jumping in with an answer. After a moment, Shepard nodded. “It is,” she said with enough conviction Garrus believed her.

“Then I’m in,” he said. “If you think this is critical, then I’m going to be right there next to you.” He leaned forward and rested his brow on hers. Four months had almost made him forget the sense of peace he felt when their brows touched. “Of course, it might help if I knew what we were doing.”

Her smile was soft as she brought her lips against his mouth plates. Garrus let himself revel in the sensation for a few seconds before breaking away. “Let’s get out of here.”
“Best idea I’ve heard all day,” Shepard said. She walked over to the curtain and pulled it open.
“After you.”

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She stopped suddenly. “It’s small.”

“What is?” Garrus asked. They had taken their time walking from the turian camp to the human’s
and were now standing in front of a few rows of prefabs. He handled the walk better than he hoped,
most likely thanks to Shepard stopping every so often to point things out to him, such as the
Council’s Building or The Shepards camp. If she did that on purpose, he can’t say he minded. “The
prefab? I expected that.”

“Smaller than the loft,” Shepard warned. “The bed is a double, so not much room to toss and turn.”

“Why are you nervous about this, Shepard?” Garrus asked, looking to see if anyone was watching.
When he was sure there wasn’t, he slid his arm around Shepard’s shoulder. “We shared your cabin
for almost the entire war. Why is this different?”

She was silent, her brow furrowed. “I wish I was offering you more than a tiny prefab,” she said
after a moment. “But I didn’t want special treatment-”

“Shepard, it’s going to be fine, you know that, right?” Garrus said, letting his mouth plates brush her
temple.

Garrus felt her relax against him. Nodding, Shepard placed her hand on his neck. “Let’s go home.”

Shepard led them to a generic prefab, identical to its neighbors. He had seen hundreds, maybe
thousands, on various colony worlds in his lifetime. But he never lived in one before. First time for
everything.

“Security measures?” Garrus asked as Shepard scanned the prefab.

Once she seemed satisfied, Shepard sent all the security information to his omni-tool. “I added your
biometrics to the logs, so you shouldn’t have any problems.”

Garrus brought the program up; already he saw a few improvements he could make. But he would
work on that project later. “Ready?” he asked, holding out his hand.

“Home sweet home,” Shepard said, putting her hand in his.

Together they walked up the few steps and into the prefab. Once the door closed behind him and
before he had a chance to look around, Shepard reached out and pulled on his tunic, placing the
fabric in her fists.

“I missed you,” she said in a whisper, even though there was no need for quiet.

Garrus put his hands on her hips. There was so much work to be done; thankfully there would be
time for reunions later tonight. But there was no harm in enjoying one kiss. “I missed you, too,” he
said softly.

Her hands went to his neck as she stood on tip toes. Their mouths met and Garrus trailed a talon
down her back, slightly alarmed that he could feel the bumps on her spine, something he never could
before. But then she opened her mouth, just enough to let his tongue slide in to meet hers. As their
mouths lingered together, Garrus breathed her in, realizing that her scent had changed slightly, less
metallic, more earthy, the product of not being in a ship for months at a time.

They parted far too quickly. Shepard slid her hand under his mandible. “Work?” she asked.

“Work,” Garrus agreed. He brought out his omni-tool and scanned for listening devices, just in case. The room was clean. He gave himself a moment to look around. The prefab was one room, with a tiny kitchen on one end and a double bed with no headboard pushed up against the wall across the way. Against one wall was a small workstation with a low back chair, similar to what he might find in a turian home. “Where’d you get the chair?”

“Asked around the turian camp,” Shepard said. “Chakwas said it would be better for your back.”

“Ah,” Garrus said. “She told you about that? I thought humans had that medical privacy rule.”

“We do,” Shepard said. “But you made me your emergency contact which meant she could tell me everything.”

“That was nice of me,” Garrus said with a laugh.

“Very,” Shepard said. She put her hands on her hips. “Confession time. I’ve learned things about myself living here during the past two months.”

“Such as?” Garrus asked, not sure where she was going with this.

“I am a slob,” she announced. Putting her hands up, she added, “And I know you are not. I will do my best.”

Leaning down, Garrus pressed his brow to hers. “Nothing more I can ask.”

“Living in a place like this without a yeoman is hard,” Shepard said, laughing. “I’ve never had to worry about running out of toilet paper before. Or toothpaste. Speaking of, I picked up a bunch of dextro toiletries for you. Hopefully they’ll work.”

Garrus nodded his thanks. “Shepard, unlike you, I have actual experience in living in an apartment without a yeoman,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist. “So how about this? I’ll make sure the toilet paper doesn’t run out.”

Shepard kissed his mouth plates lightly. “That is the sexiest thing you’ve said to me today, Garrus.” Her head rested on his shoulder as she glanced down at her omni-tool.

“You waiting for a message or something?” Garrus asked.

“Hmm? No, I asked not to be disturbed this afternoon,” Shepard said.

“That’s the third time you’ve looked at your omni-tool since you got to the hospital,” Garrus said. He hadn’t said anything before, but now he was just plain curious.

“Just checking the charge,” Shepard said, walking up to the footlocker currently sitting on the small sofa. “This was delivered yesterday.”

That didn’t answer Garrus’ question. “Three times? In an hour?”

“I’m not having my--” Shepard paused and slowly wrapped the fingers of her right hand around her left wrist. Her voice was quiet. "Haven't told you yet, have I?"

“Haven’t told me what, Shepard?” Garrus walked over to her, starting to feel nervous. He ran a talon
down her neck. “What’s going on?”

She turned and sat down at the table. Running her hands along the length of her thighs, Shepard took a breath and looked up. “I lost my hearing, in the explosion in the Crucible.”

“You lost your-”

“They gave me very good implants. I can hear better than I did before,” Shepard said, her words tumbling out of her mouth too quickly.

He tried to imagine not being able to hear. Not hearing the satisfying pop as he reloaded the Black Widow, the sound of his mother's sub-vocals when she told him she was proud of him - every day, *Garrus Vakarian, don't you forget* - or how Shepard said ‘good morning’ as they woke up, her voice still heavy from sleep. Those were sounds he treasured and to have them ripped from him...

To a turian, deafness was a severe disability. They relied on sub-vocals for so many things, a turian who couldn’t hear them was at a great disadvantage. There were programs that tried to interpret sub-vocals, but they were never as good as a person’s instinct.

Shepard looked down at the floor, her hands curling into fists. When she spoke, her voice was ice, sending a chill through him. “Don’t pity me.” Their eyes met and just for a moment, her face seemed to be made of steel. It was not a look Shepard wore often and rarely directed at him. “There are so many worse off than me.”

He wanted to ask questions. She hadn’t shared what had happened on the Crucible or how she’d been hurt. But he could wait. He’d file those questions next to the ones he had of her in the observation lounge, talking to Legion. They had time and he had patience. So instead of saying anything, Garrus simply nodded.

“Thank you,” Shepard said, standing up, her face soft again. She patted the footlocker. “Your things from the *Normandy*?”

Garrus let her change the subject. He looked down at the floor and rubbed his neck. “Our things,” he said, glancing up when Shepard made no response. “Williams’ orders before we took off. She wanted everything packed up, even yours. I didn’t want to go through your things, Shepard.”

“It’s fine, Garrus,” Shepard said. “Nothing there that you hadn’t seen before.” She opened the footlocker. “This will be good for storage.”

“So you ready to tell me about this mission?” Garrus asked as he reached inside the locker. On top were the two other civilian suits he owned besides the one he was wearing. He’d have to figure out what to do about clothes soon. At the hospital, a doctor had looked at his back and concurred with Doctor Chakwas. Until he was back at his old strength and weight, light armor or surgery were his options. The thought of his carapace being cracked open to perform the surgery made his plates itch. Light armor it would have to be.

“Top drawer is yours,” Shepard said as Garrus brought his clothes to the small dresser. “Long story short, I think Leviathan is testing the waters.” She stopped and scrunched up her nose in distaste. “Pun not intended.”

Garrus walked back to the footlocker and stood next to Shepard. “They ready to be the apex race again now that the Reapers are gone?” Shepard nodded and reached for the pile of her own civilian clothes. “Careful with those. There’s glass wrapped in there.”

She unfolded the lace dress she had worn on their date to the casino. Nestled inside the fabric were
three empty bottles of wine. Her smile lit up her entire face. “I can’t believe you kept these,” she said, picking up the bottle they shared before the Omega-4 relay. Her fingers grazed the one they drank after their time on the top of the Presidium. “Any others?”

Garrus shook his head, and reached for the bottle the shared the night the Normandy picked him up from Menae. They had shared numerous bottles of wine during the war, but these were the ones he couldn’t bear to recycle.

She took the bottle Garrus held and placed all three on the dresser, next to the hamster cage that was already there. “There really is a romantic underneath all that, isn’t there?” Shepard asked, laughing as she looked at the bottles.

“Shepard, I broke a hundred and thirty-seven regulations for you,” Garrus said. “You know damn well I can romance with the best of them.”

“No argument here,” Shepard said, grabbing his hands. She leaned against his chest and Garrus let himself run his talons through her hair. He preferred her head shaved, like she had worn for the last two years. But as he felt the smooth strands against his palms, he thought this could work as well. “There’s so much to talk about and I don’t even know where to start.”

“Let’s keep unpacking then,” Garrus said.

She nodded. “I like your thinking.” Standing up, she added, “Thank you for taking care of Hammish.”

“Ran out of hamster food after three months,” Garrus admitted. “But everyone pitched in a little bit to make sure he had enough to eat.” Not that he would readily admit this, but he was sure he bonded with the little guy in Shepard’s absence.

Shepard stretched her arms over her head, a move he always enjoyed.

“There’s a possibility Leviathan took over some of the Enthrallment Team,” Shepard said, apparently having decided what to talk about first. She picked up the crystal Bakara had given her. She pursed her lips, looking around the room. Setting the crystal on top of the small bookcase, she added, “The Council want us to investigate. Personally, I’d like to take that a step further and destroy any of those artifacts we come across.”

“So what are we talking about, a couple of months?” Garrus asked as he handed Shepard her civilian clothes to put away.

“Depends on the artifacts,” Shepard said. “But first step is talking to the team in person.”

“And you’re sure they didn’t commit these murders of their own free will?” Garrus asked, handing Shepard a stack of books that had been in the cabin. He’d never seen her actually read any of them, but he hadn’t wanted to leave them behind.

“Efron said they didn’t. He mentioned being cold and dark,” Shepard said as she arranged the books on the shelf to her liking.

“Efron?” Garrus asked. He’d have to look over the datapads to catch up soon. He hated not knowing the full story.

“The leader of the team,” Shepard said. She bit her lip. “Speaking of… Efron was able to skirt through the security of this place.”
Garrus froze. “He was here?” he asked sharply.

Shepard nodded as she stood up and walked to the kitchen area. “I was pissed, too, but he’s an N7 like me, and an Infiltrator to boot. My ego will recover somehow.”

“Don’t joke about this, Shepard,” Garrus said as he picked up the frame to his old visor, the one carved with the names of his squad on Omega. Funny how this used to feel so heavy in his hands. He placed in the drawer with his civilian clothes; he might not be able to see it, but he would know the visor was there.

“I’m not joking,” she said, opening the small refrigerator. She help up a bottle of water. “Want one?” Garrus nodded. She tossed the plastic bottle across the room, which he caught with one hand as he flipped open his omni-tool. “We don’t have to upgrade the security now, Garrus.”

“I got a message from Zaeed yesterday,” Garrus said casually. “He just wanted to let me know he was in the area.”

“Hell of a subject change, there. Yeah, he’s actually working with Jack, helping with the Grissom Academy students.” Shepard stopped with her water bottle halfway to her mouth. “Wait… Garrus, no.”

“We had some good ideas, Shepard,” Garrus said, sending off a text to Zaeed, inviting him over in the next couple of days. “Just ended up drinking too much to try to actually implement them.” Then there was the dancing. Lots of dancing. And after the group photo had been taken and everyone went back to drinking, Garrus and Shepard held a dance party of their very own in the privacy of her bedroom. It had been a good night.

Shepard let out a huff of a laugh. “Fine. But any use of explosives goes through me,” she said, putting her hands on her hips.

Garrus took a swig of his water bottle, being careful not to spill any; he had been thoroughly briefed on how important conserving water was for the time being. Then looking at her, admitted, “I just want you safe, Shepard.”

He felt a strange relief saying those words out loud. For so long Garrus kept quiet as he watched Shepard risk her life again and again. During the war, the idea of safe was an illusion; they would never be. But perhaps they could be now.

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his carapace, just above his waist. “And I want you safe. So we’ll go through all the measures and we’ll make them better.”

He nodded, running a talon down her nose, wondering how badly she must have been burned to make the skin heal a different pigment and wishing he could have been there to help her through everything. A soft keen escaped his sub-vocals and Shepard looked up, meeting his gaze, and tightening her hold. “Shepard?” he said softly.

“Yeah?” Her hands drifted slightly lower, stroking his waist. She always did know how to read him.

“Work later?”

“Agreed,” Shepard said with a smile, just before their mouths met.

Work could wait for the moment.
Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!

There will be no update for this story on Monday. That is when I'll be posting the first chapter of the E-rated companion to *Scattering Grief*, which will be a continuation of this scene. If smut's not your thing, don't worry! Nothing relevant to the plot will be included, I can promise you that.
The Page of Pentacles, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Page of Pentacles, Upright: A hardworking man, proud of his responsibilities. He is honorable but may sometimes be a little too overzealous in his duties.

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“You going to tell me why you keep looking over here and smiling, Shepard?” Garrus asked.

They had just stepped off the shuttle into the Orlando sunlight after a quick flight from Cape Canaveral. The shuttle ride was only fifteen minutes long, but it was a shuttle meant for humans. Garrus cracked his neck, feeling a brief respite when the bones gave a satisfying ‘pop.’ Next to him, Shepard shuddered. She hated the sound of his neck cracking. Always had.

As he stretched his back a bit - he always hoped for a minute after he hopped off the shuttle into a battle zone, though more often than not, he was denied - Garrus looked at the set up.

The buildings were very colorful, which surprised Garrus. Normally the Alliance liked their buildings nondescript, the better to blend in. “Why do the buildings look so damn happy?” Garrus asked Shepard.

“I think these were the administration offices of an amusement park,” Shepard said. “Still pretty much in tact, so the Alliance asked if we could use them.”

The cheerful colors made a stark contrast to the security surrounding the buildings. Guards were patrolling the perimeter and based on the sniper perches he saw, he would bet credits at least three rifles were trained on them right now. There were even a couple of skycars flying over heard.

“Not taking any chances with security,” Garrus muttered.

“Look at us,” Shepard said, placing her datapads under her arm. “It’s like we time traveled back to the SR-1. I have hair and you’re wearing…” She waved her hand over his armor.

“C-Sec light armor,” Garrus said with a sigh. With his heavy armor not an option thanks to his back, Garrus had to scramble to find some sort of armor to wear on a regular basis. He refused to conduct his day to day activities in civilian clothes, wanting to always be ready in case something, anything went wrong. Commissioning a custom kit of armor was impossible at the moment. But Garrus still knew people in C-Sec and a surprising number of them made it off of the Citadel, assisting in securing refugee camps across the entire planet. He put out a call, offering a substantial number of energy reserves in exchange for light armor in his size.

The potential barter had led to the first fight he and Shepard had since he moved into their prefab a week ago. She was absolutely obsessed with keeping her omni-tool fully charged at all times and what she called a small stockpile of reserves he called a hoard. He understood why she wanted her tool charged, he did. Without a functioning omni-tool, she had no way to hear anything. But those reserves were the only currency they had; credits were worthless across the galaxy at the moment.

During the fight, Garrus kept waiting for Shepard to shut down. He had been painfully aware that if
she wanted, she could withdraw from the conversation completely. Choose not to talk him, like she
did after Rannoch, when he had called her out on her decision to let Legion start the upload. Even
worse, she could shut off her omni-tool completely and not hear a single word he said.

But she didn’t. He could tell how uncomfortable she had been the way her eyes kept moving from
the bathroom to the door leading outside. She clearly had wanted to be anywhere but in the prefab
there with him. But they stuck it out and in the end, she agreed to use some of their reserves to trade
for armor.

“It looks good on you,” Shepard said. “I like that shade of blue.”

He nodded, accepting the compliment. The truth was he would prefer not to wear this shade of blue
again. This color reminded him of Omega and his team and the broken armor he had clung to for so
long, needing the physical reminder of his team. The color reminded him of the squad’s base, and
feeling Shepard’s steady hand on his waist as he had saw his own blood pool on the floor after
getting hit by the gunship. And when he had commissioned a custom kit of armor on Palaven, he
choose a new shade of blue, because it had been time.

Once through security, they were escorted into one of the smaller buildings. “Third door to the left,”
the Alliance lieutenant said, with a crisp salute. “They know you’re here.”

“Thank you, LT,” Shepard said to the young woman. Once their escort walked off, Shepard shook
her head and muttered, “Always so damn young.”

Before they had a chance to walk to the door, Ann Bryson stuck her head out. “Commander!” she
said, a smile on her face. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

As Shepard greeted Bryson, Garrus studied her from a distance. Nothing out of the ordinary in her
demeanor, not that Garrus had the best knowledge. He and Shepard shared a meal with her once
they rescued Bryson from Namalki on the way to the Citadel. And while she might look innocent,
she had been a tool of Leviathan, which made her a potential threat.

A salarian walked up next to Bryson as Garrus joined the group. Bryson didn’t need to know his
concerns for now.

“I believe you’ve already met Padok Wiks?” Bryson asked.

“Indeed,” Wiks said, extending his hand. Garrus looked him over. He was slight, even for a salarian,
with brick red tattoos on his face. “Memorable day, wasn’t it, Commander?”

“Sur’Kesh was quite the experience,” Shepard said, shaking his hand. She gestured towards Garrus.
“And this is-”

Wiks offered his hand to Garrus. “Advisor Vakarian, of course.”

Bryson and Wiks led them into their lab, to a small conference table. The lab had certainly seen
better days. The tiles were cracked, painted walls chipped and the furniture was battered. But the
work stations seemed active and one wall was being used as a white board, with equations written
from ceiling to floor. Various relics were scattered about along with a galaxy map in one corner.

“We’ve have some questions,” Shepard said as they all sat down.

“Of course, Commander,” Bryson said, shaking her head. “We’ve been briefed about the murders.
It’s just awful. Whatever you need.”
“We’re going on the assumption that Leviathan took over members of the team, like they did with you, Ann,” Shepard said. “But the artifacts were shielded, weren’t they?”

“They were,” Bryson agreed. She folded her hands in front of her. “But you need to understand, it seemed like the more we studied them the less we understood.”

Wikis stood up and rocked back and forth on his heels. “The amount of dark energy in these artifacts… We can only offer a hypothesis at the moment. But we think the artifacts adapted so they could permeate the shields.”

Garrus let that sink in for a moment. “Can they be altered?” he asked.

“They can, but it will be just a matter of time before the artifacts adapt again,” Bryson said. “What we’ve been working on is a personal shield that will vary the frequencies of the shield, which theoretically would keep the artifact from adapting at all.”

“What we’ve been working on is a personal shield that will vary the frequencies of the shield, which theoretically would keep the artifact from adapting at all.”

“Then what are your skills?” Shepard asked.

“I am quite proficient in technical skills and in biotics,” Wiks said. He leaned forward. “I have studied the artifacts extensively and would be able to make any necessary adjustments to the shields.”

Garrus made a note to do a thorough background check on Wiks, find out if he had been in any contact with Reaper tech, see if there was anything in his history that could jeopardize the mission. If Shepard refused to have a sense of caution, he would have one for her.

“Excellent!” Wiks said. “You should be aware, for the record, that Commander Rentola was a good friend of mine. It is imperative that we discover what happened and prevent this from occurring again.”

“Understood, Wiks,” Shepard said. “Appreciate the honesty.”

“What we really need to develop over the next two months is a way to track the artifacts,” Bryson said. “We’re working on prototype, but it’s not ready to test.”

“I thought there was a way to trace them already,” Garrus asked, trying not to fidget in his chair. It was not built for turians.

“When the artifacts are active, yes, we can reasonably trace both Leviathan and the artifact. What we need is to figure out a way to track inert artifacts.”

“There isn’t one on Earth, is there?” Shepard asked quickly.

Bryson and Wiks looked at each other slowly. “Well, we don’t believe so, not on Earth,” Bryson
said, dragging the words out.

Sitting straight up, ignoring the protest his lower back made, Garrus asked, “What happened to the one on the Citadel?”

“That’s the thing,” Bryson said, her shoulders hunched. “We don’t exactly know.”

“You don’t know?” Shepard asked, each word a staccato beat.

“It was shielded on the ship where we were living,” Wiks said. “But once the Crucible made it to Earth, our ship was hit and we had to evacuate. Neither one of us thought to bring the artifact with us.”

Garrus stood up then, tensing as he heard the legs of the chair scrape the floor. The chair was too uncomfortable to sit in any longer. He had hoped meeting with the scientists would clear up some of their questions, instead only more and more were created. “Was the ship destroyed?” Garrus asked.

“Not completely.”

“So we find the ship,” Garrus said, trying not to sound annoyed. Neither one of them thought, indeed.

Standing up, Shepard shook her head. “You know how many destroyed ships and dead Reapers are in orbit right now? It’d be impossible to find one ship.”

Garrus had read the reports and saw some of the footage as the Normandy made its way to Earth. A ship’s graveyard, they were calling it. Dead Reapers, destroyed ships of all different races… It was a scavenger’s paradise up in orbit.

The look on Shepard’s face was one he had only seen once before: when she had made that impossible jump into the Normandy after destroying the Collector Base. Her face had terrified him then, thinking she wasn’t going to make the jump and made his plates run cold now. An unshielded artifact orbiting Earth…

“That’s why we need figure out how to make this tracker,” Bryson said, almost as an after thought.

“Okay,” Shepard said, crossing her arms over her chest. Garrus let his mandibles flare in a grin. He recognized her tone. This was Shepard’s patented you have a problem and I will find you a solution or die trying tone. “What do you need?”

“It’s the dark energy that’s causing issues in the prototype. Neither Bryson or I have experience in that field,” Wiks said apologetically.

“Not to mention figuring our how the dark energy integrates with the artifacts. If that problem could be solved, then I’m sure we could complete the tracker and learn if the artifact is still in orbit,” Bryson said.

Shepard went still. “So what you’re saying is you need an expert in xenotechnology and dark energy integration?”

“Exactly, Commander,” Bryson said with a smile. “We’ve checked with all scientists in the Crucible project but none of them have those skill specialties.”

“I know someone on Sur’Kesh, but that does us no good,” Wiks added.
Shepard let out a bark of a laugh. “I think I know someone,” she said, shaking her head.


Turning to look at Garrus, Shepard smiled, her lips pursed together tightly. “Dr. Conrad Verner.”

“Commander Shepard!”

Shepard watched Jenna walk over, shoulders slumped. Even at a bit of a distance, she could see Jenna radiating misery. “Everything okay?”

“If girlfriend broke up with me last night,” Jenna said, kicking a rock of dirt on the ground. That answered Shepard’s mystery, at least. “For an asari! Works at one the strip clubs they’ve set up. I knew she was going over there a lot, but she just said she was stressed, you know?” Jenna put the heel of her palm up to her forehead. “Sorry, you didn’t come here to listen to my problems. Conrad’s going to be so happy to see you. When I told him he missed your last visit, he was devastated.”

“I actually stopped by to talk to Conrad,” Shepard told her. “He free?”

“I think he’s helping a kid right now, but let me take you over there,” Jenna said.

Jenna took her to a nearby tent. As they walked, Shepard smiled at the sound of kids playing nearby. The camp was cleaner than some of the refugee camps she’d been in. Shepard had asked Jenna about it once and was told that all the kids had a daily chore to do. With so many kids, they had to be creative and some of them swept the pathways every single day.

“I’m gonna die!”

Shepard tensed and with a hand on her pistol, looked into the tent. Conrad was kneeling next to a volus, who sounded like she was crying uncontrollably. He put his hands on her shoulders. “You’re not going to die, Darja, I promise you, okay?”

The girl kept shaking her head wildly. “It’s too tight!” Her voice rattled through her suit’s speakers and she sounded like she was clawing for each breath. “It’s gonna burst and I’m gonna die!”


Shepard watched as Conrad told the little girl to breath with him. As they started breathing, Conrad glanced up at Shepard and mouthed ‘sorry.’ She had never actually seen Conrad work one on one with any of the kids before. He would always take her to large groups, wanting her to spend time with as many as possible.

To see Conrad like this, in control and helping this little girl was eye-opening. This was not the same man who accused her of shoving a gun in his face two years ago.

It took a few minutes, but the girl stopped crying and started taking regular breaths.

“Go play with your friends, Darja, I need to talk to Commander Shepard here,” Conrad said.

“Okay, Mister Conrad,” Darja said, her voice hiccuping slightly. She waved at Shepard as she waddled out of the tent. “Hiya, Commander!”

Shepard smiled as she waved back. “Hiya, Darja,” she said, watching the girl totter towards a group of nearby kids.
“Commander Shepard!” Conrad stood up, his smile wide. “It’s so good to see you again. Commander, I am so sorry I missed your last visit.”

Like so many other men, Conrad now wore a beard instead of a goatee. Shepard sometimes wondered how long it would be before the goatee came back in style. But even with the change in facial hair, he was still Conrad, anxious and over-eager to please. That hadn’t changed one bit.

“Why was that little girl upset?” Shepard asked. She knew it was none of her business, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Because she’s growing up and getting too big for her suit. There aren’t many volus on Earth right now and none of them have a suit to spare. If I can’t find at the very least some material to patch her suit, give her some breathing room…” Conrad shook his head. Shepard was surprised to notice his fists clench. “There’re some on the black market, but I can’t afford their prices. None of them are even willing to donate a little bit.” He looked dejected, his shoulders hunched. “Commander, I know I’ve made some odd requests over the years, but if you can somehow manage to get the material—”

“I’ll find some,” Shepard said immediately. “Send me the specs and I’ll make sure we get some.”

“Oh, thank you, Shepard,” Conrad said, his relief palpable. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s not a problem at all,” Shepard said. She looked at his beaming face and wondered just how exactly she tripped onto the pedestal he put her on. “Conrad, do think there’s a place we could talk?”

Conrad’s eyes went wide. “Did I do something—” He stopped and took a breath. “Is everything okay? You don’t usually want to talk when you stop by.”

That was true. Her previous visits were to show support for the children and to let her mind wander, thinking about the future she thought she’d never have. Shepard hadn’t realized she telegraphed her desire to be alone so openly. That Conrad picked up on that surprised her. From their various interactions, she knew he didn’t exactly have what could be considered people skills.

“Things are fine for now,” Shepard said. “But I have a question to ask you. Preferably in private.”

“Okay,” Conrad said, each syllable drawn out and enunciated. There was still a slight edge of worry to his features. “My tent has some privacy, if you don’t mind going there.”

He started walking and motioned her to follow. As they walked, kids ran up to them, saying hi to Mister Conrad and the Commander. “So I heard the Normandy made it back to Earth,” Conrad said as they walked. “You must have been happy.”

“To put it mildly,” Shepard said, thinking of the past two weeks since the ship had docked. She and Garrus had friends visit the prefab almost every evening. And each morning they woke up together. Happy was an understatement, she thought as she smiled to herself.

“Here we go,” Conrad said, stepping into a tall tent. There was a folding table and two chairs in the middle with a sleeping pallet hiding in the back. “I always thought the Normandy seemed like a family more than just soldiers on the same ship. I’d watch those Battlespace reports and everyone just seemed so proud to be serving on that ship. But how could they not be proud, serving under you.”

“A family’s a good way to describe it,” Shepard said.

“Family’s nice,” Conrad said, his eyes blinking rapidly. Shepard bit her lip, remembering the conversation she had with him on the Citadel, admitting he had no family or friends.
They sat down at the folding table. “I need your help, Conrad,” Shepard said, trying to fight the smile that was threatening to spill onto her face. For more than four years Conrad wanted to help in any way possible and now she was finally able to give him a chance to do so. And Conrad was surprisingly the right choice for this mission. Shepard had checked the Alliance database, which held the records of the various war assets. According to the notes, his dissertation had proved quite useful in the construction of the Crucible.

“My help?” Conrad asked, sitting up straighter in his chair. “Of course, Shepard, anything I can do.”

“I’m working on a mission,” Shepard told him as Conrad leaned toward her, as if he were worried he might miss a single word. “And the scientists I’m working with say they need someone new on the team. Someone with dark energy and xenotechnology experience.”

Shepard smiled broadly, waiting for Conrad’s response. Instead of an eager nod of the head and a handshake like she expected, Conrad stood up and faced away from the table, his neck bowed. “You want me to go back into a lab,” he said flatly, his voice on the verge of shattering.

“Well, you provided your dissertation…” Shepard trailed off, confused by his response.

“I wrote that fifteen years ago,” Conrad said, turning around again. He started staring at the floor. “Giving you a paper is a lot different than stepping foot into a lab; actually studying dark energy again…” Conrad shivered and looked her right in the eye. His voice was quiet. “I would have died for you, Commander, you know that. Please don’t ask me to do this.”

What had he seen?

He looked like a soldier who had seen one too many battles and then told that he had no choice but to go out and fight again. Lost and maybe more than a little broken.

Shepard had known that feeling, felt it herself when she heard Miranda yelling at her to get up off the table on the Lazarus Station. But she fought it and pushed the feeling aside.

Conrad obviously was still living with it.

Her toes clenched, the only outward sign of her disappointment. Shepard felt like an absolute idiot. She had just assumed that Conrad would be more than happy to join her cause and fulfill his dream of working with her. But looking at him now? Seeing his face? Something must have happened to make him leave his lab and never turn back; turned him into a man who thought he could be a Spectre who took down red sand dealers and here she was, trying to drag him back in.

“Allright, Conrad,” Shepard said, keeping her voice soft and making sure no regret bled through. “I understand.”

She stood up and nodded, silently saying goodbye. She’d go talk to some of the children, make sure Conrad knew she didn’t take his rejection personally. There had to be someone in the area who could help. Perhaps the quarians, they had studied dark energy at Haestrom, maybe one of their researchers were on Earth.

As she stepped out of the tent, she heard Conrad say, in a voice so soft she almost missed it, “Wait.”

His voice grew stronger. “Commander, wait.”

Shepard turned and looked back at Conrad. “Yes?”

“You know what I’m trying to instill in these kids? I want to teach them to help those in need. That’s what I want them to learn, more than math, more than science. I want them to grow up thinking that
helping their fellow beings is not just the right thing to do, but the only thing.” Conrad took a breath and walked over to her. "What sort of role model would I be if Commander Shepard of all people asked me for help and I turned her down?"

And to think at one point Shepard rolled her eyes at this man and thought him a fool. “So you’ll help?”

“Some details might be nice,” Conrad said, cocking his head with a grin. “But yes, Shepard. I’ll help.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Three of Swords, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**The Three of Swords, Reversed**: Spiritual and mental confusion, loss or discord. Physical or mental disorder.

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“Tell me you have good news, Shepard,” Hackett called out from his desk even before security finished confirming her ID.

Shepard tried to keep the smile off of her face as she walked inside Hackett’s office where he and Rear Admiral Caleb Antella of the Department of Internal Naval Affairs had been waiting patiently. Both men stood as she entered. Once the door was safely closed, Shepard walked up to Antella and held out her hand. “Congratulations, Councilor.”

Antella, a slight man of European and Asian ancestry, eagerly shook her hand. Hackett pounded the knuckles of his hand once on the table, more emotion than Shepard had seen from him in quite a while. “About damn time,” Hackett said. “About damn time.”

“The Council said that all pertinent information will be sent by courier later this afternoon and you’re to start attending the sessions tomorrow, Councilor,” Shepard said.

The list of potential candidates to replace Udina had been smaller than the Alliance would like to admit. At first, Shepard didn’t like the idea of a Councilor from the Alliance. There was a growing sentiment among the humans on Earth that the Alliance controlled too much of humanity’s future as it was. But the Reapers dealt a huge blow to humanity’s government when they destroyed Arcturus Station, killing all of Parliament.

The simple matter was there weren’t all that many qualified people to step into the role of Councilor living on Earth. Their options seemed to be military or corporate executives. In the end, military seemed like the lesser of two evils as Shepard didn’t fully trust an executive to put the well being of the galaxy above the well being of their stockholders.

Though only recently promoted to Rear Admiral, Antella had quite the reputation throughout the Alliance. He was instrumental in uncovering the corruption in the Naval Exploration Flotilla two years ago. And while others tried to hush the scandal, Antella called for more and more transparency.

Hackett had also told her that Antella led the charge back when she worked with Cerberus, wanting to bring her in for questioning. She certainly didn’t doubt his commitment to the Alliance. Hopefully, he’d be able to use that same work ethic for all the peoples of the galaxy now.

As pleased as Shepard was that humanity was getting a seat on the Council again, she wished it felt more than just a pat on the head for giving in to all of their requests. Bequeathing the *Normandy* to the Council, taking charge on the Leviathan investigation, every time the Council wanted the Alliance to do something, they complied.

“We’ll want regular briefings, Councilor,” Hackett said, placing his hand on Antella’s shoulder.
“Of course, sir,” Antella said. “I won’t let you down.”

“You’re above my pay grade now, Councilor, so no more ‘sirs’ from you, understood?” Hackett asked.

“Understood, Admiral,” Antella said with a grin. Shepard couldn’t keep herself from chuckling. She liked the guy already. Would be a nice change from Udina.

“You’ll have an office here at Headquarters, but you should spend as much time as you can in the Councilor’s Building,” Hackett said, opening his omni-tool and gesturing, sending over information. “Here is a list of qualified aides. You’ll probably need two or three.”

“I’ll make that decision soon,” Antella said, looking down at his uniform. He picked at the collar. “Never thought I’d wear anything but Alliance colors. Suppose this means I should get some new clothes.”

“They make the man, so I’m told,” Shepard said.

Shepard thought about her own retirement, which was to take place the day the Normandy left Earth. Almost half her life she had been an Alliance soldier. First a grunt, then picked for officer training, to the N7 program. To suddenly be considered an advisor or a consultant, knowing if anyone called her Commander it would be only an honorary title, stung. Especially considering she had no choice due to an injury she received in the line of duty.

“You have a lot of work to do, Antella,” Hackett said. “Don’t let them hold you back.”

“Or push you around,” Shepard said seriously. She knew from discussions with Anderson when he had been a Councilor, how frustrated he had become when they almost seemingly dismissed him and his concerns. Humanity couldn’t afford that. They needed to be seen as equals with the rest of the Council.

“I won’t,” Antella said, standing a little straighter. “I better get to it.”

Hackett held up his hand. “Let’s make sure we’re all on the same page about Leviathan.” Shepard nodded, and all three of them sat down. “What’s your status, Shepard?”

She should have written the damn report. Two weeks had passed since being assigned this mission and every day seemed like there was no chance to catch their breath. They were trying to catch up in a race where they couldn’t see the opponent ahead of them.

“We’ve added an additional scientist to the team and they’re hoping to have a tracker for the artifacts and a personal shield ready to test in less than a month,” Shepard told them. She would be flying with Conrad to Orlando in two days.

“How’s recruitment going for the mission?” Hackett asked.

“Haven’t decided on ground teams yet, but I’m almost finished recruiting the Alliance crew,” Shepard said.

If the Normandy had been running a skeleton crew before, for this mission, the ship would be a ghost town. During the war, they had fifty-four crew members, including the squad. For this mission, Shepard wanted to keep the number under thirty, if possible. The usual suspects would be there; Shepard had found the time to speak to Joker, Traynor, Cortez, Chakwas and Adams, who all agreed to take part.
The only two to decline so far were Gabby and Ken because of the baby. Gabby was due in less than three months now. Shepard would miss them. While they were all engineers, Shepard’s specialty was structural and combat engineering. She knew very little of the minutia and needs of a spaceship engineer. During their time together on the SR-2, Shepard loved sitting with them in engineering and having them teach her as much as possible. In turn, she gave them safety versions of her combat drone and turret and refereed more than one mock battle in the cargo hold between the two of them.

The next step would be choosing the ground teams for the mission. Shepard was adamant that she make all the choices this time, unlike the previous ones where they were chosen for her or happened along almost by default. Granted everyone of them worked out, but she wanted to make the determination of who and who should not be on her squad.

Antella looked at a datapad. “And you’re meeting with Efron today?”

Shepard nodded. Efron was being held in Rio De Janeiro, in the Villa. The thinking was he needed to be kept far from Cape Canaveral in case Leviathan could control him somehow, especially if there was an artifact in orbit. So many variables. “He’s been cooperative so far, but the turian Hierarchy has questions. Advisor Vakarian will be questioning him.”


“Thank you, sir,” Shepard said. Time to go to Rio.

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Rio De Janeiro, The Federal Republic of Brazil

“You’re alright with me doing the talking?” Garrus asked as they stopped before the gate leading into the complex.

“The turian Hierarchy requested this meeting,” Shepard smiled, poking him on the shoulder. “I’m simply the Alliance representative.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe you’ll be able to use those investigator skills of yours, find out something new.”

“Here’s hoping,” Garrus said. “And you’re okay with leaving the room for a bit during the session?”

“Do you really think he’ll tell you something that he hasn’t told us, just because you’re not Alliance?” Shepard asked. Her look was skeptical.

The few N7s he met over the years all seemed to have the same character flaw: they wanted to look their best to their superiors, including Shepard.

Over the years, he had watched her spend hours trying to word a report just right; telling the absolute truth but putting herself in the best light. It was very possible Efron might be more agreeable speaking to someone not in the Alliance.

And Spirits, did Garrus have questions.

Going through the Leviathan Enthrallment Team reports while he worked to get back into shape had been a long and arduous task since he was released from the field hospital. The reports, quite honestly, scared him. Those artifacts were all over the galaxy, at least sixty of them, and most likely more. If Leviathan decided to use them all at once… Well, he and Shepard would have to have a plan in case that happened. He just wished his first draft consisted more than the words ‘oh crap.’
Shepard pressed the call button on the panel. Within minutes, an Alliance lieutenant, who apparently believed in the Jimmy Vega theory of uniforms, led them into the building. The inside was bland; nothing stood out. Reminded him of the ruins on Therum, actually. Sterile white and homey as Wrex had described it.

“How long did you train here?” Garrus asked Shepard in a low voice.

“N7 training lasts two years,” Shepard said. “About four months for each rank. Survive N6 and you’re an N7.”

Garrus cataloged the information away. There was still so much they didn’t know about each other. Funny how he was closer to her than anyone in the galaxy and there were still things he hadn’t told her. For now he was content knowing he had the chance to tell her at all. He had a lot he’d like to tell her one day.

They were led to a small conference room, reminding him of the interrogation rooms on the Citadel. “How’s he been?” Shepard asked.

“Fine,” the lieutenant said with a shrug. “Very cooperative.”

“Good,” Shepard said, nodding her head. “Bring him in.”

Garrus took a look at his datapad, where he already had a list of questions which weren’t answered to his satisfaction in the reports. He knew the team was busy, but their reports were laughable. Barely gave any information. Shepard started to sit down at the table, but Garrus touched her shoulder. “Don’t sit down yet.”

She looked at him incredulously. “I was just teasing when I said use your interrogation skills. You know that, right?” Shepard said.

“The team that he is responsible for has led to the death of three people, Shepard,” Garrus said, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn’t like the way his armor fit his shoulders. He needed to break them in more. If not for his damn back, he could be in heavy armor; he’d gotten used to how heavy armor made him look more imposing, more threatening. “This is absolutely an interrogation.”

She blinked rapidly. Garrus waited for her to protest, to say that they’d ask the questions together. Instead, she held up her hands and said, “I said you could do the talking. I’m not changing my mind on that.”

“Thank you,” Garrus said. Felt strange to have her at his six for once and not the other way around. But there was no doubt she’d support him as best she could.

The doors opened and the lieutenant ushered Major Efron inside the room. Garrus was surprised to see he wasn’t cuffed, but supposed the man wasn’t technically under arrest. Efron sat down right away and looked up at them both.

“Efron, this is Advisor Garrus Vakarian, representing the turian Hierarchy,” Shepard said. Garrus’ neck warmed a bit as he recognized the pride in her voice as she spoke. She sat down at the table, though not directly across from Efron. “He’s on my team and would like to ask you some questions.”

Garrus stood while he felt Efron take stock of him. Let him look, Garrus thought. While the two weeks hadn’t erased all the damage of the last four months, they had certainly improved him. At least he was eating food again - if you can call MREs and rations food - and not those horrible liquid meals. And in another week, he had clearance to lift weights again.
“C-Sec?” Efron finally asked.

“Former.”

Efron nodded, and blew out air out of his lips. “Any news on my team? Tolan?”

Garrus wanted to laugh. Typical N7, trying to control the flow of the conversation by asking the questions instead of answering them. There were times Shepard did the exact same thing. He wondered which level of N-training they had been taught the technique.

Shepard shook her head. None of the Enthrallment Team wanted to talk, perhaps not willing to implicate themselves any further. Frustrating as all hell to know they had to wait another six weeks or so before they could talk to the team in person.

“Then what do you want to know?”

Garrus sat down, leaning back slightly, leaving his posture open. For now he was content to play good cop. Next to him, Shepard brought up her omni-tool to record the conversation. “The reports never said. How did the team communicate with Leviathan?”

“We didn’t,” Efron said, taking a deep breath. “Once the team formed, our first order of business was to get as many of those artifacts from Despoina as we could. I think we took sixty in all. My job was to figure out where to deploy them. Each member of the team had access to a small scouting ship. I’d send them all over.”

“They worked alone?” Garrus asked.

“Yes,” Efron said. “Didn’t want to chance the Reapers noticing a squad. So they’d drop off the artifact and Leviathan just knew.”

“Who chose the drop sites?”

“I did,” Efron said. “I worked out of the Saltzburg. I’d get the latest intel from HQ and choose from there. I wanted them spread out, all across the galaxy. Less of a chance of the Reapers meeting up to compare notes.”

“How many artifacts actually were deployed?”

“Nine.” Efron let out a deep breath. “By the time we got the team together and picked up the artifacts, we only had two weeks before the Citadel moved to Earth. Doesn’t even seem like it was worth it. I read the reports. They didn’t change a damn thing. Colonies still were wiped out.”

“But they worked?” Garrus asked. “Leviathan took over the Reaper troops?”

Efron shrugged. “They didn’t bother to kill another Reaper like they did on Despoina, though. But yeah. We dropped them off and they controlled the ground troops.”

“Giving Leviathan the chance to observe,” Garrus noted.

“Exactly,” Efron said, nodding. “But they couldn’t observe everything. We had them shielded at all times. The only time they weren’t shielded was when the team dropped them off.”

“So each team member had a certain number of artifacts?” Garrus asked.

“Seems stupid now, doesn’t it? Would have been a hell of a lot easier if we had them all in one place,” Efron said, running his hand through his hair.
“What can you tell me about Tolan?”

“He was last assigned to Bekenstein in the Boltzmann system,” Efron said. “He’s the most resourceful of anyone on my team. STG like Rentola. Infiltration’s his speciality And for the record, he seems to have a personal grudge against you, Shepard.”

Her eyebrows shot up at her name. “Really,” she said. Garrus didn’t look over at her, but could feel her body tense.

Nodding, Efron said, “Blames you for the Reapers attacking Sur’Kesh. Blames you for the genophage cure, basically blames you for every bad thing that’s ever happened.”

Garrus knew there were people out there who felt the same way. Shepard had been the most visible symbol fighting the Reapers; he wasn’t surprised some hated her for it. He just wished Lieutenant Tolan wasn’t one of those folks.

He glanced over his notes. “Did you leave any of the artifacts on Despoina?”

“We did. Thought it made sense to leave Leviathan some protection from the Reapers, not that they needed it apparently.”

Garrus’s mind started turning. They could send an unmanned shuttle down to the surface of Despoina, see if Leviathan shot it down. He couldn’t risk saying that to Shepard, not when it was possible Leviathan was somehow listening through Efron.

Efron leaned his elbows on the table, fists clenched. “There’s at least another planet,” he said, “where there are Leviathan. Wiks and Bryson tried to find it, but didn’t have any luck. Otherwise I’d tell you to just nuke the whole damn planet and be done with them.”

Shepard stood up quickly, the legs of her chairs scratching against the floor. She turned her back to them and stared into a corner. “That’s a last resort,” she said sharply.

“Maybe it shouldn’t be,” Efron said.

“We haven’t even tried talking to them,” Shepard said. She wrapped her arms around her midsection. Garrus could see the tension rising, the muscles in her neck taunt. “We’ve just gone ahead and assumed their intentions are hostile.”

“Shepard, they took over my team. Killed people,” Efron spat. “You know what they’re capable of.”

“I am not,” Shepard spun around, her eyes flashing, “going to advocate for the death of another species. We have time.” Shepard glanced over her shoulder, letting air rush out of her lungs. “There was no time when it came to the rachni or the batarians or the geth. We don’t have to rush into this.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m going to get a drink of water.

In two steps she was out of the room. Garrus was very still as he thought over what Shepard just said. He turned to look at Efron, who was studying him intently. Garrus stared right back, not averting his gaze. Efron looked a different man from the one led into this room. Garrus was looking at Efron, the N7. Not the Enthrallment Team Leader, not an Alliance Major. An N7. “Say it,” Garrus finally said.

“You willing to hear it?” Efron asked, his tone skeptical. Garrus nodded. Tapping his fingers on the table, Efron asked, “Have you considered Shepard might be compromised?”
For the first time since Garrus learned of Shepard’s deafness, he envied her disability. What he would give not to have heard that question from Efron and ignore the evidence in front of him. Garrus wanted to look away, but didn’t. He would tell Efron the truth, feeling like he was betraying Shepard as he did. “I’ve considered the possibility, yes.”

There it was. The harsh truth Garrus hadn’t wanted to think about between reading the reports of the Leviathan Team and catching Shepard talking to Legion. The horrible ‘what if’ moment was etched in his skull. They had been sitting on the sofa reading datapads, Shepard’s thighs across his lap. He had reached over, running his talons through her hair when he wondered if there was a chance Leviathan hadn’t let her go.

Efron nodded, a look of approval on his face. Garrus looked away. He didn’t want the man’s approval. "Good. I read the reports. They were in her head, Vakarian-"

“I’m aware of that,” Garrus said, the words coming out sharper than he intended. He took a deep breath to steady himself and leaned his forearms on the table. “They didn’t control her. They only spoke to her.”

“Because they realized they needed her to defeat the Reapers,” Efron said. “They could have killed her without a second thought.”

“Leviathan can kill anyone within a close radius of those damn artifacts without a second thought,” Garrus said. They wouldn’t, not if they wanted the tribute Garrus suspected they were looking for. To get that tribute, they needed thralls. This was a dangerous enemy. They wouldn’t come out guns blazing like the Reapers. Leviathan would slither, blanketing beings with a fog before they even knew where to look.

“True,” Efron admitted. “I just needed to say to say something, just in case.”

“I’m keeping a close eye on her, Efron,” Garrus said, thinking of the suicides across the galaxy thanks to indoctrination. Damn Reapers. They were gone and still ruining people’s lives.

Efron looked down at the table then. “Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

The doors opened and Shepard stepped back into the room. “Sorry about that,” she said, sliding into her chair.

“I think we’re done here, Shepard,” Garrus said. He stood up and after a moment, extended his hand. "Thanks for the help, Efron.”

Nodding, Efron shook Garrus’ hand. Just one beat. Like a turian.

Efron and Shepard then shook hands as well. “We’ll let you know if we have more questions.”

Garrus watched Shepard glance into the corner of the room again as they left. The walk out of the compound was in silence. He continued to say nothing until they were past the heavy gates, well on their way to the shuttle. After he did a quick sweep to make sure there were no listening devices within earshot, Garrus asked quietly, but not accusingly, “Legion again?”

She stopped walking at once. He watched her face cycle through a number of different emotions. Anger, sadness and relief all mixed up in one. “No, not Legion,” she said finally, her voice soft. “Hadley. Dr. Bryson’s assistant.”

Garrus ran his hand over his fringe. He should have called her out on this sooner, once he had been released from the hospital. Then again, he shouldn’t have had to ask. She should have told him
something wasn’t quite right. Instead, they’d played house for the last two weeks, pretending things were fine as they planned the mission. “Why would you keep this from me?”

Shepard flinched at hearing the disappointment in his sub-vocals. Rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hand, she said, “I don’t know.”

He heard the honesty in her voice but it didn’t dull the hurt. “You want to tell me about it now?” Garrus asked.

She nodded. “But not here. When we get home.”

Home.

He did like how that sounded. “At home.”

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The shuttle ride back was tense, with neither one of them speaking much, except to ask and answer quick questions. Once they stepped in their prefab, Garrus scanned for the usual listening devices and came up empty. They could talk freely now.

Shepard wrapped her arms around his carapace and leaned against him. “That was the fourth time,” she said, her voice quiet. “They don’t talk to me. They just sit or stand there.”

Resting his chin on her head, Garrus closed his eyes tightly. “They haven’t tried to tell you to do anything?”

“What?” Shepard stepped back like she had been burned. “No, absolutely not. It’s PTSD, Garrus.”

“What if it’s not?”

Her face looked stricken. “What, you think I’m-” She stood up straight and pulled on her hair slightly. She took a breath and looked at him, determination coming off of her in waves. “No.” She shook her head. “I’m not indoctrinated. I made a choice, Garrus. I’m not.”

Alright,” Garrus said slowly. Sitting down wearily on the sofa, he felt like he had aged ten years in the last five minutes. He closed his eyes. He thought he would never have to do this again. Nineteen times he had to sit in the loft, across from Shepard and ask her a single question. Nineteen damn times he had to hold his breath, waiting for her response, praying to the Spirits that this week indoctrination hadn’t taken root so he wouldn’t be forced to kill her because of a wrong answer. “What if worst case happens with Leviathan? They want to take over the galaxy again?”

“We stop them,” Shepard said at once. “I didn’t live through this war to become a thrall.” She sat down next to him on the sofa, though not touching. Her voice was quiet. “You know I trust you, Garrus. The questions were your idea-”

“Once a week,” Garrus said, interrupting. Asking those questions during the war hadn’t been for her. They had been for him. He hadn’t trusted himself not to ignore the warning signs. But if he had asked the question and her answer was anything other than ‘Destroy the Reapers…’ Well, that he couldn’t ignore. He wouldn’t. “I’ll ask and if your answer changes, I’ll know what to do.”

“You don’t have to take this on yourself, Garrus,” Shepard said softly. “Someone else-”

“It has to be me,” Garrus snapped, placing his hand on her cheek, trying to dull the harshness of his tone. She was the love of his life, not someone else’s. If the unthinkable happened, he needed his
finger to be on the trigger, not someone else’s. And then it would be *his* burden to carry for the rest of his life, *not someone else’s*.

“All right then,” Shepard said, reaching up and grabbing his hand. Garrus could see the pain in her eyes and was sure his own was reflected there. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. “Once a week.”

He squeezed her hand tightly. It had to be him. She didn’t deserve anything less. “Once a week.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work! Also, I’m finding that in order to keep the quality of the story where I want it to be, I’m going to need to slow down my posting schedule. From here on out, I’ll be posting a chapter every five days instead of twice a week. So the next update will be on Saturday, December 7th. Thank you for understanding!
The Eight of Cups, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Eight of Cups, Upright:** A turning point, a severing of links with the past. A turning away from established relationships to facilitate progress

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“So this is Alliance Headquarters?” Conrad asked, looking around skeptically. “I thought it’d be bigger.”

“This is just a temporary headquarters,” Shepard told him, trying to look at the building through his eyes. The old administration building was certainly worn down with discolored cement walls and the occasional cracked window. Paths were worn across the no longer green grass. Bits of broken tech and furniture were scattered across the yard. Compared to the majestic lawns and building of the main Alliance Buildings before the war, and the area was a dump. But it did the job it needed to do. “You should have seen the office in Vancouver.”

He shrugged. “I’ve seen vids.”

“Alright, Conrad, let’s get you set up,” Shepard said, trying to hold back a smile.

A few days had passed since Conrad agreed to help the science team. Shepard had hoped he could start working right away, but Conrad insisted that he needed time to finish up a few things with the Shepards, such as patching Darja’s suit once the material was delivered. Shepard explained the situation to Garrus, who then spoke to the highest ranking volus on Earth. After a bit of persuasion, they were able to get enough material to allow Darja to be comfortable again.

“ID, please, Commander,” the guard at the gate said. Shepard showed her ID card while the guard scanned Conrad’s ID. The guard’s omni-tool flashed and she held up her hand apologetically. “You’re cleared to go in, Commander Shepard. Mister Verner, you’ll have to wait outside.”

“Doctor Verner, actually. And hold up,” Shepard said, raising her hand. “Ensign, he’s with me.”

“He’s listed as a terrorist, ma’am,” the guard said, reading her omni-tool. “And he’s got an outstanding warrant for harassment.”

Shepard sighed. “Never gonna be easy with you, is it, Conrad?”

“Never’s a strong word, Shepard,” Conrad said. To the ensign, he added, “I can explain. Honest.”

“How long were you actually with Cerberus, Conrad?” Shepard asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Two weeks. I joined right before the Coup attempt,” he said. “But I stopped being Cerberus as soon as you told me to, really I did.”

“Look, Ensign, I appreciate that you’re doing your job, but he was only Cerberus for two weeks. I worked with Cerberus for six months. Why don’t we just let bygones by bygones?” Shepard said,
her voice low.

The ensign grinned. “I wish I could help, ma’am. But there’s still the matter of the warrant for his arrest.”

“What was that for?” Conrad asked, spreading his hands at his side. “No one ever told me about this.” He scratched the side of his neck. “A warrant’s a big deal. You’d think they’d let me know.”

“Why does the Alliance want to arrest him?” Shepard asked, looking up at the gray sky and trying not to roll her eyes.

“Organizing weekly online protests that kept crashing the Alliance’s extranet site.”

Shepard paused. She looked at the ensign and then back at Conrad. “Is that true, Conrad?”

Conrad seemed very interested in his hands. “Well, yes,” he said, looking up. “I got the idea from this really old vid. A prisoner wrote the government once a week for years and finally they gave in—”

Holding up her hand, Shepard said, trying and failing to keep the exasperation out of her voice, “What in the universe were you protesting?”

“Oh, it was when the Alliance had you locked up. It just wasn’t right,” Conrad said. “So I thought I’d get a few hundred of my closest extranet friends every week to tell them so.”

She was strangely touched by the effort he had gone on her behalf. The amount of time and dedication to gather enough people to bring out the Alliance extranet site would have been considerable. It was certainly more than some people she knew had done. “Thank you, Conrad. I think,” Shepard said. Conrad smiled broadly at the praise. To the ensign, Shepard asked, “Look, do we really need this song and dance? Hold me responsible for anything bad that happens—”

“Which nothing will, Shepard, I promise.”

“See, he promises,” Shepard said. “Please don’t make me make this an order, Ensign.”

The ensign shifted her weight from foot to foot as she looked at Shepard. Blowing out air loudly through her lips, she said, “Okay, go on in.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” Shepard said, nodding her head. “Your assistance is much appreciated.” She looked at Conrad. “Grab your bag and let’s go.”

Conrad complied, and they walked into the building to the main administration office. A yeoman practically bouncing on his toes, holding a cup of coffee, walked up to them. “Yeoman Lin,” he said quickly, the words shooting out of his mouth. He extended his hand, barely giving Shepard enough time to shake it before gesturing towards the desk. “We’ve got all of Dr. Verner’s paperwork ready.”

“Perfect,” Shepard said as she followed Lin to a nearby desk.

Lin handed Conrad a stack of five datapads. “We’ll need you to sign all of these.”

“Standard non-disclosure agreements, I take it?” Conrad said, looking at the first datapad. Lin nodded and Conrad sighed and shook his head. “Do you know how many of these I’ve had to sign in my life? I wish I could just wear a sign around my neck saying ‘I promise I won’t talk.’”

Conrad completed the datawork efficiently, his eyes moving over every line of text. One done, Lin handed Conrad an official Alliance contractor ID badge. Conrad looked at the badge, his head
titled slightly before a smile crossed his lips. “Huh. We’re co-workers now, Commander.”

“Alright, Conrad,” Shepard said, finding herself pleased with his enthusiasm. There was a marked difference from the other day when he looked at her with terror in his eyes, asking her not to make him go back into a lab. Shepard much preferred his eagerness. “We’ve got a shuttle waiting to take us to Orlando.”

They walked in silence to the shuttle launch pad. Shepard waved to the pilot, missing Cortez’s steady presence at the helm. She had grown used to and very much appreciated his skill and calm demeanor taking her into battle. At least Cortez would be joining them on the Normandy.

“You seem excited,” Shepard remarked, as they sat down.

“Well, a bit. If you make up your mind to do something, no point being miserable about it, right? So I’ll make the best of being back in a lab and remind myself that I’m helping people,” Conrad said, folding his hands in his lap. “Your scientists have been very generous with their information. I had some catching up to do on the latest research.”

“Anything worth mentioning?” Shepard said as the shuttle took off.

“Actually, yes, there has been,” Conrad said, opening up his omni-tool. “It seems some quarians recovered data from a planet named Haestrom that proved a few of my theories.”

“I ended up helping the quarian team get that data,” Shepard said. “What was the theory?”

He chuckled. “It really is a small universe when it comes to you, isn’t it, Shepard? Well, my dissertation involved dark energy and the passage of time,” Conrad said. “I believe dark energy can be used to increase the passage of time. Generally, it’s a very slow process and takes millennia. But Haestrom’s different. The dark energy is affecting the rate of time more quickly than should be possible. I’m hoping to have a chance to look into it a bit. If I have free time, that is.”

Shepard couldn’t think of anything to say after that, so she opened up her omni-tool and sent a message to Garrus, just saying hello. Things weren’t strained between them at the moment, but things weren’t exactly right, either. Made Shepard think of the time her dog tags became impossibly knotted. It took some time and patience before she could untangle them, but eventually she did. She should have told him about the visions earlier. They were partners, Shepard and Vakarian, and she shouldn’t have held back something this important. Sometimes she was just entirely too good at pretending things were fine, especially when they were anything but.

But Garrus studying her carefully whenever she stared in a corner for just a moment too long wasn’t helping matters. She promised she would tell him if another vision appeared and Shepard kept her promises. And now the questions…

They were both at risk for indoctrination; Shepard knew that. When Garrus had suggested the questions, Shepard had wanted to ask him as well, but he refused, saying he trusted her to know if something was wrong. No matter how tiresome the watching and waiting could be, she would be on her guard. She had no doubt he had her back when it came to indoctrination and she absolutely had his six as well. And if the time came, whether five days or fifty years from now, Shepard would do what needed to be done. Thanks to N7 training, she knew the most efficient and painless way to kill a turian.

Shepard closed her eyes. She wouldn’t let herself go down that road of thought. Nothing good ever came from there. More to distract herself than actually wanting to know, Shepard asked, “So where’d you go to school, Conrad?”
“For my undergrad, masters or doctorate?” he asked, looking up from his omni-tool.

“What the hell, all of them,” Shepard said. She would have liked to have the life of a student. It had been her plan when she was young, before she got mixed up with the Tenth Street Reds and the Alliance came knocking. Maybe she could go to back to school someday and get a masters degree of her own in Engineering.

“Undergrad was the University of Nairobi,” Conrad said. “I grew up in South Africa, and wanted to stay on continent. Masters was from the University of Serrice on Thessia and my Doctorate was from The Talat School, on Sur’Kesh.”

Shepard sat up straight. “You went to The Talat School?” she asked. That was one of the most prestigious universities in the galaxy.

“One of the first humans accepted,” Conrad said modestly. “They made me take each class twice, since salarians process everything so much more quickly than humans. I liked Sur’Kesh.”

She wanted so desperately to ask what happened. How did someone with his background turn into someone who pretended to be a Spectre and organized online protest rallies, even if they were in her name. The Talat School? They offered degrees in engineering and Shepard didn’t think she would even have the nerve to apply. And Conrad had not only gone, but specialized in areas that humans barely understood back then. The prothean ruins would have only been discovered twenty years before.

But it wasn’t her business. If she was honest, Shepard thoroughly enjoyed getting involved with people’s lives and helping solve their problems. But only if they asked for the help. Anything else felt like she was simply meddling.

“So this Leviathan creature was in your head?” Conrad asked suddenly.

Nodding, Shepard said, “It was. Didn’t want to let me go at first. But they did.”

“I can’t even imagine…” Conrad said.

“Not gonna lie, part of me was worried,” Shepard said, thinking of the vast emptiness that surrounded her while Leviathan spoke through the visions. The ground below had felt solid, but no matter what direction she looked, there was nothingness. She remembered wondering if she’d ever see Garrus again and if she didn’t, hoped beyond reason they’d find a way off the planet. Reading those journals of some of those stranded crew members and thinking there was a chance her crew could be reduced to that…

The thought reminded her how important Conrad would be to the team. If he could help get the tracker in order and upgrade the personal shields, she’d have a much better chance protecting her squad. “You know, they actually called the artifacts ‘fragments.’ We probably should, too, but I bet it’s too late to change everyone’s thinking.”

“I read that in your report,” Conrad said. “Makes me wonder if the artifacts are part of a larger whole. Well, it’ll be nice to take my own readings.”

The shuttle landed a few minutes later and they stepped out into the warmth of the sun. “Once I introduce you to Wiks and Bryson, they’ll take over. They’ll get you set up with housing, your daily rations, everything you need.”

She led him through the series of hallways, saying hello and nodding to those who greeted her as she passed. Besides her, Conrad’s gait seemed to slow the closer they were to their destination.

“Here we are, Conrad,” Shepard said. “Here’s the lab where you’ll be working.”

Conrad stood in front of the closed door, feet spread, shoulders back, as if he was bracing himself for an attack. Gulping, Conrad said, his voice thin, “Ready.”

Shepard knocked twice.

Ann opened the door and ushered them into the lab. More tools were spread about, with new equations on the whiteboard, and a third work station set up and ready for Conrad. “Operative Wiks, Dr. Bryson, this is Dr. Conrad Verner,” Shepard said as they all shook hands.

“A honor, Dr. Verner,” Wiks said. “I read your paper on dark energy and baryonic matter years ago. Absolutely fascinating.”

“We pulled the data that you requested,” Ann said. “There might be more eventually. Golem, the geth on the Enthrallment Team was on Haestrom when they were deactivated.”

“Golem?” Conrad asked.

“A geth prime,” Wiks said. “He was sent with others to help build the Crucible, but when they developed sentience, he asked if he could help with the Enthrallment Team. Choose the name himself. Such a pity.”

Shepard looked away, trying not to think of the warehouse that stored all the inactive geth on Earth. She had made her choice - and she was convinced it was the right one - but that didn’t mean the consequences of that choice didn’t twist the contents of her stomach.

“I’ll let you all get back to work,” Shepard said. “I appreciate all of your efforts and please keep up those reports.”

“Of course, Commander,” Bryson said. “Let’s show you around, Dr. Verner.”

“Please, it’s Conrad,” Conrad said. He looked over at Shepard. “Commander?”

Shepard turned back around. “Yes?”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding his head.

Shepard smiled. She dragged him into a lab he didn’t want to be in and he was thanking her. Conrad was one of a kind, that’s for sure. “I should go,” Shepard said. She waved and headed out the door.

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“Welcome to our humble abode,” Shepard said, ushering Liara into the prefab.

The asari walked inside and looked around. Crossing her arms over her chest, she said, “You have a bathroom.” Shepard didn’t think she imagined the touch of envy in Liara’s voice. “I’m on a waiting list for prefab with a bathroom.”

“I thought you’d be used to sharing a bathroom,” Shepard said, heading over to the table to sit down.

“You shared one on both the SR-1 and SR2.”

“True enough,” Liara said, sitting down. “But I didn’t have to walk outside to get there.”
Shepard picked up a deck of cards and started shuffling. While she could bring up an electronic version of the game, Shepard preferred not to use the energy rations. Instead, she brought out a pack of cards she bought on her first trip to the Citadel after Cerberus brought her back. Many games of poker and skyltian five had been played on the Normandy with this deck.

Liara started laughing. “So when you invited me over for a friendly game of poker, you actually meant playing a friendly game of poker?”

Shepard flashed a grin as she dealt the cards for Five Card Draw. “We might talk a little bit during the game,” Shepard said.

“And now truth comes out,” Liara said, picking up her cards and leaning back in her chair. Just as Shepard was about to pick up her own cards, Liara placed hers on the table. “I’m sorry, Shepard, I just…”

Her face had always been so easy to read. Liara was hurting and Shepard could guess why. Staring down at the cards, Shepard said, “I couldn’t have anyone rummage through my head again, even innocently.” She looked up at Liara. “I’m sorry if turning down your gift hurt your feelings.”

Tapping gloved fingers across the table and not meeting Shepard’s eye, Liara said, “It wouldn’t have been rummaging.” Her tone suggested offense. “Just a quiet moment between two friends.”

Perhaps Shepard had violated some sort of asari code, but she found herself not caring. She needed her mind to be her own, not linked with asari or geth or Leviathan. Just her. Just Shepard. “We are friends, Liara. We just didn’t have time for a quiet moment then.”

Liara didn’t look mollified, though she reached across the table and rested her hand on Shepard’s. Shepard had to fight not to snatch back her hand. She never had. But she knew to move her hand so quickly would be insulting.

“I understand, Shepard,” Liara said, finally moving her hand and picking up her cards. She studied them carefully. “I’ll take three.”

Shepard scrambled to pick up her own cards. A pair of eights, a three, seven and king. She gave Liara three new cards. “I have a sneaking suspicion you might already know why I’ve asked you here to talk.”

“Three high profile murders, not even mentioning the two attempted murders…” Liara picked up her new cards. Her smile was sly. “Why would I ever have an interest in that?”

“Who told you?” Shepard asked, dealing herself two new cards, keeping the eights and the king.

“Communication is working just fine, even if the relays aren’t,” Liara said. “Not all of my agents made it through the war intact, but the ones still out in the field are doing their jobs. Once I knew Leviathan was involved I knew wild varren couldn’t drag you away.” Liara put down her cards and looked at Shepard. “If I can offer any assistance, please let me know.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” She looked at her cards. She was in luck. She had dealt herself another king and a two. “I need to know if there are other facilities like Mahavid,” Shepard said. “If there are, we need to shut them down.”

Liara pursed her lips and looked down at the floor. “That is a bigger request than you think,” she said. “Some of my hardware was damaged in the Normandy’s crash. It will take weeks, perhaps longer to reconstruct and collate the data.”

“I can only power him up occasionally,” Liara said, looking forlorn. “Even the Shadow Broker is being forced to ration.”

Shepard ran her hands through her hair. It wasn’t the answer she was hoping for, but it was certainly better than nothing. “Anything you can find would be helpful. And I’ll check with HQ about getting you some additional energy reserves.”


Shepard’s mind raced, thinking of how much needed to be accomplished before the relays were operational: she needed to find a team, learn the locations of the artifacts, of any more facilities being enthralled like Mahavid and most importantly, where the other planet of Leviathan was hiding. And ideally she’d like to have this all completed before the Normandy left the system in six weeks.

She took a steadying breath. Shepard had faced down angry krogan and even Reapers before; she could do this. The last thing she wanted was to hurt Liara’s feelings more than she already had on Earth. But she needed Liara focused on finding information. And that would be best done elsewhere, not on the Normandy.

“Did I mention I’m thinking of procuring a small ship?” Liara asked, as if she could read Shepard’s thoughts. Then again, Liara had been inside Shepard’s head twice. Maybe that led to a bit of an advantage. “Nothing nearly as pretentious as the old Shadow Broker’s vessel. But I would much prefer to be mobile instead of having a stationary location.”

Shepard tried to keep her face neutral and not show her relief. “We’ll miss you on the Normandy,” Shepard said, knowing at least that was true.

“It’s time,” Liara said. “Now that the Reapers are dealt with, I need to start providing the services one expects from the Shadow Broker. Five credits.” Liara placed a worn credit chit in the middle of the table.

“Why does that worry me, Liara?” Shepard asked.

“The services of the Shadow Broker or the bet?” Liara said.

“Liara,” Shepard said, trying not to sound exasperated.

“I don’t mean to be flippant, Shepard, but what do you expect?” Liara said, shuffling her cards in her hands. “I can’t provide free information to the Alliance forever.”

“You have some very sensitive information at your disposal,” Shepard said. She leaned back in her chair as she threw in a credit chit of her own. “You’ve seen things on the Normandy, heard things. Hell, Hackett trusts you more than anyone, considering he got you into the Mars Archive. Can I trust that information won’t be sold to the highest bidder?”

“Have you thought of what would happen if I walk away?” Liara asked, placing another chit on the table.

Shepard pulled her hair slightly. The move had become a tell of hers, grounding her. It was long enough to put in a short ponytail. She really should start wearing one. “There’d be a power vacuum.” Of course there would be. She should have thought of that right away. Taking one last chit from her pocket, she put it on the table. “Call.”
“There are already a number of information brokers looking to profit from the current confusion. The myth of the Shadow Broker needs to be maintained, Shepard. Otherwise you’ll find there to be a new broker who might not be as sympathetic as I am.” Liara flipped her cards on the table one by one. Ace of spades, jack of hearts, and three fours.

“Damn,” Shepard said with a sigh, putting down her own cards onto the table.

“There’s also the matter of my resources,” Liara said. “My wet squad is far better being employed by the Shadow Broker than going out and free-lancing. Not to mention all the resources I helped the Alliance procure.”

Part of Shepard wondered if this was the way the galaxy was going to be for a while. People calling in favors, reminding others what they had done for the good of the galaxy. Not once did Shepard ask what was in it for her? What perks could she cash in once the war was over? She just did her damn job and fought Reapers. Shepard forced the words to come out of her mouth politely, without sounding like they were through gritted teeth. “Your help was very appreciated, Liara. Truly, I mean that.”

Liara leaned forward and picked up the credit chits she had won. “I do have fun playing this game. I’ll never understand why I resisted playing it for so long.”

“Too bad those chit aren’t actually worth anything right now,” Shepard said.

“Might not be too long before they bounce back,” Liara said. “My sources on Irune say the volus are working twenty hours a day to get the galactic economy moving again.”

“Good,” Shepard said. “If anyone can do it, they can.”

“Agree,” Liara said, picking up the deck of cards and smiling. “Another round?”

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Hermit, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Hermit, Reversed:** Isolation from others. A resistance towards help. The reliance on one's own resources that are inadequate.

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“This is just about the prettiest refugee camp I’ve seen,” Shepard said, craning her neck from side to side to take everything in.

The quarian refugee camp had more color than any of the other camps she had seen. They used the same standard tents as all the others, but they were practically on top of each other, as if the quarians were trying to recreate the camped quarters of the flotilla here on Earth. Colorful scarves and sheets of fabric were draped over the tent and flying from the door flaps.

“Shepard! Garrus!”

Tali waved eagerly, standing on the top step of the only prefab in the encampment. Shepard was thrilled to see that Tali looked much healthier than the last time she saw the quarian. While she hadn’t gained all the weight back, there was no longer a looseness in her suit. She and Garrus both were truly beginning to put the hard months on the *Normandy* behind them.

The quarian camp was busy; Tali said a great deal of quarians decided to stay on Earth instead of their ships, wanting practice for when they returned to Rannoch. All the quarians Shepard saw wore environmental suits, but there were several without masks. They must have been volunteers, allowing the geth to upload into their suits to rewrite their immune systems.

There were even a few children plodding around in their bubbles. The variety of skin colors fascinated Shepard. A few had skin the shade of Tali’s, a dusty lavender. Others were deep maroon, and Shepard thought she saw someone with almost pale pink skin.

“About time you bosh’tets got here,” Tali said. Shepard recognized Tali’s body language as absolute happiness. “Isn’t today a beautiful day?”

“I am,” Tali said with a hint of superiority. “And if you’re lucky I will tell you why.”

“I know why you’re happy,” Garrus announced. “Because we’re finally paying you a visit.”

“If this was a friendly visit, that would make me happy,” Tali said. “I can tell just by looking at you both you want to talk business.” She sighed dramatically. “Let me give you the tour, less people to overhear.”

She pointed at the prefab. “This is where the admirals work,” Tali said. “Xen and Koris are on Rannoch, but Raan, Gerrel and I use that as an office.”

“How are the quarians on Rannoch doing without the geth?” Shepard asked as they started to walk.
“It’s sad,” Tali said. “They’d been helping for two months. People were used to them. And now they’re gone.” She shook her head. “Xen was - is - furious. Raan said she wanted to charge the Alliance with war crimes against the quarian people.”

“Really?” Shepard said slowly. She still remembered the letter Xen had sent her after Tali’s trial with bitterness. Lashing out about war crimes seemed right in line.

“Don’t worry,” Tali said, patting Shepard on the shoulder. “The other admirals stopped her right away. She’s convinced she can bring them back somehow. And it doesn’t hurt anyone if she tries.”

“Best of luck to her,” Garrus said. Shepard watched his mandible flick in impatience. “I can’t take this anymore. Why are you so damn happy, Tali’Zorah?”

“You are just going to have to wait, Garrus Vakarian,” Tali said, sounding smug. “I thought you had official, important business to discuss with me.”

“It can wait,” Garrus said, looking at Shepard. “It can wait, right?”

“It can wait,” Shepard said, nodding her head. She was just as curious as Garrus was to know what made Tali so happy.

Tali led them through a small maze of tents. “This one is mine,” she said proudly. Purple scarves and veils decorated the wall. They all sat down companionably on the floor. “I’ve never had a space this big all to myself before. I like it. I can’t even imagine what having a whole house will be like on Rannoch.”

“It’s lovely, Tali,” Shepard said. Tali had managed to make the standard tent feel much more homey and comfortable. “So why are you happy?”

Shepard didn’t need to see past Tali’s mask to feel her joy. “Because Kal’Reegar is alive,” she said, her voice cracking. “I just found out yesterday.”

“Oh, Tali,” Shepard said softly. She knew Tali and Reegar had become quite close when Tali had been back with the flotilla during Shepard’s confinement, even going as far to take the first step to begin the process of linking suits.

But then the Reapers invaded. Tali had said it broke her heart, but she and Reegar both agreed that they needed to concentrate on the war. A noble attitude, but one Shepard couldn’t understand. She simply couldn’t picture fighting the war without Garrus by her side. She wished Tali would have let herself have that comfort as well.

The night when Shepard had read the news article, announcing Reegar’s death, Tali had come up that night and the three of them, Shepard, Garrus and Tali drank heavily, mourning for her friend. Shepard and Garrus had purposely ignored the quiet looks of jealousy Tali threw at them every so often. And after Tali left, their embrace had been tighter than it had been the night before. Neither one of them wanted to think how easy it was to lose the person you love, thanks to the Reapers.

“Reegar’s alive?” Garrus asked. “Spirits, that’s good news. What happened?”

“He was hurt pretty bad, a coma,” Tali said. “I guess someone just made an assumption that his squad was going to go down, but they were able to get out.”

“That’s fantastic, Tali,” Shepard said.

“He’s on Palaven, so I won’t get to see him for a while,” Tali said. “He’s not sure if he can fight
anymore. But I hope we won’t need fighters, not for a long time.”

“Are you two…” Garrus said, trailing off.

“Still together?” Tali asked, her voice clearly telling Garrus wouldn’t you like to know. Garrus and Tali seemed closer than they had before. Shepard supposed the four months stranded on the Normandy brought the entire crew tighter. She felt a brief prickle of jealousy for all the conversations and moments she had missed with her crew during that time. “Yes, we are together. I’ve already used up my bandwidth rations for the week in the last twenty four hours. I’m going to have to trade for more somehow.”

Garrus looked at Shepard, and she could tell they had the same thoughts. Their plan was to ask Tali to join the mission, like old times as Garrus was so fond of saying. But it felt almost cruel to take Tali away from her future. Well, Shepard wasn’t going to make the decision for her friend. Tali certainly deserved to make the choice herself.

“You might have heard some rumors—”

Tali nodded. “Engineer Adams filled me in,” she said. Tali looked down and her palms, which were curved elegantly on her thighs. “I’m an admiral now, Shepard. I was able to stay on the Normandy after Rannoch because it made sense. I was looked at as the quarian liaison, so to speak.” Tali looked up and tilted her head. “I need to be with my people now. Without the geth… There is so much work to be done.”

It was a silly pipe dream, Shepard thought, thinking the old crowd would stay together. She had fallen down that trap before. First with Cerberus, remembering the ache she had felt inside when the Illusive Man told her that her crew was unavailable. And then during the war, remembering the messages she sent out to her old crew as the ship had flown from the Citadel to Menae, hoping that someone, anyone would heed her call and join her. Of the twelve messages she sent, only two stood by her side during the war.

She understood. They all had their own lives, their own responsibilities. It would have been selfish to insist they join her on the Normandy no matter how much she wanted her old crew. At least she had Garrus and Tali then. Shepard had known this day would come eventually since the moment they stood on Rannoch and Tali felt the sun of her world warm her maskless face. She just didn’t think it would come this soon.

“I understand, Tali,” Shepard said softly. “We’ll miss you.”

“I’m going to make Adams send me reports on how the Normandy is running. So you’ll get commentary. It will probably be colorful, so it’ll be like I’m right there,” Tali said with a laugh.

“Deal,” Shepard said. She stood up as gracefully as she could, then held out a hand to help Garrus up. “Want to show us around?”

“Of course!” Tali said, bouncing up herself. “But first, Shepard…” Tali took a breath and looked right at Shepard. “I want you to know that the Fleet will always be there for the Normandy. You’ve given us something we can never repay. Granted, once we’re back on Rannoch, only half the Fleet will remain, but it’s the thought that counts.”

“What’s happening to the Fleet?” Garrus asked.

“We need to dismantle about half our ships to use for materials and housing and such on Rannoch,” Tali said. “Going to take a long time, but we need to keep up with the work the geth have done. And
eventually I’ll have a house. And you both better plan on visiting me as soon as it’s done.”

“Just wait until you try to get rid of us,” Shepard said with a laugh. It wouldn’t be old times, but at least then they could make some new ones.

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“Here,” Victus said, his mandibles drawn in tightly to his face as he handed Garrus a datapad.

“Sir?” Garrus asked. He only stepped into Victus’ office a moment ago. Usually took longer for Victus to be this annoyed.

Victus’ sub-vocals rumbled with displeasure. “Just read the datapad.”

Garrus skimmed the contents of the datapad, his mandibles tightening as he read the contents. “Do you want me to resign?” he said finally.

“Of course not,” Victus said, yanking the datapad out of Garrus’ hands. “I want you to know what’s being said about you.”

Garrus ran his hand over his fringe. He should have known his decision to go to Omega would bite him in the ass someday. When Garrus had left the Citadel after Shepard’s death, he thought he was only deserting C-Sec. He hadn’t been thinking clearly. He still needed to complete two years of his mandatory service when he left. The Hierarchy didn’t count his time fighting the Collectors as Cerberus was classified a terrorist organization. Garrus actually considered himself lucky they didn’t throw him in irons the moment he had stepped onto Palaven after Shepard turned herself into the Alliance. The fact that he never accepted any credits from Cerberus had helped.

Miranda had offered him a stipend, but Garrus absolutely refused to take their credits. It had been bad enough he was on the ship at all. The yellow and black color combination made his plates itch. But Shepard had needed him, that’s what he clung to while cleaning up Cerberus’ messes, like the Overlord or Firewalker projects. Shepard had needed him.

Because of his refusal to take any credits from Cerberus, he hadn’t been joking when he told Shepard about a vigilante’s salary. He had given every credit of the squad’s surplus funds to their families, like to Butler’s wife or Weaver’s kids. That hadn’t left him much. Bad wine and a cheap suit were all he could afford their first night together.

“You went AWOL, Vakarian,” Victus said, shaking his head. “You deserted the turian Hierarchy. One day we’re going to talk it over. I’m fairly certain alcohol will be involved when we do. But you had the quads to come back, and serve your time. The fact that we won the damn war against the Reapers where you were my chief advisor doesn’t hurt.”

“How do you want me to respond to this?” Garrus asking, pointing at the datapad. Some of the high ranking members of the Hierarchy were using Garrus’ former AWOL status as a strike against him and Victus. Those same members weren’t pleased with Victus being Primarch of Palaven, either. Thinking back on his actions, Garrus knew the end result wouldn’t have changed, he would have still ended on Omega. But there were steps he could have taken, official channels to apply for leave instead of going AWOL, but his grief over Shepard’s death overshadowed everything else.

“Ignore it,” Victus said, sitting behind his desk. “That’s my plan. How much longer do you need to serve?”

“Depends,” Garrus said.
“On?”

“Whether the four months the Normandy was stranded counts towards my service,” Garrus said.

“Consider them counted,” Victus said with a nod.

“Then fourteen more months, sir,” Garrus said.

“Good,” Victus said. “Blasted vultures. We have so many more important things to deal with and the Hierarchy wants to focus on this.”

“Shepard told me once that politicians are the weeds of the galaxy,” Garrus said, working to keep the frustration out of his voice.

The last thing he wanted was to be a distraction for Victus but Garrus knew the Primarch relied on his council. And somewhere along the line, he had gotten used to people asking him the tough questions. Didn’t mean he liked it; probably never would. But Garrus accepted it.

“I’ll drink to that,” Victus said. “Just wait until it’s your turn in a couple of decades.”

Garrus let out a sharp laugh. “I’d rather not, if it’s all the same to you,” he said. e hadn’t been informed of his current standing in the Hierarchy, but if Victus thought there were a couple of decades before Garrus needed to worry, he wouldn’t bring trouble early.

“Fair enough,” Victus said. “Five more weeks til we can get off this damn planet.”

“We’ll have a lot of work to do once we do leave,” Garrus said.

“True, but when do people like us not have work that needs to be done?” Victus asked. Garrus didn’t have an answer. “That’ll be all for now, Vakarian. I’ll want a report on the rations situation tomorrow.”

“Understood, sir,” Garrus said. He left the office, trying to keep himself from falling into a bad mood. Damnit, some of the lies written about his two year absence infuriated him. Whoever was leading the charge against him was smart, painting lies with a hint of the truth, saying he had worked for Cerberus undercover those two years. And it wasn’t as if Garrus could refute the claim without more questions being asked about where he had been. The less the Hierarchy knew about Archangel, the better.

He stepped out of the building and took a deep breath. What Garrus wanted, at that very moment, was to go home, grab a beer, sit down on the couch with Shepard on his lap, like they used to sit a million years ago, before the Reapers invaded. He had fond memories of those times, when they were still discovering so many new things about each other. When she would invite him up to her cabin, before it became theirs, and they actually had the time to just talk.

But since dextro beer was in no supply in this system and he knew for a fact Shepard had meetings until late tonight, what Garrus wanted was inconsequential. What he would settle for was an upgraded MRE for his dinner.

The turian camp was busy, everyone was doing their jobs like the good turians they were. Thankfully the area where the rations and MREs were kept seemed fairly empty. For one night, Garrus was going to indulge. Most days, after they woke up in the morning, Shepard would stand in the line for their MREs and rations and Garrus would get line for their water. Being a dextro in a levo camp meant his food choices were limited, as they only stocked what was needed. But Shepard fought for him. She learned he didn’t like the ration bars made with meva nuts, they were just too
small, too grainy for his taste. And she knew to always grab any MRE that used a *vilj* sauce, since
that was his favorite.

But now? He was going to stand and take his time, deciding exactly what he wanted to eat for
dinner. Wouldn’t be as nice as a cold beer and Shepard sitting on his lap, but Garrus would take
what victories he could.

“Quarians got another delivery from their liveship coming,” a worker said to another as Garrus
walked up to the inventory control area of the camp. “More damn beans.”

“Good, we need to restock. Protein’s running low.”

The voice caused Garrus to clench. His toes, his abdomen, his talons, his heart, even the muscles in
his neck. In that instant he became a tightly coiled spring, ready to lash out any moment. Garrus
desperately forced himself not to reach behind and take out his Vindicator, wanting the steady weight
in his hands.

And he wanted Shepard in front of him, blocking his shot so he didn’t do something incredibly
stupid.

“Sidonis.”

The turian looked up and Garrus saw the moment of recognition in his eyes. Sidonis slowly raised
his hands, chest high and started backing up slowly. The turian looked older, more grey. His colony
markings had dulled and he had definitely lost weight since the last time Garrus had seen him.

If Sidonis was working with foodstuff, it meant someone trusted him. Maybe Tactus, who was still
working for the refugees on Earth like he did on the Citadel. Tactus was how Garrus learned that
Sidonis was on the Citadel in the first place. They had a working lunch, and Tactus raved about his
new assistant Sidonis and how much good the man was doing for the refugees. But Garrus never
once saw him in all his trips to the refugee center. Always figured he kept out of Garrus’ way on
purpose, something Garrus had to admit he was grateful for. He didn’t think he could handle seeing
him then.

But after fighting a war they managed to win thanks to luck and Shepard’s damn grit, and watching
Shepard make decisions and choices she never once thought she would be willing to make, all to
ensure that when the day of reckoning arrived they’d be ready to fight? He could look Sidonis in the
eye and not want to shoot him in the head.

And there was that fact, that Sidonis - betrayal or not - had been the first to believe in him, the first to
join up on Omega. They had swapped stories about basic and growing up on Palaven. Garrus had
subtly encouraged Sidonis’ interest when Melanis, joined the squad. She was a turian from Palaven
who left the Hierarchy the moment her fifteen years were up and had no plans to return. And when
their relationship crashed and burned a couple of weeks later, Garrus had been the one who drank
with him in the shooting range while they pretended to practice.

Sidonis had been his *friend*.

Which was why the betrayal hit him so damn hard. Because if Sidonis had stopped believing, how
had the rest of the squad felt? Garrus had been so adamant, wanting to push the team further, to try to
get the mercs completely off the station, he could have missed all the warning signs.

“Wait,” Garrus said barely realizing the words had left his mouth. Sidonis stopped and lowered his
hands. He hadn’t turned around, probably half wondering if Garrus would shoot in the back if he
“You think about them still?”

Sidonis closed his eyes and Garrus felt the usual pain in his gut that accompanied thoughts of his squad. Though this time, Garrus saw his pain reflected on Sidonis’ face. “Every damn day,” Sidonis said slowly. Garrus could hear the pure note of grief in his sub-vocals even more clearly than he could on the Citadel. “Every time I close my eyes they’re there. I hope I never stop thinking about them.”

Good.

Garrus didn’t want to be the only one who remembered. He hadn’t told Shepard about them, not even their names. Someday he would. She told him once thanks to some of the work Cerberus had done, she could potentially live twice as long as a normal human. Garrus didn’t like to think about that much. He didn’t like to think a hundred years from now he could be a dull plated old man while Shepard was barely middle aged. But if it were true, he would die long before she would. And he wanted someone to remember them. Even if only second hand.

“I’m trying to find their families,” Sidonis said suddenly, not looking Garrus directly, as if afraid to make eye contact. “See if they lived through the war.”

Garrus looked up and took a step towards Sidonis, who didn’t flinch, just held his ground. Garrus had been in contact with a number of them before the Reapers invaded, but once the war started, there was just never any time. No, that was a lie. There was time, he choose to spend it with Shepard. He wouldn’t begrudge himself that choice now. “Any luck?”

“Vortash’s husband. One of Weaver’s kids,” Sidonis said, running his head over his fringe. “I only have a few energy rations a day, so it’s going slow-”

“I’ll get you more,” Garrus said at once.

“You don’t-”

“You promise me you’ll use them to keep searching for their families, you’ll get more rations,” Garrus said slowly. He was realistic and knew he had no time to do a search like that on his own. And now that the thought was in his head, he wanted to search. If Sidonis had any luck, Garrus could try to make sure their families and loved ones were safe. Maybe when credits had more value, he could even send a little money their way.

He could take care of his squad again.

“I promise, Garrus,” Sidonis said and Garrus’ gut clenched, remembering how his rage had bled out hearing those same words, standing high in a sniper perch, Shepard standing in his cross hairs.

He flipped up his omni-tool and sent his public extranet address to Sidonis. “Can you keep me updated?” he asked, his voice tight as he tried to contain his sub-vocals from betraying any emotion, barely believing that he was asking Sidonis of all people a favor. Maybe humans were on to something with their saying, *time heals all wounds*. A year ago this would have been an impossibility.

“Sure thing, Garrus,” Sidonis said, his sub-vocals eager now as he sent his own information to Garrus. He raised his chin and looked Garrus in the eye for the first time since *I need help on a job. It’ll be quick. We’ll meet there.* “Thank you.”
Garrus wasn’t sure why he was being thanked, maybe for not killing him on the Citadel or killing him now or simply for the extra energy rations he would send Sidonis’ way.

Sidonis turned around and started walking. Garrus stood still, forcing himself to breathe even breaths until Sidonis was out of view. Not until he was out of sight did Garrus let his shoulders hunch as he pictured the face of each member of the squad in his mind.

Erash, Monteague, Mierin, Grundan Krul, Melanis, Ripper, Sensat, Vortash, Butler, Weaver

His memories weren’t as clear as they had been two years ago. What color had been Ripper’s eyes? Or Sensat’s facial tattoos?

His omni-tool beeped with a message from Shepard, forcing him out of his stupor. He read it quickly, she was just saying hello. She did that more often now, reaching out during slow times during her day, not content to leave everything until when they saw each other in the evening. Garrus had to admit he liked that, since they spent their days in different camps, and he couldn’t expect a surprise visit in the battery.

He typed a message. I’ve got a story for you when you get home. He wouldn’t tell her about the squad. Not yet. That was for another day. But Garrus could tell her this.

It would be a start.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Three of Wands, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


The Three of Wands, Upright: Dreams that turn into reality through circumstance and being in the right place at the right time. Plans and ventures that are moving ahead.


More and more, Shepard found herself craving silence. Loud noises caused her heart to clench, like when she listened to weapon training outside Alliance headquarters. But volume alone didn’t cause her wish for silence. There were times she just wanted the peace and quiet silence brought. Sometimes at home, she’d pretend to go over a datapad but actually watch Garrus work out, doing the turian versions of push-ups and sit-ups. She could silently watch him work for hours.

And almost every morning, standing in the crowded line waiting to pick up her and Garrus’ food rations for the day she felt the need for quiet. Shepard knew she should be talking to people in line, trying to raise morale, and most days she forced herself to do just that. But every so often her fingers pressed the keys turning off her implant, allowing her to be bathed in silence.

She had developed a guilty pleasure, being able to look at the world without sound. A world without people calling her name, asking for favors. No omni-tool beeping, letting her know she had yet another message, though it was smarter than she’d care to admit. Whenever her hearing implant was turned off, her omni-tool flashed once when she had a message, instead of making a noise. That’s what she got for overclocking it like she had.

As she walked towards the conference room in Alliance Headquarters, Shepard saw people crowded inside, standing room only. She knew the people there would want to talk to her and be heard, so with an inaudible sigh, Shepard flipped her implants back on, trying not to hunch her shoulders as noise filled her world again.

Shepard arrived too late to get a seat at the conference table, so she stood in the back, listening to the excited voices of the people around her. Almost everyone she had passed in Alliance Headquarters had a smile on their face. The messages she’d received from Garrus told her the turian camp was in much the same state. Today was a long ways coming.

The vid screen on the wall showed a live cam of the Charon relay. A repair ship docked next to the relay and two worker pods appeared out of the open cargo hold. She held her breath as the worker pods flew closer to a large piece of debris.

Alliance command, this is the Erdenet. Repair on the Charon relay has officially begun.

The crowd erupted and for once Shepard didn’t want to turn off her implant. She leaned against the wall and watched the officers around her congratulate each other. More than one person slapped her on the back and wanted to shake her hand. Relief bubbled up through her throat, and she let out a small laugh. Finally.

For five months, people across the galaxy had been away from their homes, with no idea if the relays would ever work again. So much faith had been placed in the Crucible scientists, relying only on their knowledge of what little Prothean technology they had. But the fix wouldn’t happen overnight.
They believed a month of repairs were needed before everyone who helped defeat the Reapers would finally have the chance to go home.

Of course, not every relay would be fixed right away. Of the fifty-four relays, only thirty-seven were in systems that had enough resources and technical experts. The other seventeen would have to wait. Once the relays were confirmed working, volunteer crews would start the journeys out towards those relays. Shepard’s gratitude towards those volunteers knew no bounds; they would end up travelling for one to three years to reach the orphaned relays. But eventually, the galaxy would recover.

The main event and excitement over, the conference room started to clear out. Shepard took advantage and sat down at the table as she opened her omni-tool. Bringing up the schematics for the relays, she compared them to what she saw on the vid screen. A pang of jealousy knotted in her stomach, watching the workers move debris and set up a temporary dry dock for repairs. Those workers, engineers, most of them, were doing exactly what Shepard herself would love to be doing. Instead of arguing with politicians and haggling over resources, they were fixing things, making things right. Some said she fixed things in her own way, but it wasn’t the same. It simply didn’t compare to the feeling of a tool in her hand and the knowledge how to make something work.

Some day, Shepard told herself wistfully. Some day.

The conference room door opened and Lieutenant Vega walked in, giving Shepard a crisp salute before leaning against the conference table. Shepard had to stifle a chuckle. Whoever James was working under at the moment apparently didn’t have the same tolerance for changes to the uniform that she did.

“Have I ever seen you in a regular BDU before, James?” Shepard asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

James rolled his eyes. “I’m working security over by the docking bays. The CO over there is big on formalities.”

“Poor baby,” Shepard said, putting her omni-tool away. She stood up, leaning forward on her hands. “Up for walking and talking?”

“Always,” James said, following Shepard out of the door. They walked in silence through the hallways of Alliance Headquarters until they reached outside. “So what’s this about?”

“Cortez didn’t fill you in?” Shepard asked, surprised. “Good man, Cortez.”

“Secrets, secrets are no fun, secrets, secrets hurt someone,” James muttered under his breath. “I gave him my last bottle of Mescal, Lola.”

“And by give, do you actually mean it is no longer in your possession or you let him have a shot?” Shepard asked.

“A double,” James said, sounding indignant as they walked towards the back of Headquarters. “He owes me. So Cortez knows why you want to see me but I don’t? Lola, I’m hurt.”

“Somehow I think you’ll survive, James,” Shepard said, sitting down on one of the benches.

“Come on, I’ve a better idea. When was the last time you and I had a dance?” James asked.

Shepard shook her head, and James’ shoulders drooped slightly. “Let’s talk first,” Shepard said.

“Talk and dance? Mmm? You know you wanna,” James said, shifting his weight from the one foot
Shepard patted the space next to her. “Maybe after we discuss the classified information that I would very much like to talk to you about.”

The word classified finally got James’ attention and he sat down obediently. “I’m listening.”

“Going on a mission, James,” Shepard said. “And I’ve got a proposition for you.” Shepard stretched out her legs in front of her, enjoying the sun that broke through the cloud coverage for once. Around them, other members of the Alliance took advantage of the sun as well, spread out on benches like she and James or lounging on the grass. “I’ve looked into a few things and Alliance Brass doesn’t believe that they’ll be officially starting an N7 training class until 2189 at the earliest.”

She watched James’ reaction carefully. At the news, he leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. “Damn, that long? You sure?”

“Unfortunately,” Shepard said. She was disappointed on James’ behalf; she knew how much he looked forward to becoming an N7 recruit. Thankfully, she had an option for him. “However…” James perked up immediately at the word. “If you want, I’ve been given permission to become your mentor during our mission and basically give you the equivalent of N1 training.”

“Really?” James asked, his smile wide. “That would be, damn, Lola, you know exactly-”

“This won’t be a picnic, James,” Shepard said. “I would be doing you absolutely no favors if I took things easy on you.”

“I wouldn’t want you to,” James said at once. “No fun in that.”

“You’ll be pulling triple duty if you agree,” Shepard said seriously. “You’ll be pulling squad duty, running the armory-”

“Yeah, but that’s with Cortez,” James interrupted.

Shepard held up her hand and James immediately went quiet. “Not this tour,” Shepard said. “Cortez is going to splitting his time between flying the shuttle and training as my XO.” Without EDI’s help by the end of the war, Shepard would have drowned in paperwork. Not this tour. Shepard quite liked the idea of keeping her sanity, and Cortez offered the most practical choice to help with the details. Thanks to a promotion, at Lieutenant Commander, Cortez would be the next highest ranking officer on the Normandy and had expressed an interest in the position down the road. This pleased her; she and Cortez worked well together. And she liked the idea of training someone, even though technically she only held the position of the XO of the Normandy for a couple of days before given command of the ship itself.

“Yeah? Good for Cortez,” James said. “Be weird thinking of him as my boss, but he’ll do a good job.”

“Glad to see you approve,” Shepard said with a laugh. “So if you accept, you’ll be a very busy man, James.”

“If I accept?” he scoffed. “Of course I accept.”

“Let’s go over the terms first, Lieutenant,” Shepard said, putting a bit of an edge to her voice. Over the six months they had worked together, she had given James a great deal of leeway simply because she liked the kid. But if she was going to help train him into a formidable N7 candidate, she needed to stop cutting him any slack. “When you are training with me, you will only be allowed to wear a
regulation uniform. And during training, there will be absolutely no more using the name ‘Lola,’
understood? You will address me only by ‘Commander’ or ‘Sir.’”

James sat a little straighter next to her. “Yes, sir,” he answered immediately.

“Then welcome aboard,” Shepard said, holding out her hand. James shook it eagerly. Shepard
opened her omni-tool and sent him the important files for the mission. “Here are the files. Start look
everything over and relays willing, we’ll be leaving in a month.”

“Sounds good,” James said.

Shepard jumped off of the bench and looked at James. There was a glint in his eyes that she
recognized. He looked ready to kick some ass, something Shepard had no intention of letting him do
at the moment. With a grin that might be described as slightly feral, Shepard asked, “Now how about
that dance?”

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“We’re going to be late,” Shepard said, slipping her hand into Garrus’. Their meeting with Wrex and
the Primarch took a bit too long for her tastes.

“We are not going to be late,” Garrus said as they walked towards their prefab. Shepard rolled her
eyes and and started walking a bit faster. Being the last to arrive at Gabby and Ken’s wedding was
the last thing she wanted.

“You ever been to a human ceremony before?” Shepard asked suddenly.

Garrus nodded. “Back on the Citadel, maybe a year after I joined C-Sec. An officer I was friends
with got married. Even got invited to the…” Garrus stopped, his mandibles fluttering in thought. “I
can’t remember the name. The party to celebrate being single.”

“Bachelor party,” Shepard offered.

“Yes, exactly,” Garrus said as they started walking again. “I just remember lots of booze and
strippers.”

“Sounds about right,” Shepard said with a laugh as they turned a corner. They both immediately
stopped. Someone was sitting on their doorstep and from this distance, Shepard couldn’t see who it
was. “Shit.”

“Zooming in,” Garrus said, touching his visor with a talon. He relaxed almost at once. “Kasumi.”

“Kasumi?” Shepard asked. “Why the hell didn’t she let herself inside?” But Shepard was pleased.
She couldn’t find the thief since she started putting her team together, so she asked Liara for help.
Liara simply let it be known discreetly that Shepard was looking for Kasumi. She smiled. Apparently
the message worked.

“Hi, Shep!” Kasumi said cheerfully as soon as they were in earshot. “I couldn’t get past your
security. I have to admit, I’m impressed.”

Garrus cleared his throat and Shepard laughed as she watched him push back his shoulders with
pride. “You just had to say that, didn’t you, Kasumi? Now I’m never going to hear the end of it from
Garrus.”

“You did the security?” Kasumi asked curiously.
“Massani and I did,” Garrus said, with a nod. Shepard tried to keep the smile off her face and failed, hearing the pride in his sub-vocals.

“Very nice. I may have some opportunities for you down the road if this is what you can offer,” Kasumi said. She looked over at Shepard. “So let’s talk!”

Shepard unlocked the door to the prefab and went to the kitchen. “Anything to drink?” Shepard asked.

“Water would be lovely, Shep,” Kasumi said, settling herself down on the sofa. She looked around and Shepard could tell Kasumi’s eyes missed no details. “You have a bathroom.”

“Seems to be the selling point,” Shepard said, walking over and giving water bottles to Kasumi and Garrus. She sat down at the dining table, pushing her work station to the side. “So how’s life been treating you, Kasumi?”

“Oh, don’t say it like that,” Kasumi said, picking off a piece of lint from her leggings. “I didn’t abandon the Crucible scientists. They just didn’t need me anymore.”

“Oh-huh,” Shepard said.

“I’ve been doing good things, Shep,” Kasumi said. “You know how many people are trying to take advantage out there? I’m practically Robin Hood right now.”

Shepard laughed at the confused look on Garrus’ face. “Kasumi, the war is over. You did exactly what I asked of you and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Under her hood, Shepard could see Kasumi’s eyes squint slightly. “So you didn’t invite me here to yell at me.”

“Of course not,” Shepard said.

Kasumi tapped her fingers on her thigh, staring into the corner of the room. “You have a another mission,” Kasumi said finally, leaning back on the couch. “Is it really just work, work, work with you people? Take a vacation sometime.” She sighed, crossing one leg over the other and taking a sip of water. “Ooh, this is better than the water I get. Could I take one for the road?”

“If you want,” Shepard said. “And yes, I have another mission.” She sketched out the details, emphasizing how it was in no way a suicide mission or galactic war. “What do you think?”

Kasumi toed the linoleum with her boot. “It actually sounds kind of fun,” she said begrudgingly. “Infiltrate all sorts of places and destroy things? That’s a mission I can get behind.” Kasumi folded her hands over her lap and sat up straight. “Alright, I’m in. When do we start?”

Shepard released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Kasumi was going to be a perfect addition. Shepard sent the thief the relevant information. “We’ll be in touch and have a few meetings, but we’ll be leaving in a month.”

“Can I have my old space?” Kasumi asked eagerly.

“Poker table there now,” Garrus said. “I think there’d be a mutiny if Shepard tried to take it out.”

“You’ll be in the Starboard Cargo, where Zaeed used to be,” Shepard said. “It’s where the Battlespace reporter stayed. Pretty nice space, actually.”
“I wonder if she left anything behind,” Kasumi said thoughtfully. “I’ll have to do a thorough examination.”

“Kasumi,” Shepard warned.

“What?” Kasumi asked. “I’m just trying to be helpful. Now, I believe we’re all going to be late for the wedding if you two don’t hurry up and change. I’ll wait outside.”

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“You may now kiss the bride,” Engineer Adams said with a huge smile on his face.

Gabby threw her arms around Ken’s neck and looked ready to jump into his arms. But Ken gently placed his hands on either side of Gabby’s face and gave her a long look before they kissed. Shepard took Garrus’ hand in hers and squeezed before the bride and groom broke apart.

Shepard stood up and clapped along with the rest of the small crowd. The moment the two engineers broke apart, Gabby placed her hands on her pregnant belly and announced, “I’m starving. Everyone go grab your MRE. Let’s eat, please.”

For a wedding without much time to plan and little resources, they had done a lovely job. They asked everyone to bring their own MRE for the reception dinner, since providing for the crowd of twenty would be impossible. For a surprise for Gabby and Ken, instead of presents no one had credits to give, Adams asked if everyone might be willing to donate some rations so that Yeoman Fitch could bake a small wedding cake -- one tier, nothing fancy.

Shepard wore her black lace dress, not having much else appropriate to wear to a wedding. Next to her, Garrus wore his black and white suit. Shepard smiled to herself, thinking about dancing later on. Perhaps she might let Garrus persuade her for a dance. She couldn’t think of a nicer discovery than learning just how enjoyable dancing could be when she was in Garrus’ arms.

The guests were milling around the picnic area, picking up their MREs. Shepard smiled and waved to the entire engineering team from the Normandy, all standing together in a large group. Looking around, Shepard realized she recognized all the faces of the guests, leaving no one who might have been family for either Gabby or Ken.

Garrus grabbed their MREs and they sat down at a picnic table. Gabby, Ken, Tali, Adams and Chakwas quickly joined them. “What’d you bring me?” Gabby asked Ken as he sat down and put an MRE in front of her. “Beef Ravioli? You are officially my favorite husband.”

“I’m going to take that as the compliment I know you meant it to be,” Ken said, squeezing Gabby’s shoulder.

Shepard unwrapped her own meal of Mediterranean Chicken, with sides of dried fruit and peanut butter and crackers, one of her favorites. She looked up to see Gabby staring at her. “Everything okay, Gabby?”

“You want to trade? The cheese for the peanut butter?” Gabby asked, batting her eyelashes.

Garrus held up his hand. “Gabby, do not come between this woman and her peanut butter,” he said seriously.

“Normally, I’d agree with Garrus,” Shepard said with a laugh. She handed Gabby the packet of peanut butter. “But it’s not my wedding day.”
“Best Commander ever,” Gabby said, giving Shepard the tube of processed cheese. “Thank you so much.”

Everyone ate in silence for a bit until Chakwas asked, “So what are quarian wedding ceremonies like?”

“A bit like this,” Tali said. “A small gathering. The bride and groom sign the captain’s log and then they start to share a cabin. We used to have really big ceremonies on Rannoch. Maybe we’ll have them again someday.”

“What about turian?” Gabby asked as she spread peanut butter over a tortilla shell she had taken from Ken’s MRE. “I read they’re really quiet or something, right?”

“Ah, yeah,” Garrus said, opening up a package of dried pytmol. “The ceremony is self-uniting, so there isn’t an officiant like you guys had. Each celebrant has three witnesses. They say some words to each other and the marriage starts.”

“Celebrant?” Ken asked. “The bride and groom?”

“You know, turians actually never developed words for bride and groom,” Garrus said, scratching the side of his neck. She could tell he was slightly uncomfortable talking about the ceremony. From her own research, she knew that turian weddings were truly private affairs. The three witnesses for each side were meant to be filled by people that would help support the marriage through the years. Parents were rarely present for the actual ceremony, but siblings were common. “Marriage has always been a civil act, never associated with religion. And since the sex of the partners don’t matter, we never made different words for each person. When you get married, you’re a celebrant.”

“So only six people attend the wedding?” Adams asked. “I had a cousin once that had more than two hundred people at her wedding.”

“Well, that’s just for the ceremony,” Garrus said. "Most couples throw a party afterward and invite practically everyone they know.”

“That sounds more familiar,” Chakwas said.

Another silence fell over the table and Shepard tried not to squirm in her seat as she felt the others glancing her way, probably wondering what her and Garrus’ plans were. Shepard knew whenever the time came, she preferred the idea of a turian ceremony, the privacy aspect appealing to her.

But before she started thinking too much about a ceremony, she had to remind herself they hadn’t actually discussed marriage. Every so often she wondered why Garrus hadn’t proposed, like he said he would, just before they ran to the beam in London.

Maybe he had the right idea, Shepard thought, discreetly putting her hand on his knee, hidden, thanks to the picnic table. Garrus stilled and bumped his shoulder against hers as he continued to talk. They did have another mission to deal with. Probably best to dust off their old rule of not talking about the future.

“Is that cake?” Gabby asked, standing up as Fitch brought out a small layered cake. “Chocolate frosting?”

“Happy wedding day, Gabby and Ken,” Adams said with a laugh.

“I love you people so much,” Gabby said, grabbing Ken’s hand. “Let’s go shove cake in each other’s face.”
“Did she really just say that?” Garrus asked in a low voice. “I don’t remember that part from the other wedding I went to.”

“It’s a really old tradition,” Shepard said. “Not everyone follows it anymore.”

The cake was delicious and afterward, music started playing. Shepard was content to sit back, holding Garrus’ hand as they watched others dance. Adams and Chakwas seemed very friendly on the dance floor; Shepard wondered if there was a story there. Tali was dancing next to James and Ashley. And then the music changed.

The moment Shepard realized what song was playing she stood up. “Time to dance;” she said, poking Garrus in the shoulder.

Garrus groaned and put his head in his hands. “I am never living this song down, am I?”

“Never, ever,” Shepard said, trying to bounce in time with the beat. “Come on, Garrus, dance with me.”

“I’m only doing this because I love you,” Garrus muttered. Shepard smiled, feeling the warm rush she always did when he said those words. They rarely said them out loud. Shepard could count using both of her hands and still have a finger or two left over how many times he’d said those words since the top of the Presidium. Shepard didn’t mind; she knew when he said them, he truly meant the words.

“Hey, there they are,” James said. “Finally joining the cool kids.”

Shepard wrapped her arms around Garrus’ waist. “This is our song.”

“This is not our song,” Garrus said at once, putting his hands on her hips. They started swaying slowly to the techno beat.

“This is absolutely our song,” Shepard told the group with a grin. She lowered her voice so only he could hear. “So how did your research lead you to this song anyway?”

Garrus leaned forward and rested his brow against hers. “I might have taken a suggestion from Mordin.”

“You didn’t,” Shepard said, thinking of her own awkward conversation with Mordin. He had her believing about not ingesting until she did some research of her own and discovered the asari had been ingesting for a thousand years with no consequences. “Oh, Garrus.” His talon traced her jawline. Shepard closed eyes and felt a shiver go down her spine. “Least it worked out in the end.”

She leaned back to get a better view of Garrus’ face. “I’d say it more than worked out,” he said, his voice low and she felt the vibrations of his sub-vocals all the way through her fingertips.

Shepard thought of all the ways things had worked out for them. Supporting each other through the Collector Base, the war and now Leviathan. Looking back, Shepard still wasn’t exactly sure how the words what if we skip straight to the tiebreaker? ever came out of her mouth, but she was so grateful she said them, and even more grateful that Garrus didn’t treat the words as a joke but instead as an opportunity. Someday, when their lives settled down a bit, they’d take the step that Gabby and Ken took today. Someday.

A smirk found its way onto her lips. “Totally our song.”
Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Eight of Swords, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Eight of Swords, Reversed:** Hard work reaping little reward, frustration, depression. Effort being exercised in the wrong place. A moving away from a problem rather than finding a solution.

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“Hiya, Commander Shepard!”

Shepard nodded at the group of children playing at the front of the Shepards camp. After more than five months, she recognized most of them, though names escaped her. A young salarian and turian ran up to her, arms out for hugs.

She laughed as she knelt down to hug the two children. Five months ago, these same kids had barely looked her in the eye, thinking her the vaunted *Commander Shepard*. Now they demanded hugs when they saw her.

Everywhere she looked these days signs of healing showed. Kids wanting hugs, the turians and krogan formally announcing an alliance, even the burnt skin on her shoulders and thighs, where armor had melted from the heat of the blast on the Citadel had begun to heal.

Glancing around, Shepard tried to find something of interest to tell Conrad later today when she went to Orlando to meet the scientists. She wanted something personal, not just *oh the camp looks great!* As she started to walk, a breeze caused the hair on her arm to stand up; she wished she thought to bring a light jacket with her.

Shepard turned down the closest row of tents and grinned, finding the perfect story.

There stood Javik, tall and proud, surrounded by a least a dozen children sitting on the ground.

“And then,” Javik said, his voice low and with the practiced lull of a storyteller, “just as I thought death had come for me at last, my first officer, the brave and ferocious Pilka leapt from the rubble, her gun taking down husk after husk.”

Shepard could barely keep the grin off her face. Javik’s speech on the Citadel so many months ago proved he had a flair for the dramatic. Listening to him speak, she could just picture him, thinking himself alone and without hope, only to be rescued at last.

“I thought she was dead,” one child whispered to another.

“As did I, human child,” Javik said, nodding his head. “But Pilka was full of surprises. With her help, my crew and I were able to liberate the city of Jawbalang.”

The kids broke into cheers. Shepard clapped right along with them. The scene before her could have been from her own childhood, when she had snuck into libraries, a reliable place where she could be sit down and rest her feet. Storytime had always been her favorite growing up, especially when they served cookies and juice afterwards. Even when she had been too old for the children’s section, Shepard would linger, pretending to look for a book and instead listen to the lull of the librarian’s
She caught Javik’s eye and he nodded to the children. Before he could take a step, a small ecor asked, “With sincere pleading: another story?”

“Another time, ecor child,” Javik said, looking at the ecor. “The commander is here to speak with me.”

At her mention, the kids all looked over and waved, a few jumping up. She waved back, smiling, though part of her felt awful for stealing away their fun. However, this conversation couldn’t wait any longer.

She and Javik walked to the outer rim of the camp, where there was a large field of grass in front of them. Kids ran around the field, playing tag or kicking a ball, enjoying the outdoors as only a kid could.

“Javik the storyteller,” Shepard said with a chuckle. “And here I thought I’d seen everything.”

“These children are impressionable,” Javik said. “They will grow up knowing the greatness of the Prothean empire.”

“Uh-huh,” Shepard said. “That’s all this is? Brainwashing the kids into thinking the Protheans are superior?”

Javik slid his fingers down the side of a tent behind them and Shepard wondered what it told him. Which child stayed there, maybe their hopes and dreams or information about their families. “I am finding there is something calming about being around the young,” he said after a moment. “There is hope in this place. I come here often.”

“Hope is a beautiful thing,” Shepard said softly. “I was sort of surprised you wanted to meet here.”

“I enjoy telling the children of some of what they call ‘my adventures,’” Javik said. “They are young, so I spare them the realities of war.”

“Javik, these kids are in this refugee camp because they have no other place to go,” Shepard said. “They’ve seen the realities of war.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Javik said, wiping his fingertips on his armor. “All the same, I am glad these children know of my crew, even if only as a fable. It is also good practice, remembering these tales for the book Dr. T’Soni keeps insisting we write.”

“There is something to be said for that,” Shepard agreed. She shifted and looked straight at Javik. “Any chance you’re up for another adventure?”

“Dr. T’Soni provided details of your mission,” Javik said. “I will relish the chance at revenge against the Leviathan.”

Shepard held up her hand. “We’re gathering information and destroying any of the artifacts we find along the way. It’s a long way from revenge.”

Javik gave her a steady stare and then shook his head as if disappointed. “I thought you knew better, Commander.”

“We’re not going to war if we don’t have to, Javik,” Shepard said.
“Leviathan has had millions of years to prepare for this moment,” Javik said, pushing his shoulders back. “The moment the galaxy became free of the Reapers.”

Shepard tried not to sigh. She recognized Javik’s posture; he wanted to lecture her. *Throw the machine out the airlock. There was a Normandy before this one. You died in an attack.*

Her hands curled into fists as memories above Alchera fluttered through her mind. She remembered being so damn angry at being left behind, that the galaxy would dare to continue on without her. And in those last moments, she remembered sparing a thought for Garrus, wishing she had taken the time to read the message he had sent her earlier that day, before anger consumed her again.

Those memories needed to wait. Shepard forced them down, crumpled them into a ball to be dealt with later. She’d been doing that more and more lately with certain feelings, there’d come a time when it had to stop. “War is the absolute last resort, Javik, understood?”

He looked back towards the children, where some still milled around, most likely hoping for another story. “I understand that is your hope, Commander.”

“That is my hope, Javik,” she said. She waved her omni-tool, sending the details over to him. “We leave in a little more than three weeks.”

“I will be ready,” Javik said.

“It’ll be good to have you back on the *Normandy*,” Shepard said. She had meant what she said at the Embassy on the Citadel: Javik was one of the best soldiers she’d seen. After Garrus, she included him on her squad more than any others; his combat and biotic skills fitting seamlessly with her and Garrus’.

More than that, he understood her in a way few could. He understood the responsibility that had been placed on her shoulders, being tasked to defeat the impossible.

Javik nodded. “If that is all, Commander, I believe I will tell the children about the battle of Bwarge. It is a story I learned in my own childhood.”

The children started cheering again as he walked back to them. With one last wave to the kids, Shepard stuck her hands in the pockets of her trousers and headed towards Alliance Headquarters.

She took a back route, one where she could have a better view of the ocean. Strange how she hadn’t lived near an ocean for almost half her life, yet she still felt a sense of home looking out into the water. She knew some people believed her place out among the stars - and she loved them, she did - but give her the vastness of the ocean, teeming with life underneath the waves over the great empty void, as Samara had called it once.

Shepard took a moment to appreciate the view before walking again. Once she started, Shepard turned and almost ran into a woman. She gasped, recognizing the woman at once and dropped to her haunches. Tears formed in her eyes as Shepard pulled her short ponytail hard, trying to ground herself. Her eyes closed almost involuntarily, perhaps hoping when they opened the woman would be gone.


Shepard opened her eyes and the woman still stood there, head slightly cocked, staring down. Dirt covered her olive skin and dreadlocks matted her hair. She wore animal skins that clung to her body. Shepard wondered if she still smelled of animal grease and burnt ashes.
That damn trinket. Shepard had kept it in her armor jokingly as a good luck charm, saying Sha’ira had given it to her right before being appointed as a Spectre. She didn’t even know what possessed her to bring the trinket out on Eletania. But she did. And within a matter of minutes, the memories of a caveman from fifty thousand years ago had been placed in her head.

She remembered the constant struggle, going out with the other tribesmen and hunting while the women worked to keep the home camp safe. Raids, where other tribes thought it easier to fight and steal for food and clothes than provide for themselves.

And she remembered the woman in front of her.

The memories she had were full of this woman. He had cared for her, so much. He had given her small tokens, a bit of leather or fur for use as decoration. Shepard knew he had loved her, and the day she accepted him as a mate the second happiest of his life.

The happiest day Shepard could remember of his was realizing the woman was with child.

Shepard looked up, meeting the woman’s gaze for the first time. She had beautiful eyes, large and brown with thick lashes. “Did you have the baby?” Shepard asked, knowing the woman wouldn’t answer even if they could understand each other.

Placing her hands on the pavement in front of her, Shepard lifted herself off of the ground. The top of the woman’s head barely came up to Shepard’s shoulders. Shepard forced herself to look into the woman’s eyes. She studied them, wondering if somewhere out in the galaxy a living person had those same flecks of green in their eyes. “He loved you,” Shepard finally said. Then she took a breath and forced herself to walk. Nothing would be gained by standing and staring. She walked to the end of the path and counted to thirty. Slowly turning around, Shepard saw no trace of the woman.

She exhaled and tried to compose herself. Shepard felt her hands shake as she brought up her omni-tool. Part of her wanted to shut down, pretend this didn’t happen. If she didn’t tell anyone it would be so much easier to pretend.

But she promised.

Shepard took her finger and pressed the chat program app - their private channel, Shepard didn’t want to risk anyone intercepting anything - and quickly typed Garrus a message. He called her almost at once and Shepard felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders at the sight of his face.

“You okay?” he asked. Shepard watched his eyes search her face, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

“Been better,” Shepard said, giving him a small smile. He seemed more at ease after her smile. The timing of this vision couldn’t be worse. Garrus’ stress-level had skyrocketed since seeing Sidonis a few days ago and now this. “Didn’t expect this today.”

“Shepard, there comes a day when you do expect these, I think we need to sit down and have a chat,” Garrus said dryly.

She chuckled. “Touché, Vakarian,” she said. She felt better already, talking openly about this. He had been so right to call her out on the visions. “You remember on the SR-1 when I blacked out on Eletania?”

Garrus’ mandibles pinched his face a bit - his thinking face, Shepard joked once - before asking, “Sure, with that Prothean ruin, right?”
“Yeah, that’s the one,” Shepard sighed. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hand. “What sort of cavemen were turians?”

His eyes blinked several times at the odd question. “Ah, turians never lived in caves. We evolved from the pleket, so early turians were plain dwellers. I’ll show you a picture sometime.”

“Early turians have art of any kind?” Shepard asked, remembering the simple drawing the tribe made in the dirt and etched on the walls. Her caveman had loved to draw pictures.

“Carved the bark of trees, I think,” Garrus said. He let out of huff of impatient air. “You really okay, Shepard? I can meet you in fifteen minutes if you want.”

“I’m fine,” Shepard said a bit too sharply for her liking. She softened her voice. “I’m fine, really. This vision… it’s hard to explain. Basically, I have the memories of a caveman in my head.”

Garrus rubbed his neck. “And that’s just what you need, when you already have the Prothean beacon and the Cipher in your head. Damn.”

He sighed, long and deep and Shepard sense the question he wanted to ask, so she answered it for him. “The woman just stood there. Didn’t say anything, just like the others.”

“Good,” Garrus said at once. Shepard heard the relief in his sub-vocals. “I’m just working on supply logistics today so message me anytime you want, okay, Shepard?”

“I will,” Shepard promised, feeling lighter than she had before they spoke. She needed to remember this feeling the next time she wanted to shut down when they fought. Talking these things over with Garrus helped more than they hurt. Hopefully she could remember that. “I’m still going to go to Orlando. I want an update on how everything is going.”

“If you’re sure,” Garrus said.

“I am,” Shepard said, meaning the words. These visions wouldn’t stop her from doing her job. hey couldn’t. If they did, she had no right to be leading this mission.

“Be safe and I’ll see you tonight then.”

“See you tonight,” Shepard echoed, turning off the feed. She looked behind her one last time to make she couldn’t see the woman. She couldn’t. With a sigh, Shepard dug her toe into the ground and started walking towards headquarters.

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Shepard walked into the lab, surprised only to see Ann Bryson working. “Where are Conrad and Padok?” Shepard asked.

Ann looked up from her workstation and waved Shepard over. “Conrad wanted some material that required two authorization codes to pick up, so Padok joined him.”

“So you get the lab to yourself?” Shepard joked as she sat down next to Ann.

Ann pushed her hand through her hair. "Don’t get me wrong, Commander. Padok and Conrad are both brilliant scientists,” Ann said, sighing and crossing her legs. "But they like to talk through everything. Every hypothesis, every theory, every experiment… It can get grating sometimes.”

“The things we do for science,” Shepard said with a smile.
Ann snorted and brought up her omni-tool. “We do have some good news for you though, Shepard,” she said. “The new shield is ready for activation. You won’t ever notice the change, but the program will modify the frequencies at varying intervals. One cycle might be two point three seconds, the next point eight. Leviathan should have no chance of penetrating it.”

“Fantastic,” Shepard said. “How soon can we start using it?”

“Right away,” Ann said. She folded her hands together in her lap and looked down. When she spoke again her voice was timid. “I’ve decided to start using the shield as well, for now.”

“Worried about Leviathan?”

Ann nodded, still not raising her head. “I can’t believe we were so careless,” she said after a moment’s pause. “There could be a working artifact in orbit right now and it’s all my fault. What if…” Shepard said nothing, content to let Ann talk for now. “Sometimes I wonder, Commander, if I didn’t think about the artifact when we were evacuating because Leviathan didn’t want me to think about it.”

Shepard pulled her ponytail, missing the buzz cut where she could just easily run her hands over her head. Ann’s question seemed relevant, especially with Garrus’ worry about Shepard’s visions. “What was it like?” Shepard asked softly. “Besides being cold and dark?”

Closing her eyes, Ann leaned back in her chair. “I don’t think I have a definitive answer for you. I try not to look back too much.”

“But when you do?” Shepard asked.

“And I do,” Ann said with a rueful smile. “Oh I do.”

While waiting for Ann to continue, Shepard looked around the lab. The white board looked messier than ever with formulas and calculations covering almost every inch. While Shepard wasn’t a scientist, she did consider herself to be a bit of a mathematician. She saw calculations regarding mass effects fields, dark energy and several about the relativity of time. Part of her wanted to ask questions and learn a bit.

A black console stood on a table in the center of the lab, surrounded by datapads, wires and other equipment. If Shepard had to hazard a guess, she’d say she found the prototype of the artifact tracker. Amazing to think three people and their collective knowledge stood the best chance of finding and then destroying the artifacts across the galaxy.

“I mainly remember the anger,” Ann said, looking into the corner of the room. “Anger and disdain. Like the thought they were sullying themselves by speaking through me.”

“Do you worry that it will happen again?” Shepard asked quietly, sensing the answer from the way Ann’s shoulders tensed and her fist curled.

Ann shifted and with a start, Shepard realized the scientist stared at the pistol holstered at Shepard’s waist. “Did you know when we first landed after the Reapers were defeated, there were weapons everywhere?” Ann asked. “Just lying around next to bodies on the street that hadn’t been cleaned up yet.”

“I was in a coma when that happened,” Shepard said. “Heard it was pretty ugly though.”

Riots over weapons and supplies. Krogan looking for a fight, not caring who their opponents were. Starving animals feasting on husks until the bodies could be burned. By the time Shepard woke from
the coma, the worst of the fighting and ugliness had passed. She sometimes felt gratitude for that.

“I saw vids,” Ann said, hugging her midsection. She shuddered. “But the point being is that for almost a week, it was fairly simple to find a gun. So I found one. Really nice model from what I can tell from my research. A Paladin.”

“I used to carry a Paladin,” Shepard said, missing the extra weight she usually felt on her right side. The Alliance-issued Predator didn’t have the same heft in her hands. She missed her Paladin; she wondered who might have found it in the rubble of London. Whoever had better be treating it right. “Good weapon.”

Ann took a deep breath and breathed out slowly through her nose. “I sleep with it under my pillow,” she said. She turned and looked Shepard straight in the eye. “If I ever start to feel cold and dark again… Well.” Ann chuckled humorlessly. “Let’s just say you’ll need to find another scientist. I’m not letting them win.”

Shepard remained still as she remembered seeing Shiara sitting on her couch, staring at her. Shepard had gripped her pistol in her hand and waited until the vision disappeared. She was lucky, Shepard knew. She didn’t have to worry about not being brave enough to take herself out if the worst happened. Garrus would do it for her. Shepard let out a quick breath, trying to picture Garrus carrying around that guilt for the rest of his life - and he would feel guilty, she knew he would, taking no comfort in the idea it was what she’d want - and couldn’t. She would simply have to make sure that never happened.

“Have you had a pysch eval since you’ve been working on this project?” Shepard said, her voice level, not trying to sugarcoat her words.

Ann shook her head briskly. “No, I haven’t.”

“You had weekly ones though, when you were working on Project Aurora?”

Ann sat up a little straighter. “We all did. Anyone who came into the office near the fragment of Sovereign was required to go.”

“I think we’re going to start that up again,” Shepard said, stretching her hands behind her back. “You, Padok and Conrad. Weekly sessions. It was sound policy.”

Weekly pysch evals might not give Ann the same comfort of a Paladin underneath her pillow, but it might provide some sense of security.

When Ann looked up again, Shepard saw her that Ann’s seemed lighter, a burden lifted. “That’s a good idea, Commander. Thank you.” Ann held up a finger, asking Shepard to wait. After she pulled up her omni-tool, Ann waved her arm. Shepard’s own omni-tool beeped, the transfer successful. ”That’s the shield. I’ll let you handle the distribution among your team.” Ann bit her lip and looked down at her omni-tool. “I don’t know if this is my place…”

“Probably would be a good idea for me to start using this shield at all times like you,” Shepard said, activating the shield. She and Garrus would have to take some time going over the specs and make sure it didn’t interfere with their normal shields. The last thing they needed was to solve one problem only to create another. Then again, some would say that’s the story of Shepard’s life. She rubbed her temple, trying to stave off the headache she felt forming. Seemed like days had passed since she recruited Javik for the mission only this morning. “Leviathan didn’t take me over but they did speak to me.”
“They did,” Ann said. She looked up curiously. “And you didn’t feel cold or dark at all when it happened?”

Shepard shook her head. “No, nothing like that. I think that’s their signature move when they control you, not just talk to you.”

“That’s my guess as well,” Ann said. She sighed. “I’ll feel a lot better once we have the tracker ready and get that artifact out of orbit if it’s up there.”

“Agreed,” Shepard said at once. But her job required her to deal with the ‘what ifs.’ She needed to be better, to prepare more for those ‘what ifs.’ Standing in front of a panel where the men and women expected her to magically fix everything when the only words she could muster were ‘we fight or we die,’ wouldn’t cut it anymore.

Every possibility had to be considered and planned accordingly. Even the ones she didn’t want to think about, like the idea of an artifact in orbit above Earth. She’d come up with a plan. She and Garrus would come up with a plan.

“Another week, two weeks, hopefully, tops,” Ann said.

“Keep me updated,” Shepard said. She took a breath and looked at the black console in the middle of the lab. Not exactly the stuff dreams were made of, but it would do. She nodded at Ann. “I should go.”

Shepard turned and walked out of the lab. Time to deal with more ‘what ifs.’

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**The Empress, Upright:** Maternal care and domestic stability. Fertility, security, achievement of goals and growth.

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**Beijing, Chinese People’s Federation**

Shepard stepped off the shuttle and felt the humidity in the air seep into her skin. Even with the heat, seeing so many refugees in such tight quarters sent a chill down her spine. The stench of bodily fluids and filth started to overwhelm her. She cursed her sensitive nose and began to walk. Garrus once told her he had grown used to the smell of burning bodies. She never had and part of her hoped she never would.

Everything seemed gray in front of her, the sky, the tents, even the people, clad in gray colony jumpsuits. Shepard’s fingers itched to turn off her implants from all the noise around her. Children crying, people yelling at each other, skycars flying overhead.

Such a stark contrast from Cape Canaveral, where the camps were clean and quiet, and people worked together. The lines for water weren’t fifty people long like she saw here in Beijing, full of anxious faces, worried there wouldn’t be enough water left to fill their bucket. There weren’t armed guards standing in front of electric fences protecting the food stores in Cape Canaveral. She didn’t see faces full of anger and fear and desperation back in Cape Canvaral.

Shepard brought her hand to her own face, thinking how Hackett had asked her to have the procedure to heal the burns on her face. How he wanted her to look every inch of *Commander Shepard*. She would bring them hope, he said. And she refused, thinking the resources could be spent elsewhere.

Perhaps she made a mistake by deciding to concentrate more on the upcoming mission than her own damn planet. Give her a math equation or a engineering puzzle or a suicide mission. Those were things she could do. Problems she could solve.

This? She had no idea how to fix this. A unscarred face waving merrily at the people below wouldn’t fix this. It wouldn’t even plaster the surface. These cracks ran too deep.

Hope was an illusion in Beijing.

*Could Commander Shepard bring hope to these people? Could anyone?*

Once upon a time, Beijing was the most sophisticated and glamorous city in the world. But the discovery of the relays meant the wealthy could find a fresh start and they did, setting up colonies on Bekenstein and Terra Nova. Their exodus had left too many people on Earth fighting over too few credits.

And now credits had no value, leaving people to barter for extra food, energy and medicine. Shepard had enough of all three, even to the point of hoarding energy reserves. Looking around at the human
and asari faces around her, these people clearly didn’t have enough of anything.

Anger swelled in her chest, thinking of the disparity. Shepard took a breath and decided the moment she arrived back in Cape Canaveral, she would schedule the procedure to heal her face. Maybe even cut her hair. No more ponytails, at least. She would hone herself into Commander Shepard again.

It would never be enough, but it would be something.

A number of asari children ran up to her, hands out, looking for a handout. The asari had set up their largest refugee camp in Beijing; the encampment in Cape Canaveral mainly for matriarchs. The rest spread out, many taking advantage of the depressed situations by setting up strip clubs around the world.

But for those who choose not to dance or didn’t want to stay in Cape Canaveral, Beijing became their home. Shepard saw a mixture of both human and asari in the crowded camp. The Reapers hit the city hard. Shepard had been to Beijing once, during N7 training. The skyline had been impressive once. Now hardly any of those buildings still stood.

She wished she had thought to bring some extra ration bars, something, anything to help these kids. Beijing needed another Conrad, someone able to give the orphaned children a cot to sleep in, food for their bellies and a sense of belonging.

Around her, conversations grew louder as people started to stare. Her fingers itched to bring out her concealed pistol just so she could have some breathing room. More children ran up to her, a mix of human and asari faces, all with their hands out. Grubby fingers clutched at her Alliance uniform and Shepard wished she could look behind her to see Garrus at her six. And not just for the sense of security she felt in his presence. In his heavy armor at his height, he made quite the looming figure; people moved out of his way almost instinctually.

Shepard expected to meet Samara at the shuttle landing zone but she couldn’t see the justicar anywhere. So she kept moving, gently removing small hands from her clothes as she did. Shepard’s fingers curled around her pistol, not wanting any of the children to accidentally grab hold of her gun.

The crowd hushed, and Shepard turned her head to see Samara, intimidating in her red and gold armor, walking towards her. The contrast couldn’t be more striking; Samara was a burst of color in all the gray.

“Shepard,” Samara said, nodding her head, “I apologize for the delay in meeting you.”

“Not a problem, Samara,” Shepard said, relaxing her fingers slightly. Her trigger finger didn’t itch nearly as much now. “Do you know any place we could talk?”

“Of course,” Samara said. “Follow me.”

They walked in silence through the maze of tents. Shepard had planned on asking why Samara choose to reside here instead of at Cape Canaveral, where her counsel would have been much sought after by the asari. But seeing the conditions here, and knowing Samara always wanted to be where she could do the most good, made the question irrelevant. The justicar belonged here for the time being.

Samara led her to a small tent, covering only a worn sleeping bag. Shepard felt a knot of guilt form in her stomach when she thought of her prefab. It might not have running water but she and Garrus had made it their home.

“This is where I reside,” Samara said. “We may converse here.”
Shepard followed Samara’s example and sat down on the ground, bringing her knees up to her chest. They might have been in a tent instead of the observation lounge of the *Normandy*, but Shepard still felt the same sense of calm settle over her as she did whenever she spoke to the justicar.

“I’m going on a mission, Samara,” Shepard said, not needing to waste any words with the justicar. “I’d appreciate your help.”

Samara crossed her ankles, assuming the meditative pose Shepard had seen so often back on the SR-2. “I am the last justicar, Shepard,” Samara said. Shepard saw no sorrow or regret on Samara’s face, only truth. “The rest died during the final days of the fight. It is up to me to decide the future of the justicars.”

“That’s a tall order,” Shepard said.

“It is,” Samara said. “I need time to think and meditate. A mission… A mission will give me time to do both, and to fulfill my promise to you.”

“Samara, you fulfilled your oath when we returned from the Collector Base,” Shepard said, feeling slightly uncomfortable. She wanted Samara to join her out of her free will, not because she felt obligated.

“I am aware of that, Shepard,” Samara said. “I also promised that I would always be there if you called. I will be there for your mission.”

Shepard bit the inside of her cheek. If something were to happen to Samara while on the mission… Could Shepard live with that? Knowing her mission ended an asari tradition which had thrived long before the ancient Greeks?

But Shepard could think of no other pure biotic she trusted to bring along. Jack refused to leave her students and Liara’s skills were needed elsewhere. Shepard would simply have to take the risk.

“Would you like details?” Shepard asked, knowing the answer would most likely be no. Samara hadn’t wanted to know about the Collectors either.

“Simply tell me when I should be ready to join you and I will be there,” Samara said.

“Thank you,” Shepard said softly. May she never take for granted the people willing to follow her into hell and out of it again. “How have you been holding up?”

“I worry about my daughter,” Samara said. “I have only been able to speak to her a few times since the Reapers were defeated. I believe she is lonely.”

“That’s understandable,” Shepard said.

“I have lived so much of my life alone, there are times I have difficulty remembering the feeling,” Samara said. She stood up, putting her hands behind her back. When she spoke again, Shepard heard sadness in Samara’s voice. “But better Falere experience a lonely life than one of a fugitive. Perhaps when our mission is complete, I will go visit her.”

“You should,” Shepard said, standing up next to Samara. She debated putting her hand on Samara’s shoulder, but decided against it. Even after all they had been through, the gesture felt too familiar. “Family is so important these days.”

“There is something to be said, though, of the family one creates for themselves. Those bonds are just as important,” Samara said.
Shepard certainly had no argument for that. In regards to her chosen family, Shepard had fared far better than most. She was damn lucky. “Thank you, Samara,” she said, nodding her head. “I’m very glad you’ll be on the Normandy. You can even have your old space, if you want.”

A small smile appeared on Samara’s face. “That would please me greatly. I spent many contented hours looking out that window.” Samara put her hands behind her back. “Perhaps we will be able to converse occasionally when there is time available.”

“I plan on keeping the old routines,” Shepard admitted. Her rounds were vital to check the pulse of the crew. “So there will definitely be time.”

They walked back to the shuttle with no words said between them, Shepard content with the silence between two friends.

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Shepard tried her damnedest not to think. *Smell the roses, blow out the birthday cake.* All she needed to do was breathe. Don’t think. Just breathe. She needed to ignore everything around her and simply concentrate on the imaginary goal post in front of her.

Her feet pounded the makeshift track as she continued to run. The weight on her back pinched her skin, causing the muscles to burn. She didn’t even know why she had to wear the stupid thing. Shepard carried a pistol and an SMG into combat, not a Black Widow like Garrus. And to add insult to injury, her armor was light, not heavy. She must have pissed off her physical therapist and his chosen method of revenge included torturing her while she ran.

“I’m doing another lap, Shepard!” Garrus yelled over his shoulder.

“Traitor!” Shepard yelled at him. *Smell the damn roses.* Her breathing was heavy, sweat trickling down her brow. Looking ahead, she saw Garrus running easily. Back on the SR-2, it was Shepard who always ran the extra laps while Garrus concentrated on lifting weights. Now, their roles were reversed. Shepard hated the weak feeling left over from her weight loss, her muscles sometimes feeling like deflated balloons. Vanity wise, she simply missed her old body. Shepard had been proud of the muscle definition in her abs and biceps. She wanted them back again. So weight-lifting had became a priority in her work outs. It seemed like such a petty thing to want and work towards, compared to everything else going on. But unlike Beijing yesterday, her body she could fix. Putting the work in would eventually lead her to her goal.

Garrus, on the other hand, worked tirelessly to regain and improve upon his stamina. He always had a bit of an issue of endurance in the field, something Shepard teased him about once, then never again after she saw the crestfallen look on his face. She had resolved right then and there not to say anything unless it affected his squad performance, which it never had. And now he ran hard almost every day instead of the haphazard laps she remembered him taking around the cargo bay on the Normandy.

The white line was close, so close. Shepard smelled the roses one last time and put forth every bit of energy to crossing the finish line. She knew she should cool down or stretch, but once she stopped running, Shepard threw the weight off her back and plopped onto the grass. Her stomach grumbled; she wouldn’t mind a slice of an actual birthday cake. Too bad hers was last month.

Instead, she closed her eyes and waited for the show-off to finish his lap. She didn’t nap, just enjoyed the light breeze cooling off her skin. A few minutes later, Garrus collapsed next to her, breathing hard. “That felt good,” he said, taking a greedy gulp of air.
Shepard turned on her side and looked at him. Garrus looked good. Just the other day he said he was back at a weight he was happy at, so he felt like he could concentrate on bulking up a bit. And a Garrus comfortable with his body made Shepard happy. As for her, Shepard would like to put on another four kilograms, ideally muscle.

Garrus scooted a bit closed and before Shepard could stop him, nuzzled her neck, licking up a bead of sweat. She sat up immediately. “Garrus,” she said with a grin, swatting him away. They were in public, he knew better.

“Shepard, we are the only ones at the track,” Garrus said, his sub vocals maddeningly low as he reached for her again. “And you’re sweaty. I like you sweaty.”

Laughing, Shepard kissed Garrus on the mouth plates. “I’ll still be sweaty when we get home.” She stood up and held out her hands to help him off of the ground.

“Promises, promises,” Garrus grumbled as Shepard helped him stand up. He flared his mandibles wide. “Race you there?”

“Oh hell, no,” Shepard said, grabbing her water bottle and towel from a nearby bench. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t take a leisurely stroll.” Garrus started to reply, but a priority message on Shepard’s omni-tool stopped him. Shepard brought up the interface, wondering what might be needed. She scanned the message and clapped her hands. “You win, Vakarian, we are racing.”

“Gonna fill me in?” Garrus asked as they started to jog.

“Wrex. Bakara messaged him. She thinks they’re going to hatch within the hour.”

Garrus beat her home.

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“Why don’t you sit down, Wrex,” Shepard said. “I’ve got water. Even have an extra MRE for the occasion.”

Wrex simply shook his head as he continued to pace along the length of their prefab.

“Alright, I think I’ve got it,” Garrus said, handing Wrex his omni-tool. “The connection is as secure as I can make it and that’s pretty damn secure.”

Slapping the omni-tool on his wrist, Wrex brought up the interface. Shepard could tell nerves made his fingers clumsy. Without being asked, Shepard reached over and opened the communication panel. With a gesture, Shepard enlarged the omni-tool screen and with another flick of her wrist moved the image to the wall.

“Vid calls can still take a while to link up,” Shepard warned. “Might as well get comfortable, Wrex.”

Wrex nodded and sat down at the dining table. Taking her own advice, Shepard went to the sofa and sat down next to Garrus, leaning in to him. In response, Garrus wrapped his arm around her waist. She didn’t mind a bit of affection now, even in front of Wrex. This was a big day. A long awaited day.

Letting out a rumbling sigh, Wrex leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “I’ve committed fifty-seven children to the void, Shepard. I don’t know if I can handle sending any more.”

Shepard felt Garrus’ grip on her waist tighten as she placed her hand on his knee. “Oh Wrex, I’m so
Wrex waved the apology away. “We burn our dead, even the babies. Every time another one burned, I’d take the ashes out to the Hollows, right to the very spot where my father tried to kill me. That’s where I scattered them, left them to rest.”

“Other krogan babies have been born already, right?” Shepard asked. Only a few days ago a celebration had broken out in the krogan camp when news of the first child born after the cure had been hatched. Six hours passed before order had been restored.

“But not mine,” Wrex said, his voice taunt. He stood up. “Not mine.”

He started pacing again, leaving Shepard and Garrus helpless to do anything but watch. She couldn’t even begin to think what Wrex might be going through. Patting Garrus’ knee, Shepard thought back to their conversation on Earth, about a turian-human baby. She tried to imagine herself pregnant, but stopped at once. Garrus fathering a child of hers was an impossibility. Best not even to think about it. If her trip to Beijing proved anything, adoption was the most unselfish choice they could make.

“How many were there in the clutch?” Garrus asked.

“Eight hundred and eighty-three,” Wrex said as he paced. “Thirty-two actually developed enough to become eggs. Bakara thinks three will hatch.” His movement stilled and Wrex stared at the vid screen on the wall. “I need something to shoot.”

“You and Garrus could go outside,” Shepard suggested. “I can wait for-”

“How many were there in the clutch?” Garrus asked.

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“You and Garrus could go outside,” Shepard suggested. “I can wait for-”

“The clutch?” Garrus asked.

“Bakara?” Wrex said, sounding as frantic as Shepard ever heard. “Any news?”

“No yet,” Bakara said, her voice calm. “It will be soon. Within minutes.”

Squeezing Garrus’ hand, Shepard went to stand next to Wrex. “Good to see you, Bakara.”

“As it is you, Commander,” Bakara said. “I’m glad you’re able to share this with Wrex.”

“Damn relays,” Wrex said, kicking a toe to the floor. “I should be there with you.”

Shepard studied the vid screen. Bakara was off to the side, standing with another woman, wearing the same traditional shaman garb as Baraka. In the middle of the screen were three eggs, Wrex’s children, no bigger than a bowling ball, sitting in a nest of soft fabric. Biting her lip, Shepard looked back at Garrus and waved him over; she wanted to stand next to him for this. Just a moment later, Garrus was there, his arm around her shoulder.

“So those are the hatchlings?” Garrus asked, sounding surprised. He looked at Wrex. “Thought they’d be bigger.”

“They grow a great deal during their first year,” Bakara said. A sudden crack made everyone in the prefab still. Bakara and the other shaman went to the eggs. As the shaman chanted softly, Bakara gently placed her hands on the egg to the left of the screen. “This will be the first. This will be Mordin.”
A tiny red hand punched its way through the top of the egg. Shepard found she couldn’t move. Every ounce of energy she had focused on the eggs in front of her. *Please be okay.*

A cry pierced the room as the egg on the left broke its head through, fighting its way out of the egg. Then the one of the right started to hatch. A blue leg kicked the shell. And then the two baby krogans seemed to race to see who would be rise out of the egg first.

The middle egg only moved slightly during all of this.

The red krogan won the race then, screaming loudly, like it wanted to go back inside where it was warm. Bakara picked the krogan up and stared at it like she was afraid the baby would disappear. “A girl,” she said, her voice cracking. Bakara brought the baby to her chest and looked up at the ceiling. “Mordin.”

She handed Mordin to the shaman who immediately started cleaning the baby. Out of its shell, the blue krogan demanded attention, wailing fiercely. Picking the baby up, Bakara said, “Another girl.” Shepard could hear the smile in her voice as Bakara clutched the baby, placing her hands on the baby’s head. “She will be Solus.”

The Shaman took Solus from Bakara, who turned her focus to the middle egg. Taking off her gloves, Bakara placed her hands gently on the egg.

Wrex took a step closer to the vid screen. “Are you sure it’ll hatch?” he asked.

“Let us be patient,” Bakara said, her voice calm. Behind her, the shaman started a different chant. This one was mournful and Shepard felt it straight in her gut. Needing an anchor, she wrapped her arm just above Garrus’ waist and looked up at him. He wasn’t staring at the egg, like she had been, but the two wiggling babies off to the side.

A soft cry emitted from the egg. “Fight, little one,” Bakara said softly, removing her hands and taking a step back. “Fight.”

“What are you doing?” Wrex asked, his voice distraught. “Get her out of there.”

Bakara drew in a sharp breath. “The child mustn’t have help, you know this, Wrex.”

“What’s going on?” Garrus asked, his mandibles fluttering nervously.

Wrex clenched his fists and turned away from the screen. “That baby will suffocate in about two minutes if she doesn’t hatch.”

The only sounds were Mordin and Solus crying in the background while Garrus muttered softly to the Spirits, asking them to watch over the child. For almost thirty seconds, only slight movement rocked the egg. Wrex kept his back to the screen, his head low. Each second felt a year. Shepard wanted to look away; she had seen so much death in her life, she didn’t want to add more, not today, not Wrex’s child.

*Come on, baby krogan, you can do this.*

And then a tan leg punched through the shell. She wanted to cry out in relief, but Bakara didn’t look ready to rejoice yet. Seconds passed. An arm appeared. Another leg. Wrex turned back to the screen, his face full of hope. Shepard put her hand on his shoulder, waiting for the little one to finish hatching.

Ten seconds later, it was over. The baby cried out, louder than the other two combined, shaking its
fists in the air. Shepard started laughing, too happy to keep anything inside. Garrus kissed her hard on the lips and reached over to shake Wrex’ hand. “Congratulations, Papa,” he said. Shepard could hear the slight keen in his sub-vocals.

Shepard gripped Wrex’s free hand. “You’re a father, Wrex.”

He nodded, but didn’t have any eyes except for the babies on the vid screen.

Bakara raised the child, who still shook its fists. “A boy,” she said. “He will be Wreav.”

“After Wrex’s brother?” Garrus asked, brow plates raised in surprise.

“Wreav died to help fight Kalros,” Bakara said, handing Wreav over to the shaman. “Without his sacrifice, we might not have made it to The Shroud.” She picked up Mordin, who shared Wrex’s color. Looking directly at Wrex through the vidscreen, she said, “Urdnot Wrex, as the father of these children, I offer you right of parentage.”

Wrex seemed to stand a little taller. “I accept, Urdnot Bakara,” he said, his voice cracking ever so slightly. “I accept.”

Bakara and the shaman started feeding the babies. Wrex stared, his face full of awe. After a few moments, he said, “We’ll let you go, Bakara. I’ve probably used up all of their energy reserves for the day.”

“We’ve got extras, Wrex,” Shepard said as Garrus pressed his mouth plates to her temple. She normally hated the idea of using their reserves, but for this, she’d go through them all. “You can keep up the link if you want.”

“Nah, I’ll let them get to work. You’ll keep me updated, Bakara?”

“Of course, Wrex,” Bakara said, looking down at Solus. “And in less than a month you’ll be here yourself.”

“Congratulations, Bakara,” Shepard said. “Looks like your hands will be full.”

“At last they will be, Commander. At last they will be.”

Wrex nodded one last time and ended the vid call. “I have children, Shepard,” he said slowly. “Children who will never have to experience the pain of the genophage, thanks to you.”

Shepard had to wipe away a tear threatening to spill down her cheek. Hard to believe she’d ever feel grateful to the Reapers for anything, but she could admit she felt gratitude for this moment. The krogan may have never gotten their cure if not for the invasion. It didn’t make up for the loss and devastation everywhere, but it was the beginning of hope. Thank you, Mordin. “Thanks to a lot of people, Wrex.”

He put his hand on Shepard’s shoulder. “Agreed,” he said. Then slamming his fists together, he added, “Bah, that’s enough of the sentimental crap. Let’s drink.”

“I thought you were supposed to belch out the names of your children when you were drunk,” Garrus said. “Seems like Bakara’s already gone ahead and named your babies for you, Wrex.”

“Maybe I’ll give them two names, like humans do,” Wrex said, following Garrus into the kitchen. “Let’s see what we can come up with.”
Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Five of Cups, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Five of Cups, Reversed:** Worries which arrive both unexpectedly and from an unexpected source. Ill luck which leaves a feeling of being bereft.

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Garrus stretched his arms behind his back, feeling a slight pull in his shoulders as he moved his weight foot to foot, getting a sense of the gravel below him. “You know, you could just give me your credits now.”

“She seems so confident there, Garrus,” Shepard said with a grin. “You want to go double or nothing already?”

“Please,” Garrus scoffed.

“I seem to remember last time we fought that I came out the victor,” Shepard said, hand on her hip.

“That was on the Normandy. Shepard, in the cargo hold,” Garrus said. “We’re outside now. Last time we dueled outside, I do believe I won.”

Shepard took a few steps towards him and placed her hands on the waist guard of his armor. Thanks to the armor, he couldn’t feel the heat from her palms but the gesture still made his neck flush. “King of the bottle shooters,” she said, her voice low and inviting. “Big man, Vakarian, beating an pistol toting engineer in a sniping contest.”

His mandibles widened into a smile. So maybe it hadn’t been the fairest of contests. A more appropriate contest for the two of them probably would have involved tech, maybe trying to take down each other’s shields using only tech powers. If Garrus was completely honest, he simply wanted to see Shepard holding a sniper rifle. And damn, if it hadn’t been one of the sexiest things he’d ever seen.

He had managed to get a good pic of her with his visor that day, one of the few pics he had of her. Over and over again Garrus had looked at them during the four months the Normandy was stranded. When the low point hit, that one single night - single hour, really - when ending things with a bullet seemed a better option than waiting for starvation to kill him, Garrus looked at those pictures. Her face, and his absolute certainty she would be pissed if he took himself out of the game early kept him from reaching for his pistol.

“You’re thinking sad things,” Shepard whispered, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Nah, just thinking about how mad you’ll be when I kick your ass,” Garrus said, the levity to pull off the line not quite reaching his voice. “Don’t make me sleep on the couch tonight.”

The expression on her face told him she clearly wasn’t buying what he was selling, but wouldn’t push the issue. He already told her about that evening and Shepard knew there were subjects he didn’t want to touch once discussed, that hour being one of them. “Alright, big guy,” Shepard said, taking a step back and stretching her arms above her head.
Garrus forced himself to ignore her torso, opening his omni-tool to busy himself. “You ready for this, Shepard?”

A new set of Ajax-issued Alliance armor had shown up at their prefab two days ago, along with a new Carnifax and Shuriken. Shepard decided to start breaking the armor in, making sure it would handle combat. Even though she kept insisting their mission hopefully wouldn’t even require combat, Garrus knew better. Fights just seemed to follow Shepard around like little lost varren.

“I’m gonna get blisters,” Shepard muttered. “Boots don’t fit quite right.”

“Better now than later,” Garrus said, activating his ammo power with his omni-tool. He glanced at Shepard as she wiped her brow. The sun decided to shine for once, and the temperature reminded him of Cipritine, just about perfect for him but warmer than Shepard would like.

Trying to get a better lay of the land, Garrus surveyed the small combat training zone the Alliance set up. Lots of cover, a few decent sniper perches and plenty of room to run around. If Shepard wanted to break in her new armor, he would make her work, though Garrus had no doubt that she had the same line of thinking. His armor felt like a second skin now, after wearing it for more than a month, but he had yet to test it in combat.

Shepard balanced her Carnifex in her hands. “Wonder if I remember how to shoot this thing,” she said with a laugh.

“Didn’t you spend six months in lock up and then not miss a beat last time?” Garrus asked. “You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know about the ‘not missing a beat’ part,” Shepard said with a snort. “You didn’t hear Anderson ragging on me back in Vancouver.”

Garrus stilled, waiting for Shepard to sigh or frown like she usually did when Admiral Anderson’s name came up in conversation. But instead she simply loaded a practice clip into her pistol. Perhaps acceptance finally had overcome her grief.

She had one foot up on a crate and Garrus let his eyes linger on her legs for a moment. Shepard caught him and smirked, stepping away from the crate and slowly lowered herself down to the ground, almost doing the splits. Her flexibility hadn’t quite returned, but Shepard certainly worked hard to get it back. Sometimes she let him help.

“Trying to distract me won’t work, Shepard,” Garrus said, wanting to focus, libido be damned. He turned his back to her and rolled his shoulders.

“Since when?” Shepard asked. He could hear the smile in her voice. “Ready?”

“Always,” Garrus said. He walked over to a ladder on some scaffolding. Her damn drone gave away his position, so he never bothered trying to hide from her. He’d rather have the high ground.

“Usual safe word?”

Damnit, she had moved to cover while he had climbed the ladder. Shepard certainly had a talent for being a sneak when she wanted. He blinked twice, turning on his visors heat sensor and looked for her. There she was… “Drive core, it is,” Garrus yelled. He tapped his omni-tool, and the training arena’s timer started counting down.

Ten seconds… The key to beating Shepard was hitting her with Overload before she hit him with the same. Nine times out of ten, Shepard deployed her combat drone first thing. That would give him
time to hit her with Overload then take a shot with the Black Widow before the drone made it over to him. Theoretically. Shepard always seemed to have a trick or two in her cowl. He’d really have to learn the human version of that metaphor one of these days.

Three…

Two…

One…

Garrus immediately threw out his arm in her direction, and felt the charge flow through his wrist. Just as he brought up the scope of his sniper rifle to his eye, ready to aim his shot, he heard Shepard yell, her voice as panicked as he’d ever heard, “Drive core!”

He didn’t hesitate. A hundred thoughts flew his mind as he slapped the Widow onto his back, each worse than the other. Perhaps her shields malfunctioned. Maybe he overclocked Overload just a hair too much. Spirits, what if he hurt her? Even in practice, getting hit with Overload could sting, but actual pain? He saved that for combat. Never for Shepard.

“Shepard, talk to me,” Garrus yelled as he slid down the ladder.

She didn’t answer.

Running as fast as he could to her location, Garrus tried to remain calm as he felt his throat constrict and the blood running faster through his veins. Nothing ever good came from panicking. But the images in his mind wouldn’t let him. Seeing her knocked out on Eletania, hijacked by David Archer, falling out of that underwater mech… This could not happen again.

He found her crouched down, her back towards him, working furiously on her omni-tool. “The hell, Shepard,” Garrus said, breathing heavily as relief and annoyance warred inside him. “I thought you were hurt.”

Shepard didn’t even acknowledge he stood behind her.

Oh crap.

Garrus touched her shoulder, letting his talons linger as Shepard jumped. “Damnit, Garrus, don’t sneak up on me like that,” she said, her voice too loud. “You hit me with Overload?” Garrus nodded, sensing the tension in her body. “It fried my implant or something. I can’t hear anything.”

“Nothing?” Garrus asked before he could stop himself.

The look Shepard gave him could have evaporated water as she slumped onto a nearby crate. Leaning forward, she placed her head in her hands. He sat next to her and put his hand on the small of her back, rubbing small circles.

Garrus knew Shepard enjoyed the quiet her implants could give her. More than once in their prefab, he’d say something to her only to have silence be the only answer. The first few times annoyed the hell out of him, though when he thought it over, he decided she deserved the peace.

Made sense in a way, the implants gave her something to control when so many things in her life were uncontrollable. But at the same time, when something happened to deny Shepard that control - a battery running out or being hit with Overload, apparently - she became more than just a little upset.
Stamping her foot on the ground, Shepard said angrily, “Fuck. How am I supposed to lead a ground team if I can’t hear?”

Part of him wanted to panic right along with her. Leading a ground team with this vulnerability wouldn’t work. As much as he trusted Shepard in every aspect of his life, they couldn’t risk her losing her hearing in the middle of a firefight.

Garrus didn’t bother answering her question; she already knew the answer. Each moment that passed seemed to increase her anxiety. Her hands fisted the heavy fabric of her leggings while she tapped the heel of her foot on the ground. While he could open a chat program on his omni-tool and talk to her, Garrus had a better idea.

He tugged her ponytail, just slightly, but enough to get her to look at him, her eyes curious. Squatting next to her, he started to thrum and gently took her off her glove and placed her hand on his neck. Her eyes closed as she felt the vibrations.

His sub-vocals were simple, telling her of safety and protection. These sub-vocals he rarely used with her, only occasionally as she fell asleep. She’d probably punch him in the shoulder if she could hear the tone; Shepard never liked thinking she needed protection.

After a moment, he felt her brow against his. “Thank you,” she whispered as she brought her other hand up to his neck.

He changed the sound, lowered it a bit, a tone to convey comfort and love. This sub-vocal Shepard knew well. Garrus remembered the first time he heard it in his own voice, telling Shepard he needed her while surrounded by the leaders of the Blue Suns and Eclipse. At the time, Garrus hadn’t realized just how strong his feelings were for her. After that conversation, he had no doubt.

“Let me switch omni-tools,” Shepard said, sitting up straight. She reached into a pocket of her armor and quickly changed tools. Like him, Shepard carried a few backups at all times. Garrus never wanted to be in a position without an one. Sure he could defend himself with a weapon or even his bare hands, but an omni-tool made everything easier.

“Nothing,” Shepard said, blowing out air through her lips.

Grabbing one of his backups from the casing of his armor, Garrus handed the tool to her. Shepard looked at him, confused. “Thank you, but I need the software-” Garrus gave her a look and Shepard laughed. “Really, you installed my hearing implant software even on your backup omni-tools?”

He shrugged. Shepard usually let him upgrade the software on her omni-tool - though never her combat programs - since he actually enjoyed the minutia. She could spend hours updating her combat drone, but installing updates on her e-mail VIs or chat programs? Shepard had no problem letting him handle that.

And so the last time he upgraded her tool, he decided to put the program on his own, just in case. Shepard’s obsession of always having a charged omni-tool rubbed off on him, he guessed.

Shepard put on the omni-tool and winced. “There we go,” she said. Placing her hands behind her, she leaned back. “What the hell are we going to do?”

“We know tech, Shepard,” Garrus said, putting his hands on her knees. Already he thought of a couple of ideas to work on. “We’ll figure out a way to protect your implant so this doesn’t happen again.”

“You’re right, we’ll figure this out,” Shepard said, putting her hand under his mandible. Garrus
leaned into the touch, feeling her thumb stroke his neck. “Just how much did you overclock your Overload since we last fought? Hurt like a son of a bitch.”

“Jealous?” Garrus teased, as he sat next to her.

“Damn right I am. I want that upgrade,” Shepard said as Garrus put his arm around her waist.

“Shepard?” Garrus asked, having a thought. He didn’t like not being able to speak to her. Not one bit. Not when communication was vital on the battlefield. “What would you say to us learning turian sign-language? Just in case.”

“Well, we could use a chat program if this happens again.”

“It be nice to be able to talk to you without having to worry about an omni-tool,” Garrus said.

“Granted, we need an omni-tool right now to have this conversation.”

“Subdermal translator for me,” Shepard said with a smirk. “I’m thirty percent cyborg according to some, remember?”

“And a hundred percent Shepard,” Garrus said, nuzzling her neck.

“Flatterer,” Shepard said with a laugh. “Would I even be able to learn turian sign language? It’s not like we have the same shaped hands.”

“True,” Garrus chuckled, taking her small five fingered hand in his. “But I’m thinking I learn the signs and you learn how to read them. Then if something like this happens again, we can still talk.”

“Sounds good to me,” Shepard said, picking her Carnifex off of the ground. “I think I’m done fighting for the day.” She stood, twisting her torso a few times. The gleam in her eye told Garrus the move was more for his benefit than for hers. Can’t say that he minded. “Too bad. I was so looking forward to kicking your ass.”

“Next time,” Garrus said, kissing her brow. “Next time.”

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This getting through? We good, Cortez?

“I read you, Garrus,” Shepard said to the air. She placed her hands under her thighs to try to break the silly habit she had of holding her hand to her ear when she received messages. Around her, the air in the lab practically crackled. Padok Wiks typed furiously at a workstation while Ann and Conrad focused on the prototype tracker.

I hear you, Shepard. We’re taking off now. Let you know when we’re in orbit.

“Copy that,” Shepard said, standing up and muting her feed.

“I would have thought you’d want to be up there in the shuttle, Commander,” Padok said.

Shepard crossed her legs and took a moment, deciding whether or not to answer. She did want to be up there, well, in the shuttle, actually. Cortez at the helm with Garrus and James along for the ride. Just like old times, as Garrus would say. She hated the idea that her people were taking risks without her. But the larger picture had to be looked at.

If Garrus was right, if her visions meant more than PTSD, like Leviathan actively trying to get into her head, she needed to be far away from any artifacts until the shielding improved. She couldn’t
risk giving them a chance to get into her mind.

“Figured I’d let someone else have the fun for once,” Shepard said, trying to sound unconcerned. Garrus would have called her out on her tone of voice. No one here knew her well enough to tell the difference.

To change the subject she turned and studied the device, which seemed to be a plain black plastic box with an interface taking up one side, smaller than she thought it would be. Looked like it could even be portable in a pinch by strapping it to someone’s back. “So how’s this thing work?”

Looking up and clearing his throat, Conrad said, “Oh, it’s pretty simple, really. The artifacts are composed mostly of dark energy, but in an extremely concentrated form. It’s incredible, actually, what Leviathan had to do to make them.” He opened his omni-tool. “The technology needed is far beyond us, Shepard.”

“So the device is searching for concentrated dark energy?” Shepard asked.

“Dark energy mixed with the element, xenon,” Conrad said. “There’s not much of it, but enough to search and filter out any untapped eezo fields.”

“Why xenon?” Shepard asked.

“It’s a possible link with the rachni, maybe aiding with communication,” Ann said. “Xenon is found in every planet the rachni have inhabited.”

“I see,” Shepard said, fighting the urge to take apart the tracker and see how it worked for herself. She really needed a project to tinker on during her downtime, something to help her distract her occasionally. Maybe Garrus would have an idea. “And we’ll take this one onto the Normandy?”

“That’s right,” Bryson said. She indicated a corner of the lap where several other black boxes lurked. “Assuming the tracker works, we’ll make a few more.”

“We’ll want the device running at all times,” Padok said, his voice rushed as he started at his workstation. “Once we get to a region of space, we’ll scan the surrounding areas for artifacts. The rest of the time, the device will systematically scan the galaxy looking for artifacts.”

“That sounds like it will take a very long time,” Shepard said, her gut twisting. The last thing she wanted was to be hunting down these artifacts years from now. They didn’t have that sort of time. But the devices could be anywhere. Leviathan had millions of years to thread the artifacts throughout the galaxy.

“Possibly,” Conrad said. “But this is to find the inert artifacts. You’ll also be able to scan specific star systems. I’d suggest all the home systems for all major spacefaring systems, plus any potential spacefaring ones.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “And any major Prothean systems.”

“Right,” Shepard said, opening up her omni-tool to make a list. “Leviathan observes. Makes sense for them to have artifacts on planets they think might be worth observing.”

“Exactly,” Ann said.

“What about when we tracked Leviathan through Ann?” Shepard asked. “Is there a way to reverse that and track active artifacts? Those really should be the ones we try to destroy first.”

“If we were in fifty meters of one, yes, we could absolutely track active artifacts,” Padok said. “Sadly, I doubt that will happen very often.”
“I’m going to keep working on that, Shepard,” Conrad said. “I’ll see if I can’t come up with anything.”

“You’re sticking around, Conrad?” Shepard asked, surprised. “I thought you were only staying until the tracker was completed.”

“Wiks will be on the *Normandy* and it doesn’t seem fair to leave Dr. Bryson alone to do all the work,” Conrad said, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s very generous of you, Dr. Verner,” Ann said with a smile.

“And, well, once the relays are up, the Alliance is moving us down to Cape Canaveral,” Conrad said. “So I’ll be able to work with the Shepards again during my off time.” He pressed a few buttons on his omni-tool. “I miss the kids.”

*We’re in orbit and ready to search.*

The three scientists went into action. “Copy that, Cortez,” Shepard said. “We’ll upload the coordinates as soon we we have them.”


*Got them. Other side of the planet. Give us a few minutes.*

“Understood,” Shepard said. She didn’t envy Cortez right now, trying to maneuver around the debris still scattered around the Earth’s orbit. No one knew exactly how many ships were lost that day, how many people’s graves were lost in space. She wondered if any of them recognized the ships out there.

Shepard looked at the scientists, wanting to rid her mind of the morbid thoughts, but all she could think about was watching ship after ship be destroyed as she struggled with the Catalyst, and then as she limped along to make her final choice of the war. If only that damn AI spoke more quickly or if she could have walked faster...

"Before we forget, Commander," Ann said, breaking Shepard’s train of thought, "Dr. Verner's developed a second shield for your use, this one to shield any artifacts you come across until you've had a chance to destroy them."

"Not a bad idea," Shepard said. "You've all managed to accomplish a hell of a lot in just so few weeks."

Shrugging, Conrad said, "The shields are based off some work I had done at Sitra Foundation. Took it all with me when I left and never bothered to license it, so I can use it now."

“You were working on a dark energy shield? That’s convenient,” Shepard said with a laugh. Sometimes she couldn’t believe how things in her life lined up.

Conrad blinked rapidly and looked down at his omni-tool. “Not everyone wants accidental eezo exposure.”

*At the coordinates, Shepard. Visual search commencing.*
Shepard pulled the end of her ponytail and held her breath. The entire mission could be derailed if the tracker didn’t work. If they couldn’t find the artifact-

*There’s the bastard. Let’s bring it in.*

*Cortez is sealed in, our mag boots are powered up, we’ve got the old shield up and we’re ready to open the hatch.*

“Do it,” Shepard ordered. Relief tingled in her toes. The tracker worked. Next to her, Conrad, Ann and Padok congratulated each other. “How bad is the debris out there?”

*Thank goodness for mass effect fields. It’s a nightmare up here, Commander.*

*Little to the port side, Cortez... Got it. Bringing it in.*

“Don’t forget to take the scans we programed,” Padok said quickly.

*Scanning now.*

Shepard crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for... something. A vision, perhaps. Some sign that Leviathan knew what they were doing. But she felt nothing, just the normal throb in her right shoulder when she felt stressed. “Any sign that the artifact is active?” Shepard asked.

*None whatsoever. Scans are done and we’re shielding the artifact.*

“Commander, we’re getting a second signal,” Ann said, her voice quiet.

“In orbit?” Shepard asked, whirling around to look at her.

“No, on Earth,” Ann said, her hand resting on her throat. Her voice sounded unsteady as she peered at the whiteboard. Shepard could imagine why Ann might be worried. No one knew exactly sure how far a reach the artifacts had.

“Looks like it’s in Egypt,” Conrad said. “Makes sense depending on how long ago it was placed here.”

“You getting this, Cortez?” Shepard asked.

*Yes, ma’am. Want us to head there next?*

“Go ahead,” Shepard said. Looking over at the scientists, she added, “I suppose we should feel grateful they thought we were worth observing.”

“I’m curious to know who put them here in the first place,” Padok said. “I hypothesize that when the Reapers started the first Harvest, Leviathan put the artifacts on any world that had potential for life.”

“Which according to the Drake Equation is approximately ten thousand,” Ann said. “It’s amazing how many worlds are out there that we don’t know about.”

Shepard busied herself with her omni-tool as they waited for the shuttle to get to the new location. So many damn variables. If there were as many artifacts out there as it seemed there might be, she’d need more than one ship. They’d have to get at least two or three, scouring different parts of the galaxy.

Fifteen minutes later, the shuttle arrived in Egypt.
“Well, the artifacts are beautiful in a way,” Shepard said, thinking of the orbs. “Maybe someone found it and added it to their art collection.” She stood up and rolled her shoulder, trying to get rid of some of tightness. “Anyone home?”

Whoever lived here is long gone. Couple of boxes of rations here though.


The search for the artifact didn’t take long.

What’s the call, Shepard?

“Destroy it,” Shepard said at once. The science team had the scans they needed from the other artifact. Dragging this one all the way back to the shuttle only asked for trouble. Through the comm, Shepard heard a shotgun and grinned.

“Letting Vega have the honors, Garrus?” she asked.

Well, he wasn’t on Despoina with us. Baby’s first artifact kill.

But not the last!

“That’s the spirit, James,” Shepard said. “Once you get back to the shuttle, destroy the other artifact as well and then head back to base.” She felt her body unwind for the first time since she stepped into the lab today. “Good job, all of you.”

See you soon, Shepard.

Now that the first major hurdle had been jumped over, Shepard felt excitement beginning to build in her core. Earth no longer had to worry about the artifacts. And soon she and Garrus would be back on the Normandy, ready to solve the mystery of the Enthrallment Team.

Let the hunt begin.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
Temperance, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Garrus didn’t mean to slam the door behind him. He didn’t. The closer they came to testing the relays - a week, where the Spirits did the time go - multiplied the number of meetings he needed to attend. Even with the general excitement around the turian camp, the day felt never ending, causing even his light armor to be a burden, weighing him down like he was cast of stone.

And then, during the middle of the meeting with the Primarch and his other aides, Garrus received a message from Sidonis, of all people, updating Garrus on what he found. It took all of Garrus’ effort not to betray the bitter ash he tasted in his mouth when thinking of Sidonis and the squad. His mandibles didn’t move an inch. Not a damn inch.

Sidonis had done some good work. Found out that a brother of Grundan Krul and his mate hatched four eggs on Tuchanka. Ripper’s granddaughter, the dancer, not the musician, was on Earth, staying in a refugee camp in Dublin. Sidonis said he’d keeping looking, which Garrus appreciated.

Garrus’ plates already felt heavy when he received the damn memo from Shepard on his way to another meeting. The general in charge of that meeting droned on and on and Garrus forced himself not to look down at his omni-tool to check the time every five minutes. Once he finally could go home, when he stepped into their prefab and saw Shepard lounging on the sofa, casually reading a datapad, he snapped. And the door slammed.

Shepard jerked up at the noise, her hand reaching for a sidearm that wasn’t there. He watched her release her breath as she realized he caused the disturbance. Then she smiled, the one only he ever saw, and Garrus was not in the mood for that smile. Not today.

Not when they needed to talk.

“Omega, Shepard?” Garrus asked, shifting his weight onto one foot and crossing his arms over his chest. He carefully kept his voice neutral but stress cascaded from his neck, down his shoulders and carapace and pooled into his gut.

Her shoulders slackened, just barely. “You read the memo? I wanted to tell you about it in person, but the Council demanded the schedule,” she said, straightening herself on the sofa. He recognized her posture. Defensive. Ready to argue. Well, so was he.

“Did the Council make the schedule?” Shepard shook her head and Garrus grit his teeth. “We’re going to Omega first? Before we go to Thessia? Haestrom? Or Palaven? We’re going to fucking Omega?”

Garrus shook his head. He hadn’t stepped foot on Omega since Jacob and Zaeed carried him up to the roof of his base, watching his blood trail behind them, as he prayed to the Spirits to let him live, to not be cruel enough to take his life once he had found Shepard again.
Their mission had taken the *Normandy* to Omega several times before they hit the Collector Base, but Shepard - deliberately or not, he had never asked - left him behind each time. Instead of thinking about Shepard on Omega, he simply threw himself into his calibrations, making sure the Thanix cannon would be ready for whatever lurked in the shadows.

But he couldn’t calibrate for four days straight after she took off with Aria’s fleet, ready to lead a ground war on Omega against Cerberus. At night he’d stare at her side of the bed, wishing he could see the way her body indented the mattress instead of emptiness. Shepard messaged when she could during the siege, but it still didn’t stop him from imaging the worst, seeing her broken like he had found his squad as he walked through the base, thinking *my fault, my fault, my fault.*

Shepard stood up and faced him. “We’re going to Omega first. I knew you wouldn’t be happy about it.” The heel of her foot rose as if to take a step towards him then moved to the right as she sat down at the dining table, bringing up her omni-tool. “But that’s my decision.”

“I don’t think so,” Garrus said. “You do not get to play the *this is my mission and I’m the commander* card, not with Omega.” His fists clenched without thinking and Garrus counted to three, forcing them to relax. “Just tell me why.”

She bit the inside of her cheek and closed her eyes. The silence in the room almost crackled as Shepard gently tapped her palm against the table. Finally she looked him in the eye. “I made this choice very deliberately,” Shepard said slowly. She exhaled. “The press will have a field day when it gets out—”

“Then why?” Garrus said.

Shepard never liked being interrupted. Leaning back in her chair, she crossed her legs and a look of annoyance flitted across her face. “Are you going to let me finish?” Garrus nodded and took a step closer. “The *Normandy* is going to Omega first to make a public show of support for Aria.”

He would have had an easier time accepting her words if Shepard had said ‘the sky is green.’ His mandibles felt strained, they were pinched so closely against his face. “Support for Aria?” he asked, each word fired from a gun.

“I know how you feel about Aria, Garrus, I do. But when I accepted her help for the war, I knew there would be consequences when the dust settled,” Shepard said. She ran her hands through her hair. “The Alliance needs her to stay legit.”

“How is anything she does on Omega legit, Shepard?” Garrus asked harshly.

He walked to the kitchen just to move. Standing still didn’t seem to be an option, not when it came to Omega. Not when Shepard had spent less than a week there all together while he lived and breathed Omega for almost two years. Omega, whatever else it was, had been his *home.* Hell, adding the time up, he had lived on Omega longer than all of his tours on the *Normandy* combined.

“This has nothing to do with the station,” Shepard said. She stood up, wrapping her arms around her waist and rocking so slowly it look like she barely moved. Garrus could tell she felt just as boxed in as he felt by the way her eyes kept darting around the room. “Do you have any idea how much Aria contributed to the war effort? We took her troops, her eezo. We used her corporations. Whether we like it or not we set her up to be a major player in the galaxy.”

Opening the refrigerator, Garrus grabbed a bottle of water. He held one up towards Shepard, silently asking, and she nodded. He took a second one. “There is no ‘we’ here, Shepard. We did not take her troops or her eezo. We did not set her up to do anything.”
Shepard turned her face quickly as if she’d been slapped. “Fine,” she spat out. “The Alliance did. I did. And I’d do it again, Garrus. We needed her supplies.”

Garrus offered the water bottle to Shepard, and for a moment she looked away like she wouldn’t accept it. He held back a sigh, realizing she already wanted to retreat. Their fingers brushed as she reached out and took the bottle. “So the Alliance created a monster and is willing to keep feeding it?”

“What choice do we have?” Shepard asked warily. “Former Blue Suns and Eclipse members make up thirty percent of Alliance enlisted—”

“Who start riots,” Garrus shot back, thinking about a scuffle that occurred the other night between the Blue Suns and Blood Pack. Left seven for dead. Destroyed a shipment of fresh spring levo vegetables, which pissed people off more than the dead and the clean up. In this new galaxy, one simply didn’t mess with fresh food.

“Do you have any idea how many fights the krogan started before the Normandy got back to Earth?” Shepard asked angrily. “How many times I had to meet with Wrex to deal with them running around? And yet the Hierarchy still allied with them.”

“They haven’t started anything since,” Garrus said. “We know exactly what we’re getting with the krogan. They wanted their price upfront and they got the genophage cure. Do you even have any idea what Aria might want in exchange for what she’s done?”

“Completely besides the point, Garrus, and you know it. This isn’t about whose allies are better,” Shepard said, running her hand through her hair. “When the relays are up, the Alliance is going to have to beg Aria to keep giving us eezo so we can start to rebuild our fleets. And if she can keep her mercs in line…”

She sat down again, patting her hand on the table. Garrus stared at her, but she wouldn’t meet his eye and he realized she was deliberately keeping something from him.

“What aren’t you telling me, Shepard?” he asked, not bothering to hide the disappointment in his sub-vocals. She heard them, too, and her head lowered, so her chin almost touched her chest. He’d like to think Shepard wouldn’t hold back any important information but perhaps they had a different idea of what might be considered ‘important.’ Garrus sat down next to her and reached for her hand.

“Is it mission critical?”

Nodding, Shepard turned and put his hand between both of hers. Her hands always marveled him, those small hands that didn’t look nearly as capable as they were. Too many fingers covered by her thin skin, yet he couldn’t imagine someone else’s hand in his.

“When I was on Omega, Aria and I had a… talk,” Shepard said, trailing off. “No, I need to start earlier.” Taking a breath, Shepard looked up, more composed than she was a moment before. “Remember the old Shadow Broker saying there was a bounty for Archangel?”

Garrus nodded slowly. The moment had singed his skull, knowing that the Shadow Broker simply looked at him and knew his identity. At the time, Garrus had wondered how many people might have paid for that information.

She took his undersuit glove off, and pressed her palm against his. Her skin, as always, was cool to the touch. “When I got the merc bands to work for Aria, one of my conditions was that any bounty on you disappear. And Aria agreed. Readily.”

“You never told me this,” Garrus said, trying to keep the accusation out of his voice.
“It seemed unimportant at the time,” Shepard said, closing her eyes briefly. “I probably should have. But the point of this, when I was with Aria on Omega, she hinted that once the war ended, the mercs might change their target from you to me.”

He stood up, yanking his hand away. His armor felt like it was shrinking, constricting his lungs, not letting him get enough air to breath. Without thinking, Garrus took off his chest piece, trying to get more air into his lungs.

“They are not going to touch you,” Garrus said, hearing the anger in his sub-vocals. The thought that one of those merc groups would try to hurt Shepard to get to him… Garrus knew without a doubt he’d lay down his life before they had a chance. “That is a promise, Shepard.”

Her face softened, and it struck Garrus just much younger she looked with her hair down, loose waves brushing her cheeks. And yet the streaks of grey threaded throughout the brown showed the world just how much she had gone through in her thirty-four years.

“If I could convince Aria to stay legit and actually run her corporations and use the mercs as security consultants? It would give her a reason to keep them in line. She’s not stupid. If one of her mercs kills me? She’ll lose all credibility. Any hope for continued relations with the Alliance would end.”

Garrus looked at Shepard incredulously. “So this is just to protect yourself?” He scoffed and started pacing, one foot in front of the other. “Shepard, that’s not like you to bend over like that.”

She placed her hands on the table, fingers splayed apart. “It’s not about me,” she said, shaking her head. Shepard might not have sub-vocals, but that didn’t mean Garrus couldn’t decipher the meaning behind her words. She hadn’t convinced herself. “This isn’t showing weakness. The Alliance-”

“Leave the Alliance out of this, Shepard,” Garrus said, his voice forceful. His tone was one he hadn’t used in some time, the voice that barked orders to soldiers and generals on Menae. He turned and looked at her; she sat in her chair almost at attention. “This has nothing to do with the Alliance.”

Shepard leaned forward, her forearms on her knees. Her feet were bare and her toes pressed into the laminated flooring of the prefab. Garrus watched Shepard struggle with herself, obviously not wanting to talk anymore, to simply leave the conversation and pretend it didn’t happen. “Fine,” Shepard said finally. “You’re right. This is about us.”

“I don’t need you to protect me, Shepard,” Garrus said, fighting between hate that Shepard felt she had to and love that she wanted to. He walked a very thin line. “We’ll figure it out. You don’t have to kowtow to Aria.”

Her eyes were focused on the door to their small bathroom and he saw the longing there, wanting to get away from this conversation. More often than not, a confrontation between them ended with Shepard in the bathroom, either here or on the Normandy, just not willing to talk any more. Garrus hated it, the one sour note of their relationship was her unwillingness to see an argument through.

But today, instead of running, Shepard kept twisting her fingers together. As annoyed as Garrus wanted to be with her right now, part of him felt a hint of pride at her behavior, that they still were talking.

“It’s not about you and it’s not about me,” Shepard insisted, her voice growing louder. She sat up straight, reached out and grabbed his ungloved hand. “What happens in ten years, when we have that family you talked about?”

Garrus froze.
For the first time, he thought about running away from the fight himself, not responding, not talking and see how she liked it. See how she felt when he just shut down. Punish her for making him realize something he should have thought of from the beginning.

He would never escape Omega.

Garrus thought of Zaeed, twenty years after his betrayal. Garrus still remembered seeing the crazed look in the merc’s eyes as Zaeed fired at Vido’s gunship. He had wondered at the time if his own eyes looked like that when he had Sidonis in his scope. He thought of Aria, keeping Patriarch around like a pet. Mercs had long memories and they tended not to forget.

Human, krogan, salarian, Garrus didn’t care what species the children he raised with Shepard were, as long as they had the chance. And the thought that he could put a child, one that he and Shepard would raise together and love, in danger, thanks to his actions on Omega tore at his heart.

So he pushed the agony aside and focused on her actual words. “Thought you said we wouldn’t make good parents,” he said, his voice a cracking whip.

She dropped his hand and turned her head, looking away from him. He had finally pushed her far enough. He waited for the shutdown to begin, torn between anger and relief. Instead, Shepard slammed her palm on the table. “Goddamnit, Garrus, you broke our rule! What was I supposed to say? We don’t talk about the future. And you bring up kids? When I was looking right at the fucking beam?”

The timing could have been better, Garrus knew. But he had to say something, do something to let Shepard know that he wasn’t fighting for the galaxy. He fought for her, for them, for their future together. The words slipped out, even as he tried to phrase it as a joke, a turian-human baby. But the soft smile he expected in response never showed on her face. And when the doors had shut behind her, Victus let out a snort and said, “That’d be a damn ugly baby, Vakarian.”

Garrus knew. He didn’t care.

“Back then, yeah, you’re right, we didn’t talk about the future,” Garrus said, grateful he could focus on something else, like that damn rule of hers. “We didn’t, not then. But now? Let’s talk about the future, Shepard. *Our* future.”

“Garrus-”

He didn’t let up. Since the moment she said *I love you, Garrus Vakarian*, he had wanted to talk about their future, find out what her hopes and dreams were, but whenever he had tried, she shot him down. It became so much easier just not to talk about the future, but it didn’t mean he didn’t think of one. He crouched down in front of her, taking both her hands in his. “I meant what I said, Shepard,” he told her, his voice soft. “I want to raise a family with you.”

At night in her cabin, when they were surrounded by the dark and quiet, after he watched Shepard fall asleep, he’d think about what sort of parents they’d make. There was no doubt in his mind that Shepard would be a good mother. Patient and kind but she could be strict when necessary. The way people opened up to her still amazed him after four years. And she knew how to listen. Garrus was less sure of himself as a father, but knew he wanted the chance. “They’d never have a biological child of their own, but they could be a safe haven for some angry orphans. Maybe even foster some krogan. Wrex and Eve already were talking about plans to foster the brighter young krogan, to develop homegrown doctors and scientists and not just warriors.

“How is this the time to talk about this?” Shepard asked, entwining their fingers. “We have a
“We’re always going to have a mission, Shepard,” Garrus said quietly, squeezing her hands. “The rest of our lives is going to be one long fucking mission.” Shepard nodded slightly, and Garrus felt encouraged. She wasn’t shutting down. He could actually talk for once, tell her his thoughts. “We didn’t talk about the future when we dealt with the Reapers. They’re gone. Let’s talk.”

She stood up and walked around him, moving over to the sofa. Weariness settled in her shoulders and the line of her back. Sitting down, Shepard hugged her knees to her chest. Her posture spoke of defeat, even more than it did after Thessia.

“What if I’m crazy?” she whispered so softly Garrus had to strain to hear. Shepard let out a long breath and Garrus recognized she just admitted something that worried her for a long time. He doubted she even realized it until now. Shepard was the master at keeping secrets from herself.

“What if these visions is all that this is? That I’m nuts? My mind is barely my own, it’s been rifled through so many times.”

Garrus sank next to her on the sofa. He didn’t reach for her or take her hands. He simply wrapped his talons around her ankle, grateful that she always took her boots off when she arrived home. “Do you really believe that?” he asked.

“You said it yourself, at the Cerberus Headquarters,” Shepard said. “A little crazy.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, you have to know that,” Garrus replied instantly. Hearing those video logs, hearing proof how close to truly gone she was, had hurt like someone had punched him in the gut. And then to hear her doubts, wondering if she was a VI, especially so soon after dealing with her clone - a damn clone - almost wrecked him. He had searched for any words of comfort, something that might ground her, make her realize that she was his Shepard, no matter what. Now it felt like unknowingly he had made things worse. “We’re in this till the end, Shepard.”

She nodded, reaching for his hand holding her ankle. Her hand gripped his, and she spread out her legs, her calves laying across his lap. Her eyes focused on their joined hands. “So… is not being sure what I wanted why you haven’t proposed yet?”

“Shepard…” Her name felt heavy on his tongue as he squeezed her hand. Garrus had assumed since Shepard never broached the subject that she didn’t remember that conversation, saying he would ask her to marry him first thing when the war ended first. Vids had been watched and Garrus knew the moves and what words to say. He didn’t have a ring, thanks to a conversation they had once where she mentioned she wouldn’t want one.

What he did have were two thin leather straps - the turian version of a physical token of an engagement - that they would tie around each other’s right wrist when they agreed to wed. The wristlet was discreet and to be worn underneath the clothes, as it wasn’t anyone’s business but your own if you were married. And then on the day they wed, they’d take a leather punch, and make a hole in one end, to symbolize the start of the union. Each time a life event occurred, a birth, a move, a death, they would punch another hole, to celebrate, to mourn or to remember.

He bought them the night after they tangoed in the casino, thinking he wanted to be prepared whenever the opportunity arose.

Her eyes closed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” Shepard climbed over him and straddled his lap. “How could you, if you weren’t sure what I wanted?” Leaning forward, Shepard pressed her brow to his. She breathed out, and Garrus breathed in, taking the air she breathed and making it his own. “I want that family, Garrus, our family. I do.”
“Glad to hear it,” Garrus said, his voice cracking just slightly, as he held onto her hips. She had been his anchor for so long, ever since he heard her speak the words *sounds like you really want to bring him down*.

“I don’t want you thinking I need anything more from you than what you’re willing to give,” she said, sitting up straight and placing her hands on his neck. “What we have is enough, Garrus. It’s more than I ever thought I would have.”

He pulled her flush against him then, wanting to be as close to Shepard as possible. His one doubt about their relationship was that they wanted different things in regards to children. And now he didn’t have to worry any more. Even with the fears Shepard had unwittingly brought forward - angry mercs wanting revenge - they’d figure it out. They’d figure a way to keep their family safe.

He wouldn’t propose now, not after a fight. But at some point the time would feel right and he’d ask. Garrus knew Shepard well enough to know she might say what they had was enough - she might even believe it - but she wanted the stability a marriage would bring to a family. Shepard never had that growing up, and he wanted nothing more than to be the one who created that life with her.

An omni-tool beeped and they separated, checking their tools. “Mine,” Shepard said with a sigh. “Oh perfect. A thank you from Tevos for going to Omega first to ensure Aria’s safety.”

“That enough to change your mind?” Garrus said, his voice teetering between teasing and pleading. He ran his talons through her hair so she knew he only joked. Her mind was set and he’d support her like he always did.

Her omni-tool beeped again. “I need to get some work done,” she said, an apology written across her face. “Be nice to sit here all night though.”

“Another time,” Garrus said. As Shepard took a step away, he reached out and tapped her knuckles. “Shepard?”

She paused, stretching her arms above her head. “Yeah?”

“Thanks for seeing this through,” Garrus said quietly. He took a risk, actually speaking this out loud, knowing she might become defensive or dismissive. The words still needed to be said.

Shrugging, but with a small smile on her face, Shepard said, “Well, the bathroom’s really not all that comfortable a place to hid out in. Might as well stay out here where it’s cozy.” She gripped his talons. “We good?”

He nodded once slowly, running his thumb along her palm. “We good,” he repeated, meaning the words. Standing up, but not letting go of Shepard’s hand, Garrus rested his brow against hers.

After a moment, she took a step back, squeezing his talons before sitting down at the table to work. Garrus settled himself at his workstation, leaning back in the turian style chair. As heavy as his plates felt as he walked through the door, Garrus felt lighter now as any doubts he had for his future with Shepard washed away.

Turning around, Garrus looked at Shepard only find her looking at him. Her cheeks reddened at being caught and he grinned as she went back to work. They cleared one hurdle. Now they only had to deal with Leviathan and then their family could grow.

*Right,* Garrus thought with a snort. *Only.*
Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Ace of Wands, Upright

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Ace of Wands, Upright: An exciting new project. The essence of fire, creativity and enthusiasm. The pursuit of new ventures.

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Shepard could only remember being this nervous a few times in her life. Each time seemed to involved waiting of some sort. Locked in a detention cell, after being caught by the Alliance breaking into one of their warehouses with the Tenth Street Reds. Sitting in a transport, prepping her gear before being dropped off in enemy territory for her first N7 mission. Hoping beyond hope Garrus survived the first wave of Reapers on Palaven, and they would find each other again.

And now waiting to learn if the tests on the relays had been successful.

The small conference room - the same where Alliance personal gathered to celebrate the beginning work on the relays - housed almost those exact same people hoping to celebrate the end.

The livecam of the Charon Relay was turned off for the moment. Shepard supposed no one wanted to actually see a failed test. It would be bad enough to hear about one, but to see it? She thought of the children in the Shepard camp, all hoping to go to their home planets, all desperate to hear good news. A failed test would be devastating.

The atmosphere of the room seemed lively, despite the fear everyone wore on their heads like a crown. People talked and joked, making bets with each other, though Shepard noticed more than one person staring at her, causing her to wonder if she hadn’t made a mistake.

She dug her nails into her palms to keep from touching her face, which no longer had the piebald look about it. While the seed had been planted back in Beijing to undergo the procedure, until yesterday, Shepard hadn’t made a move to actually schedule anything.

But as she inspected the Normandy, making sure the ship was prepared for its journey in three days (assuming the relays worked - please let them work) Shepard saw Chakwas taking inventory in the med bay. As they conversed, Shepard’s eyes settled on the Dermal Regenerative Unit that had healed her scars left over from the Lazarus Project.

Ten minutes later, her skin no longer looked two toned. Shepard refused Chakwas’ request to heal her other mementos from the Citadel, like her left forearm or the tender pink skin circling her thighs where her armor melted into her flesh. For a second, Shepard thought to heal everything, but realized she had grown accustomed to her scars. She wanted the reminders. And that moment, Shepard truly understood why Garrus never took Chakwas up on her standing offer to heal his own scars.

“How much longer?” someone said. Around her, shoulders started to hunch for some while others tapped their fingers nervously on the table.

Shepard knew all over the galaxy people huddled into groups, waiting for news of the relays. The test was simple. An unmanned ship, full of everyone’s desperate hopes, controlled from Alliance Headquarters, would go through the relay and head towards Arcturus. Similar tests would run for the
other thirty-six relays at the same time.

While no humans in the Acrurus system survived the Reapers, thankfully enough people on Benning in the nearby Euler system had survived. More importantly, people with the technical knowledge to follow the Citadel scientists’ instructions on how to fix the relays could be found on Benning.

The relays had to work. They had to. Garrus confided to her that the turians had maybe two months of food supplies left to sustain the population on Earth. If the relay test came back negative, the Hierarchy decided strict rationing would be in order. He had tried to sound casual when they spoke about it, but she saw the fear in his eyes, that he would have to endure rationing again. Shepard knew if the worst happened, and relays didn’t work, Garrus would come close to the edge. She wouldn’t let that happen.

And now it all came down to waiting for the results.

Her omni-tool pinged with a message from Garrus. He stood with the rest of the turian Hierarchy for results of their own tests, to see if the relay in the Apien Crest Relay worked. Selfishly, she wished they could be together for this moment. What she wouldn’t give for his steady presence next to her. Shepard had tried to organize a meeting for all the races to test together, but each race seemed more interested in their own relay. Shepard hoped that wasn’t a sign of things to come.

She read the message and took a sharp breath. The Apien Crest relay worked.

Someone else’s omni-tool beeped. “The asari are reporting their relay is active!”

Shepard thought she had felt relief when repairs had begun. Those feelings didn’t even compare to what she experienced now. Her entire body felt lighter as if someone took off the shackles chaining her to the earth. She brushed her hair back behind her ear with a shaking hand.

The galaxy could finally heal. After six months, everyone would be able to find their way home. And in three little days, Shepard and Garrus would be on the Normandy, ready to do their part to help the galaxy move forward. Strange to think some day the Reapers would be a distant memory instead of an open wound. She looked forward to that day.

“Here comes Hackett!” someone yelled.

Shepard stood on tip toes, trying to get a glance at the Admiral, to gleam a bit of information based on his walk or even the hunch of his shoulders. But Hackett’s face was blank, leaving Shepard amazed how even handed the man could be, no matter the circumstances.

At once the conference room quieted, so much that Shepard felt like she could have turned off her hearing implants and not notice a difference. Hackett stepped into the room and craned his neck from one side to the other, taking everyone in.

He smiled slowly and everyone in the room, normally hardworking, reserved admirals, stood up and cheered. Shepard knew that moment would stand out for the rest of her life. Earth could finally give all the men and women of all species who fought for the planet a chance to go home.

Tears formed in Shepard’s eyes - that had been happening far more than usual lately - that she wiped away quickly, before anyone could see. Happy didn’t even begin to describe the way she felt. She wrapped her arms around her waist, nodding and smiling at the others in the room.

Hackett met her eye then, and raised an eyebrow. Looking down the hallway, Shepard saw a few select reporters - Diana Allers among them - standing a respectful distance from the conference
room. A pic, of course that’s what they wanted. She grinded her teeth, the only physical tell she’d allow herself. When her life would stop being reduced to a vid or a soundbite?

Throwing her shoulders back, Shepard reminded herself that people would find hope in this recorded moment. The very least she could do was put a genuine smile on her face.

Shepard thought of Tali, who’d finally be able to build herself a home on Rannoch. Primarch Victus, who’d be able to govern his homeworld on Palaven instead of a dreadnought. She thought of all children that Conrad’s Shepards had been taking care of, knowing that they’d have the chance to go home and hopefully find caring people to look after them.

Her smile came easily after that.

“I see you took my advice,” Hackett said softly as they shook hands. The press inched closer, wanting to get the best angles.

Again she resisted the urge to touch her face. How long had Hackett campaigned for this procedure? “You have been known to have a good idea now and then, sir.”

“Three days, Shepard,” he said, putting his hands behind his back. “Will the Normandy be ready?”

“Damn right we will be,” Shepard said, confidence obvious in every word. She had her crew, her squad and her mission.

All she needed now were some answers.

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Shepard glanced at her omni-tool. Approximately twenty-seven hours until she’d be able to relax in her private shower on the Normandy.

Once the flight got underway, and Shepard felt confident that things were ready, she planned on dragging Garrus into the shower with her and living there for the next couple of hours. If she never had to take a sponge bath again it would be too soon.

But Shepard had something very important to do first.

Wind from the ocean kissed her cheeks as she stood outside Alliance Headquarters. Glancing overhead, she scowled up at the sky. Of course it would be too much to ask that the sun shine down on her today. Around her, people breezed in and out of the security line, and not a single one of them realizing that Shepard couldn’t put one foot in front of the other.

Because once she stepped into Headquarters, she would eventually have to step out and when she did…

Shepard would no longer be an Alliance soldier.

For sixteen years, ever since Anderson gave her the decision between enlisting or jail time, Shepard had lived and breathed the Alliance. Like Conrad once said, *if you make up your mind to do something, no point of being miserable about it.* And when she made the decision to enlist, knowing her dreams of college had dispersed like whiffs of smoke, Shepard decided to make the best of it.

She had the Alliance charter memorized, along with every edited version of its mission statement, which changed immensely from its first version, written in 2148. When the Ajax Armory gave her the choice between N7 or Alliance colors after the Reapers invaded, Shepard didn’t hesitate. After
wearing Cerberus colors for six months, she wanted to look down and see blue and grey when she fought. Colors she could believe in. Colors worth dying for.

And after today she would simply be a reserve, her title only a token.

Platitudes Garrus would scoff at entered her head. Every journey begins with a single step! When one door closes, a window opens! This is the first day of the rest of your life!

“Single step my ass,” Shepard said in a small voice, thinking of everything she had gone through over the last sixteen years. Even at her lowest points, after Akuze or Logasiri or the Collector Base, the Alliance had been her home.

“Shepard. I certainly didn’t expect to see you out here,” a familiar voice rang out.

“Doctor Chakwas,” Shepard said, pleased to see a friend, to possibly have a bit of support today. Garrus wanted to be there for her, but said he had a meeting with the Primarch that couldn’t be missed. “I thought you’d be prepping for the Normandy’s departure tomorrow.”

“I have an appointment that I believed I would be late for,” Chakwas said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. After three tours together, it felt strange to see Chakwas wear a regular BDU instead of a science uniform. The change gave the doctor a softer look. “But it appears I shall be right on time.”

“Convenient,” Shepard said with a smile.

“And since I’ve run into you, if you’ll forgive a bit of sentiment on my part, I might stand with you as you officially retire,” Chakwas said, her voice betraying a hint of sadness.

“I’d like that,” Shepard said, swallowing. She doubted she would ever be used to seeing the word ‘retired’ after her name, but the time had come. She would fill out the data work, shake Chakwas’ hand and then go back to the prefab to finish packing.

“After you, Commander,” Chakwas said.

Shepard nodded and walked up to the security gate, her ID in her hand. The ensign guarding the gate offered a crisp salute. “A couple of reporters tried to get in, but we have orders from Hackett not to let them near the place today.”

One less hurdle to worry about. The last thing Shepard wanted was for her retirement to become a spectacle. She hoped for quiet and low key this afternoon.

As they entered Headquarters, Shepard tried to memorize everything in her mind’s eye. The way the linoleum tiles no longer quite fit together or the paint the peeled from the walls. Crumbling and broken down, but the building had done it’s job. Alliance brass already spoke of rebuilding in Vancouver. Chances were high the next time she stood on Earth, the Alliance would be stationed there.

More people than Shepard expected rushed through the hallways, though with the horde of people planning on leaving the system in the next few days, the extra activity made sense. A number of asari matriarchs had already left. Most of the turian Hierarchy, including Primarch Victus, planned on leaving the day after the Normandy.

Turning a corner, Shepard saw the large administrative area of Headquarters. Where the hallways felt almost electric, this area seemed deserted.
“Commander!” a young yeoman called out. “Admiral Hackett has the data work all in order. He’d like to meet you outside.”

Shepard clenched her fists, forcing herself not to audibly sigh. She wanted this over as quickly as possible and a detour outside only lengthened the process.

The yeoman set a quick pace; Shepard found herself almost needing to jog to catch up. At once, Shepard realized they were being led to the large picnic area where the Normandy crew had their party the night they returned.

Turning a final corner, Shepard stopped, seeing how many people were waiting outside through the large picture windows. “Karin…” she said, giving Chakwas a look.

“Garrus’ and Ashley’s doing, I’m afraid,” Chakwas said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Hackett agreed immediately. Apparently they thought your retirement required a bit of pomp and circumstance.”

Beaming, the yeoman opened the door for Shepard. Knowing everyone outside could see her through the window, Shepard tried to compose herself before going out there. She dug her nails into her palm, hoping find a sense of calm. She hadn’t expected this. She hadn’t expected anyone to make a fuss over her, not when so many other things required everyone’s attention.

Shepard stepped through the door. The moment her foot touched the ground, a shrill whistle made by a boatswain’s call could be heard. She recognized the call at once: a pipe aboard, only used when an important guest boarded a ship.

Her hand went to her throat as she recognized the faces. Garrus, the sneaky bastard, stood next to Tali. Member of her squad from all three tours, Wrex, Ashley, Liara, Samara, Kasumi, Zaeed, Jack, Grunt, Jacob, Miranda, Jakiv and Vega. Her crew, Adams, Joker, Cortez, Traynor, Fitch, Gabby and Ken and from the looks of it, everyone who had been picked to serve on Normandy’s next tour stood under the grey skies. A number of high ranking Admirals and even Councilor Antella stood in attendance.

Through the crowd, she sought out Garrus. Their eyes met, and from the way his mandibles fluttered ever so slightly, she could tell he worried about her reaction. So Shepard smiled, a real smile, nothing fake about it, and he relaxed at once.

The thought that her friends would come together for like this, specifically for her retirement, made her heart swell. One day, far away, Shepard understood historians might write about her. If they did, she hoped that they also sung about the people in front of her, for without them, she would never have climbed to such heights. She couldn’t thank them enough for what her squad mates had done for her throughout the years. Some day, she’d have to find a way.

As Shepard walked up to Admiral Hackett, a silence fell over the group. He brought up his omni-tool. “Sign here, Shepard.”

This was it. The moment Shepard would transform from Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy into a civilian. Yes, the Alliance would still employ her, but Advisor Shepard didn’t roll off her tongue nearly as well as Commander Shepard did.

Taking her forefinger, Shepard signed her name, her full name, and waited for something to feel different. Some sort of letdown, something telling her that she had just became a different person. But she was still Shepard, that hadn’t changed. As far as she was concerned that would never change.
“Attention to orders,” Hackett said, loud enough to be heard by everyone. “By order of the Systems Alliance Navy, Commander Shepard is relieved from her active duty responsibilities effective June fourteenth, twenty-one eighty-seven.”

He reached out and they shook hands firmly. Her instinct was to snap off a salute, but civilians didn’t do that, so her hands fell limply to her side. No applause started, none was expected, not yet.

*Oh god, they’d want me to give a speech...*

As Hackett settled into a parade rest, Ashley and Vega stepped forward, standing next to her. Ashley’s omni-tool was out and Vega carried a flat glass box.

“There’s an old navy tradition, from back when our ships sailed the sea instead of space. When a sailor retires and leaves the ship for the last time, it’s considered bad luck for the sailor’s shadow to touch the ground before she does,” Ashley said, her voice halting a bit, clearly reading from a script. “So the sailor’s shipmates would construct a sturdy box, to house all the sailor’s accomplishments - creating a symbolic ‘shadow.’ On behalf of the *Normandy* we present to you your shadow.”

Vega placed the shadow box on a nearby picnic table. It took all her effort not to stare into the box and discover what personal treasures had been placed inside. She smiled to herself; she should have realized Garrus had something planned when he asked where she kept her photos on her omni-tool.

Even with the threat of having to give a speech looming overhead, Shepard felt herself beginning to relax and enjoy the ceremony. While certainly different than her party on the Citadel, it still accomplished the same feat: bringing all the people she cared about together.

Hackett spoke again. “The Honor Guard will perform the flag folding ceremony.”

Joker and Cortez made their way to the front of the group, holding an Alliance flag. Their movements were slow and deliberate, folding the flag twelve times, until it was completely folded and tucked in, a perfect triangle.

Walking over slowly, Joker carefully handed Shepard the flag. “We practiced,” Joker said in an exaggerated whisper.

“Clearly,” Shepard whispered back just as loudly, hugging the flag to her chest. The satin felt smooth underneath her calloused fingertips.

Hackett cleared his throat. “Shepard, would you like to say a few words?”

She thought back to her last speech in London, the one she gave standing in front of her squad, knowing her words were being piped over loudspeakers throughout the entire fleet. On that occasion, Shepard choose to err on the side of dramatic, speaking of brotherhood and the future.

Her gut told her simple words would be best here, and Shepard knew to trust her gut. This all started thanks to her gut, the split second decision she made to push Alenko out of the way of the Prothean beacon back on Eden Prime. She wondered what he would have thought of all of this.

Shepard took a moment to look over the crowd of people gathered. So many people she had put her trust in over the years stood in front of her. “Thank you,” she said, her voice a little shakier than she’d like. “It’s… gratifying to see you all here. Some of you I only had the privilege to serve with for a short time.” Her eyes sought out Garrus and Tali. “And some of you I’ve been lucky enough to serve with for years.”

“While I may no longer be an Alliance soldier, I am still *Alliance* and I’ll hold up our ideals as I start
down this new path.” Her voice cracked and Shepard knew she had to wrap this up. “Thank you.”

Certainly wouldn’t rank in her top ten speeches, but the words rang true, and nothing else mattered.

Unlike some of the elaborate retirement ceremonies Shepard had attended throughout the years, there were no refreshments or champagne toast. Once Shepard had finished speaking, she simply walked into the crowd, clutching the Alliance flag Joker had given her like a life line.

People started milling about, talking quietly as Shepard walked up to Garrus. “So you did all this?” she asked in a low voice.

“Nah,” Garrus said, pulling her closer for an embrace. Shepard felt his arms wrap around her, and she relaxed against him, overwhelmed with a sense of peace. They touched brows for just a moment before parting. “I had the idea and spoke to Ash. Then she ran with it.”

An aide appeared, taking the Alliance flag from her arms, saying the flag along with the shadow box would be delivered to the Normandy before tomorrow’s departure. Tomorrow. Shepard felt the tip of her fingers tingle with excitement at the thought.

The next hour felt like a combination of politics and hosting a party. Shepard shook hands and said thank you to every single person who showed up. A number of them would set off with her tomorrow, but some, like Miranda or Jacob, she didn’t know when they would see each other again.

Finally, the time arrived to leave.

Shepard and Garrus walked through the halls of Headquarters in silence, their hands occasionally brushing. As the door leading outside grew closer, Shepard realized she didn’t feel nervous, like she assumed she would. The brief ceremony saw to that. Instead, she felt prepared for the road ahead and she’d leave the Alliance with her head held high.

But before she could embark on that journey, Shepard decided she needed to do one more thing.

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“You sure about this, Shepard?” Garrus asked, his hand on her shoulder.

They sat in their prefab, Garrus on the couch, Shepard sitting cross legged on the floor between his legs. The lights were dimmed and, looking behind her, Shepard could see the glow from the omni-razor in Garrus’ hand.

“Very,” Shepard said, leaning back slightly. She smoothed out the cotton shorts she wore over her thighs, before wrapping her hands around each of Garrus’ ankles, glad he had changed into loose sleeping clothes instead of one of his civilian outfits. Careful to keep her fingers away from any bare hide, Shepard held onto his ankles tightly.

Her scalp pricked slightly as he grabbed sections of her hair and cut it off with the razor. Within minutes, Garrus ran his talons over her scalp. “This look reminds me when we first me,” he said. Shepard smiled, thinking of her old pixie haircut, trying to keep the waves in some semblance of order.

“I hated that haircut,” she said, raising her arms to balance her elbows on Garrus’ thigh. “Never could do anything with it.”

“Because there’s so much more you can do with a shaved head,” Garrus said. Shepard playfully slapped his knee, hearing the smirk in his voice.
Settling back, Shepard simply closed her eyes and waited for Garrus to start. Slowly and methodically, she felt the razor cross her scalp. Even though it had been more than six months since Garrus last shaved her head, he still knew exactly how much pressure to use. There was something incredibly reassuring about that.

Neither of them spoke as he worked, bathing their prefab in a warm silence. Occasionally, his talons would linger on her neck or shoulder to steady himself and each time he did, Shepard’s breath hitched slightly and desire sparked deep in her core.

They only had one more night in their prefab. After this, they’d be back on the Normandy, where Shepard would be at the mercy of the ship’s every whim. They would have to take one last advantage of the privacy the prefab offered.

Their armor and most of their belongs had already been transferred to the ship. They only had a small duffle bag shared between them to transport in the morning. Even Hammish had been moved onto the Normandy earlier today; Shepard knew the little guy would okay alone for one night.

“There,” Garrus said softly, though Shepard thrilled to hear a note of pure need in his sub-vocals. He laced his talons with her fingers and raised her hands to feel her head.

Running her hands over her scalp, Shepard felt fuzz instead of strands of hair. Some things she knew she’d miss about longer hair, thinking of how many times she tugged on her hair to ground herself. Moving her head from side to side, Shepard could sense how much lighter she felt. It felt right, like she finally took off the mask she had worn for the last few months.

She turned around, settling herself back on her knees. “Thank you,” she said looking up at Garrus, running her palms along his thighs.

Without a word, Garrus opened up his omni-tool and brought up a vid screen so Shepard could take a look. Every inch of Commander Shepard stared back at her, with her healed skin tone and shaved head. After the Crucible, after leaving the hospital, Shepard thought she might never be that person again. Funny how life works.

And honorific title or not, Commander Shepard felt ready for whatever lay ahead. Especially when she’d be standing in a shower only nineteen hours from now.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Queen of Swords, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Queen of Swords, Reversed: A deceitful, sly and intolerant woman, expert in the use of half truths. A formidable enemy due to her subtility and sharp intellect.

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Shepard stood at the Galaxy Map, looking into the blueish-white light. Close to five years had passed since she first used one, other than a training simulation. She remembered hesitating before walking up the platform, ready to make for Therum, the weight of her task settling on her shoulders.

That weight still pressed down, even though now there was a different enemy. Failure still would have the same result.

Servitude.

Not on her watch.

So you gonna give me a heading at some point, Commander, or do you want to keep staring at the Galaxy Map for a bit?

Shepard rolled her eyes at Joker's voice over the intercom. Some things never change. "Take us to Omega, Joker," she said.

Other ships have used the relay already, right? Been a while since I've done a solo jump.

Her stomach clenched, thinking of EDI. There had to be a way to get her and the geth back someday. There had to. "We're one of the first, not the very first," Shepard said, keeping her voice steady. "And there's a long line behind us, so let's get moving."

Roger that. ETA two hours.

Shepard stepped down from the Galaxy Map. Thanks to habits formed during the last two tours, Shepard moved to her right, to check her mail. But Cortez stood at her old workstation, now his workstation. From now on, Shepard would use the War Room as an office.

The change made sense. Shutting Cortez away in the Cargo Bay when he meant to serve as her XO seemed foolish. Miranda had locked herself away in her office, a decision Shepard never truly approved of. Pressly, as her XO, had always been on the bridge. He had known every heartbeat of the ship, probably even better than she did. And now Cortez followed his example and worked on the bridge, the better to learn and observe the inner workings of the CIC.

She stepped back awkwardly, though Cortez seemed so wrapped up in what he worked on he didn’t notice. There was always so much to do at the start of a tour, from arranging sleep schedules to making sure everyone had equal comm access.

"I'll be in my quarters if anyone needs me, Cortez," Shepard said. "Make sure Samara knows the ETA, please."
“Sure thing, Commander,” Cortez replied with an easy nod. He didn’t look nervous, unlike Shepard’s first day as an XO. Why she felt the need to wear her armor on the trip to Eden Prime will confound her for the rest of her life. She smiled as she watched him work as the elevator doors closed, already pleased at her choice.

As the elevator inched upwards, Shepard wondered how Garrus fared. He hadn’t said much once they made it onboard the *Normandy*, telling her he’d inspect their weapons while Shepard checked in with the crew. That was three hours ago.

Shepard walked into her quarters to find Garrus sitting on the turian style chair they had brought from their prefab. Shepard started to say hello before she realized what he held in his hands: the visor frame he wore during their first tour on the SR-2, the one which bore all his squadmate’s names.

"Hey," she said softly as she walked down the stairs.

Garrus looked up, almost guiltily, and placed the visor down on the desk. “Hey yourself. I take it we’re on our way?”

His voice sounded too cool, too collected. Shepard recognized the obvious avoidance; hell, she had used the same tactic plenty of times when Garrus tried to get her to open up about things that she simply didn’t want to talk about. He never pushed her; instead he simply let her know that the day she wanted to talk, he’d be ready. Shepard would give him the same courtesy.

Part of her wished they would talk. While Garrus obviously had much more of a connection to Omega, Shepard had her share of close calls as well: adjutants and plagues and coming closer to losing her mind to Morinith than she ever cared to admit.

But she pushed those thoughts away for later. For now, they both seemed in need of distraction, and Shepard happened to know one that never failed to work.

“We’ve got two hours before we’ll be at Omega,” Shepard said, giving Garrus a sly grin. “Remember the last time we had two hours before hitting the Sahrabarik system?”

Garrus thrummed, and Shepard bit her lip. That sound never failed to sharpen her mind, and let her focus only on him, on *them*. As distractions go, mission accomplished. She turned away and walked slowly towards the bathroom, stripping off her uniform. Behind her, Shepard heard Garrus working at the latches of his armor, quick and methodical.

Her hand lingered over the controls. Six months of sponge baths were finally at an end. She turned the knob and closed her eyes, waiting for the water to wash over her. As it did, Garrus slipped behind her, hands on her shoulders.

Shepard lifted her face, feeling the warm water trickle down her cheeks. She pondered about the burden of the upcoming mission she felt standing at the Galaxy Map. And as Garrus slid the his palms from her shoulders to her waist, Shepard realized how grateful she was that this tour, unlike her first, she had someone to share the burden with.

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Shepard checked the fasteners of her boots one last time. Risking a look at Garrus, she found him staring up out of the skylight of their quarters, arms crossed over his chest. Above them she could see the outline of Omega.

“You ready for this?” Shepard asked. She didn’t like the look on his face. It seemed wrong somehow, too constricted, too pained. Then again, it never was easy running into ghosts. Shepard
certainly had enough practice to know.

Garrus nodded, still staring up at the station. “Hard to believe I spent almost two years of my life there,” he said finally, his voice raw. “Almost spent more time there than I have the Normandy.”

“I can take someone else, Garrus,” Shepard said softly. “You don’t have to go in there.”

“I know,” Garrus said, tearing his eyes away from the skylight and looking at her. Shepard closed the gap between them and put her arms around his torso, just above his waist. “But I’m good, Shepard. Won’t let you down.”

“You never do,” Shepard said with a smile. She took a step away and ran her gloved hands over her shaved head. Shrugging her shoulders, Shepard willed the harness on her Ajax armor to sit right. Maybe the walk around Omega would finally break her kit in. “Let’s grab Samara and talk to Queen Aria.”

“Don’t call her that,” Garrus said with a groan. “She’d think you’re serious.”

Shepard shrugged as she holstered her Carnifax and Shuriken. As she told Garrus once, she hoped not to fire a single shot during their investigation, but she knew better. Somewhere something would go wrong and it would take heat sinks to fix it.

“Let’s get this over with,” Shepard said as they left their quarters and headed into the elevator.

She didn’t exactly know what she expected to find on Omega. It didn’t help knowing she had almost two different missions and she had to hope the two didn’t come at odds. First and foremost, she needed to talk to Ledia, from the Leviathan Enthrallment Team. And then she had to keep Aria happy, make sure the asari would be willing to continue selling eezo to the Alliance. Shepard had a sneaking suspicion that both would be easier said than done.

Samara waited for them at the airlock. “Commander,” she said with a tilt of the head.

“She’s how I want to play this,” Shepard said, turning around to face both Garrus and Samara. “I’m assuming Aria is in Afterlife, like always. I want us all to make an appearance, then I want you both to go and wait where Ledia T’Prim is being held. Observe and assess all you’d like, I’d welcome the information. But no discussion until I’m there.”

Garrus crossed his arms over his chest. “So you want to talk to Aria alone?”

She heard the annoyance in his subvocals and decided to ignore them. “Yes, she and I have business to take care of.” Her eyes found Garrus’ and she held his gaze for a beat, then looked to Samara, who simply nodded. “Let’s head out.”

The airlock doors opened and Joker’s voice came over the intercom. Don’t stay out past your curfew.

“We shouldn’t be long, Joker,” Shepard said, looking at the ceiling. Such a silly habit, but one she never could seem to break. The doors behind them shut and she felt the pressure of the atmosphere regulating around her. As they waited for the doors to Omega to open for them, she risked a peek at Garrus. He stood there, staring straight ahead, though she could see the tension in his shoulders and the way his talons looked ready to curl into fists.

A pang of guilt coursed through her. Maybe she had been wrong to keep him from Omega during their tenure with Cerberus. At the time, it made sense; he had been in mourning. But her own mourning hadn’t stopped Shepard from heading to Alchera. Shepard faced her demons on that
planet, but hadn’t given Garrus the option to face his until now.

She should have asked and not assumed. For now, Shepard would simply have to hope the two years Garrus had been away from Omega hadn’t made things worse.

The docking bay doors opened and Shepard took a single step forward. Six months had passed since she stood somewhere other than Earth. Shepard inhaled and let her breath out slowly. Same recycled air that she remembered. The smell of smoke and alcohol and bodily filth still dominated, reminding her of Beijing. She heard skycars and shouting and a persistent loud bass.

Shepard had arrived on Omega, no doubt.

The welcoming party Shepard had expected, like her first time on Omega, was nowhere to be found. Aria knew Shepard would be here; they had spoken just last week. Her mind raced, wondering what sort of game Aria wanted to play.

Aria knew that Shepard and Garrus had enemies on Omega. The asari had warned Shepard herself. And Aria damn well had to know if any sort of trade agreement was to take place, risking their safety might not be the best idea.

Perhaps this was Aria’s way to telling Shepard it simply didn’t matter. Fair enough, Shepard though. She’d been to Afterlife plenty of times. No tour guide needed.

As they started to walk to the club, Shepard tried to discreetly look for any sign of change since she was last here. She couldn’t find any. A long line still formed outside Afterlife, while others walked by with their shoulders hunched, not making eye contact with anyone.

“You said you thought about coming here once to serve, didn’t you, Samara?” Shepard said as they walked. An elcor bouncer - could it be the same one?- let them pass into the hallway leading to Afterlife without comment.

“I did,” Samara said. “At the time, it seemed like a logical place to do some good. Now…”

Samara didn’t have to finish the sentence. Shepard understood. People needed help everywhere now.

Shepard didn’t stop walking as they entered the club, though her eyes roamed everywhere, trying to perceive any potential threats. But the lights were low, the music loud, with people dancing and drinking everywhere. The Reaper War might be over, but Shepard recognized Joker’s ‘Forget their problems type dancing.’

She glanced over her left shoulder, and felt calmed a bit at Garrus’s presence. As they continued to walk, she heard name mentioned more than once, followed by stares. She ignored them all.

When they reached the stairs leading to Aria’s domain, a krogan stood in their way. “You have to be on the list to see Aria,” he said, voice rumbling.

Shepard had to keep herself from rolling her eyes. Such stupid posturing. A year ago, she would have understood, maybe even played the game. But now, after everything the galaxy had gone through, it just seemed petty and stupid. “Commander Shepard,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “You tell Aria if I’m not on that list I’m going to be very upset.”

The krogan didn’t miss a beat. “You’re on the list,” he said. He looked behind her. “But they’re not.”

“They go where I go,” Shepard said at once.
“Let them up.”

Shepard glanced up to see Aria standing on the top of the stairs. The asari hadn’t changed one bit. Still wearing that ugly white leather jacket with black leather pants, though with a more detailed inspection, Shepard was quite surprised to see Aria carry a sidearm. When they had fought together, Aria used a shotgun. Perhaps the murder attempt had cracked some of Aria’s calm. Shepard couldn’t say that she minded. Let Aria feel hunted, like the majority of Omega’s citizens for once.

“Of course, Aria,” the krogan said, moving to the side. Shepard walked past him, following Aria to her infamous couch.

Aria sat down right in the middle, her arms outstretched over the back. “Welcome back to Omega, Shepard,” Aria said, sounding as smug and self-satisfied as ever. “All the places you could have gone, and you choose to come to me first. It’s almost… an honor.”

Sitting down, Shepard crossed her legs and tried not to wince as her boot pinched her heel. They still hadn’t broken in right. She took a moment to plan her response.

In the last year, thanks to her incarceration and the Reaper War, Shepard had discovered a newfound respect for words. Perhaps if she could have figured out the right words after she surrendered to the Alliance after her time with Cerberus, they might have been more prepared for the Reapers. And maybe if she had better words, more potent words, fewer quarian and geth might have been killed before they made peace.

The right words could be just as important as any mod on a gun or engineering app on her omni-tool. It had taken Shepard a long time to learn that lesson, but it was one that had finally stuck.

Shepard knew Aria didn’t have the same respect for words. To her, actions mattered. Tit for tat. It was why she wasn’t willing to help with the war effort until someone else helped her first. The only reason Aria sat on that couch was because of Shepard and she would not let the asari forget that.

“Let’s cut the crap, Aria. You know why I’m here.”

“And this is why I like you, Shepard,” Aria said. “You never waste time with bullshit.”

Shepard gave her a sardonic grin and leaned into the armrest of the couch, marking her territory a bit, making sure Aria knew she planned on staying a while. “Vakarian and Samara will go see T’Prim while we talk.”

“A Justicar and Archangel. You always do keep such interesting company. I don’t know where you find them all,” Aria said. With a wave of her hand, she added, “Grizz, take them to the vault.”

From the now sour look on Aria’s face, Shepard guess using the name Archangel didn’t have the effect she planned. Shepard hadn’t moved, not one inch, and she guessed Garrus did the same. She wanted to look at him, give him some sense of support, but she had to play the damn game instead.

Once Grizz had led Garrus and Samara away, Aria said, “I should have just killed that bitch. Do you know what a hassle it’s been to keep her alive these past two months?”

“Why didn’t you?” Shepard asked. The truth was the fact that T’Prim still lived amazed Shepard a bit. She didn’t think Aria took assassination attempts lightly.

“She’s a… the closest translation is niece, I think, to Tevos. Tevos would have never spoken to me again if I killed her,” Aria said, sounding somewhat contrite.
Ever since seeing how quickly the asari Councilor had answered Aria’s call back during the war, Shepard had to admit she wondered about their relationship. Were they friends? Lovers? Two powerful women who realized they accomplished more together than apart?

Funny how Tevos never mentioned that she was connected to the Leviathan Enthrallment Team in any way. Shepard decided to file that bit of information away for later.

“But who gives a fuck about T’Prim?” Aria asked with a wave of her hand. She looked at Shepard. “Do you know how many times I’ve thought about this moment? When the great Commander Shepard comes to thank me for all my help during the war.”

“Aria, do you really think for one moment I came here to kiss your ass?” Shepard asked with a bark of a laugh. “I’m here to talk business. Business that the Alliance advised you on and helped you start up. Business that we’d like to continue.”

“My, my, Shepard,” Aria said. “Seems Tevos was wrong. You haven’t lost your bite, have you?”

“I think you’re better off dealing with who you see in front of you and not anyone you believe me to be,” Shepard said, keeping her voice low. She would have to have a word with Antella, the human Councilor. If Tevos had gone behind the Alliance’s backs, even innocently, and sabotaged this deal…

Aria nodded her head - the closest Shepard would get to an apology - and uncrossed and crossed her legs. “Fine, since you want to talk business, I’m pleased to report that my hold on Omega is stronger than ever and it’s all thanks to you.”

“You’d still be on the Citadel if it wasn’t for me,” Shepard said.

“If you hadn’t agreed, I would have found someone else. While you’re good, Shepard, you’re not the only person who knows how to fight,” Aria said. “You’re just the first person smart enough to say yes.”

“Lucky you,” Shepard said. She wondered how Garrus and Samara were doing, if T’Prim had been led out yet.

“Lucky me, indeed,” Aria replied. “I’m almost… content for once in my life. My cargo transporters are going to be incredibly profitable, now that the relays are back up. So much infrastructure destroyed. Such a shame. Colonies and governments will pay a lot for transportation these days.”

“I’m not here to talk about your profits, Aria-”

“Aren’t you?” Aria asked. The smile on her face was sharp like jagged glass: one touch and blood would spill. Shepard wondered how much it would hurt to keep Aria smiling. “If my calculations are correct, and they are, my guess is you’re here to talk about my profits. About how the Alliance wants to add to them.”

Shepard breathed sharply through her nose. Damn her. Aria held all the cards right now and the asari knew it. Until the Alliance got their colonies up and running, they desperately needed any eezo they could get. And right now, Aria had the largest stockpile in the galaxy.

“Why don’t I tell you a bit about my plans?” Aria said smugly. “Remember that Raiding Fleet you convinced me to organize? The one that saved the Alliance’s ass more times than I can count? I’m going to keep it intact. The Terminus System would be much safer for everyone if there was some sort of order, don’t you think? Maybe I could even make the raids on the Attican Traverse stop.”
“Stop wasting my time,” Shepard said, her hand curling into a fist. This was Garrus’ worst nightmare, multiplied. An Aria who wanted to expand her territory and worse, had the resources to do it. “What exactly is it that you want?”

Any bravado left Aria’s face. Their eyes met, and all Shepard saw was the calm, determined look of a leader. “To be left alone,” Aria said, her voice sure. “Omega’s been my playground for a long time, Shepard. And now I want the Terminus System.”

“You want the entire Terminus System?” Shepard asked matter of factly, keeping the disbelief out of her voice.

“And here I thought you might not understand,” Aria said almost sweetly. “It really is that simple. But to do that, I need time. I need my mercs back from the Alliance. And the Alliance needs my eezo. I think that’s a fair trade.”

Shepard did the math in her head. Thirty percent of the enlisted personnel in the Alliance was made of Aria’s mercs. She knew most of the mercs could give half a damn about the Alliance; they only wanted the steady paycheck it provided while they were stuck on Earth. If even half of them left, would the Alliance have enough bodies to protect their borders. But would it even matter if they didn’t have enough eezo for their ships? The good old catch-22.

In the end, the choice was simple. Hackett told her to get the eezo, no matter what. And considering he was the closest thing to a leader humanity had these days, Shepard refused to let him down.

“Done,” Shepard said, the word tasting sour on her tongue. “Any merc currently enlisted in the Alliance will be given the choice to leave and join your Raiding Fleet. But I expect you to keep up with our demands for eezo. If there’s one shipment less than what we were promised…” Shepard let the threat linger, hoping for some response from Aria.

Instead, Aria gave her an almost pitying look. “Ah, it’s cute to think you have the strength to back those words up, Shepard.”

“Earth’s better off than you think, Aria,” Shepard said casually. “We just had six months of free labor from everyone stuck there from the final battle. We’ll be back and stronger than ever before you know it. You might want to remember that when we don’t need your eezo any longer.” Shepard flipped open her omni-tool and found the documents she needed, sending them to Aria. “Here are our quotas.”

“Does it always have to be business with you, Shepard? And here I thought we could have a toast to our ongoing partnership,” Aria said, bringing up her own omni-tool. Her eyes scanned the document quickly. “These numbers are fine. Tell Hackett he’ll get his eezo.”

“ Appreciate it,” Shepard said, flexing her toes, trying to make her boots a bit more comfortable. Finally felt a bit better, though still didn’t feel quite right.

Leaning into the armrest of the sofa, Shepard rested her chin on her hand. “So what the hell happened between you and T’Prim?”

“As you might recall, Shepard, I have a weakness for ex-military do-gooder types,” Aria said. “ especially Commandos. She was cute, so I thought ‘why the hell not?’ We started a meld and through that I realized she wanted to kill me. So I put her in stasis and dragged her ass to the vault.”

“Aren’t you one for sharing,” Shepard said dryly. She tried to work out what the details could possibly mean. Either Aria actually trusted her now or simply didn’t give a shit what Shepard
thought. Shepard didn’t know which one she preferred.

“We’re business partners, Shepard,” Aria responded. “I’ll be disappointed if I don’t get an invitation to your wedding. I went to a human wedding once. The amount of alcohol was impressive to say the least. I don’t know what it says about your species that you need to be shitfaced to get through the night.”

Knowing their conversation was at an end, Shepard stood up. If Aria was human, Shepard would reach across and shake her hand, but the asari had no gesture to conclude the end of a conversation. So Shepard said the only thing that mattered.

“Take me to T’Prim.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
The Six of Wands, Reversed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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*The Six of Wands, Reversed: Indecision, fear that one’s enemies are engaging in surreptitious activity. Fear about the outcome of a situation.*

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“Justicar.”

Garrus watched as Samara clasped her hands behind her back and looked at Ledia T’Prim. The asari sat on her bed in her cell, leaning against the wall, one leg dangling over the side of the bed. T’Prim looked awful, with dark purple bags underneath her eyes and a mangy crest. He could even see the outlines of the bones in her wrist, never a good sign for an Asari Commando. Even her plain grey jumpsuit looked ragged and worn. No one escaped the ravages of the war.

He’d seen plenty of people out in the streets of Omega wearing the exact same jumpsuit, criminals who had escaped or had someone bribe their way out of Aria’s vault. Grundan Krul had worn one just like it the first time they met. Garrus didn’t want to trust the krogan at first because of it, seeing that faded grey color and immediately thinking ‘criminal,’ but when Grundan Krul helped the squad take out of shipment of Red Sand and saved Ripper’s life, Garrus decided to take a chance and invite him along. Drug busts had a way of bringing people together.

“Justicar, please.”

“I cannot continue to ignore T’Prim’s words, Garrus,” Samara said in a low voice.

Letting out a quick sigh, Garrus said, “Shepard hasn’t been gone that long. Give her a little more time.”

“Shepard understands I will not break the Code for her,” Samara said, her voice serene. He really needed to learn that skill some day, sounding calm all the damn time. Wrex had once joked that Garrus had mastered the art of relaxing, and while, yes, he knew how to project a feeling of calm, that didn’t mean he actually was so. Garrus could certainly stand to take a few lessons from Samara.

Samara took a step closer to the cell. “What is it you wish of me, Ledia T’Prim?”

T’Prim looked startled, as if she didn’t expect Samara to actually talk to her. She fidgeted with a thread coming off of her thing pillow. “I’ll talk to you about what happened. No one else.”

Aware of the annoyance in his subvocals, Garrus said, “You’ll talk to Shepard when she gets here.” This was Shepard’s mission. He really didn’t like the idea of going around her.

Shaking her head, T’Prim said, “No. Only the Justicar.” Garrus heard a bit of steel in her voice which conflicted with the way her foot tapped nervously on the concrete floor.

“I will speak with you,” Samara said. “Garrus, please ask a guard to let me into her cell.”

“No, justicar.” Garrus said, his voice low. “It’s one thing to talk to her, but go into
her cell?"

“I would prefer to give her the illusion of privacy,” Samara said. “Shepard will understand.”

*Shepard might understand, but she’ll be pissed,* Garrus thought. “I’ll go in with you,” he said. He and Shepard had discussed the questions to ask each member of the team. At least then he could make sure they got the information they needed.

“Only the Justicar,” T’Prim repeated, her voice sounded stronger now. “Or I’m not talking.”

Garrus raised his hands in mock surrender, knowing when he had been beaten. “I’ll grab a guard.”

Minutes later, Samara stepped into the cell while a guard escorted Garrus to a simple waiting room, with only a rickety wooden table and chairs. He leaned against the wall and waited.

He tried not to think of what planet the *Normandy* planned on going to next. He tried not to think of seeing his home world in ashes, like the Titans had walked across the planet crushing everything underfoot.

Garrus heard footsteps behind him and exhaled, recognizing Shepard’s gait, her long strides and purposeful steps. Turning, he searched Shepard’s face, looking to glean some indication of how her meeting with Aria had gone. From the way her eyebrows seemed to be furrowed, he could only imagine it didn’t go the way she wanted.

“Where’s Samara?” Shepard asked.

“Justicar privilege,” Garrus said lightly. “T’Prim wanted to talk to Samara alone and Samara’s Code had no problem with that.”

He watched as Shepard’s hands curled into fists as she let out a slow breath. “Remind me to get a copy of that damned Code and read it,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe I’ll figure out which rules won’t make her disobey an order.”

“How’d the meeting go?”

Her free hand went to her shoulder harness, brushing the symbol of the Alliance painted there. “The mercs enlisted are going to have a choice between staying in the Alliance or working for Aria. Guess who pays better?”

“They’re scum, Shepard,” Garrus said softly, reaching out and touching that same symbol. He never respected the Alliance all that much until he met Shepard. But if an organization like that could produce a soldier like Shepard, they earned a second look. “They never deserved to wear the uniform in the first place.” Garrus felt a sense of relief, a lightness in his shoulders, knowing the mercs were on their way out. Hopefully all of them would take up Aria’s offer and get them out of the Alliance and off of Earth. “The Alliance will be better without them.”

“In the long run, I agree,” Shepard said. She shook her head and opened up her omni-tool. Garrus watched as she checked the battery. Every single damn time she opened that ‘tool she checked the battery first. “You haven’t seen our recruitment numbers. Hackett’s even talking about invoking a draft. People already think the Alliance is trying to take over Earth. We start a draft? Shit.”

The sadness in her voice made Garrus want to comfort her somehow, maybe run his hand over her shaved head, in the way that always caused her to close her eyes and rest for a moment. His instinct would be to simply reach out and put his hand on her shoulder, but here in this prison? Knowing cameras were hiding, watching their every move? He elected to bring up his own omni-tool as well,
to keep himself from temptation. They worked in a companionable silence while they waited for Samara and T’Prim to finish their talk.

And then the sharp knock of Samara’s combat heels could be heard on the floor. “Shepard, T’Prim would like to speak to you now.”

“Joy of joys,” Shepard muttering, flicking off her omni-tool. “She tell you anything?”

“She told me a great deal, but I think it best we discuss it outside of this area,” Samara said.

“Agreed,” Shepard said as she started to walk towards the cell with Garrus only a few steps behind.

T’Prim didn’t even look up as they approached the cell, and instead hugged her legs against her chest, rocking gently back and forth. She looked defeated and even more tired than she did before, causing Garrus to wonder just what exactly was said. He wondered if all the others would have the same look.

“Where’s the artifact, T’Prim?” Shepard asked, her voice sharp. “You brought one to Omega, didn’t you? Aria hasn’t said a damn thing about one. So where is it?”

T’Prim brought her hand to her mouth, biting a nail. “They destroyed it,” she said, looking up at the ceiling. “Aria wanted to slum it, so she came back with me to my little hovel. I don’t remember what happened when we made it there, but when I came to, I was in stasis and the artifact in pieces on the floor.”

Garrus felt a bit of stress lift from his carapace at the news. Aria being under Leviathan’s control would have been a nightmare. She alone would be trouble enough, but as a Thrall? Garrus didn’t even want to think about it.

Shepard’s shoulders relaxed, just slightly, enough so Garrus knew she felt just as much relief as he did. “You have any questions?” she asked T’Prim.

The asari looked up, hopeful. “Is my sister alive?” Her face fell a bit. “Or did the fucking artifacts take over Jedia, too?”

“She’s in custody on Thessia,” Shepard said. “I’m sorry.”

“Damnit,” T’Prim said, sounding defeating. Her hands curled into fists, and just as quickly, she released them, as if she couldn’t bear to hold onto anything, any longer. “We had shields, Commander. They were supposed to protect us. Why didn’t they protect us?”

Garrus couldn’t feel anything but sorrow for T’Prim. Here was someone who had willingly joined an advanced infiltration squad during wartime and now had nothing but grief to show from it. His stomach twisted, thinking how he, Cortez and Ashley were surrounded by artifacts on Despoina while Shepard plunged into the sea. Leviathan could have easily taken them over. His and T’Prim’s position could very well have been reversed, if not for timing. She deserved better. Good soldiers, willing to sacrifice everything deserved better.

Glancing over at Shepard, he could tell from the grief in her face that she ached the same way.

And yet, somehow the responsibility of cleaning up after Leviathan had fallen squarely on her shoulders. Yes, she woke them up. But what if she hadn’t? They could have slithered their way back to the top of the cosmic food chain without anyone even realizing it. At least this way, the galaxy had a fighting chance to stop them.
“Ledia,” Shepard said, taking another step towards the cell. T’Prim looked startled at the use of her given name. Garrus had to hand it so Shepard, she knew how to capture someone’s attention. “You know Councilor Tevos, right?”

T’Prim nodded. “She’s my father’s half-sister. They had the same father, an elcor.”

“Use that as leverage and get out of here. See if Tevos can pull some strings to get you moved to Thessia,” Shepard said.

Garrus sighed, knowing Shepard was trying to save the galaxy one person at a time again. Yes, he pitied T’Prim, but until they knew more, moving a potential thrall of Leviathan didn’t seem like a great idea.

“I thought Tevos would have gotten me out already,” T’Prim said with a resigned sigh.

Garrus didn’t know what to think about that. From the information he had, Tevos hadn’t mentioned knowing any of the Enthrallment Team. But then again, Garrus hadn’t mentioned his own weak connection to the team to Shepard, either. He’d have to face up to that at some point, preferably before they made it to Palaven.

“Well, don’t wait for her,” Shepard said, with a sense of urgency. “Use that pull yourself.”

T’Prim stood up and walked towards the energy field keeping her locked up. “Thank you, Shepard.” She turned and bowed to Samara. “Thank you, Justicar.”

“Remember what I said,” Samara said. Garrus heard a sense of purpose in her voice. “When my mission with Shepard is complete, I will contact you again.”

Garrus raised his brow plates at that and even Shepard gave Samara a bit of a side-eye glare. Nodding to T’Prim, Shepard said, “Good luck, Ledia.”

They left the vault in silence. Once back on the streets of Omega, Garrus inhaled deeply, letting the slightly metallic taste of the recycled air enter his lungs. He always hated the air here, but never enough to make him want to leave.

Shepard broke the silence by asking Samara the question he found himself curious about. “You’re going to contact T’Prim? What for?”

“She wishes to be a Justicar.”

Garrus’ brow plates shot up in surprise. He glanced over at Shepard and saw she wore a similar expression. “So you’ve decided?” Shepard asked. “You’re going to rebuild the Order?”

“The matter has been decided for me, it seems,” Samara said.

Shepard looked like she wanted to stop and talk, but the streets were full of people, walking in both directions. They had no choice but to keep moving. “Don’t you get a say in all of this?”

When Samara spoke, Garrus could almost hear a thousand years of weariness on her tongue. “I do,” she said. “I choose to follow the Code, which dictates I must pass on my knowledge if sought.”

“And T’Prim seeks,” Shepard said, letting out a low whistle.

Around them, voices seemed to be getting louder and a little more rowdier. Garrus heard someone say ‘Shepard’ more than once, causing his plates to itch. The sooner they were back on the
“Normandy, the better. He felt like he had a target on his back.

Knowing Aria, he might.

“What if after all of this is complete, T’Prim’s still in custody?” Shepard asked. Garrus wondered about the question. For all Shepard’s knowledge about different cultures and species, thanks to her N7 training and her own curiosity, she seemed to never quite understand the asari and the Justicars. Even Garrus knew the answer to Shepard’s question: no one denied a Justicar. If Samara wanted to train T’Prim, Samara would train T’Prim.

As Samara explained the concept to Shepard, Garrus let himself fall a step behind, deciding to act more as an enforcer. The murmurs around them became louder, and Garrus couldn’t help but remember what Shepard told him back on Earth, that Aria’s mercs might gun it for Shepard to get back at him. Even if Shepard and Aria brokered a business deal, would the mercs care?

Garrus didn’t let himself relax until they began walking down the ramp of the docking bay leading to the Normandy. Shepard was safe and he didn’t break. He’d chalk that up for a win in his books.

As they walked down the ramp, Shepard said, “Any chance you recorded that conversation with T’Prim?”

Samara brought up her omni-tool and transferred data to Shepard. “With her permission, I did. I also made observations.”

“I’d like to hear those.”

Hey Shepard?

“Yeah, Joker?” Shepard asked as they stepped into the decontamination chamber.

There’s a really antsy salarian waiting to talk to you. He’s pacing the CIC. Please make him go away.

“Tell Wiks I’ll talk to him as soon as I get the report from Samara,” Shepard said. Garrus saw Shepard silently sigh. “In his office.”

You heard her, Wiks. Thanks for that, Commander.

Shepard gave Garrus a wry look. “This should be fun,” she said, rubbing the heels of her palm against her eyes. “Samara, give me ten minutes to change into a BDU and I’ll meet you in the Observation Lounge.”

Samara nodded as the doors opened and together they walked into the Normandy.

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The moment the door to their cabin closed behind them, Garrus found himself pushed up against the wall, Shepard resting her body weight against him. “You doing okay?” she asked softly. “I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

For reasons he couldn’t explain, he found himself more annoyed than touched by her concern. It didn’t quite make sense to him, but perhaps he didn’t want her treating Omega like it would shatter in his hands if he held onto the memories too long. “I’m fine, Shepard,” he said, trying not to sound curt.
Shepard blinked and took a step back. “Just checking,” she said, smiling slightly as she methodically started taking off her armor. Garrus had no plans to change, so while Shepard stripped, he grabbed a BDU for her to wear. As he handed her the uniform, Shepard stopped and stared at it. “I need to find something else to wear while on duty.” She sighed and began to dress. “This is an Alliance uniform—”

“You’re still Alliance.”

“The reserves,” Shepard grumbled, looking back at the desk where the shadow box they had presented her at her retirement ceremony lay. “Maybe I could get a catsuit like Miranda’s. Or a uniform like Chakwas. I think they make civilian versions of that.”

“What about that orange jumpsuit Chambers bought you to wear off duty?” Garrus said, smirking a bit. Shepard’s face fell and Garrus wondered what he said wrong. “Shepard?”

“Six months, Garrus. Six months and Kelly Chambers hasn’t even crossed my mind once. I have no idea if she even made it off the Citadel,” Shepard said, tucking her uniform shirt into her trousers. “Or Gardner. It’s been close to a year since I’ve heard from him. Hell, any of the Cerberus folk from the SR-2. I tried to reach all of them after the Reapers hit and I only heard back from a couple.” Now dressed, Shepard flopped back onto the couch and looked up at the ceiling. “And I haven’t given them a second thought.”

Garrus walked over to Shepard and held out his hand. “You’ve been busy,” Garrus said quietly. He understood completely. During the final weeks of the war, he hadn’t reached out to his Task Force at all. Still didn’t know if some of them were alive or not.

He told Shepard they’d know if his Task Force did any good once the war was over. One of these days, he’d like to find out.

She placed her hand in his and let him help her up. “Or maybe I’m just an asshole,” Shepard muttered. She looked up and gave him a grim smile. “Hope you didn’t have lots of plans for us during our free time. I think I’m going to have my hands full for a while, finding everyone.”

“What’s free time?” Garrus asked. He got the reaction he hoped for: a smile.

“Good point,” Shepard said with a chuckle, causing Garrus to hum in relief. “Something we’re never going to have again, especially if we decide to adopt once this is over.”

His heart seemed to expand slightly at the casual way she brought up their future family. They hadn’t spoken of the future since their last conversation, there’d simply been no time, but knowing she thought about everything made him happier than he thought it would. “Yeah, well, free time is overrated,” Garrus said, ignoring the sentimentality he heard slip into his subvocals.

The look on Shepard’s face told him she clearly heard the subtext and grabbed his gloved hand in her ungloved one as they walked to the elevator. They dropped hands the moment the elevator doors opened onto the crew deck and made the short walk into the Observation Lounge.

Garrus was surprised to see a cot out; back during the Cerberus tour, Samara never left it out, giving the illusion that no one lived in the lounge at all. Samara herself stood facing the big, picture window, hands clasped behind her back.

“Councilor Tevos seems to have used to the Enthrallment Team to her own advantage,” Samara said without bramble. “T’Prim and her squad partner, Grehk Ran-perah, were assigned to Lorek, a former asari colony.”
Shepard’s free hand curled into a fist. “And a current batarian one.”

“Why’s that sound familiar?” Garrus asked.

“You probably read the mission report. We went there right after we picked you up on Omega,” Shepard said, her voice slightly distant. Her eyes closed for a moment, like she was trying not to see something. “I took Jacob and Zaeed down; you were still recovering from surgery.” Shaking her head, Shepard made a few notes on her omni-tool. “There were almost five million people on that planet. What’s Tevos’ play? Hope the batarians never recover and take their colony back?”

“It is a world rich in platinum,” Samara said.

“I remember. I mined enough of it myself,” Shepard said. She let out a slow breath. “How long were T’Prim and Ran-perah there?”

“They were on the planet when the Reapers fell,” Samara told them. “Apparently they barely missed being crushed by a Reaper carcass.”

Shepard froze.

Unlike Omega, when he felt the cameras on him, Garrus didn’t hesitate. With Samara’s back turned towards them, Garrus put his hand on Shepard’s shoulder, reminding her she was never alone. There had been horror stories of people being crushed or trapped under dead Reapers, buildings being destroyed, leading to more deaths. Garrus couldn’t think of a worse way to die. Make it through to the end of the war, only to be killed on by the Reapers on their way out.

And Shepard, being Shepard, wrapped herself in guilt each time she heard a new story. Each time, Garrus could see her face crumple slightly, making him even more determined to keep her from being weighed down. He could help keep her upright. Damn right he could.

She reached up and squeezed his hand before taking a step closer to Samara and letting his hand fall. “Why’d they go to Omega?”

“T’Prim said she felt cold and dark and compelled to go there. Ran-perah dropped her off and left, presumably to Camala,” Samara said, turning to look at Shepard for the first time. “She stayed on the station for two months, helping rebuild. Each time she thought of leaving, the cold and dark feeling overwhelmed her. Then one day she felt compelled to speak to Aria.”

“So basically exactly how we thought it would go down,” Shepard said with a sigh. “Anything else you can think of that’s important?”

Samara took a breath and for the first time since he’d known her, looked uncomfortable. “These Leviathan… They seem to strip you of any bodily autonomy. Ledia said she prefers individuals who prefer not to conform to a specific gender and would never look for companionship with Aria, who so strongly associates with the female sex.” Samara looked down, staring at her hands. “These creatures cannot be allowed to take away one’s will.”

“Agreed,” Shepard said. “We’re going to stop them, Samara.”

Garrus watched her face harden until she was no longer his Shepard, but Commander Shepard. Amazing how many lives she was going to feel responsible for again. She had said words just like that before, Garrus thought, thinking how she spoke to Vendetta in the Cerberus Headquarters, her voice weary and exhausted as she told the VI, “We’ll stop them.”

“But you do not know how.”
“No,” Shepard admitted. “I don’t know how this will play out, if we’ll end this through diplomacy or full out war. I just know that it will end.”

Samara’s face settled into the mask of calm Garrus was so familiar with. “That is enough for me,” she said.

Shepard nodded. “I’ll listen to the recording you made and let you know if I have any questions.”

Garrus and Shepard turned to leave when Samara said, “Shepard? If you have time in the next few days, I would very much like the chance to talk. Perhaps in front of this window.”

“I’d like that,” Shepard said quietly. “Thank you, Samara.”

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“Ah, you’ve made it!” Padok Wiks said, standing up from his workstation. Garrus glanced around the Liara’s old space. Gone where all the monitors and datafeeds. The bed still sat in the back, but now the room was much more sparse than it had been.

But Padok looked like he had settled in. His work station took up half the wall, three monitors lined up in front of a keyboard. The other side of the room had a workbench, with various tools and a couple of mods. Garrus nodded in approval when he saw a M-9 Tempest. Shepard lived and died by her Shuriken, but nothing beat a Tempest, in his opinion.

The true focus of the room stood in the corner, the device. Such a simple thing, but it could be the answer to all of their problems.

“D.E.A.R. has found our first artifact!” Padok said proudly.


Padok beamed. “The Dark Energy Archiver Resource. My idea,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Dr. Verner, Dr. Bryson and I had a contest the day before we left Earth, naming the machine. D.E.A.R. won, though I did like L.A.S.T., the Leviathan Artifact Searcher Tool, which was Dr. Bryson’s contribution.” He paused and tilted his head. “Dr. Verner said to simply call it the B.O.X., but he wouldn’t clarify what the letters stood for and I simply haven’t had time to sit down and work out what they might mean.”

Garrus forced a laugh into a cough and turned to look at Shepard, who had a smile on her face. “Any chance this artifact it found is on Lorek?”

Padok’s face fell. “How in the galaxy did you know that?” he asked, looking at D.E.A.R.’s console. “I had planned on programming it to alert your omni-tool when we had a new reading, but-”

“We got the information from Ledia T’Prim on Omega,” Garrus said.

The mention of T’Prim perked Padok right back up. “And how did the interrogation go?” he asked, looking at D.E.A.R.’s console. “I had planned on programming it to alert your omni-tool when we had a new reading, but-”

“We got the information from Ledia T’Prim on Omega,” Garrus said.

The mention of T’Prim perked Padok right back up. “And how did the interrogation go?” Padok asked. “Did we receive any new information?”

“Pretty much what we expected. Cold and dark, she blacked out, textbook case of Leviathan taking over,” Shepard said. “Have you scanned Omega? I really hate the idea of an artifact taking over Aria. She’s going to give us enough trouble.”

Padok nodded and Garrus felt the knot in his stomach loosening a bit. These artifacts scared the shit out of him. Bad enough he worried that Leviathan already had a foothold into Shepard’s head, but
the idea of completely losing his autonomy? Any of the galactic leaders under Leviathan’s control would be an absolute nightmare.

“Now I think we need to discuss the real question,” Garrus said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do we destroy the artifact on Lorek, now that we know one is there?”

Shepard blew air out of her lips and ran her hand over her shaved head. “That is the question, isn’t it?” She turned and looked at him. “What do you think?”

He hadn’t expected her to put him on the spot. Scratching the back of his neck to buy some time, Garrus considered their options. “We go straight to Lorek and destroy the artifact, I think we tip our hand,” he said. “I think the real question is how long can we hide under Leviathan’s radar?”

“Officer Vakarian makes an excellent point, Commander,” Padok said.

“Garrus, please,” Garrus said quickly. He wondered when the day would arrive when he didn’t immediately think of his father when he heard that.

Padok nodded. “Garrus, then.” He looked at Shepard. “As much as we can make scientific estimates of how many artifacts there are, we cannot be sure. The longer Leviathan is not aware we are actively searching to destroy the artifacts is to our benefit.”

Shepard closed her eyes briefly. “They know their Enthrallment Team failed. They have to know something is happening,” Shepard said. She took a breath and Garrus could see the tension gathering between her brows. “And they know me. As much as I hate to admit that, they’ve been in my head. They know I’m not going to back down from something like this.”

“So you wish to destroy the artifact now, while we’re in the system?” Padok asked.

“No,” Shepard said. Garrus met her gaze and flicked out his mandibles in a smile, wanting to be her support. “You’re right. You’re both right. Let’s leave it. There will be time to smash the thing later.” She brought up her omni-tool. “Guess we’ve decided then. Joker?”

Yeah, Shepard?

“Take us out,” Shepard said. “We’re heading to Palaven.”

On our way.

Garrus felt his stomach clench at the thought. Palaven.

Home.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!
Chapter Summary

Many thanks to theherocomplex for her beta work!

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The Five of Wands, Reversed:

Litigation and legal wrangles. Spiteful conversation and unnecessary competitiveness.

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“I need to tell you something, Shepard,” Garrus said. His natural inclination to wring his hands threatened to overwhelm him, so instead he ran his palms down his thighs, letting them rest on his knees. To anyone else, he knew he looked completely comfortable, simply relaxing, Garrus working on some mods while Shepard overclocked her drone, for the six hours they had before reaching Palaven.

No doubt Shepard would see through his posturing.

Shepard’s drone disappeared with a loud pop and she looked over, her brow slightly furrowed. “There goes that upgrade,” she said with a sigh. “Didn’t you see my fingers moving?”

He had, but it still hadn’t stopped him. “Sorry about that,” he said sheepishly.

Waving off his apology, Shepard said, “It was an experimental one. Probably wouldn’t have worked.” She brought her legs up under her and reached out, placing her hand on his knee. “What’s up?

Garrus scratched the side of his neck, his gizzard clenching with guilt. He should have told her this from the beginning, instead of chastising Shepard for keeping the visions away from him at first while he kept important information away from her. “I should have said something a while ago, but then I thought it was too late…”

Her face lost a bit of color and she looked down at her hands, her fingers intertwined. “What do you mean?”

He tilted his head, worried about the slight fear he thought he heard in her words. “This is about the mission, Shepard.”


Garrus never liked to give reports sitting down. Knowing he’d feel more at east on feet, Garrus stood in front of Shepard, no longer able to resist the urge to wring his hands. “I knew Colonel Corinthus,” he said, looking at the floor. “It was a long time ago.”

“Did you two serve together?” Shepard asked, crossing her legs at the knee while leaning back on the couch, resting her intertwined fingers on her belly.
“We did,” Garrus said, hearing the embarrassment in his own voice. His mandibles clenched and he forced himself to relax and look Shepard in the eye, silent apologizing for ruining the moment of peace. “Remember that story I told you once, back when this was a Cerberus boat, about sparring and the recon scout…”

Shepard tapped her chin with a finger, a wry smile on her lips. “I think I see where this is going. Are you telling me Colonel Corinthus was your recon scout?”

Nodding, Garrus said, “She was. We haven’t spoken in years, though. Spirits, until I told you that story, I hadn’t even thought of her in years.”

“I suppose I should thank her for being memorable to you,” Shepard said. Garrus heard a trace of amusement in her voice. “Without that story, who knows if we would have gotten together?”

Truth out and report done, he felt the tension in his shoulders ease. He had even made Shepard smile a bit. Garrus sat down on the couch next to Shepard and took her hand. “We would have ended up together at some point, story or not,” he scoffed. “You know we would have.”

Shepard nodded, seemingly conceding the point. “I think we’re getting off track,” she said. She sat up straight as she removed her hand from his. Garrus noticed the subtle shift from Shepard to Commander.

Silence, not a comfortable one, filled the cabin. Shepard laced her hands in her lap and looked at the ground. Garrus’ stomach churned, not quite sure of her reaction. Her biometrics looked normal, which was good. But her body was the opposite of relaxed and the smile disappeared from her face.

“I would have appreciated knowing about your connection earlier.” She ran her hand over her head. Garrus realized she didn’t seem angry or upset, just possibly disappointed, which was worse. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wish I had a good excuse,” Garrus said, straightening up, wanting to be a good soldier again. “I figured since you’ll be the one to actually talk to her, why did it matter?” He placed his hands on his knees and looked ahead. “It was only that one time. I got transferred almost immediately afterward and we didn’t keep in touch.”

Blowing air out her lips, Shepard said, “Everyone seems to have connection with this team. I knew Efron, you know Corinthus, Tevos is related to the T’Prim sisters, Padok served with Tolan.” Her laughter sounded brittle to his ears. “I bet if we dig long enough, we could find someone who knew Ran-perah.”

“Don’t forget we met Rentola on Virmire,” Garrus said, thinking of the how wonderful Virmire felt at first, with the heat and the humidity and the hope that they were so close to stopping Saren. And here, more than four years later, they were still fighting.

“Never will,” Shepard said with a decisive nod. “The man bought those horrible pistols off of me.”

“Which ones, the Strikers? Those things were a piece of crap,” Garrus said with a snort.

“Rentola gave me actual credits for those,” Shepard said. She looked down at her hands. “Shame he was killed.”

“At least he didn’t kill that Dalatrass,” Garrus said. Such a damn waste that Rentola had ever been in that position in the first place.

Shepard nodded and for a moment, they were silent. Garrus felt a bit lighter, not so much tension in
his waist, now that he had told Shepard the truth. He was about to tell her so when she let out a laugh and punched him in the shoulder. “You dog, you. There you were on Menae, General Corinthus saluting you and you had slept with his daughter.”

Flicking his mandibles out in a smile, Garrus said, “Well, it was a long time ago. I’m pleased to say my reach has improved since those days.”

Shepard kicked out her legs, putting her bare feet on his lap, while lying down. “Damn straight it has,” she said with a smirk. Her face turned serious. “Any connection to Invectus that I should know about?

Garrus shook his head, pleased to report the truth. “I heard Joker had a run in with him at some point, though. Seemed like an impossible story, Joker stealing the SR-1.”

“Joker’s full of shit,” Shepard said with a laugh. “He tried that story on me, too. I looked into his record. He was assigned the Normandy because he was the best. Simple as that.”

Curling his hand around Shepard’s ankle, Garrus let out a sigh, thinking of Palaven. He had watched news footage and read the reports, but until he saw the planet with his own two eyes, walked on the ground with his own two feet, it wouldn’t feel real.

“It’s funny, Shepard, I haven’t lived on Palaven since I was fifteen years old,” he said, his subvocals betraying the emotion he felt. “More than half my life… And yet…”

“When rushing in to save a platoon of turian soldiers, you yell ‘For Palaven!’ And you and Victus geek out over a war banner,” Shepard said. “I get it, Garrus. Earth didn’t do me any favors growing up. I was in and out of foster care and then I lived out of a fucking skycar. But when the Reapers hit….”

“Almost felt personal,” Garrus said, remembering the fear he felt when the reports came in that the Reapers had entered the system. He had been at his parent’s home, alone, his father and sister away, and barely had time to grab the duffel bag he packed weeks ago for this very scenario. The bag had rations, toiletries and a change of civilian clothes wrapped around a bottle of wine. He gave himself one whispered prayer to the Spirits, hoping Shepard would be alright, before forcing her and the bottle of wine out of his mind.

Shepard shook her head. “Yeah, Harbinger had a way of making it feel that way, didn’t he?”

“Always did want to show you Palaven,” Garrus said quietly. “I just hoped it would be at its best for your visit.”

“Well, to be fair, you didn’t exactly see Earth in all its glory.” Shepard smiled and Garrus saw how it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You didn’t seem too put off by it. I think I’ll be okay on Palaven.”

“And just think, because of all the debris and dust in the air, you won’t even need to wear a radiation suit.” Garrus tried to laugh, but his subvocals betrayed the lie in his poor joke.

Shepard reached out her hand, which he took gladly. Never ceased to amaze him how smooth her skin was against his own. “We’ll get through this,” she told him.

Garrus smiled in spite of himself as she mirrored words he had used so often for her. Squeezing her hand, he said, “We always do.”
Garrus spent the entire shuttle ride standing up and wanting to pace, though thanks to some self-control, he simply leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. More than a year had passed since he had left the planet.

As the shuttle descent started, Garrus glanced at Shepard, sitting next to Padok Wiks and noticed the paleness of her face. “Shepard?” he asked softly.

She met his gaze. “Last time I made this flight, I thought you were dead.” Her hands, which had been splayed across her thighs, curled into tight fists. “Glad you’re right here in front of me this time.”

“Me, too, Shepard,” Garrus said. If Padok hadn’t been in the shuttle compartment with him, he would have squeezed her hand. Instead, he looked at the aerial viewer Cortez had brought up on the side view screen. “What a difference a year makes.”

“Is that Victus?” Shepard asked, looking at the screen. “Certainly didn’t expect a Primarch’s welcome.”

The shuttle touched ground and Garrus took a breath, readying himself as Shepard gave instructions to Cortez. The shuttle doors opened and Garrus stepped onto Palaven’s soil for the first time in more than a year.

The temperature felt cooler than he remembered, but like Earth, the clouds were heavy and the dust overhead was something fierce. At this time of year, his plates should be eagerly soaking up the sun instead of him feeling grateful that he wore heavy armor to keep out the chill.

He tasted a dryness in the air he didn’t recognize. And as Garrus looked around, he realized unlike Tuchanka, he could see no green.

Tuchanka, with all the krogan had done to destroy their world, looked to be in better shape than Palaven. Garrus felt ready to retch at the thought, but instead he looked right at Victus, wondering what they could possibly do to make things better.

“Vakarian,” Primarch Victus said, nodding his head. “Damn good to see you.”

Garrus snapped off a salute, glad to be distracted from his thoughts. “Thank you, sir.” Then crossing his arms over his chest, added, “Didn’t expect to see you out here.”

“Had to get out of my office for a bit. I’m suffocating in that building,” Victus said. “Let’s walk and talk. We shouldn’t keep Shepard and Padok out in the sun too long.”

“Thank you, Primarch,” Shepard said.

Garrus glanced over at her as she stood next to Padok, amused by the Alliance issued cap she wore over her head. Reminded him of the cap that Hackett always wore, even though Shepard wore a BDU and not her hardsuit. But she wore a long sleeve shirt underneath her uniform, making sure she was covered up as much as possible under Palaven’s sun.

“You know one of the things I looked forward to the most about getting back to Palaven?” Victus asked as they started to walk. Garrus counted at least four guards walking with them and wouldn’t be surprised if there were more, just out of sight.

“Can’t imagine, sir,” Garrus said, even though he clearly remembered Victus saying it would be having sex with his wife.
“All I wanted was a mekret steak, medium rare, smothered in vilj sauce,” Victus said, sounding wistful. “I wanted real meat after eating all those damn beans the quarians kept giving us for protein.”

Garrus felt his stomach grumble at the thought. Perhaps he’d be able to pick up some fresh turian food while they were on Palaven. Anything, even the drunt meat he rebelled against as a child would be welcome. While he didn’t mind the rations and occasional nutrient paste, having eaten them for so long, it never beat out having fresh food.

Victus stopped walking and turned towards Garrus. “I’ve never used my political clout for anything; I truly haven’t. But when I arrived back on Palaven and my wife told me that she heard Cipritine would be getting a shipment of fresh meat…” Victus shook his head and Garrus grinned, hearing the embarrassment in the Primarch’s voice. “I’m a weak man, Vakarian. I made sure I got two steaks, one for me and one for my wife.”

“How was it?” Shepard asked, amusement lacing her voice.

Mandibles flicking out in an annoyed fashion, Victus said, “Tasted like shit.” They started walking again. “I think I got used to the beans. Never been so disappointed in my life.”

Garrus chuckled and took advantage of the silence to look around. They walked through a refugee camp, almost a duplicate of the turian camp they left on Earth. Every turian they passed had an occupation of some sort and none were idle. A beautiful sight to see as the constriction in Garrus’ chest eased a bit.

Victus stopped in front of three story pre-fab. “Welcome to the heart of Palaven politics,” he said wryly. Victus looked at Shepard. “You would have loved the old government civics building. Absolutely beautiful. Damn work of art, not an office.” He lowered his head and Garrus head the sorrow in his subvocals. “One of my bigger regrets as Primarch is I never got to step into the Primarch’s office. I went from the Normandy to my flag ship to Earth.”

“We’ll rebuild,” Garrus said, knowing the long-term efforts had already started, thanks to his daily Hierarchy reports.

“Agreed,” Victus said, as they walked into the prefab to Victus’ office.

It was sparse, just like Garrus imagined any office of Victus’ to be. The only personal item that Garrus could see was a picture of Tarquin on the desk. He watched as Shepard looked at the picture and close her eyes just for a moment before putting her attention on Victus.

Instead of sitting down at the small desk in the corner, Victus leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest as Shepard and Garrus stood across him with Padok just a step behind.

“Colonel Corinthus was interrogated after the murder. I highly doubt you’ll get more from her than my men did.”

“I know,” Shepard said briskly. “I read the reports. Very thorough.”

Garrus nodded his head in agreement. According to the reports, Evleen Corinthus had answered every question without one word of protest, just like any good turian.

“I have to tell you, Shepard, I’m at a damn loss what to do here,” Victus said, running his hand over his fringe. “Invectus was a good man. I don’t like good men being killed, especially by other good men.”

“None of us do, Primarch,” Shepard said, her voice quiet.
“Based on General Corinthus’ recommendation, I personally chose Colonel Corinthus to be apart of the Enthrallment team,” Victus said. Garrus could see the stress weighing down Victus’ shoulders; he had seen the exact same posture in the mirror enough, before forcing himself to stand up straight. “What the hell am I supposed to do with her? If you’re right, Shepard, if this didn’t happen of her own free will…”

Shepard looked like she was trying to choose her words carefully. “At this point, I agree with Hackett and the Council that the Enthrallment team needs to be locked up,” she said, clasping her hands tight behind her back. “Until we have a better handle on this-”

“We are a society of laws, Shepard. Laws I intend to obey. I can’t keep her in detention indefinitely without sending her to trial,” Victus said as he walked to his desk and finally sat down. “Except if she didn’t commit this murder of her own free will, I don’t want to send her to trial.”

“It’s your classic ‘between a rock and a hard place’ scenario,” Shepard said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Primarch, we can’t have a potential thrall of Leviathan wandering around,” Garrus said. “Not right now.”

Victus tapped his fingers on the desk, one by one, a move Shepard made often. Garrus wondered when he became accustomed to always hearing four fingers instead of only two. “Agreed,” Victus said. When he spoke again, Garrus heard the humor in his subvocals. “Just do me a favor and wrap this up quickly, will you, Shepard? I’d think after the Reapers, you could handle this in two months, tops.”

“I’ll do my best, Primarch,” Shepard said. Garrus heard no humor in Shepard’s voice and a chill ran down his carapace. The last thing Shepard needed was to feel like she had to personally solve this. Of course, knowing Shepard, she most likely already did.

Damn Leviathan.

“Vakarian, I’ve been paying attention. Still no word from your father and sister,” Victus said after a moment’s silence. Garrus heard the slight apology in his subvocals.

The sudden change of subject felt like a sucker punch. Half expecting to reel from the blow, Garrus straightened up and squared his shoulders. “I appreciate you telling me.”

“We get new people checking in every day, even six months later. There’s no reason to lose hope,” Victus told him. “If we get word, I’ll make sure you find out immediately.”

“Thank you, Victus,” Garrus said with a nod, linking his fingers behind his back, trying not betray any emotion. He’d have to deal with this later, but now certainly wasn’t the time.

“I’ll have an aide take you to the detention center,” Victus said, standing up. “You and Shepard still plan on joining us for dinner?”

“Not if we’re having steak that tastes like shit,” Garrus said as the group walked to the door.

“Only had two, Vakarian,” Victus said. “And you better believe I ate every bite. I believe my wife plans on serving us a delicacy of those damn quarian beans, with a levo MRE for Shepard. We are nothing if not gracious hosts.”

Victus opened the door and an aide stood waiting. “See you then,” Victus said. “And good luck with Corinthus.”
Shepard seemed unusually quiet as they walked to the detention center. Garrus supposed it made sense. He wondered what he’d be like, about to meet one of her old lovers that just happened to be in custody for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“The cap’s a good look on you,” Garrus said in a low voice to Shepard.

She smiled, putting her hands on top of the cap. “Can’t burn my delicate skin, can I?” she said with a laugh. “Maybe I’ll start wearing it more often. Fits like a glove.” Shepard looked around Garrus. “You doing okay, Padok? You were awfully quiet in the Primarch’s office.”

Padok blinked several times. “I assure you, Commander, I am fine. You, Garrus and the Primarch seemed to have an excellent rapport in the office. It was fascinating to watch.”

“Ah okay,” Shepard said.

His plates itched at the idea of being observed as an experiment. He never did like being spied on. “Well, you develop that when you work with people long enough.”

“That is very true,” Padok said. “I had that same relationship with several members of the STG back in the day. I’m curious to see what sort of relationships I will develop on the Normandy.”

“Time will tell,” Shepard said as the aide led them into a decrepit building. The stone on the outside had all but crumbled, but Garrus could tell some serious work had gone on to restore the inside. “I like my crew getting along with each other.”

The aide took them into a small waiting room, sparse with only a table and chairs. Even so, the room felt comfortable, with turian style furniture and decorating. Garrus watched Shepard as she took off her cap, wiping her brow as she put the headwear into her back pocket. “Warm in here,” Shepard said. “But this is room temperature for turians, right?”

“And salarians,” Padok said. “It’s quite comfortable.”

A few minutes later, Corinthus came out from the back, her head held high. Garrus looked her over, trying not to let his gaze linger. Even in prison garb, she was still one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Her plates were slightly darker than average and her eyes, a bright green. He remembered those same eyes watching him as they prepped for the batarian raiders. And then there was her carapace size, smaller than most, allowing for a bit more flexibility.

Corinthus barely glanced at him before looking at Padok with a sneer. “Thought you said the shields would protect us, Wiks.”

Padok, to his credit, didn’t break eye contact. He looked right back at her. “I thought they would be enough,” he said after a moment. Garrus heard the sorrow in the salarian’s voice. “I truly did.”

Corinthus shrugged, running a hand over her face, briefly covering her elegant grey colony markings, the ones she shared with General Corinthus. “Well you were wrong, weren’t you?”

“I’m sorry,” Padok said and Garrus heard the genuine grief in his voice. “I wish there was something I could do.”

Shepard brought out her omni-tool. “I’m Commander Shepard-”

“I know,” Corinthus said, annoyance in her subvocals. Garrus crossed his arms over his chest, and
glanced at Shepard, who clearly heard the meaning underneath the words.

“Then let’s not waste time,” Shepard said, and started with the questions.

Corinthus answered every question succinctly and quietly, her account matching T’Prim’s perfectly. At this point, Garrus wondered if it was even worth going to Thessia. The only mystery of the team was Grehk Ran-perah, simply because the batarians agreed to hold him, but refused to release any interrogations.

“So that’s it?” Corinthus asked, bitterness underlying her words. “I dance to your tune and then go back to my cell?”

Garrus waited for Shepard to respond. When she didn’t right away, Garrus looked over and realized Shepard’s attention was focused in the corner of the room. Shit, Garrus thought. Of all the times for her to have a damn vision. She hadn’t had one since they left Earth. They’d both hoped foolishly, it seemed, that the visions would stay on Earth. And now they might have to pay for that hope.

“There’s nothing we’re able to do at this time,” Garrus said, covering for Shepard. “If that changes-”

Corinthus brushed away his apology. “Fine, I’ll be a good little turian and not complain.” Corinthus stretched her arms above her head, highlighting her waist, still beautiful, but he vastly preferred Shepard’s. “Good to see you again, Vakarian.”

Dipping his head in acknowledgement, Garrus said, “Wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Next time,” Corinthus said, turning her head to stare at Shepard.

Thankfully, Garrus saw Shepard shake her head as she straightened her shoulders and focused on the meeting instead of the corner. “Never figured you for a xeno-lover. I remember you turning down asari back in the day.”

Garrus shrugged. “Times change.”

Corinthus let out a snort. “That they do.” The aide came back in and Corinthus’ entire body stood still. She hardly even breathed as the aide cuffed her hands behind her back, a look of terror crossing her face. “Don’t let them forget I’m in here,” she said, her subvocals betraying her fear. “Please.”

“We won’t,” Garrus said at once. He wouldn’t and he knew Victus wouldn’t, either.

“We got what we needed,” Shepard said, her voice soft as she put her cap back on. “Let’s get out of here.”

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“You sure you want to want to do this?” Shepard asked him as they slipped into the battered skycar. They found themselves with some time before they were to meet Victus and his wife for dinner. So while Padok went back to the ship, eager to see if D.E.A.R. found any more artifacts in the system, Garrus negotiated for the use of a skycar for an hour.

Garrus sat in the driver’s seat, remembering the last ride they took together. Then he had been nervous, wondering how exactly to tell Shepard just how he felt. But that afternoon had been bathed in the artificial sunlight of the Presidium as they drove along the most prestigious area of the Citadel.

Now they drove in the remains of a crumbling neighborhood. The Reapers had hit this area hard. Houses had been torn apart. Bricks and metal and glass covered yards instead of grass. Some
animals, mainly strays, smaller ones that walked on four legs, roamed the streets.

He tried not to look around too much as he drove, but everywhere he looked there were memories. This section of Cipritine had been his home. Garrus wore the neighborhood’s markings on his face. And now it had been reduced to ash.

The drive wouldn’t take long, and Garrus wondered if he should bring up the vision Shepard had earlier. But when she placed her hand on his shoulder, he could tell she had an idea of where they were going. He could hardly feel the warmth of her hand through his armor, but the pressure helped keep him calm.

He stopped the car right in front of the pile of bricks and wood that had once been the house where he grew up. Shepard stepped out quickly and Garrus saw her glance at the sun before putting on her cap.

Garrus walked around the front of the skycar, holding out his hand, which Shepard accepted at once. “So this is where you grew up?” she asked.

“That big blaze of orange,” Garrus said, hearing the keen in his subvocals. Shepard undoubtedly heard it, too. She stood on tiptoes, learning against him, and that was all the invitation that Garrus needed. He carefully pushed back the brim of her cap and rested his brow on hers, grateful, more than ever, for her support. “The place was small. We didn’t have a lot of money, with Dad on the Citadel. Hell, Solana and I had to share a room until she went off to basic.”

Grounded, Garrus took Shepard’s hand and they walked through the rubble as he pointed out various rooms. Where the kitchen had been, where he and Sol almost came to blows after a fight when they were children, where he had proudly sung _Never Say Die_ in the backyard for a vid his mother sent to his father.

“This used to be a vegetable garden,” Garrus said, pointing to a burnt patch of soil. “Mom loved to garden.” He trailed off and squeezed Shepard’s hand. “Wish you could have met her.”

“Me, too,” Shepard said as she slipped a hand underneath his mandible. Normally, she would never use such a private gesture in public, but Garrus accepted the gift and leaned his head into her hand. “I’m looking forward to meeting your dad and sister.”

“Hopefully,” Garrus said, closing his eyes briefly. “Spirits willing.” He took a breath and looked at the remains of the house before pressing his mouth plates gently against her lips. The neighborhood would be rebuilt, but it would never be his again. Just like he’d never have his family together again. But with Shepard, he had the hope of a new family someday. “Thanks, Shepard.”

“None needed,” Shepard said, her voice soft. “You know I’m always here for you.”

He did know. Together they walked back to the skycar, and Garrus left the realities of his childhood home behind him.
The Eight of Pentacles, Reversed

Inappropriate use of energy and skills for unsuitable ends. Short term gain at the expense of long term profit.

D.E.A.R. had become almost too successful.

Shepard looked at the list of planets and moons and asteroids Padok had given her hours ago. Each one potentially held an artifact. Which meant each one would need to be visited. As good as her crew was, and she had no doubt she had the best the Alliance had to offer, it would be too much work for the Normandy to realistically handle by themselves. They had to get more ships, more bodies, more anything to keep in front of Leviathan. Where they would find these things was a different matter.

The empty War Room gave Shepard a moment to rest her forehead on her workstation and try to will the stress away from her body. She could feel the tension in her shoulders that refused to disappear no matter how many back rubs or tie breakers she indulged in with Garrus. Part of her wondered if the stress would ever leave, if she would always feel that knot.

Her mind wandered back to the Crucible and that impossible choice. Perhaps she deserved the stress. Perhaps this was to be her reminder of everything she had lost because of one decision.

Shepard slapped opened her omni-tool. When she became maudlin and brooding, generally it meant she had been working too hard and for too long. She looked at the chronometer: seven hours had somehow passed since she last took a break. Craning her neck side to side, Shepard stood up, stretching her arms high above her head, feeling somewhat satisfied as her vertebrae lengthened, one by one.

“Commander?”

Shepard waved Traynor inside the War Room. “Got something for me, Traynor?” she asked, taking a sip of coffee, grimacing at the bitter cold taste as it her tongue.

“There’s an incoming message,” Traynor said, her voice hesitant. She walked into the room, her hands held behind her back. “Except, I can’t place it. I don’t recognize the frequency and…” She threw up her hands in apparent frustration. “I’ve no idea who it is.”

A chill ran down Shepard’s spine. Could Leviathan be trying to reach her somehow? An unmarked transmission in these times was a dangerous game to play. Most sensible people ignored them at all costs. Only the desperate sent them out. “Digital or QEC?”

Traynor bit her lower lip. “QEC,” she said. “Which is what bothers me. The QEC codes are supposed to be incredibly secure and classified. Only a handful of people even know the Alliance has the technology in the first place.”

Shepard rested her fingertips on the workstation, leaning forward slightly. “Let’s take it,” she said after a moment’s thought. “I want to know who’s trying to contact us.” She walked into the QEC room. “Just be ready, Traynor, to pull the plug the moment I say so.”
“Yes, sir,” Traynor said. She set up at a console, looking ready for anything. Shepard couldn’t help but smile, thinking of the scared specialist she met her first day on the *Normandy*. Now she could call herself a battle weary veteran. “Accepting the transmission now.”

Shepard clasped her hands behind her back and readied herself. The image cleared up quickly and Shepard found herself face to face with an asari, arms crossed over her chest, and an amused smile on her face.

“Liara.”

Her shoulders deflated, and Shepard felt the quick burst of adrenaline leave her body as quickly as venting the heat from the stealth drive.

“Expecting someone else, Shepard?” Liara asked, raising a painted eyebrow.

“You could have given us some warning,” Shepard said, her voice teasing, now that she saw the caller in front of her. “An unmarked transmission between friends? I’m hurt, Liara.”

Looking at Traynor, Liara asked, “Is this line secure?”

“Absolutely,” Traynor said at once. Her voice was pointed as she added, “On our end.”

Liara laughed, a genuine laugh that Shepard hadn’t heard in far too long from her friend. “I almost forgot how much I like you, Samantha.” She brought up her omni-tool. “I am aboard what I think might be the most secure ship in the entire galaxy. We can talk freely.”

Shepard nodded and glanced at Traynor. “Nothing more, Traynor. Thank you.”

“Page if you need anything, Commander,” the specialist said before quickly exiting the room.

“Got something for me?” Shepard asked Liara.

“I’m sending you the information now, Shepard,” Liara said as she worked the interface of her omni-tool. “A facility on Altahe. So small they almost escaped my radar, but the numbers aren’t adding up.”

“What do they produce?” Shepard asked, bringing up what information she had on the planet. They had been there before, during the hunt for Saren. Shepard had made a tactical error during that mission, not bringing any muscle down to the planet, and instead three tech experts. If it hadn’t been for Kaidan’s biotic abilities, the mission might have ended in disaster.

“They mine samarium,” Liara said. “Less than half of what they’re capable of producing actually gets shipped to distributors.”

The doors to the War Room opened and Shepard looked over, ready to stop the conversation if needed, but quickly relaxed as Garrus strode in. Giving her attention back to Liara, Shepard said, “We need to go there.”

“I agree,” Liara said. “If anything, perhaps we could discover where the material not being sent to
“The distributors is going.”

“Are we sure the numbers are that off?” Shepard asked, resting her weight on the railing to the communications center. Behind her, she heard Garrus enter the QEC room. “On the asteroid, they seemed to be doing everything but mining.”

“The Alliance sent a ship to clean up after the Normandy left the area,” Liara said. “They actually did quite a bit of mining, besides all of the, ah, additional projects discovered. The metal went somewhere. But the data was erased before we could shift through it.”

Shepard laced her fingers behind her head, and took a deep breath, feeling her ribs expand. Pressing the comm panel, she called the bridge. “Joker? If we headed to the Acheron system now instead of the Indris System, how long out of the way would that be?”

Shepard, it’s twenty-two hundred hours. You’re really going to make me calculate this now?

Twisting her torso a bit to loosen up, Shepard decided not to say anything.

You’re gonna make me calculate this now. Fine, you win. Well, it looks like you’re in luck, Shepard. We’re heading to the Horseshoe Nebula anyway to get to Camala. Going to Acheron will only add three hours, tops. It’s the Mass Relay system.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Shepard said, letting out a sigh of relief. “Take us to Altahe.”

And I was so looking forward to you making demands of the batarians, too.

Her shoulders dropped slightly. “You’ll still get the chance, don’t worry. Shepard out.”

She closed the channel and faced Liara. “We’ll let you know what we find out, Liara. Thank you.”

“I’m glad to help,” Liara said, her face brightening.

“So how’s the life of the Shadow Broker?” Garrus asked.

“Very pleasant so far. Glyph sends his compliments; I’m able to have him up full time again. And…” Liara looked down and Shepard could swear she saw her cheeks darken. “Feron is staying aboard the ship, acting as my second, so to speak.”

“Good,” Shepard said with a smile. “ Wouldn’t want you to get lonely.”

“I’ve spent many years on dig sites by myself, you know.”

“True, but that was a different you, Liara,” Shepard said, thinking of just how much Liara had changed over the years. Sometimes she truly missed the shy archaeologist. “Things change. People change.” She scratched the back of her neck. “But I think that’s a conversation for a different day. I’d like to jump on this lead.”

“Understood,” Liara said. “I’ll keep in touch.”

The QEC dimmed and Liara disappeared. Shepard quickly pinged the information on Altahe to Garrus. “This is your mission, Garrus,” she said, not quite meeting his eye. “If we’re heading to a facility with people controlled by Leviathan, it’s probably best I don’t go down.” A sigh escaped. Most of the time, she barely even thought about her deafness, except when she wanted to experience silence. This would be the first real time that her hearing impairment would keep her from doing her job. She had to say she didn’t like it. “We need to figure out the issue with my implants.”
“We will,” Garrus said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Just hasn’t been time.”

Shepard nodded in agreement. Time always seemed to be the problem, no matter what they did. “I’m going to inform the science team about this facility. If Leviathan is really building a weapon, Conrad might be able to figure out what others materials Liara should search for.” She looked up to get Garrus’ opinion only to see his mandibles spread out in a smirk. “What?”

In response, Garrus simply crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall, still smirking. She couldn’t help but laugh. “Why are you grinning like that?”

“I just want to appreciate the fact that we now live in a galaxy where you look to Conrad Verner for answers.” He stood up and started walking and Shepard followed. “Truly the dawn of a new era.”

Shepard could only shake her head. Times truly had changed, hadn’t they

“We get clearance yet, Cortez?” Garrus asked, trying not to hover over the shuttle pilot.

“I’m going to have to circle around again,” Cortez said. He started pressing the interface but stopped almost as quickly as he started. Cocking his head, Cortez added, “Yes, I have two people here for a tour. We already arranged it ahead of time. Permission to land?”

Garrus looked to the back of the shuttle. Kasumi looked a picture of calm, leaning back in her seat, legs crossed at the knee and hands folded demurely in her lap. James stood, wearing a non-descript set of armor, with no Alliance markings.

“We’re all set, Garrus,” Cortez said. “Landing now.”

“Let’s hope this works,” Garrus said, under his breath.

“It will,” Kasumi said cheerfully. “Who doesn’t want the chance to show off their mining facilities?”

Infiltrating Altahe on the guise of a tour for potential buyers had been Kasumi’s idea. Shepard had thought to simply land like they did on Mahavid and let themselves in, but decided a slight of hand might be easier.

Felt strange to be on an Alliance shuttle leading a team with Alliance personnel. He thought back to the shuttle bay, in the middle of gear checks, talking strategy, while Shepard stood on the sidelines, looking slightly lost. Part of him wanted to say, implants be damned, lead us, but they truly couldn’t take that chance. He’d like to think just once they could make it through a mission without a fight, but he knew better. Much better.

At least they knew no Reapers would be knocking at the front door this time.

The shuttle landed and Garrus checked the seals of his helmet as James and Kasumi put on their breathing masks. “Cloaking!” Kasumi said as she disappeared. A force field shimmered into view, protecting Cortez from the nitrogen and ethane atmosphere.

A warm blast of air hit Garrus as the doors opened. If they could remove their helmets, he had no doubt he’d love the temperature, almost as warm as Palaven should be.

Garrus took a moment to check their surroundings. He hadn’t been part of Shepard’s ground team last time they came to Altahe, so the high winds and basaltic rocks were all new to him. The facility
in front of them was much smaller than the one on Mahavid, thank the Spirits. Wouldn’t be nearly as easy for anyone to hide in a place like this. The buildings were grey, not quite as dark as the sky. No windows, which Garrus had to think made a gloomy working environment.

**Garrus?**

He turned off his helmet mic so no one outside could hear him. “Yeah, Shepard?”

*DEAR just finished the detailed scan on the planet. Only one artifact.*

“What’s the call?” Garrus asked. He stopped walking, wanting the decision made before they walked into the building. Shepard hadn’t quite made up her mind about what to do with the artifact when they left the *Normandy*.

*We’ve no guarantee that simply removing the artifact will affect these people. Destroy it.*

He took a breath, painfully aware that James, Kasumi, Joker and who knew who else could hear him speak. It would be one thing voicing his opinion in the privacy of their quarters. In public, even when this part of the mission belonged to him, was a completely different matter.

“Shepard, worst case scenario—”

*We’ve already gone over this, Garrus. These people deserve their lives back.*

She sounded curt, and he wondered how much of that had to do with the fact that she stood on the ship and he stood planetside. The thought they were giving away their plan to Leviathan scared the crap out of him, but Shepard had made her decision and when it came down to it, he trusted Shepard, sometimes more than he trusted himself. “Then let’s go give it back to them. Kasumi, when we get inside, you know what to do.”

“I do like exploring new places,” the thief said happily.

As they reached the gates, Garrus turned his helmet mic back on and pressed the console. “Officer Talid and Scott Rodriguez here for the tour,” he said. If Leviathan wanted to hunt, they decided fake names would be better than real ones. Vakarian was simply too closely associated with the name Shepard these days. Not that he minded.

The gates opened and Garrus realized thanks to the wind and the dust, he could see the outline of Kasumi’s tactical cloak. They’d have to hope that their greeters simply didn’t notice. A short walk lead them to the main building and Garrus dreaded to think what sort of maintenance he’d have to do on his guns after this mission was over. He *hated* dust getting in his weapons.

Now that they were inside, Garrus couldn’t see Kasumi whatsoever. He quickly switched to a private channel. “Have fun, Kasumi.” Even listening as carefully as he could, he wasn’t able to tell which direction Kasumi went off to.

Two human women, both wearing scientific uniforms too big for them, walked towards Garrus and James. With the doors shut safely behind them, Garrus took off his helmet, balancing it on his hip as James removed his breathing mask. He purposely didn’t wear his visor on the off chance someone would recognize it and missed it, used to the numbers and the insights that it gave him during missions.

“Welcome to Altahe Mining Company,” the dark-skinned woman droned. Garrus felt a chill run down the back of his carapace. She sounded exactly like the men on Mavahid.
One of his first missions on the Citadel with Shepard had been undercover work, picking up an experimental mod from a weapons dealer for Chellik. Garrus had wanted to do everything by the book, even making them stop so he could change out of his C-Sec uniform, even though he could tell Shepard wanted nothing more than to fly through the pile of errands that fell into her lap. Even with her annoyance, Garrus enjoyed the setup. Maybe it satisfied some sense of the dramatic in him. Hopefully he’d be able to pull off today’s job just as well.

He forced the revulsion away and stuck out his hand. “Officer Talid for the Pheiros Magnet Corporation,” Garrus said. The woman simply looked at his hand, making no movement, causing Garrus to bring his hand back to his side. Great start. “We’re in need of a new supplier, thanks to the war. Thought we’d check you good folk out.”

Okay, this place is freaky, Kasumi said in his ear. Without wearing his helmet, Garrus couldn’t respond.

No, seriously. Someone here’s been dissecting those shifty looking cow thingies, the ones with the arms. There are three corpses here. No artifact though. Still looking!

“You made an appointment,” the other woman, a blonde, said, tilting her head. “You belong here.”

“Er… thanks,” Garrus said, trying not to stare at the dead look in the woman’s eyes. Shepard was right. No one deserved this fate a minute longer than they absolutely had to. “Perhaps we could begin?”

“Follow me, please,” the first woman said, leading them through the generic corridors. Garrus couldn’t help but think the place put some of the Protheans ruins he’d been in to shame. “Altahe Mining Company was founded in 1923 by an asari matriarch. Now, it is owned by a volus businessman who trusts us to meet our quotas.”

“And do you?” Garrus asked.

The women stopped walking and Garrus tried not to cringe at his obvious question. “We will be able to satisfy your demand for the metal,” the dark haired woman said. Garrus almost wished they would stop talking. Their voices… This could be everyone’s future if this wasn’t stopped before it started. “Shall we continue?”

“Of course,” Garrus said, linking his hands behind his back. “Lead the way.”

The group started to walk again and Garrus kept his mouth shut as the guide pointed out different areas: the accounting room, the break room for employees or the quality assurance area. Each room they passed, employees would stop what they were in the middle of and stare.

“Where do you do the actual mining?” James asked.

“They are below ground,” one guide said stated. “Visitors are not allowed.”

“Not allowed?” Garrus asked, furrowing his brow plates.

Already on it, Kasumi said. Heading to the mines now.

“Perhaps we could see the distribution center,” Garrus said, keeping his voice casual.

I found a room that’s locked by the mine entrance. Just need a minute…

Garrus pictured Shepard in the War Room, probably pacing, waiting for something to happen. He always hated it when she left him behind on ground missions, wanting to have her back. Then there was just the assurance that if something had happened on a mission, he would be there. Never
realized how much he would want her by his side when the tables were turned.

This lock is good, Kasumi said. They’ve actually managed to impress me. Stall them a little longer, please.

He fell back on his days as an investigator, letting the suspect do the talking, and continued to ask open-ended questions.

I’m in. Destroy it?

Garrus let Shepard answer this one.

Do it, Shepard said in his ear.

You know, usually I’m stealing these things, not destroying them. Ah well.

Garrus brought his hand up to scratch his neck, waiting for the moment when Leviathan’s hold on these people would end. One breath. Two.

Both guides suddenly slouched and took large gasps of air. One put her hands on her knees, while other’s eyes shut tight, heel of her palm rubbing her temples. “What just happened?” the blonde asked, her voice full of shock.

Around him, the other employees all were looking around bright eyed, unsure of what exactly had happened. Garrus felt a bit of pride in his gizzard, knowing they had taken away something from Leviathan.

Padok’s running another scan. It’ll be just a moment, Shepard said.

“Who are you?” the dark haired woman asked Garrus, noticing him for the first time. Her body tensed as she took a step back.

“Advisor Garrus Vakarian,” Garrus said. “I’m on a mission with Commander Shepard.” He didn’t know if name dropping would help in this case, but it didn’t hurt.

“Commander Shepard is dead,” the blonde said. “We all saw the vids last week. The Normandy was destroyed.”

The words felt like a crack in Garrus’ carapace. Even though he knew Shepard was anything but dead, it still brought him back to the moment he learned of her death the first time. He had been so angry at her back then, after she stole the Normandy. And then to see a news brief on his lunch break that she had died…

Padok says the planet is clear, Shepard said. Garrus flicked out his mandibles, trying to clear his head, letting her voice calm him. Shepard was alive. I’ve contacted the Alliance. They’ll have a ship out here in six hours. In the meantime, Cortez is going to pick up Chakwas.

“Sounds good, Shepard,” Garrus said. He focused on the two women in front of him. “You think it’s 2183, it’s actually 2187.”

Both guides started talking at once and Garrus held up his hands, feeling pity for these people. He tried to think how he’d want to he told if he’d lost four years of his life. Quick and matter of factly, he decided.

“An Extraction team is on its way. In the meantime, I’d like to gather all the employees in one central
room so our doctor can take a look.”

“What you’re saying is impossible,” the blonde said. She crossed her arms over her chest and held her chin high. “Four years? How could we have lost four years?”

“I know it doesn’t seem possible, but we’ll get you through this.” Garrus said.

“This was supposed to be a six month contract. I have a two year old daughter,” the dark haired woman said. Garrus saw the tears in her eyes. “I haven’t been here for four years.”

“I’m sorry,” Garrus said, unsure of how to comfort the woman. “I know this will be difficult for you, but I’d like to move everyone to one location.”

Kasumi walked through the door then, uncloaked. “Well that was fun.”

The blonde stared at Kasumi, open mouthed. “Give me one reason why I should take the word of three people, none of you in any sort of military uniform, that what you said happened, actually happened?”

“I’m Alliance, ma’am,” James said. A hint of pride entered his voice as he added, “N1, actually. Lieutenant James Vega.”

The women looked like they didn’t believe Vega, so Garrus decided to take a different tactic. “What’s your name?” he asked, trying to sound gentle.

Staring at Garrus, the woman said, “Penny.”

“Penny, I know I’m asking you to believe the impossible. It’ll get even worse when you hear what’s happened over the last couple of years.” Garrus paused, wondering if he would believe what was said if he stood in their shoes. Probably not. “But we have a doctor from the Alliance on her way down and we’d like to make sure everyone is doing okay.”

Penny uncrossed her arms and looked at the floor. “Four years?” Her voice sounded unsure, but he could hear a hint of acceptance.

Garrus wanted to say he’d seen worse, that he’d come across people who had lost ten years of their lives to Leviathan. But that would raise more questions than he cared to answer right now.

Chakwas will be there any minute, Shepard said. Cortez and Traynor will be with her, to boost the Alliance presence. Just keep them calm until then.

The next six hours were a bundle of heartbreak, listening to the employees talk as they waited for Chakwas to examine them, trying to figure out how they could have missed so much in their lives. Garrus answered what questions he could, but painting the bleak picture of the post-Reapers reality was never fun for anyone.

Garrus tried to piece together how Leviathan got away with this. These people had families, people who cared for them. How did none of them fight to find out what happened here? Then again, he had disappeared for two years on Omega, and his family hadn’t ever done more than send him messages to which he rarely replied.

He tried to think what he would do if Shepard all but disappeared like these employees and quickly realized that nothing would be able to stop him until he knew the truth.

Once the extraction team arrived, the six members of the Normandy crew cleared out quickly. Garrus
wished he felt a different emotion than relief at seeing an N7 Alliance officer introduce herself and her squad, ready to take over. But now all he wanted was to have a quick debriefing and then remind himself and Shepard that she was thoroughly alive.

Shepard waited in the shuttle bay, behind the forcefield, while the shuttle docked. Garrus watched her on the viewscreen, feeling only relief at the sight of her again, as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, arms crossed over her chest.

“Good job, everyone,” Garrus told the crew as they disembarked.

“Was nice to get out of the ship for once,” Chakwas said, adjusting her medical bag. “Though I didn’t particularly enjoy the reason.”

“Debriefing in the war room,” Shepard told everyone. “We’ll meet there in an hour.”

The crew scattered, Vega and Kasumi to the armory to check their weapons, while Cortez, Traynor and Chakwas left the shuttle bay altogether. Garrus jerked his head, silently asking Shepard to follow him behind the shuttle.

Shielded by the shuttle, Garrus rested a gloved hand against her neck and drank her in. She looked at him with a curious expression on her face. “Are you alright?”

He thrummed, a low mournful sound. “Don’t like that there were people out there who thought you dead,” he said honestly.

Her face softened as she weaved her fingers in his. “Well, they know the truth now.”

One step forward and he brushed his brow against hers. “Just don’t do it again,” he said, his voice quiet as he placed his free hand on her waist.

It didn’t surprise him when she made no response, instead just closing her eyes. Shepard knew better not to make promises she couldn’t keep.
The Five of Swords, Upright

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*The Five of Swords, Upright:* Defeat, loss, failure, a need to accept the inevitable and swallow pride. Negative thoughts and attitudes.

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“Trying out a new look, Commander?” Traynor said as Shepard walked onto the CIC.

Shepard looked down at her outfit - a pair of dark blue trousers, regulation boots and a short-sleeved black blouse - since wearing her BDU didn’t quite feel right any longer. No rank insignia or Alliance symbol to be found.

“I’m going for not-quite military casual,” Shepard said with a shrug, trying to make light of her experiment. “We’ll see if it works.”

“Very chic,” Traynor said, leaning against her workstation, a sly smile on her face. “If Diana Allers was still on board and reporting, I bet you could start a whole new trend.”

“Never again,” Shepard said, her jaw clenching when she thought of Allers. There were times Shepard didn’t feel comfortable in her own ship back then, knowing anything the reporter heard or saw could be considered fair game. “Military ships and reporters do not mix.”

The elevator doors opened and Cortez walked out, holding two cups of coffee. He handed one to Shepard. “Ready when you are, Shepard.”

“Don’t I get a coffee?” Traynor asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Are you my commanding officer?” Cortez said, taking a sip from his own cup.

Hearing the casual banter pleased Shepard more than she could say. Granted, the *Normandy* had only left Earth two weeks ago, but everyone still seemed in good spirits. She hoped morale would stay high, considering just how open-ended the mission seemed to be.

Their next stop was Camala and once there, they would make the decision if making a trip to Thessia would be worth the resources. Perhaps she should start scanning again. They could never, ever have enough element zero on hand. But after that, what Shepard did next would be in the Council’s hands. She just wished she trusted the Council to make the right decision. Hopefully her recommendation would be enough to guide them.

Shepard knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to destroy all the damn artifacts and find the three planets where Leviathan resided, and then quarantine them. If Leviathan couldn’t get their hands on thralls, problem solved.

Somehow Shepard didn’t think it would be as easy as that, though. Already she worried. What if Leviathan took control of this place or that? Would she even know if they had? Fighting the Reapers was a cakewalk compared to Leviathan. Damn Reapers just came blaring down, announcing their presence to the world they intended to conquer. Leviathan… They were a blanket of fog, where you didn’t even realize you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face until it’s too late.

But she would figure it out. She and Garrus and the entire damn crew of the *Normandy* would figure
“Alright, with me, Cortez,” Shepard said after taking a sip of coffee. No sense worrying about the what-ifs when she had work to do. She’d leave that for her off-duty hours, which seemed to decrease with each passing day. Those peaceful evenings with Garrus in the prefab felt like a dream sometimes. She missed those moments. Looking at Traynor, she added, “Let me know if you find anything interesting.”

“Will do,” Traynor said, her attention back on her workstation.

Their footsteps seemed to echo loudly in the fairly empty CIC. Only six crew members on duty, when during the height of the war, every station had a body, ready to salute and follow her orders without question. The dynamic felt different, she found, without an immediate threat to their lives.

The cockpit door opened automatically and Joker turned around in his chair. “Oh boy, Shepard and Shuttle Guy today!”

“It’s your lucky day,” Shepard said dryly. “So how’s everything up here?”

“Camala is a nightmare, Shepard,” Joker said, his voice turning serious. “We don’t have a permit yet to orbit the planet.”

“We need a permit to orbit the planet?” Shepard asked, trying to hold back her frustration. No other planet had a restrictions like that. “I can understand to land, but just to orbit?”

Cortez brought up his omni-tool. “Reapers killed almost ninety percent of the population here, Shepard. A lot of the cannibals you fought during the war were from here.”

Shepard ran her hand over her head. “And I can’t evoke SPECTRE authority because the batarians don’t recognize the Council. Just great.”

“I’ve been in contact with Governor Pazness’ aide,” Cortez said. Shepard heard the familiar ping of a data transfer and brought up her own omni-tool. “He seems to want to help. I’m hoping to have everything settled by the time we get there.”

“Good,” Shepard said, skimming Cortez’s report. Her face turned serious and she allowed a hint of censure to enter her voice. “And gentlemen, I appreciate you taking the initiative to deal with this, but in the future, I really need to be informed of these developments.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cortez and Joker said in unison.

“How long before we reach the planet?” Shepard asked, lightening her tone so they knew the dressing-down had finished.

“Three hours,” Joker said. “But don’t worry, I found us a place to park if we need one. Sweet little moon orbiting the fourth planet in the system.” He grinned, slow and sly. “I checked and there’s a shitload of platinum down there if you want to do some scanning, Shepard.”

She rolled her eyes. “You laugh, but scanning’s a great way to beat insomnia,” she said, thinking of all the nights they would stop by planets to try to find some resources. Four billion credits Cerberus spent to reconstruct her and they had refused to hand her the company credit card. Crossing her arms over her chest, Shepard glanced at some of Joker’s screens. Truth be told, she didn’t really know how to read any of them. She supposed at some point, she really needed to learn every aspect of the Normandy. Until then, she’d be content finding competent people to do their jobs and do them well. It did get them through the Reaper War after all.
“Let me know the moment you hear something,” Shepard asked. “Cortez, you’re in charge of the CIC. I’m going to talk to Wiks.”

Cortez nodded, and Shepard walked out of the cockpit, unbuttoning the top button of her blouse, feeling too constricted otherwise. Her hands went to where pockets should be, and she groaned, realizing the pair she pulled on this morning had none. She’d just have to try a new look tomorrow.

Fitch stood in the mess, making sandwiches for lunch. As soon as the Yeoman saw her, she moved the coffee machine, probably to put on a fresh pot. Shepard gave her a nod as she walked into Liara’s old room, now Padok’s office. There was no trace of Liara left in the room. All of the terminals and viewscreens were gone, replaced by flat surfaces, full of machines and gadgets. The engineer in her wanted to tinker with everything; to take things apart and not put them back together again until she understood just what made them tick.

Instead, she sat down, folding her hands in her lap so she wouldn’t be tempted to touch anything. “You wanted a word, Padok?” she asked.

“Received some information from the STG today,” Padok said, sounding cheerful as he stood at a console. “We finally discovered the operative who informed Cerberus of the female krogans.”

“Really?” Shepard said, crossing her legs. It had been a mystery at the time, and Shepard hated mysteries. “We always assumed indoctrination was involved.”

Padok nodded, handing Shepard a report. “That’s a correct assumption. It was an STG operative, Ganto Imness.”

Shepard repeated the name in her head, trying to figure out why it sounded familiar. And then she remembered. “I let him go on Virmire,” she said, her voice dry as dead leaves. She folded her hands in her lap so tightly she could see her knuckles turning white. “Does the STG blame me?”

“No,” Padok said, shaking his head. Shepard heard no censure in his voice, only honesty. But it didn’t matter, because already Shepard blamed herself. How could they have known? The idea of indoctrination had been so new then. How were they supposed to have any idea what the consequences would be for a decision made almost five years ago? “But they did want to make sure you were aware of what happened.”

“Of course they did,” Shepard muttered. She could just picture Dalatrass Linron, back in salarian space, one of the systems better off after the war, making sure this information made its way to Shepard. She stood up, suddenly feeling the past of this room closing in on her, the memories of conversations with Miranda, then Liara, everyone always needed something, wanting pieces of her until she had nothing left to give. “Is there anything else?”

Padok blinked rapidly, and Shepard forced herself to stay still. Her feelings of annoyance had nothing to do with Padok. It would be completely unjust to take it out on him. “I wondered, Shepard, if I could ask a personal question.”

Shepard raised her brow in surprise. “Why not?” she said, sitting back down. She had time, and it would be good to get to know Padok a bit more. Part of her wondered if he felt like the odd man out all on the ship, being the only one who hadn’t worked with her on a previous mission. Though she had heard through the grapevine that he seemed to be making friends; he and Samara seemed to speak a great deal.

He seemed pleased by her consent and rubbed his hands together. “I’ve been curious,” he said, sitting down across from her. “What was it like being dead?”
She let out a low whistle. “Not many people have the quads to ask me that.” Not even Garrus had asked her anything about those two years. Miranda had, of course, but at the time, Miranda seemed to feel like she had right to every aspect of Shepard’s life, both on-duty and off.

“Do you believe in a religion?” Padok asked, tilting his head. Shepard suddenly had the feeling that she was under observation.

The truth was she didn’t know. She had vague memories of attending church as a child, then mosque with a foster family. She winced, thinking about the Khalibs and Yasmin. But then fate drove her to the Alliance and orders became her religion. ICT cemented the idea, especially when bomb diffusion became her specialty. She had worshiped guns and tech and anything that could help her feel alive until the next mission.

Religion never seemed to matter, not when she went to each mission expecting to die.

Garrus believed in turian spirits, a belief that seemed to have only gotten stronger the past few years. Shepard liked the idea of spirits, especially because they made no demands. Quiet deities without the need to be worshiped was something she could believe in. Unlike Leviathan and their quest for thralls.

“I’m not sure,” Shepard said, deciding to turn around the question, not quite ready to answer. “What do you believe?”

“I believe in the originator,” Padok said at once, a quiet conviction Shepard couldn’t help but feel slightly jealous of. “The being that started this all. I have to believe that every species in this galaxy, even in this universe, serves some greater purpose. Even Leviathan.”

“Their job was creating the Reapers,” Shepard said bitterly.

“True enough, but they might have another role to play.”

*Commander,* came Cortez’s voice over the intercom.

She stood up, stretching her arms behind her back. “Anything from Camala?”

The pause before Cortez spoke again told Shepard plenty. *It’s not… good news.*

With a quick wave to Padok, Shepard started out the door. “Page Garrus and meet us in the war room.”

#

“What do you mean I can’t go down there?” Shepard asked, crossing her arms over her chest. The batarian on the QEC tilted his head to the right, and Shepard took a step closer. “I don’t appreciate your insults.”

The batarian straightened. “You heard what I said, Butcher of Aratoht,” the man said, practically snarling. “We will not have you polluting our planet.”

Shepard put her hands behind her back, opening her chest up a bit, a sign of humbling oneself. She only remembered a few of the batarian body language cues now, when back in N7 training she could list off dozens. “We’ve been in contact with Pazness’ aide-”

“And he’s been dealt with,” the batarian said. “The only reason we’ve kept ran-Perah alive is out of Pazness’ memory. He wanted the batarians to work on our galactic policies, but looked where that
got him. Dead.”

One of the things she had learned over the years was when to pick her battles. She had no chance at winning this one. “Fine. I’ll stay on the ship, and my second will go down.”

“We’ll accept that,” the batarian said, bringing up his omni-tool. “You have permission to orbit and to bring one shuttle down to the surface for six hours.”

“How generous,” Shepard said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “Any other restrictions?”

The batarian tilted his head to the right again. Smug bastard, Shepard thought. The man held all the cards and he knew it. “Yes, actually. As I’m sure you can imagine in these times, security paramount. Therefore there can be no communication between your ground team and your ship.”

“Absolutely not,” Shepard responded at once. “I need to be able-”

“You are in no place to make demands, Butcher of Aratoht,” the batarian said, the venom in his voice unsettling Shepard a bit. She refused to show it though. “Your shuttle can let you know it arrived safely, but we will not compromise Camala’s safety for anyone.”

Shepard folded her hands in front of her, acquiescing not just in words, but in her body language. “I accept your terms. Shepard out.”

With far too much force, she pressed the interface, ending the transmission. That impotent feeling threatened her again. First Altahe, now Camala. When would it end? The thought of sending Garrus down to the surface and not being able to find out what was going on galled. But Shepard trusted Garrus, more than anyone. He would know the questions to ask and get the information needed.

“Shepard?” Garrus asked behind her.

“Looks like you’re running this one, too,” she said, hands on her hips, not turning towards him. “I had thought to bring Samara down with us. Apparently batarians have some respect for Justicars, but bring who you want.”

“James,” Garrus replied quickly. “I want some sort of Alliance presence down there with me.”

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her palms. “Good thinking. How soon can you be ready?”

“Give us an hour and we’ll be on the planet.”

#

The Butcher of Aratoht.

Shepard slid her palms down her thighs and tried not to let the words overwhelm her. The first time she killed a person - a living, breathing person - it had taken some time before she wanted to pick up a gun again. And then when she started with explosives, all she had to do was build a bomb and other people did the dirty work for her.

Kill one man and you are a murderer. Kill millions and you are a conqueror, Shepard heard once. Choosing which path to walk down in the Crucible, she had effectively touched every being in the galaxy. Even so, it was the smaller decisions that weighed on her shoulders.

Why had Benning been more important than other colonies being attacked by Reapers? Why had she chased down artifacts and treasures when she could have been out there helping the evacuations?
How many men and women joined Cerberus because Commander Shepard had been a part of it? Conrad couldn’t have been the only one. So many little decisions she had made since stepping onto the SR-1 the first time.

Seemed like a million years had passed since she first saw the Normandy. Oh she had such plans back then. Shepard wanted to be Anderson’s second for years, learning as much as she could before getting a ship of her own. But when had fate ever let her go through with her plans anyway? If Shepard had her way at 18, she would been a student at MIT and a structural engineer for a colony. And at 23, all she wanted was to join the Alliance Engineering Corps, but then a Thresher Maw changed everything.

Would she have been happier on either of those paths? Building and creating instead of killing and destroying? But who would have stopped Saren? Or the Collectors? The Reapers? And eventually Leviathan?

Perhaps she would have been happier for a time, working for a colony or the AEC, but the awful truth was she would also probably be dead.

The silence of the war room felt unnatural, almost unnerving, like a tomb. There was no comfort in this silence, not like when the silence was her choice. Strange how a quiet room could feel artificial to Shepard now while the silence she experienced without her implants seemed perfectly normal.

A light appeared on her console, the one signal the batarians allowed Cortez to send, letting her know they arrived safely on the planet. Shepard took a breath, knowing she had a long six hours ahead of her.

She turned off her implants, relaxing at once, and plowed into a stack of datapads. Time seemed to crawl as Shepard went over requisition requests, SPECTRE reports, the latest intelligence from the Alliance.

Only three hours after the shuttle landed, did Shepard realize that the signal light had activated. She stood, twisting her torso a few times, trying to shake off the feeling of disuse. Once she turned her implants back on, she stared at the datapads she hadn’t finished. EDI would have done those reports during the war. Shepard’s heart lurched, thinking about EDI and how much she came to depend on the AI.

And now she and the geth were gone, all thanks to an unfucking fair choice.

Shepard pushed the thoughts aside as she started her way to the cargo bay. Once in the elevator to the shuttle bay, she tried putting her hands in her pockets with no success. “Why do I even own these?” she asked out loud, before remembering she kept them because of a compliment Garrus paid her once. Well, compliments weren’t worth the hassle of no pockets.

As the elevator doors opened, Shepard winced at the sound of the alarm, warning those in the shuttle bay to get behind a forcefield as the shuttle docked. Shepard nodded to Ng and Watson, two of her engineers, as they stepped next to her. The forcefield activated and Shepard waited as the shuttle bay doors opened.

There was something majestic about being so close to space. She had worried, once, that space wouldn’t be the same after dying out in its vastness. But Shepard didn’t have to worry; she still loved it. Loved the mysteries and especially loved the possibilities.

The shuttled glided into the Normandy effortlessly before docking. Shepard crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for the shuttle bay doors to close and the area to become pressurized again. And
within minutes, Garrus and the others exited the shuttle. “Debriefing in an hour,” she told them, trying to get some idea of how things went based on everyone’s body language. Samara looked serene as always, while James fidgeted a bit. Garrus’ mandible were drawn in tight to his face, which told her things either didn’t go as planned or he had bad news. Or both.

“No need to wait, Shepard,” Garrus said. “We barely broke a sweat down there.”

Shepard tilted her head and the sorrow she heard in his subvocals. What had happened down there? “Alright,” Shepard said. “Let’s head to the war room now, then.”

A few minutes later, the four of them were back in the war room. “Shit,” Vega said, settling into one of the chairs. He slumped as he covered his eyes with a hand.

“Overview?” Shepard asked, looking at Garrus.

Scratching the back of his neck, Garrus said, “Same thing as the others. Everything went cold and dark and he didn’t know he had killed Pazness. Apparently the two were actually really good friends.” Garrus sighed, a deep one that seemed to use every cell in his body. “The batarians destroyed the artifact Ran’perah had with him, so that’s good, I guess.”

“It is disconcerting how easily Leviathan controls people,” Samara said softly.

“The batarians give you guys any trouble down there?” Shepard asked.

Garrus shook his head. “Samara was a huge help.”

“They respect the Justicars,” Samara said. “Many species called Camala home before the war. But with so much of their population decimated, I do not believe their world will open up again soon.”

“Would you?” James asked. “You saw that Reaper processing camp. I didn’t see anything that bad on Earth.”

Just the words *processing camps* set Shepard on edge, feeling a cool sort of dread glaze over her skin. Every planet the Reapers invaded had horror stories like the processing camps. Some camps turned living beings into Reapers, like cannibals or husks, while others continued the work of the Collectors, even after Shepard had destroyed them.

“Any luck on getting Ran’perah out of batarian custody?” Shepard asked. It was a long shot, but the Council hoped the batarians might be willing to let them take custody of the Ran-perah, since he had been working for an multi-species Alliance team.

The war room went silent, never a good sign.

“What happened?” Shepard asked, her voice quiet.

“Fucking wrong, man,” James muttered.

“There were batarian officials in the room, listening to every word we said,” Garrus said.

“To be fair,” Samara said, her voice not quite the steady solace Shepard was used to, “the turians had someone listen in on Shepard’s conversation with Corinthus and it would be naive to assume Aria did not have the prison cell where I spoke to T’Prim bugged as well.”

Garrus flexed his mandibles, a move Shepard understood as him conceding Samara’s point. “They killed him, Shepard,” Garrus said, his subvocals betraying his pain. “The moment I said we had what
we needed, they shot him in the head.”

Shepard blinked a few times, curling her fists tightly. And they dared to call her a butcher. She wanted to be outraged on Ran-perah’s behalf, on the Alliance’s behalf, but she couldn’t find it in herself to muster the emotion. This was a tragedy, certainly, but how could she find the energy to fight for one man when she needed to fight for millions? “We’ll let the Council know,” Shepard said after a moment, wondering if the person she used to be, the one who walked her original path would let this go so easily. “They can decide what they want to do about it.”

“Understood,” Garrus said quietly.

“They won’t do shit,” James said, pounding the arm of his chair with his fist. “So we just have to watch a man get his brains blown out and do nothing.”

“It is not the Normandy’s role to correct every wrong in the galaxy,” Samara said. Shepard heard the pain in her voice and wondered how much it cost the Justicar to stand there, watch a man be killed and do nothing. “There is only so much one ship can do.”

“Truer words, Samara, truer words,” Shepard said. “So now we just have to decide if it’s worth going to Thessia to talk to the other T’Prim or go back to earth to wait for the Council to decide what to do next.”

And as if fate had everything tied up in a neat little bow, Joker’s voice came over the intercom.

Shepard, I’ve got a priority communication from the Council.

“Thanks, Joker,” Shepard said, shaking her head. She looked at Samara and James, who both simply nodded and headed towards the door. Once they left, Shepard added, “Patch it through.”

Shepard? Antella here. I need you to head to Dagnes right away. There’s a situation brewing.

“Regarding Leviathan?” Shepard asked, bringing up her omni-tool and searching for the planet; she hadn’t heard of it before.

Regarding the krogan. Dagnes is a salarian breeding colony. A group of krogan attacked it, going specifically after the eggs. They managed to destroy some, too, before they were stopped.

“Send over everything you can, please,” Shepard asked. She knew she should ask questions, try to get as much information as she could. But reading a report will give her just as much information.

The transmission was audio only, giving Shepard the chance to slouch in her chair. And here she thought things had been going so well with the krogan. Shepard felt her stomach turn and refused to believe this could be the start of bigger problems. Wrex wouldn’t allow it. Bakara wouldn’t allow it.

“Turians have anything to say about the incident?” Garrus asked.

Wrex has disavowed the attack, saying it was just some angry rebels. But I want you there, Shepard. If this gets ugly…

“The last thing we need is a situation between the salarians and turians,” Shepard sighed, and a tendril of worry coiled around her thoughts: would the galaxy truly ever know peace? “We’ll head there now.”

That’s what I hoped to hear, Shepard. The Council appreciates it. Antella, out.
Shepard ran her hand over her shaved head before Garrus took it in hers. She laughed, brittle and uncomfortable. While Garrus called her a peacemaker once, it was a mantle that never quite fit right on her shoulders. Never the less, she’d do whatever she could to help. “And here I thought we had gotten to the easy part of the mission.”
The High Priestess, Upright

The High Priestess, Upright: Intuition, wisdom and secret knowledge, the feminine side of the male personality. Something remains yet to be revealed, but patience must be observed. Duality and mystery.

“Talk to me, Wrex,” Shepard said, staring at Wrex through the screen of her console.

“What do you want me to say, Shepard?” Wrex asked. He held a tiny blue krogan in his arms - Solus - if Shepard remembered correctly. “Half a dozen krogan from Clan Nakmor attacked the colony. Eight salarians were killed and a couple of eggs smashed.”

“I have the same report-”

“I’ve already disavowed their actions,” Wrex said, moving Solus to his other shoulder. Even with a baby on his shoulder, Shepard knew they weren’t talking as friends at the moment, but as politicians. And she hated it. “There are three billion krogan out in the galaxy, Shepard. You and the Council can’t hold me personally responsible for every single damn one of them.”

The now all too familiar throb appeared behind Shepard’s left temple. “I’m not saying this is your fault, Wrex,” she said. “But you are the defacto leader of the kro-”

“Look at Cerberus,” Wrex snapped. Shepard wanted to wince at the harshness in his voice, but she stood firm. “Do I blame you for them? For almost getting Bakara killed? No.”

You should, Shepard thought to herself, the reality of what Padok told her earlier resurfacing. If she had simply killed Ganto Imness, Cerberus might never had gotten wind of the female krogan on Sur’Kesh. “You’re right, Wrex,” Shepard said, hearing the weariness in her voice. She wanted a hot shower and a good night’s sleep, two things she didn’t think would be happening any time soon.

Wrex nodded and at once his posture changed and he was her friend again. “Glad you can see reason, Shepard. Maybe the Dalatrass will be able to as well.”

“I’ll deal with her,” Shepard said, letting her shoulders relax a bit as she rubbed her temple. “So how’s Tuchanka?”

“Come over and see for yourself,” Wrex said immediately. Shepard smiled at the humor in his voice. But then he held up Solus and his face looked softer than she had ever seen. “I don’t have words, Shepard. Everywhere I go there are children. Children.”

Shepard felt a flutter in her stomach as an idea branched out in her thoughts. Even through the viewscreen, she could see how much Wrex loved the child in his arms and Shepard wondered how long it would be before she and Garrus had the same chance. The picture of Garrus, a proud father, carrying a child of their own rooted in her brain and wouldn’t leave, causing her to put her hand over her mouth so her smile wouldn’t be too wide. “I’ll get out there as soon as I can, Wrex. That’s a promise. Just have to deal with these loose ends from the war.”

“Calling Leviathan a loose end? That’s a bit much, even for you,” Wrex said with a laugh.
She dipped her head in acknowledgment. “Point taken.”

“Have you told Shepard about our plans?” Bakara’s voice came from off-screen.

“Not yet,” Wrex said. “I can now.”

“I will,” Bakara said. “Can you see to Mordin? She’s acting up.”

Wrex sighed. “When doesn’t she?” he said. “Out of the three of them, Shepard, Mordin is more work than the other two combined.” He stood up, patting Solus gently on the back, who did not seem to appreciate being moved.

Bakara appeared on-screen then. “Hello, Commander,” she said. “Wrex and I have been in touch with the head of the various female clans and we have a plan.”

“Plans are good,” Shepard said. “Hit me.”

“It’s quite simple,” Bakara said. “We will make it known if there are other attacks like this, not only do the krogan involved lose all mating privileges, female krogans will refuse to allow anyone from their clans to sire their children.”

Using reproduction as an incentive for good behavior seemed almost barbaric, but thinking of the future, what choice did they have? “So if a krogan steps out of line and attacks, he’s hurting not just himself, but those closest to him?” Shepard asked.

“Exactly,” Bakara said. “I’m hoping it will be enough for now. And then in a few generations, this rule will hopefully no longer be needed.” Bakara tilted her head and Shepard wondered how a woman with most of her face covered could betray such emotion. Just the tilt of her head and the look in her eyes and Shepard could see her pain. “One other thing, Commander.”

“Of course,” Shepard said.

“I suppose I want to reassure you that we’re not going to have a population explosion,” Bakara said. “More than a year has passed since the genophage cure and the reality is settling in. We’re encouraging women to only have two clutches fertilized in their lifetime, and considering how long we live, that can be considered a sacrifice.

Shepard knew the shaman’s words would help assuage a number of fears across the galaxy. If it were truly the women in control of their own reproduction, perhaps things wouldn’t be as bad as some analysts predicted. She had been sent reports that made her cringe, predicting the krogan would cause another galactic war within the next hundred years. The reports all broke Shepard’s heart, but maybe things wouldn’t go down that route, not when women like Bakara were leading. “Thank you, Bakara,” Shepard said.

“I know you’re on your way to the colony. We’ve already sent condolences, but please do so again on our behalf in person,” Bakara said.

“I will.” She could think of nothing else to say, so with a nod, she ended the call and leaned back in her chair. Five minutes, Shepard decided. She’d take five minutes for herself and watch varren puppy vids. Maybe then the tension in her neck would dissipate a bit.

Her omni-tool screen was up and ready to search when Cortez’s voice came over the comm. Important news, Shepard.

Varren puppies would have to wait. “Bring it to the war room, Lieutenant.”
Two minutes later, Cortez handed her a datapad. “Reports show that Tolan was seen at the colony not long before the krogan attacked.”

_Crap._ “Looks like our day just got a hell of a lot more complicated,” Shepard said, looking over the datapad. “The other salarian on the Enthrallment Team, Rentola. He tried to kill a Dalatrass. Do we know if any high ranking salarians are at that colony?"

“You can tell from public records. The colony hasn’t exactly been forthcoming, though,” Cortez said.

“Of course not.” Shepard said with a sigh. “Alright. I want to go on the assumption that Leviathan sent Tolan to the colony on purpose and he was meant to kill someone. He had to arrive on a ship. Let’s check all traffic going in and out of the planet.”

“I’ll work with Traynor.”

“Let’s get it done.”

#

Garrus liked this world. Reminded him of Palaven a bit, though not in the whole ‘destroyed by Reapers’ sort of way. This place had been relatively untouched by the Reapers, much like Sur’Kesh. Hard not to feel a little bitter after walking on Earth and Palaven and seeing the destruction first hand. But the slight bitterness he felt in his gizzard wouldn’t keep him from enjoying the sun on his face.

Well, at least Padok confirmed there was no artifact on the planet. But that didn’t mean Tolan didn’t have one with him, though from reading all of Efron’s reports, Tolan had spent the least amount of time around the artifacts. Garrus thought of the shield Conrad designed, the one they banked on keeping them from Leviathan’s influence. So much depended on software. Scary to think about sometimes. Efron had wanted to send Tolan the schematics to his public account, so that he could upgrade his own shields, but Shepard put her foot down. If Tolan was under Leviathan’s control, the last thing she needed was handing them a copy of the specs to study and overcome.

Shepard walked a few feet in front of him, talking to the Dalatrass of the colony in a low voice. He couldn’t quite catch all the words, but he heard Wrex’s name more than once. After being sidelined for the last two missions, Garrus recognized the spring in her step. She must be glad to be off the _Normandy_ with the chance to do some good. Though Garrus still didn’t quite understand what Hackett hoped for by sending Shepard here, besides apologizing in person.

And technically, as Primarch Victus had reminded Garrus as they discussed the situation, this was an apology Shepard had no right to make. The turians had made the krogan their allies; their actions reflected on the Hierarchy, not the Alliance. If the Salarian Union wanted to lash out at someone, they should lash out at them. Garrus didn’t particularly like the idea of being at odds with the salarians, but no one quite seemed to trust their government at the moment, not when they were so willing to undermine the genophage during the war.

Shepard and the Dalatrass stopped in front of a small office building and Garrus took a few steps to join them, not content to stay at Shepard’s six for this conversation. He stood here not as a member of Shepard’s team, but as a representative of the Hierarchy. Had to admit, it felt a bit strange, with so much responsibility on his shoulders. But he had a job to do and he would do it.

“Tell Urdnot Wrex if there are any more attacks - I don’t care if they’re not sanctioned by him - the Salarian Union will respond,” the Dalatrass said angrily.
“Why don’t you tell me?” Garrus asked dryly. “The krogan are our allies.”

The Dalatrass shook her head. “What Primarch Victus was thinking when he made this deal with those barbarians, I’ll never know.”

“Those barbarians helped keep the Reapers at bay on Palaven. They more than won our respect, Dalatrass,” Garrus said, trying to keep his voice calm, but hearing a bit of anger leak into his subvocals. Shepard must have heard it too and stilled. Thankfully the Dalatrass didn’t seem to notice. “They are our allies.”

“As you’ve already said,” the Dalatrass said, crossing her arms over her chest. “We’ll consider the matter closed for now. But if this happens again…”

“You’ve made your thoughts very clear,” Shepard said. “I’ll let Urdnot Wrex know.”

The Dalatrass nodded and started to walk towards the building before turning back. “It speaks highly of the Council that they were willing to send you here personally, Shepard. Your efforts are not unappreciated.”

Garrus watched Shepard nod, noticing the tension in her neck, before they started back towards the shuttle. “Speaks highly of the Council, my ass,” Shepard muttered when they were out of earshot.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. “You’re not unappreciated, Shepard.”

His words had the desired effect, and she smiled, rubbing the back of her neck. But as quickly as the smile appeared, it left her face. “Prothean child, ten o’clock,” she said, her voice strained. Garrus looked, he always looked, when she told him one of her visions decided to pay a visit. And as always, he saw nothing. “I wish I knew if it was a boy or a girl.”

“What’s the child look like?” Garrus asked, softly, checking out her readings with his visor. Everything looked right. If only something was off, even just a little bit, maybe they could get a better idea of what caused these. “Mini version of Javik?”

“Sort of,” Shepard said just as quietly. “Their head is more round, the sides aren’t as developed. You know how Javik’s chin is almost a light aqua? Theirs is sort of mauve. They’re beautiful.” Her eyes close and she takes a breath. “Sometimes I forget that I have an entire race’s knowledge in my head. I wish I could get it out, share it somehow.”

“Maybe someday,” Garrus said, not wanting to think about all the times Shepard’s mind had been invaded, not now, anyway. “Let’s get back to the shuttle.”

They started walking and were quickly interrupted by a message on Shepard’s omni-tool. Garrus crossed his arms over his chest, recognizing the message tone, one from the Normandy. “We’re on our way back, Traynor,” Shepard said. “What’s so important it can’t wait.”

I think I found Tolan’s ship, Traynor said. It’s already left orbit, but I think I was able to decrypt his message to Orbital Control. I know where he’s going.

“Good work, Traynor,” Shepard said. “Send me the coordinates and tell Joker to prepare a course.”

Yes, ma’am.

Garrus let out a breath as they waited for the coordinates. They finally had some sort of break. If they could just reach Tolan and bring him in for questioning, perhaps there’d be one less murder out in the galaxy. Shepard’s omni-tool beeped and she showed him the planet name.
“Damn,” Garrus muttered under his breath.

Haestrom.

#

“You ready for this, Vega?” Garrus asked in a low voice.

Joker made it to Haestrom in record time, but there was no sign of a shuttle or of Tolan. Traynor planned on working her magic, the same magic that led them to horrors on Horizon, but hopefully Tolan wouldn’t have any tricks like that up his sleeve.

But while Tolan might not be there, the Normandy had plenty of other things to occupy their time on the planet. They had two objectives. First, find and destroy the artifact on the surface and second, recover Golem’s platform. Easy enough in theory, Garrus knew, but with the radiation on the planet, Shepard decided it best to split into two teams, and since she couldn’t lead either, Vega would be leading his first official N1 mission.

“You know it,” James said. Garrus tried to hide his smirk as James glanced down at the red and white stripe painted down the right side of his armor. Garrus had to admit, though, since coming back on board the Normandy he almost seemed like a different marine. The mohawk disappeared, replaced by a shaved head like Shepard’s and the only time Garrus saw James wearing a t-shirt instead of a regulation uniform was off-duty. “I’ve got this, Scars. Besides, Shepard’s making me take the easy mission.”

“Good old smash and grab,” Garrus said. “Just make sure Kasumi and Samara keep an eye on their shields. They haven’t been planetside here before.”

“I read the report,” James said. “Kal’Reegar’s the guy Sparks is marrying, right? Sounds like he owes you one.”

“Already paid it back tenfold, from what I hear he did on Palaven,” Garrus said. “But that was a hell of a mission. Glad we won’t have to face any geth colossus while we’re down there.”

Garrus shuddered, remembering the last time he stepped on Haestrom. This time, at least, his team of Javik and Padok had had a much better idea of where to start. Unlike the search for Tali, when Miranda basically told them all ‘Good luck.’

The elevator door open and Shepard walked into the shuttle bay. From the way her shoulders hunched, he could tell just how stressed she must feel. This couldn’t be easy, having all six members of her ground team down on the planet at once, especially when the planet was as hostile as Haestrom.

It only took a few minutes before everyone gathered around the weapons bench. “No risks down there, especially for those of you with skin exposed. Stay in the shadows as best you can. Just being out in the sun for more than a couple of minutes will fry your shields,” Shepard looked down at the floor for only a moment before looking at the group again. Placing a hand on her hip, she added, “Once you get the surface, you’re on your own. The solar output will make it practically impossible to communicate with the shuttle.” She looked at Cortez. “I expect you to bring them all back safely, Cortez.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cortez said with a crisp nod. “We’ll be back, safe and sound before you know it.”

“Good man,” Shepard said. “Alright. Off you go to destroy an artifact and bring us home a geth.”
Garrus stayed behind for just a moment as everyone walked to the shuttle. He pressed his brow against hers, only for a second, but that brief touch was enough to give him some comfort and from the way her face softened when they parted, her as well. “Be safe,” she whispered.

He nodded before walking to the shuttle. The back looked cramped, so Garrus sat in the co-pilot seat next to Cortez. Behind him, he heard Javik grumbling about the lack of space. “Everyone, play nice,” he called over his shoulder as Cortez took off.

The ride to the surface didn’t take long and they quickly made it to the first set of coordinates. “Any chance the artifact is out in the open?” Garrus asked, looking out at the planet through the view screen.

“We’re going to have to search a bit,” James said, putting on his helmet. “We’ll let you know as soon as it’s destroyed.”

“I’m going to hover halfway between the two drop points,” Cortez said. “You need an extraction, I can be there in minutes.”

“Sounds good, Cortez,” James said. The name sounded strange coming from James; Garrus was so used to the marine calling Cortez ‘Esteban.’ But Shepard’s rule of not calling her Lola on duty seemed to rub off on all the Alliance personnel as well. But not Garrus. He was still Scars and didn’t quite know if he should feel insulted or not.

The shuttle doors opened and Garrus felt a blast of hot air rush in as James, Kasumi and Samara jumped from the shuttle into a large shaded area. “You both ready, back there?” Garrus asked, looking over his shoulder. Padok wore a hardsuit with a sensible helmet while Javik wore his standard tunic and breathing mask.

Both nodded. But then Javik said, crossing his arms over his chest, “It is a mistake to trust the Kasumi on this mission.”

I can still hear you, you know. This is a shared channel. Kasumi said. Garrus could actually hear her rolling her eyes. Are you still annoyed I cloaked at the party? Geez, you really need to learn how to let things go.”

“I am Prothean,” Javik said, his voice serious. “I never let things go.”

“Unless it it’s out the airlock,” Garrus said with a smirk, wishing Shepard could hear the banter from the Normandy.

Only a few minutes passed before Cortez let out a low whistle. Garrus watched him press a few buttons on his console before the shuttle activated its virtual windows. “You really need to take a look at this, Garrus.”

Not liking the sense of dread settling in his gizzard, Garrus stood up and the view practically knocked the wind out of him.

They were flying over a geth graveyard.

Garrus knew the geth used Haestrom as a base of operations; they had fought enough of them the last time they were here. But between that mission and Shepard brokering peace, he heard that thousands of geth worked and prepared for military ventures on the planet. What they flew over now must have been one of their bases.Inactive geth lay all across the surface, hundreds of them. And somehow they had to find one unique geth Prime out of all of that.
He whispered thanks to the Spirits that Shepard didn’t see this. She felt guilty enough, he knew, from that damn choice she had to make on the Crucible. The last thing she needed was to have more of the consequences shoved in her face. He would have to mention it in his report and that would be bad enough.

“Damn,” he said under his breath. “This mission just got a lot more complicated.” He turned to the back of the shuttle, where Padok had his omni-tool out. “Just how important is it we find Golem’s platform?”

“If his memory core wasn’t destroyed, it could contain vital information,” Padok said. “Golem is the only member of the Enthrallment Team guaranteed not to have fallen under Leviathan’s control. He’ll have access to the team’s communications and movements. It’s imperative we recover it.”

Garrus could tell Padok was only half paying attention to the conversation; the rest of his focus seemed to be solely on his omni-tool. “What are you seeing?” Garrus asked.

“I conferred with Doctor Verner on the way out here,” Padok said. “He provided a baseline for certain energy readings using the data Shepard had from your last mission here. Something is not right.”

“Because it wouldn’t be a Normandy mission if it were otherwise,” Garrus said with a sigh. “Well, as Shepard told us on the ship, we’re on our own for now. Any chance you can give me more than ‘not right?’”

“There seems to be an energy build-up, far more than what Doctor Verner predicted,” Padok said as his fingers moved rapidly over his omni-tool. “I would very much like the chance to see what it is.”

Garrus didn’t like the sound of any sort of energy build-up. “We’ll make that a secondary objective then.” Standing up, he walked to the back of the shuttle. “You know the rules, stay in the shadows and hope we can find Golem’s transponder when we’re close enough. If not, the last time it was seen, the platform was a navy with silver accents. Alliance colors. It’s choice.”

Alliance colors. Just the thought choked him up a bit. Funny to think how a year ago, he would have been happy never to have seen another geth again. Hell, even when Shepard had tried so desperately to forge peace between the quarians and the geth, Garrus thought she was wasting her time. And now they were searching for a geth platform who voluntarily joined the Enthrallment Team and wore Alliance colors because it wanted to.

He took off his visor and put it in one of his armor pouches as he briefly looked at the world without numbers before putting on his helmet. The HUD lit up at once and Garrus readied himself for the jump from the shuttle.

“Here we go,” Cortez said as the shuttle doors opened. “I’ll be a five minute ride away if you need an out.”

“Understood,” Garrus said. He took a breath and then jumped. The moment he landed, he brought out his assault rifle, ready to secure the area. His HUD sensed no life signs, but that didn’t stop him from making a visual survey as Padok and Javik landed next to him. Nothing. “We’re clear.”

Padok already had his omni-tool up and running before Garrus had a chance to put away his rifle. “What’ve you got, Padok?”

“Northeast, about two hundred yards,” Padok said. “There’s an energy build-up. My sensor isn’t even able to estimate the number of Joules.”
“Alright,” Garrus said, bringing up his own omni-tool to start scans for Golem. “Solid lead. Let’s head over in that direction.”

They moved slowly, visually searching for Golem along the way. The majority of the geth on the ground where Destroyers or Hunters, with a Juggernaut thrown in here or there. No sign of any Primes. But these geth didn’t quite look like geth; each one looked slightly different than he remembered. Garrus took a moment and knelt down next to a Hunter, trying to figure out what might be the difference.

And then he did.

This Hunter had a bird etched into the casing of its arm. The Destroyer next to it wore a necklace made out of what looked to be broken omni-tools. Each geth Garrus saw found some way to make themselves unique, to make themselves more than the whole. Some painted their hardware casings, some seemed to wear tokens of some sort. They had truly become individuals in those last few months. Garrus took a moment to bow his head in grief before decided he wouldn’t tell Shepard this piece of information.

“The machines tried to imitate people,” Javik said. The sneer in his voice made Garrus want to curl his talons into fists. “No matter. A dead machine is always better than a working one.”

“The geth did a lot of good by the end,” Garrus snapped.

“They fought a war against the quarians,” Javik said.

“They defended themselves,” Garrus said, hardly believing that he of all people, he who would have chosen the quarians in a heartbeat in Shepard’s shoes, now defended the geth. “They did what any sentient species would have done.”

Padok cleared his throat. “The energy build-up is right behind this building.”

Garrus unholstered his assault rifle, wanting to be ready for whatever they might come across. The HUD in his helmet didn’t any movement or life signs, but he’d rather they be prepared. They walked around a shell of a building, one like he and Shepard had fought in while searching for Tali. That’s when they saw it.

Some sort of machine, almost a story high and just as long, leaning against the building. And on the ground in front of it? One geth Prime in Alliance colors.

Padok started working furiously on his omni-tool as Garrus took readings of his own. “What the hell is this thing?” Garrus asked.

“Did you ever have a chance to read Dr. Verner’s dissertation?” Padok asked, his voice quiet. Garrus simply shook his head. “I did when he joined the team. Fascinating. He made several theories and arguments about dark energy and time. Apparently it caused quite the stir when he was published. But the data the quarians took a few years ago supported his theories.” He breathed in deeply. “I’m reading dark energy, xenon, baryonic matter… Everything Leviathan would need.”

“Need for what, Padok?” Garrus asked, already wishing he didn’t have to hear the answer.

“To create a machine with the ability to destroy stars.”

Garrus stared pointedly at Golem, the one member of the Enthrallment Team they all assumed would be impervious to Leviathan’s machinations, who lay right in front of the control console.
“Well, crap.”
The Emperor, Upright

#

**The Emperor, Upright:** Authority, structure, governmental and corporate identities. Ability to shoulder responsibility. Powerful individuals, ambition together with the possibility of long term achievement.

#

**August 2187**

The damn AI Core needed better lighting.

Shepard sat on her heels, staring up at the inactive Geth Prime laying on the back platform. At the moment, Shepard was the closest thing the *Normandy* had to an AI expert. So while Garrus led a team down on Rannoch’s surface to destroy an artifact, she had decided to take a crack at Golem. And wait for the inevitable.

Any time she looked at the corner, she expected to see a vision of Legion. It just made sense. Here she was, in it’s old room, working on a geth. Surely it’d show up?

*Hey, commander?*

“Yeah, Joker?” Shepard asked, standing up. She brought up her omni-tool, ready to take more readings. If Legion didn’t want to show up, she had work to do.

*Tali’s on her way.*

“Thanks,” she said, biting her lower lip. The last thing she wanted to do was admit this was beyond her, but it was. While she could hack terminals with the best of them, AIs, especially *sentient* AIs, were a completely different story. One wrong command or prompt and she could wipe the core completely. If she were to do something wrong, damage the memory core, Shepard wouldn’t forgive herself, not when so much was at stake.

The door opened, and Tali strolled in, wearing her usual suit and scarves, but no mask. “Didn’t think I’d get to see you so soon, Shepard,” Tali said with a smile. So strange to see Tali’s face, and see, not just hear a smile. Strange, but certainly not unwelcome. “Though I’m glad. I need to make sure Adams hasn’t done anything to hurt my work.”

“Thanks for making the trip up here, Tali,” Shepard said. It just made sense. The trip from Haestrom to Rannoch wasn’t a long one, and once D.E.A.R. discovered an artifact on the surface of Rannoch? Shepard decided to kill two birds with one stone. Destroy the artifact, and get one of the galaxy’s leading experts on the geth to study Golem. “How’s Kal’Reegar?”

Tali’s smile disappeared for a moment. “He’s having trouble adjusting to civilian life,” she said finally, staring down at her hands. “A lot of quarians are. We worked towards reclaiming Rannoch for so long… It’s taking longer than we hoped for everyone to get used to the idea that it’s ours. Losing the geth didn’t help things.”

“Wedding still on?” Shepard asked quietly. The guilt about the geth would always be there, back at the base of her skull, always waiting to flare. But for now, she needed to concentrate on the here and now, and pushed that guilt aside.
“Of course,” Tali said. She crossed her arms and looked at Shepard, who already knew what her friend was going to say. “Are you sure you and Garrus can’t make it?”

“If we can be, we will,” Shepard said. She wanted nothing more than to watch her friend get married, and she hated that she might not be able to be there. “That’s a promise. But we’ve been recalled to Earth and I have no idea what our next step is going to be against Leviathan. I’m at the Council’s mercy.”

A truth Shepard hated admitting. Once Golem had been discovered, along with the super weapon on Haestrom, the decision had been made to regroup on Earth. Only a month had passed since they left Earth, and Shepard felt no closer to figuring out a way to defeat Leviathan than she did the day they left. Somehow, finding the answer by chance in Prothean ruins didn’t seem likely this time around, meaning it was up to Shepard to lead the charge towards an answer.

“At least watch the livecam if you can’t be there in person,” Tali said. “I’m going to wear a dress and that’s not something that happens every day.”

“Damn right we will,” Shepard said eagerly. A livecam wouldn’t be the same as being there, but much better than nothing. “Garrus and I will dance at your wedding, even if it’s not in person.”

A bright smile, showing off even whiter teeth, crossed Tali’s face. “Good. It’s not a party without your awful dancing. Maybe we should set up a two way livecam so we can all dance together.”

“Not a bad idea, Tali,” Shepard said. Hell, if people wanted to make fun of her dancing, let them. The days when that sort of teasing bothered her were long gone.

“Of course it’s not. I thought of it, didn’t?” Tali said. She glanced up at the ceiling. “Has it always been this bright in here?”

Shepard shook her head. “Nothing’s changed.”

Tali shrugged, before placing a hand on her hip. “Different seeing the Normandy without a mask. I sort of miss having the filter.” She walked up to the Golem’s platform and studied him for a moment. “Alliance colors?”

“It’s choice,” Shepard said, thinking of the shock when she saw Golem for the first time, wearing the same colors she had come to revere. “Are the quarians still working on the geth?”

With the relays fixed, some people seemed to think that meant the galaxy was fixed as well. Most of the Crucible scientists left Earth once the relays were back up. Shepard could admit, it disappointed her a bit, but she should have known better. Of course people want to go to their homes. So many lives needed to be rebuilt.

“Admiral Daro’Xen is a woman possessed,” Tali said, bringing up her omni-tool and waving it over Golem. “If anything, it’s simply because of spite at this point. But let’s see what Golem can tell us.”

Shepard leaned against the wall as Tali worked. The last time Shepard had seen Tali in the AI Core with a geth, she had been pointing a pistol at Legion. She smiled, thinking about just how much time had changed.

Tali shook her head, never a good sign. “Most of its memory core’s damaged, Shepard. It was out in that radiation for what, more than six months? It didn’t stand a chance.” Tali started to remove some of Golem’s protective casing. “I might be able to salvage a little, but it won’t be much.”

“Anything is better than nothing,” Shepard said, disappointment pooling in her stomach. At least the
artifacts on Haestrom and Rannoch were destroyed. She’d have to be happy with the little victories. “Suppose I shouldn’t have hoped for more.”

Shepard watched as Tali bit her lower lip, her eyes squinting. She turned around, holding a small microchip. “Something’s not right.” She projected her omni-tool screen on the wall, showing basic computer codes. “There’s a layer here I don’t recognize. It shouldn’t be here.”

“Are you telling me that Leviathan managed to indoctrinate a geth?” Shepard asked, suddenly feeling very small and unsure, as if the walls were closing in around her. She swallowed, and tried to keep out all the worst case scenarios from forming in her head at once. No point in jumping to conclusions until there was more information.

“I don’t know what I’m telling you,” Tali said, her voice as serious as Shepard had ever heard. “I need more than my omni-tool for this, maybe use the computers on Rannoch.”

It would be a risk to let Tali bring the data back to Rannoch. No doubt Daro’Xen would have a field day if the admiral found out about it. But Tali knew far more about the geth than practically anyone alive. “Everything you discover is classified,” she said. The statement was just a formality as far as Shepard was concerned. Tali would never violate that trust. “I’m also going to send you some data on a machine we on Haestrom. I wouldn’t mind your scientists taking a look, compare them to the numbers you took a few years ago.”

A machine that could destroy stars. One the surface, it seemed to work just how Conrad thought: speeding up the lifespan of a star to make it go nova long before it should. The thought that Leviathan might have access to that sort of weapon? No one should have that ability. If given the choice, how many worlds would choose to become thralls instead of having their home destroyed?

Saren’s face flashed before her eyes. “Is submission not preferable to extinction?”

“Do you still have access to a QEC?” Shepard asked, forcing the vision of Saren out of her head. Tali nodded. “When you have any information, use the encrypted QEC channel to contact us.”

“I’ll figure this out, Shepard,” Tali said and the confidence in her voice helped ease the tension Shepard held in her shoulders. “I promise.”

“I know you will,” Shepard said, meaning every word. She had absolute faith in Tali’s abilities, especially when the stakes seemed higher than ever. “Now, let’s wait for Garrus to get back and have dinner for old time’s sake.”

#

“Rannoch suits her,” Shepard said, palming the cabin door’s interface. The door opened at once, and she stepped inside. But Garrus didn’t follow. “Garrus?”

“Tell me you didn’t make that pun on purpose,” Garrus said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Tell me, Shepard.”

Shepard realized what she said and groaned. “No. No, that was not on purpose, I promise.”

“Thank the spirits,” Garrus said, walking into their quarters.

Once the door shut safely behind him, Shepard walked over to her dresser and started changing into pajamas. “I’m ready for this day to be done. At least nothing eventful happened when you destroyed the artifact down there.”
“Wish we could have seen more of the planet,” Garrus said. “We flew over one of the new cities, at least. You would have loved it, Shepard. All those ships converted into living and working spaces. Your inner engineer would have been very happy. Once this is all over, we should come back and visit.”

Shepard knew herself well enough that she could admit to some jealousy. She followed several prominent quarian structural engineers on the extranet, to keep up with the progress on Rannoch. Each post they made filled her with pride for Tali and her people. Seeing everything in person would have been amazing. “That’s what I wanted to do, before the Alliance realized I could shoot a gun and take orders. Make a city out of ships.”

“You don’t have to be Alliance after this, Shepard,” Garrus said as he settled onto the couch, still wearing his civilian clothes. “Maybe you’ll still have a chance to build a city someday. Just choose someplace warm for my sake.”

“So Noveria is out of the question, then? They have a lot of rebuilding to do,” Shepard asked. She hadn’t really considered her possibilities after the mission, so focused on what was in front of her. The opportunities would be interesting to explore.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,” Garrus said, kicking his feet up on the coffee table. Her omni-tool choose that moment to ding, informing her a message waited. “Of course,” she said with a sigh, bringing up her interface.

“What’s that human saying? No rest for the wicked?”

“You trying to tell me something, Vakarian?” Shepard asked with a laugh as she glanced at the message. Without another thought, Shepard went to Garrus and straddled his lap. “We’ve got a message to watch.”

She pressed play, ignoring how Garrus traced light circles with his talons onto her hips. Gabby and Ken, sitting next to each other on a couch, holding a small baby that looked to be sound asleep, appeared on her omni-tool screen. The baby, wearing a navy blue onesie, had a shock of red hair already. Shepard bit the inside of her cheek, transfixed at the sight.

Gabby spoke first.

_Hey, Commander. Well, the kid finally decided to show up. We have a son. His name’s Hunter Kenneth Daniels-Donnelly. Thought it might be nice to introduce him._

Ken picked up Hunter’s hand and waved it at the screen. _He’s not being very interesting right now, Commander. Seems all he wants is to eat and sleep._

_And that’s different from you how, Ken?_ Shepard couldn’t help but smile. The words said one thing, but the tender look Gabby gave Ken told an entirely different story. _That’s all, Shepard. Hunter’s gonna wake up soon. We’ll send you some pics when he’s awake. Later!

“They look happy,” Garrus said softly after Shepard turned off the message. “Wonder what Hunter’s for? Think they named him after the geth?”

“I doubt that. Maybe it’s a family name.” Shepard rested her forearms on either side of Garrus’ neck, the hide soft against her forearms. “So I was thinking…” she said, a knot forming in her stomach. From nerves? Fear? Excitement? She had no idea. “It might change because of the war, but when I was a kid…”
Memories of her childhood were hazy, but she did remember the Khalibs telling her that they’d love to adopt her, but it took time and money. Shepard knew the money wasn’t an issue. The Khalibs had plenty. That meant time must have been the problem. Back then, she wondered if they simply didn’t care enough to find the time. Of course, if they had adopted her, she probably would have been killed on Mindoir like all of them.

“It takes a while to apply for adoption,” Shepard said, the knot smoothing itself out as Garrus’ mandibles flicked out in surprise, and stayed out in a smile. “I know we’re in the middle of a mission, but maybe we should start looking into things.”

Garrus let out a slow breath. “I’d like that, Shepard,” he said, talons digging into her waist. She could hear the hope in his voice and she didn’t even try to hide the smile on her face. “I’d like that a lot.” His grin turned slightly sheepish. “I might have done some preliminary, ahem, research. Of course, that was before the end of the war.”

“What’d you learn?” Shepard asked. Of course he had. He always did like to be prepared.

“It’s harder for couples that are two different species, like us,” Garrus said, his subvocals betraying his annoyance. “Planets guard their young pretty carefully. It might be easiest to go to a planet that’s not aligned with any one species.”

“Speaking of species…” Shepard trailed off, wondering how to ask this question. Personally, she didn’t care, but if Garrus had a preference, that mattered.

He shook his head, and somehow Shepard wasn’t surprised. “I just want to give a kid a home.”

“Me, too,” Shepard said quietly. Neither one of them said anything for a moment, and she was content just to sit in silence, listening to the sounds of the ship. But then Garrus ran his talons down the back of her thighs, and when his mouth plates pressed hard against her lips, Shepard knew they’d finish this discussion another time.

#

“Feels like we just left,” Joker said.

Shepard nodded as she watched Earth come into sight on the main viewpoint. She’d seen a lot of planets in her day. Logged surface time on more than she can even remember. But even having seen as many wondrous places in the galaxy as she had, she still had a soft spot for Earth. And even looking at it now, the blues and greens not quite as bright, the clouds more grey than white, all thanks to the dust kicked up in the atmosphere when the Reapers fell, Shepard still thought it was one of the more beautiful planets she’d ever seen. Though it would be more beautiful if anyone had bothered to tell her the purpose of the recall. No doubt it was about the weapon on Haestrom.

And circling Earth, other than the usual satellites, were hundreds of Reaper corpses and dead ships, a mockery of Saturn and Uranus’ rings. After the Crucible fired, all the dead Reapers eventually settled into orbit around the planet. Rumor had it that on a clear night near the equator, the ring could even be seen on the surface. “You’ll be able to navigate through all that, Joker?” Shepard asked.

“Got us off Earth, didn’t I?” Joker scoffed. “We’ll be fine. Better question is how long will it take for them to get rid of the dead Reapers. Creepy having them circle the planet.”

“Got us off Earth, didn’t I?” Shepard asked. Most major cities had at least one Sovereign-class Reaper. Larger cities, like New York or Beijing, had two. Even with all her training, staring one in the face had been difficult. She couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for
civilians having to see one of those bastards every day. The sooner they were off off Earth, the better. “After that, I guess.”

“Not soon enough. I can’t do nearly as many cool moves with these things here,” Joker said. “We’ll be in Cape Canaveral in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks, Joker,” Shepard said, walking back into the CIC.

“Almost got the schedule done, Commander,” Cortez said. Cortez had the unenviable job of scheduling shore leave for the crew while they visited Earth. Shepard had no idea how long the Council would keep them here, which frustrated the hell out of her, and made scheduling a nightmare for poor Cortez. At least Shepard had no doubt he was up to the task.

“You include yourself in that schedule?” Shepard asked with a smile, putting her hands in the pockets of her trousers.

Cortez rubbed the back of his neck. “I really don’t need any time away from the ship-”

Shepard would have pulled the same stunt under Anderson, she was sure of it. Pitfall for any new XO. “Give yourself at least twenty-four hours, Cortez. Don’t make me make it an order.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, going back to his workstation. Shepard saw the sigh in his shoulders. That had been one lesson of command she learned and appreciated more than she could say: making sure to take a little time for yourself.

Once the ship docked, Shepard stood at the exit, waiting for clearance. “How’s it look out there, Joker?” Shepard yelled up to the front. “We have an audience?” The last thing she wanted was to be on display right now.

“Not enough to be worried about, Commander,” Joker called back.

Shepard waited patiently for the hatch to unlock, passing the time with a vid of varren puppies. Jack had an endless supply these days. Almost every single day, Jack sent her new ones. But then the tell-tale sound of the hatch unlocking made her straighten up, ready to get some work done.

Even with just the small opening of the docking bay, Shepard could feel a slight breeze against her skin. She hadn’t left the Normandy since Palaven, which felt like a lifetime ago. Leading missions might not be an option right now, but she would have to make an effort to get off of the ship more. Feeling stir-crazy was no fun at all.

The sight of Admiral Hackett sitting in a golf cart at the end of docking ramp made Shepard to pick up the pace. She ignored the sinking feeling in her gut, trying not to guess if his presence was a good or bad sign. Overall, Shepard considered the start of the mission a success. They destroyed some artifacts, spoke to almost everyone on the Enthrallment Team. She’d call that a win.

For now.

“Shepard.” Hackett’s voice was grave. “Get on in. Everything’s a mess right now.”

Of course it is. “When isn’t it?” Shepard asked, strapping herself into the cart. She took a quick look at Hackett. The beard was still there, along with BDUs instead of a dress uniform.

“The Council’s decided to leave Earth, now that the Relays are back up. Surprised they lasted this long, to be honest,” Hackett said as he started driving.
“Where are they headed?”

“Nevos, an asari colony,” Hackett said. “Bad as Noveria when it comes to corporations and politics. But the Reapers barely touched it.”

“No longer in the thick of things, huh?” Shepard said, turning her head so it caught a little more of the breeze.

As they passed through the Alliance camps, Shepard realized the number of tents and pre-fabs were reduced considerably. A good sign, hopefully, that more and more people were getting back to their lives. Maybe things were finally starting to heal.

“Same goes for Cape Canaveral,” Hackett said. “There’s a push to move Alliance Headquarters back up to Vancouver before winter. We’ll make the decision soon. Though I’ll admit I’ve grown fond of the Atlantic.”

Alliance Headquarters came into view and the cart was stopped at the gate. Shepard fished her ID out of her pocket while Hackett simply lifted the lanyard around his neck.

“Surprised you came to get me yourself,” Shepard said as they stepped out of the parked golf cart.

Hackett shook his head. “Everyone needs fresh air, Shepard. Even admirals.”

“Noted,” Shepard said. That was a fact true enough for her; why wouldn’t it apply to Hackett as well? She wondered how the man handled everything. Far as she knew, not that it was any of her business, Hackett had no partner. She couldn’t imagine going through the war and now the fallout without Garrus. Hackett must find comfort other ways. And Shepard could admit she might be a tiny bit curious of what those ways might be.

They walked in silence through the halls of the Alliance Headquarters. They passed aides and officers and Shepard saw more than one mercenary playing as enlisted soldier. Years of experience helped her recognize the difference. She wondered how many soldiers had left the Alliance, going off to serve Aria and her illusions of being the self-proclaimed queen of the Terminus System.

“Have some friends of yours waiting in my office,” Hackett said as he opened the door. Curiosity piqued, Shepard followed Hackett into his office.

“Jacob.”

“Jacob Taylor,” Shepard said, walking up to the man himself and extending her hand. They hadn’t really had a chance to talk during her retirement ceremony, so it was damned good to see him now. “An Alliance uniform? Apparently I’ve been out of the loop.”

Jacob laughed, a bright, clear sound, and shook her hand. “Let’s just say the Alliance is in a forgiving mood.”

“And what I am? Chopped liver?”

Shepard turned at the voice to be face to face with Ashley Williams. “Ash!” she said, holding out her hand, which Ashley quickly grasped. She looked at the admiral with a smile. “You weren’t kidding about old friends, sir.”

Hackett sat down at his desk, leaving the three of them standing. “Decided it was time to expand this hunt. The Council wants all of the artifacts in the galaxy destroyed and the science team estimates there are close to two hundred artifacts out there. Far too many for the Normandy to handle alone.”
Shepard nodded in agreement. “Understood,” she said, beginning to understand why Jacob and Ashley might be here.

“So congratulations, Shepard,” Hackett said. “You are now a Commodore. I’m giving both Taylor and Williams command of a corvette, but they both will be reporting directly to you.”

Commodore.

Years ago, when she first was assigned to the Normandy as XO, this would have been the type of promotion she dreamed of. But now she stood in non-regulation civilian clothes, in a poor attempt to look military, with two members in actual Alliance BDUs on either side of her. I’m still in the reserves, she reminded herself. She still was a part of the Alliance, even as a retiree. Shepard couldn’t forget that.

“Thank you, sir,” Shepard said, pleased to hear no difference in her voice. “We’ve already got a good list of locations started.”

“I don’t need to be a part of this conversation, then,” Hackett said. He pointed to a side door. “You can use the conference room to discuss strategy.”

All three of them muttered thank you, sir as they walked into the conference room. Shepard saw Ashley give Jacob a side-eye glance. The two had met before, after they saved the scientists on Noveria and at the party she hosted in her apartment. But for the life of her, Shepard couldn’t remember how often the two actually interacted.

“How’re Brynn and Hope?” Shepard asked, sitting down at the head of the table, with Ashley and Jacob on either side.

“Good, Shepard,” Jacob said with a chuckle, bringing up his omni-tool. “I’ve got pictures.” He transferred them with a wave of his hand. “Brynn’s still with the Crucible Scientists, so she and Hope will be moving to Nevos.”

Shepard brought up the pictures, slightly surprised that Ashley raised her own ‘tool. Jacob must have sent them to both of them. The pic of Hope, holding a stuffed elcor, was adorable. Bright brown eyes with hair of tightly coiled curls. “What is she? Five months now?”

“Give or take,” Jacob said. “Hate to leave her, but this is bad business with Leviathan. Wouldn’t feel right turning my head on this one.”

“Understood,” Shepard said, quickly formulating a plan in her head. Most of her best work came on the fly like this, she realized over the years. “Here’s what I’m thinking. I’m going to send you both to opposite ends of the galaxy. You’ll destroy artifacts on uninhabited planets or planets where they’re not surrounded by people. Most inhabited planets and any artifacts in a facility like Mahavid, will be the Normandy’s job.”

That way, if anything went wrong, if one of those damn orbs took someone over, it would be one of her people, on her ship. The less collateral damage, the better.

“Sounds good to me, skipper,” Ashley said. “Send us wherever you want.”

“We’ll check with Conrad and Ann, see if we can’t get a D.E.A.R. for each of your ships,” Shepard said, accessing a file on her omni-tool. “Ashley, I want you starting in the Terminus System. Aria wants to be left alone, so no going to Omega unless you have to. Find someplace else to refuel.”

“Got it.”
“Jacob, you’ll start in Inner Council Space. The sooner we get those artifacts off of possible Council worlds, the safer I’ll feel,” Shepard admitted. “Now. Do either of you have questions about Leviathan or what we’ll be doing?”

Ashley shook her head, while Jacob said, “Nope.”

“Hackett outlined the situation pretty good, skipper. We’ve got small crews. Corvettes only handle ten at a time. We’ll be fine,” Ashley said.

Twenty more people to be responsible for. While Jacob and Ashley might be in command, they were Shepard’s ships and under her ultimate authority. “I’ll need profiles on all your crew and your ship specs ASAP,” Shepard said, thinking of the amount of work that just fell on her lap. But truth be told, it wouldn’t feel right if someone else called the shots here. Like Mordin said, it had to be her.

“Will do,” Jacob said with a brisk nod of his head.

“Not going to lie, this might get ugly. Jacob, you weren’t around when we found Leviathan, but Ash, you know what they can do. Once they realize we’re actively seeking out and destroying the artifacts, they’re going to retaliate,” Shepard said.

“Let them,” Ashley said. “We defeated the Reapers. We can end Leviathan, too.”

Shepard nodded, agreeing completely. “Let’s take the fight to Leviathan.”
The Page of Swords, Upright

The Page of Swords, Upright: A person of grace and dexterity, diplomatic and skilled in the ability to work out the true nature of things. A person who can negotiate expertly on behalf of his peers.

Cape Canaveral, August 2187

The last time Shepard saw Conrad and Dr. Bryson, they were surrounded by what she would consider organized chaos. Standing here in the small laboratory were they now worked, much smaller than the room they had back in Orlando, Shepard could only call the scene in front of her absolute chaos.


“Do you want us to come back later?” Shepard asked. Padok stood next to her, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet; she could tell he itched to go into the lab and work.

“Shepard,” Ann said, her eyes going around the disorganized room.

“The commander’s here?” Conrad asked. Shepard winced as he stood up too quickly and hit his head on the edge of the table. He shook it off quickly and walked up to Shepard, hand out. “It’s really great to see you here, Shepard.” Turning to Padok, he bowed his head slightly. “I hope you don’t mind the mess.”

“We only moved into this room less than a month ago, and now they tell us we have to pack up and go to Nevos,” Ann said, shaking her head. “I hate politics.”

“You really went into the wrong field, then. Corporate research might be a better fit,” Conrad said. “Non-profit research is nothing but politics. At least corporations are mostly honest when it comes to science. They just want whatever will make them the most money.”

“Little too late to make a change now, I suppose,” Ann said with a sigh. “Besides, my father absolutely loathed corporate research. I’m afraid it’s hereditary.”

“I dabbled in corporate espionage before I joined the STG,” Padok said. “An interesting three years, to say the least.” He rubbed his hands together, a gleeful look on his face. “I hear Nevos is in much better shape than Earth. You both should be content there.”

Shepard perked up. She assumed Conrad would stay on Earth. “You’re going to Nevos, too, Conrad? What about The Shepards?”

Conrad looked around, like he worried someone without the right amount of clearance might overhear. “Well, when your team brought back the information from Haestrom…” He looked down at his feet. “I need to see this through.”

“And The Shepards?”

He looked older than she remembered, as if the last month had aged him considerably. A twinge in
her stomach reminded Shepard that she did that, that she used his devotion to her as a way in, to get him on the science team. And look at him now, with greying hair at his temples and threaded throughout his beard. But they were all older now, herself included.

“We’ve actually gotten most of the non-humans off of Earth and to their home planets. Volunteers have been very generous with their time. There’s a Shepard’s camp set up on most of the major planets, and I’m hoping we’ll find a home for them all eventually,” Conrad said, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. Shepard recognized the move, like he wanted to make himself smaller than he appeared. “Jenna’s in charge of the Earth camp. They don’t really need me any more.”

“Speaking of the Haestrom data,” Ann said, an apology in her voice. “Conrad and I had a matter to discuss with you, Commander.” She looked at Padok. “That was a brilliant analysis you sent us, Padok.”

“To think Leviathan has built a machine that proves your thesis, Dr. Verner,” Padok said. “I bet you can’t wait to start writing that paper.”

“I don’t need to prove anything,” Conrad said so simply, so matter-of-factly, that Shepard felt a hint of jealousy at his certainty. Her whole life seemed to revolve around proving things to people. Even now, she felt the need to show that she could still work in the Alliance without any issues with her deafness. Of course, not being able to lead field missions didn’t help that cause.

Ann interlocked her fingers in front of her, and Shepard could almost feel the scientist’s nerves. Those nerves made her nervous. When neither Conrad or Ann spoke for a moment, Shepard was half-tempted to bark out, ‘sit rep,’ but she stayed quiet.

“The Council now wants daily reports of our progress,” Ann said finally. “Any new information is to go directly to the Council, directly to Councilor Valern.”

“He does have a science background,” Padok said, tilting his head. “But surely he has far too many other important things to do than oversee our progress.”

Shepard put her hand over her mouth, tasting the slight hint of acid on her tongue. Of course. “They want the weapon.” She shook her head. Just when she thinks the galaxy might truly start to heal… “Of course they do,” she spat, anger coiling in her stomach. “These are the Councilors that tried to sabotage the Genophage, demanded help for their own planet before anyone else, and kept the fucking secrets of the Crucible from everyone until the last minute. Damnit.”

Her mind spun like a centrifuge, and refused to stop. After Leviathan was dealt with, she thought to keep up with Spectre work, perhaps. But how could she fight for government officials who had lost her trust? A Spectre’s job: get your hands dirty so the Council didn’t have to. And look what Shepard, a good little Spectre, unknowingly gave the Council. A weapon that could destroy an entire solar system.

Interlacing her hands behind her head, Shepard took a deep breath. Her hair was longer than she liked; she’d have to ask Garrus to shave her head again soon. At least that would help her relax later when she felt anything but.

“We don’t really have to tell them everything, do we?” Conrad asked with a shrug. “Just enough so they’re in the loop. I used to do that all the time with donors when I worked at the Sitra Foundation.”

“I did the same for the Alliance,” Ann said, with a sheepish smile. “No offense, Commander, but most military officers simply don’t have the background and expertise to understand.”
Shepard chuckled, feeling the sudden spike of stress dissolve away. These were good people. They’d make sure to keep any progress and research safe. “Have they asked you to reverse engineer the machine yet?” Shepard asked.

Conrad shook his head. “Based on the scans, the only way to reverse engineer that thing will be in person. So unless the Council wants to bring in the machine from Haestrom, there won’t be much progress.”

“That’s good news, at least,” Shepard said. Digging her fingers into her thighs, she took a breath, needing to work up the courage to discuss why she really came to the lab. “What I’m about to say next is classified and not to be spoken of outside of this room.” The three scientists all shared a glance before looking eagerly over at her, giving Shepard the not quite so comfortable feeling of being on display. “I hoped you could check my personal shield against the artifacts, make sure it’s working correctly.”

A longer moment than Shepard would like passed before Conrad brought out his omni-tool. “Is there a reason you think it might not be working?” he asked as Shepard watched him run a diagnostic.

Shepard bit her lower lip, ready to come clean. “I’ve been having… visions,” she said. “Just people from my past, well, mostly from my past, staring at me.” Shepard paused to gage their reaction and none of them laughed or shook their heads. They simply listened, which was exactly what she needed right now. “None of them have talked to me. None of them have told me what to do. They’re just there. Until they disappear.”

“And they the same ones every time?” Ann asked, clasping her hands behind her back. Her voice was soft, and no doubt she thought of her own run-in with Leviathan.

Shepard sat down on a nearby chair, crossing her legs, ready to talk. She explained everything she could, going over the visions that haunted her: Legion, Shiala, the Prothean child, the cave woman, and Derek Hadley.

“So they account for every time your mind has been invaded,” Padok said, fingers tapping his chin. “How do you manage to get in so many of these situations?”

“It’s not like I set out to have this all happen,” Shepard snapped, twisting her fingers together. “It just did. The only ones I’ve volunteered for was joining the Geth consensus and taking the Cipher from Shiala. I didn’t ask for the Prothean beacon, or that artifact on Eletania, or Leviathan.”

Padok held his hands up in a peace offering. “I meant no offense, Commander.”

With a sigh she tried to hide, Shepard said, “I’m worried it’s Leviathan doing this. If they can get in my head, cause these visions, can they do more? Are they taking information from me? Can they tell me to do things?”

Conrad looked up, then. “Everything looks good, Shepard. I ran every scan I can think of. The shield is protecting you. You are wearing it all the time, right?”

She nodded. Even when naked, Shepard still had her omni-tool around her wrist. “Always.”

“Good,” Conrad said. “We’re updating it all the time. We’ll keep you safe, Shepard.”

The galaxy truly had gone insane, Shepard decided. Conrad’s words comforted her more than she cared to admit. Who would have ever thought?

“We’d like to invite Dr. Brynn Cole to join the science team. She’s done some impressive work with
“Dark Energy,” Ann said. “She’s been working with the rest of the Crucible scientists, but I think she’ll be amendable to working with us, now that her husband is part of the team.”

“She published a paper not too long ago, detailing the tech she used to help shield her scientists from Cerberus,” Conrad said. “I think I can integrate some of it into the personal shields, make them even stronger.”

“Sounds good,” Shepard said, standing up. The visions still worried her; she can’t imagine them not being worrisome, but she trusted her people. They would do what they could to keep everyone safe. “I know Padok is interested in helping you organize for the move, so I’ll get out of your way.”

Ann and Padok moved off, leaving Conrad behind. “Actually, Shepard, I did have something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Curious, Shepard nodded. “Of course.”

“I’ve been researching a bit in my free time,” Conrad said, rubbing the back of his neck. “And quite frankly, I’m worried.”

“About the mission?” Shepard asked quietly, crossing her arms over chest.

“Well, no. I mean I’m always worried about the mission, possible servitude and all,” Conrad said, blowing out air from his lips. “It’s something else. Eezo.”

“I’m listening,” Shepard said, thinking of the deal she just made with Aria on the Alliance’s behalf.

“I think this might sound like rambling in the beginning, Commander, but I really do have a point, I promise,” Conrad said and Shepard heard the earnestness in his voice. “One of the things I noticed in Haestrom when I wrote my thesis was that the amount of baryonic matter seemed… off. There are a few other locations I found as well, but since they weren’t colony worlds or had inhabited planets, I didn’t focus on them.”

Shepard always considered herself above average when it came to mathematics. But the rest of the sciences? The humanities? She had to work to keep up with those subjects. Quantum physics? A bit beyond her reach, but she would do her best to follow along with Conrad.

“I started doing some tests, around some of the major Prothean civilization hubs, like Eden Prime, Feros, and Judor IV. And I realized the baryonic matter for those numbers were off from the rest of the galaxy, especially compared to known civilized areas like Thessia or Sur’Kesh.” Conrad started to pace slowly, wringing his hands. “This is only a hypothesis right now, but the difference, Shepard, is the eezo.”

“But what about it?” Shepard asked.

Conrad stopped and took a breath. “I think the Reapers were bringing in dark energy from outside the galactic barrier, Shepard. A species would evolve, and right near them would be a large stash of eezo. And sooner or later we start to mess up the fabric of space itself, thanks to over-mining and too much FTL. But then…”

Shepard bit the inside of her cheek, understanding what Conrad was telling her. “But then we’re harvested.”

“Exactly,” Conrad said, his eyes lighting up. “We’re harvested. That gave the galaxy about forty-eight thousand years to heal. It also gave the Reapers a chance to bring in dark energy and place it by the species they thought would evolve next.”
“Eezo is a limited resource,” Shepard said weakly. “And we have no way to get outside the galactic barrier to get more.” There were rumors, of course, that a way had been found, but that’s all they were. Rumors. She thought back to reports on Leviathan, ones she barely heeded after she brought them over to fight the Reapers, and cursed herself for not paying more attention. “They use biotics, right? They’re able to travel in space unassisted?”

“I would guess since the Reapers have the ability to travel through the galactic barrier, Leviathan does, too,” Conrad said, his voice apologetic.

“So they can get more eezo, but we can’t,” Shepard said, hope falling through her fingers as if she tried to cup water with her hands. “Great. Just fucking great. Long term, they have the advantage.”

“Not just that, Shepard. FTL causes minute damage to space. It’s barely perceptible, but over hundred of thousands of years? Giving the galaxy no time to heal?” Conrad asked, looking down at the floor. “We won’t need a machine to destroy our stars. We’ll do it ourselves, ruining space until we can’t travel beyond our own atmosphere.”

As an engineer, Shepard liked to consider herself a problem solver. It’s how she thrived, fixing things. But this? What Conrad suggested couldn’t be solved by Shepard simply yelling until the right people listened or brokering treaties and alliances. For once in her life, though every instinct told her to take responsibility for the problem and fix it, Shepard knew she couldn’t. She wouldn’t. She would do the right thing here, talk to the right people, make sure other governments were aware, but for once in her life, Shepard would back down from a problem.

If anyone suggested that she take the lead on this, she would say no.

“Thank you for telling me this, Conrad,” Shepard said, squaring back her shoulders. Just the concept of no was against everything she had been trained. Her entire life revolved around yes: trying to make foster families happy growing up, trying to look good in the eyes of the Alliance, trying to make the Council listen to her. But after thirty-four years, Shepard had earned the right to say no.

“Sounds like this would be a long term problem. I’ll talk to some people and see what they think.”

“Thanks, Shepard,” Conrad said. “They’d definitely listen to you more than they would me.”

“Anything else?” Shepard asked. Conrad shook his head. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

Shepard turned on her heel. She had come to the lab, hoping for reassurance about her visions, and left worrying about the state of the galaxy. Not the day she hoped for, that’s for sure.

The message Shepard received had been cryptic in such a way that if she didn’t have 100% confidence in who sent it, she would have taken it to Alliance security. Instead, Shepard followed instructions and found herself on the outskirts of Cape Canaveral, in a half-ruined warehouse. Even as sure as she was, Shepard kept her hand on her sidearm. Just in case.

“Fancy meeting you here, Shepard.”

Turning slowly as not to cause any sort of alarm, Shepard found herself face to face with Miranda Lawson. “An abandoned warehouse, Miranda? Did you really need to go the cliche route?”

Miranda shrugged an elegant shoulder. “I’m developing my flair for the dramatic. We are space divas, after all.”

“It’s good to see you,” Shepard said. She and Miranda didn’t have a hugging type friendship, so
Shepard settled for a handshake. Only a month had passed since Shepard had seen Miranda, right before the Normandy left Earth, but the month treated her friend well. Miranda wore a black pantsuit, the sleeves pushed up to her elbows, looking every bit a professional and not someone who had been arranging secret meetings.

“And you as well, Shepard,” Miranda said, motioning to a stack of crates. “Retirement suits you.”

Shepard let out a snort as she sat down on one of the crates. “Yet somehow, I’m still barely getting four hours of sleep a night.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do with more,” Miranda said, sitting down on an opposite side crate. Shepard watched as Miranda crossed her legs at the knee, folding her hands carefully on top. “A lot has happened, and I wanted you to hear it from me.”

“I’m listening,” Shepard said, trying to sound casual.

“You know how I’ve been trying to seize control of Cerberus’ assets since the war ended?” Miranda asked. Shepard nodded. “Well, I finally did it. The Illusive Man was one conceited son-of-a-bitch, Shepard. He truly must have thought he’d never die, at least not until the Reapers were his. He had no backups, no contingency plans. Nothing. Some of the live resources have just been waiting around for months, with no guidance.”

Shepard let out a low whistle. “What are we looking at? Any credits?”

Miranda shook her head. “No, from what I can tell, Cerberus was basically bankrupt by the end of the war. Which doesn’t matter, credits are still worthless. They weren’t above stealing what they needed, though. They still have ships, supplies, hell, people that are still working.”

“What sort of people?” Shepard asked.

“Did you ever wonder why you had no notice of the Cerberus coup on the Citadel? Even when your Shadow Broker had an agent in Udina’s office?” Miranda asked, running a hand through her hair. Shepard had to admit she did wonder. Not that she ever would have called out Liara, but it seemed impossible that the salarian councilor figured something was wrong before the Shadow Broker did. “I take it you have a reason?”

“I do,” Miranda said. “From what I could tell, they had their own Information Broker, purposely feeding Liara misinformation.” Miranda paused and pursed her lips. “She crashed her ship and gave all of that information directly to Cerberus. I hate to give them credit for anything, but they are very good at salvaging.”

Thinking back to Sanctuary, Shepard saw the human Reaper - the one she almost died trying to destroy in the Collector base - hung from the rafters like a trophy. She had dislocated her shoulder keeping Garrus from falling over the edge of the platform, and even with all her fancy cybernetics, her shoulder still occasionally twinged to this day. “Is everything Liara has compromised?” Shepard asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice. She needed Liara’s information, but if they couldn’t trust it…

“I don’t believe so. Once Liara made it onto the Normandy, Cerberus could only give her false leads, not take any information,” Miranda said. “So we have an Information Broker, full of Cerberus secrets, just waiting for us. If we don’t move fast enough, they might become competition for Liara. It’s better they have a guiding hand.”

“Depends on where you plan on guiding that hand,” Shepard said, standing up. “So now comes the
big question, Miranda. Now that you have control of Cerberus’ resources—"

“What do I plan on doing with them?” Miranda asked with wry smile. “Change the name of the organization, for one. It’s been so much work just getting to this point, that looking beyond - it doesn’t seem possible yet. And besides, I’ve been… distracted.”

Shepard’s guard went up at once. Miranda simply didn’t get distracted. “Want to talk about it?” Shepard asked.

Miranda nodded, and stood up so they were eye to eye. “I went to Sanctuary. The minute I got clearance to go through the relay, I went there. I got there before any salvagers could pick the place apart.” Miranda wrapped her arms around herself and licked her lips. If Shepard didn’t know better, she would have thought that Miranda was frightened. “My father’s body wasn’t there.”

“What?” Shepard asked. “How is that possible? I saw you throw him through the window.”

“I know,” Miranda said. “I hated making Ori watch that. But it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I should have been more controlled, more careful, but all I could think of was protecting my sister.”

“What are you thinking?” Shepard asked. “Someone move him or did he survive the fall?”

“I want to think that bastard’s dead, is what I want to think,” Miranda said. She closed her eyes and took a breath. “There were some files I managed to decrypt. About his Legacy project.” Miranda met Shepard’s gaze then. “He named us alphabetically, Shepard. M was the thirteen attempt. O was the fifteenth.”

Shepard let those numbers sink in. Twelve other attempts at playing god before finally succeeding. “Where’s fourteen?” she asked. Her heart tightened, thinking about the pain Miranda must be feeling. She worked so hard to free Oriana, and to learn she might have yet another sister…

“And sixteen and seventeen,” Miranda said, blinking rapidly. It’s the closest Shepard ever saw Miranda to crying and it hurt. “The files went up to seventeen. I should have realized he wouldn’t have stopped after I took Ori. I should have bloody known.” She shook her head. “No. No, the Illusive Man should have told me. He flat out lied to me. Even when I was technically his second in command. He lied.”

Anything Shepard said would sound like platitudes, she decided. So she kept quiet, hoping that her presence would be enough. After a moment, Miranda shook her head. “Look at me, getting all emotional. I just want to find my sisters.”

“If there’s anything—”

Miranda cut Shepard off with a wave of her hand. “I know, Shepard. I know. You have too much already. I just wanted to update you. Well, just tell you, really,” Miranda said, sounding as vulnerable as Shepard had ever heard her be. “It’s… It’s good to talk to a friend about this.”

“I’m always here, Miranda,” Shepard said.

With a crisp nod, any trace of vulnerability disappeared and Miranda Lawson stood in front of Shepard. “Thank you, Shepard. When I find something useful, I’ll let you know.”

Confidences over, Shepard grasped Miranda’s hand for just one more moment, before heading out the warehouse.
“Ready?” Shepard asked Garrus, ignoring the slight hitch in her voice.

“Can you ever be, for something like this?” Garrus said, clearly trying to sound nonchalant, though she could hear the quiet joy in his subvocals.

For this meeting, they both wore civilian clothes, not a hint of military showing. Neither one even wore a sidearm, though Shepard willingly admitted she missed the reassuring weight at her side. But guns were the last thing they needed right now.

Tension eased out of her shoulders when he took her hand. “Let’s go,” Shepard said.

She could see Conrad, working on his omni-tool, as he sat on a bench in the park where they agreed to meet. As they approached, Conrad jumped up, looking nervous. “Shepard,” he said with a nod of his head. “Vakarian. Is everything okay? I wasn’t sure why else…”

“Everything’s fine, Conrad,” Shepard said, sitting down on the bench. Garrus and Conrad sat on either side of her. “This is a personal matter, so we’d appreciate it-”

“My lips are sealed,” Conrad said.

Shepard smiled. “Thank you. Good thing that’s what we hoped for,” Garrus said.

It was a warm, humid day, the type Garrus loved, but Shepard could do without. Around her, people were lying in the grass or playing games or families walking together. A beautiful day for a world trying to heal. Shepard felt the reassuring touch of Garrus’ hand on her shoulder, and she took a breath.

“Conrad, we wanted to talk to you about adoption.”
The Six of Swords, Reversed

#

**The Six of Swords, Reversed:** Developments that are unexpected, a need for continuing effort and strength. Once one obstacle is surmounted another presents itself.

#

“What are you doing up here?” Joker asked as Garrus walked up into the cockpit. “Shouldn’t you be calibrating?”

Garrus’ mandibles closed in annoyance, and he wondered just what exactly he would have to sacrifice to the Spirits to make that damn joke end in a fiery and painful death. “Supposed to be meeting Shepard in the War Room, but she’s running late,” Garrus said as he stepped into the cockpit of the *Normandy*. “Figured I’d slum it for a bit.”

“Ha ha,” Joker drawled, as he pressed a couple of buttons on the interface. Once he finished, Joker leaned back and turned in his chair. “I can’t believe Leviathan put an artifact on Heshtok. The vorcha? Seriously?”

Garrus shrugged. “Heard a theory about them. You know they haven’t developed space flight themselves, right? Some think if they never got off their planet, the Reapers would leave them alone, let them keep developing.”

Joker let out a laugh, a real laugh, one Garrus was glad to hear. “Oh shit, are you saying the vorcha would have been next cycle’s Protheans? It might be worth being turned into paste just for that.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Garrus said. He wondered if Joker knew him well enough to hear the humor in his subvocals. Funny to think how he and Joker didn’t get along all that well on the SR-1. Understandable, though, if Joker really did think Garrus had a pole up his ass during that time. Thankfully, things have changed since those days.

“Still, Heshtok is basically the seventh level of hell. Have fun when we get there,” Joker said.

Garrus nodded, even though Joker couldn’t see, and tried to figure out how to say what he wanted to say. Probably best to come right out at it and ask. “So to awkwardly change the subject, Joker, what’s this I hear about you visiting the Crucible scientists?”

Joker stilled, and Garrus wondered if he shouldn’t have just minded his own damn business, seeing the way the pilot’s knuckles turned white as he clenched his fists. But Shepard asked Garrus to do her this one favor, to make sure Joker was okay. At the time, it seemed easy enough. Now? He wasn’t so sure.

“I went to get an update on EDI in person,” Joker said, sounding far too casual. “And I got one.”

As Joker started going through the ship’s interface, Garrus simply crossed his arms over his chest. He had nowhere pressing to be. He could wait. “And?”

“Yippee,” Joker said, sarcasm dripping from each syllable. “My dead AI girlfriend has reverted back to being a VI. She’s awake, but doesn’t remember a damn thing before 2183.”

Garrus closed his eyes and pictured EDI sitting in the copilot’s seat, the way she used to be. “But that
can’t be all bad, right?” Garrus asked. “Her memories might be in there somewhere.”

“Yeah, the scientists walked me through it. To get EDI back, all they need to do is replicate whatever happened to make her self-aware in the first place, which, might I mention, EDI didn’t even know,” Joker said with a bitter laugh. “And oh, yeah. Once she becomes self-aware, combine her with Reaper tech, which if you might remember, is all inert.”

“Crap,” Garrus said, running his hand over his fringe. Said like that, bringing EDI back felt impossible. But at the same time… The galaxy has seen the impossible before. “That’s rough, Joker. I’m sor-”

“Don’t,” Joker said quietly. The pilot kept working on his console, not looking away. “Don’t say you’re sorry. When the Normandy was stranded on Gliese, we were equals, Garrus. You lost Shepard, I lost EDI. But then you got Shepard back.”

Garrus thought of the late nights in the mess, when he, Tali, and Joker just sat, and drank in silence. At the time, all three of them thought they lost their partners. And look at them now. Tali getting married to Kal’Reegar in a week. Garrus and Shepard wanted to adopt a child.

And EDI was a VI. Life just wasn’t fucking fair sometimes.

“Don’t get me wrong, Garrus. I’m glad you’re happy. You two? Two of the good ones. You both deserve all the happiness in the fucking world. Especially Shepard. I just wanted a little happiness of my own,” Joker said, taking a deep breath and leaning his head back on the seat. “This sucks.”

“No argument from me,” Garrus said.

The pilot’s interfaced beeped. “The hell?” He looked up at Garrus, frustration clearly written on his face. “Why is she taking us to the Kepler Verge? I had my jumps all planned, Shepard!”

“I’ll pass along your disappointment,” Garrus said, turning to walk out of the cockpit. A sudden course change didn’t sit well with him. If they were changing destinations, he wanted to know why.

“You do that,” Joker called after him.

As he stepped into the CIC, Shepard exited the elevator. Garrus picked up the pace, seeing her there. “Change of plans,” Shepard said as they started walking to the War Room. “We’re going to get Liara on the QEC.”

“New facility?”

“That’s what she says,” Shepard said. “She’s going to give us specifics once we get her on the comm.”

Traynor already stood at the QEC, ready to go. “Whenever you’re ready, Commander,” she said. “The signal’s already established.”

“Thanks, Traynor,” Shepard said as Liara appeared in front of them. Traynor nodded and quietly left the War Room.

“Juncro,” Liara said.

Both Garrus and Shepard had their omni-tools up and out at the planet’s name. “It’s a gas giant,” Garrus said. “What do they mine?”
“Hydrogen,” Liara said, hands behind her back. “There’s an orbital platform around the planet. They take hydrogen directly from the atmosphere. The SR-1 made a stop there as well, I believe.”

“We did,” Shepard said. “They can’t have been under Leviathan’s control for long. We would have noticed if they were like those other facilities.” She looked at Garrus, and he could see a hint of doubt in her eyes. They were all so focused on stopping Saren back then. Maybe they missed something. “Wouldn’t we?”

“Maybe they weren’t,” Liara said. “The numbers I have are only from the last two years.”

“Better than nothing,” Garrus said, thinking of the briefing he read from the science team. “Didn’t Conrad say one of the materials needed for that Haestrom weapon was hydrogen?”

Shepard nodded quickly, her lips pursed tightly together. “We’ll check it out, Liara. Let us know if you find anything else.”

“Of course, Shepard,” Liara said. She took a breath and spoke again. “Miranda and I have been in touch. She’s provided data from Cerberus’ information broker. I’ll be able to cross-reference and see which leads and data streams no longer can be considered valid.”

Garrus wasn’t sure what to think about Miranda’s revelation. On one hand, it made just made so much damn sense. On the other, he really hated to think that they all missed something so obvious. What else might they have missed? Once they heard Cerberus had control of the old Shadow Broker’s ship, maybe they should have tried to go after it. But with what resources? They were barely above water at that point.

“Good to hear, Liara,” Shepard said. “Keep us updated. Shepard out.”

Once Liara disappeared, Garrus found himself with an armful of Shepard, feeling her breath against the hide of his neck. “Shepard? You okay?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her.

“Just need a minute,” Shepard said, her voice muffled. “This is better than a nap.”

“I’m not the most comfortable pillow, Shepard, you know that,” Garrus said with a laugh. Her shoulders rose then fell in a shrug as he tightened his arms around her.

Sooner than he liked, Shepard stepped away, with a look on her face that clearly said it was time to work. “How do we want to play this?”

“We’re going to have to dock with the facility to get on board. They’re going to see we’re an Alliance ship. No playacting businessmen this time,” Garrus said. “Fun as that was, the direct approach will be best here. We’ve docked there before. Let’s just use that.”

Shepard nodded and opened her omni-tool. “Joker? Got an ETA for me yet?”

*You do realize that the Kepler Verge is on the other side of the galaxy from the Shrike Abyssal, right? Completely different jumps. Just gimme a couple more minutes for the calculations.*

“Just let me know when you have an ETA,” Shepard said.

*Will do.*

“I’m thinking Kasumi again,” Garrus said as he went through the files known about the orbital platform. “Pretty damn helpful just to have her search the facility in stealth. Maybe Javik. He’s only had one mission off of the ship so far. Surprised he’s not stir-crazy.”
“I’ll have Cortez send the facility a message, letting them know we’re on the way,” Shepard said. “With any luck, hopefully this will go smoothly.”

#

It didn’t go smoothly.

“Did they just fire at us?” Shepard asked. Garrus heard the disbelief in her voice, and was sure his own face mirrored the sentiment.

“Oh, yeah, they did,” Joker said, his voice all business. Joker never seemed to get serious often, so Garrus learned to pay attention when he did. “And I’m reading their weapons hot. Shepard, they’re gonna fire again.”


“No worries there,” Joker said, his hands moving over the controls.

“Explains why Cortez never got a response back to his message. Leviathan must be on to us. Damnit,” Shepard said, running her hand over her shaved head. “I wanted more time.” The ship lurched starboard and Garrus grabbed hold the back of the co-pilot’s seat to stay upright. Shepard gripped the doorway with both hands before bringing up her omni-tool. “All crew, strap yourselves in if you’re not needed at your station.”

Behind them, just standing outside of the cockpit were Javik and Kasumi. “The Leviathan have just declared war on the galaxy,” Javik said. While Kasumi settled herself in one of the jumpseats, Javik stood upright, arms crossed over his chest. “You should destroy the station and be done with it.”

“Not happening,” Shepard said, practically growling. “Garrus, get to the battery and knock out those damn weapons.”

His heart started beating just a little bit faster, like it always did, when given permission to play with the guns. This wasn’t play, though. This was life or death for a whole hell of a lot of people. “On it, Shepard.”

Without a look back, Garrus ran to the elevator, hearing Shepard trying to get the station on the comm.

“This is Spectre Shepard, representing the Council. You’re shooting at a Council ship-”

The Normandy swerved violently as Garrus stood in front of the elevator. Made him wish for the SR-1, when he could just take the stairs down to the crew level. How in the galaxy could this be considered efficient?

Finally the elevator opened, and Garrus stepped inside, willing the thing to go as quickly as possible. Once the doors finally opened again, Garrus sprinted to the battery, ignoring the crew sitting in jump seats. The battery door opened at his approached, and there stood the console. A swipe of his talon brought it to life. He checked the readings, and tried to stay calm, even after he realized just how long it’d been since he did a fight like this without EDI’s assistance. “Crap,” Garrus muttered, opening up a channel to the cockpit.

“I’m at my station, Joker,” Garrus said, bringing up a visual of the station. Even though he’d hardly use it during the fight - the numbers were what mattered - Garrus still liked having it up to look at. As he talked, his talons flew over the controls, prepping the first shot. No Thanix today, that would cut through the station like a laser. “I’ve got the GUARDIAN locked on, ready to fire.”
There’s eight seconds between shots from them, Garrus. Soon as they take the next shot, I’m flying straight at them.

“Understood,” Garrus said, glancing at the visual. With the weapons built on top of the station, ideally there would be no collateral damage. All he needed was three little shots to take those bad boys out.

They’re firing.

Garrus gave Joker three seconds to straighten out the Normandy, then fired, then once again. Only one hit. “Damnit.” Garrus tried to calculate the numbers in his head, see where he went wrong. “Come on, you bastards,” Garrus muttered.

You gonna take another shot?

Ignoring Joker, Garrus concentrated on the numbers on his console. The station’s energy level spiked, another shot at the Normandy. Garrus targeted the orbital weapons and waited four seconds, then fired twice. Both hit. Clapping his hands together once, Garrus said, mandibles wide in a smile, “And down you go.”

Well, that was a short lived victory. Now they have shields. How you want to play this, Shepard?

Damnit. Can we knock out the shields from here?

To Garrus’ surprise, it was Cortez who spoke up next. They’re internal. From what it looks like, they’ve got two generators. One is for the shields, weapons, and most of their mining capabilities. The other is life support and powering their mass effect fields.

“We know which is which?” Garrus asked, looking at the vid screen. The generators were far enough apart he didn’t have to worry about destroying them both with one shot.

Cortez muttered some things under his breath, which Garrus couldn’t pick up. See the one closest to the main cargo bay entrance? That’s the one to take out.

Shepard chimed in next. You sure about that, Cortez?

Absolutely, ma’am.

You heard the man, Garrus. Take it out.

Garrus’ talons flew over the console, prepping the shot. Funny how an interface meant for ten fingers instead of six talons had became as comfortable to him as his omni-tool. Algorithm set, Garrus let the shot loose. He watched the visual and tried not to be too pleased with himself as it hit exactly where he intended. “And that is why I calibrate,” Garrus said, shifting his weight to one leg and crossing his arms over his chest.

He meant the words to be for himself, but of course the others heard. Yeah, yeah, Garrus. We’ll never get you to stop now.

That’s enough, Joker. Garrus, get back up here. I want you guys in there and finding the artifact as quickly as possible.

“On my way,” Garrus said, jogging out of the battery. This time, the elevator doors opened the moment Garrus pressed the interface. Once he stepped out of the CIC, Garrus saw not just Javik and Kasumi, but Samara and Vega, the latter wearing his hardsuit.
Shepard stood at the airlock. “Joker managed to land the ship in the cargo bay. Assume there’s no gravity or life support. Wiks is trying to get a more accurate map of where the artifact is. As soon as we have the location, we’ll tell you. Samara, Vega, and I will defend the ship if they try anything stupid. As soon as your team leaves, I’m grabbing my pistol.”

“Shepard,” Garrus said, thinking about her implants, if anything were to happen to her while he was out searching.

“You really think I’m going to let people onto my ship and not defend it, hearing implants or not?” Shepard said, her eyes meeting his and not backing down. Spirits, he loved this woman. “I’ll be fine, Garrus. If anyone actually makes it onto the ship, it’s Vega’s show. We’ll consider this part of his N1 training.”

“No one is setting a foot on this bird,” Vega said, slamming a fist into his palm.

Joker stood at the entrance of the cockpit, pistol in hand. “I should have let you guys take me to the firing range.”

“Enough talk,” Shepard said. “Get that artifact destroyed.”

Garrus grabbed his helmet from one of the jump seats and put it on, carefully checking the seals. Next to him, Kasumi had on a breathing mask covering her entire face. Javik’s mask, on the other hand, only covered his nose and mouth. “Might not be atmo out there, Javik.”

“I am geared sufficiently,” Javik said.

“Alright, then. Joker, put up the forcefield,” Garrus said, taking his assault rifle off his back. The Black Widow stayed strapped on for now. He stayed still while the forcefield went up, separating the trio from the rest of the ship. “We’ll be back before supper.”

Garrus opened the docking bay door. The moment he did, Kasumi went into stealth and Javik took out his Particle Rifle. A tiny barricade awaited them, with five beings of various races, standing firm. Javik fired first, and the people scattered. “They are not trained. Leviathan is making them do this.”

“Let’s try not to kill anyone today,” Garrus said as they started making their way down the stairs. “Concussive rounds, only, unless it’s you or them. Kasumi, you clear?”

Already out of the cargo bay. You people are slow.

“Joker, you can retract the stairs. Let’s make it a little harder for anyone who tries to get on board.”

Shepard left her drone and a turret at the entrance while she changes, Garrus. I think we’ll be okay. But even as Joker spoke, Garrus was relieved to hear the gentle whir of the stairs retracting.

From the files he read before they traveled here, Garrus knew that there were twenty-seven workers at this facility. Mostly miners, with some administration types thrown in. Regular people, just trying to make their way in the galaxy, and Leviathan took that chance away from them. He’d do his best to make sure they got their lives back. They deserved nothing less.

Wiks here. There seem to be two artifacts at this location. One on either side of the building.

“Thanks, Wiks. Hear that, Kasumi?”

Searching port side first. Not much resistance here. Bet they’re all hiding with the other artifact.
It didn’t take long before the resistance from the barricade was dealt with. These were clearly miners, probably rarely held a gun before. Now they were unconscious, lying in a heap on the ground. All Garrus could hope was that they hadn’t been injured too badly.

“Javik and I will start searching starboard,” Garrus said as he reloaded his rifle. As they exited the cargo bay, another four miners waited, including an elcor with a missile launcher on their back. “That is not what I wanted to see.”

A small rocket launched, and Garrus and Javik had to dive out of the way. Bringing himself up on one knee, Garrus shot the elcor in the right front leg. They screamed out in pain, and lowered their front legs. Thanks to that, the missile launch faced the ground, instead of the hallway. Much safer that way.

I could use a little help here!

Kasumi’s voice made both Garrus and Javik turn and start running to the port side. What sort of trouble could Kasumi get into that she couldn’t stealth out of? Thankfully, she didn’t sound hurt or panicked, just calm as she asked for assistance.

They turned down a hallway and Garrus saw two vorcha outside a room, banging the door and trying to get inside. If there was one sentient species Garrus hated fighting more than any of the others, it was the damn vorcha. Bastards were nearly impossible to kill. Even wounding them barely made a dent.

“Kill them and be done with it,” Javik said, his voice dismissive. “They are nothing more than vermin.”

Javik’s casual disdain for the two vorcha infuriated Garrus. “We’re not killing them,” Garrus snapped. No civilian casualties. It had been his hard, fast rule since he had taken the mantle of Archangel. He damn well wasn’t about to change that now. Didn’t matter that Javik was right, that as of today, the galaxy was unofficially at war with Leviathan. Didn’t matter that these vorcha would kill him without a second thought, thanks to Leviathan. They weren’t soldiers of mercenaries. They were civilians.

Garrus was not about to let them be killed.

“You’ve got your lift grenades, right?” Javik nodded, and Garrus could swear he was rolling his eyes. “That will give Kasumi four seconds to get out of there, then three seconds for us to move them into the room when they’re stunned. You get all that, Kasumi?”

I liked the part where I get out of this damn room. It’s cramped.

“Perfect for a couple of vorcha, then.” Garrus turned to Javik, who already had a grenade out. “On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark.”

The moment Javik threw the grenade, Garrus sprinted down the corridor, just as Kasumi opened the door to the room. The lift wore off, slamming the vorcha to the ground. There was just enough time to push the vorcha into the room and slam the door shut. As the stun wore off, the vorcha started to scream. Garrus took advantage of the time and overloaded the door console. No vorcha was getting out of that room any time soon.

“Appreciate the assist,” she said with a laugh. “Didn’t think playing Duck Duck Vorcha was in my cards today. You do manage to keep things entertaining.”

“Any luck with the artifact?” Garrus asked.
“Artifact one is destroyed. Time to find number two.”

She quickly went back into stealth, leaving Garrus and Javik alone with the sound of the vorcha pounding on the door. They made their way back to the makeshift barricade. The elcor that Garrus shot in the leg now lay on their side, and Garrus’ stomach clenched, hoping he hadn’t killed them without meaning to. What did he know about elcor physiology?

“Shepard, tell Chakwas, she’s going to have some wounded when the artifacts are destroyed,” Garrus said through the comm.

Already on it. She’s here with two other crewmen. Just waiting for the all clear.

“How’s the ship?” Garrus asked, prepping to turn a corner.

No one’s tried anything. Vega’s bored.

“Let’s keep it that way,” Garrus said. “Kasumi, find anything yet?”

Looks like the rest of the crew is guarding the artifact. No way I can get to it. But…

“Talk to me, Kasumi.”

Sweet little sniper’s perch if you can get up to it. You should be able to destroy the thing. I’ll find you.

“Why aren’t they hiding it? Covering it?” Garrus asked.

“Perhaps if it is covered, Leviathan is not able to use the artifact,” Javik said. “It is a theory we should look into.”

Wiks spoke up next. I’m already sending the theory to the science team. We’ll look into this right away.

Kasumi appeared out of thin air. “Follow me,” she said.

She lead Garrus and Javik through a hallway to the edge of the mining production area. “The minute we go through these doors, they’re going to be on to us,” Kasumi said. “There’s scaffolding to the left of the doorway. Maybe Javik and I can distract them while you set up the shot?”

“Good a plan as any,” Garrus said, latching his assault rifle to his back. Hopefully the scaffolding would be able to support his weight. “Let’s finish this.”

“I’ll go left, you go right,” Kasumi said to Javik, who nodded.

Garrus cracked his neck as Javik and Kasumi went through the doors. He followed immediately, finding the scaffolding, and wishing for a stealth kit of his own. Climbing, much like swimming, was something no turian was good at. But that didn’t stop him from climbing as quickly as he could. Garrus ignored how he was breathing heavily by the time he made it to the top. Gunfire and shouts could be heard as he grabbed the Black Widow from his back, his eyes scanning the room, looking for the artifact.

It stood in the far corner, unceremoniously placed on a desk. The scaffolding wasn’t deep enough for Garrus to lay down, so he got down on one knee, and took his time prepping the shot. He’d been sniping long enough that everything was second nature. His body relaxed, even with the chaos around him.
Once the target was in sight, Garrus held his breath, wanting no mistakes which might cost someone their life. The last thing he needed was a bad shot. If he missed, the enemy would tear the scaffolding down in an instant.

As gently as he liked to touch Shepard sometimes, he pressed down on the trigger.

A second later, the artifact was destroyed. Even having destroyed a couple of these bastards now, Garrus could never get over the sudden shift of atmosphere. How one moment people were trying to kill each other, and then were standing around in confusion.

The tension in his shoulders eased as the workers dropped their weapons, everyone talking at once. Garrus climbed down the scaffolding, needing to see that Leviathan’s control had ceased for himself. Kasumi waited for him at the bottom. “These people aren’t a threat,” she said softly. “We need to help them.”

“Shepard, let Chakwas off the ship. I’d have Vega escort her, though,” Garrus said.

*Understood. Chakwas said to bring anyone that can be moved into the cargo bay. We’ll set up a triage station while we wait for an Alliance ship to take over.*

Garrus switched to his private channel with Shepard. “We at war, Shepard?”

The silence that passed felt like an eternity. *I dunno,* she finally said. *But you really think the Council will let this slide?*

Garrus had a feeling he knew far too well the answer.

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